India – Maldives Bilateral Relation

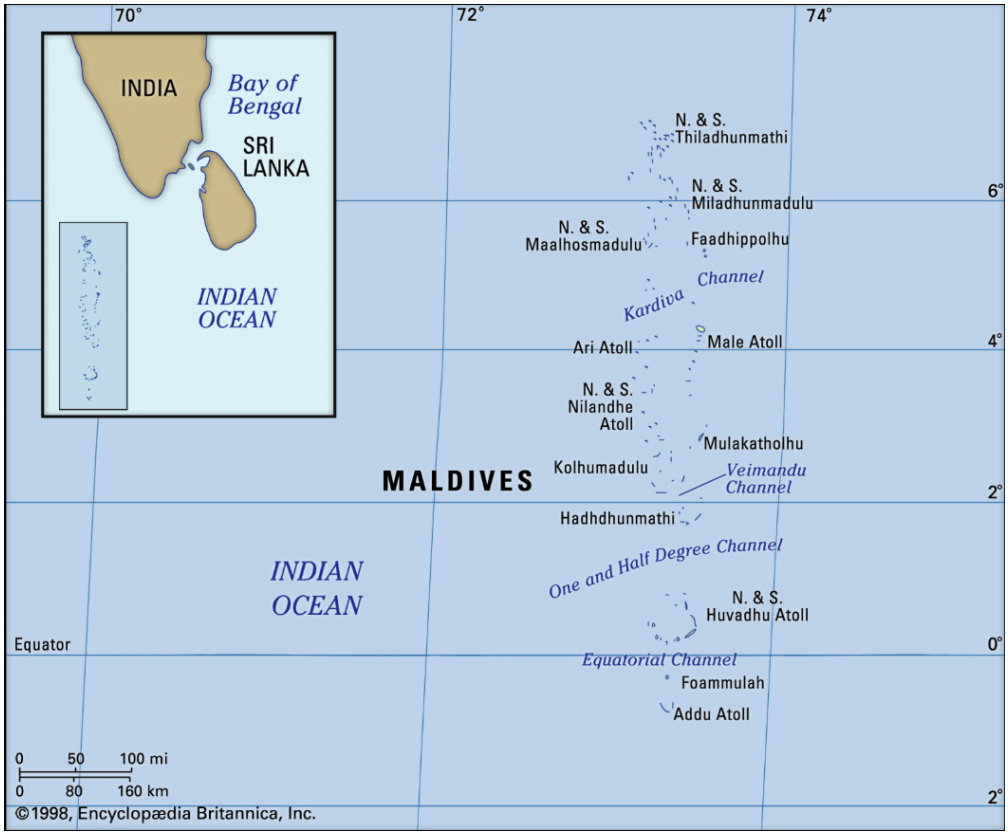
Mains: *Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.*

Why in News?

Recently, Indian Prime Minister participated in the 60th Independence Day celebrations of the Maldives, as the Guest of Honor.

What are the pillars of Ind0-Maldives relations?

- India and the Maldives are bound by deep-rooted ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and trade ties that date back centuries, forming a strong and multifaceted relationship.
- **Geographical proximity –** Maldives is a tropical island nation located about *700 km southwest of the Indian mainland*, southwest of Sri Lanka and India in the Indian Ocean.
- Its position near major sea routes makes it strategically significant for maritime security and international trade.



- **Historical relations –** It is widely believed that Sri Soorudasaruna Adeettiya, an Indian prince, established the earliest organized form of government in the Maldives.
- India was one of the earliest country to *recognise Maldives after its independence in 1965*.
- **Political ties** - India's prompt a*ssistance during the 1988 coup attempt,* led to development of trust and long-term and friendly bilateral relations with the Maldives.
- Maldives is covered under India's '*Neighbourhood First' policy*, which guides the management of India's relations with countries in its immediate neighbourhood.

India's Neighbourhood First' policy *focuses on creating mutually beneficial, people-oriented, regional frameworks for stability and prosperity, including through the building of physical, digital and people to people connectivity.*

- **Diplomatic ties -** India diplomatic mission began in 1972 and appointed high commissioner in 1980 and Maldives established their High commission in New Delhi in 2004.
- India and Maldives are members of SAARC grouping.
- **Economic ties –** *Addu Development Project* involves improving water and sanitation systems on 34 islands, along with road development and land reclamation efforts.
    - **Other initiatives** - A port development project, 2 airport expansion projects, and Greater Male Connectivity Project.
- **Cultural relations** – Indian expatriates constitute a major part of the Maldivian workforce, especially in the fields of healthcare and education
- **Security ties –** India-Maldives military exercise ***Ekuverin*** strengthens defence ties between the 2 nations.
- Both are part of the Colombo security conclave.

Colombo Security Conclave *is regional maritime security grouping formed in 2011 with India, Srianka, Maldives, Mauritius and Bangladesh as members while Seychelles is an observer nation. It aims to make maritime security, marine pollution response and maritime search & rescue priorities for the region.*

- **Humanitarian relations -** India was the 1st to assist Maldives during the 2004 Tsunami and water crisis in Male in Dec 2014.
- India's rapid and comprehensive assistance to the Maldives during COVID- 19 pandemic further reinforced India's credentials of being the "first responder".

Challenges in India-Maldives Relations

• **India out campaign** – Beginning in 2020, it started as protests in the Maldives that spread widely across social media, expressing public concerns about India's influence in the country.
• **Lack of transparency** – Some critics have pointed to a lack of openness regarding certain bilateral agreements signed between India and the Maldives during President Solih's tenure.
• **Indian Military Presence** – Allegations have surfaced about Indian military personnel operating in the Maldives, leading to unease among sections of the Maldivian population.

What are recent agreements in Indo-Maldives ties?

- **Trade pacts –** India launched talks on an Free trade talks with Maldives after sealing the FTA with United Kingdom.
- **Capital support –** India announced a new l*ine of Credit of 4850 crore rupees* to support the development.
- **Fisheries development –** A joint efforts in sustainable tuna fishing, deep-sea fisheries, aquaculture, and eco-tourism.
- **Digitalising initiatives –** It involves sharing India's successful large-scale digital platforms with the Maldives.
    - **For example**, enabling digital transactions in the Maldives through *India's UPI system*.
- **Pharma collaborations** – *Facilitating access to Indian medicines* and integrating Indian pharmacopoeia standards within Maldivian healthcare.
- **Connectivity** – India has introduced direct air connectivity to strengthen cooperation and boost tourism.
- **Defence –** India will also *provide 72 heavy vehicles* to the Maldivian Ministry of Defence.
- **Social initiatives -** India handed *over 3,300 social housing units in Hulhumale* and have inaugurated a roads and drainage system project in Addu city.

What are key outcomes of recent agreements?

- **Maritime security –** It will help to curb the privacy, smuggling, terrorism in Indian Ocean region.
- **Promotes tourism –** Improved connectivity through direct flights and infrastructure projects enhances tourism flows between them thereby benefiting both countries' economies.
- **Enables digitalisation –** By sharing India's proven digital solutions like UPI, the Maldives advances its digital payment systems and overall technological infrastructure.
- **Counters Chinese aggression –** Strengthening bilateral relations helps India mitigate China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean like China's "String of Pearls" strategy that aimed at securing strategic ports and assets.
- **Boosts trade -** Free trade agreement encourage greater economic collaboration and investment between India and the Maldives.

What lies ahead?

- India can take steps to pursue soft diplomacy to ensure continued relationship with Maldives.
- India's economic ties with Maldives can be bolstered by finalizing free trade agreements benefitting both nations.

Reference

The Indian Express | India Maldives Agreements

