4. India-China Face-off at Pangong Tso Lake

Prelims: India- Bilateral

Mains:

GS-II- India and its Neighbourhood- Relations.

GS-III- Security Challenges and their Management in Border Areas

Why in News?

➤ According to a PTI report Indian and Chinese soldiers had a heated exchange in Ladakh near the Pangong Tso lake and the issue has now been resolved. The report said the exchange happened after Chinese Army personnel objected to patrolling by Indian soldiers. Differing perceptions about the Line of Actual Control (LAC) was responsible for the incident.

➤ The incident recalls a similar incident almost exactly two years ago, in the same area in Eastern Ladakh. Differing perceptions of where exactly the LAC lies has often been the reason for such incidents.

About Pangong Tso:

➤ In the Ladakhi language, Pangong means extensive concavity, and Tso is lake in Tibetan.

➤ Pangong Tso is a long narrow, deep, endorheic (landlocked) lake situated at a height of more than 14,000 ft in the Ladakh Himalayas.

➤ The western end of Pangong Tso lies 54 km to the southeast of Leh. The 135 km-long lake sprawls over 604 sq km in the shape of a boomerang, and is 6 km wide at its broadest point.

➤ The brackish water lake freezes over in winter, and becomes ideal for ice skating and polo.

➤ The legendary 19th century Dogra general Zorawar Singh is said to have trained his soldiers and horses on the frozen Pangong lake before invading Tibet.

Strategic Location of Pangong Tso Lake:

➤ The LAC cuts through the lake, but India and China do not agree on its exact location. As things stand, a 45 km-long western portion of the lake is in Indian control, while the rest is under China’s control. Most of the clashes between the two armies occur in the disputed portion of the lake.
By itself, the lake does not have major tactical significance. But it lies in the path of the **Chushul approach**, one of the main approaches that China can use for an offensive into Indian-held territory. Indian assessments show that a major Chinese offensive, if it comes, will flow across both the north and south of the lake.

During the 1962 war, this was where China launched its main offensive — the Indian Army fought heroically at Rezang La, the mountain pass on the southeastern approach to Chushul valley.

Over the years, the Chinese have built motorable roads along their banks of the Pangong Tso. At the People’s Liberation Army’s Huangyangtan base at Minningzhen, southwest of Yinchuan, the capital of China’s Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, stands a massive to-scale model of this disputed area in Aksai Chin. It points to the importance accorded by the Chinese to the area.

**The Dispute:**

- The difference in perception over where the LAC lies on the northern bank of the lake, makes this contested terrain.
- In 1999, when the Army unit from the area was moved to Kargil for Operation Vijay, China took the opportunity to build 5 km of road inside Indian territory along the lake’s bank. The August 2017 skirmish took place in this area.
- The 1999 road added to the extensive network of roads built by the Chinese in the area, which connect with each other and to the G219 Karakoram Highway. From one of these roads, Chinese positions physically overlook Indian positions on the northern tip of the Pangong lake.
- The mountains on the lake’s northern bank jut forward in major spurs, which the Army calls “fingers”. India claims that the LAC is coterminous with Finger 8.

**Induction of High-Speed Boats by India:**

- On the water, the Chinese had a major advantage until a few years ago, but India purchased better boats some seven years ago, leading to a quicker and more aggressive response.
- Although there are well-established drills for disengagement of patrol boats of both sides, the confrontations on the waters have led to tense situations in the past few years.
- The induction of high-speed boats has ostensibly provoked the Chinese, who have responded by increasing the number of transgressions in this area in recent years.