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ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

India-Maldives Relations

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INDIA-MALDIVES RELATIONS

In Context:

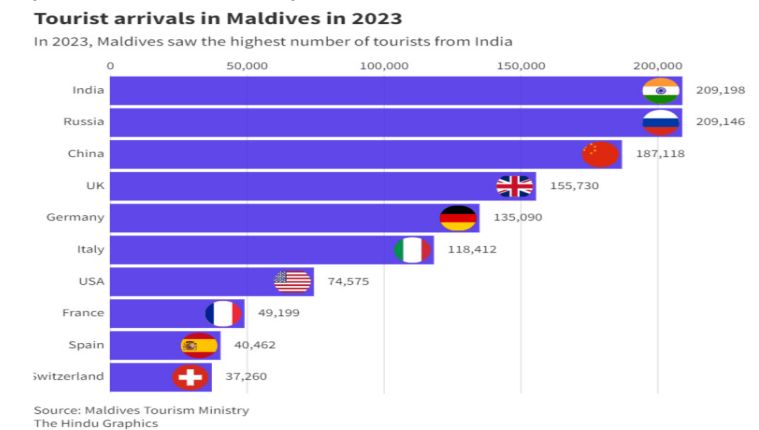
- **Maldives and China signed 20 agreements** after the Muizzu-Xi meeting **amid a diplomatic row with India.**

About:

- The Chinese President with his Maldivian counterpart signed **20 “key” agreements**, including on **tourism cooperation, disaster risk reduction and the blue economy.**
- It also announced the elevation of their bilateral ties to a **comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.**

Recent Maldives-India Row:

- The latest trigger has been **undiplomatic words used by ministers in Maldives** against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in particular and Indians in general.
- The new government led by President Mohamed Muizzu **asked India to withdraw military personnel** and **chose China for one of his first overseas visits.**
 - ♦ Maldives President Muizzu in his visit also **urges China to reclaim top spot in tourist arrivals** which was dominated by India in the last few years.



- The incumbent government rode to power on an **‘India Out’ poll campaign.**
 - ♦ The release of a report by the **EU Election Observation Mission of Maldives** said, the ruling coalition in Maldives **deployed anti-Indian sentiments and attempted to spread disinformation in the 2023 presidential elections** in which Mr. Muizzu won.
- Maldives has also decided **not to renew the agreement with India on a hydrographic survey** of its waters.
 - ♦ The agreement, signed in 2019, **allowed India to conduct a hydrographic survey of the Maldivian territorial waters**, study and chart reefs, lagoons, coastlines, ocean currents and tide levels.

Evolution of India and Maldives Relations

- The **relationship between India and the Maldives** has evolved over the years, influenced by **geopolitical, economic, and strategic considerations.**
- **Early Diplomatic Ties (1965-1978):** The Maldives gained independence from the British in **1965**, and established diplomatic relations with India.
 - ♦ India was one of the first countries to recognize the Maldives as an independent nation.
- **Strategic Partnership (1978-1988):** The signing of the **Maritime Boundary Agreement in 1979** helped define the maritime boundaries between the two countries.
- **Political Turbulence (1988-2008):** The relationship faced challenges in **1988** when a **coup attempt in the Maldives** led to the intervention of Indian forces in **Operation Cactus.**
 - ♦ India’s military intervention was aimed at thwarting the coup and preserving the Maldives’ political stability.

- ◆ This event **temporarily strained diplomatic relations** but was later resolved.
- **Normalization and Economic Cooperation (2008-2013):** In 2008, the Maldives experienced a peaceful political transition, and Mohamed Nasheed became the President.
 - ◆ The relationship between India and the Maldives improved, focusing on **economic cooperation, trade, and people-to-people ties**.
 - ◆ India provided developmental assistance to the Maldives, particularly in infrastructure projects and capacity building.
- **Period of Strain (2013-2018):** The relationship **faced challenges** during the presidency of Abdulla Yameen, with concerns over issues such as democratic backsliding, human rights, and a perceived **tilt towards China**.
 - ◆ The Maldives' growing engagement with China, including infrastructure projects under the **Belt and Road Initiative**, raised strategic concerns for India.
- **Renewed Engagement (2018 Onward):** The **election of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih** as the President of the Maldives in 2018 marked a **shift in bilateral relations**. There was a renewed emphasis on strengthening ties with India.
 - ◆ The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to democratic values, and India extended financial assistance for various developmental projects.

