

## Tourism Diplomacy: Lakshadweep-Maldives Dispute

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### Abstract

Indian Ocean is an important hub for global trade and cultural exchange among nations. Some host island nations rely entirely on tourism for economic stability and a source of income. The Maldives and Lakshadweep are located in the Indian Ocean and are particularly noteworthy. It is an essential route for global trade and is home to beautiful islands like Lakshadweep, Sri Lanka, the Andaman Islands, and the Maldives. Regardless of their cultural and natural charm and attraction, the diplomatic tension between India and Maldives stresses the uncharted potential of tourism diplomacy in promoting regional cooperation and addressing geopolitical challenges. This study examined the dynamics of tourism diplomacy, providing attention to India's effort to make Lakshadweep a proper and viable tourist destination and analyzing the impact of the diplomatic controversy on Indian tourists' attitude towards the Maldives. The findings reveal that there has been a significant decline in Indian tourists and a surge of Chinese tourists during this diplomatic tension. Meanwhile, Lakshadweep is emerging as a yet promising, underdeveloped tourist destination. The diplomatic trends showcase two aspects of tourism diplomacy: building cultural bridges and resolving geopolitical disputes. This study highlights and sheds light on the transformative potential of tourism in shaping international relations. It also provides valuable insights to policymakers and stakeholders on improving and designing tourism infrastructure by protecting ecological preservations, leveraging tourism diplomacy in building alliances, and improving cultural exchanges in the Indian Ocean.

**Keywords:** Dispute, Indian Ocean, International Relations, Tourism Diplomacy, Tourist Arrival and Departure.

### Introduction

Maldives is a stunning and independent island in the Indian Ocean located in the north-central area of the ocean, which is made up of more than 1000 coral islands which are grouped into 26 ring-shaped islands (Atolls) where a population of 527,299 people live in Maldives according to 2024 data. The islands are low-lying, with none rising more than 6 feet. Male is the capital and the most populated city in Maldives. They are known for their fascinating beaches with soft white sands, vibrant marine life, enthralling crystal-clear turquoise oceans, luxurious resorts and water sports activities, and more. These attractions attracted a global audience and tourists to Maldives and made this a global destination for tourism. The contribution of the Maldives's economy relies on tourism, which makes tourism the backbone of Maldives. Tourism helps the Maldives in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contribution and provides the availability of foreign exchange reserves and earnings. According to the statistical data, from 2005 onwards, there

was a continuous massive increase in tourist arrivals in Maldives. According to statistics by the Ministry of Tourism in Maldives, 2019, there was a record number of tourist arrivals in the history of Maldives, a whopping 1.7 million in December. The global ranking of Maldives was 181 in 1960, and it started to make its position higher. In 2010, it was 178. From 2015 – 2020, it earned its rank of 174. From 2022 onwards, it has positioned itself in the global ranking of 173.

India stands in the top 5 positions in tourist arrivals; the most were from India, with 166,015 tourists. According to surveys conducted in 2019 and published, those data show that the motivation to choose where 72% voted is because of its beaches. The past 5-year trend analysis, according to 2019, showed that the key motivation to choose Maldives was its beaches; the purpose of the visit during the peak season was honeymoon rather than the group which comes for rest relaxation. After 2019, during the surveys till 2022 published by the Tourism Department from Maldives, the key

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factor for choosing Maldives as a tourist destination was its beaches, and the purpose of the visit was rest, relaxation, and honeymoon became the second factor of the purpose of visit. During the COVID-19 period in 2020, Maldives faced a significant decline in tourism, GDP, and tourism due to Covid-19. In 2019, the GDP change was 7.10%, which changed in 2020. During the year 2020, tourism was globally affected due to the pandemic, and the GDP of Maldives declined to a whopping -33.49%, which was the lowest in the history of Maldives because the lowest Maldives GDP was negative was in the year 2005 which was -13.13% and in the year 2009 it was -7.23%. By the year 2023, the number of tourist arrivals started to escalate.

Maldives actively collaborates with international organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and participates in global tourism events to showcase its presence on the global tourism map. Another big attraction of the Maldives is the top-class facilities that offer budget accommodation to the most luxurious resorts in the world. International hotel chains such as Four Seasons, Conrad, and Anantara are some luxury partners that ensure a high standard of service and luxury. These hotel chains have made their mark in the Maldives. Many other resorts focus on sustainability, offering eco-friendly amenities and activities that help protect the environment and concentrate on providing travelers with a unique, immersive experience. The water activities such as snorkeling, diving, and sailing provide access to abundant marine life and rich coral reefs. It is also renowned as a famous honeymoon destination, offering solitude and privacy. The geographical aspect of Maldives makes it a strategic location, which is a short flight away from major Asian hubs such as India and China, have also made it a popular choice for travelers. The culture of Maldives plays an important role in attracting tourists because the Maldivian culture is shaped by South Asian, Arabic, and African influence, which is appropriately reflected in food, music, dance, and religious practice. Even though it is successful, tourism faces significant challenges in Maldives, such as climate change, increasing sea level, and coastal erosion, which endangers local and tourism infrastructure activities and living. Maldives entirely relies on tourism, which is a threat and is vulnerable to

global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturns.

