



COMPLEX ASIAN GEOPOLITICS

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(GS2: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests)

Context:

- The Indian Air Force (IAF) will participate in the Exercise Desert Flag-VI for the first time, along with the air forces of the UAE, the US, France, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Bahrain.
- The exercise is scheduled in March at the Al-Dhafra airbase in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
- It offers an interesting view for New Delhi of the various geo-political intricacies at play in and around the West Asia region.

About desert flag exercise:

- The Exercise Desert Flag is an annual multi-national large force employment warfare exercise hosted by the UAE Air Force.
- The multinational "Desert Flag" exercise will involve ten countries including the United States (US), France, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain.
- The exercise would involve Greece, Jordan, Kuwait and Egypt as observers.
- The exercise will be held in the UAE and will involve fighter jets and heavy-duty airlift aircraft of different kinds.
- The three-week-long exercise will be coordinated by the air warfare centre at the Al Dhafra airbase in the UAE.

Aim of the exercise:

- The aim of the exercise is to provide operational exposure to the participating forces, while training them to undertake simulated air combat operations in a controlled environment, the statement said.

- The participating forces will get an opportunity to enhance their operational capabilities and also be a mutual exchange of best practices.
- The large-scale exercise involving diverse fighter aircraft from across the globe will provide the participating forces, including the IAF, a unique opportunity to exchange knowledge, experience, enhance operational capabilities and interoperability.
- Exercising and interacting with the participating nations in a dynamic and realistic warfare environment will also contribute to strengthen international relations.

Complexities in west Asia:

- West Asia is home to perhaps some of the most complex security conundrums of the modern times.
- The sixth edition of Desert Flag this year takes place as tensions between Iran and the U.S. peak.
- Also added into the mix is the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain.
- Abraham Accord is more cordial and joint Arab-Israel dynamic predominantly designed to counter Tehran's growing influence in the region, as seen through the wars in Syria and Yemen.
- While joint exercises in West Asia between Arab states and their western counterparts is common, the 2021 edition's involvement of contingents from India and South Korea showcases the growing interests of Asian economies.
- As net importers of crude oil, these Asian economies rely heavily on the West Asian states for their supplies.
- Asian states have increased stakes in the safety and security of the region from the perspective of political and economic stability.
- More importantly, Asian states have high stakes in the protection of vital sea lanes in areas such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea stretching out into the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean.

A fading U.S. hold:

- To put the above in perspective, in April 2020, Saudi Arabia was India's top supplier of oil followed by Iraq.
- For South Korea, in late 2019, it was also Saudi Arabia as the top supplier as both New Delhi and Seoul hedged their bets and diversified, with Russia and the U.S. entering as strong alternatives.
- The participation of both India and South Korea in these exercises in the Persian Gulf is reflective of these trends and growing concerns in Asian capitals over an eroding U.S. security blanket in the region.

- This is highlighted even further by the fact that January 2021 marked the first time since 1985 that the U.S. did not import oil from Riyadh and this reality will be reflective in how Washington DC deals with West Asian politics in the years to come.

JCPOA and Iran:

- Amidst these new realities, both India and South Korea have found themselves caught in regional tensions.
- Following the drone strike on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Gen. **Qasem Soleimani**, Tehran announced that it would no longer observe the JCPOA's restraints, though its cooperation with the IAEA would continue.
- Tensions rose as the U.S. pushed ahead with its unilateral sanctions, covering Iranian banks, industries, defence, intelligence and nuclear establishments.
- However, pressure on Iran to restart the 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) increased now.
- The U.S. unceremoniously exited from JCPOA in 2018 under the American presidency of Donald Trump.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA):

- The Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is a landmark accord reached between Iran and several world powers, including the United States, in July 2015.
- JCPOA seeks to prevent Iran from producing a nuclear weapon by putting curbs on its atomic programme in exchange for economic incentives.
- Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, and reduce by about two-thirds the number of its gas centrifuges for 13 years.
- For the next 15 years Iran will only enrich uranium up to 3.67%.
- Iran also agreed not to build any new heavy-water facilities for the same period of time.
- Uranium-enrichment activities will be limited to a single facility using first-generation centrifuges for 10 years.
- Other facilities will be converted to avoid proliferation
- To monitor and verify Iran's compliance with the agreement, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will have regular access to all Iranian nuclear facilities.
- The agreement provides that in return for verifiably abiding by its commitments, Iran will receive relief from the U.S., European Union, and United Nations Security Council nuclear-related sanctions.

India and South Korea faces same consequences:

- Both India and South Korea have faced carbon-copy consequences over the past decade as the West first negotiated with Iran, and later tried to manage the fallout of the JCPOA collapse.
- In 2013, an Indian oil tanker named *MT Desh Shanti* was confiscated near the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian forces and taken to the port of Bandar Abbas on the pretext of the ship violating environmental norms.
- This was also the time when Iran was under sanctions, and looking for oil payments from India, which New Delhi could not complete due to said sanctions.
- The *Desh Shanti* episode was seen as a pressure tactic by Tehran.
- Fast forward to January 2021; Iran confiscated a South Korean tanker, *MT Hankuk Chemi*, also from near the Strait of Hormuz, lugging the ship to an Iranian port, once again highlighting that the vessel was violating environmental norms.
- This came at a time when Tehran and Seoul were locked in an argument over billions of dollars' worth of oil payments frozen due to sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme.

India's involvement:

- The idea of Asian nations having to band together to protect their energy interests in West Asia is not new.
- Former Indian diplomats have even suggested an idea equitable to an 'importers OPEC', or Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, led by Asian states which today have a much larger stake in West Asia's oil than the West.
- India's security footprint in West Asia has seen a steady increase.
- Energy security and safe passage of sea routes are one of the main driving factors.
- The Indian Navy has made multiple port calls from the UAE and Kuwait to Iran and Qatar in recent years.
- In 2020, India had also planned its first bilateral naval exercise with Saudi Arabia, which was postponed due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion:

- Trend of an increasing Asian security interest and footprint is expected to only magnify in the years to come as the nature of security in West Asia changes itself.
- Regional states will become more responsible for their own security.
- Thus, Asian economies become stronger stakeholders; their geopolitics will become more visible across this geography.

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