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Covid-19 & India's Foreign Policy

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This article is based on **“A COVID blot on India’s foreign policy canvas”** which was published in The Hindu on 05/05/2021. It talks about the impact of covid-19 on India's foreign policy.

The second wave of Covid-19 and its agonising consequences has prompted India to accept foreign aid after a gap of 17 years. This is bound to have far-reaching strategic implications for India.

As a direct consequence of the pandemic, India’s claim to regional primacy and leadership may take a major hit. These in turn will impact the content and conduct of India’s foreign policy in the years to come.

Impact of Covid-19 on India's Foreign Policy

- **Regional Primacy:** India’s traditional primacy in the region was built on a mix of material aid, political influence and historical ties.
Now, India’s political influence is steadily declining, its ability to materially help the neighbourhood will shrink in the wake of Covid-19, and its historical ties alone may not maintain India’s regional hegemony.
- **Chinese Intrusion into India’s Strategic Space:** China, due to its chequebook diplomacy has been already pushing India in its strategic space i.e. Indian subcontinent.
The second wave of Covid-19 has quickened this process, as India’s ability to stand up to China stands vastly diminished today: in material power, in terms of balance of power considerations, and political will.
- **Affecting India’s Engagement With Quad:** Covid-19, will prevent any ambitious military spending or modernisation plans and limit the country’s attention on global diplomacy and regional geopolitics.
With reduced military spending and lesser diplomatic attention to regional geopolitics, India’s ability to project power and contribute to the growth of the Quad will be uncertain.

- **Affecting Diplomacy in Indo-Pacific:** India is pivotal to the Indo-Pacific project, but with India's inability to take a lead role and China wooing smaller states in the region will eventually turn the balance of power in China's favor.
- **Economics Affecting Geo-politics:** Covid-19 has led to a general economic distress, a fall in foreign direct investment and industrial production, and a rise in unemployment will also limit India's strategic ambitions.

Post-Covid-19, Indian foreign policy is therefore likely to be a holding operation.

- **US-China Relations:** With the rise of China and India's Covid-19-related troubles could prompt the US to normalise relations with China.
- **India-China Relations:** Other potential impact of COVID-19's devastating return and the damage it has done would be that India might be forced to be more conciliatory towards China.
- **India-US Relations:** A post-COVID-19 India might find it harder to resist demands of a closer military relationship with the U.S.

Way Forward: New Opportunities

- **Reinvigoration of SAARC:** 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.
- **Focusing on Regional Health Multilateralism:** India might do well to 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 par with health diplomacy, environmental concerns and regional connectivity in South Asia.

Conclusion

As the diplomatic bandwidth for expansive foreign policy goals would be limited, in post-Covid-19, Indian foreign policy is unlikely to be business as usual. However, Covid-19 may have opened precisely such an opportunity to the world's least integrated region.

Drishti Mains Question

Discuss the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on Indian foreign policy.
