

CURRENT AFFAIRS – 2019

PART-4

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS and INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS



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Smart Way to Succeed

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PART – 4

**INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
and
INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS**

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

FATF move to put Pakistan on 'grey list'

Why in news?

India welcomed the step by an international organisation that placed Pakistan on a special list of countries that are kept under watch in a move to counter international terror financing.

Pakistan in Grey-list

The External Affairs Ministry welcomed the grey-listing of Pakistan by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and expressed hope that Pakistan would prevent terror acts emanating from its territory. The FATF action plan shall be complied with in a time-bound manner and credible measures would be taken by Pakistan to address global concerns related to terrorism emanating from any territory under its control.



Need additional guarantees

Being on the grey list will require Pakistan to meet additional guarantees while borrowing finance from international donors such as the International Monetary Fund. Pakistan had been on the grey list between 2012 and 2015 but was taken off the list. But subsequent terror attacks on Indian targets by groups such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), headed by Hafiz Saeed, and Jaish-e-Mohammed, led by Masood Azhar, revived the international demand to place the country back on the list. Reminding Pakistan's commitments to prevent further terror attacks, India urged Islamabad to control the armed terror groups operating from its soil.

Pakistan has given commitment to address the global concerns

Pakistan has given a high-level political commitment to address the global concerns regarding its implementation of the FATF standards for countering terror financing and anti-money laundering, especially in respect of UN-designated and internationally proscribed terror entities and individuals. The freedom and impunity with which the designated terrorists like Hafiz Saeed and entities like Jamaat-ud-Dawaa, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed continue to operate in Pakistan is not in keeping with such commitments.

Plenary session of FATF

The decision to place Pakistan back in the Grey List was taken following the Plenary session of FATF in February, but it finally came into force recently. Pakistan had activated diplomatic channels to prevent the listing but Islamabad could not prevent the latest move by the FATF.

India bombs Jaish camp in Pakistan's Balakot

Why in news?

Twelve days after the Pulwama attack, the Indian Air Force bombed the Jaish-e-Mohammad's "biggest" terror training camp in Pakistan's Balakot early. The operation was carried out by 12 Mirage-2000 fighter jets, which unleashed five one-tonne bombs on the camp, based 70 km inside the Line of Control (LoC), in the Pakistani province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Details of the attack

Senior officials citing intelligence inputs said the JeM facility was particularly crowded with 200-325 militants as many had abandoned launch pads and training camps closer to the LoC after the Pulwama attack in the expectation that India would not target Balakot. The aerial attack on a target inside Pakistani territory marks a major shift in India's counter-terror responses, which have thus far been restricted to ground operations across the LoC in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Announcing the strikes, the government said it was a "non-military, pre-emptive" counter-terror operation against imminent threats from the JeM.



Why Balakot is a watershed?

The first time India has used airpower, and its first venture this deep inside Pakistan. The precedent also raises new challenges before the two countries in responding to each other. First, the recent airstrikes by the Indian Air Force establishes a new threshold between the two nuclear neighbours for an Indian response to a terror attack. So far, India has either chosen to put diplomatic pressure on Pakistan (after the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack), mobilise its armed forces (after the 2001 Parliament attack) or conducted limited ground-based operations (after the 2016 Uri attack) but has never used the Air Force, that too inside Pakistan.

Use of airpower

The use of airpower has been taboo between the two countries, especially after both became declared nuclear powers in 1998, because of the dangers of escalation. While Pakistan has threatened retaliatory action, the fact remains that a major red-line about use of airpower has been crossed by India now. Restrictions around the use of airpower are best illustrated by the Kargil War, when the Vajpayee government allowed the IAF to be used, but did not allow it to cross the LoC. As much as it was about respecting the LoC and highlighting Pakistani incursions, it was also about the escalatory dangers of using airpower. A more important reason making it a watershed is the extent of incursion. Indian operations after the 1971 War have always been limited to the Line of Control and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, never venturing into mainland Pakistan.

Statement by Official Spokesperson on 27 February 2019

India had informed about Counter Terrorism (CT) action it took against a training camp of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) in Pakistan based on credible evidence that JeM intended to launch more attacks. Against this Counter Terrorism Action, Pakistan has responded by using its Air Force to target military installations on the Indian side. Due to our high state of readiness and alertness, Pakistan's attempts were foiled successfully.

The Pakistan Air Force was detected and the Indian Air Force responded instantly. In that aerial engagement, one Pakistan Air Force fighter aircraft was shot down by a MiG 21 Bison of the Indian Air Force. The Pakistani aircraft was seen by ground forces falling from the sky on the Pakistan side. In this engagement, we have unfortunately lost one MiG 21. The pilot is missing in action.

India, Pakistan should meet obligations under international law

Why in news?

According to Amnesty International both India and Pakistan should fulfil their obligations under international human rights law and end the atmosphere of impunity to rights violations in Kashmir.

Human rights situation in Kashmir

It said the UN report on the human rights situation in Kashmir on both sides of the line of Control reaffirmed the demands of various domestic and international human rights organisations to deliver justice for human rights abuses, and protect the freedoms of all people in Kashmir. In a statement, Amnesty International India Executive Director said both India and Pakistan should fulfil their obligations under international human rights law and end the atmosphere of impunity in Kashmir by conducting effective, impartial, and independent investigations into human rights abuses by armed forces.

Use of repressive laws

They should also end the use of repressive laws and respect the right of all people to peacefully express their opinions.

What report said?

The 49-page report issued by the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva on the human rights situation in "Indian-Administered and Pakistan-Administered Kashmir", detailed human rights violations and abuses on both sides of the line of Control and highlighted a "situation of chronic impunity for violations committed by security forces". The Indian government has outright rejected the report, terming it "overtly prejudiced and seeks to build a false narrative". Amnesty International India also noted that the UN human rights body said it had made repeated requests to both India and Pakistan over two years for unconditional access to both sides of the line of Control, but had been refused access.

Beijing again hints at India-Pakistan-China trilateral dialogue

Why in news?

Without explicitly proposing a trilateral dialogue among India, Pakistan and China, Beijing offered to "strengthen" its cooperation with New Delhi and Islamabad to bolster "stability" in the region.

For better development and stability

Both India and Pakistan are China's neighbours and friends. They are willing to conduct relations with all our neighbours, including Pakistan and India, to strengthen our cooperation for better development and stability in the region. India was exploring the possibility of connectivity to Central Asia through the Pakistan-Afghan corridor, under the SCO framework. The SCO has been working on connectivity among its member countries. Now that India and Pakistan are both members, it provides New Delhi with a fresh opportunity to reach out to Central Asia across the Pakistani corridor. However New Delhi had not been considering the SCO as a forum where bilateral differences between India and Pakistan were to be addressed.

India summons Pakistan diplomat over infiltration issue

Why in news?

India summoned a senior diplomat from the Pakistan High Commission here and issued a diplomatic note of protest regarding the military casualties suffered on October 21 during a cross-border infiltration attempt from the Pakistani side.

Statement from the Ministry of External Affairs

A statement from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) conveyed concern regarding continued infiltration attempts from Pakistan. The demarche or diplomatic note came a day after Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan called for dialogue on Kashmir in view of the ongoing security situation in Kashmir. India had responded by saying that Pakistan should focus inwards and take "credible action against" terrorism. The MEA said the latest infiltration bid showed complicity of the Pakistani forces in encouraging violence against India. Our grave concern at the continuing unprovoked ceasefire violations by the Pakistan forces along the

Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB) was also shared. The Army too lodged a strong protest to its Pakistan counterpart over the killing of three of its soldiers, during the scheduled weekly conversation between the officials of the Director General Military Operations.

India, Pakistan commit to Kartarpur corridor

Kartarpur Sahib Corridor

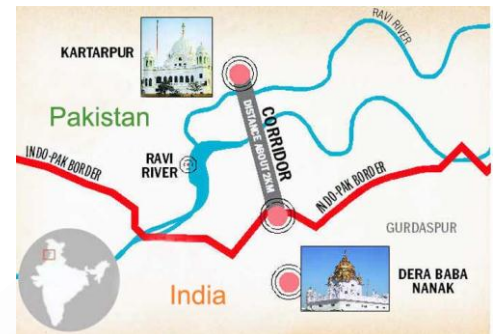
India and Pakistan exchanged letters committing to build the required infrastructure for visa-free direct travel by Indian Sikh pilgrims to Pakistan's Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara. This has been done to allow them to mark the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev in November 2019. In a rare sign of concord between the two countries, the letters were exchanged on the same day.

Inception of the Proposed Corridor

The Kartarpur Sahib corridor was first proposed in 1999 when former PM Vajpayee took a bus ride to Lahore. He raised a long-standing demand from the Sikh community for easy access to the revered shrine across the border where Guru Nanak spent the last 18 years of his life.

Work to begin soon

India proposed building a passage for the pilgrims accessible 365 days and 24 hours. The pilgrims will traverse on the Indian side from Dera Guru Nanak Dev in Gurdaspur district directly to the border and from the Pakistani side of the border directly to Kartarpur Darbar Sahib Gurdwara.



Pakistan Shares Draft Pact on Kartarpur Corridor

Why in news?

Indian and Pakistani officials are expected to meet to discuss a “draft agreement” on the Kartarpur corridor in Punjab. The meeting follows the Pakistan government’s announcement that it had shared the draft of the agreement, to be signed by the two governments, for “facilitation of (Indian) Sikh Yatrees to visit the Gurudwara, Darbar Sahib Kartarpur, Narowal, Pakistan”.

Details of the issue

The Kartarpur initiative is seen as an exceptional case for the Indian government, which has refused to open talks with Pakistan on any other issue until concerns on terror are addressed. It has agreed to work with Pakistan on the plan to help Sikh pilgrims access the sacred site, which is just four kilometres across the border from India. Among the issues that need to be finalised are the exact point of crossing over for the pilgrims, the identity cards required, as well as security procedures and guarantees needed by both sides.

Previous draft

In a previous draft, Pakistan had proposed a 14-point agreement, which included visa free travel for the pilgrims who would be processed at checkpoints on both the Indian and Pakistani side. The agreement included setting up a database of all pilgrims visiting, with a suggested cap of 500 pilgrims per day. Earlier, the MEA had said there should be no restriction on the number of pilgrims or visiting hours. However, given security protocols, the Ministry of Home Affairs concluded that a cap would be necessary. The draft agreement from Pakistan also proposes to keep the corridor open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day.

Kartarpur Gurdwara

The gurdwara in Kartarpur stands on the bank of the Ravi, about 120 km northeast of Lahore. It was here that Guru Nanak assembled a Sikh community and lived for 18 years until his death in 1539. The shrine is visible from the Indian side, as Pakistani authorities generally trim the elephant grass that would otherwise obstruct the view. Indian Sikhs gather in large numbers for darshan from the Indian side, and binoculars are installed at Gurdwara Dera Baba Nanak.

The gurdwara was opened to pilgrims after repairs and restoration in 1999, and Sikh jathas have been visiting the shrine regularly ever since. There are no restrictions on visiting Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib once a pilgrim has entered Pakistan on a valid visa. Sikh jathas from India travel to Pakistan on four occasions every year for Baisakhi, the martyrdom day of Guru Arjan Dev, the death anniversary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and the birthday of Guru Nanak Dev. These Indian pilgrims are given access to all gurdwaras in Pakistan.

India flays Pakistani SC move on Gilgit-Baltistan

Why in news?

India summoned a Pakistani diplomat and protested against a recent order of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that brought the region of Gilgit-Baltistan within its ambit. External Affairs Ministry said that the region was, and would remain, an integral part of India.

Islamabad's move

Pakistan in recent months had taken a series of steps to ensure full constitutional and legal guarantees to the region which was strategically important for the country especially in view of the passage of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through the region. India rejected such continued attempts by Pakistan and was asked to immediately vacate all areas under its illegal occupation.

Where is Gilgit-Baltistan?

The region was a part of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, but has been under Pakistan's control since November 4, 1947, following the invasion of Kashmir by tribal militias and the Pakistan army. The region was renamed 'The Northern Areas of Pakistan', and put under the direct control of Islamabad. The Northern Areas were distinct from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), the part of J&K that Pakistan calls "Azad Kashmir"; the Northern Areas are, however, more than six times the size of PoK. After the Pakistani government enacted the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order in August 2009, the 'Northern Areas' came to be known as Gilgit-Baltistan.

What is Gilgit-Baltistan's current status?

It has an elected Assembly and a Council headed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan. This Council wields all powers, and controls the resources and revenues from the region. Gilgit-Baltistan or Northern Areas do not

What is India's stand on the region?

India sees Gilgit-Baltistan as part of Indian Territory illegally occupied by Pakistan. The unanimous parliamentary resolution of 1994 had reaffirmed that the region is a "part of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, which is an integral part of India by virtue of its accession to it in 1947".



Saudi agrees to de-escalate Indo-Pak tensions

Why in news?

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister vowed to "de-escalate" rising tensions between Pakistan and India as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman prepares to travel to New Delhi. After his arrival MBS signed \$20 billion in investment deals with cash-strapped Islamabad and vowed to free thousands of Pakistani prisoners in Saudi custody.

Deal signed

Islamabad is facing a serious balance of payments crisis and hopes the huge deals signed over the two-day visit seven separate agreements and memorandums of understanding will boost its struggling economy. Pakistan laid on a lavish welcome for the Prince, including a 21-gun salute, fighter jet escort and honour guard. He also received the country's highest civilian award the Nishan-e-Pakistan (Order of Pakistan).

Pakistan has also been accused by its western neighbour Iran of harbouring militants who carried out an attack that killed 27 Revolutionary Guards. The Guards' commander has also vowed to make Pakistan pay. Mr. Jubeir also noted that Riyadh continues to participate in a months-long push by Washington for peace talks in Afghanistan, saying that if the war-torn country can be stabilised "it will be to benefit the region as a whole".

In sending a strong message to Pakistan, India should not shoot itself in the foot

Why in news?

The decision of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to revoke Tokyo 2020 Olympics qualification status for the men's 25-metre rapid fire pistol event from the New Delhi shooting World Cup is a controversy Indian sport could have done without. This has come after India refused visas to two Pakistani competitors, in the backdrop of heightened bilateral tensions after the terror attack in Pulwama.

What IOC said?

The IOC has declared that this is against the Olympic Charter's principles, of which non-discrimination, equal treatment of all athletes and sporting delegations and political non-interference are supreme. In the short term, the scrapping of two out of 16 quota places will deny three Indian shooters, including 16-year-old Anish Bhanwala who won the gold in the event at the 2018 Commonwealth Games, an opportunity to make the Olympic grade at home. While the National Rifle Association of India has thanked the IOC for sparing the 14 other places by restricting the withdrawal of recognition to just one event, three Indian shooters, for no fault of theirs, have ended up as collateral damage.

