India-China Relations: Amidst the Pandemic and Border Disputes

What is the issue?

- It has been a year since the news of tensions between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh first broke (May-June 2020).
- With this, here is an assessment of the developments so far, the present conditions and the future challenges.

What happened back then?

- The crisis involved Chinese ingressions and violent clash with soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in mid-June 2020.
- It eventually involved seven places: Depsang plains, Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs, North bank of Pangong Tso, Kailash range and Demchok.
- With agreements to disengage from the Pangong lake area , it was planned to convene meeting of the senior commanders to address and resolve all other remaining issues.
- The last such meeting of commanders was held in April 2021, but the Chinese have refused to even discuss the remaining issues.
- Modi government seemed keen to announce a closure of the border crisis by creating the impression of an honourable solution against a major power.
- But, no such closure is in sight yet.

What is the current situation?

- The PLA troops deny India access to territories it controlled by patrolling.
- With this, the government's asserted aim of restoring the status quo ante as of April 2020 remains unfulfilled.
- Even on the north bank of Pangong, a new status quo has been created where the patrolling rights are yet to be restored.
- Similarly, the Kailash range has seen neither de-escalation nor de-induction so far.
- So, in all, there have been no further deaths after June 2020 and no firing

after early September 2020.
- But, the peace on the border is both unstable and unsustainable.
- Ongoing tensions, with massive deployments on each side, belie any hope of tranquillity.
- Cognisant of the volatility and risk, Indian Army has undertaken a major reorientation of its units and formations towards the China border.
- China-India ties are thus moving into a zone of problems even as New Delhi grapples with pandemic-related issues.

How is COVID-19 and geopolitics playing now?

- India's geopolitical concerns have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the mismanagement of COVID-19.
- Through its 'Vaccine Maitri' programme, New Delhi was presenting itself as a better alternative to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in South Asia.
- But this trust was shaken, as the government has backtracked on existing contractual commitments to supply vaccines to its friendly neighbours.
- So, countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have started procuring vaccines from China.
- They are further casting doubts on India's reliability as a partner and raising questions about its ability to act as a counter to China.
- Sensing the opportunity, Beijing also moved in quickly, organising a meeting with all South Asian countries except India, to deal with the pandemic.
- New Delhi was also the lynchpin of the Quad's pledge to deliver a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine throughout the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022.
- But, India is now trying to import vaccines for its own population.
- Failing on its commitments to other poor countries under GAVI's COVAX scheme, the proposal now seems to be on a weak footing.

What is the larger impact?

- The failure of the government to anticipate and deal with a public health crisis has affected India's image as an emergent power.
- A weaker India is not only less attractive as a partner globally, it makes New Delhi more dependent on the US to deal with China.
- This will only confirm China's presumptions that India had been acting at the behest of the U.S. and further strain India-China ties.
- Meanwhile, the threat of a two-front collusive threat after the Ladakh

crisis forced the Modi government to seek peace with Pakistan.

- This led to the announcement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control, and Pakistan awaits the steps on Kashmir promised by the Modi government.
- But no political environment has been created in India for any such step so far.
- It is hard to predict the Pakistani course of action hence.
- In all, an assertive China and a vengeful Pakistan acting in concert on the land borders is a serious threat to India.

How are the pandemic-related India-China terms?

- Beijing's efforts to offer aid to India to deal with the pandemic have been largely confined to private companies and donations from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.
- These are largely commercial contracts between private companies and not that of the Chinese government.
- Nevertheless, the fact remains that India is heavily dependent on China for crucial medical supplies.
- State-owned Sichuan Airlines had suspended cargo flights to India, but the supply chains have since been kept open by Beijing.
- This is in tune with the Indian demand from Beijing that the supply chain should remain open.
- But the other demand to ensure stable product prices has not been met.

How does the future look?

- Soldiers of both armies are facing each other in Ladakh and there is lack of trust between the two countries.
- With this, it is clear that the China-India bilateral relationship is moving into a zone of increasing disruptions and clashes on the disputed border, amidst the challenges of the pandemic.

Source: The Hindu

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