Lakshadweep is a hidden jewel in India's tourism because it offers a blend of natural beauty, adventure tourism, culture, and sustainability. Lakshadweep is an archipelago consisting of 36 islands situated in the blue waters of the Indian Ocean. It is a paradise that has the least explored destinations in India. Lakshadweep is known for its clear blue water, beaches, coral reefs, and white sand, and more than all of these, this union territory has a vast treasure: its cultural richness and community spirit (1). The people of Lakshadweep are well known for their hospitality. In Lakshadweep, tourism is an economic activity and a bridge between cultures and the world. The name Lakshadweep translates to "a hundred thousand islands" – in Sanskrit. In Lakshadweep, there are only 10 inhabited islands with only a few accesses to tourism, but among these, the most popular island for visitors includes Agatti, Bangaram, and Kavaratti, each offering visitors a unique experience. Kavaratti, the capital of Lakshadweep, stands out because of its white sandy beaches and clear lagoons. This island has one of the prominent mosques, "Ujra Mosque." This island offers a glimpse of traditional Muslim culture, local crafts, traditional music, and coastal cuisine. Agatti Island is famous for its mesmerizing aerial view while flying into its tiny airport and its long stretch of gorgeous coral atolls surrounding the islands. Lakshadweep is attractive due to its vibrant marine life and adventure in water sports. The island boasts some of India's best scuba diving spots, where tourists can see and experience vibrant and vivid fishes, turtles, coral reefs, and marine life. When focusing on scuba diving, Kadmat Island is famous for its diving schools, which attract seasoned and beginner divers. Lakshadweep's tourism industry is unique because it focuses on sustainable and eco-friendly tourism. Plastic use is highly restricted in islands as they are sensitive and prone to environmental degradation, which affects their beauty. Compared to other beaches offering tourist destinations, Lakshadweep has limited tourist accommodation. Tourism diplomacy is important in international relations, especially for tourism-reliant countries. The tensions between India and the Maldives, which were prompted by statements by Maldivian officials after Prime Minister Narendra Modi

related Lakshadweep to tourism, illustrate the contradiction between tourism and diplomacy. Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, and Niche Diplomacy will help obtain more profound insights. Joseph Nye coined the term soft power to describe what he meant by influencing others through attraction instead of coercion (2). India promotes Lakshadweep as a tourist destination as it wants to promote the natural beauty of the islands as a way to promote India's global image by increasing tourism arrivals. Public diplomacy involves strategic communication with foreign public audiences (3). When Maldivian officials made negative statements about India, Indian public sentiment was outraged, which forced negative travel advisories and impacted Maldivian tourism. The public sentiment is representative of how tourism can disrupt public diplomacy in a very swift manner. After public outrage, the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry or MATI had to issue statements on the need for cordial relations, mainly with India, to save their economy. Niche diplomacy is when a state seeks to exploit its unique ability within a niche market. As a luxury island market, the Maldives developed a niche market, while India attempts to develop a market with Lakshadweep and has created its niche place, but with the added nuance of being boutique and private beach tourism experiences (4).

The article "Chinese Tourism Diplomacy: A Chinese-Style Modernity Perspective" examines outbound tourism as part of modern Chinese statecraft and as a diplomatic tool. It characterizes four central elements of China's tourism diplomacy: its economic utility, its ability to serve as a mechanism for reward or sanction, its flexibility in policy, and its ability to cohere with cultural diplomacy and assist in the image of China. These characteristics facilitate how tourism operates as a soft power tool with minimal political risk to reinforce China's global image and pursue its strategic interests. This model of tourism diplomacy provides a valuable tool for the comparative evaluation of tourism diplomacy in other regions. Using this comparison framework, a review of tourism-related diplomatic measures among South Asia and island nations reveals how regionalism encourages diplomacy and cooperation (5). Literature developed about Southeast Asian tourism policy and regional development emphasizes encouraging tourism

through regional cooperation and tourism as a site for community building for small island developing states (SIDS) and regional partners. Transnational collaboration about tourism between state and non-state actors has facilitated economic development, regional identity, and regional integration (6). These examples illustrate how tourism diplomacy connected to regionalism is also a multidimensional tool supporting soft power and regional solidarity for Global South nations.

