

India must counter China in S-E Asia

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Context:

- India and China have a long and complex bilateral relationship that oscillates between concepts of “Chindia” and great power rivalry.
- In South Asia, India seems to be a regional power by default. But a closer look reveals that China is gaining an upper hand in the region.

Economic power:

- In terms of money and trade, it is emerging as a global force. Despite its lack of technological advancement, **China controls a majority of the world through its corporate acumen and debt trap strategy.** China’s economic growth has accelerated to the point where it is now the world’s leading economy.

How China emerged as militarily and strategic power?

- Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, China’s chances of increasing its strength grew. China was not in good shape before 1950, but after the advent of Mao and the Communist party, China started to gain power.
- But in a real sense, the rise of China militarily and as a strategic power, **started with the fall of the USSR.** The instinct for survival and self-sufficiency made the Chinese Communist Party think beyond its borders.
- The presence of a single global superpower, the USA and the wars waged during this period in Kuwait and Iraq sent messages to the non-Western nations that US foreign relations are volatile and may even turn against allies.

Communist state with capitalist characteristics:

- The rise of China was not an accident, as it had the highest employable population in the world during the turn of the century. China became the factory of the world, leveraging on its cheap labour. This made several countries turn to China to source the parts and raw materials for their production and consumption.
- The Chinese state called a communist state with capitalist characteristics used this to help solve the social and economic crisis at home and it became a country developed enough to export not just small electronics and toys, but also weapons and its state-run companies, to the developing world.

Threat of U.S. led expansionism:

- The second prong for the increased Chinese domination in affairs outside its borders came with the concentration of modernisation of its armed forces to conduct operations in the western Asian region and to protect its eastern seaboard from the might of US carriers and bombers taking off from Guam and Hawaii.
- The need for an **adventurous and venturing naval** force, able to use the physical and numerical capacity to overwhelm the enemy was the need of the Chinese higher command. **The brewing situation in the South China Sea was also a push factor.**
- The South China Sea area is under competition from seven states and arch-nemesis Taiwan, just 100 miles from mainland China.
- The Chinese command was also scared that American-led expansionism as happened in Eastern Europe could also happen in Asia. The sale of some strategic weapons by the US to Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia, and the stationing of anti-ballistic missiles at US bases in South Korea and Japan led to heightened Chinese calls for restraint from the US.

China’s role in the Indian Ocean & the South China Sea:

- The Chinese side replied in the same way by **increasing its role in the Indian Ocean by building naval bases** and also making incursions using its navy and the **naval militia flotilla consisting of fisher boats**, also known as ‘little blue men’. This tactic has been used in the **Scarborough islands of the Philippines by the Chinese navy**, to show their military superiority in the region.
- China has also been **fortifying and militarising islands in the South China Sea as well as the Sea of Japan.**
- China also announced an ADIZ or **Air Defence Identification Zone in the South China Sea**, where all passing ships and aircraft need to identify themselves to Chinese officials. But this move has been opposed by the US using the ‘freedom of navigation’ exercises.



Sino- Indian relations & similarities:

- The geographical location of India has both advantages as well as disadvantages. It is surrounded by non-friendly countries like Pakistan and China, as well as neutral countries like Nepal, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Sino- Indian relations are as old as the formation of human civilization.
- Throughout history, **both Indian and Chinese civilizations faced several existential crises**. Many parallels can be drawn between the two, like the **lack of a unified commanding authority over the territory for a long period** and the **intervention of foreign powers** to take advantage of the natives.
- Both India and the People's Republic of China were **introduced to the modern, post-WW2 world at the same time**.

Sino-Indian war of 1962:

- There are very few instances of similarities after that time, as China took the path of a centralised communist regime under the general secretary of CCP, Mao Ze Dong and India emerged as a democratic republic under PM Jawaharlal Nehru. China was behind the Iron Curtain and was isolated, while India followed a more liberal but socialist governance model.
- The Sino-Indian war of 1962 was a big blow to the Indian defence establishment as well as Indian administrations, who gave very few decision-making powers to the military to forestall any chance of a coup.
- The Indian system, a parliamentary democracy, was not suited for fast and powerful decisions on the military front. This meant that Indian defence acquisitions were inefficient and slow.

Rise of China militarily:

- The rise of China militarily can be described by certain characteristics – a centralised command structure based on the Soviet military model, ideologically motivated troops with a good image in Chinese society and the existence of good facilities for soldiers and commanders as the military is treated as part of the central core of government.
- These characteristics gave the PLA troops much-needed force concentration and allowed emergency procurement of military essentials according to their defence doctrine and usage and not based on comparisons.
- Till the fall of the Soviet Union, China stayed in the shadows and was not interested in a position of global significance. It didn't proactively use the power it had from the UNSC and was concentrated on small border clashes with neighbours like India, Mongolia, Vietnam and Hong Kong. But the fall of the USSR forced China to take up the position of a contender against western Neo-imperialism.

Distrust among Sino-India relations:

- From the Indian perspective, the rise of China happened after the war of 1962, which was painful to Indian military morale. It also created a public image of China being an untrustworthy party to agreements and treaties. China's rise from then onwards was treated with suspicion.
- During the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, there was Chinese involvement in moving troops against India in the Himalayan borders to open up a new front. China at the time was against the Soviet Union and stood with the western side with the likes of the US, Pakistan and UK.
- In 1987, China and India had a small clash with their border troops in Sikkim. An agreement on the maintenance of peace and tranquillity along the line of actual control in the India-China border areas was reached in September 1993 and formed the basis of the border management between China and India.

Sino-Indian relations are harder to negotiate due to some major reasons:

- The ongoing conflict over the Line of Actual Control or the LAC, which is the border between India and China, is not accepted as a legitimate border by the Chinese side.
- The actions by the Chinese PLA, and PLAAF to make incursions into Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh and the tri-junction area in Bhutan.
- The increased presence of PLAN ships in the Indian Ocean region and the docking of PLAN submarines and destroyers in countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc, will make India suspicious.
- The increased relations between Pakistan and China, including the proposed road connectivity between Pakistan and China through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

Way Forward:

- China is trying to build its own form of colonization with the help of money. This technique has been used by China in South Asia, but due to the rise of India, China is not able to take complete control over the region.
- China is trying to surround India by getting involved in its neighbouring countries. If India needs to maintain its power in the South Asian region, it must take care of its neighbours.