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(Mains GS 2 : Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests)

Context:

- Fifty years ago, India and the former Soviet Union had signed a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation on August 9, 1971.
- Apart from changing the contours of South Asian and global politics, the treaty could also be seen as the harbinger of the idea of the Indo-Pacific between India and Russia.

The year 1971 and the Indo-Pak war:

- In 1971, China decided to ditch its ideological mentor, the USSR and ganged up with the US to balance the Soviet Union.
- Hence, India was facing security threats from Pakistan's allies — the US and China — during the Indo-Pak war in 1971.
- However, when the India-Pakistan war started in December 1971 and the US navy tried to threaten Indian security, the Soviet Union dispatched a nuclear-armed flotilla, from its Pacific Fleet based in Vladivostok, in support of India.
- This engagement could be seen as the beginning of Indo-Pacific concept between India and Russia.
- To keep China quiet, the Soviet Union had moved 40 army divisions near its Xinjiang border with China and 7 divisions towards the Manchurian border.

Russia as a critical element in Indo-Pacific:

- Long before the US threw its weight behind the idea of the Indo-Pacific, these events from 50 years ago demonstrate that cooperation between India and Russia (which are both Eurasian and Indo-Pacific powers) has been a critical element in the Indo-Pacific.
- However, geopolitics has now changed as the US now sees India as a partner in its struggle against China.
- Beijing, on the other hand, has carved out a partnership with Moscow to challenge Washington.

Certain reservations about the Indo-Pacific:

- Russia has expressed certain reservations about the Indo-Pacific.
- For one, the Indo-Pacific is seen as an American creation by Russia and hence, Moscow has rejected it outright.
- However, Asia-Pacific, the predecessor of the Indo-Pacific was also an American construct that Russia had accepted.
- At the government level, Russia continues to oppose the Indo-Pacific but academia, think tanks and even the media have started to engage with this idea and debates, discussions, seminars and conferences are taking place on it.

Balance between two powers:

- From time to time, India has assured Russia that New Delhi's closeness to Washington will not come at Moscow's cost.
- In contrast to the US understanding of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific, India has always signalled that it is interested in a "free, open and inclusive" Indo-Pacific, an understanding that reflects India wanting Russia to be an active player in this region.
- In fact, India has tried to rope Russia into its Indo-Pacific initiatives so that the latter emerges as an independent pole outside China's shadow which would make Indo-Pacific multi-polar in nature.

Multi polar Indo-pacific:

- The Chennai-Vladivostok maritime route and efforts by India and Japan to invest in Russia's Far East are the initiatives which would make Indo-Pacific multi-polar in nature.
- These initiatives are part of India's Act Far East policy which seeks to connect with the Asian part of Russia.

The people-to-people contacts:

- It is important to note that people-to-people contacts have been a key area of success in India's ties with the US.

- However, this is not the case with India-Russia ties.
- As Russia has concerns about the migration of the Chinese in its Far East, state-facilitated controlled immigration of the Indian workforce to Russia can bring political and economic benefits to both sides.

Similarities in approach:

- From the Indian perspective, the Indo-Pacific is similar to Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership whose aim is to avoid Chinese hegemony in Eurasia.
- This policy has elements of both cooperation as well as competition with China.
- In the face of China's advances through the Silk Road Economic Belt in the Russian sphere of influence in Eurasia, Russia has agreed to align its own initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union.
- In the same way, the Indo-Pacific is India's attempt to safeguard its neighbourhood against China's assertive behaviour.
- Russia has an opportunity to collaborate with India to shape the emerging order in the Indo-Pacific, which can be done given the historical trust between the two sides.

Tackling China's challenge in the Arctic:

- India gives more emphasis to the Indian Ocean, while the US and its allies have given priority to the Pacific, highlighting another difference in India's and America's conceptual understanding of the Indo-Pacific.
- India is not a serious military power as of now in the Pacific but helping its naval capabilities reach that goal would also help Russia in tackling China's challenge to its pre-eminence in the Arctic.

Indo-pacific adds value to Russian diplomacy:

- China defines itself as a "near-Arctic state", although it does not have a coastline in the Arctic.
- As part of its Polar Silk Road, China's activities would increase in the Arctic in the coming years.
- Strategic experts in China have even argued that whoever controls the Arctic sea route would control the world economy and China should play an active role in this area.
- Hence, the Indo-Pacific is an idea that can add value to Russian diplomacy in different areas, including Asia, the Pacific and the Arctic.

Conclusion:

- Traditionally, the Russian have seen their country as European, but it also has Asian and Pacific dimensions.

- The Indo-Pacific is not just about the US, and Russia's worldview is likely to be incomplete without engaging with the Indo-Pacific as there's the potential danger of making it dependent on China.