Impact of COVID-19 on India’s foreign policy

Introduction
- The second wave of COVID-19 and its consequences, prompting the country to accept foreign aid after a gap of 17 years, is bound to have far-reaching strategic implications for India.

Possible Impact
- As a direct consequence of the pandemic, New Delhi’s claim to regional primacy and leadership will take a major hit.
- India’s aspirations will be dented.
- These in turn will impact the content and conduct of India’s foreign policy in the years to come.
- Pandemic could adversely impact India’s ability and desire to contribute to the Indo-Pacific and the Quad.
- COVID-19 will prevent any ambitious military spending or modernisation plans.
- It will limit India’s attention on global diplomacy and regional geopolitics, be it Afghanistan or Sri Lanka or the Indo-Pacific.
- The international community might reach the conclusion that post-COVID-19, India is too fragile to lead and be a ‘leading power’.
- With India’s inability to take a lead role and China wooing smaller states in the region, the Indo-Pacific balance of power could eventually turn in Beijing’s favour.
- COVID-19 devastation in the country could also limit New Delhi’s strategic ambitions.
- These strategic consequences of the pandemic will shape the content and conduct of India’s foreign policy.
Regional primacy

- India aspires to be a “leading power, rather than just a balancing power”.
- But, COVID 2.0 has quickened the demise of India’s regional primacy.
- The country’s geopolitical decline is likely to begin in the neighbourhood itself.
- India’s traditional primacy in the region was built on a mix of material aid, political influence and historical ties.
- India’s ability to materially help the neighbourhood will shrink in the wake of COVID-19.
- India’s historical ties alone may not do wonders to hold on to a region hungry for development assistance.
- As a result, South Asian states are likely to depend on China.
- Being boxed in a China-dominated region will provide New Delhi with little space to pursue its regional, global and geopolitical ambitions.

India-China equations

- India might be forced to be more conciliatory towards China, albeit reluctantly.
- Compared to most other countries, China has emerged stronger in the wake of the pandemic.
- The world, notwithstanding its anti-China rhetoric, will continue to do business with Beijing — it already has been, and it will only increase.
- It would impact India’s ability to compete with China as a global investment and manufacturing destination.

Way Forward

- Every crisis opens up the possibility for change and new thinking.
- COVID-19 will also open up new regional opportunities for cooperation especially under the ambit of SAARC, an initiative that already saw some small beginnings during the first wave of the pandemic.
- New Delhi must get the region’s collective focus on ‘regional health multilateralism’ to promote mutual assistance and joint action on health emergencies such as this.
- Classical geopolitics should be brought on a par with health diplomacy, environmental concerns and regional connectivity in South Asia.