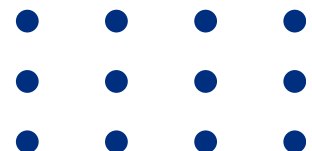


# EVENT REPORT

International Conference on  
**India & Maldives: Sailing the  
MAHASAGAR Together**

**20 & 21 January 2026**  
**Kochi, Kerala**

Organised by  
**Centre for Public Policy Research | Kochi**  
**& Indian Council of World Affairs | New Delhi**



Report prepared by  
**Centre for Public Policy Research | Kochi**

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01

## About the Event

The International conference “India & Maldives: Sailing the MAHASAGAR Together” was jointly organised by the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR), Kochi, and the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi, with the objective of examining the evolving dimensions of the India-Maldives partnership within the broader strategic context of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Rooted in centuries-old ethnic, cultural, religious, and commercial linkages, the India-Maldives relationship has evolved into a multidimensional partnership encompassing maritime security, economic cooperation, capacity building, and climate resilience. Through focused sessions and outcome-oriented deliberations, the conference brought together policymakers, scholars, and practitioners to explore contemporary bilateral dynamics, the Maldives’ foreign policy trajectory, internal political and economic developments, and pathways for strengthening regional stability under the MAHASAGAR framework, with an emphasis on advancing sustainable growth and mutual prosperity in the Indian Ocean Region.

The conference commenced with an Inaugural Session featuring welcome remarks by Dr D. Dhanuraj, Chairman, CPPR, who underscored the enduring civilisational ties and growing strategic convergence between the two nations. The Keynote Address was delivered by the Chief Guest, Deputy Inspector General Ashish Mehrotra, Commander, Indian Coast Guard (District No. 4 - Kerala and Mahe), who highlighted India’s expanding role as a maritime security provider and the significance of cooperative security frameworks in the IOR. This was followed by a Special Address by the Guest of Honour, Vice Admiral G. Ashok Kumar PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd.), Former Vice Chief of Naval Staff and Former National Maritime Security Coordinator of India, who provided strategic insights into India’s maritime vision and the relevance of the MAHASAGAR initiative in promoting stability, security, and sustainable development across the region.

The two-day conference brought together representatives from India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, along with participants from leading policy think tanks, academic institutions, and maritime and security establishments.

02

# 02

## Inaugural Session

### Inaugural Welcome Address

Date: 20 & 21 January 2026

Venue: The Avenue Regent, Kochi



Dr D. Dhanuraj began by underscoring Kochi's historical significance as a maritime gateway connecting India with the wider Indian Ocean world. He set the context for the international conference on India-Maldives cooperation under the MAHASAGAR vision, jointly organised by the Centre for Public Policy Research (CPR), Kochi, and the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi. The conference, he noted, was convened at a critical juncture in Indo-Pacific geopolitics to examine the **evolving partnership between India and the Maldives**. Highlighting centuries-old cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and commercial linkages, Dr Dhanuraj noted that the India-Maldives relationship has acquired renewed strategic relevance for regional stability amid evolving Indian Ocean geopolitics. He explained that MAHASAGAR builds on the SAGAR vision by integrating maritime security, economic cooperation, sustainable development, and climate resilience within an inclusive, partnership-based framework.

Dr Dhanuraj further emphasised the **strategic importance of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean**, a key conduit for global trade. He identified maritime connectivity, coastal surveillance, humanitarian assistance, and capacity building as core pillars of cooperation, presenting the India-Maldives partnership as a cooperative model grounded in mutual trust and shared maritime security.

Concluding his remarks, Dr Dhanuraj referred to consistent affirmations by Maldivian leadership describing India as the Maldives' closest and most trusted partner, alongside Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reiteration of the Maldives' central place in **India's Neighbourhood First policy**. He noted that the partnership reflects a shared destiny founded on mutual respect and deep people-to-people ties, with Kochi's maritime legacy symbolising the Indian Ocean as a space of enduring connectivity rather than division.

# 03

## Keynote Address

### Inaugural Keynote Address

- **Deputy Inspector General Ashish Mehrotra**

Commander, Indian Coast Guard District No. 4 (Kerala and Mahe)



In his keynote address, Deputy Inspector General Ashish Mehrotra underscored the deep historical ties between India and the Maldives, spanning geography, culture, religion, and commerce, and highlighted the Indian Ocean as a connective bridge rather than a dividing barrier. He described the **ocean as a shared strategic space** critical to global trade, energy flows, undersea data networks, and maritime security, noting that developments in this domain have direct and equal implications for both countries. Against the backdrop of shifting global power dynamics towards Asia and the growing complexity of maritime challenges, DIG Mehrotra stressed the imperative for India and the Maldives to act in unison, prospering together in periods of stability and standing united during times of uncertainty. He contextualised these remarks within a changing strategic environment marked by the resumption of India-Maldives diplomatic engagement and intensifying great-power competition in the Indian Ocean Region.

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...Ocean is a shared strategic space critical to global trade, energy flows, undersea data networks, and maritime security, noting that developments in this domain have direct and equal implications for both countries.

He noted that China currently accounts for a significant share of the Maldives' external debt and that bilateral ties between the Maldives and China have evolved into a **comprehensive strategic partnership**, reflecting broader geopolitical contestation. While this competition offers the island nation's multiple development partners, he cautioned that such engagements carry long-term strategic consequences.

DIG Mehrotra observed that although the Maldives lies within **India's immediate strategic sphere**, it has adopted a hedging approach by engaging China, while increasingly recognising India as a more sustainable and dependable long-term partner. He emphasised that India must protect its strategic interests without appearing coercive, instead offering a transparent, proximity-based, and development-oriented alternative. This approach, he noted, is reflected in **India's transition from the SAGAR vision to the more comprehensive MAHASAGAR framework**, which integrates maritime security with economic cooperation and environmental sustainability.

