

CSB IAS ACADEMY

TOPIC OF THE DAY (DATE: 10.01.2024)

India-Maldives Controversy

WHY IN NEWS?

A few ministers of the Maldives made offensive remarks against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi after he pitched for Lakshadweep as a tourism destination.

BACKGROUND

- The controversy began when three deputy ministers in the Ministry of Youth Affairs in Maldives Maryam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef, and Mahzoom Majid---made negative comments about India and the Prime Minister following his recent visit to Lakshadweep.
- The Indian government raised the issue with Maldives, after which the Maldives government suspended the three ministers.

India and Maldives Relations

- The Maldives' proximity to India barely 70 nautical miles from the island of Minicoy in Lakshadweep, and 300 nautical miles from the mainland's western coast at the intersection of commercial sea-lanes running through the Indian Ocean, makes it strategically important for India, particularly in the light of China's growing aggression in the region.
- India's geographic proximity to the Maldives is unlikely to change despite the frequent shifts in the Maldives' foreign policy.

Political Relations:

- India was among the first to recognize the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and later established its mission at Male in 1972. They share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links. Both nations are founding members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the South Asian Economic Union and signatories to the South Asia Free Trade Agreement.

Strategic Relationship:

- In the Indian Ocean, the Maldives archipelago comprising 1,200 coral islands lies next to key shipping lanes which ensure uninterrupted energy supplies to countries like China, Japan, and India.
- The Maldives is India's key maritime neighbour in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and occupies a special place in India's vision of 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and the 'Neighbourhood First Policy'.

Defence:

- A technical agreement on sharing 'White Shipping Information' between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force was also signed, enabling the exchange of prior information on the movement of commercial, non-military vessels.
- Ekuverin is a joint military exercise between India and Maldives.

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Trade and Economy:

- India and Maldives signed a trade agreement in 1981, which provides for the export of essential commodities.
- India provides essential food items like rice, wheat flour, sugar, dal, onion, potato and eggs and construction material such as sand and stone aggregates to the Maldives on favourable terms.

Tourism

- More than 2.09 lakh Indians visited the Maldives in 2023. Tourism makes up for over 25 per cent of the Maldives's GDP

India's crucial help to the Maldives:

- ***Operation Cactus:*** It was an attempt by a group of Maldivians and assisted by armed mercenaries of a Tamil secessionist organisation from Sri Lanka to overthrow the government in the island republic of Maldives in 1988. The coup failed due to the intervention of the Indian Army.
- ***Operation Neer*** was initiated by the Indian government to help the Maldives after a major fire broke out at the Male Water and Sewerage Company. The Maldives urged India for help following the collapse of the island's only water treatment plant, India helped by sending its heavy-lift transporters like C-17 Globemaster III, Il-76 carrying bottled water.

Challenges to India-Maldives Bilateral Relations

India Out Campaign

- The campaign was backed by the country's opposition leader Abdulla Yameen and the new president elect echoes the same sentiment towards India.
- It aims to fuel more hatred by creating scepticism for India's investments in Maldives, the defence partnerships between the two, and India's net-security provider image.
- It accuses the government of Maldives of allowing Indian boots on the ground, and thereby compromising the sovereignty of the island nation.

Increasing Islamic Radicalisation Among Maldivian Population

- The Maldives has become the country which has been sending the highest per capita number of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria and Iraq in recent years.
- This has been revealed by a 2020 report by the European Foundation for South Asian Studies.

The China Factor

- China's entry is solely to advance its own interests. It has done so through debt financing, leading to debt traps and consequent hegemony of China.
- China's policy of interference in the internal politics and support to conservative elements in Maldives has the potential of becoming a barrier to the development of a vibrant democracy in Maldives.
- It seems that the legacy of a controlled regime of the Gayoom years is being carried forward by elements that are aligning with China for their narrow gains. This may not be in the larger interest of the nation in the long run.