



CURRENT AFFAIRS



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Date - 4 May 2024

THE PARADOX OF INDIA'S GLOBAL RISE

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "THE PARADOX OF INDIA'S GLOBAL RISE". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

CONTEXT

This article appeared in 'The Hindu' newspaper, written by Happymon Jacob, who writes very frequently on the important topics related to India's foreign policy highlighting the paradox which is emerging in the South Asian region in respect of changing geopolitical realities.

MORE ABOUT THE ISSUE

India's ascension on the global stage has been accompanied by a paradoxical decline in its influence within South Asia. In contrast to its significant sway during the Cold War era and when compared with China's burgeoning dominance today, India's regional power has declined considerably. This decline, while not absolute, is a consequence of various external factors and could gradually erode India's standing on the world stage.

Ironically, some of the very factors contributing to India's global eminence are also responsible for its waning influence in its immediate neighborhood. For instance, the void left by America's retreat from the region has allowed China to expand its presence, to India's detriment. However, this shift has compelled the United States and its allies to seek closer ties with India to counterbalance China's influence, thereby bolstering India's global relevance.

India's ascent on the global stage is attributed to its increasing absolute power and strategic alignments forged with key players in the international arena. Conversely, the decline of India's regional clout is shaped by the interplay of relative power dynamics and the geopolitical strategies pursued by smaller nations in the region. Hence, disregarding the nuanced balancing acts undertaken by these smaller regional powers in favor of solely concentrating on great power dynamics could prove detrimental.

THE SKIRMISHES WITH CHINA

- **Border skirmishes:** China's assertive behavior along the disputed border regions, leading to periodic clashes and standoffs, such as in Doklam (2017) and the Galwan Valley (2020).
- **Geopolitical encroachment:** China's expanding presence and influence in India's neighborhood, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), raising concerns about strategic encirclement.

- **Regional competition:** China's deepening ties with South Asian nations, including Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, challenging India's traditional sphere of influence and fostering regional competition.
- **Military modernization:** China's rapid military advancements, including in missile technology and naval capabilities, prompted India to reassess its defense strategies and bolster its own military capabilities.
- **Security concerns:** China's growing assertiveness casting a shadow over India's security calculus, compelling New Delhi to navigate a delicate balance between engagement and safeguarding its strategic interests.
- **Diplomatic tensions:** Friction in diplomatic relations, with India seeking to assert its interests while engaging with China on various bilateral and multilateral platforms.
- **Economic competition:** Competition with China in economic spheres, including trade and investment, driving India to seek alternative partnerships and diversify its economic ties.

INCREASING CHINESE INFLUENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

- **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** China's flagship infrastructure development project extends into South Asia, facilitating connectivity and economic integration among regional countries. However, it also increases China's influence in the region, potentially undermining India's traditional dominance.
- **Economic investments:** China's significant investments in South Asian countries, including in infrastructure projects and industries, enhance its economic clout and leverage in the region, challenging India's economic partnerships.
- **Military cooperation:** China's expanding military cooperation with South Asian nations, such as Pakistan, through arms sales, joint exercises, and defense cooperation agreements, raises security concerns for India and affects its strategic calculations.
- **Diplomatic engagements:** China's proactive diplomacy in South Asia, including through high-level visits, bilateral agreements, and multilateral forums, aims to strengthen its political influence and undermine India's regional leadership, leading to diplomatic competition and tensions.
- **Border disputes:** China's assertive stance on territorial disputes, such as in the Himalayan region, can lead to border tensions and military standoffs, directly impacting India's territorial integrity and national security.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

To effectively address the challenges posed by China's growing influence in the region, New Delhi needs to adopt a Proactive approach and reassess its traditional perceptions of South Asia. Ignoring the shifting geopolitical landscape will only exacerbate the situation.

- Instead of attempting to directly compete with China on every front, India should capitalize on its unique strengths and advantages. It's impractical to match China's might in every aspect, and pursuing such a strategy would be futile. Instead, India should focus on leveraging its traditional strengths and historical ties in the region to forge new and innovative engagement strategies.
- One such approach could involve reclaiming and revitalizing India's historical and cultural connections, such as its rich Buddhist heritage. By emphasizing shared cultural ties and historical legacies, India can foster deeper connections with its neighbors and enhance its soft power in the region.