Highlighting that contemporary security considerations increasingly extend into the maritime domain, DIG Mehrotra outlined the widening range of challenges at sea, including terrorism, transnational crime, trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, environmental risks, and humanitarian and search-and-rescue responsibilities. In the context of India and the Maldives, he observed that maritime security is closely interconnected, with stability in adjacent waters contributing to security across the wider Indian Ocean region.

He emphasised the importance of sustained coordination among navies, coast guards, and other maritime agencies, referring to established mechanisms such as **Exercise DOSTI**, as well as ongoing cooperation in training, information sharing, and law-enforcement coordination. The India-Maldives partnership, he noted, has evolved through long-standing institutional engagement, with cooperation extending to areas such as crisis response, capacity building, hydrographic support, and search-and-rescue operations.

DIG Mehrotra underscored the value of complementing security cooperation with initiatives that support broader economic and developmental objectives within the blue economy, including fisheries, tourism, maritime connectivity, renewable energy, and marine conservation. He highlighted the **shared interest of India and the Maldives in contributing to an open, stable, and rules-based maritime environment in the Indian Ocean**, anchored in cooperation, transparency, and long-term regional sustainability.



...The widening range of challenges at sea, including terrorism, transnational crime, trafficking, illegal and unregulated fishing, environmental risks, and humanitarian and search-and-rescue responsibilities.

# 04

## Special Address

### Inaugural Special Address

- **Vice Admiral G Ashok Kumar PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)**

Former Vice Chief of Naval Staff and Former National Maritime Security Coordinator, India



In his Special Address, Vice Admiral G. Ashok Kumar (Retd.) located the India-Maldives partnership within a complex and evolving global strategic environment characterised by shifts in economic and strategic influence, pressures on multilateral institutions, and changing patterns of international cooperation. Against this broader backdrop, he highlighted the **increasing salience of regional cooperation**, noting that the security interests of neighbouring states are closely interconnected and best addressed through collaborative regional frameworks.

He observed that regional coordination in the Indian Ocean region has gained greater prominence in recent years, reflected in mechanisms such as BIMSTEC, the Colombo Security Conclave, and emerging trilateral cooperation among India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka.



...The increasing salience of regional cooperation, noting that the security interests of neighbouring states are closely interconnected and best addressed through collaborative regional frameworks.

Practical initiatives, including coast guard exercises under the DOSTI framework, were cited as examples of operational cooperation that reinforce shared maritime security objectives. Emphasising the enduring influence of geography, Vice Admiral Ashok Kumar described the **Maldives and Sri Lanka as India's closest maritime neighbours**, underscoring the importance of sustained engagement for regional stability.

The Vice Admiral highlighted the interlinked nature of India-Maldives maritime security, drawing attention to the strategic significance of major sea lanes, particularly the Eight Degree and Nine Degree Channels. He noted that these routes carry a **substantial share of regional trade and energy flows**, making their security relevant not only for littoral states but also for the broader Indian Ocean and East Asian economies.

Addressing the range of maritime security challenges facing the region, he outlined transnational threats such as piracy, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and associated criminal networks that affect multiple countries simultaneously. Given the cross-border character of these challenges, he emphasised the importance of coordinated and cooperative responses at both bilateral and regional levels.

Reflecting on the institutional foundations of India-Maldives cooperation, Vice Admiral Ashok Kumar referred to established mechanisms such as the **Annual Defence Cooperation Dialogue** initiated in 2016, as well as India's role in providing assistance during humanitarian and emergency situations, including the Maldives' water crisis. He also noted recent high-level political engagements that culminated in the establishment of a **Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership**, subsequently expanded to a trilateral format with Sri Lanka.

Looking ahead, he identified several areas for strengthening maritime cooperation. These included the timely completion and effective operationalisation of infrastructure initiatives such as the **Coastal Surveillance Radar System** and associated data centres linked to India's Information Management and Analysis Centre; the development of standardised patrol vessel programmes to support regional maritime requirements; the expansion of training and capacity-building opportunities; and the importance of clear timelines in infrastructure delivery to ensure effectiveness and credibility.



...Interlinked nature of India-Maldives maritime security, drawing attention to the strategic significance of major sea lanes, particularly the Eight Degree and Nine Degree Channels.

He further emphasised the value of **enhancing connectivity** to support trade and people-to-people exchanges, strengthening maritime domain awareness through transparent and comprehensive information sharing, advancing cooperation in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and marine pollution response through trilateral standard operating procedures, and deepening engagement in regional and international fisheries bodies, including the **Indian Ocean Tuna Commission**, within the broader framework of the blue economy.

On climate change, Vice Admiral Ashok Kumar described it as a critical long-term challenge for the Maldives, particularly in relation to sea-level rise and its implications for livelihoods and tourism. He noted that India is well-positioned to contribute through climate risk assessments, disaster-resilient infrastructure development, and strengthened hydrographic cooperation, which has gained renewed momentum following recent bilateral engagements.

Concluding his address, he underscored the **importance of effective maritime coordination** supported by timely information sharing and operational cooperation among India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. He also noted the value of responsible public discourse, emphasising that maintaining constructive external partnerships requires care to ensure that domestic political dynamics do not inadvertently affect long-term regional cooperation.

