Geopolitical Challenges in South-Asia

What is the issue?

- The nature and dynamics of South-Asian geopolitics are undergoing a radical transformation.
- India needs to see through many balancing acts to deal with the regional tensions.

What is the geo-political scenario in South-Asia?

- South Asia has been one of the world's most volatile regions and hitherto dominated by the United States.
- The region is now at a transformative stage with far-reaching implications for the states in the region, including India.
- Russia and China are jointly and individually challenging the U.S.'s pre-eminence and influencing the smaller countries in the region.
- The resultant geopolitical competition for space, power and influence is undoing the traditional geopolitical certainties in South-Asia.
- History shows that a favourable unipolarity or a balanced multipolarity with some amount of great power contribution is generally better than unbalanced multipolarity.
- Unbalanced multipolarity when combined with a situation of power transition (the case now with South-Asia) might be destabilising.

How does the China pivot work here?

- U.S.'s role as the regional pivot and power manager is becoming a thing of the past with China gradually taking the spot.
- Regional geopolitics, from Iran to Central Asia and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean region, is increasingly being shaped by China.
- When new powers are on an ascendance, its neighbours tend to recalibrate their policies and old partnerships and alliances.

What are the other features of this regional power play?

- **Trust deficit** - There is a presence of an extreme trust deficit among the various actors in the region.
- There is, for long, the trust deficit between India and Pakistan, and China

and India.

- But beside this, trust deficit exists between even seemingly friendly partners such as the U.S. and India, Russia and China.
- This is also the case with traditional partners such as Iran and India, and Russia and India.
- This, when combined with some unresolved conflicts, misunderstandings or a crisis, could easily lead to more conflicts and friction.
- **War talk** - The rising war talk in the region is yet another contemporary feature of the Southern Asian regional sub-system.
- The possibility of a military conflict between Iran and the U.S. could draw many more countries in the region into it.
- This could, in turn, lead to widespread instability.
- Besides these, there are other issues that sustains the unrest conditions in the region, which include -
    i. the potential for India-Pakistan border skirmishes
    ii. an escalating China-U.S. trade war
    iii. many proxy and cold wars in Afghanistan and West Asia

What lies before India?

- India has to adopt some balancing acts which is perhaps the most appropriate strategy, given the current circumstances.
- **U.S.** - Getting too close to the U.S. will provoke China, and vice versa.
- India will have to balance between its innate desire to get closer to the U.S. and the need of not excessively provoking China.
- **West Asia** - India would have to take care of its energy and other interests (including the Chabahar project) with Iran.
- At the same, it has to ensure that these do not alienate the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel.
- Notably, Iran's share in India's energy imports is steadily decreasing.
- However, alienating Iran might not suit India's strategic interests in the longer run.
- **Russia-China** - Dealing with the Russia-China partnership will be crucial for India's continental strategy.
- This applies to the issues of arms sales, the Afghan question, and checking Chinese dominance of the region.
- India should be clever enough to exploit the not-so-apparent fissures between China and Russia.
- A related concern is the growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia, which India must deal with by smart diplomacy rather than outrage.
- **Pakistan-China** - Pakistan is advocating a policy of revision or modification, and China is a rising superpower and an already status quoist power.

- China could potentially be persuaded to check Pakistan's revisionist tendencies.
- This again requires a great deal of subtle effort from India to convince China that it has great stakes in regional strategic stability.
- Notably, despite the sharp differences and unavoidable strategic competition, China and India share a stake in the region's stability.
- **Afghanistan** - If India is serious about having a say in Afghanistan's future, it would need to enact several balancing acts there.
- This involves managing between Russia and China, China and Pakistan, the Taliban and Kabul, and the Taliban and Pakistan.
- In a constantly changing Afghan geopolitical landscape, the contents of India's interests should also evolve.
- In all, engaging in a delicate balancing game is undeniably the need of the hour.

Source: The Hindu

