China at Indian Sea - Shiyan Incident

What is the issue?

- Indian Navy, reportedly, "chased out" a Chinese vessel named 'Shiyan 1' from the Andaman Sea.
- This has drawn India's attention to China's growing maritime scientific capabilities and its ambitious research agenda for distant waters.

What happened?

- Shiyan 1 was operating near Port Blair.
- It had neither taken prior permission from India nor did it inform the relevant Indian authorities of its plans.
- Shiyan 1 is operated by the Chinese Academy of Sciences.
- It is part of Beijing's growing marine research fleet that now stands at about 50 vessels.

What is China's stance?

- China accepted that Shiyan 1 was indeed "conducting acoustic propagation experiments and hydrologic environment measurements on the high seas of the Indian Ocean".
- However, it insisted that Shiyan 1 did not conduct any operations in the Indian EEZ (exclusive economic zone) during the whole process.
- It only sailed through the Indian EEZ on the way to and from the experimental area.
- Also, throughout the ship's voyage, the Indian navy aircraft followed it with warnings and its crew also replied in accordance with international practice.
- Notably, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) favours freedom of marine scientific research.
- It also lets coastal states decide on granting permission for marine scientific research by other entities in their exclusive economic zones.
- In this context, China maintains that it was merely asserting its rights.
- It also expressed hope that Delhi would take a correct view of China's marine scientific research activities.

What is India's real concern then?

- The issue is not a technical one about the provisions of the law of the sea.

- It is instead about China's growing maritime scientific ambition.
- Beijing's expansive investment in marine scientific research is very much part of its rise as a great maritime power.
- China has leveraged marine science diplomacy to good effect in the South China Sea over the last many years.
- It has now begun to extend it to the Indian Ocean.
- In 2018, Shiyan-3 invited Pakistan scientists to join a research expedition in the Arabian Sea.
- Delhi must expect to see more of this in the Indian Ocean littoral.

What are the legal challenges in this regard?

- There are many grey areas in the law of the sea.
- These include the conduct of maritime scientific research in the waters that other states have sovereign control over.
- Great powers, rising or incumbent, tend to interpret international law to suit their interests and convenience.
- Weaker ones have no way of enforcing their rights under UNCLOS.
- More broadly, it is difficult to separate marine scientific research for peaceful and military purposes.

How does this apply in the Shiyan 1 case?

- Shiyan 1 now operates as part of the so-called "national fleet" for marine scientific research.
- Earlier this decade, China consolidated its marine research activities.
- In this regard, it brought together multiple governmental agencies, ministries and commercial entities like oil companies under one administrative framework.
- It will also closely align research with larger maritime goals, civilian and military, set by the party-state.
- In the past, China's marine science research was confined to near seas in the Western Pacific.
- It now extends to seas all around the world.
- About half of the marine scientific fleet is reportedly devoted to distant seas.

What are Chinese objectives for the national science fleet?

- Experts on the Chinese navy identify at least four broad objectives for the national science fleet:
- 1) To map the sea-bed resources of the world's oceans.
- China has internationally sanctioned licences to explore sea-bed mining in a few areas including in the South-western Indian Ocean.

- 2) To develop large ocean databases that facilitate Chinese naval operations by providing accurate maritime domain awareness.
- 3) To use its national fleet for science diplomacy that adds to building productive maritime and naval cooperation with coastal states across the world.
- 4) It also lets China set the rules for global marine scientific research.
- All major naval powers through history have sought to leverage marine scientific research to broader national objectives, both civilian and military.

What is the need now for India?

- The Shiyan incident is a useful reminder to India on the need to invest more in maritime scientific research.
- India needs to strengthen its own national capabilities in this regard.
- Besides this, it should also deepen its scientific cooperation with its partners in the maritime domain.
- Along with the US, Japan, Australia and France, India should develop mechanisms for collaborative research in maritime scientific domain.
- This would provide a sound basis for eventual engagement with China on marine scientific research.

Source: Indian Express

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