# 05

## Fireside Chat

India & the Maldives Bilateral Relations: Contemporary Dynamics



### Guest

- **Ms Eva Abdulla**, Chairperson, The Maldives Policy Think Tank for Foreign Policy and former Deputy Speaker of the Maldives

### Moderator

- **Dr D Dhanuraj**, Chairman, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

Dr D. Dhanuraj opened the fireside chat by contextualising India-Maldives relations, highlighting the depth of their historical, cultural, and linguistic connections. He noted India's early recognition of Maldivian independence in 1965 and referred to high-level exchanges in 2024 as evidence of the enduring nature of the bilateral partnership.

### Historical Trust and Contemporary Volatility

Ms Eva Abdulla traced India-Maldives relations back several centuries, emphasising their historical predictability and mutual reliance, particularly through regional linkages with Kerala. She observed that, for much of their modern history, the two countries have been dependable partners in times of crisis. At the same time, she noted that the past decade introduced elements of volatility into an otherwise stable relationship. During President Abdulla Yameen's tenure, the Maldives expanded engagement with China, which became its largest creditor. Relations subsequently improved under the Maldivian Democratic Party government, marked by substantial Indian support in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and crisis response.

The relationship experienced renewed uncertainty during the 2023 presidential elections, when the “India Out” narrative entered mainstream political discourse.

Despite the Maldives’ longstanding reliance on India as a first responder in situations ranging from Operation Cactus in 1988 and the 2014 water crisis to COVID-19 vaccine distribution, the politicisation of India-related issues created periods of uncertainty. Ms Eva highlighted the importance of restoring stability, predictability, and trust, while examining the social and political drivers behind anti-India sentiment in Maldivian politics. She attributed the observed volatility primarily to intensifying great-power competition and the Maldives’ efforts to diversify partnerships. While recognising the legitimacy of engagement with multiple partners, she cautioned that strategies aimed at leveraging external powers carry inherent risks for a small state. She observed that early diplomatic outreach to Beijing and Ankara did not deliver the expected outcomes, and fiscal pressures subsequently led the Maldives to re-engage with India, highlighting the benefits of stable bilateral cooperation. She also noted the broadly positive reception of Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Maldives’ 60th Independence Day celebrations as indicative of enduring public support for India-Maldives engagement.

### **Economic and Strategic Diversification**

On the evolving regional context, Ms Eva outlined a multi-layered approach to external relations. India remains the principal partner, valued for the consistency and immediacy of its support, followed by longstanding partners including the UK, EU, US, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. A third layer comprises newer entrants such as Turkey and Gulf states, whose large-scale investments, while potentially transformative, also introduce questions of transparency and associated risks, particularly when proposed investments exceed the Maldives’ GDP.

Regarding India’s Neighbourhood First policy, she noted that from India’s perspective, stability in the Maldives is a critical priority. India’s timely financial support during periods of fiscal stress has been significant, and there is little substantive basis for grievances regarding India’s approach. She highlighted the importance of understanding the roots of political acrimony to ensure long-term bilateral stability. The factors identified include delays in infrastructure delivery, perceptions of Indian involvement in domestic politics, and limited transparency in security cooperation. Ms Eva emphasised that anti-India narratives were largely politically constructed, though underlying governance and communication gaps allowed them to gain traction.



...Despite the Maldives’ longstanding reliance on India as a first responder in situations ranging from Operation Cactus in 1988 and the 2014 water crisis to COVID-19 vaccine distribution, the politicisation of India-related issues created periods of uncertainty.

The discussion also addressed economic vulnerabilities, particularly the Maldives' heavy reliance on tourism. Ms Eva highlighted the need for broader economic diversification, including stronger private-sector engagement with India, to create more resilient and less politicised economic ties. On climate change and extremism, she noted the Maldives faces existential threats from rising sea levels and highlighted the potential for collaborative initiatives on climate-resilient infrastructure and renewable energy. She also raised concerns regarding Islamic radicalisation, noting that insufficient attention to this issue could pose broader regional security risks.

### **Future Pathways for Cooperation**

Concluding the session, Ms Eva reflected on the future trajectory of India-Maldives defence cooperation, stressing that it must be conducted with sensitivity to sovereignty and local priorities. She observed that India's recent approach, focused on completing ongoing projects and promptly addressing concerns regarding personnel, demonstrates calibrated engagement. She also emphasised the importance of people-to-people ties, including education, healthcare, culture, and tourism, and recommended expanded private-sector collaboration, particularly in education, to strengthen the foundation of bilateral relations. She noted that accurate information and communication are critical, particularly in the tourism sector, to ensure the continued positive impact of Indian engagement on the Maldivian economy.

### **Key Takeaways**

- India-Maldives relations have historically been stable and trust-based, but have experienced recurring volatility over the past decade due to domestic politicisation and great-power competition.
- The "India Out" narrative was identified as a politically manufactured discourse rather than an organically rooted public sentiment, amplified by governance and communication gaps.
- India remains the Maldives' most reliable partner and first responder, unmatched in the immediacy, scale, and consistency of assistance during crises.
- Strategic hedging by the Maldives, while asserting agency, carries significant risks for a small state and has exposed vulnerabilities during periods of fiscal stress.
- Delays in infrastructure delivery, limited transparency in security cooperation, and perception management failures have contributed to mistrust and require correction.
- Long-term stability depends on strengthening people-to-people ties, private-sector engagement, and climate- and education-focused cooperation insulated from political cycles.