The literature on tourism diplomacy and international relations reveals several key insights. A study has been conducted concerning Indonesia's diplomatic strategies to attract Indian tourists, highlighting the successful use of cultural similarities to enhance tourism. A literature review was conducted to assess the effectiveness of Indonesia's tourism diplomacy towards India. Tourism diplomacy fosters international relationships and breaks down complex interactions between countries through tourism, sports diplomacy, national pride, and nature (7). Bangladesh can leverage tourism diplomacy to attract international stakeholders by showcasing its tourism resources. According to this paper, the researchers investigated the evolution of Indo-Maldives relations, focusing on recent developments and the influence of China and Turkey (8). The origins and implications of the "India-out" slogan highlight the challenges faced by India's "Neighbourhood First Policy" and the impact of diplomatic tensions on bilateral relations. The potential of adventure tourism in India, focusing on Lakshadweep Island, has been evaluated in this research (9). The current state of development and the challenges in promoting adventure tourism, as well as insights for the government and international stakeholders on enhancing this sector, have been provided in their study. This research paper focuses on the intricate relationship between India and Maldives, and this study has examined the factors influencing their diplomacy (10). The changes in diplomatic strategies since the current Maldivian president took office and the impact of economic campaigns like "#boycott Maldives" and "India-out" on global perceptions and bilateral relations. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive overview of the role of tourism diplomacy in international relations and the specific dynamics between India and its neighboring countries. This article explored

and examined the relationship between tourism and peace, focusing on the role of cultural diplomacy and heritage management (11). This research article explored cultural diplomacy as a tool for international relations, spotlighting tourism as a key vehicle. Tourism promotes tourists to see other cultures at the destination and helps promote intercultural communication for world peace. The study highlights the importance of the government, private, and civil sectors in incorporating tourism into cultural diplomacy agendas. This study emphasized the necessity of proactive measures in policy-making and cultural exchanges, which help promote mutual respect and collaboration across different populations to achieve enduring peace. This article explains the importance of tourism as a soft power that acts as a diplomatic tool (12). This paper explored how tourism enhances a nation's reputation by promoting cultural diplomacy and hosting international events like the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Japan's "Cool Japan" initiative and other global events enhance Japan's image. This research study spotlighted the link between the roles of public diplomacy and economic goals to emphasize the role of tourism in encouraging international engagement. This research study concluded that properly integrating tourism with cultural elements, other events, and sports diplomacy will strengthen and maximize global influence. In this paper, the researchers assessed the major challenges that currently exist in Lakshadweep Island vis-à-vis the opportunities that would promote and boost ecotourism in Lakshadweep by keeping in mind environmental concerns and ecological conservation as the island is scarce in resources and traditional fisheries being relied on by the people (13). A primary focus is improving potable water and managing land-based pollution, including solid and sewage waste and biodiversity and fisheries conservation. This research paper examined Lakshadweep's sustainable tourism within the blue economy framework, balancing environmental conservation and economic growth (14). The carrying capacity of tourism has been evaluated, and a model has been suggested that considers the capacities of different islands in Lakshadweep. The study analyzed water quality and coral reef health as indicators to analyze the limits of acceptable change. Insights have been provided to policymakers to improve their

sustainability goals by aligning tourism strategies and enhancing welfare in Lakshadweep. This research paper investigated the involvement and influence of power and politics in shaping the sustainability of tourism in Maldives (15). The government's long-standing 'quality tourism' policy is often cited as the model for sustainable tourism, and concerns persist over different factors, such as economic inequalities and environmental degradation. This research emphasized the state's vital role in managing the competing interests of powerful tourism stakeholders. It underscores the importance of a balanced approach that combines sustainability and governance to ensure beneficial outcomes and minimize the negative impacts on the environment and the local community. The evolving relationship between tourism and diplomacy, which focuses on how tourists act as informal representatives, has been investigated. This includes a roundtable discussion with six scholars (16). The historical importance of tourism in terms of cultural diplomacy, international relations, and soft power has also been investigated in this study. This paper spotlights tourism's role in improving economic development and shaping national perceptions, using case studies on geopolitics from various contexts. This study provides a broader understanding of the impact on foreign policy and global engagement by analyzing tourism as a diplomatic tool. The relationship between tourism and classical diplomacy focusing on how tourism strengthens bilateral relations between Israel and Tanzania has been analyzed (17). A case study approach has been used to investigate how tourism is important for fostering geopolitical cooperation, economic diplomacy, and political support. This study highlighted Tanzania's effort to attract tourists to Israel as a part of its diplomatic strategy, leading to increased engagement between the two nations. This paper analyzes the impact of tourism on international relations and contributes to the growing literature on the important role tourism plays in diplomacy and economic development. According to this research paper, the evolving geopolitical tension in the Indian Ocean focuses on India's strategic interest in Lakshadweep and Maldives and China's growing influence (18). The overall impact of behavioral changes from the side of the Maldives and India's naval expansion in Lakshadweep and the broader

regional security issues with India and China has been examined. This study spotlights the concern over a potential threat to the vital sea routes and the dangers of piracy, terrorism, and instability. According to India's "Neighbourhood First Policy," this paper explored the diplomatic strategies to overcome and counter China's influence while analyzing the investment pattern by both the nations in Maldives and their implication for India's national security (19).