- India faces considerable challenges in its continental strategy, while its maritime domain offers abundant opportunities for trade enhancement, participation in multilateral initiatives, and the formation of issue-based coalitions. One potential approach involves integrating India's smaller South Asian neighbors into discussions and initiatives within the broader Indo-Pacific framework.
- India, along with its partners like the U.S., Japan, Australia, the European Union, and others, should explore ways to involve countries such as Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh in the Indo-Pacific strategy. This can reduce their reliance on China's regional initiatives and capitalize on the strategic advantages that India and its partners possess over China in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Unlike during the Cold War era, India is now more receptive to the presence of external powers in its neighborhood. This shift signifies a willingness to collaborate with friendly external partners in both the Indian Ocean and South Asia to tackle shared challenges within the region.

Finally, To uphold its influence in the region, New Delhi should capitalize on its soft power assets creatively. An effective strategy involves promoting informal interactions between political and civil society figures from India and neighboring South Asian countries. Encouraging such informal contacts fosters dialogue and understanding across borders, strengthening relationships and influence. By leveraging its soft power in these ways, India can maintain its influence in the region and contribute to stability and cooperation among South Asian nations.

Ankit Kumar

SPICES CRISES

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "Spices Crises". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "Economics" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

Why in the News?

Several nations, including Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United States, have initiated inquiries into potential contamination of Ethylene oxide distributed by leading Indian companies, MDH and Everest.

MORE ABOUT THE NEWS

- On April 5th, Hong Kong's Centre for Food Safety halted the sale of three MDH spice blends (Madras curry powder, Sambhar masala, and curry powder masala) as well as Everest fish curry masala due to **elevated levels of ethylene oxide**, a pesticide unauthorized for food use.
- Singapore followed suit, issuing a recall for the Everest spice mix for the same reason.
- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), known for its previous rejection of food and spice imports from India, is investigating the matter after being made aware of the reports.
- Regulatory bodies in Maldives, Australia, and Bangladesh have also announced similar actions.



Health issues due to Ethylene Oxide

Ethylene Oxide, a clear, combustible gas initially devised for sterilizing medical equipment, serves various purposes in industries, agriculture, and food production. Its role in the spice industry is significant, as it effectively minimizes microbial presence, thereby prolonging product freshness and ensuring safe storage conditions.

- **Carcinogenic in nature:** Ethylene oxide is classified as a carcinogen by several health organizations, including the **International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)**. Prolonged exposure to ethylene oxide has been associated with an increased risk of certain types of cancer, such as leukaemia and lymphoma.
- **Respiratory Problems:** Inhalation of ethylene oxide vapor can irritate the respiratory tract, leading to symptoms such as coughing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness. Individuals with pre-existing respiratory conditions may experience exacerbation of their symptoms.
- **Nausea and Vomiting:** Ingestion of food contaminated with ethylene oxide may cause gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. These symptoms can vary in severity depending on the level of exposure and individual sensitivity.
- **Headaches and Dizziness:** Ethylene oxide exposure can also cause neurological symptoms, including headaches, dizziness, and confusion.

Spices sector of India

- India holds the title of being the **largest exporter, producer, and consumer of spices globally**, with its domestic spice market reaching a value of \$10.44 billion in 2022. Among the 109 varieties recognized by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), India cultivates 75 types.
- In terms of exports, during the fiscal year 2022-23, the **United States, United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom emerged as the top importers of Indian curry powders and mixtures**, with values amounting to ₹196.2 crore, ₹170.6 crore, and ₹124.9 crore respectively. Following closely are Saudi Arabia, Australia, Bangladesh, Oman, Canada, Qatar, and Nigeria. China, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh, and Thailand stand out as the primary importers of all spices and spice mixes originating from India.
- Besides MDH and Everest, other prominent manufacturers include Madhusudan Masala, NHC Foods, Tata Consumer Products, and ITC. Major spices exported from India encompass pepper, cardamom, chilli, ginger, turmeric, coriander, cumin, celery, fennel, fenugreek, garlic, nutmeg & mace, curry powder, spice oils, and oleoresins.