# 06

## Panel Discussion 1

### Maldives Foreign Policy: Evolving Trajectories



#### Panellists

- **Dr T.C. Karthikheyan**, Associate Professor at Saveetha School of Law, Chennai
- **Dr Gayathry Gopal**, Assistant Professor, Political Science, KCC Institute of Technology and Management, Noida

#### Moderator

- **Dr Pooja Bhatt**, Associate Professor, Jindal School of International Affairs, JGU; Research Fellow (Maritime Studies), Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

The session on “Maldives Foreign Policy: Evolving Trajectories” examined the domestic, institutional, and geopolitical drivers shaping Maldivian foreign policy, with particular attention to India’s role as a constructive and long-term partner under the MAHASAGAR framework. Opening the discussion, the moderator outlined two core objectives: understanding the internal factors that drive Maldivian foreign policy choices, and assessing how India can engage meaningfully while respecting Maldivian agency. MAHASAGAR was presented as an evolution of India’s earlier SAGAR vision, broadening the neighbourhood concept beyond the Indian Ocean and deepening cooperation across capacity building, sustainable development, the blue economy, science, and technology.

## **Domestic Foundations and Institutional Drivers**

Addressing the domestic foundations of Maldivian foreign policy, the panellists emphasised the centrality of state institutions to the survival of a small island nation. The constitutional framework, shaped by past democratic challenges, establishes strong checks and balances, particularly through the Majlis, ensuring oversight and rule-based decision-making. This institutional orientation is reflected in the Maldives' preference for rules-based international engagement and adherence to global norms.

The panellists also highlighted domestic imperatives common to post-colonial states, particularly concerns related to sovereignty, national agency, and regime stability. These considerations have grown increasingly salient as multiple major and middle powers, including the United States and China, have expanded their engagement in the Maldives. Economic development and climate change were identified as key domestic drivers, with climate diplomacy framed as a matter of existential importance. Maldivian agency was noted to have historical roots, with early instances of independent foreign policy decisions, including resistance to external influence in the late 1970s.

## **Political Leadership, Regime Transitions, and Foreign Policy**

Focusing on political leadership and regime transitions, the introduction of multi-party democracy in 2008 was identified as a pivotal moment. While this reform broadened political participation, it also contributed to the politicisation of foreign policy, with different parties adopting distinct external alignments, particularly in relation to India, to consolidate domestic support. Considerations of regime stability often influence foreign policy decisions as much as, if not more than, long-term strategic planning. In this context, governments have sometimes prioritised partners capable of facilitating visible developmental outcomes, with investment from China occasionally viewed as attractive due to perceived flexibility in governance requirements, even as policy continuity can be affected by changes in government.

## **Climate Change, Fisheries, and Non-Politicised Cooperation**

Climate change featured prominently in the discussion. The panellists underscored its long-standing centrality to Maldivian policy, embedded in domestic legislation governing tourism and fisheries. Addressing challenges such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, India's role, under MAHASAGAR and the Neighbourhood First policy, in supporting maritime surveillance, fisheries protection, and seabed resource assessment was highlighted. Climate action, fisheries, and the blue economy were identified as stable, non-politicised areas of cooperation capable of sustaining bilateral ties across political transitions.

## Managing Great-Power Competition and Strategic Hedging

On managing great-power competition, the Maldives' approach was described as strategic hedging, allowing it to balance relations and preserve agency between competing powers. However, this strategy also creates vulnerabilities, particularly in a fragile region affected by debt pressures and institutional disruption. India's traditionally cautious stance toward extra-regional military involvement may be evolving in response to regional volatility, reinforcing the need for calibrated and supportive engagement with the Maldives.

The discussion further explored areas where India could extend support beyond defence cooperation. The panellists stressed the importance of long-term, institutionalised engagement through economic integration, trade agreements, education exchanges, digital connectivity, and private-sector collaboration, rather than personality-driven diplomacy. Frameworks such as MAHASAGAR derive strength from legal and institutional foundations that provide continuity, transparency, and investor confidence.

In concluding reflections, the panellists examined how the Maldives may view MAHASAGAR going forward. Sustainable development, maritime security, climate resilience, and capacity building were identified as inseparable priorities. The transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR was seen as enabling small states to strengthen defence and economic resilience without compromising sovereignty, while reinforcing multilateralism through partnerships with like-minded actors such as Japan and the United States. The session emphasised the need for reflective, inclusive dialogue when shaping regional security frameworks, cautioning against uncritical adoption of strategic concepts and underscoring the importance of regionally owned, rules-based cooperation.

### Key Takeaways

- Maldivian foreign policy is fundamentally shaped by domestic institutions, constitutional checks and balances, and regime survival concerns rather than purely external considerations.
- The introduction of multi-party democracy in 2008 increased political pluralism but also politicised foreign policy, leading to fluctuating external alignments.
- Climate change, economic development, and counter-radicalisation emerged as enduring and non-negotiable drivers of Maldivian foreign policy.
- Strategic hedging between major powers has enabled agency but has also increased debt exposure and institutional fragility.
- MAHASAGAR was viewed as a constructive evolution of SAGAR, offering inclusive, needs-based, and non-hierarchical cooperation.
- Durable India-Maldives engagement requires rule-based, institutionalised mechanisms rather than personality-driven diplomacy.

# 07

## Panel Discussion 2

### Internal Dynamics of Maldives: Polity and Economy



#### Panellists

- **Dr Samatha Mallempati**, Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs
- **Mr Mohamed Hoodh Ibrahim**, Vice President, Maldivian Red Crescent Chairperson, The Maldives Centre for Policy Research, UNESCO IYF Asia Pacific Regional Facilitator

#### Moderator

- **Dr Dhritishree Bordalai**, Senior Research Associate, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

This session examined the internal political and economic dynamics of the Maldives and their implications for India-Maldives relations under the MAHASAGAR framework. The discussion was framed against the backdrop of post-2008 political transitions, highlighting how evolving interpretations of sovereignty, regime change, and leadership styles have periodically influenced bilateral engagement. As of January 2026, the Maldives was characterised as entering a phase of strategic pragmatism, underpinned by a strong legislative mandate and an executive-driven governance approach. While this configuration may facilitate decisive policymaking, it also underscores considerations related to institutional resilience, democratic consolidation, and policy continuity.