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because tourism diplomacy in the Indian Ocean consists of a multi-layered analysis of the intersection of different aspects, such as culture, geopolitical, and economic interests. The Indian Ocean plays an important role as it is a region that has diverse cultures because of the countries situated in the ocean region. It not only has cultural diversity but also plays an important role in terms of vital sea routes. Tourism diplomacy fosters good relations with countries and advances in economic interest. The study will also provide insights to policymakers, stakeholders, and scholars present in the tourism industry to build and improve tourism aspects such as adventure tourism, residual stays for tourists, and waste management, which not only create tourist attraction but also ensure job opportunities for the locals in that area.

This research evaluates the effects of the recent diplomatic tensions between India and the Maldives on the Maldivian tourism sector, focusing primarily on the steep reduction of Indian tourist arrivals due to the controversy and social media backlash. Since India is a valuable source market, the implications are significant. The study also provides several actionable recommendations for policymakers, such as tourism diplomacy, diversification of source markets, crisis communication, and regional cooperation. These recommendations have implications for potential action to foster tourism resilience, honor economic stability, and broaden and enhance diplomacy, especially in the Indian Ocean Region.

### Methodology

This study is descriptive cum analytical in nature. Only Secondary data is used for the study. Secondary data is collected from the Tourism Ministry of Maldives, Lakshadweep Tourism, and CEIC Data. Statistical tools used for the study are the Compound Annual Growth Index, Mean, SD, One Way Anova, Post Hoc Test, and Simple Diagram.

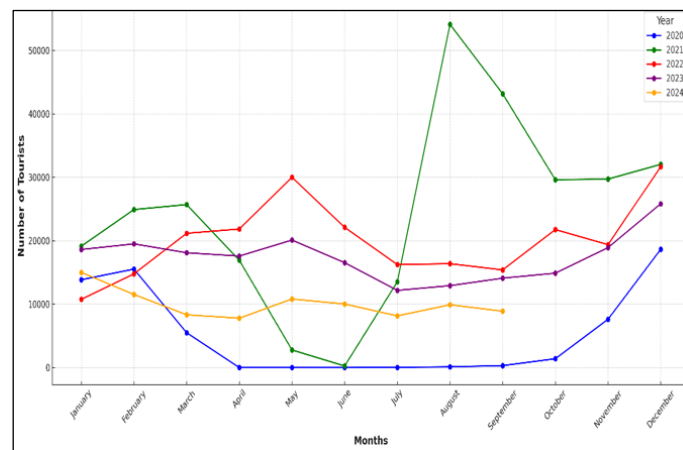
### Results

According to the data in Table 1 which shows the tourist arrival from India to Maldives, and according to the data in Table 2 showcases the tourist arrival. Figure 1 (Indian Tourist Arrival) and Figure 2 (Tourist Arrival from China) illustrate the monthly trend of tourist arrival. The tourism sector in the Maldives went through numerous shifts in tourist arrivals from 2020 to 2024, mainly due to a global health crisis and regional geopolitical conditions. In 2020 high levels of global disruption was occurred due to COVID-19, primarily due to persisting global lockdowns, curtailing mobility, and bans on international travel. The global situation and its effects on travel caused significant declines in all tourist arrivals in the Maldives, with severe social consequences in the country where tourism forms the majority of domestic consumption. The recovery was notable in 2021, as travel returned internationally with the easing of pandemic restrictions. The patterns of recovery varied by country. The data show that India was emerging as a primary contributor to Maldives' tourism, with an average of 24,315.58 arrivals in the year. Most noticeably, China was a traditionally important source market that had not yet started the easing of travel restrictions and social mobility restrictions, contributing only an average of 186.5 arrivals in 2021. In 2022, total Indian tourist arrivals decreased slightly from 2,91,787 in 2021 to 2,41,382, so India remained the most significant source market.

**Table 1:** Tourist Arrival from India in Maldives (2020-2024)

Months	2020	% in 2020	2021	% in 2021	2022	% in 2022	2023	% in 2023	2024	% in 2024
January	13845	21.99	19135	6.56	10750	4.45	18612	8.90	15003	16.60
February	15521	24.65	24905	8.54	14770	6.12	19497	9.32	11522	12.75

March	5496	8.73	25690	8.80	21163	8.77	18099	8.65	8322	9.21
April	1	0.00	16918	5.80	21839	9.05	17577	8.40	7780	8.61
May	1	0.00	2776	0.95	29991	12.42	20098	9.61	10807	11.96
June	0.00	0.00	251	0.09	22103	9.16	16532	7.90	10017	11.08
July	31	0.05	13520	4.63	16229	6.72	12168	5.82	8149	9.02
August	115	0.18	54094	18.54	16375	6.78	12912	6.17	9905	10.96
September	308	0.49	43160	14.79	15393	6.38	14092	6.74	8884	9.83
October	1396	2.22	29603	10.15	21750	9.01	14879	7.11	NA	NA
November	7609	12.09	29708	10.18	19375	8.03	18905	9.04	NA	NA
December	18637	29.60	32027	10.98	31644	13.11	25822	12.34	NA	NA
SUM	62960		291787		241382		209193		90389	
AVERAGE	5247		24315		20115		17432		10043	

