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The Big Picture: Maritime Security Challenges

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Why in News

Recently, the Defence Minister of India addressed the **8th ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus**.

The **ADMM-Plus** is a platform for **ASEAN** and its eight Dialogue Partners.

Key Points

- India has **raised concerns over maritime security** and has called for rule-based order in **Indo-Pacific**.

India has also raised the issue of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

- **China's regressive behaviour** in the critical sea lanes in the **South China Sea** is the centre of the entire maritime security challenge.
 - The sea lanes of communication are critical for peace, stability, prosperity and development of the Indo-Pacific region.
- Terrorism has been referred to as the **gravest threat to global peace**.

ASEAN, India and China

- **India's Call for Free and Open Indo-Pacific:** India has called for a **free, open and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific**, based upon **respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity** of nations, peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue and adherence to international rules and laws.
 - India supports **freedom of navigation, over flight, and unimpeded commerce** in the international waterways.
 - India also **supports utilisation of ASEAN-led mechanisms** as important platforms for implementation of our shared vision for the Indo-Pacific.
- **China and ASEAN:** China has lost this case in the **UNCLOS**, it has filed another case and there are code of conduct negotiations going on between the five other countries and China.
- **China and India:** China is not very concerned about India's opinion on the South China Sea issue due to its ongoing **conflict with India** at the Ladakh border, it is expected for India to put pressure on China on the maritime issues.
 - Moreover, **India has not yet expanded its trade in the South China Sea**, hence, it is **not as greater a threat** as the USA, Japan or Australia.
 - However, China is interested in India and its coordination with the other powers such as the **QUAD nations** as there are talks among these countries regarding introducing inclusive policies for the Indo Pacific region.
- **China's Nuclear Policies:** China's nuclear policy laid out by **SIPRI** says that China will have around 8-10 nuclear submarines which can fire missiles that can go 10,000 km long.
 - China is also developing a system called "Fire on Warning" for striking back in case of an attack.
- **Significance of South China Sea:** The sea holds tremendous strategic importance for its location as it is the connecting link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.
 - According to the **UNCTAD**, one-third of the global shipping passes through it, carrying trillions of trade which makes it a significant geopolitical water body.
 - The sea is also **rich in minerals, hydrocarbons, oil and gas**.

- **The Chinese Strategies:** China **does not recognise Indo-Pacific as one** but it does consider both the Oceans as key areas of its interests. China has two different strategies for the Indian and Pacific Ocean.
 - In the western Pacific, the core interest of China, it has a full spectrum dominance strategy.
 - It is the region where China prefers to force grayzone operations using terms like incremental takeover of territory.
 - However, for the Indian Ocean, China uses the term stakeholdership for the same purposes; for gradually increasing their presence and leverage in the region.
 - China is increasing its influence not just with military force but through the **belt and road initiative** too.
 - China is, however, keeping itself out of those regions sensitive to India, as it does not want to give any chance to India to raise any objections and even if it happens, China wants the onus of aggression to be on India.

Global Response towards China

- **NATO:** The **NATO** countries are not happy with China breaching the international code of conduct established for the **Global Commons**.
 - The recently held NATO summit for the first time has **explicitly described China as a security risk**.
- **QUAD:** China is a big trading partner of Australia and Japan. A number of Japanese industries have their manufacturing bases in China. A lot of US industries are also linked to Chinese raw materials and also supply chains.
 - Notwithstanding, the QUAD members Australia and Japan issued a joint statement saying China is a threat to them; it has threatened Australia with the missile strike.
 - Australia is now trying to remove China from the Darwin base in the country's northern part.
- **The EU and UK:** The **European nations** and the **United Kingdom**, despite having friendly relations with the country in the immediate past, have considered China as a threat to global peace and security.

- **G7 Countries:** There are two aspects to the problem that **G7 nations** are facing:
 - **Chinese military aggression** in the South China Sea and with regard to **Taiwan**. There have been a number of aircraft and Chinese fighter jets incursions in Taiwanese air space. China is exerting pressure on its reunification or forcible capture of Taiwan.
 - The **issue of global recovery**. There isn't much focus on the conflicts due to the global **recession** from which only China has rebounded. The big nations are trying to compete with China. The **Build Back Better** initiative of the G7 was aimed squarely at competing with China's trillion-dollar **Belt and Road infrastructure initiative**.
 - **Russia** is also concerned with China's rapidly increasing influence in Central Asia as it will impact Russia's strong influence in the region.

Way Forward

- **Role of Developed Democratic Nations:** Countries like the US or Russia have to outpace China from world order, which is Authoritarian country. Issues in **Xinjiang**, Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea are a great threat to the world.
- **India to Adopt Multi Pronged Approach:** For India, only a robust military strategy to counter China is not enough, it will have to be a multipronged approach including infrastructure component, the technology related aspect.
 - In the Indian Ocean, India must maintain its preeminence and assertiveness, deter China from operating in regions that are significant to India.
 - India must cooperate and improve ties with its partners to gain an influence over the Pacific region because it is where China is highly unstable and sensitive.
 - India's maritime policies have to be mated against China.
- **Matching China's Levels of Infrastructure Projects:** China is planning to build a port in Israel, antagonizing the USA.
 - It has ports in **Djibouti** in Africa and also in **Gwadar** in Pakistan near Iran and its Belt and Road Initiative has its reach in Europe.
 - Indian strategy will have to match the Chinese level of the effort which it is making in the African countries by building infrastructures.
- **Collectively Countering Terrorism:** The networking amongst terrorists is now reaching alarming proportions.
 - Only through collective cooperation could the terror organisations and their networks be fully disrupted, the perpetrators identified and held accountable.
 - Strong measures should be undertaken against those who encourage, support and finance terrorism and provide sanctuary to terrorists.

- **Updating the Technology:** Issues of cyber threats like ransomware, **Wannacry** attacks and cryptocurrency thefts call for a multi-stakeholder approach, guided by democratic values, with a governance structure that is open and inclusive that would drive the future of cyberspace.

The multitude of challenges of today's dynamic and interdependent world cannot be addressed with outdated systems that were designed to deal with trials of the past.

Conclusion

- Maritime Security Challenges in Indo-Pacific and South China Sea are the key areas where India and Other like minded countries have to work in a Coordinated manner.
- The South China Sea remains a critical aspect of the larger discussion. However, a lot of countries including India are still not so keen to confront China directly.