Panellists noted that since the transition to multi-party democracy in 2008, India-Maldives relations have closely tracked domestic political shifts within the Maldives. Successive

governments have calibrated engagement with India differently, often influenced by internal political narratives and perceptions of sovereignty. A significant inflection point occurred in 2023, when a new government came to power on the back of an explicitly anti-India campaign, resulting in a period of volatility and cautious engagement through 2024. Despite early attempts by the Maldivian leadership to diversify partnerships and reduce perceived dependence on India, relations recalibrated in 2025 following the Maldivian President's visit to India. This visit led to the signing of a Vision Document and agreements on comprehensive economic and maritime security cooperation, marking a return to pragmatic engagement.

This recalibration was attributed to India's restrained and consistent approach, which combined continued developmental, financial, and security assistance with responsiveness to Maldivian concerns. Key confidence-building measures included the formation of a high-level core group and the subsequent withdrawal of Indian military personnel, underscoring India's willingness to adapt while prioritising long-term stability over short-term political sentiment. The discussion, however, also flagged recent domestic reforms in the Maldives, ranging from media regulation and judicial changes to proposals for electoral synchronisation, which, while framed as internal governance measures, may have implications for democratic institutions established since 2008. These developments were seen as important to monitor, given their potential impact on institutional continuity and bilateral trust.

### **Economic Vulnerabilities and Diversification**

Economically, the Maldives remains heavily dependent on tourism, which contributes nearly 28 percent of GDP and around 60 percent of foreign exchange earnings. Recognising the vulnerabilities of this narrow economic base, the government has designated 2026 as the *Year of Productivity*, alongside an ambitious goal of achieving developed nation status by 2040. Diversification has thus emerged as a central priority, though these ambitions are constrained by fiscal pressures, high public debt, and balance-of-payments challenges. In this context, India's role as a stabilising partner was emphasised, particularly its debt restructuring support in 2025, treasury bill rollovers, currency swap facilities, and financial assistance since 2023, which have helped cushion macroeconomic stress despite political frictions.

The blue economy featured prominently as a potential driver of diversification, with government targets envisioning around 15 percent of GDP from marine-based and creative industries. Panellists identified fisheries, aquaculture, marine ecosystems, deep-sea exploration, renewable energy, and sustainable tourism as areas of promise. India's extensive experience in fisheries management, aquaculture, and marine science was seen as complementary to the Maldives' global leadership in hospitality and tourism. However, the discussion cautioned against overreliance on leader-centric diplomacy, emphasising instead the need for institutionalised, people-to-people, private-sector, and trade linkages to build public trust and ensure sustainability.

## Institutional Mechanisms for Policy Continuity

Institutional mechanisms were highlighted as critical anchors for policy continuity. The Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership was described as providing a broad framework encompassing trade, digital connectivity, development cooperation, defence, and people-to-people exchanges. Proposed initiatives such as a Free Trade Agreement and a Bilateral Investment Treaty were viewed as instruments to institutionalise economic engagement, expand Maldivian exports, particularly seafood, and deepen long-term trade and investment ties. These efforts align closely with the Maldives' Vision 2.0, proposed National Development Plan, and aspirations to emerge as a digital-first nation by 2026.

At the same time, panellists acknowledged structural challenges to economic cooperation. These include the Maldives' limited implementation capacity, the need to ensure transparency in large-scale projects, and concerns that India's economic scale could overwhelm Maldivian MSMEs if not carefully calibrated. The importance of a "soft-touch" Indian approach, respectful of sovereignty and sensitive to domestic economic ecosystems, was repeatedly emphasised. Addressing misinformation, enhancing transparency, and maintaining open communication were seen as essential to insulating economic cooperation from political volatility.

## Human Capital and Capacity-Building

Human capital development emerged as another critical pillar of long-term resilience. The Maldives' 2024-2028 Strategic Action Plan places strong emphasis on skill development and workforce reform, particularly for its young and digitally adept population. India's longstanding role in education and training, through ICCR and ITEC programmes, defence training, and institutional exchanges, was widely acknowledged, though concerns were raised about declining scholarship uptake due to inadequate stipends and administrative delays. Panellists suggested a joint review of these programmes, alongside deeper university-to-university partnerships and collaboration in renewable energy, sustainability, and digital skills, to better align capacity-building initiatives with Maldivian needs.



...Proposed initiatives such as a Free Trade Agreement and a Bilateral Investment Treaty were viewed as instruments to institutionalise economic engagement, expand Maldivian exports, particularly seafood, and deepen long-term trade and investment ties. These efforts align closely with the Maldives' Vision 2.0, proposed National Development Plan, and aspirations to emerge as a digital-first nation by 2026.

## Institutionalising Long-Term Economic Cooperation

The session concluded with a discussion on the proposed India-Maldives Free Trade Agreement. While widely viewed as a significant step toward institutionalising long-term economic cooperation, panellists stressed that its success would depend on phased implementation, sector-specific safeguards, and careful management of asymmetries in economic size. Beyond fisheries and tourism, opportunities were identified in e-commerce, digital services, and affordable tourism models, particularly to attract Indian visitors. Ultimately, the FTA's value was seen as contingent on effective implementation of the broader Vision Document and the ability of both sides to translate agreements into tangible, inclusive economic outcomes.

