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PM Modi's Visit to Maldives & Sri Lanka

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first foreign tour in his second term would be to its neighbourhood nations in the Indian Ocean, emphasising on the need for greater cooperation and maritime security in these waters. Prime Minister Modi initially is going to Maldives as his chosen destination for his first visit on June 7th and 8th. He will stop over in Colombo (the capital of Sri Lanka) as a mark of solidarity with the nation that witnessed the biggest ISIS attack on Easter Sunday. The Prime Minister will pay an official visit to Sri Lanka after completing his bilateral engagements in the Maldives early in June.

India-Maldives

- **Maldives** is the country which India did **not invite for the swearing-in ceremony** of the Prime Minister of India, **because of the BIMSTEC** (Bay of Bengal Initiative for

Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) paradigm, being now used, **instead of the SAARC** (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation).

- Of all the SAARC countries other than Pakistan, managing relationship with Maldives, at one time, was the most difficult.
- Possibly, there is a **big danger** of **ISIS gaining little foothold in the South Asian countries**. The attack on Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday is a recent example.

The necessity to have the linkages of both economy and security in India's own region has become more essential than ever before.

- The situation in Maldives has really gone out of hand vis-a-vis relationship with India is concerned. **Maldives' previous administration tried itself to project more closer to China**. Besides, there are many issues, a prominent Indian airport has to shut down its shop owing to the Maldives' government decision.
- Maldives still remember that whether it is **1988 mercenaries attack or 2004 tsunami** or water crisis, **India has helped the nation every time**.

India-Sri Lanka

- There was a drastic attack on Easter Sunday, this year, in Sri Lanka. The visit of the Prime Minister of India is a good way to show solidarity with the people of Sri Lanka.
- **Sri Lanka is India's Indian Ocean friend and a close neighbour with whom India has an old cultural comfort.**
- The recent trilateral idea that India and Japan would work in Sri Lanka on the Colombo port is bringing alive what Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had decided in Japan, the last year, that both the countries will look at **Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar as the first three areas besides Africa where trilateral projects could take place.**
- There are differences between the present Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and the President of the nation, but both of them are friendly to India.

Connecting Points

- With both Maldives and Sri Lanka, **security is at the top**, with Sri Lanka, it is how to deal with the terror and with Maldives, India may conclude the **mutual assistance legal treaty** which has been discussed over the last six months.

The treaty is important for putting into place a structure that in case one needs, to get back to the country people involved in drugs or money laundering or terror.

- In the present government in Sri Lanka and that in Maldives, there is a positive sign that it is not anybody first but India first, **both are ready to work with India on political issues, security issues, economic issues etc.**
- India wants to share the same model with both the countries that it shares with Bangladesh i.e. very close political relations but economy of these countries being

open to all ie. India, China etc.

But trade with India, access to the Indian market, close cooperation on terror is very important.

- India **needs to have a NSA (National Security Adviser) - level or working level tie up** with both the countries, where the intelligence can be shared and the actions can be initiated well in time to stop a terror attack.
- **China being trading with both the countries** is another factor that links India with Sri Lanka and Maldives.

India and China in the Indian Ocean

- China is an economically strong power that wants to challenge India's pre-eminence in South Asia and beyond.
- **China is making efforts to work closely with all of India's neighbours.** Countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar have tried to balance their relationship with China vis-a-vis India. Somewhere down the line, Sri Lanka and Maldives decided to adopt an approach where they wanted to shut out India from their economy and open up their spaces for Chinese visits which India perceived as a threat to its security. India wants to balanced out this.
- **China is there in the western Indian Ocean.** The pace at which the Chinese navy is growing is a matter of concern for India.
- Nearly 70-80% of the energy of the Chinese travels through the Indian Ocean. **The three choke points through which the ships travel are, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden** and in all seas, the Chinese have got a foothold. The Malacca port has been developed by the Chinese, because the Malaysians have given that to the Chinese, in spite of the fact that Port Klang (Malaysia) and Singapore is not very far. It seems that **there is as such no economic agenda behind developing such ports.**
- **India's Indian Ocean policy is fairly robust** i.e.
 - **helping neighbours at the time of crisis**, for instance, India helped Mozambique when cyclone hit the nation.
 - **India, under its chairmanship, in 2012, revived the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA, non China body), to maintain its aura over the Indian Ocean.**
 - All along the African coast, and also on the coast of Oman and everywhere else in the Indian Ocean, India's presence is there.
 - **India also has agreements with countries like U.S. and France to use their naval facilities in Djibouti, Diego Garcia etc,** if required.
 - Recently, the Ministry of External Affairs has formed **a separate division for the Indo-Pacific region.**
 - India has a very robust maritime domain awareness network and have deployment in all choke points 24x7 throughout the year.

- China is willing to use its power in the South China Sea, the navy of US and other countries there in the region need to manage that.
- In the Pacific, Australia and the US needs to work much harder because those in the South Pacific and the other smaller island nations are very close to China as China provides them with large aids.