IOC statement

The long-term consequences, however, could be more severe. The IOC, in a strongly worded statement, said that it has decided to "suspend all discussions with the Indian National Olympic Committees and government regarding the potential applications for hosting future sports and Olympic-related events until clear written guarantees are obtained...to ensure the entry of all participants." This means negotiations regarding India's potential bids for the 2026 Youth Olympics, 2030 Asian Games and 2032 Olympics are set to go into cold storage. While it is true that the IOC's record in dealing with the overlapping worlds of geopolitics and sports is uneven, there have been precedents of strong action in similar cases.

Other incidents

Ahead of the 2016 Rio Olympics, the Asian Shooting Championship in Kuwait had its qualification status removed after an Israeli delegate wasn't granted a visa. Less than a month ago, Malaysia was stripped of the World Para Swimming Championship for turning down visa requests from Israeli participants. The entire episode has also played out at a time when sections of the BCCI, egged on by a few yesteryear greats,

seemingly mulled over the option of calling for a complete ban on Pakistan from the upcoming ICC World Cup in England. Going by experience, beyond feeding into a certain kind of atmospherics, such bans on sportspersons and interactions in international sports events will have no meaningful effect.

Pakistan to raise 'Indian LoC violation' at international forums

Why in news?

Pakistan decided to raise the issue of "India's violation of the Line of Control" (LoC) at international forums after the IAF struck the Jaish-e-Mohammed's (JeM) biggest training camp in Balakot in Pakistan.

High level meeting

The decision was taken at a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan and attended by the civil and military leadership, including Army Chief General Qamar Jawed Bajwa and the Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs.

Indian LoC violation

It was decided that the matter of Indian LoC violation be immediately raised at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), UN and with friendly countries. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi will raise the issue at international forums. The meeting also decided that a joint session will be called to take Parliament into confidence.

India protests China-Pakistan bus via PoK

Why in news?

India has lodged a protest with Pakistan and China over a bus service set to be launched between Lahore and Kashghar (a city in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China's far west) through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) under the ambitious CPEC project.

Background

Pakistan and China don't share a border. Pakistan's only link to China is through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir's Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is part of Jammu and Kashmir.

India's stand

The so-called China-Pakistan 'boundary agreement' of 1963 is illegal and invalid, and has never been recognised by the Government of India.

China's stand

China defended the proposed bus service with Pakistan through PoK, saying its cooperation with Islamabad has nothing to do with the territorial dispute and will not change its principled stance on the Kashmir issue. China maintains that the Kashmir issue should be resolved bilaterally between India and Pakistan through dialogue and consultation.

Pakistan's stand

Pakistan rejected India's claims and concerns and instead stated that the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir is disputed, the final status of which is to be determined through a democratic and impartial plebiscite to be held under the auspices of the UN. It also asked India to allow the Commission of Inquiry (COI) recommended by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to investigate human rights violations.



INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN

India for Afghan-led peace talks

Why in news?

India advocated any peace negotiation should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled at Samarkand meet.

Highlights of Samarkand Meeting

Discussion was held between foreign ministers at the India-Central Asia Dialogue at Samarkand, Uzbekistan. India provided supports to build a united, sovereign, democratic, peaceful, stable, prosperous and inclusive Afghanistan. India supports all efforts for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan which are inclusive and Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and



Afghan-controlled. Such statement was in contrary to General Bipin Rawat, chief of army staff who urged India to begin talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Meeting described Afghanistan as a “land link” in the region that will help in connectivity between India and Central Asian nations. Meeting also discussed opportunities for Afghanistan people through this platform and asked.

India-Afghanistan-Central Asia Connectivity Projects

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is multi-modal transportation cooperation between member states

India-Afghanistan-Central Asian nations Common Forum

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is an intergovernmental organization where India and Central Asian nations (except Turkmenistan) are permanent members and Afghanistan has observer status.

Taliban demands new Afghan Constitution

Why in news?

In a meeting, held in Moscow, between Taliban and Afghan opposition political parties, which excluded Afghan government, the Taliban demanded a new Constitution for Afghanistan.

Why Taliban demanded new Constitution?

For Taliban, current Afghan Constitution is a Western import and is an obstacle to peace. The new Afghan Constitution would be based on “inclusive Islamic system” and would be drafted by Islamic scholars. Recently Taliban also held talks with US negotiators in Doha, Qatar, in which Afghan government was not included. Taliban government was ousted from Afghanistan by US in 2001 but Taliban, through its strikes, has been gaining ground in Afghanistan gradually. After the proposed US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the accommodation of Taliban in Afghan polity has become imminent for long term peace.

INDIA AND CHINA

No plan to contain China, says India

Why in news?

India recently reaffirmed that its Indo-Pacific strategy was not aimed at China’s containment.

Second India-China Maritime dialogue

During the second India-China Maritime Affairs Dialogue held in Beijing, the Indian delegation led by Pankaj Sharma, Joint Secretary (Disarmament and International Security Affairs) in the Ministry of External Affairs cited Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s remarks at the Shangrila dialogue in Singapore in June. The Indian

side also elaborated on India's vision for the Indo-Pacific region as articulated in Prime Minister Modi's keynote address at this year's Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore.

PM's address

In his address, Mr. Modi had pointed to the 10 countries of Southeast Asia as the junction of India and Pacific oceans in both the geographical and civilisational sense. India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means do we consider it as directed against any country. India and China discussed "perspectives on maritime security and cooperation," signalling their intent to find common ground in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. They also brainstormed ways to work together in the field of blue economy, and further strengthening of practical cooperation.



Maritime cooperation

The statement highlighted that stepped up "maritime cooperation" was "a platform to strengthen political and strategic mutual trust between the two countries." It added exchanges in the maritime domain were "an important area of India-China bilateral relations". In the past, India has been concerned about China's forays in the Indian Ocean, including Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Modi, Xi reaffirm promise of peace

Why in news?

India and China held talks on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas.

Reaffirm promise of peace

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi also discussed plans to hold multiple, high level meetings during the rest of the year. Both leaders have reaffirmed once again their readiness to give the necessary directions to their militaries to enhance communications between them and to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas. The Indian statement closely resembles the understanding reached at the informal summit in Wuhan in April, where both the leaders had "directed" their militaries to execute "confidence-building measures".

China proposed 2+1 format for India talks

Why in news?

Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Oli's visit to Beijing

Important facts

During Mr Oli's visit, China made its intent clear to engage deeply with Nepal. China wants to develop special ties with the Himalayan neighbor. China-Nepal ties would be docked with India's shared interest as well.

China's 2+1 format

China proposed 2+1 format for India talks. This is different from a trilateral mechanism. Under the Chinese proposal, China and India can jointly conduct a dialogue with a third regional country. China wants that this 2+1 format to be flexible and apply in other country in South Asia. This initiative is not Nepal-specific. China made it clear that they were not interested in pursuing a zero-sum approach with Nepal. The Chinese made

direct reference to the April Wuhan informal Summit, which has begun to have a cascading impact on the region. While the analyst says that China is keen to build bridges with India after frictions with the U.S. under Trump administration. For achieving China's Belt and Road Initiative's full potential, it is important to enhance regional connectivity with India, including a trans-Himalayan corridor through Nepal.

Heavy discharge of Waters from China threatens Arunachal

Highest discharge of water in decades

The Yarlung Zangbo (Tsangpo) was swelling with observed discharge of 9,020 cumec due to heavy rainfall in Tibet. This discharge from China, the highest in 50 years, is threatening to submerge at least 12 villages along the river Siang in Arunachal Pradesh. Hydrological experts said the unusually high discharge indicates sudden release of water from man-made barriers or a natural dam. Natural barriers are formed due to landslips caused by major earthquakes in the Tibetan region of China. Local authority has issued an advisory, warning the people of the 12 villages to be on alert because of the sudden surge in the water level in Pasighat Dist. The Siang has already eroded 12 acres in Borguli village while at least 10 families of Seram village nearby have dismantled their houses and shifted to a safer location.



Natural barriers are formed due to landslips caused by major earthquakes in the Tibetan region of China. Local authority has issued an advisory, warning the people of the 12 villages to be on alert because of the sudden surge in the water level in Pasighat Dist. The Siang has already eroded 12 acres in Borguli village while at least 10 families of Seram village nearby have dismantled their houses and shifted to a safer location.

Learning from the Past

The risen level has indications of water being suddenly released from a natural or man-made dam. Earthquakes triggered landslides and dammed Tsangpo last year resulting in Siang's water turning muddy. Many in India talked about sudden collapse of the earthen dam in the future leading to moderate to big flood downstream in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. But there was no serious follow-up action. The turbidity of Siang's water last year was China's plan to divert Tsangpo to the parched Xinjiang province via a 1,000 km tunnel.

Conclusion

The situation is grim, and the government needs to come up with effective anti-erosion measures. The Central Water Commission needs to closely monitor the level and quality of Siang's water. There is a lot of concern at the international, national and local levels about the geologically and strategically important Siang that impacts Bangladesh too.

Chinese intrusions declined by 10% this year

Why in news?

There has been a 10% decline in the number of Chinese transgressions this year and the presence of Chinese troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has also reduced by around 30%.

Background

The transgressions continue to take place due to the difference in perception of the actual boundary. But after Doklam, the diplomatic manoeuvring and dialogue with the counterparts at the border ensured there was no steep increase.

About Chinese Transgression

The transgressions are anywhere from 300 metres to 19 km in the Indian Territory. There were only 10-12 locations along the China border which saw dispute. From August 1-19, as many as 19 incidents of transgressions were reported, out of which 13 were in the Leh sector.

India, China Armies meet in Ladakh

Why in news?

Amid continuing transgression by China at Demchok in eastern Ladakh, the Armies of India and China held a ceremonial Border Personnel Meeting to mark India's Independence Day.

About the meeting

The meeting was held at Chushul-Moldo and Daulat Beg Oldie. The Indian delegations were led by Brigadier V.K. Purohit and Colonel Anil Kumar Sharma, and the Chinese delegations by Senior Colonel Wang Jun Xian and Lieutenant Colonel Li Ming Ju. However, not far from the venues, a stand-off has been going on in Demchok since early July when Chinese troops intruded 300 metres into the Indian Territory and pitched tents. A group of Chinese soldiers entered the area, in the garb of nomads, and pitched five tents. However, four tents were removed within days, after India opened discussions between border commanders under the existing mechanisms.

One tent is still there, and the discussions are continuing. The incident comes a year after the 73-day stand-off at the Doklam trijunction. Transgressions are common along the unsettled Line of Actual Control. The two countries have instituted several mechanisms to resolve such issues. However, according to government figures, the number of transgressions by the People's Liberation Army into Indian Territory has gone up from 272 in 2016 to 426 in 2017.

India, China to improve military links

Why in news?

India and China agreed to work towards full implementation of ongoing confidence-building measures (CBM) along the border as well as improve military to military interactions. This was agreed during bilateral consultations between Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and visiting Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe.

Decision taken during India and China interactions

It was decided to expand the engagement between the Armed Forces relating to training, joint exercises and other professional interactions. Both sides also decided to work towards a new bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence exchanges and cooperation to replace the MoU signed in 2006. In order to ensure peace and tranquility on the border, both Ministers agreed on greater interactions at the working level, including operationalisation of the hotline between the relevant departments of the Armed Forces.

The two countries are also working on setting up additional Border Meeting Points (BPM) along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). There are five BPM points along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at Bum La and Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh, Daulat Beg Oldi and Chushul in Ladakh, and Nathu La in Sikkim.

India, China set to resume drill

Why in news?

India and China will resume the annual joint Army exercise 'Hand in Hand' in December in China's Chengdu region.

Drill was cancelled last year

The drill was cancelled last year due to tense relations in the aftermath of the Doklam standoff. Following the Wuhan summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in April, the two countries have initiated several measures to normalise relations. The scope of the exercise is to understand transnational terrorism and evolve joint drills for the conduct of counter terrorism operations, in addition to

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief operations. The exercise will be held in three phases familiarisation, basic training and the joint exercise. Separately, the Army has for the first time organised a forward area tour to Leh on October 16 and 17 for interested foreign service attaches posted in India.

China will review new inputs on Azhar

Why in news?

China has assured India that it will, in future, consider any additional information that is provided on Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) chief Masood Azhar to designate him as an international terrorist.

High level meeting

The assurance was given by Minister of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, Zhao Kezhi, to Home Minister Rajnath Singh at a high-level meeting held in New Delhi. On its part, India said its territory would not be used for any political activity against China, when Beijing raised the visit of the Dalai Lama to Arunachal Pradesh in 2016. The Doklam stand-off between the armies of the two countries at the China-Sikkim-Bhutan tri-junction, which lasted for over two months, was not raised by either side.

China blocked India's proposal

China had blocked India's proposal to designate Azhar as an international terrorist at a UN sanctions committee. China considers Arunachal Pradesh a disputed territory and has referred to Tibetan leader Dalai Lama as a "separatist." China was categorical that no protests or demonstrations should be organised by the Tibetans. Beijing also raised the unrest in Xinjiang province and sought India's cooperation on the movement of Uighur militants. On October 22, India and China signed an agreement to "strengthen and consolidate discussions and cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism, organised crime, drug control and other such relevant areas."

Elite China security team arriving

Why in news?

A delegation of a Chinese group that takes care of the security of the top seven members of the nation's leadership will visit New Delhi in November, as security ties between India and China begin to expand.

About the wing

The wing is in charge of the security of seven members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, headed by President Xi Jinping. The delegation will hold talks with India's elite Special Protection Group (SPG). The Chinese team's visit comes after Zhao Kezhi, Minister of Public Security, concluded a visit to India. The Indian side is especially keen on learning from Chinese experiences in tackling cybercrimes, as part of a broader security interaction with China.

India's Act East policy can meet OBOR

Why in news?

Days ahead of a likely meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping along the sidelines of the G20 summit in Argentina, Chinese Ambassador Luo Zhaohui in the 1st India-China Youth Dialogue held recently batted for the 'One Belt One Road' project.

One Belt One Road project

China's Ambassador, made another pitch for India to join China's mega-infrastructure corridor, by stating that India's Act East policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (One Belt One Road or OBOR) are a "natural" area of cooperation between the two countries. However, India objects to OBOR on grounds of

violation of sovereignty since its flagship project the China Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) runs through PoK (Pak Occupied Kashmir). He also suggested that the cooperation could come through the “China-India-Myanmar” BCIM corridor to India’s North-East. The ambassador also encouraged more Indian students to study in China and more Chinese students to study in India stating that there are more than 20 Chinese universities which are teaching Hindi and also encouraged more Indian universities and educational institutions to teach Chinese.