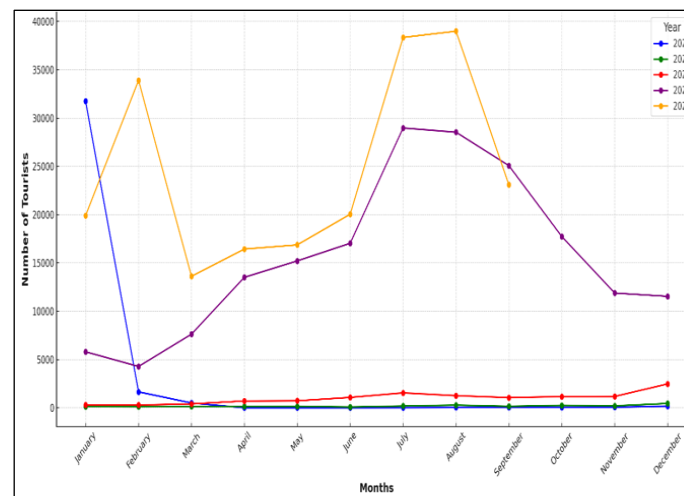


**Figure 1:** Tourist Arrival from India in the Maldives (2020-2024)

**Table 2:** Tourist Arrival from China in Maldives (2020-2024)

Months	2020	% in 2020	2021	% in 2021	2022	% in 2022	2023	% in 2023	2024	% in 2024
January	31744	92.70	122	5.45	290	2.39	5,796	3.00	19,895	9.00
February	1647	4.81	108	4.83	282	2.33	4,276	2.00	33896	15.33
March	498	1.45	132	5.90	399	3.29	7619	4.00	13608	6.15
April	0	0.00	142	6.34	705	5.81	13504	7.00	16427	7.43
May	0	0.00	149	6.66	726	5.99	15204	8.00	16864	7.63
June	0	0.00	85	3.80	1071	8.83	17028	9.00	20036	9.06
July	16	0.05	181	8.09	1544	12.74	28964	15.00	38338	17.34

August	34	0.10	273	12.20	1253	10.33	28530	15.00	38987	17.63
September	33	0.10	153	6.84	1054	8.69	25065	13.00	23093	10.44
October	41	0.12	247	11.04	1157	9.54	17726	9.00	NA	NA
November	61	0.18	199	8.89	1175	9.69	11880	6.00	NA	NA
December	171	0.50	447	19.97	2468	20.36	11533	6.00	NA	NA
SUM	34245		2238		12124		1,87,125		2,21,144	
AVERAGE	2853.75		186.5		1010.33		15593.75		24571.56	



**Figure 2:** Tourist Arrival from China in the Maldives (2020-2024)

On the other hand, China experienced a marked increase in arrivals, increasing from 2,238 in 2021 to 12,124 in 2022, and its average monthly arrivals increased from 186.5 to 1,010.33, indicating that the outbound travel from China had gradually resumed. In 2023, there was further divergence between both countries (Table 2). India experienced a drop in total tourist arrivals to 2,09,193, while its average monthly arrivals fell to 17,432.8 from 20,115.17 in 2022. China's tourist arrivals soared to a total of 1,87,125 due to the total lifting of travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic, and the year 2024 represented a watershed moment not associated with health-related issues but, instead, with diplomatic discord between India and the Maldives. The dust-up over Maldivian officials' disparaging remarks about the

Prime Minister of India sparked an immediate boycott of the Maldives by Indian tourists. In 2023, there were 2,09,193 arrivals from India compared to a 2024 total of 90,389, (Table 1) indicating the negative economic impacts of the diplomatic rift. Conversely, the number of tourist arrivals from China continued to trend upward from an average monthly total of 15,593.75 in 2023 to 24,571.566 in 2024 (Figure 2). These events illustrate the changing geopolitical and tourism landscape of the Indian Ocean and the effects of diplomatic relations on tourism flows. At the intersection of tourism and diplomacy, the statistics show that geopolitical events can shape and pivot tourist behaviour and, in many cases, economies in national settings, particularly on the islands that depend on tourism, such as the Maldives.

**Table 3:** Mean and Standard Deviation of Tourist Arrival from China to the Maldives (2020-2024)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation
2020	2853.750	9110.197
2021	186.500	98.762

2022	1010.333	611.990
2023	15593.750	8338.862
2024**	24571.556	9841.447
Total	8015.368	11383.817

Notes: \*\* For the Months of October, November, and December, Tourist Arrivals are Calculated Based on Projection

Table 3 indicates the measure of central tendency and is analyzed based on tourist arrival from China from 2020-2024. In 2020, the mean value was 2853.75, with a high SD of 9110.1972. This indicates that there is variability in the data. The mean value and SD are anomalously low compared to other years; this decline is due to the pandemic. In the years 2022, 2023, and 2024, both the mean value and SD through the years (Table 3). The sharp increase in tourist arrivals from China is visible in Maldives.

