On South Asia, US must Reorient Itself

What is the issue?

Russia's Ukraine war and the Sino-Russian alliance are setting the stage for a reordering of South Asia's great power relations.

What is the current trend in South Asia?

- In the wake of the missile accident, all the familiar themes of the traditional US debate on South Asia were brought back. These include
    - Crisis management
    - Strategic stability
    - Nuclear arms control
    - Kashmir solutions
- **Pakistan issue**- Pakistan moved to seek international intervention, including from the UN Secretary-General.
- Pakistan still has nuclear weapons and can always be a spoiler like Vladimir Putin's Russia.
- But, it has been pursuing unrealisable geopolitical goals in Kashmir and Afghanistan neglecting the modernisation of its economy and the stabilisation of its polity.
- Imran Khan has pushed Pakistan into a deep constitutional and economic crisis and undermined relations with the US, Europe and the Gulf.
- US President Joe Biden has refused to call Imran Khan, who runs a major non-NATO ally and high-level visitors from Washington now skip Pakistan during South Asia visits.
- Islamabad's decline after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is likely to accelerate amidst Pakistan's deepening domestic political chaos.
- Pakistan will find it hard to match its traditional claim for strategic parity with India.
- **Declining charm of China's BRI in South Asia**- Pakistan and Sri Lanka, which embraced the BRI are South Asia's two worst-performing economies now.
- The deepening economic crises are compelling both the countries to focus on non-Chinese financial sources to stabilise their economies.
- Pakistan turned to the IMF with great reluctance under Imran Khan but abandoned the adjustment programme to play populist politics
- Sri Lanka, which refused to accept 480 million dollar developmental assistance from the US in 2020, is now desperately looking for hard currency support.
- In Nepal, the dominant communists had made political opposition to US infrastructure assistance of 500 million dollar but recently it was shattered by Nepal government by getting the parliament to ratify the US loan.
- **Growing possibilities for US security cooperation**- During the Cold War, the US military engagement was limited to Pakistan.
- In the 21st century, there has been a steady expansion of US defence cooperation with India.
- The US began to recognise the strategic significance of the smaller South Asian states for its Indo-Pacific strategy by signing a defence cooperation agreement with the Maldives and diplomatically reaching Bangladesh.
- There is also a progress towards signing the GSOMIA (General Security of Military

Information Agreement) with Bangladesh that codifies the commitment to protect classified military information.

What is the way ahead for the US?

- The US need to involve deeper security cooperation with the South Asian region and develop alternatives to military dependence on Beijing and Moscow which can be done in partnership with Delhi.
- George Bush also recognised that the US would be better off letting India take the lead on regional issues in the Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean.
- The changed regional circumstances and the new geopolitical imperatives are now nudging India and the US in that direction.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/amidst-russia-ukraine-war-us-can-rise-in-south-asia-7830361/

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