India-China facts

China is the largest trading partner of India. In 2017 the bilateral trade volume reached \$84 billion. Over 1,000 Chinese companies are doing business in India, creating more than 1 lakh jobs. India had also agreed in Wuhan to work with China in the neighbourhood under what Beijing described as a 2+1 format.

India steps up agro-diplomacy with China

China opens up to non-US Imports

As the trade war with the US continues to grow, China appears to be opening up to non-U.S. imports. Sensing that China would look first at its food security by diversifying imports in view of the trade war, New Delhi has stepped up its agro-diplomacy with Beijing. The focus so far has been on pushing agri-products into the Chinese market. Over the past two months, Indian food and beverage producers have been conducting seminars and road shows in the Chinese capital.

Chinese Agri-imports likely to grow from India

Soya bean

Indian soya bean exports are apparently a priority, especially after the China imposed a 25% levy on U.S. imports. Success in the huge Chinese soya bean market is yet to materialize, though some progress may have registered during talks.

Tea

Recently an Indian Company signed a \$1-million black tea export contract with Chinese state-owned COFCO. China has been traditionally a green tea market. Assam tea, in particular, has good prospects in China as it blends well with milk-based tea drinks. But of late, its young people are developing a taste for milk infused bubble tea, potentially opening a larger market for Indian black teas.

Sugar

India’s efforts to export sugar to China, which began in earnest in June, also appear to have paid dividends. The Indian Sugar Mills Association had signed its first sugar export contract of 50,000 tonnes with COFCO. The Chinese Sugar Association was recently briefed about India’s proven capacity to meet China’s sugar needs over the long haul.

Rice

China is a lucrative \$1.5-\$2 billion market for Indian rice. Recently China has opened up imports of non-Basmati rice from India in June on the sidelines of the Qingdao summit of the SCO.

Hurdles to Trade Balance

Despite signs of incremental progress, India’s \$63-billion trade imbalance with China is alarming. India had raised the red flag about its adverse trade balance during China’s trade policy review at the WTO. It specifically cited hindrances that Indian exporters of rice, meat, pharmaceuticals and IT products were encountering to access the Chinese market.

Conclusion

It's a matter to be considered that pharmaceuticals, information technology services and tourism, in which India has a significant global footprint, had a minuscule presence in China. There are some positive developments as well in this regard. But we want that to be reflected in concrete trade figures. Then only we can conclude that there has been a turnaround in our commercial ties with China.

No local currency trade with India

China has not accepted India's proposal to carry out bilateral trade in local currencies, which was aimed at bridging the ballooning trade deficit with the neighbour. India had mooted renminbi-rupee trade with China to boost exports and tackle the widening trade deficit concern. India has also proposed trade in national currencies with other countries, including Russia, Iran and Venezuela with which New Delhi has a trade deficit.

India, China join hands to promote tea globally

Why in news?

Two apex industry organisations, Indian Tea Association (ITA) and China Tea Marketing Association (CTMA), have signed a memorandum of understanding to promote green and black tea consumption in major tea markets in Europe, the U.S., Russia and West Asia, besides India and China. The pact could also involve organisation of joint events.

China's import

The China imported 30 million kg of black tea annually amid its rising popularity in the country where green tea had earlier held sway. Indian exports stood at about 8.7 million kg in 2017 with the market being dominated by Sri Lanka and Kenya. An export of 15 million kg was being targeted next year. It may be mentioned that Tea Board and ITA had organised a tea delegation to China in October to boost trade between the two countries.

Significance

This alliance would promote sustainable development of the tea industry in the two countries, including that of the small tea sector. The MoU covers the areas of trade promotion, intellectual property protection and technology exchange.

India seen emulating China growth in LNG use to fight pollution

Why in news?

China's dramatic increase in liquefied natural gas imports over the past two years may have hogged the headlines, but India may well emulate its neighbour in switching to the cleanest and fastest-growing fossil fuel. As China's shift to natural gas from dirtier burning fuels such as coal and fuel oil helps improve air quality, Indian cities are rising in pollution rankings. That may increase pressure on lawmakers in India to boost imports of LNG.

Most polluted cities

It used to be if you look at the 50 most polluted cities in the world, 30 of them would be in China. If you now look at the 50 most polluted cities in the world, most of them are in India, and the Indian government are looking at this in the same way that China did.

China surprised the industry with the strength of a government-led push to convert to natural gas, which led to a doubling of LNG imports over the past two years. The nation may be a “big part of the solution of absorbing new LNG” as production plants from the US to Australia ramp up next year.

India's natural gas demand

India's natural gas demand is seen rising 4.9% annually to 2040, outpacing growth of 4.7% in China, according to the International Energy Agency. The Indian government is keen to boost the use of gas to combat air pollution and is promoting the expansion of gas infrastructure, including four additional LNG receiving terminals under construction.

MEA upbeat over China ties

Why in news?

Restoration of relations with China and a “balance” in ties with the neighbours are considered achievements of the government's foreign policy in the year 2018, while the challenges ahead will include keeping the balance between the U.S.-Europe axis on the one hand and the Russia-China bloc on the other.

Year-end review of Government policies

Sources said that according to a year-end review of the government's policies, the establishment of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) by India ranked amongst its biggest successes, as it is the first multilateral organisation with as many as 71 member countries already signed on that is headquartered in India.

Neighbourhood relationship

In the neighbourhood, the restoration of balance in our relationship with Nepal, as well as the reconnection with the new leadership in the Maldives are positive outcomes. The fact that the new Bhutan Prime Minister is making his first visit to India within a month is a positive, adding that India was not “the subject of domestic politics in the region, and the government has taken great care to ensure this in the recent political developments both in Sri Lanka and in Bangladesh.” However, no forward movement is expected with Pakistan, where talks over the Kartarpur corridor were described as a “cultural initiative” but not diplomacy.

Meeting between two leaders

Describing the Wuhan Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping as well as three subsequent meetings between the leaders this year as “unprecedented”, relations with China had returned to the “normal track” with progress made with high-level visits, the resumption of defence ties suspended last year after the Doklam standoff, restoration of peace at the India-China boundary and forward movement on trade where Beijing is actively considering Indian requests for more market access on agricultural and pharmaceutical products in particular.

Ties with United States

While ties with the United States have seen an upward swing, the sources said some concern was felt about the recent developments over Afghanistan, with reports of a possible pullout of US troops and moves to engage the Taliban along with visits to Pakistan by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad being studied closely. Meanwhile, the government acknowledged that there was a relatively lower amount of contact at the level of PM Modi and US President Trump, who only met once in the year in a trilateral format with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, but said that there had been must closer contacts between the Foreign, Defence and Commerce Ministers and their counterparts than before.

INDIA AND NEPAL

Nepal welcomes 'two-plus-one' dialogue mechanism

Why in news?

Nepalese officials are mulling over China's proposal of a "two plus one" mechanism, where Beijing and New Delhi can jointly hold a dialogue with a third country in South Asia.

China's relation with Nepal

The Chinese side has been emphatic that its relations with the Nepal will be conducted according to the five principles of peaceful coexistence the basis for a foreign policy among equals. The joint statement stressed that China-Nepal ties "maintained the momentum of healthy development on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which sets a model of harmonious coexistence between countries of different size and social system."

Not Nepal-specific

A "two-plus-one" format is different from a trilateral mechanism. Under the Chinese proposal, China and India can jointly conduct a dialogue with a third regional country, the proposal is not Nepal-specific. In the era of globalisation, it was imperative for Nepal to maintain close ties with both its neighbours China and India. The Nepalese Minister saw the rise of China and India as a "big opportunity" for the development of Nepal. "Nepal's two big neighbours are developing very fast. It is a big opportunity for us if we can manage our relations with both countries properly."

Desiring ties with both

Nepal's ties with India and China were governed by "specific conditions that were not contradictory". India and Nepal, at the state-to-state level had already bridged the divide caused by the 2015 events, when the flow of Indian goods into landlocked Nepal had been impeded, following a controversial agitation. The sentiment of the people has also been moving in the positive direction, in tune with the rebooting of the political relationship. Nepal was looking for a partnership with China and India to develop connectivity in the Himalayan nation. Connectivity could be one of the topics of a dialogue under the two-plus-one mechanism. Also look at the management of rivers such as Kosi and Karnali that originate in Tibet and then flow into Nepal and India.



INDIA AND BHUTAN

China, Bhutan discuss boundary dispute

Why in news?

China and Bhutan have discussed their boundary dispute and reached many agreements during the visit of Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou.

Discussions during the visit

Mr. Kong also invited Bhutan to take part in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during the visit. The two countries do not have diplomatic relations but maintain contacts through periodic visits by officials. The two sides should continue to push forward the border negotiations; abide by the principled consensus reached; jointly maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas; and create positive conditions for the final settlement of the border issue between the two.



Cabinet approves Amendment to the Article 3 of the Agreement

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved Amendment to the Article 3 of the Agreement between India and Bhutan regarding Mandechhu Hydro Electric Project (MHEP) in order to extend the loan repayment tenure by two years extended by India to Bhutan, for implementation of the said Project in Bhutan from fifteen (15) to seventeen (17) years.

Benefits

The First Year Tariff for import of power from the 720 MW MHEP in Bhutan at Indian Rupees 4.12 per unit, Certainty to supply of surplus power to India by Bhutan from MHEP, Strengthening India-Bhutan economic relations and inter-linkages especially in the field of hydro-power co-operation and overall deepening of India-Bhutan relations.

INDIA AND MYANMAR

India to help repatriate Rohingya

Why in news?

Promising to help repatriate Rohingya to Myanmar, Home Minister Rajnath Singh told Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that India would provide relief supplies for the refugees in Bangladesh and build homes for them in Rakhine state of Myanmar.

India's assistance

The home minister said India was prepared to “step up” assistance to approximately 7,50,000 Rohingya refugees who had fled the violence in Myanmar, and provide food, medical or relief supplies needed.

Later, Mr. Singh and his Bangladesh counterpart, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, inaugurated the largest Indian visa centre in the world at about 18,500 sq.ft in Jamuna Future Park in Dhaka. It replaces four visa centres in the capital and will serve visa seekers with 48 counters. The Indian High commission issued 1.4 million visas last year.



Myanmar meet didn't discuss Rohingya issue

Why in news?

India did not discuss the deportation of Rohingya with Myanmar at a meeting held recently. The annual 22nd National Level Meeting between India and Myanmar was held on October 25-26.

Not on agenda

An official of the Ministry of External Affairs present at the meeting confirmed that the issue was not on the agenda.

Rajnath's assertion

On multiple occasions, Home Minister Rajnath Singh has raised the illegal migration of Rohingya at public rallies and events, stating they would use diplomatic channels and ask the Myanmar government to take them back.

Exact no not known

Though the exact number of Rohingya living in India is not known, as per the Centre's estimate, there are around 40,000 of them in India, of which around 5,700 are in Jammu. Only 16,000 of them are said to be registered with the United Nations. The Rohingya came in during 2012-13 when thousands were displaced

following a wave of violence in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. The attacks revived in 2017 when lakhs took shelter in Cox's Bazar area of Bangladesh.

Mechanism exists

The Rohingya issue was not discussed at the meeting as a mechanism exists to deport illegal migrants. Recently, seven Rohingya, who were caught in Assam in 2012, were sent to Myanmar after the latter verified their credentials.

INDIA AND SRILANKA

India seeks Lanka help for JVs

Why in news?

India has sought Sri Lanka's cooperation in swift completion of joint ventures, amid anxiety in South Block over apparent delays in taking India-assisted projects in the island forward.

Foreign Secretary's visit

Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale visited Sri Lanka and conveyed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's keen interest in seeing the projects expedited. The talks, both with Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe, were largely focussed on key Indian projects, such as the proposed joint venture to run the Mattala airport in the island's Southern Province; an LNG terminal near Colombo, and the joint development of the oil storage facility in the eastern port town of Trincomalee.

India's offer to revive loss-making airport

Recently Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Nimal Siripala De Silva told Parliament that India had offered to help revive and run the loss-making airport near Hambantota, where China has a 99-year-old lease on a huge port, and discussions were on to finalise the joint venture. However, New Delhi has been concerned about the pace at which the projects are moving and has conveyed that on different occasions in the past. This is Mr. Gokhale's first visit to Sri Lanka after he assumed charge as Foreign Secretary in January. Mr. Gokhale urged Sri Lankan authorities to keep "India's interests in mind", even as he pledged further support to partner Sri Lanka not just in the economic front, but also in the spheres of culture and spirituality.

Avenues of investment

India was willing to explore avenues for further investment, including in the war-affected north and east. India's ongoing housing programme India is building about 60,000 houses in the island figured in the discussion between Mr. Gokhale and Mr. Wickremesinghe. India has also offered assistance to build roads and highways. Leader of Opposition and veteran Tamil politician R. Sampanthan met Mr. Gokhale, and sought India's push to the new Constitution. Expressing concern over the delayed attempt at drafting a new Constitution, he told the visiting Foreign Secretary that the Tamils looked up to India, which had been a party to the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, that recommended devolving some power to the provinces, including Tamil-majority areas.

India voices concern over housing project

Why in news?

Indian officials have questioned the government's decision to award a huge contract to build 40,000 homes to a Chinese company, reportedly without a fair tendering process. In May, Sri Lanka's Resettlement Ministry obtained Cabinet clearance for the project, which involves China Railway Beijing Engineering Group Co. Ltd



and its local representative, to construct 40,000 prefabricated concrete houses in the island's war-affected areas.

India role in post-war housing

India has been a key player in post-war housing in Sri Lanka. Its owner-driven scheme of 46,000 homes across the north and east is nearly complete. Additionally, it is building 14,000 houses in the central highlands which is home to several thousand tea estate workers whose ancestors hailed from India and 1,200 houses in the Southern Province. The projects are being executed with a grant totalling nearly \$400 million.

Earlier projects

The Resettlement Minister, earlier faced strong opposition for involving Luxembourg-based steel giant Arcelor Mittal to build 65,000 prefabricated steel homes for the war-affected communities, at a cost of LKR 2 million each (roughly 8.5 lakh). The project was subsequently withdrawn in the face of mounting resistance from locals and engineering experts, who found it unsuitable and exorbitant.

Source of funding

The Cabinet-cleared project came with a 100% financing option from the company, and was likely to be completed fast, in two years. The project will be funded through private commercial loans at a base price of LKR 1.28 million per house. According to the official data, as many as 1,65,000 houses are required in the north and east, where thousands of families lost all their property in the incessant and indiscriminate shelling during the protracted civil war. Locals have sought brick-and-mortar housing that are suitable for their warm climatic conditions, and have been pushing for initiatives that will generate local employment.

