India’s Neighbourhood Dilemmas

Why in news?

India's foreign policy faces challenges in its neighbourhood, where China has become a major rival and superpower in the region.

What are the challenges that India faces in its neighbourhood?

Challenges	About
Anti-India regime	Countries in South Asia are hostile or unfriendly to India. • Maldives- India Out Campaign started since 2020 asking Indians to leave the country. • **Bangladesh-** Opposition party has accused India of interfering in Bangladesh's internal affairs.
Aggressive China	China has become a major player in South Asia, offering economic and strategic benefits to the smaller states in the region. • Belt and Road Initiative- It involved many South Asian countries in infrastructure, it also infringes on India’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. • **Connectivity projects**- Economic and strategic influence is achieved with projects like *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)* and the *China-Maldives Friendship Bridge*. • **Diplomatic support**- It has engaged with countries that are isolated or sanctioned by the international community, such as Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, providing them with diplomatic and military support. • **Debt trap diplomacy**- It is China’s predatory lending practice in which poor countries are overwhelmed with unsustainable loans and would be forced to cede control of strategic assets to China. Example- Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. • **Friendly approach**- China tried to resolve border disputes with its neighbours except India as seen in the case of Bhutan, where China offered to swap territory in exchange for Doklam plateau, which is claimed by both Bhutan and China
Geopolitical lock-in	India will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia. • Influence of China with the South Asian Countries would weaken the bilateral ties of other countries with India. • This could limit India’s strategic options and regional leadership role.

What are the causes of dilemmas faced by India in its neighbourhood?

- **Regional geopolitical architecture-** It is characterised by 5 overlapping elements.



- **US diminishing presence-** The US withdrawal from South Asia has created a power vacuum that China has filled, and that this is disadvantageous for India.

- **Indo-Pacific region focus-** US has reduced its military presence and aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan and shifted its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Geopolitical buffer-** China's rise has provided a buffer for the smaller states in South Asia, which can use the *"China card"* to balance against India and assert their strategic autonomy.
- **Lack of regional connectivity-** South Asia is one of the least interconnected and poorest regions in the world, and that the inhabitants of the region naturally gravitate towards China which can cater to their material needs.
- **Normative approach of India-** India intervening in domestic affairs of its neighbours such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives is not welcomed by them.
- **Norms-free-zone-** China has offered itself as a no-frills non-normative alternative to India, and that this has changed the India-centric calculus of the region.
- **One track approach-** India's policy stance of dealing only with those on power is less risky but it also generates path-dependencies and alienates other centres of power or opposition leaders.
- **Pro-China orientation-** India's status quo bias has created problems in Bangladesh where the opposition party has become hostile about India and oriented towards China.
- **Flawed assumption-** India believes that South Asia minus Pakistan would be amenable to India and that the India's cultural and historical ties with the region would give it an advantage over China.

What lies ahead?

- **Regional reality-** India must acknowledge the fundamental change that China is a serious contender for a regional primacy, this would help India to deal with reality and frame the foreign policy accordingly.
- **Constructive engagement**- India need to proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region, to counter the possibility of a Sino-centric South Asia and lessen the anti-India elements in the neighbourhood.
- **Flexible policy**- India should engage with multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries to reduce their anti-India attitude and increase their trust
- **Effective diplomacy**- India should increase the human resources and capacity for India's diplomatic pursuits, to match its growing role in world affairs.

Reference

1. The Hindu- India's growing dilemmas
2. Ministry of External Affairs- India Maldives relation

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