### Null Hypothesis

No significant difference exists between tourists in the Maldives from China in the last five years. Table 4 shows that there is a significant difference in tourist arrival between the groups being compared. The data strongly showed genuine differences in tourist arrivals, which means that some factors attract tourists more than others.

**Table 4:** One-Way ANOVA Test for Tourist Arrivals in Maldives from China in the Last Five Years (2020-2024)

Tourist Arrival					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P value
Between Groups	4800196425	4	1200049106	25.399	<0.001**
Within Groups	2456915254	52	47248370.28		
Total	7257111679	56			

Notes: \*\* Denotes P-Value Less Than 0.01

**Table 5:** Post Hoc Tukey Test (2020-2024) – Chinese Tourist Arrival to the Maldives

KEY HSD						
Year	(J) Year	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
2020	2021	2667.25	2806.19	0.876	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	2022	1843.41667	2806.19	0.965	-5262.471	10596.971
	2023	-12740.00000*	2806.19	<0.001**	-6086.3044	9773.1377
	2024	-21717.80556*	3031.04	<0.001**	-20669.721	-4810.279
2021	2020	-2667.25	2806.19	0.876	-30282.8832	-13152.7279
	2022	-823.83333	2806.19	0.998	-10596.971	5262.471
	2023	-15407.25000*	2806.19	<0.001**	-8753.5544	7105.8877
	2024	-24385.05556*	3031.04	<0.001**	-23336.971	-7477.529
2022	2020	-1843.41667	2806.19	0.965	-32950.1332	-15819.9779
	2021	823.83333	2806.19	0.998	-9773.1377	6086.3044
	2023	-14583.41667*	2806.19	<0.001**	-7105.8877	8753.5544
	2024	-23561.22222*	3031.04	<0.001**	-22513.1377	-6653.6956
2023	2020	12740.00000*	2806.19	<0.001**	-32126.2999	-14996.1446
	2021	15407.25000*	2806.19	<0.001**	4810.279	20669.721
	2022	14583.41667*	2806.19	<0.001**	7477.529	23336.971
	2024	-8977.80556*	3031.04	0.036	6653.6956	22513.1377



2024	2020	21717.80556*	3031.04	<0.001**	13152.7279	30282.8832
	2021	24385.05556*	3031.04	<0.001**	15819.9779	32950.1332
	2022	23561.22222*	3031.04	<0.001**	14996.1446	32126.2999
	2023	8977.80556*	3031.04	0.036	412.7279	17542.8832

Notes: \*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 5 summarizes the results of the post hoc Tukey test, which revealed significant differences in tourist arrivals from China in the years 2020 through 2022 and in the years 2023 and 2024 (p value <0.05). In particular, the results suggested that tourist arrivals from China in the years 2020, 2021, and 2022 were overall significantly less than the number of tourist arrivals in 2023 and 2024. This difference is primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on global travel during the earlier years; there was a significant resurgence in tourist arrivals from China in 2023 and 2024. The resurgence of tourist arrivals following China's relaxation of travel restrictions and established policies promoting international tourism was to be expected. Therefore, the arrival of Chinese tourists was also aided by the alignment of the Maldivian government with China through an increase in direct flights and visa facilitation for Chinese tourists. Conversely, the same period saw a

significant decrease of Indian tourists in the Maldives due to the deteriorating diplomatic relations between India and the Maldives, including incidences of derogatory comments made by Maldivian officials, followed by calls for boycotts of tourism from India. Clearly, these geopolitical events have shifted the tourist landscape in the Maldives, with China supplanting India as the largest source of tourists to the Maldives in 2024.

Table 6 shows the measure of central tendency and is analyzed based on tourist arrival from 2020-2024. According to the 2020 data, the mean value was 5246.6667, and SD was 7004.89353. In 2021, the mean value showed 24315.5833 and an SD of 15379.35031. In 2022, the mean value showed 20115.1667 and an SD of 6100.33379. In 2023, the mean value showed 17432.75 and SD of 3722.35778. In 2024, the mean value showed 10043.2222 and SD of 2247.38691.

