

General Studies-2; Topic: Issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure

States in Indian Diplomacy

1) Introduction

- Indian states historically have not been closely involved in the country's foreign policy
- Today there is increasing importance of state governments both in domestic as well as foreign policy.

2) Past Experiences

- PM Narendra Modi had visited Japan, China and Singapore when he was the chief minister and secured the best deals for the state within the overall policy of the Central government.
- In his earlier stint as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu negotiated with foreign governments to make Hyderabad an IT capital, prompting even presidents and prime ministers to visit the city.

3) Sharjah ruler's Kerala visit

- In tune with competitive federalism, visit of the Sharjah ruler to Kerala had discussions with the chief minister which gave tangible results.
- They hold discussions on trade and commercial cooperation and presented a road map on joint projects between Kerala and Sharjah
- Kerala submitted a proposal to establish a cultural complex, an education hub, and a family city for Malayalis in Sharjah
- The ruler agreed to release 149 Indian prisoners from Sharjah jails.
- The two sides agreed to cement ties between Kerala and Sharjah.

4) State's Role

- Team India shall not be limited to the Prime Minister-led team in Delhi, but must also include Chief Ministers and other functionaries as equal partners.
- States must play an important role in not only implementing foreign policy, but also in formulating it.
- The Ministry of External Affairs now has a States division, which assist them in building bridges with the countries in which they have proximity or the presence of diaspora from that State.
- IFS officers have been asked to choose a State each to understand its special requirements and to advise them.
- High-profile MEA events like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas are held in different parts of India
- States have begun to host large scale investor summits.

5) International Practices

- Countries like the U.S. and China encourage their State governments to take economic delegations to foreign countries and establish their own trading offices abroad.
- Secret for China's success has been the proactive role by provinces in drawing foreign investment.
- China's enhanced people-to-people linkages with countries like the United States and Australia through sister province and sister city agreements.

6) A New Trend

- PM Modi set the new trend to entertain foreign dignitaries to visit state capital rather than in New Delhi.
- President Xi Jinping of China and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan visited Gujarat and pledged support for projects like smart cities and the bullet train in the State.
- It was unthinkable earlier for Prime Ministers to establish major projects in their own States without considering the merits of competing venues.

7) States taking over the interests of the Centre

- Pandit Nehru wrote letters to the Chief Ministers, explaining certain aspects of foreign policy, but did not solicit their views.
- As regional parties began to exert influence at the national level, States began to dictate terms even in foreign policy.
- The Chief Minister of West Bengal stopped signing an agreement on sharing of Teesta waters with Bangladesh
- Political parties in Tamil Nadu insisted that India should support the U.S. resolution against Sri Lanka in the Human Rights Council, and also stopped the Prime Minister from attending a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)
- Kerala had insisted that the Italian marines who killed two fishermen should be tried in India and punished here, causing a rift in India's relations with the European Union.
- In all these cases, the larger interests of India on the global scene were sacrificed.

8) Way Forward

- States must be involved more in foreign affairs, as the moves made so far are tentative and half-hearted.
- Ministry of External Affairs should have offices in key States.
- Think tanks should be established in States to facilitate policy options and to provide inputs to the States and the Centre.
- The Sharjah success can be replicated only if a new architecture is devised to involve the States in issues identified as crucial to them.
- The States must also develop expertise on foreign affairs to be able to take responsible decisions in their interaction with foreign lands.
- States should be involved in dialogues with countries where there is a significant diaspora, or where state governments have significant economic interests.
- As northeast is a key stakeholder in India's ties with Southeast Asia, it is important to ensure political and economic stability if the region is to emerge as a gateway to the east.

9) Conclusion

- As states play a key role in India's links with the outside world, it is important that both New Delhi and state governments do not allow any political differences.
- India must learn from the successes of countries like China, which have successfully harnessed their provinces.