Sirisena orders release of all Tamil civilian lands by Dec. 31

Why in news?

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has ordered the release of all the Tamil civilian lands held by the State in the country's northern and eastern provinces by December 31. Sri Lanka witnessed three decades-long civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), during which the military occupied civilian lands in the northern and eastern provinces for military purposes.

Lands in armed forces

Since the end of the armed conflict in May 2009, a considerable part of private lands were released to the original owners. It was not clear if the latest release instructions came from Mr. Sirisena in response to representations made by the main Tamil party, Tamil National Alliance (TNA), in late August. Even 9 years after the conclusion of the civil war, both agricultural and residential lands continued to be in the possession of the armed forces.

Lands has been released to civilians

Pointing to the lands in Keppapilavu in the Mullaitivu district, the TNA said that 75 acres of private land owned and possessed by local people for generations and centuries was held by the Army. Mr. Sirisena told them then that more than 85% of the lands held by the military and belonging to civilians had been released. However, the TNA urged that in order to achieve reconciliation and national integration, all lands belonging to the people, which are now in the possession of the armed forces, should be released without any further delay.

Srilankan political crisis ends

Why in news?

India welcomed the end of political uncertainty in Sri Lanka with the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister.

Resilience of Sri Lankan democracy

A statement by the spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the latest developments indicated the resilience of Sri Lankan democracy. This is a reflection of the maturity demonstrated by all political forces, and also of the resilience of Sri Lankan democracy and its institutions. Earlier, Mr. Wickremesinghe said his return was a collective victory. India remains committed to taking forward its people-oriented development projects. We are confident that India-Sri Lanka relations will continue to move on an upward trajectory.



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BANGLADESH

Rohingya relocation plan pushed to 2019

Why in news?

Bangladesh's plans to tackle the Rohingya refugee crisis have been stalled until the New Year with repatriation and relocation programmes only likely to be revisited following the year-end general election.

Earlier problems

Bangladesh has delayed the planned relocation of a part of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to an islet of Bhashan Char in the Bay of Bengal as a major part of the camp is done but approximately 30% work remains to be completed. On 4th October 2018, UN urges India not to deport seven Rohingya. On 5th October 2018, the Supreme Court dismissed an application to stop the government from deporting seven Rohingya men detained in Assam since 2012.



Rohingya

The Rohingya, who numbered around one million in Myanmar at the start of 2017, are one of the many ethnic minorities in the country. Rohingya Muslims represent the largest percentage of Muslims in Myanmar, with the majority living in Rakhine state. They have their own language and culture and say they are descendants of Arab traders and other groups who have been in the region for generations. But the government of Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country, denies the Rohingya citizenship and even excluded them from the 2014 census, refusing to recognise them as a people. It sees them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Since the 1970s, Rohingya have migrated across the region in significant numbers. Estimates of their numbers are often much higher than official figures. In the last few years, before the latest crisis, thousands of Rohingya were making perilous journeys out of Myanmar to escape communal violence or alleged abuses by the security forces.

New Bangladesh's Prime Minister

New Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took oath for the third consecutive term. Sheikh Hasina was sworn as Prime Minister of Bangladesh for a record fourth term. Her Party is Awami League. Bangladesh President Md. Abdul Hamid administered the oath. Sheikh Hasina was first elected Prime Minister in 1996.

BHUTAN

Bhutan to focus on development

Why in news?

Bhutan's development agenda is expected to feature in bilateral talks that will be held during the visit of the country's newly elected Prime Minister Lotay Tshering.

Visit of Bhutanese leader

The visit by the Bhutanese leader is the first since he took charge of the post of the Prime Minister on November 7. Dr. Tshering, a well-regarded surgeon in Bhutan, led his party Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa to victory in the October 18 election, in which the party won 30 of the 47 seats of the Bhutanese national assembly. The victorious party had presented an agenda of development during the poll that is the agenda of the government in Thimphu. The Indian source hinted that India is aware that Prime Minister Tshering has to deliver on his development promises. It was also known that both sides will discuss the details of the ongoing hydroelectricity projects in Bhutan. The visit, the first foreign trip by the leader since he took charge, also highlights the special relation that exists between Bhutan and India.



CHINA

China dispatches low-level official to security conference

Why in news?

China has dispatched a low-level military delegation to an annual security conference in Singapore that has dwelled heavily in past on Chinese activities in the South China Sea.

China's presence at the Shangri-La Dialogue

China's presence at the Shangri-La Dialogue meeting was led by Lt. Gen. He Lei, vice president of the People's Liberation Army's Academy of Military Science. The move follows a recent pattern



of not sending high-level officials to the three-day forum, in an apparent attempt to deflect attention from China's shoring up its claims to virtually the entire South China Sea.

Mattis's view on last year's meeting

At last year's meeting, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis sharply criticised what he called Beijing's disregard for international law by its "indisputable militarization" of artificial islands in disputed areas of the South China Sea. The waterway, crucial to global trade and rich in fish and other resources, is claimed in whole or in part by six governments.

Mattis present view

Mr. Mattis is again representing the U.S. at this year's forum, which comes amid on-again, off-again prospects for a summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. China is North Korea's most important ally and has encouraged talks while seeking to preserve its own economic and diplomatic interests. The Singapore gathering also follows the Pentagon's decision to withdraw its invitation for China to participate in a multinational naval exercise in what it called "an initial response" to China's militarization of the South China Sea. The Pentagon cited evidence China has deployed anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missile systems and electronic jammers to contested areas in the Spratly Islands, where China has built military installations on man-made islands.

U.S. and China relationship

Despite strong mutual suspicions, the U.S. had included China in the past two versions of the naval exercise known as Rim of the Pacific, or RimPac, in 2014 and 2016. China's Defense Ministry said it still hoped for a "sound a healthy" relationship with the U.S. military. Ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang also confirmed China's development of its latest-model type 055 guided missile destroyer, which weighs 10,000 tons and features both stealth design and a land-attack capability. The PLA navy is believed to be planning to link the 055s with its slightly smaller type 052 destroyers as part of its future aircraft carrier strike forces. China operates one carrier at present, while another is undergoing sea trials and others are believed to be in the construction or planning stages.

China revises controversial anti-terror regulations

Calls for 'vocational education centres' to reform extremists

Anti-terror efforts in the controversial "reeducation centres" in China's Xinjiang region will be governed by new standardised rules, as international criticism mounts over the detention of as many as one million in the restive far west. The revised rules, passed recently, call on local governments to tackle terrorism by establishing "vocational education centres" that will carry out the "educational transformation of people who have been influenced by extremism."

Thought education

The centres should teach Mandarin Chinese, legal concepts and vocational training, and carry out "thought education". As many as a million people are believed to have been detained in extra-judicial detention centres in Xinjiang as authorities there seek to battle what they describe as religious extremism, separatism and terrorism. A previous version of the rules issued in March 2017 included a long list of prohibitions on religious behaviour, including wearing long beards and veils. It also encouraged local governments to engage in "educational transformation", a term critics have described as a euphemism for brainwashing. The detentions have mostly focused on the region's Muslim minorities, especially the Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group that make up around half of Xinjiang's population of 22 million. The new regulations seem aimed at standardising the centres' management, which was initially carried out piecemeal.

Denies detention

Beijing has denied reports of the mass detention of its citizens in camps, but evidence is mounting in the form of government documents and testimonies from former detainees. Chinese authorities have, however, said that they give vocational and language training to people guilty of minor crimes. Testimony from people who have escaped the centres provides a much darker picture, however. In July, a former teacher at one of the centres told a court in Kazakhstan that "in China they call it a political camp but really it was a prison in the mountains."

Xi opens world's longest sea bridge

Why in news?

Chinese President Xi Jinping has officially opened the world's longest sea crossing bridge nine years after construction first began. Known as Hong Kong-Zhuhai bridge it spans 55km (34 miles) and connects Hong Kong to Macau and the mainland Chinese city of Zhuhai. The bridge has cost about \$20bn (£15.3bn) and can withstand earthquakes and typhoons, was built using 400,000 tonnes



of steel, enough to build 60 Eiffel Towers. About 30km of its total length crosses the sea of the Pearl River delta.

Timeline

The project was initially conceived in 2003, and construction began on December 15, 2009. Its total cost, according to authorities, is now 120 billion yuan (\$17.3 billion). This has been shared in different proportions by the Hong Kong, Zhuhai and Macau governments. The bridge was originally slated to be opened in 2016. Before construction began, it was estimated that 33,000 vehicles would cross the bridge every day. In 2016, this was re-estimated to 29,000 vehicles a day.

Objective

China has promoted the structure as a key component of its plans to develop a “Greater Bay Area”. This area will be a business hub comprising Hong Kong, Macau and nine cities of Guangdong province. The Greater Bay Area will aim to rival New York and Tokyo in terms of technological innovation and economic success; Beijing believes the bridge will play a vital role in facilitating the creation of a single market.

Criticism

The bridge is being considered as a political statement asserting China’s control over Hong Kong and Macau. Both are former European colonies, handed back to China in the late 1990s, and are run under the “one country, two systems” principle, which allows them to retain their systems of government independent of China for 50 years. There have been concerns that the project will affect the ecology of the area. Sightings of the White Chinese dolphin have gone down drastically after the project was started. Safety concerns had also been raised after reports that the artificial islands had drifted. According to the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims, 10 construction workers have died, and more than 600 have been injured.

China carries out overhaul of military

Why in news?

China is on course to overhaul its military by pumping in technology and cutting down personnel, to enable its leaner armed forces to project power far beyond their borders.

Personnel in armed forces

The Army now absorbs less than half of the total personnel in the Chinese armed forces. Besides, the entire chain of command in the People’s Liberation Army has been changed to enable integrated warfare of all combat units, steered by a joint operational chief of staff. The Navy, Air Force, rocket force and strategic support force, which handle areas such as cyber warfare, comprise more than half of China’s armed forces. Beijing is also modernising its nuclear deterrent, based on a triad of long range missiles, bombers that can deliver atomic weapons, and nuclear submarines. The size of China’s Type 094 nuclear submarines, which entered service in 2010, is expected to climb to eight by 2020.

China must lead way in reform of global governance

Why in news?

China must lead the way in reforming global governance, the foreign ministry cited President Xi Jinping as saying, as Beijing looks to increase its world influence. China has sought a greater say in global organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and United Nations, in line with its growing economic and diplomatic clout.

China's own global bodies

Since taking office in late 2012, Xi has taken a more muscular approach, setting up China's own global bodies like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and launching his landmark Belt and Road project to build a new Silk Road. Beijing has cast itself a responsible member of the international community, especially as President Donald Trump withdraws the United States from agreements on climate change and Iran, and as Europe wrestles with Brexit and other issues.

China's sovereignty, security and development

China must uphold the protection of the country's sovereignty, security and development interests, proactively participate in and show the way in reform of the global governance system, creating an even better web of global partnership relationships. This would help create conditions for building a modern, strong socialist country. While Xi did not provide details, the statement cited him as mentioning the importance of the Belt and Road, and other key diplomatic platforms like his "community of common destiny", a lofty concept meant to guide China's relations with the world.

New style of international relations

This proposes a "new style" of international relations is proposed that is "win-win" and of "mutual benefit" for all, but many Western nations remain critical of China's behaviour over issues such as the contested waters of the South China Sea. Xi added that China must strengthen its relations with developing nations, who he described as natural allies, but also learn from all other nations. He made no direct mention of issues like the trade dispute between China and the United States, North Korea, or self-ruled Taiwan, claimed by Beijing as its own and considered China's most sensitive territorial and diplomatic issue.

China's 'Type 002' begins sea trials

Why in news?

China's second aircraft carrier, Type 002, being built at Dalian shipyard, has started the second phase of sea trials. Sea trials are essential to test and fine-tune a brand new ship's complex systems, paving the way for its entry into the Navy.

Expectation of second sea trial

An unnamed Chinese Navy researcher that he expected the second sea trial to mainly verify the carrier's communication, navigation and other electronic and mechanical instruments. But analysts say that China's new warship is unlikely to become a game-changer. For starters, it appears similar to Liaoning China's only aircraft carrier bought from Ukraine. The Liaoning underwent 10 sea trials starting in August 2011 before entering service in September 2012. The new warship has an estimated displacement of around 50,000 tonnes, similar to that of Liaoning.

The National Interest a U.S. publication points out on its website that Type 002 retains conventional propulsion and a ski-jump for assisted takeoffs, quite like the Liaoning. There are only minor changes in the superstructure, including new advanced electronically scanned array radars. The new carrier will board 24 to 30 J-15 fighters slightly more than Liaoning.

Recalibrating posture

The Type 002, however, compares poorly with much larger U.S. aircraft carriers, which usually have a more than 85,000 tonne displacement. It is likely that the U.S. military power will be further enhanced in the Indo-Pacific under the Donald Trump administration, which is already engaged in a trade war with China. China is also working on a third aircraft carrier in Shanghai, which will stand in the premier league of similar



platforms. The Type 003 is being developed on the same lines as the U.S. Navy's super-carriers, says another National Interest article. The new ship will be powered by a nuclear engine. It is estimated that by 2020, the Chinese Navy will have 351 warships a significant advance from the present level, but no match to the heavy arsenal of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command spread across a string of military bases in the Indo-Pacific.

China's combat aircraft makes debut flight

Why in news?

China's indigenously-built new multi-role combat aircraft for exports has made its debut flight.

FTC-2000G

The FTC-2000G, a new multi-role combat aircraft developed for export by the State-owned Aviation Industry Corp of China (AVIC), made its debut flight recently in the Guizhou province. The FTC-2000G aircraft flew for about 16 minutes. More than 1,000 people, including provincial leaders as well as Ambassadors and military attachés from several nations, took part in the ceremony marking the flight. According to AVIC, the aircraft is tasked mainly with air strikes against ground targets.



Google employees go public to protest against China project

Why in news?

More than 200 engineers, designers and managers at Alphabet Inc's Google demanded in an open letter that the company end development of a censored search engine for Chinese users, escalating earlier protests against the secretive project.

Project Dragonfly

Google has described the search app, known as Project Dragonfly, as an experiment not close to launching. But as details of it have leaked since August, current and former employees, human rights activists and US lawmakers have criticised Google for not taking a harder line against the Chinese government's policy that politically sensitive results be blocked.

Amnesty International launched public petition

Human rights group Amnesty International also launched a public petition calling on Google to cancel Dragonfly. The organisation said it would encourage Google workers to sign the petition by targeting them on LinkedIn and protesting outside Google offices. Google declined to comment on the employees' letter as Alphabet shares fell 0.35% to \$1,052.28.

