Strengthening India's Presence in Asia – The New Direction

Mains: *GS II – International relations*

Why in News?

Recently, the U.S. Secretary of State told the Senate that the story of the 21st century will be written in Asia.

Why India should strengthen its position in Asia?

- **U.S actions** – The U.S. is overturning multilateralism and reducing India's strategic policy space in several key domains as India's relations with China improve and those with Russia strengthen.
- **Improving relation with China** – With China, it should be a case of 'trust but verify' as negotiations for an international border in Ladakh advance.
- India is having the potential to settle the Kashmir issue and investment that may follow.
- **Strengthening ties with Russia** – Russia is a 75-year-old tested partner and its S-400 was the game-changer in 'Operation Sindoor'.
- **India's choice** – For India, the choice is not binary, as western analysts argue, tilting towards the U.S. or China.
- The new direction for India should be toward Asia, whose market will be larger than the U.S.
- **Asia's potential** – Asia coming together in a form very different to the way the West came together, not based on colonialism or global rules but shared value chain interests.
- Countries in the region want partnership with India, as it has the technological capacity and economic heft to balance China.
- Asia, with two-thirds of the global population and wealth, is again at the centre of the world.
- **Knotting the region** – BRICS, with overlapping membership and policies, the SCO, with its stress on geo-security-economics, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a political-trade grouping, are going to be intertwined.
- The door to re-entry into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is still open.
- This is where trade concessions should be made, which will be outside World Trade Organization rules, including modus vivendi on trade with China, as an alternative market to the U.S.

What are the hard decisions that has to be made by India?

- **Operationalisation of 'strategic autonomy'** – It should be based on India's uniqueness having two global agendas.
- It has the highest growth rate, huge potential till 2100, the largest labour pool and the highest number of the poor.
- Within the United Nations, India's foundational sustainable development interests are closer to the Global South.
- India will need to clarify its understanding of 'partnership' linking value chains and adjusting priorities without diluting them to avoid accepting the agendas and frameworks of others.
- **Framing new rules** – Asia had no answer to Europe's gunboats and later leverage, and interdependence gave immense advantage to the West.
- Interconnectedness of the digital economy is reflected in technological capacity, not diplomacy, leading to military capability.
- Assumptions of foreign, technology and security policies are being questioned as innovation interconnections determine economic growth, political influence and military strength.
- For India, there can be no compromise on national data, endogenous technology innovation, local defence production and inclusive growth.
- **Cyber warfare** – It should be the central pillar of national security, based on India's comparative advantage, and not theatre commands as land-based threats have changed.
- **Countering pakistan's move** – China has stepped back from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which Pakistan has substituted with expensive Asian Development Bank loans.
- Pakistan has strategic support from the U.S, a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia and increased influence, along with the U.S., in Bangladesh.
- The U.S. is seeking the Bagram base in Afghanistan.
- India has also secured a six-month waiver from U.S. sanctions on Chabahar Port which gave India an opening into Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia.
- **Reorienting the defence allocations** – The evolving neighbourhood landscape suggests the need for a national debate on reorienting defence allocations.
- By halving the size of the Army and reducing numbers of large (imported) platforms for endogenous Artificial Intelligence (AI), air defence, space, missiles and drones where India has world-class capability — to factor in the need for continuing innovation, with spin-offs for growth.
- **An AI future –** Shaping the global AI future is necessary for double-digit inclusive growth.
- A Parliamentary Standing Committee has emphasised the need for indigenous research in foundational AI models to ensure sovereign capability.
- Funding should increase at least 20-fold to support national strategic collaboration, high-end computational resources, proprietary models and talent development driven by the Prime Minister's Office.
- AI sovereignty is now the key requirement to be a global power by 2047.

Reference

[The Hindu| India in Asia]