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ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

India's Neighbourhood Dilemmas

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INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD DILEMMAS

In Context

- According to experts, there are a few dilemmas that India faces in the neighbourhood.

India's Neighbourhood dilemmas

- **Anti-India regimes:**
 - ♦ The rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia such as the one in the Maldives where the new government is effectively asking Indian troops stationed in the island nation to leave.
 - ♦ A Khaleda Zia-led government in Bangladesh, planning to contest elections early next year, could also turn out to be ideologically anti-India.
- **Growing influence of China:**
 - ♦ The second type of dilemma India faces in the neighbourhood is structural, resulting from China's growing influence in South Asia.
 - The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** and **other Chinese projects**.
 - **China's desire to settle border disputes** with its neighbours (excluding India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.
- **India's one-track policy approach:**
 - ♦ India's policy stance, according to experts, exhibits a deep-seated status quo bias when it comes to dealing with the region's domestic politics and the multiplicity of actors/power centres therein.
 - ♦ However, such a one-track policy generates path-dependencies often alienating other centres of power or opposition leaders.
- **Asia minus Pakistan approach:**
 - ♦ There has, for some time, been a strong belief in India that South Asia minus Pakistan would be amenable to Indian geopolitical reasoning.
 - ♦ It also prompted an attempt to deal proactively with South Asia without Pakistan.
 - ♦ However, in retrospect, this policy has not exactly panned out that way India imagined.
- **Liability of 'cultural' aspect:**
 - ♦ India approached the neighbourhood with the idea that India's special relationship with the region rooted in culture, soft power, history and ethnicity would help the country deal with the neighbourhood better than those without intimate knowledge of the region, for example, China.
 - ♦ However, according to experts, India's culture-connect with its neighbours has indeed become a liability in the conduct of foreign policy towards them.

India's "Act East Asia" Policy

- Announced in November **2014** is a diplomatic initiative to promote **economic, strategic and cultural relations** with the **vast Asia-Pacific region** at different levels.
- It involves **intensive engagement** with Southeast Asian countries in the fields of:
 - ♦ Connectivity, trade, culture, defence and people-to-people-contact at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels.

Significance of East Asia:

- **Eastern countries:**
 - ♦ The eastern region of Asia consists of the **Asian nations, Greater China** (Greater China consists of the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan), Japan, Mongolia, North Korea and South Korea.
- **Regional Security:**
 - ♦ Considering tension on the Korean Peninsula, South China and in the Taiwan Strait, among others, it is vital for Japan, China and South Korea to maintain a common stance and to share a common concern for security in the East Asian region.

- **Economic benefit:**
 - ♦ It represents nearly **50 per cent of the world's population** with **20 percent of global trade**, and comprising **16 nations** that are on a dynamic path of economic development.
- **Global Implications:**
 - ♦ An East Asia community would play a big role in instilling a sense of responsibility in Asian countries and in leading them jointly in contributing to the **resolution of global issues**.

Causes of Rise of China vis-à-vis India

- **Acting as a 'geopolitical buffer':**
 - ♦ The aggressive and astounding rise of China has come as a **'geopolitical buffer'**, for the smaller states in the region.
 - ♦ In one of the least interconnected regions in the world, with **mostly underdeveloped nations**, it is natural that the inhabitants of the region will tilt towards a power with the **ability to cater to their material needs**.
 - With India's ability to meet those needs being limited, China is that power.
- **Culturally easier:**
 - ♦ India historically enjoyed unrivalled primacy in the region.
 - ♦ Today, the **downside** of being the **resident power in South Asia** — with all its attendant cultural, ethnic, refugee and other spillovers — is felt more sharply than being the primary power.
 - ♦ China, on the other hand, is the region's non-resident power which benefits from the absence of complications — ethnic, linguistic, religious — arising out of being a resident power.
- **Reaching crisis hit regions:**
 - ♦ Beijing's outreach to South Asian states when the rest of the international community is unable to reach them — as was the case with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar and crisis-hit Sri Lanka.
 - ♦ India does too, but the overall impact of China's outreach is far higher than that of India primarily as a function of deeper pockets.

Suggestions & way ahead

- **Acknowledging changing dynamics:**
 - ♦ It is time India made a mental switch and acknowledged that South Asia and its balance of power have changed fundamentally.
 - Old South Asia where India enjoyed primacy no longer exists.
 - ♦ India's neighbours and periphery **also includes China's influence**.
 - Such a realistic and pragmatic framing would help India deal with the reality as it is rather than working with the mental frame of Indian primacy which is long gone.
- **Need of more diplomats:**
 - ♦ India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits.
 - ♦ The glaring shortage of sufficient diplomats to implement the foreign policy of a country of 1.4 billion people will **prove to be India's single most crucial challenge going forward**.
 - ♦ The more India's role in world affairs grows, the more the shortage of personnel will be felt by us and others.
- **Befriending external actors:**
 - ♦ New Delhi must proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region.
 - ♦ That is the only way to deal with the impending possibility of the region becoming Sino-centric.
 - ♦ Dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power could be a bad policy.

- **Need of flexible diplomacy:**
 - ♦ Indian diplomacy must be flexible enough to engage multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries.
 - ♦ The art of diplomacy is not about hating the anti-India elements in the neighbourhood, but, instead, lessening their anti-India attitude.

Mains Practice Question

- Q. Dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power could be a bad policy. Examine in context of India's diplomacy engagements with South Asian countries.**