Google have to adjust their earlier plans

Google has long sought to have a bigger presence in China, the world's largest internet market. It needs government approval to compete with the country's dominant home grown internet services. An official at China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, who was unauthorised to speak publicly, there was "no indication" from Google that it had adjusted earlier plans to eventually launch the search app. However, the official described a 2019 release as "unrealistic" without elaborating.

Employee's reaction

About 1,400 of Google's tens of thousands of workers urged the company in August to improve oversight of ethically questionable ventures, including Dragonfly. The nine employees who first signed their names on

letter said they had seen little progress. The letter expresses concern about the Chinese government tracking dissidents through search data and suppressing truth through content restrictions.

That incident sparked global protests at Google, which like other big technology companies has seen an uptick in employee activism during the last two years as their services become an integral part of civic infrastructure. This story has been published from a wire agency feed without modifications to the text. Only the headline has been changed.

China tests its ‘Mother of All Bombs’

Why in news?

China has developed a massive bomb, said to be the country’s answer to the US-built ‘Mother of All Bombs’, the most powerful non-nuclear weapon. It is dubbed as the Chinese version of the “Mother of All Bombs” due to its huge destruction potential that is claimed to be only second to nuclear weapons.

Background

While waging war against militants in Afghanistan, the US military dropped a GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) weapon, more commonly known as the “Mother of All Bombs,” on the Islamic State. Although China is using the same nickname for its bomb, said to weigh several tonnes, the Chinese weapon is smaller and lighter than its American counterpart.

Mother of all Bombs

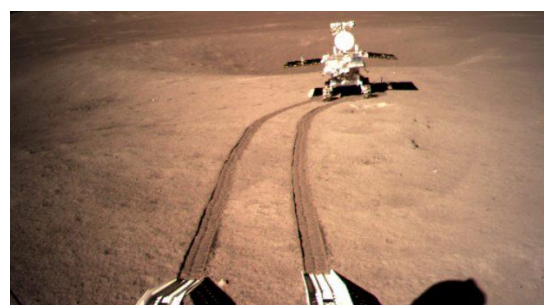
- The Moab or GBU-43/B is the world’s largest non-nuclear weapon.
- It is designed to destroy heavily reinforced targets or to shatter ground forces and armour across a large area.
- Its blast is equivalent to 11 tons of TNT. By comparison, the nuclear weapon dropped on Hiroshima had a blast yield of 15 tons of TNT.
- While it has a blast radius that stretches a mile in each direction the bomb leaves no lasting radiation effect because it is non-nuclear.



Chinese lunar rover named as ‘Yutu 2’

Why in news?

China lunar rover successfully deployed to carry out a string of experiments on the far side of the moon, as ‘Yutu-2’. The rover’s touchdown is part of China Chang’e-4 lunar probe. China’s lunar probe is part of its ‘Made in China-2025’ project, which focuses on advanced technology, including space applications. The rover has been programmed to launch ground penetration radar that would help map the moon’s inner structures. It would also analyse soil and rock samples for minerals, apart from activating a radio telescope to search for possible signals from deep space. The payload also carried a canister filled with air, soil, water, bacterium, silkworm eggs, the seeds of a small flowering plant and a potato.



Why is this Moon landing so significant?

Previous Moon missions have landed on the Earth-facing side, but this is the first attempt to explore the rugged far side from the surface. Landing on the far side isn't fundamentally different to landing on the near side of the Moon. But it presents a communications challenge because there's no direct line of sight to Earth.

CHINA AND JAPAN

China, Japan pivot to new markets to counter trade-war headwinds

Why in news?

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is on its first official visit to China, the first formal visit by a Japanese leader to China in seven years. The last Japanese prime minister to make an official visit to Beijing was Yoshihiko Noda in 2011. 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of the 1978 bilateral Treaty of Peace and Friendship, between China and Japan which followed the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1972.

Significance of the visit

The two governments are expected to agree on following areas:

- Economic cooperation such as joint infrastructure development in third countries.
- Confidence-building measures, including exchanges between their defense officials.
- Convergence between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Japan's concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The Nikkei Asian Review is reporting that Japan and China are expected to promote around 50 private-sectors, third-country infrastructure projects, setting in motion the first joint deal of building a smart city in Thailand.

Why rapprochement between Tokyo and Beijing now?

The decline in U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific, is a major factor persuading Japan to re-define its role in the region. The two countries see third-country infrastructure as a cornerstone of their growing economic cooperation. Tagged with politically benefiting from "debt traps" through its loans to developing countries, China is particularly keen to work together with reputed Japanese financial firms in third countries. China wants to befriend Japan as it faces an increasingly bitter confrontation with the United States, and Japan, which aims to stabilize its relationship with China by promoting cooperation with the economic powerhouse that possesses growing international clout.

Concerns

Concern remains deep in Japan that China, with its rapid military buildup and aggressive maritime postures, is seeking to build hegemony in Asia. Beijing is apprehensive that Japan is teaming up with the U.S. to contain China's rise.

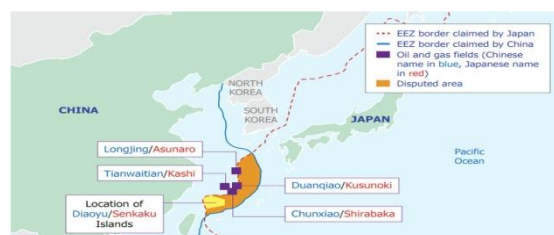
China-Japan frontline sees a 'cold peace'

Why in news?

Senkaku is an Okinawa chain of 150 islands in East China Sea contested by China and Japan.

Senkaku Island

Senkaku are small but strategically significant and are guarded and controlled by Japanese government. According to Japan, it was Japanese nationals who pioneered a settlement in these islands in late 19th century and China started to claim these islands only after 1968 when



UN cited the possibility of oil reserves in the area. However, China and Taiwan, on the basis of documentary evidence, claim that the territory was held by China before First Sino Japanese War (1894) and Japan later captured it, which should be returned back to China. Japan believes that by controlling Okinawa chain of islands China want to dominate the 150 km wide Miyako strait, between Senkaku and Miyako islands.

Miyako strait

Miyako strait would give Chinese army channel to West Pacific, which is dominated by US Navy. Chinese fishing ships had started entering the area around Senkaku since 2012 but their entry is checked by Japanese navy and troops guarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu frontline.

CHINA AND MALDIVES

China hopes Maldives will back BRI, trade deal

China signalled its expectation that the newly elected government in the Maldives will continue to back the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) reached with the outgoing administration of Abdulla Yameen. China and the Maldives enjoy traditional friendship and in recent years, the two countries maintained sound momentum and conducted mutually beneficial cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road, and achieved outstanding outcomes.

CHINA AND MYANMAR

Rohingya crisis reinforces China-Myanmar bond

Why in news?

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) got a high-octane boost recently, when Myanmar facing the heat from the West because of the Rohingya refugee crisis inked an agreement with Beijing to establish, China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a cross-border economic corridor.

Details

The 1,700 km corridor will provide China yet another node to access the Indian Ocean besides Gwadar port in Pakistan. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) can become a major factor in lifting the economies of landlocked southwest China, which includes the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, by providing them a passage to the Indian Ocean. The CMEC will also reduce Beijing's trade and energy reliance on the Malacca Straits the narrow passage that links the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. Chinese planners worry that the military domination of the U.S. there can threaten one of China's major economic lifelines.

Regions covered by CMEC

The CMEC will run from Yunnan Province of China to Mandalay in Central Myanmar. From there, it will head towards Yangon, before terminating at the Kyaukpyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the Bay of Bengal.

What led to this?

The ascending pressure on Myanmar from human rights groups and Western governments, appear to have reinforced the China-Myanmar bond. Domestically, the Myanmar economy is growing very slowly because of the lack of investment. Globally, there has been talk of sanctions against Myanmar over the Rohingya issue, so more than ever the country needs China. India's tepid enthusiasm for the previously proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor also appears to have persuaded China to head for the CMEC.



CHINA AND NEPAL

China to build railway connecting Tibet with Nepal

Why in news?

China will build a railway connecting the western region of Tibet with Nepal, one of several bilateral deals signed during Nepali Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli's visit to Beijing.

Link

The link will connect the Tibetan city of Xigaze with Nepal's capital Kathmandu. The two sides signed more than 10 agreements involving technology, transportation, infrastructure and political cooperation. China would also like to work with Nepal to build a "cross-Himalayan connectivity network" through aviation, trading ports, highways and telecommunications.

Oli's view

Mr. Oli said "cross-border connectivity" was Nepal's top priority, and he called for the two countries to work together to develop Nepal's hydropower resources. Nepal has already scrapped a \$2.5 billion deal with China's state-owned Gezhouba Group to build a hydropower facility in the west of the country. A \$1.6 billion deal with China's Three Gorges Project Corporation to build the West Seti hydropower plant in Nepal has also been put in doubt.



CHINA AND PAKISTAN

Xi calls for 'new era' in ties with Pakistan

Why in news?

Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan arrived in Beijing to rework "all-weather" ties with China, after reinforcing Islamabad's bonds with Saudi Arabia, and keeping the door open for the re-entry of West-backed International Monetary Fund (IMF) into his country.

New era

Khan has arrived at a time when Pakistan's economy is in doldrums, and could benefit from financial support from China Islamabad's longstanding ally. President Xi stated that China-Pakistan "all weather" friendship should enter a "new era".

Talks between two leaders

Talks between the two leaders commenced when Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves have reached an alarming low of around \$8 billion barely sufficient to finance about two months of imports. Current account deficit in the financial year that ended in June was around \$18 billion.

Saudi Arabia's aid to Pakistan

Prior to Mr. Khan's arrival in Beijing, Saudi Arabia had come to Pakistan's aid with a \$6 billion package. That included a \$3 billion deposit for one year, to help Pakistan wriggle out of its immediate balance of payment crisis. Despite Riyadh's emergency support, Pakistan is likely to approach China for financial backing to minimise its requirement for a loan from the IMF. Pakistan is expected to receive a \$6 billion economic package from China during Mr. Khan's visit. That includes a loan of \$1.5 billion and a grant of \$1.5 billion, along with an additional package of \$3 billion for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China has billed the \$62 billion project as the flagship undertaking of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China backs Pakistan's 'quest for peace' via talks

Why in news?

China Supports Islamabad's efforts to resolve outstanding issues" with India through dialogue, and appeared to support Islamabad on two other key topics the expansion of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and counterterrorism. In a joint statement, issued at the end of the Beijing leg of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit, China stated that it appreciated "Pakistan's quest for peace through dialogue, cooperation and negotiation, on the basis of mutual respect and equality, and supports Pakistan's efforts for improvement of Pakistan-India relations and for settlement of outstanding disputes between the two countries."

Role in SAARC

The statement also veered closer to Pakistan's position on counterterrorism and NSG, whose subtext was apparent a UN designation of Masood Azhar, head of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad as an international terrorist, and India's entry into an expanded NSG. The two countries also said they were not yet ready to join a global counter-terror treaty, pointing out that a "consensus" should be forged on the text of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT) first. China also supported Pakistan on nuclear non-proliferation in the statement.

SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union in South Asia. Its member states include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. SAARC was founded in Dhaka in 1985. Its secretariat is based in Kathmandu. The organization promotes the development of economic and regional integration. It launched the South Asian Free Trade Area in 2006. SAARC maintains permanent diplomatic relations at the United Nation as an observer and has developed links with multilateral entities.

China has ignored Wuhan spirit

Why in news?

China has not shown respect to the 'Wuhan spirit', by praising Pakistan for its role in South Asia, after the China-Pakistan joint statement urged Beijing to play a greater role in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

China frozen all fresh initiatives

China would have frozen all fresh initiatives with Pakistan if it had any respect for the Wuhan spirit that took off after Prime Minister Narendra Modi met President Xi Jinping earlier this year. By appreciating Pakistan for its role in the relationship with India, China is clearly interfering with India's affairs in South Asia.

In the statement, China appreciated Pakistan's position on dialogue with India on outstanding disputes. Both sides agreed on ensuring a peaceful and stable South Asia. Pakistan urged China to play an "active" role in the SAARC platform where it is at present an observer. But Mr. Sibal said the association is stuck due to Pakistan's role in promoting cross-border terrorism.

Bus service

Appreciation of Pakistan's conduct is in contrast with India's recent criticism of a new bus service through the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The bus service is a clear sign that China does not intend to respect the Wuhan spirit. Some said the statement reflected China's eagerness for a multilateral foothold in South Asia.

China has emerged as a bilateral development partner for several South Asian countries, but is yet to acquire institutional and multilateral support for its role in the region. It can acquire such a multilateral support only if it respects India's sovereignty concerns.

China's Pakistan investments take a military turn

Why in news?

The confidential plan would also deepen the cooperation between China and Pakistan in space, a frontier the Pentagon recently said Beijing was trying to militarise after decades of playing catch-up.

Military projects are part of BRI

All those military projects were designated as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a chain of infrastructure development programmes stretching across some 70 countries, built and financed by Beijing. The Belt and Road is purely an economic project with peaceful intent. But with its plan for Pakistan, China is for the first time explicitly tying a Belt and Road proposal to its military ambitions.

Programme's flagship site

Since the beginning of the BRI in 2013, Pakistan has been the programme's flagship site, with some \$62 billion in projects planned in the so called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the process, China has lent more and more money to Pakistan at a time of economic desperation there, binding the two countries ever closer. For the most part, Pakistan has eagerly turned more toward China as the chill with the U.S. has deepened. Some Pakistani officials are growing concerned about losing sovereignty to their deep-pocketed Asian ally, but the host of ways the two countries are now bound together may leave Pakistan with little choice but to go along. Even before the revelation of the new Chinese-Pakistani military cooperation, some of China's biggest projects in Pakistan had clear strategic implications.

Strategic card

A Chinese-built seaport and special economic zone in the Pakistani town of Gwadar is rooted in trade, giving China a quicker route to get goods to the Arabian Sea. But it also gives Beijing a strategic card to play against India and the U.S. if tensions worsen to the point of naval blockades as the two powers increasingly confront each other at sea. A less scrutinised component of BRI is the central role Pakistan plays in China's Beidou satellite navigation system. Pakistan is the only other country that has been granted access to the system's military service, allowing more precise guidance for missiles, ships and aircraft. The tightening China-Pakistan security alliance has gained momentum on a long road to the Arabian Sea. In 2015, under BRI, China took a nascent port in the Pakistani coastal town of Gwadar and supercharged the project with an estimated \$800 million development plan that included a large SEZ for Chinese companies. Linking the port to western China would be a new 2,000-mile network of highways and rails through the Balochistan province, a resource rich region plagued by militancy.

