General Studies-2; Topic: India and its neighbourhood- relations

Geo-Political Scenario in South Asia
1) **Introduction**
- The nature and dynamics of South Asian geopolitics are undergoing a radical transformation.
- India needs to see through many balancing acts to deal with regional tensions.

2) **Present Scenario**
- South Asia is one of the world’s most volatile regions and dominated by the United States.
- South Asia is today at an inflection point with far-reaching implications for the states in the region, and for India in particular.
- There is a great power competition in the region.
- Russia and China are challenging the U.S.’s pre-eminence and influencing smaller countries of the region.
- The resultant geopolitical competition for space, power and influence in the region is undoing geopolitical certainties in South Asia.
- Unbalanced multipolarity when combined with a situation of power transition in the regional sub-system might be destabilising.

3) **China Pivot in the Region**
- There is the emergence of the ‘China pivot’ in the region.
- Washington’s role as the regional pivot and power manager is becoming a thing of the past with Beijing assuming that role.
- Regional geopolitics, from Iran to Central Asia and from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean region, is increasingly being shaped by China.
- When new powers are on an ascendance, its neighbours tend to recalibrate their policies and old partnerships and alliances.
- By using its economic strength to expand its relations with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar China has attempted to control India’s rise, while simultaneously supporting Pakistan’s development.
- A significant driver of change in South Asia’s political geography has been the string of infrastructure projects in the subcontinent.
- The projects in Pakistan and Sri Lanka have given China strategic access points in the oceans surrounding India.

4) **Trust-Deficit in the Region**
- Another feature of the current regional sub-system is the presence of an extreme trust deficit among the various actors in the region.
- There is trust deficit between India and Pakistan, or China and India.
- Trust deficit exists between U.S. and India, Russia and China.
- It also exists among traditional partners such as Iran and India, and Russia and India.
- Trust deficit combined with other factors such as unresolved conflicts, misunderstandings or the occurrence of a crisis could push the region towards more conflict and friction.

5) **War Talk**
- The rising war talk in the region is yet another contemporary feature of the South Asian regional sub-system.
- Possibility of a military conflict between Iran and the U.S, would draw many more countries in the region into it.
- It could lead to widespread instability.
• **Other Issues**
  a. India-Pakistan border skirmishes.
  b. Escalating China-U.S. trade war
  c. Many proxy and cold wars in Afghanistan and West Asia

6) **India’s Approach**
- India has found interest in ASEAN countries, Central Asia and its neighbours in the Bay of Bengal region.
- ASEAN is India’s fourth largest trade partner with a free trade agreement that has helped facilitate trade and the movement of manpower and investments.
- It has also taken steps to increase its diplomatic engagement with Central Asia, as a part of it “extended neighborhood”.
- The International North South Transport Corridor, along with the Chabahar port have been two of India’s large scale projects in the region.
- BIMSTEC has received a push for revival from India.
- India has used different bilateral and multilateral strategies to pursue a regional leadership role in South Asia.
- Its outreach towards Southeast Asia, Central Asia, as well as the wider Indo-Pacific underscores the renewed importance that New Delhi is giving to Asia and its own footprint in the region.

7) **Way Forward for India**
- India must adopt a slew of balancing acts which is the most appropriate strategy to adopt under the present circumstances.
- **U.S.**
  a. India must balance its desire to get closer to the U.S.
  b. Getting too close to the U.S. will provoke China, and vice versa.
- **West Asia**
  a. India will have to take care of its energy and other interests (including the Chabahar project) with Iran.
  b. By doing so, it should not alienate the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Israel.
  c. While Iran’s share in India’s energy imports is steadily decreasing, alienating Iran might not suit India’s strategic interests in the longer run.
- **Russia-China partnership**
  a. Dealing with the Russia-China partnership will be crucial for India’s continental strategy.
  b. This is with regard to arms sales, the Afghan question or checking Chinese dominance of the region.
  c. The growing relationship between Pakistan and Russia which must be dealt with smart diplomacy.
- **Pakistan - China Partnership**
  a. Another layer that requires careful balancing by India is the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China.
  b. Both Beijing and New Delhi share a stake in the region’s stability.
  c. India must convince Beijing that it has great stakes in regional strategic stability.
- **Handling Afghanistan**
  a. If India is serious about having a say in Afghanistan’s future, it would need to enact several balancing acts
b. This is between Russia and China, China and Pakistan, the Taliban and Kabul, and the Taliban and Pakistan.

c. In a constantly changing Afghan geopolitical landscape, the contents of India’s interests should also evolve.

d. Engaging in a delicate balancing game is undeniably the need of the hour and is what smart diplomacy is meant to achieve.