Significance of Maldives for India:

- **Location:** Maldives' proximity to the west coast of India (barely 70 nautical miles from Minicoy and 300 nautical miles from India's West coast).



- **Trade Route:** Situated along crucial maritime trade routes between the Gulf of Aden and the Strait of Malacca, the **Maldives acts as a “toll gate” for nearly half of India’s external trade and 80% of its energy imports**.
- **Strategic Importance:** The Maldives is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, and its stability and security are of interest to India.
- **Counterbalancing China:** Maldives presents an opportunity for India to counterbalance China’s growing influence in the Indian Ocean, fostering regional balance of power.
- **Economic partnership:** India is one of the biggest investors and tourism markets for the Maldives, with significant trade and infrastructure projects underway.
- **Defence: Defence and Security Cooperation: Since 1988**, defence and security has been a major area of cooperation between India and Maldives.
 - ◆ A **comprehensive Action Plan for Defence** was also signed in **2016** to consolidate defence partnership.
 - ◆ Estimates suggest that almost **70 per cent of Maldives’ defence training is done by India** — either on the islands or in India’s elite military academies.

Significance of India for Maldives:

- **Essential Commodities:** India supplies Maldives with its everyday essentials: rice, spices, fruits, vegetables, poultry, medicines and life-saving drugs.
- **Education:** Every year, Maldivian students come to Indian higher educational institutions.
- **Economic dependence:** Of the Rs 50 crore total trade between India and Maldives in 2022, **Rs 49 crore was India's exports to Maldives.** India emerged as Maldives' second largest trade partner in 2022.
- **Disaster Relief Assistance:** When a tsunami struck the islands in 2004, India was the first to send in help.
 - ♦ **In 2014 Male had a drinking water crisis** as the major desalination plant broke down, India overnight airlifted drinking water to the islands.
 - ♦ **During the Covid-19 pandemic,** India sent essential medicines, masks, gloves, PPE kits and vaccines for the island country.

Challenges:

Political Instability

- **Domestic turmoil in the Maldives:** Recent political upheavals and changes in government can create uncertainty and complicate long-term cooperation projects.

Chinese Influence

- **Economic and infrastructure investments:** China's growing economic presence in the Maldives, evidenced by investments in infrastructure projects and debt-trap diplomacy, can be perceived as a challenge to India's strategic interests in the region.
- **Military ambitions:** Chinese naval expansion and potential military ambitions in the Indian Ocean with the active support from Maldives can raise concerns for India.

Security Concerns:

- **Non-traditional threats:** Piracy, terrorism, and drug trafficking remain concerns in the region, requiring continuous collaboration and intelligence sharing between India and the Maldives.
- **Extremism and radicalization:** The Maldives' vulnerability to religious extremism and radicalization poses a security threat that necessitates joint efforts in countering such ideologies.

Economic and Environmental Concerns:

- **Trade imbalance:** The significant trade imbalance between India and the Maldives could lead to resentment and calls for diversifying trade partnerships.
- **Impact of climate change:** Both nations are highly vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels, requiring coordinated efforts for adaptation and environmental protection.

Overcoming the challenges:

- **Open and transparent communication:** Regular dialogue at all levels can address concerns and build trust.
- **Focus on common interests:** Prioritizing areas like maritime security, climate change, and economic development can solidify the foundation of the partnership.
- **Respect for sovereignty and non-interference:** Both countries must respect each other's internal affairs and avoid interference in domestic politics.
- **Strengthening people-to-people ties:** Cultural exchange programs and educational collaborations can foster deeper understanding and empathy.
- **Addressing internal issues:** Both India and the Maldives need to address domestic challenges like corruption and instability to project a positive image and foster a stable partnership.

Way Ahead:

- The evolution of India-Maldives relations reflects a combination of geopolitical dynamics, changes in leadership, and shared regional interests.
- India is steadfast in its commitments towards Maldives and **has always walked the extra mile** towards building relations.
- Any impulsive steps to undo the carefully nurtured all encompassing partnership is **likely to harm Maldives more than it would India**.
- By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, India and the Maldives can **navigate the complexities of their relationship and build a stronger, more resilient, and mutually beneficial partnership** for the future.

Source: TH**DAILY MAINS QUESTION**

Anti India-sentiments along with deep Chinese presence in Maldives is a cause of concern for India. Discuss the measures India needs to take to regain the ground in Maldives? [15 Marks, 250 Words]

