Forked Tongue Strategy: China's dealings with ASEAN

What is the issue?

The recent incidents in the South China Sea particularly with respect to maritime spaces with the ASEAN states, shows the Chinese ability to speak with a forked tongue.

How China’s action looks forked tongue?

- On one hand China tries to elevate ASEAN-China ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).
- On the other hand China frequently violates the maritime territorial boundaries with these states as claimed under UNCLOS through naval incursions and blockade.
- Both these actions go against each other when it comes to bilateral relationship of China with ASEAN countries.

Is China a reliable partner for ASEAN countries?

- The ASEAN and China concluded a Special Summit to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the ASEAN-China Dialogue Relations.
- The elevation of the ASEAN-China ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) must be seen within the context of recent incidents in the South China Sea.
- China’s action is evident enough to say that it is not willing to move towards a more binding Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.
- Increasingly, Beijing is trying to push the normative order, particularly in regards to the maritime spaces with the ASEAN states.

Why ASEAN countries view Beijing with suspicion?

- **Philippines -** The summit took place in the background of a stand-off between Beijing and the Philippines over the Second Thomas Shoal (Ayungin Shoal).
- It is a territory contested since 1999.
- The stand-off took place over the Philippines efforts to deliver supplies to its defence personnel stationed on this shoal.
- A stranded vessel (Sierra Madre) at Ayungin Shoal has been a bone of

contention.

- The stationing of Philippines troops there has been to ensure that incursions from China do not go undetected.
- Filipino Secretary of State Teodoro Locsin, stated that restricting the movement of Filipino naval vessels goes against Article 4 of the Philippines-United States Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT).
- He stated that Ayungin Shoal was an integral part of the Philippines. The region falls under the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Philippines, which is clearly recognised under the tenets of the UNCLOS.
- Chinese assertions do not recognise UNCLOS and are based on its claims to the nine-dash line that covers almost 80% of the South China Sea waters as its own.
- China has even rejected the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2016.
- **Indonesia –** China has objected to the Indonesian oil exploration near Natuna islands in the north Natuna Sea, which Beijing calls the South China Sea.
- The friction with China over the Natuna region has been evident since 2014.
- Indonesia has also been repeatedly highlighting the relevance of international law and the UNCLOS.
- Indonesia's response was augmenting its defence capabilities around the Natuna archipelago.

How should we view the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)?

- The elevation of the ASEAN-China ties to CSP will remain merely rhetorical.
- The incursions by the Chinese into Indonesian waters in the aftermath of the AUKUS deal made Indonesia express its concerns over the impending arms race in the regional waters.
- But during the East Asia Summit (EAS) in October 2021, the ASEAN raised the level of its ties with Australia to CSP
- This belied the view that there were strained relations with Australia post the AUKUS deal.
- So the CSP in itself may be seen as a form of diplomatic leverage, with little or no binding impact.
- A close reading of the Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the summit reveals four core areas of challenge in the China-ASEAN ties
    1. ASEAN claims to reaffirm the principles of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

2. Mutual respect under international law which is negated by China's repeated incursions;
3. Commitment to the UNCLOS, which has also been repeatedly violated by China;
4. Moving towards a Code of Conduct (COC) based on the principles enshrined in UNCLOS, which is unlikely.

Reference

1. https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2021/dec/05/forked-tongue-strategy-chinas-dealings-with-asean-2392193.html