Naval footprint

The public vision for the project was that it would allow Chinese goods to bypass much longer and more expensive shipping routes through the Indian Ocean and avoid the territorial waters of several U.S. allies in Asia. Military analysts predict that China could use Gwadar to expand the naval footprint of its attack submarines, after agreeing in 2015 to sell eight submarines to Pakistan in a deal worth up to \$6 billion. China could use the equipment it sells to the South Asian country to refuel its own submarines, extending its Navy's global reach. According to the undisclosed proposal drawn up by the Pakistani Air Force and Chinese officials at the start of the year, an SEZ under the CPEC would be created in Pakistan to produce a new generation of fighter jets. For the first time, navigation systems, radar systems and onboard weapons would be

built jointly by the countries at factories in Pakistan. The proposal, confirmed by officials at the Ministry of Planning and Development, would expand China and Pakistan's current cooperation on the JF-17 fighter jet, which is assembled at Pakistan's military-run Kamra Aeronautical Complex in Punjab province. The Chinese-designed jets have given Pakistan an alternative to the U.S.-built F-16 fighters.

Reports claim China building warships for Pakistan

Why in news?

China is building the first of four "most advanced" naval warships for Pakistan as part of a major bilateral arms deal to ensure among other things "balance of power" in the strategic Indian Ocean.

Modern detection and weapon systems

Equipped with modern detection and weapon systems, it will be capable of anti-ship, anti-submarine and air-defence operations. The ship's class is reported to be Type 054AP, which means it is based on the Type 054A of the People's

Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, the report quoted the Pakistani Navy as saying. The Pakistani Navy previously said four such ships had been ordered. Once constructed, the warship will be one of the largest and technologically advanced platforms of the Pakistani Navy and strengthen the country's capability to respond to future challenges, maintain peace and stability and the balance of power in the Indian Ocean region. It will also support the Pakistan Navy's initiative of securing sea lanes for international shipping by patrolling distant waters.



CHINA AND RUSSIA

Russia, China set to launch joint military exercises

Why in news?

China and Russia to conduct joint exercise VOSTOK. China and Russia conducting giant 5 days military exercise in September 2018, Mongolia will be the third country to participate. The exercise will be bigger than Zapad 81 carried out in Eastern Europe by the former Soviet Union in 1981. Joint exercise is a clear indication to USA in response to

- National security strategy
- Presence of NATO in South China Sea in Taiwanese Straits
- Permanent USA troops on Russia western border.
- The intentions of US as 'hegemonic power' for safeguarding peace and stability of the region and the world.

China and Russia has been named "revisionist powers" by USA.

Facts about Vostok-2018

- Will involve 300,000 troops.
- Will engage tri-service mock-operations, involving 1,000 military aircraft, two of Russia's naval fleets and all its airborne units
- 36,000 military vehicles will participate in the drills at Russia's Tsugol training range in the trans-Baikal region.
- China will dispatch about 3,200 troops, along with more than 900 pieces of weaponry.
- 30 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters of China

Last year Both Russia and China has also concluded joint Missile Exercise. Russia has also said, nuclear conflict either Russia or china will naturally involve both. Upcoming exercise is a clear indication of deepening “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”. US National defence strategy has said Russia and China as “principle strategic challenges” to the U.S. US said, primary focus of US is to deal with competition of power and not terrorism. However such exercises will defeat the purpose of escalating pressure by USA on Russia and China.

Xi, Putin thinks big on lifting Russia’s ‘far east’

China and Russia are signalling their intent of working together to link the Russian ‘far east’ with the Asia-Pacific as part of a larger Eurasian integration plan. Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Vladivostok a coastal city in Russia’s resource-rich ‘far east’ to discuss plans with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for developing the region.

Economic forum

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his South Korean counterpart Lee Nak-yeon have also marked their presence at the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), which Mr. Putin is hosting. Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu is leading an Indian delegation to the forum. Observers say that his visit is part of a fresh round of New Delhi’s engagement with Moscow, which will culminate in October when Prime Minister Narendra Modi will host Mr. Putin for the India-Russia annual summit. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj is also heading for Russia for a meeting later this week of the India-Russia Inter Governmental Commission (IGC).

Putin’s regional plan

Analysts say that presence of the two leaders who have arrived from Tokyo and Seoul demonstrates the interest of key countries of the Asia-Pacific in realising Mr. Putin’s ambitious regional plan, which has China and other countries, including India, as possible partners. The Vladivostok conclave is being held amid a massive ongoing Russia-China joint military exercise an indication of Beijing and Moscow’s intent to deter a military strike on Eurasia’s core. The Vostok-2018 is involving a mammoth 3,00,000 troops. They will engage in tri-service mock-operations involving 1000 military aircraft, two of Russia’s naval fleets and all its airborne units, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has been quoted as saying. Nearly 36,000 military vehicles are participating in the drills that are taking place at Russia’s Tsugol training range in the trans-Baikal region.

About 3,200 troops, along with over 1,000 pieces of weaponry and 30 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s Northern Theater Command, are scheduled to conduct combat training together with the Russian troops. The PLA and Russian armed forces have formed a joint operational commanding system, under which military forces from the two countries will hold joint exercises including mechanised defence, fire strike and counterattack training.

Russia-China Investment Fund

Russia-China Investment Fund (RCIF) a joint undertaking of the state-owned China Investment Corporation and Russian sovereign wealth fund announced that a group of Russian and Chinese businesses are considering 73 joint investment projects, with a cumulative value of more than \$100 billion. Cooperation between China and Russia is an issue of global importance as both nations try to achieve economic stability despite the pain of U.S. penalties sanctions against Russia and an escalating tariff war against China. Russia and China are also expected to discuss reconstruction in Syria. Russia’s Ambassador in China Andrei Denisov as saying on the sidelines of the EEF that Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to compete in the economic recovery of Syria.

CHINA AND U.S.

China uses DNA to track its people, with U.S. help

Why in news?

Chinese authorities have been tracking millions of its people using a DNA database with the help of American expertise. Chinese government is preparing a DNA database that could be used to chase down Muslim Uighur minority who resist Beijing's plans.

Uighur

Xinjiang is home to most of China's Uighur ethnic minority and has been under heavy police surveillance in recent years after violent inter-ethnic tensions. Nearly one million Uighurs and other Turkic language-speaking minorities in China have reportedly been held in re-education camps.

China, US and India are world economic powers of the future

Why in news?

The three new world economic powers of the future are China, the US and India, with the relationship between the Asian giants holding the key to stability in the new world order shaped by the triangular relationship among the three.

India is viewed as strategic

In the past, India was viewed as an "irritant" in the international order given its espousal of non-alignment, but now, India is being viewed as strategic because of its economic weight.

USDA Projection

Several projections, including one by the United States Department for Agriculture Economic Research Service (USDA) last year, have projected the Indian economy to reach \$6.84 trillion by 2030 making it bigger than that of the economies of Japan and Germany. India's fast growing young population is perceived to help the country outpace ageing developed nations. Besides this, rising aspirations in the world's second-most populous country is driving demand for a range of consumer products like mobile phones, electronic goods, cars and houses.

Three poles

According to Sheth, the new emerging world order will consist of three poles—China, the US and India. This is the new power play that will shape the European Union on one hand, shape the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and definitely shape Africa. With the US-China relationship stressed by Beijing overtaking Washington in all areas including military, technology and innovation, it will be the India-China equation that will hold the key in this triangular setting.

Given that the US-India relationship had warmed considerably, India would be placed in a position of "strategic advantage" or "strategic dilemma" with New Delhi pondering whether it should align with them positively or not. India's importance is underpinned by its economic weight, Prime Minister Modi had proved himself a better leader on the world stage in comparison with US President Donald Trump who was still politically quite "naive. Modi possessed the knack of how to relate to world leaders from Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to former US president Barack Obama to current President Donald Trump to German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Google plans censored version of search engine in China

Why in news?

Alphabet Inc's Google is planning a censored version of its search engine for China that will block websites and certain search terms, The Intercept reported recently citing internal Google documents and people familiar with the plans. The project is a code named "Dragonfly" and has been underway since the spring of 2017.

Terms blacklisted

Search terms about human rights, democracy, religion and peaceful protests will be among the words blacklisted in the search engine app.

Finalised version

The finalised version could be launched in the next six to nine months, pending approval from Chinese officials. Google declined to comment on specifics mentioned in The Intercept report, but noted that it has launched a number of mobile apps in the country and works with local developers as part of maintaining its domestic presence. China's top Internet regulator, the Cyberspace Administration of China, did not immediately respond to Reuters' requests for comment.

Main platform blocked

Google's main search platform is blocked in China along with its video platform YouTube, but it has been attempting to make new inroads into China. In January, the search engine joined an investment in Chinese live-stream mobile game platform Chushou, and earlier, launched an artificial intelligence (AI) game on Tencent Holdings Ltd social media app WeChat.

Asian nations slam U.S.-China trade war

Asian countries have voiced concern about the potentially devastating impact of a U.S.-China trade war, with Ministers calling for the acceleration of talks for a gigantic Beijing-backed free-trade deal that excludes the United States. Fear that a simmering trade spat between the world's top two economies could spiral into a full-blown trade war with painful consequences for China's neighbours was among topics dominating discussion at a regional summit in Singapore. The prospect of a trade war is a "real threat" to Asian countries. Other top diplomats at the forum, hosted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, spoke out against protectionism, warning that it places the region's development in jeopardy. Some Ministers also called for the early conclusion of talks for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a 16-nation free trade pact.

INDONESIA

Indonesia's Merapi volcano ejects towering column of ash

Why in news?

Indonesia's Mount Merapi shot a towering plume of ash about 6 km high in eruption authorities.

Volcano's alert status

The National Disaster Mitigation Agency said the volcano's alert status, raised from the lowest level, is unchanged and a 3-km no-go zone around the crater remains in force. Merapi's last major eruption in 2010 killed 347 people. Indonesia, an archipelago of more than 250 million people, sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire" and is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Indonesian government seismologists monitor more than 120 active volcanoes.



Volcano-triggered tsunami toll climbs to 222 in Indonesia

A tsunami killed at least 222 people and injured hundreds on the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra following an underwater landslide believed caused by the erupting Anak Krakatau volcano. Hundreds of homes and other buildings were “heavily damaged” when the tsunami struck, almost without warning, along the rim of the Sunda Strait, Sutopo Purwo Nugroho. Thousands of residents were forced to evacuate to higher ground. By 10.40 a.m. GMT, the disaster agency had raised the death toll to 222 from 168, with 843 injured and 28 missing.

IRAN

Iran to launch two satellites

Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani said that the country plans to launch two domestically made satellites into orbit in the “coming days” to gather information on its environment.

IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

Iran held talks with Taliban

Why in news?

Iran has met with the Afghan Taliban, just days after the militants attended reconciliation talks in the UAE. Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, made the announcement while on a visit to Kabul. The Afghan government has been informed of the communications and talks carried out with the Taliban, and this process will continue.

A pillar of stability

The Islamic Republic has always been one of the primary pillars of stability in the region and cooperation between the two countries will certainly help in fixing Afghanistan’s security. The announcement follows reconciliation talks between the U.S. and Taliban officials in the UAE. Iran and Afghanistan share a nearly 600-mile border, and had a complex relationship in recent years. Tehran has long supported its co-religionists in Afghanistan, the Shia Hazara minority, who were violently persecuted by the Taliban during its rule in the 1990s. Iran worked alongside the United States and Western powers to help drive out the Taliban after the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.



INDIA AND IRAN

India, Iran pledge to maintain trade levels

Why in news?

Striking a defiant note against the U.S.’s demands to zero out oil imports and end engagement with Iran, Indian and Iranian officials said they would maintain the momentum of bilateral cooperation between them.

Background

Earlier, the United States pulled out of the 6-nation Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and decided to re-impose sanctions on Iran, due to be implemented in two batches.

US push

In line with its sanction, US has declared a campaign to isolate Iran and asked many countries to close all trade ties with Iran. India has been told to take oil imports to “zero” along with other trade. The U.S. sanctions, pushed from visit of U.S. U.N. envoy Nikki Haley to India asked India to revise ties with Iran.

Iran push

On another hand, Iran had warned that India would face a deprivation of all other privileges Iran has offered to India if it chose to replace Iranian oil from other sources. Although it clarified later that Iran understands India’s difficulties with its choices and will respect its sovereign right to choose partners. It also expected that Indian government will make proper decisions in favour of the national interest of India.



Implication of US pressure

If India rejects U.S. pressure, it risks sanctions as well as incurring the displeasure of its all-powerful friend and defence partner. If it yields, it risks its relationship with traditional partner Iran, access to important trade routes through Chabahar, the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), as well as its international reputation. So India finds itself in complex negotiations with Iran and USA.

India, China gets relief from US sanctions on Iran

Why in news?

India is one of eight countries to receive temporary exemptions from U.S. sanctions on Iran that came into effect on 5 November 2018.

Exemptions given by US

The U.S. will be granting these exemptions to China, India, Italy, Greece, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey. Each country on the list had demonstrated “significant reductions” of the purchase of Iranian crude over the past six months. Two have stopped importing oil from Iran and would not do so as long as sanctions were in effect. China and India, in that order, are the top two importers of Iranian oil. All payments for Iranian oil will be held in Foreign Accounts.

Tehran view

Tehran can use the money to purchase non-sanctioned goods and for humanitarian purposes, including food, medicines and medical devices. In 2017-18, India, which imports over 80% of its oil, sourced some 10% of its oil imports, or just over 22 million tons from Iran. The Indian Oil Corporation is the biggest Indian customer for Iranian oil.

Iran deal

More than 20 countries have decreased their imports of Iranian crude, the Secretary of State said, cutting Iran’s oil revenues by more than \$2.5 billion since May 2018, when Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or “Iran Deal”. The European Union, which has stayed in the deal, has been frustrated by America’s efforts to stifle European business’s activities with Iran.

SWIFT

The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), the international financial messaging service headquartered in Belgium, has said it will comply with U.S. sanctions as have many other European companies, faced with the choice of being penalized by the U.S. or trading with Iran.

IRAN AND RUSSIA**Iran plans naval drills with Russia**

Why in news?

Iran and Russia are preparing to hold joint naval exercises in the Caspian Sea, including rescue and anti-piracy drills. Tactical, rescue and anti-piracy war games between Iranian and Russian naval forces are being planned and will be implemented in the near future.

Several naval drills

Iran and Russia have held several naval drills in the Caspian Sea, including in 2015 and 2017. Iran and Russia have close ties, including in Syria where they both back President Bashar al-Assad in the country's civil war. Admiral Khanzadi reiterated Iran's opposition to the military presence of any country from outside the region in the Caspian Sea. Russia said it was firmly committed to deepening ties with Iran despite a U.S. decision to quit an international nuclear deal and reimpose sanctions on Tehran.

ISRAEL**Golan Heights annexation**

Why in news?

