Relook at India's Act East Policy

What is the issue?

Despite the best intentions of an Act East Policy, India's standing and image in Southeast Asia have suffered.

What is the present scenario?

- Three developments over the past five years are testing Indian diplomacy in the region:

1. the rising profile of China combined with growing China-India tensions
2. disappointment in the region with India's economic under-performance
3. rising concern in the region with India's approach towards its minorities, especially Muslims and Christians

What does a rising China mean?

- China's rise and growing assertiveness of the Xi Jinping regime initially generated a strong pro-India sentiment in the South-east Asian region.
- Many ASEAN countries wanted India to balance China's enhanced power.
- But, India's economic slowdown and inward orientation (decision to stay out of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement) disappointed regional business.
- ASEAN and Indian governments tried to maintain good relations.
- But Southeast Asia's powerful business groups, mostly ethnic Chinese, began losing interest in India.
- However, as recently as 2017, during the Doklam stand-off between China and India, many ASEAN governments conveyed their quiet support for India.
- This was in the hope that a robust response from India would keep China's geopolitical ambitions in the region under check.
- But between Doklam and Galwan tensions, there has been a change in the Southeast Asian assessment of China and India.
- It could be due to a willingness to accommodate Chinese interests, a growing admiration for China's assertion of power within the ethnic Chinese community in the region.

- Or, it could be due to a disappointment with India.

How have civil society attitudes changed?

- Ethnic Chinese loyalties define one segment of Southeast Asian civil society.
- And Islamic faith defines another large segment.
- In most ASEAN countries, ethnic Chinese practise Islam, Buddhism or Christianity.
- Given this, growing concern on Hindu majoritarianism in India has impacted civil society attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.
- India deployed the soft power of "Buddhist diplomacy."
- But, Southeast Asian states and civil society seem less impressed by Indian hard and soft power even as their fear and/or admiration of China has gone up.
- [India was successful till a few years ago in holding China's rising hard power back with its own hard and soft power.]
- Both China's direct influence and that of ethnic Chinese in the South Asian region are on the rise.

What is the larger impact?

- All the above developments weakened the business-to-business (B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) connect between India and ASEAN.
- This was despite the best efforts of hard-pressed diplomats to maintain good government-to-government (G2G) relations.

What is the way forward?

- Indian diplomacy must take a fresh look at its Act East policy.
- The constraints being imposed on it by unsatisfactory economic performance and sectarian and communal politics at home should be looked into.

Source: The Indian Express

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