### Key Takeaways

- Domestic political stability and institutional resilience are critical determinants of the sustainability of India-Maldives cooperation.
- Despite political volatility since 2023, bilateral relations recalibrated in 2025 due to India's consistent, restrained, and responsive engagement.
- Maldives' overdependence on tourism presents structural economic risks, reinforcing the urgency of diversification under the Year of Productivity agenda.
- India's financial support, through debt restructuring, currency swaps, and credit facilities has played a stabilising role during periods of macroeconomic stress.
- The blue economy offers a shared pathway for diversification, but success depends on institutionalised private-sector, MSME, and people-to-people linkages.
- Proposed instruments such as the FTA and BIT can anchor long-term cooperation if implemented gradually, transparently, and with safeguards for Maldivian economic ecosystems.

# 08

## Panel Discussion 3

### Strengthening Regional Stability through the MAHASAGAR Initiative



#### Panellists

- **Dr N Manoharan**, Professor & Director, Centre for East Asian Studies, Department of International Studies, Christ University, Bangalore
- **Professor S. Chaminda Padmakumara**, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo (Online Participation)
- **Dr Gulbin Sultana**, Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), Delhi

#### Moderator

- **Vice Admiral M P Muralidharan AVSM & Bar, NM (Retd)**, Former DG, Indian Coast Guard, and Hon. Distinguished Fellow (Maritime & Defence Studies), Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

This session focused on the strategic and economic significance of the Indian Ocean region and the evolving maritime security architecture under the MAHASAGAR initiative. The discussion highlighted the Indian Ocean's centrality to global trade, energy flows, and resource management, and underscored the Maldives' pivotal location at its heart. India and the Maldives were described as sharing deep historical, cultural, and civilisational ties, with recent developments, particularly the elevation of bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Maritime Security Partnership in October 2024, reflecting deeper integration across defence, economic cooperation, and technological infrastructure. Panellists situated MAHASAGAR as an expansion of India's earlier SAGAR policy, extending its scope from regional maritime security to global partnerships, particularly with the Global South.

MAHASAGAR also addresses non-traditional challenges, climate change, sustainable development, illegal fishing, trafficking, cyber threats, and disaster response. Platforms like the Colombo Security Conclave support maritime cooperation, counter-terrorism, and information sharing among regional partners.

### **Framework for Indian Ocean Security**

A conceptual framework for understanding Indian Ocean security was presented, structured around three elements: threats (both traditional and non-traditional), actors (including threat bearers, security seekers, and security providers), and the regional environment. Within this framework, the role of neighbourhood stability was emphasised as critical to any effective security architecture. Governance gaps and uneven development across the region were identified as factors that exacerbate insecurity, suggesting that decentralised, people-driven approaches may be more effective than top-down models.

Sri Lanka's role in the Indian Ocean was discussed as illustrative of how regional partners can contribute to MAHASAGAR. Sri Lanka's central location, natural harbours, and proximity to India enhance its strategic relevance, enabling cooperation on maritime security, freedom of navigation, disaster response, and sustainable resource use. Recent examples, such as India's rapid assistance following a cyclone affecting over 1.4 million people, were cited as demonstrations of India's role as a first responder and responsible regional partner. Bilateral MOUs, joint military exercises, infrastructure development, digital governance initiatives, and capacity-building programmes were highlighted as pillars of India–Sri Lanka maritime cooperation.

### **India's Comparative Advantage and Regional Role**

India's comparative advantages over China in the Indian Ocean include its proximity, size, and capabilities, allowing rapid humanitarian and disaster response. Its approach is more inclusive and partnership-oriented rather than hierarchical, though panellists noted the need for improved perception management and strategic communication.

India-Maldives defence and security cooperation was discussed as long-standing and predating both SAGAR and MAHASAGAR. India's assistance in thwarting the 1988 coup attempt and its subsequent role in developing the Maldives National Defence Force were highlighted as foundational moments. Ongoing cooperation includes training, equipment provision, defence infrastructure development, and maritime domain awareness through coastal surveillance networks. At the same time, the discussion acknowledged that misinformation and domestic political campaigns, such as the "India Out" movement, have at times cast doubt on India's intentions, reinforcing the importance of transparency and public engagement.

## Non-Traditional and Technical Cooperation under MAHASAGAR

Looking ahead, panellists identified non-traditional and technical areas as promising avenues for implementing MAHASAGAR objectives. These include fisheries management, climate-related maritime surveillance, disaster risk reduction, and emerging technologies such as unmanned maritime systems. India's support to expand the Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company's processing capacity was cited as an example of linking maritime security with economic development. Collaboration with space and defence institutions was also highlighted as a means of strengthening climate resilience and maritime awareness.

Audience interventions further emphasised opportunities for collaboration in disaster management, open data systems, digitisation, and space-based applications. The potential to integrate satellite capabilities with existing ground-based surveillance networks was discussed, alongside the role of India's Information Fusion Centre in Gurugram as a regional hub for maritime domain awareness. Capacity building emerged as a recurring theme, with panellists stressing that effective cooperation requires mutual learning, openness, and engagement with local institutions, research organisations, and young professionals.

## MAHASAGAR as a Comprehensive Regional Framework

The session concluded with a broad consensus that MAHASAGAR offers a comprehensive framework for regional cooperation that goes beyond security to encompass economic development, technology, climate resilience, and people-to-people ties. Its success, however, will depend on inclusive implementation, sensitivity to local perceptions, and sustained engagement at both institutional and societal levels to ensure that regional partnerships are cooperative, resilient, and future-oriented.