**Table 6:** Mean and Standard Deviation of Tourist Arrival from India to Maldives (2020-2024)

Year	Mean	Std. Deviation
2020	5246.667	7004.894
2021	24315.583	15379.350
2022	20115.167	6100.334
2023	17432.750	3722.358
2024**	10043.222	2247.387
Total	15714.228	10776.660

Notes: \*\* For the Months of October, November, and December, Tourist Arrivals are Calculated Based on Projection

**Table 7:** One-way ANOVA Test for Tourist Arrivals in Maldives from China, in the Last Five Years (2020-2024)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2759939553	4	689984888.2	9.584	<0.001**
Within Groups	3743698643	52	71994204.67		
Total	6503638196	56			

Notes: \*\* Denotes p-value Less than 0.01

**Table 8:** Post Hoc Test (2020-2024) – Indian Tourist Arrival to Maldives

(I) YEAR	(J) YEAR	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		(I-J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2020	2021	-19068.91667*	3463.9622	<0.001**	-28857.3517	-9280.4817

	2022	-14868.50000*	3463.9622	0.001	-24656.935	-5080.065
	2023	-12186.08333*	3463.9622	0.008	-21974.5183	-2397.6483
	2024	-4796.55556	3741.5068	0.703	-15369.2737	5776.1626
2021	2020	19068.91667*	3463.9622	<0.001**	9280.4817	28857.3517
	2022	4200.41667	3463.9622	0.744	-5588.0183	13988.8517
	2023	6882.83333	3463.9622	0.287	-2905.6017	16671.2683
	2024	14272.36111*	3741.5068	0.003	3699.6429	24845.0793
2022	2020	14868.50000*	3463.9622	0.001**	5080.065	24656.935
	2021	-4200.41667	3463.9622	0.744	-13988.8517	5588.0183
	2023	2682.41667	3463.9622	0.937	-7106.0183	12470.8517
	2024	10071.94444	3741.5068	0.069	-500.7737	20644.6626
	2020	12186.08333*	3463.9622	0.008**	2397.6483	21974.5183
2023	2021	-6882.83333	3463.9622	0.287	-16671.2683	2905.6017
	2022	-2682.41667	3463.9622	0.937	-12470.8517	7106.0183
	2024	7389.52778	3741.5068	0.292	-3183.1904	17962.246
	2020	4796.55556	3741.5068	0.703	-5776.1626	15369.2737
2024	2021	-14272.36111*	3741.5068	0.003**	-24845.0793	-3699.6429
	2022	-10071.9444	3741.5068	0.069	-20644.6626	500.7737
	2023	-7389.52778	3741.5068	0.292	-17962.246	3183.1904

Notes: \* The mean Difference is Significant at the 0.05 Level

## Null Hypothesis

There is no significant difference between tourists in the Maldives from India in the last five years.

Table 7 indicates that there has been a significant decrease in tourist arrivals from India to the Maldives. This analysis strongly agrees that due to some factors, tourism was broadly affected, and the number of arrivals decreased.

Table 8 shows the findings of a Tukey post hoc analysis of Indian tourist arrivals to the Maldives between 2020 and 2024. Statistically significant differences lie in tourist numbers present in 2020 and tourist numbers in 2021, tourist numbers in 2022, and visitor numbers in 2023 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The differences in tourist arrivals indicate a statistically significant increase in tourist numbers after the initial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The notable change is the factor of year, where in 2024 the number of arrivals greatly decreased to significantly fewer tourists than recorded in 2021 ( $p = 0.003$ ). This decline in arrivals sees an inverse trend to the prior years studied, both of which have seen increases. Four and two years after pandemic

interruptions, and currently experiencing a drop indicates an change in trend, yet the differences in tourist numbers between 2024 and 2022 ( $p = 0.069$ ) and also in tourist arrivals between 2024 and 2023 ( $p = 0.292$ ) is not statistically significant, suggesting that the decreased tourist numbers in 2024 may not differ meaningfully from those two years.

This substantial decline in tourist arrivals in 2024 can be linked back to ongoing diplomatic tensions between India and the Maldives that began toward the end of 2023. These tensions led to the observed downturn in Indian tourist arrivals for the following year with estimates between 33% to 38% overall decline reported. This significant example highlights the considerable influence and volatility that geopolitical events have on the tourism industry.

## Discussion

The Maldives is a country that entirely relies on tourism; during the pandemic, India gave the Maldives financial support to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19. In the year 2020, due to the pandemic and global restrictions, the overall tourist arrival was significantly lower and minimal, and in the years

2021, 2022 and 2023, there was a significant increase in Indian tourists in Maldives. Due to geopolitical tension between India and Maldives, there was a notable decrease in Indian tourists in the year 2024, resulting in a significant mean drop in Indian arrivals. Historically, rapid economic growth has also impacted migrations for outbound tourism purposes and exhibited pronounced seasonality. The original study examined tourist arrivals from Hong Kong and Singapore to Australia, which may offer insights into tourist flow for India-Maldives tourism. There is a regular seasonal inflow of Indian tourists visiting the Maldives. However, recent tensions in diplomatic relations—including the "India-Out" campaign and disputes over Lakshadweep—have begun to disrupt this inner flow of tourism. The situation demonstrates that other geopolitical issues can disrupt established tourism flows. This is a relevant issue that draws attention to the importance tourism diplomacy has on maintaining flows of regional tourism and soft power influence from the Indian Ocean (20). Tukey HSD test revealed a significant mean difference in 2020, 2021, and the subsequent years and an intense highlight of a considerable decline in 2024 tourist arrivals. The number of Chinese tourists arrived significantly low during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the country started its gradual recovery as restrictions started to lift. A significant resurgence of Chinese tourist arrival in 2023 as travel bans lifted. An exceptional increase in Chinese tourists was seen, especially during the diplomatic tension between India and Maldives. A significant increase in Chinese support was seen during geopolitical tension with India.

