Halving Staff Strength at High Commissions - India-Pakistan

What is the issue?

- The Indian government has decided to reduce the staff strength at both High Commissions by half.
- With recent incidents, the ties between India and Pakistan seem strained beyond immediate repair.

What led to this decision?

- India, followed by Pakistan, has decided to halve the strength of diplomatic missions in each other's capital.
- The government's decision follows the recent ill-treatment and torture of Indian personnel posted in Islamabad.
- This came as a clear violation of the personnel's diplomatic rights.
- Pakistan's contention was that the two men arrested were carrying fake currency.
- But it is more likely the action was a response to arrests and the expulsion of two Pakistani High Commission officials from India.
- They were accused of espionage in May 2020.
- New Delhi also accused Pakistan High Commission officials of maintaining "links to terror organisations."

How serious are these decisions?

- Expulsions of diplomats are common between countries as inimical to each other as India and Pakistan are.
- But, in this case, this is the first time such a measure has been taken since 2001.
- Back in 2001, the following were the triggers to diplomats' expulsions -
    i. the Parliament attack in December 2001
    ii. the largest military mobilisation of the time along the India-Pakistan border, Operation Parakram
- Eventually, there was a thaw in ties between the two countries.
- The then Indian PM Atal Behari Vajpayee made a visit to Pakistan for the SAARC summit in 2004.
- So, the move was reversed and diplomats were gradually taken back to a full strength of over a 100 in each High Commission.

- On the other hand, the latest decision follows not one event, but a general downslide in relations in the past year.

What are the recent disturbing developments?

- Some of the contentious events in the recent period include -
  i. the Pulwama attack in February 2019
  ii. the Balakot air strike
  iii. the August 5, 2019 decision to amend Article 370 of the Constitution and reorganise Jammu and Kashmir
- With these, India and Pakistan have snapped all trading ties.
- They also downgraded missions (without High Commissioners) and shut down most diplomatic activities.
- India and Pakistan have had no talks since 2015, when PM Modi visited Lahore, and the External Affairs Ministers met a few months later.
- All sporting and cultural exchanges are at an end.
- Also, visas are rarely granted, apart from the rare exception being made for the Kartarpur corridor inaugurated in 2019.
- The relations are strained in every angle from the LoC to practically every multilateral forum India and Pakistan are a part of.
- Islamabad and New Delhi are unable to find common cause even on non-contentious issues such as -
  i. cooperating on the coronavirus pandemic as a part of the SAARC grouping
  ii. collaborating against the recent locust invasion that affected the region

How does the future look?

- The decision to reduce mission strengths may not impact the working relations between India and Pakistan at present.
- However, it is a sign that the relations between the two neighbours have taken a worse turn.
- Also, the future does not augur well for a change, particularly as India-China tensions occupy New Delhi's concerns and focus.

Source: The Hindu

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