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Q20

Discuss the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of Maldives for India, with a focus on global trade and energy flows. Further, also discuss how this relationship affects India's maritime security and regional stability amidst international competition?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS II · 15 marks · India and its Neighbourhood

India and its neighborhood - relations.

Core demand of the question

- Place the Maldives on Indian Ocean sea lanes and energy flows
- Discuss how the bilateral relationship affects India's maritime security and regional stability
- Treat China and electoral swings in Male as international competition, not a cartoon

Revision summary

Maldives sits on Indian Ocean channels that carry Gulf energy and East-West trade past India's south-west.

Bilateral trade is small; location, tourism, fuel and people-to-people ties are the substance.

- **India's security tools:** SAGAR, radar, hydrography, Greater Male projects, Colombo Security Conclave.

Electoral swings in Male, including India Out politics, show Chinese competition and sovereign sensitivity.

Regional stability is a stable Male, not a client.

Sea lanes remain; patrons change.

Introduction

The Maldives is a thin chain of atolls a few hundred kilometres from India's west coast, astride the sea lanes that take Gulf oil to East Asia and containers across the eight-degree and one-and-a-half-degree channels. For Delhi it is not a small tourism market. It is a maritime neighbour whose politics can open or close the western Indian Ocean.

Body**Geopolitics, trade and energy flows**

The Maldives does not pump the oil. It sits beside the road.

- **Peg:** Most of India's seaborne oil and a large share of East Asian energy transit the wider Indian Ocean; a hostile or extra-regional base, dual-use port or survey ship in those waters changes maritime domain awareness.
- **Peg:** Colombo and Male together are the southern lid on India's peninsula; Gwadar and Hambantota already taught the cost of extra-regional logistics.

- **Peg:** Bilateral trade is modest next to India's majors; tourism, rice, medicines, aviation and workers are the everyday economy.
- **Peg:** Energy here means the sea lane, plus Indian help with fuel, grid and water - location plus dependence, not a customs union.

Maritime security and the relationship

India's tools are presence and first response, not a resident overlord.

- **Peg:** **SAGAR**, the **Colombo Security Conclave**, hydrography, coastal radar, patrol craft and Greater Male connectivity were the security relationship.
- **Peg:** An India-leaning spell and then an "**India Out**" campaign that asked Indian military personnel to leave and courted Chinese visits show how quickly the file swings.
- **Peg:** Radicalisation in pockets of the archipelago has been a counter-terror file for Delhi; naval diplomacy must live with sovereignty rhetoric.

International competition and regional stability

Competition with China is real and reversible with each Maldivian vote.

- **Peg:** Belt and Road credit versus neighbourhood-first presence is the contest the question names.
- **Peg:** A bankrupt or polarised Male invites external security patrons; overbearing hydrography can lose an election, absence can lose a sea.
- **Peg:** The relationship affects India by early warning, exclusive-economic-zone watch, and the message to the rest of the Indian Ocean that Delhi is a first responder.
- **Peg:** Energy sea lanes will still flow; who is alongside them is the variable.

Flow diagram

Gulf-East Asia SLOCs -> Maldives atolls
India -> Maldives atolls
China BRI -> Maldives atolls
Maldives atolls -> Maritime domain awareness
Maritime domain awareness -> Regional stability
India -> Colombo Security Conclave

Conclusion

Maldives matters because the oil and container road runs past it, not because bilateral trade is huge. India's maritime security needs a stable, non-aligned Male. That is a relationship that elections and Chinese credit can still swing.

Facts & figures

Eight-degree channel

Water between Minicoy (India) and the Maldives - a local name for how close the two exclusive economic zones sit.

SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)

India's Indian Ocean neighbourhood doctrine of presence without overlordship.

Colombo Security Conclave

India-Maldives-Mauritius-Sri Lanka grouping, with later partners, on maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

Greater Male connectivity projects

Bridges, patrol craft and urban infrastructure that were the everyday face of India's neighbourhood-first offer.

One-and-a-half-degree channel

A deep-water passage through the Maldivian chain used by east-west shipping - why atolls sit on energy routes.

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