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has urged the international community to recognize the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights, a Syrian territory seized by Israel 51 years ago.

Issues about Golan Heights

Israel on the Golan Heights is a fact that the international community must recognize and as long as it depends on me, the Golan Heights will always remain under Israeli sovereignty. According to Netanyahu, Iran and its proxy, the Lebanese-based military of Hezbollah, are "trying constantly to establish a force opposite us that would operate against the Golan Heights and the Galilee." Israeli presence in the Golan is "thwarting" Iran's ambitions of expansion and "is a guarantee for stability" in the region. Israel seized the Golan Heights in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed it shortly later, claiming it as part of Israel, in a move never recognised internationally.

**Israel adopts Jewish nation law**

Why in news?

Israel's Parliament adopted a law defining the country as the nation state of the Jewish people, provoking fears that it could lead to blatant discrimination against Arab citizens. Arab lawmakers and Palestinians said it legalised "apartheid." Others said it neglected to specify equality and Israel's democratic character, implying the country's Jewish nature comes first.

Ministers seek changes to Jewish nation law

Two key Ministers have called for changes to a deeply controversial law declaring Israel the nation state of the Jewish people after a backlash and a court challenge from the Druze minority. Opponents have called the law “racist” as it makes no mention of equality and Israel’s democratic character, implying that the country’s Jewish nature comes first. Members of Israel’s 1,30,000-strong Druze community many of whom willingly serve in the police and the military have been among those strongly denouncing the law. Community leaders have filed a court challenge to the law.

INDIA AND ISRAEL

Israel, India sign \$777 mn missile deal

India and Israel has signed a \$777 mn deal. Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) to supply additional Barak-8 Long Range Surface to Air Missile (LRSAM) systems for seven warships of the Indian Navy. The LRSAM can intercept aerial targets up to a range of 80 km. It is being co-developed by the DRDO in India and IAI, and will be manufactured by Bharat Dynamics Limited.

INDIA AND JAPAN

Modi, Abe back ‘free Indo-Pacific’

Why in news?

India and Japan outlined a vision document for strengthening bilateral relations at the 13th annual summit held in Japan recently.

Highlights of the vision document

Both sides called for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” which is usually seen as a response to China’s growing dominance in the region. Commitment towards upholding the rule of law and democratic values which underlies the new security architecture that Japan and the United States are trying to put in place to counter China. The vision statement specifically mentioned the willingness of both countries to “expand concrete cooperation with the U.S. and other partners”. It also referred to the necessity of ensuring the freedom of navigation and the importance of upholding the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), a set of conventions that China has been accused of flouting in the South China Sea.

Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement

The start of negotiations on an Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement, a logistics-sharing pact that would allow Japanese ships to get fuel and servicing at Indian naval bases was also announced in the vision document. A new Foreign and Defence Ministerial Dialogue, termed 2+2, was also announced that will include the Annual Defence Ministerial Dialogue, Defence Policy Dialogue and the National Security Advisers Dialogue. On the economic front, the two countries have agreed to a Bilateral Swap Arrangement that would allow their central banks to exchange local currencies for up to \$75 billion. Earlier Japan had offered a \$50 billion currency swap in 2013 and, before that, one for \$3 billion in 2008. This is substantially more than the \$30 billion currency swap arrangement announced between China and Japan.



Significance of the announcements

Bilateral swap arrangement should aid in bringing greater stability to foreign exchange & capital markets in India. The facility will serve as a second line of defence for the rupee after the \$393.5 billion of foreign exchange reserves that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has at its disposal. Once Acquisition and Cross-servicing Agreement is signed, Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force will be able to secure access to Indian naval facilities in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, which are strategically located close to the western Malacca Straits, a choke point for much of Japan and China's trade and fuel imports.

JAPAN AND EU

EU, Japan sign major trade deal

Japan and the EU signed a sweeping free trade deal saying they were sending a "clear message" against protectionism, as Washington puts up barriers and threatens a trade war. The deal signed in Tokyo is the largest ever negotiated by the EU and creates a massive free trade zone, eliminating tariffs for everything from Japanese cars to French cheese. It also provides a stark counterpoint to U.S. President Donald Trump's aggressive "America First" protectionism, which has seen Washington impose trade tariffs on allies and rivals alike. The agreement is expected to enter into force from 2019.

INDIA AND KUWAIT

MoU for cooperation on the Recruitment of Domestic Workers

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the signing Memorandum of Understanding between India and Kuwait for cooperation on the Recruitment of Domestic Workers.

Details

The MOU provides a structured framework for cooperation on domestic workers related matters and provides strengthened safeguards for Indian domestic workers including female workers deployed in Kuwait. The MOU is initially valid for a period of five years and incorporates provision for automatic renewal.

Implementation Strategy

Under this MOU, a Joint Committee will be set up to follow up the implementation of this MOU.

Major Impact

The MOU will promote bilateral cooperation in domestic workers related matters between the two countries.

Beneficiaries

Around 3,00,000 Indian domestic workers deployed in Kuwait. This includes around 90,000 female domestic workers.



MYANMAR

Myanmar rejects UN findings on 'genocide'

Why in news?

Myanmar rejected the findings of a UN investigation alleging genocide by its military against the Rohingya, after the U.S. and other countries joined growing calls for them to face justice. The UN probe detailed evidence of genocide and crimes against humanity "perpetrated on a massive scale" against the Rohingya.

Myanmar rejects UN findings

Myanmar government didn't allow the FFM (the UN Fact-Finding Mission) to enter into Myanmar, that's why they don't agree and accept any resolutions made by the Human Rights Council. They pointed to the formation of Myanmar's own Independent Commission of Enquiry, which was set up to respond to "false allegations made by the UN agencies and other international communities".



MALDIVES

Maldives strongman Abdulla Yameen faces defeat

Why in news?

Voters in the Maldives delivered a stunning defeat for President Abdulla Yameen in a contentious presidential election, an outcome regarded as a victory for democracy over authoritarianism in the Indian Ocean island nation. The people of the small archipelago in the Indian Ocean voted for change and brought to power the Opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. They came out in huge numbers with the turnout being 89.2%.

Importance of Maldives

The Maldives, long a popular tourist destination, has grown in strategic importance in recent years as China and India to establish their influence in the region and as Beijing pushes ahead with its global trade and infrastructure plan. Spread over nearly 1,200 islands spanning more than 90,000 sq km, key shipping lanes where Beijing and New Delhi compete to pursue their often-conflicting maritime strategies pass through this tiny Indian Ocean nation. Though small, the Maldives is India's important neighbour. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the Maldives "a valued partner in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood". India-Maldives "ties are built on a very strong foundation" the contours of



which are defined by shared strategic, security, economic and developmental goals. However, the bilateral ties are not without irritants, which can be seen in two broad areas: political and strategic.

How is China engaging with the Maldives?

Beijing has made large investments in infrastructure projects in the Maldives during Yameen's time in office. They include a US\$830 million investment to upgrade the Maldives airport and build a 2km bridge to link the airport island with the capital Male. Chinese are also building a 25-storey apartment complex and hospital in the Maldives. Meanwhile, some 306,000 Chinese tourists visited the Maldives last year accounting for 21 per cent of the country's total number of visitors. When three Chinese naval ships docked in Male in August last year, it only amplified India's concerns.

Tilt towards China

Mr. Yameen's China visit last year, the two nations signed 12 pacts, including a free trade agreement (FTA). Mr. Yameen not only fully endorsed China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative but also made the Maldives the second country in South Asia, after Pakistan, to enter into an FTA with China. The Yameen

government pushed the FTA through the nation's Parliament, the Majlis, stealthily, with the opposition not attending the parliamentary session.

Chinese Investments: Massive Debt trap, according to opposition

The opposition accused the Yameen government of allowing a Chinese 'land grab' of Maldivian islands, key infrastructure, and even essential utilities, which "not only undermines the independence of the Maldives, but the security of the entire Indian Ocean region. The massive infrastructure growth funded by Chinese debt was a key part of Mr. Yameen's election campaign but the massive debt trap made it a difficult proposition to be accepted.

How have the Maldives ties with India fared under Yameen?

Bilateral ties between India and the Maldives have deteriorated during Yameen's time in power. In March 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled his state visit to the island nation over the treatment of Mohamed Nasheed, the former pro-India Maldivian president who had been jailed. The Maldives also declined India's invitation to take part in its biennial eight-day naval exercise, Milan, this year. Yameen's government has also rejected visa renewals for Indians who were legally working in the Maldives, without giving any explanation.

Conclusion

Many of the challenges the Maldives faces linger. The opposition may have been united in its desire to oust Mr. Yameen but this unity will be tested in governance. Democratic institutions have been weakened and a fragile democracy can also be susceptible to radical ideologies if not effectively governed. Its economic presence in the Maldives is a reality that all governments will have to contend with. Mr. Yameen's defeat has certainly produced a favourable outcome for New Delhi and it should seize the moment to rebuild ties with Male. If there is one lesson out of the Maldives crisis, it is that political elites in India's neighbours will come and go. But if India can stand together with the aspirations of citizens of neighbouring countries, then the prospects of a long-term sustainable relationship will be much brighter.

INDIA AND MALDIVES

Agreement on the facilitation of visa arrangements

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has given its ex-post facto approval to the Agreement on the facilitation of visa arrangements signed between India and Maldives signed in December, 2018.

Visa Facilitation Agreement

The Visa Facilitation Agreement signed during the visit of Maldivian President to India aims to further deepen people to people exchanges between the two countries making it easier for Maldivian and India nationals to travel to each other's countries for tourism, medical treatment, education as well as business and employment. The Agreement provides for 90-day visa free travel for tourism, medical and limited business purpose and also provides for easy conversion of such visa free entry to medical visa as well as visas for dependents of students and those pursuing employment in each other's territories.

Background

India and Maldives share time tested and traditional bonds of friendship. Close people to people contacts constitute the foundation of special bilateral relation between India and Maldives, which received a positive momentum with the visit of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi to Male in November, 2018 for the Inauguration ceremony of the newly elected President of Maldives, Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, and the subsequent visit of the Maldivian President to India in December, 2018.

Maldives' new President promises to reset India ties

Why in news?

Promising a host of people-focussed policies and a foreign policy formulated on the basis of human rights, democracy and climate diplomacy, the Maldives's new President, Ibrahim Solih, sought to turn a new page in the country's politics at a glittering inaugural ceremony.

Inaugural ceremony

The event was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lankan MP Namal Rajapaksa and other dignitaries from across the region. The new government assumes power on the back of a coalition of parties led by Mr. Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party, and comes after five years of rule under Abdulla Yameen that saw Male moving strategically and economically closer to Beijing than to New Delhi.

Meeting between two leaders

At their meeting, the two leaders agreed on the importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being "mindful of each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region". The need to boost economic cooperation was writ large in their conversation. Their joint statement recognised that easing the visa regime mutually in both countries would be the quickest way to expand opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives, and for Maldivians to travel to India for a variety of purposes. India was also invited to step up again as an economic partner which could help the Maldives meet its most pressing economic needs, including for increased housing and infrastructure development and for water and sewerage systems on the outlying islands. On the more troubling question of tackling climate change, President Solih corroborated his reference to "climate diplomacy" with details on his plan to introduce a green tax and halt fishing permits to foreigners.

NEPAL

International ICT conference concludes in Nepal

Why in news?

The two-day international Information and Communication Technology (ICT) 2018 conference concluded recently.

Event

The event was organised by the Federation of Computer Association Nepal under the theme of Sustainable Development Goals for Smart Society. The conference was attended by both local and foreign ICT stakeholders, experts and enthusiasts from various countries including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and China. The conference discussed various issues and aspects of ICT including infrastructure, global trend, its usage and benefits among others. According to the Federation, the event worked as a common platform to discuss about global perspectives, promoting digital economy and use of ICT in security and services. Speakers highlighted the need for promoting the ICT sector through digitalisation.

PAKISTAN

Can Imran bring Pakistan in from the diplomatic cold?

Why in news?

Tensions with Afghanistan, faltering relations with the U.S., and chronically poor ties with India, Pakistan today stands isolated, observers say, and bringing it back into the fold is a formidable task for its new premier Imran Khan.

Anti-terror campaign

Mr. Khan has repeatedly blamed Pakistan's participation in the U.S.-led anti-terror campaign for the surge in terrorism on home soil over the last decade. Now as Premier, in a tone noticeably softer than his earlier anti-U.S. comments, Mr. Khan has said he wants a "balanced relationship", instead of "fighting America's war" in exchange for aid.

Talks with Taliban

Mr. Khan has long advocated a negotiated settlement with Islamist insurgents, a commitment that led to the criticism that he is soft on militants and earned him the nickname "Taliban Khan". If not in Washington, he may find a sympathetic ear in Kabul. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has also been pushing for talks with the Taliban, and offered a new, conditional ceasefire.

All weather friends

Beijing has long been Islamabad's "all-weather friend", and the strategic relationship was stepped up with the 2013 launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project that is part of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. The alliance is widely considered Pakistan's most important, and Mr. Khan has vowed to strengthen it further.

CPEC deal

But CPEC deals are opaque, and amid fears about Pakistan's ability to repay Chinese loans, his party has vowed more transparency. That may be difficult in a country where any criticism that may hurt ties with Beijing is considered taboo. It is arch-rival India which remains Pakistan's biggest foreign policy challenge, however. The nuclear-armed rivals have fought three wars since the end of British rule in 1947, including two over Kashmir, the vast Himalayan territory that is claimed by both.

Khan advocated peace

But reaching out to New Delhi is a path fraught with risk for civilian leaders in Pakistan, where foreign and defence policies are dominated by the powerful military. Mr. Khan's charged anti-India statements prompted many in both countries to predict that ties could suffer under his leadership. But in an apparent about-turn after his poll victory, Mr. Khan has advocated peace as the only way forward. In the end, observers say, the extent to which Khan can influence Pakistan's foreign policy will depend on what the military deems acceptable.

PAKISTAN AND RUSSIA

Pakistan troops to get training at Russian institutes

Why in news?

Pakistan and Russia have signed contract on admission of service members of Pakistan in Russia's Military Training Institutes. The agreement was signed at conclusion of first meeting of Russia-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC), the highest forum of defence collaboration between both countries held in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. This will be for first time, Pakistani soldiers will undergo training at Russian military institutes. This agreement is considered as sign of further strengthening defence ties between Russia and Pakistan.

Russia-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC)

During inaugural JMCC meeting, both sides discussed present status of their defence relations with aim to further strengthen, expand and diversify mutual cooperation. They exchanged views on bilateral and major international issues, including situation in West Asia and Afghanistan. They also expressed requirement of greater cooperative and collaborative approach among global community to defeat extremism. Moreover,

comprehensive issue-based review was also carried out during which both countries expressed satisfaction on milestones achieved since signing of defence cooperation agreement in 2014. They also discussed regional security situation and matters of mutual interest, including enhancement of bilateral defence and security cooperation.