## Key Takeaways

- The Indian Ocean was reaffirmed as a shared strategic space where security, development, and environmental stability are deeply interconnected.
- MAHASAGAR broadens maritime cooperation beyond defence to include climate resilience, disaster response, fisheries, technology, and capacity building.
- India's key advantages in the region, proximity, first-responder capability, and inclusive partnerships, remain underleveraged due to perception gaps.
- Regional mechanisms such as the Colombo Security Conclave are essential for addressing non-traditional maritime threats collectively.
- India-Maldives security cooperation is long-standing and demand-driven but requires greater transparency and public communication to counter misinformation.
- Future cooperation under MAHASAGAR should prioritise non-traditional sectors, emerging technologies, and institutional capacity building rooted in mutual learning.

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## Key Discussion Outcomes

- **Historical Stability and Recent Volatility in India-Maldives Relations** - India and the Maldives have shared a historically stable, trust-based relationship rooted in culture, geography, and crisis cooperation. However, the past decade has seen episodic volatility driven by domestic political narratives, great-power competition, and attempts at strategic hedging. While India remains the Maldives' most reliable partner, political cycles and perceptions of interference have periodically destabilised the relationship, underscoring the need for trust restoration and predictability.
- **Politically Manufactured Anti-India Sentiment** - The "India Out" discourse in Maldivian politics was largely politically constructed rather than a reflection of organic public sentiment. Its resonance was amplified by governance gaps, delayed infrastructure projects, and limited transparency in security cooperation. Addressing these root causes through communication, transparency, and inclusive engagement is critical to preventing recurrent mistrust and ensuring sustainable bilateral ties.
- **Domestic Drivers of Maldivian Foreign Policy** - Maldivian foreign policy is primarily shaped by internal institutions and considerations of regime survival rather than being driven solely by external pressures. Multi-party democracy has increased political pluralism but also politicised external alignments, making foreign policy sensitive to electoral outcomes. Sustainable engagement requires understanding domestic imperatives and respecting Maldivian agency in decision-making.
- **Strategic Hedging and Risks** - The Maldives has attempted to balance relations between major powers, including India, China, and the Gulf states, to preserve its sovereignty and leverage development opportunities. While strategic hedging allows agency, it exposes the Maldives to fiscal stress, debt vulnerability, and institutional fragility. Careful, consistent, and rules-based engagement from India mitigates these risks and strengthens regional stability.

- **Economic Vulnerabilities and Diversification Imperatives** - The Maldivian economy remains heavily dependent on tourism, creating structural vulnerabilities, especially amid environmental constraints and global competition. Recognising this, the Maldives has prioritised economic diversification under initiatives like the Year of Productivity and Vision 2040. India's support through financial instruments, technical expertise, and trade partnerships is central to enabling sustainable economic resilience.
- **Blue Economy and Institutionalised Cooperation** - The blue economy offers a shared pathway for India-Maldives cooperation, encompassing fisheries, aquaculture, deep-sea exploration, renewable energy, and sustainable tourism. Success depends on institutionalised, private-sector, and people-to-people linkages insulated from political volatility. Frameworks such as the Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership, Free Trade Agreement, and Bilateral Investment Treaty provide durable mechanisms to anchor cooperation.
- **Climate Change and Non-Traditional Security Challenges** - Climate change poses an existential threat to the Maldives, particularly due to sea-level rise, while issues like radicalisation and environmental degradation affect regional security. India's engagement through climate-resilient infrastructure, disaster response, and maritime surveillance strengthens the Maldives' adaptive capacity. Cooperation in these non-traditional security domains offers stable, politically neutral avenues for long-term partnership.
- **MAHASAGAR: Expanding Maritime and Regional Cooperation** - For Maldives and Sri Lanka, MAHASAGAR represents an evolution of India's maritime engagement from a primarily security-focused approach under SAGAR to a broader, partnership-oriented vision. It means deeper collaboration on climate resilience, sustainable development and technology and addressing challenges such as sea-level rise, disaster preparedness, and blue economy opportunities. Through institutionalised cooperation, capacity building, and mutual learning, MAHASAGAR strengthens their ability to tackle both traditional security concerns and emerging threats collectively, fostering resilient and mutually beneficial maritime partnerships in the Indian Ocean.

- **India's Comparative Advantages and Perception Management** - India's geographical proximity, first-responder capability, and consistent assistance remain unmatched in the region. Yet, these advantages are often underappreciated due to misinformation and political narratives, highlighting the importance of strategic communication. Greater transparency, public engagement, and calibrated diplomacy are essential to maximise India's influence and credibility in the Indian Ocean.
- **Institutionalised, People-Centric, and Sustainable Engagement** - Across political transitions and domestic volatility, the resilience of India-Maldives relations depends on long-term, rule-based, and institutionalised mechanisms rather than personality-driven diplomacy. Education, workforce development, private-sector linkages, and technology transfer are critical for building trust and sustainable cooperation. Strengthening people-to-people ties, economic integration, and climate-resilient infrastructure ensures the bilateral partnership remains future-ready, mutually beneficial, and insulated from political fluctuations.

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## Conclusion



The International conference “India & Maldives: Sailing the MAHASAGAR Together” provided a timely and comprehensive platform to examine the evolving contours of the India-Maldives partnership within the broader strategic, economic, and environmental landscape of the Indian Ocean Region. Bringing together scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and civil society voices, the conference underscored both the enduring strengths of the bilateral relationship and the complex challenges it faces in a rapidly changing regional and global environment.