- In terms of recent statistics, India's spice exports amounted to approximately US\$ 3.73 billion in 2023 and around US\$ 3.67 billion in the period from 2023 to February 2024.
- The states contributing significantly to spice production in India include Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Assam, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala.

GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO FOSTER THE EXPANSION OF SPICE CULTIVATION IN INDIA:

Establishing Spices Parks: The board initiated the establishment of eight specialized Spices Parks tailored to specific crops in strategic production zones and market centres.

Goals:

- Facilitating farmers to obtain competitive prices and broader market reach for their produce.
- Developing an integrated system encompassing spice cultivation, post-harvesting processes, processing, value addition, and spice storage.

Sikkim Spice Complex: A program aimed at aiding farmers and other stakeholders in Sikkim by offering financial support to enable common processing and value addition activities in spices.

Formation of Codex Committee on Spices and Culinary Herbs (CCSCH): As a subsidiary of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, jointly led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), CCSCH focuses on standardizing international food regulations.

- Since 1964, India has actively participated as a member in the Codex Alimentarius Commission to uphold food trade's safety, quality, and equity.

Challenges faced by the Spices sector

- **Quality Control & Standards Adherence:** A significant obstacle in the spices industry involves maintaining elevated quality standards and adhering to the rigorous pesticide residue regulations set by importing nations.
- **Concerns Regarding Food Safety:** Ensuring food safety stands as a paramount issue globally, particularly in developed countries where strict regulations safeguard product integrity. Indian spice exporters face challenges in reassuring consumers about the safety and cleanliness of their offerings.
- **Tariffs & Trade Restrictions:** The imposition of tariffs and trade barriers by developed nations presents notable challenges for Indian spice exporters. Despite India's prominent position as a spice producer and exporter, it contends with substantial competition from other exporting countries.
- **Price Fluctuations & Competitive Environment:** The international spice market is fiercely competitive, and Indian exporters frequently encounter difficulties associated with price instability, which can be influenced by variables like crop yield, weather patterns, and currency exchange rates.

Way forward

- **Stringent Regulations & Safety Measures:** Addressing the growing skepticism surrounding the FSSAI necessitates the implementation of more rigorous regulatory protocols and enhanced transparency in the food production and safety industry standards.

- **Exploring Alternatives to Ethylene Oxide:** It is imperative to investigate safer chemical substitutes with similar antimicrobial properties but without the carcinogenic risks associated with ethylene oxide. Substances like ozone, hydrogen peroxide, or heat treatments could potentially serve as replacements for ethylene oxide in certain applications.
- **More Investment:** Prioritizing investments in quality infrastructure, implementing stringent food safety measures, enhancing traceability and transparency, and aligning with market trends are crucial steps for Indian spice exporters to overcome these challenges and tap into the vast potential of developed markets for India's diverse range of spices.
- **Diversifying Market Opportunities:** There is a need to explore fresh markets and generate interest in less familiar spices, which could lessen reliance on conventional markets.

Organizations to look for

Spices Board of India:

- The Spices Board of India is a crucial regulatory and export promotion agency for Indian spices, established in 1987 under the Spices Board Act 1986. Its headquarter is located in Kochi, Kerala.
- The board holds a crucial role in guaranteeing the quality and safety of Indian spices by operating modern testing facilities across different regions such as Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Tuticorin, Kandla, and Guntur.

International Organization for Standardization (ISO):

- It is a global organization dedicated to developing standards, consisting of delegates from the national standards bodies of its member nations.
- ISO was formally established in 1947.

Prelims based Question

Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. India is the largest producer, exporter and consumer of Spices globally.
2. USA is the largest importer of Indian spices.

Choose the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a). 1 Only
- (b). 2 Only
- (c). Both 1 and 2
- (d). Neither 1 nor 2

ANSWER: C

Mains based Question

Q1. What are the major challenges faced by the Indian spice sector, and what strategies are suggested for overcoming these challenges?