### Implications of the Study

The recent geopolitical tensions between India and the Maldives have, in effect, created a renewed interest in Lakshadweep as a tourist destination. The salacious and disparaging comments from some officials of the Maldivian government have severely impacted tourism diplomacy in the Indian Ocean region. Historically, tourists from India are the predominant market for tourists in Maldives, but this has dropped appreciably in arrivals, effectively creating an economic circumstance in Maldives, a country whose GDP depends on tourism. Geopolitical relations are important to bilateral strengthening, especially with China's prominence in the Maldives. This security document also presents a partnership opportunity for furthering bilateral relations with China while the diplomatic relations between India and the Maldives have strained as China expands its Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI). Moreover, the administration of President Mohamed Muizzu has increased its economic reliance on Chinese investment in infrastructure, financial aid, and debt financing, thus creating uncertainties over whether it has shifted the Maldives strategically. The case of Sri Lanka and the Hambantota Port ending up in a debt trap comes to mind. These matters underscore the dual use of Chinese infrastructure projects for civilian and military purposes. The Maldivian government's lack of diplomatic prudence also reaffirms the importance of government officials being responsible in their political speech, as incendiary remarks could threaten diplomatic relationships and the delicate economies of small island states.

The controversy over Lakshadweep and the Maldives offers an important window through which to evaluate India's Act East Policy, maritime diplomacy, and Indo-Pacific strategy's strategic dimensions. The Act East Policy, developed in 2014 as a strategic shift from the Look East Policy, aims to further India's engagement with Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific, applying a holistic approach to trade, connectivity, cultural relations, and security cooperation. In this mix, tourism as a means of diplomacy constitutes an important but usually understated component of India's regional strategy. The Maldives has become more closely aligned with China's strategic objectives, evidenced by recent electoral success by pro-Beijing actors and an uptick in Chinese-sponsored infrastructure projects, producing great-power competition in the Indian Ocean. In response, India seems to have repositioned the strategic and symbolic value of Lakshadweep. The commissioning of INS Jatayu by the Indian navy on Minicoy Island bolsters India's maritime surveillance and defence capability while enhancing India's stature in Lakshadweep as a high-quality, sustainable tourism destination, perhaps a less evident manifestation of tourism diplomacy. This dual-purpose approach exemplifies how India's maritime and tourism strategies intersect within the larger Indo-Pacific framework. Tourism is an economic activity and a strategic tool for soft power, influence, and regional engagement.

### Conclusion

This research confirms that tourism is, and continues to be, the engine of the Maldivian economy, both in terms of its contribution to GDP and its primary source of revenue. A recent episode of diplomatic tensions between India and the Maldives—due to promotional

efforts pointing to Lakshadweep as a possible alternative tourist destination and statements by some Maldivian officials—demonstrates how sensitive tourism can be regarding bilateral relations. The situation saw a noticeable reduction of Indian tourist arrivals, an important portion of Maldives tourism in the past, and an increase in tourist arrivals from China—indicative of changing geopolitical interests for the Indian Ocean region. Although India seeks to develop Lakshadweep's potential for tourism as a sovereign economic strategy, it certainly creates reasonable concerns for the Maldives, which has not yet fully recovered from the economic impacts of COVID-19 (21). Such a diversion of international tourist flows – particularly from the regional partners – creates serious risks. This situation called for a higher level of diplomatic discretion. A public, more restrained response from the Maldivian officials may have been appropriate given India's significant historical support, including monetary, medical supplies, and other support during COVID and beyond.

Even though some tensions may arise in the short term, the long history of India-Maldives relations has been characterized by connection and mutual support. While both states have shifting relations in the region, we can still rely upon tourism diplomacy to promote connection rather than frailty. These two states can reinforce socio-economic connections between their peoples, promote mutual trust and social cohesion, and develop positive contributions toward achieving the sustainable development goals of the Indian Ocean region by promoting togetherness through shared regional tourism and development.

## Abbreviations

GDP: Gross Domestic Product, INS: Indian Naval Ship, MATI: Maldives Association of Tourism Industry, SIDS: Small Island Developing States, UNWTO: United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

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## Author Contributions

Padmakanth PS: Conceptualized the study and developed the research framework, data collection, and analysis. Namitha Sreekumar: Responsible for collecting and reviewing the literature. Dr. Prasanth AP: Contributed to proofreading and assisted in

interpreting the data. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## Ethics Approval

Not Applicable.

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