Across sessions, a clear consensus emerged that India-Maldives relations are historically rooted in trust, proximity, and crisis cooperation, yet have experienced periodic volatility over the past decade due to domestic political dynamics in the Maldives, intensified great-power competition, and evolving perceptions of sovereignty and agency. While these fluctuations have introduced uncertainty, discussions repeatedly reaffirmed that India remains the Maldives’ most consistent and reliable partner, particularly in times of humanitarian, economic, and security stress. The importance of restoring predictability, transparency, and mutual confidence was identified as central to sustaining long-term stability in the relationship.

Economic resilience and diversification emerged as critical priorities for the Maldives. Heavy dependence on tourism continues to expose structural vulnerabilities, reinforcing

the urgency of broadening the economic base. In this context, India's role as a stabilising economic partner, through financial assistance, debt restructuring, capacity building, and trade facilitation, was widely recognised. The blue economy was identified as a particularly promising area of cooperation, linking maritime security with sustainable livelihoods through fisheries, renewable energy, marine conservation, and responsible tourism. However, participants stressed that such cooperation must be institutionalised, people-centric, and sensitive to local economic ecosystems to ensure inclusivity and long-term impact.

Climate change featured prominently as a cross-cutting and existential challenge for the Maldives, with implications for security, development, and regional stability. The discussions underscored the value of India-Maldives cooperation in climate-resilient infrastructure, disaster preparedness, maritime surveillance, and environmental governance. These non-traditional security domains were viewed as politically neutral and stable avenues for sustained collaboration, capable of insulating the partnership from domestic political fluctuations.

In conclusion, the conference reaffirmed that the future of India-Maldives relations lies in moving beyond episodic resets toward a stable, institutionalised, and forward-looking partnership. Anchoring cooperation in rules-based mechanisms, economic and human capital development, climate resilience, and people-to-people ties will be essential to ensuring that the relationship remains resilient, mutually beneficial, and responsive to shared regional challenges. As the Indian Ocean grows in strategic significance, the India-Maldives partnership, guided by the principles underpinning MAHASAGAR, has the potential to serve as a model of cooperative, inclusive, and sustainable regional engagement.

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# Agenda

20 January, 2026

13:00 - 14:00

## Registration & Lunch

14:00 - 14:45

## Inaugural Session

- **Welcome Address by Dr D Dhanuraj**, Chairman, CPPR
- **Keynote Address by the Chief Guest, Deputy Inspector General Ashish Mehrotra**, Commander, Indian Coast Guard District No. 4 (Kerala and Mahe)
- **Special Address by the Guest of Honour, Vice Admiral G Ashok Kumar PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)**, Former Vice Chief of Naval Staff and Former National Maritime Security Coordinator, India

14:45 - 16:00

## Session 1: Fireside Chat: India & the Maldives Bilateral Relations: Contemporary Dynamics

### Guest:

**Ms Eva Abdulla**, Chairperson, The Maldives Policy Think Tank for Foreign Policy and former Deputy Speaker of the Maldives

### Host:

**Dr D Dhanuraj, Chairman**, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

16:00 - 16:15

## Tea/Coffee break

16:15 - 17:30

## Session 2: Maldives Foreign Policy: Evolving Trajectories

### Panellists:

- **Dr T.C. Karthikheyan**, Associate Professor at Saveetha School of Law, Chennai
- **Dr Gayathry Gopal**, Assistant Professor, Political Science, KCC Institute of Technology and Management, Noida

### Moderator:

**Dr Pooja Bhatt**, Associate Professor, Jindal School of International Affairs, JGU; Research Fellow (Maritime Studies), Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

**DAY 1 CONCLUDES**

21 January, 2026

10:00 - 11:15

### Session 3: Internal Dynamics of Maldives: Polity and Economy

#### Panellists:

- **Dr Samatha Mallempati**, Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs
- **Mr Mohamed Hoodh Ibrahim**, Vice President, Maldivian Red Crescent Chairperson, The Maldives Centre for Policy Research, UNESCO IYF Asia Pacific Regional Facilitator

#### Moderator:

**Dr Dhritishree Bordalai**, Senior Research Associate, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

11:15 - 11:30

### Tea/Coffee Break

11:30 - 12:45

### Session 4: Strengthening Regional Stability through the MAHASAGAR Initiative

#### Panellists:

- **Dr N Manoharan**, Professor & Director, Centre for East Asian Studies, Department of International Studies, Christ University, Bangalore
- **Professor S. Chaminda Padmakumara**, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo (Online Participation)
- **Dr Gulbin Sultana**, Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), Delhi

#### Moderator:

**Vice Admiral M P Muralidharan AVSM & Bar, NM (Retd)**, Former DG, Indian Coast Guard, and Hon. Distinguished Fellow (Maritime & Defence Studies), Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

12:45 - 13:00

### Valedictory Session

**Concluding Remarks and Vote of Thanks by Dr Dhritishree Bordalai**, Senior Research Associate, Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

13:00 - 14:00

### Lunch & Departure

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# Photogallery



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## Team

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### Project Advisors

**Dr D Dhanuraj**, Chairman, CPPR

**J Paul Zachariah**, Program Officer, Chairman's Office

### Research Team

**Dr Dhritishree Bordalai**, Senior Research Associate (IR)

**Kalyani S K**, Research Associate (IR)

### Event Team

**Binumol V B**, Program Lead

**Anu Maria Francis**, Senior Associate (Research and Project Management)

**Jofi Francis**, Senior Associate, Project Administration

**Raju T Mathew**, Chief Accounts Officer

**Lakshmi Viswanathan**, Associate, Communications

**Darshan Deepak**, Associate, Academy

**Nandana Satheesh**, Global Strategy Associate

**Varsha Dev**, Global Strategy Associate

### Representative from ICWA

**Dr Samatha Mallempati**, Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs



**Indian Council  
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