Background

Pakistan's defence ties with Russia have moved past bitter Cold War hostilities in recent years, mostly after chill in Pakistan's relations with US. This has further pushed Pakistan close towards Russia and China. Russia and Pakistan had defence cooperation agreement in 2014. This has further enhance their bilateral relations. Both countries also have initiative military exercise DRUZBA (Friendship) in 2016.

PAKISTAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia to join CPEC as third strategic partner

Why in news?

Pakistan has invited Saudi Arabia to join \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the third strategic partner. Formal request in this regard was made after Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Saudi Arabia during his first foreign trip after getting elected.

Key Facts

Saudi Arabia is first country that Pakistan has invited to become partner in CPEC. Pakistan's main interest in inviting Saudi Arabia in CPEC is to ensure huge investment from cash rich gulf country. This invitation comes after Pakistan concern over rising debt levels have especially due to unsustainable loans from China for CPEC projects, compromising cash-strapped Pakistan's sovereignty. Projects as part of CPEC in which Saudi Arabia will be investing will be smoothed out during visit of Saudi Arabia's Finance and Energy Ministers to Pakistan in the first week of October 2018. During this visit, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will also finalise important economic partnership.

Note

Saudi Arabia has long history of financially bailing out Pakistan during economic crisis. Saudi Arabia had loaned Pakistan \$1.5 billion in 2014 to strengthen its rupee currency, six months after Pakistan obtained its last IMF bailout.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

CPEC is flagship project as part of China's multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at enhancing China's influence around the world through China-funded infrastructure projects. CPEC aims to construct and upgrade transportation network, energy projects, deep-water port at Gwadar and special economic zones (SEZs) to eventually support Pakistan's industrial development as manufacturing hub by 2030. CPEC will linking Gwadar in South Western Pakistan to China's North Western region Xinjiang through vast network of highways and railways. The proposed project is financed by heavily-subsidised Chinese loans, disbursed to Pakistan Government by Chinese banking giants such as China Development Bank, Exim Bank of China and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China.

QATAR AND IRAN

Qatar won't be part of any military action against Iran

Why in news?

A senior Qatari official said his country will not be dragged into any conflict with Iran.

There is no war

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Khalid Al Attiyah told an international security conference in Singapore that Qatar has “a lot of differences” with Iran but it does not mean “we go and fuel a war” in the region. Responding to a question whether Qatar’s air bases could be used to launch airstrikes on Iran, Mr. al-Attiyah said that his country was not a “fan of war” and supported engagement and dialogue. Qatar is hosting 10,000 U.S. troops stationed at sprawling al-Udeid Air Base as part of its campaign against the Islamic State group and the war in Afghanistan.

Mr. Al Attiyah called for salvaging a 2015 nuclear accord between world powers and Iran that offered Tehran sanctions relief for curbs on its nuclear program. The U.S. withdrew from the deal recently. Everyone should keep holding on to this and advance with this.



RUSSIA

Joint military exercise in Russia ends

Why in news?

Exercise Peace Mission 2018, the joint military exercise of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), ended in Russia with the eight-member states undertaking joint training on combating terrorism. This is the first time India and Pakistan participated in the exercise, which began on August 24 at the firing ranges in Chebarkul.

Exercise concluded

After intense training, the joint exercise concluded with multinational forces exhibiting their combat

power and dominance over the extremist groups in simulated realistic situation. The closing ceremony showcased the immense talent and unique military ethos of all the member nations. India, China, Kazakhstan and Russia showcased their armoured and mechanised forces while Pakistan has sent only Special Forces personnel. The Indian delegation was led by Lt. Gen Satish Dua, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff. China has welcomed the participation of the two south Asian countries in the exercise and said stability between the two countries was “significant to the peace and development of the region and the whole world.”



Russia successfully tests hypersonic missile

Why in news?

Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed final tests of a hypersonic missile, which he had earlier said would render existing missile systems obsolete. On my instructions, the Ministry of Defence prepared and conducted a final test of this system. This has just been completed with absolute success.

Strategic weapon

Russia has a new type of strategic weapon, adding that the intercontinental “Avangard” system would be ready for use from 2019. The Kremlin told that the test had taken place in far eastern Kamchatka. Mr. Putin had unveiled features of the Avangard during his annual address in March, which he said would be part of a new generation of “invincible” weaponry.

Hypersonic missile

The hypersonic missile could fly at 20 times the speed of sound and manoeuvre up and down, meaning that it could breach defence systems, he had said at the time. The final test comes after U.S. President Donald Trump announced plans to pull out of a key Cold War-era nuclear weapons pact, the three-decade-old Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Mr. Putin has laid out plans to develop missiles banned under the deal if the U.S. abandons it.

INDIA AND RUSSIA

Talks on for logistics deal with Russia

Why in news?

India and Russia are in the process of concluding a logistics agreement, with both sides targeting to conclude consultations before the annual summit in October between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The proposed agreement follows a series of such agreements India has signed since the first logistics agreement with the U.S.

Draft from Moscow

A draft logistics agreement has come from Russia. At the end of July, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) had sent it to the Integrated Defence Staff and the three services for their comments. The Army and Navy have since sent back their observations on the draft. Another official said the agreement with Russia will be on the lines of those signed with the U.S. and France. The idea is to increase our operational flexibility.

LEMOA

India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Understanding (LEMOA), with the U.S. in August 2016 after a decade of negotiations. Since then it has concluded several such agreements with France, Oman, Philippines, and Singapore and for access to the Sabang port in Indonesia. Logistics agreements are administrative arrangements facilitating access to military facilities for exchange of fuel and provisions on mutual agreement simplifying logistical support and increasing operational turnaround of the military when operating away from India. Officials underscored the fact that India and Russia have had deep rooted military cooperation for several decades.

India to gift 3 MiG-21s to Russia

Why in news?

A highlight on the sidelines of the upcoming India-Russia bilateral summit is likely to be the gifting of three MiG-21 fighter jets to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin will be in New Delhi on October 4 and 5 for the annual summit with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Gift of aircraft

The aircraft to be gifted are in flight-worthy condition and the cost of crating and transportation will be borne by the Russians. This will be major symbolic gesture to showcase the all-weather friendship and deep strategic partnership between India and Russia, which has been put to test in recent times due to changing geopolitical conditions.

About the aircraft

The aircraft will get new registration numbers and may be adopted for vintage flight. However, it is not clear how the Russians intend to use them. The MiG-21 has more of emotional value for Russia, as it has the distinction of being the most produced supersonic fighter in history. The MiG-21, a product of the Soviet Union, was designed by the Mikoyan-Gurevich Design Bureau in the 1950s. It made first flight in 1956 and entered service in 1959. However, Russia stopped producing the aircraft in 1985, while India continued operating the upgraded variants. India inducted the MiG-21s in 1963 and got full technology transfer and rights to license-build the aircraft in the country. It is the first supersonic fighter aircraft of the Indian Air Force. The IAF still has about 120 MiG-21s in service which will all be phased out of service by 2021-22.



India, Russia sign S-400 missile deal after summit

Why in news?

India and Russia concluded the contract for five S-400 ‘Triumf’ missile systems, one of the biggest defence deals in recent times, after the annual summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The announcement of the deal, which could attract sanctions from the United States, was made in a joint statement issued by both sides. The sides welcomed the conclusion of the contract for the supply of the S-400 long range surface to air missile to India.

About Kamov

Kamov is a small, twin engine Russian utility helicopter. This light multipurpose helicopter has a maximum takeoff weight of 3.6 tons and a maximum speed 220 Km/hr. It can carry up to one ton payload. The machine has excellent maneuverability and handling, easy maintenance

About Kamov deal

India and Russia have signed a deal to jointly produce 200 Kamov Ka-226T helicopters, at the India Russia Summit in Goa. The helicopters are expected to boost the capabilities of the armed forces. Kamov 226T will replace the ageing Cheetah and Chetak choppers. Under the deal, 60 helicopters will be imported from Russia and at least another 140 will be built in India by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) with technology transfer. As part of this, a joint venture was set up in India which will build the helicopters.

S-400 Triumf

An S-400 ‘Triumf’ long-range air defence missile system is one of the most advanced long-range defence systems in the world. It is referred to as SA-21 Growler by NATO. It has been in service in Russia since 2007. It is capable of firing three types of missiles. Thus, it creates a layered defence, and simultaneously engaging 36 targets. The S-400 uses four different types of missiles and can track and shoot down incoming objects as far away as 400 kilometres, while it also has shorter-range missiles to track and shoot down objects that are closer.

About S-400 deal

In October 2016, India and Russia concluded IGA for five S-400 systems and four stealth frigates after which the negotiations began to conclude a commercial contract. But there has been mounting concerns in India over US sanctions against Russian defence majors export as billions of dollars of military purchases may be impacted because of punitive measure. The US had announced sanctions against Russia under CAATSA for its alleged meddling in presidential election in 2016. The five S-400 systems will be operated by the Indian Air Force (IAF).

S-400: a major point of friction

With the friction in relations between the U.S. and Russia, the S-400 has become a major point of friction. Several countries, including some U.S. allies, have expressed interest or are acquiring the system and Washington has threatened them with sanctions. In September 2018, the Trump administration imposed sanctions on some entities and individuals in China as it recently acquired Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 systems. In December 2017, Turkey signed a deal to acquire these systems; in October 2017 Saudi Arabia signed a memo of intent to acquire the S-400 and talks are on to finalise the deal. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has threatened Qatar with military action if it moves to acquire the same system. According to the portal military today, the S-400 has been exported to Algeria as well.

Why does it matter?

The acquisition of S-400 by countries such as India and Turkey has taken centre stage in the American diplomacy regarding Russia. Upfront, the recent sanctions against Russian entities, especially its military manufacturers and suppliers, mean any country buying the system may run into trouble. Besides, the U.S. has singled out the acquisition of S-400, telling potential customers such as India and Turkey that it is opposed to the move. It believes that S-400 could access sensitive U.S. military technologies in service with the potential buyers. Congressman Mac Thornberry, Chairman of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, during a recent visit to New Delhi, said: "There is lot of concern in the U.S. over the S-400 system. There is concern that any country, and not just India, that chooses to acquire the system will make it harder to have the level of interoperability we want to have."

India, Russia to build stealth frigates*Why in news?*

India signed a \$500 million deal with Russia to locally manufacture two stealth frigates with technology transfer. The agreement was signed between Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL) and Rosoboronexport of Russia.

Deal between two countries

The deal is for material, design and specialist assistance from Russia for the ships. Balance work will be done by GSL, and it will have a whole lot of Indian equipment, including BrahMos missiles. Work on the two frigates will start in two years by mid-2020 and is expected to be completed by 2026-2027.

The cost of the engines for the ships which would come directly from Ukraine and the cost of constructing them at GSL are in addition. While the ships are built by Russia, the engines are supplied by Zorya Nashproekt of Ukraine. Four gas turbine engines, gear boxes and specialist support will cost around \$50 mn



per ship. In October 2016, India and Russia signed an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) for four Krivak or Talwar stealth frigates two to be procured directly from Russia and two to be built by GSL. Of late, GSL has maintained a good track record. It has delivered 28 ships ahead of schedule in the past four years. India recently signed a \$1 bn deal with Russia for direct purchase of two frigates. The basic structures of the two frigates are already ready at the Yantar shipyard in Russia and will be finished now.

RUSSIA AND AFGHANISTAN

Russia steps into Afghan peace efforts

Why in news?

The Taliban met with members of Afghanistan's High Peace Council in a conference organised by the Russian government in Moscow. This is the second such meeting with the insurgent group being organised by international stakeholders in a bid to push peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Taliban met with U.S. special envoy

The Taliban reportedly met with U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, to start negotiations on the terms of a peace deal. Both meetings, however, did not see the participation of the Afghan government. President (Ashraf) Ghani is committed to peace and has taken bold steps. However, the Taliban did not reciprocate, a source close to the Afghan President said on condition of anonymity.

In a statement issued ahead of the meeting, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed displeasure. It confirmed that the government wasn't sending an official delegation, and that it would be represented by members of the High Peace Council, an independent body of political and religious leaders, assigned to facilitate talks with the insurgents. Our agreement with the Russians is that this meeting should lead to direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, only a group of people were invited and that reflects the intention of the Taliban, who are not yet willing to negotiate with the government.

Not a negotiation

The Taliban reiterated in two consecutive statements that the meeting would not be a negotiation, but instead a discussion on "finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan quandary and ending the American occupation". For the Russians, the meeting is the second attempt this year to step into a reconciliatory role between the Afghan government and the Taliban. In September, a similar event organised in Russia fell through after the demands of the Afghan government to co-chair the meeting were disputed by the Taliban, a fact that they emphasised on while accepting the invitation to the November meeting.

However, the fact that the Moscow conference comes close after the Taliban's meeting with the American envoy has raised concerns over the competitive nature of the two countries in facilitating the peace efforts. "Absolutely, it is obvious that there is a competition between Russia and the U.S. India, which was also invited to the conference, sent "non-official" representatives Amar Sinha, a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan, and T.C.A. Raghavan, head of the Indian Council for World Affairs.

India's consistent policy has been that such efforts should be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, and Afghan-controlled and with the participation of the government of Afghanistan. However, the participation of regional and international stakeholders is being seen by many as providing a much-needed momentum to the peace efforts.

RUSSIA AND JAPAN

Russia proposes peace treaty with Japan

Why in news?

Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested that Russia and Japan sign a peace treaty this year, ending Second World War hostilities “without any preconditions” as a territorial dispute has led to decades of deadlock.

Putin’s proposal

But Mr. Putin’s sudden proposal was received coolly in Japan, where a government spokesman said the two countries should first resolve the dispute before signing a peace deal. The dispute between Russia and Japan centres on four islands in the strategically-located Kuril chain which the Soviet Union occupied at the end of war in 1945 but are claimed by Japan. It has kept the two countries from signing a peace accord that would formally end their wartime hostilities.

RUSSIA AND SYRIA

Russia to send newer, S-300 missile defence systems to Syria

Why in news?

Russia announced that it will supply the Syrian government with modern S-300 missile defence systems following recent downing of a Russian plane by Syria, a friendly fire incident that sent regional tensions over the war-torn country soaring.

Russian military aircraft

The Russian military aircraft was downed by Syrian government missile defense systems, killing all 15 people on board. Russia laid the blame squarely on Israel, saying that its fighter jets had pushed the Russian plane into the line of Syria’s fire. Shortly before the downing, Israeli strikes had hit targets inside Syria, reportedly preventing an arms shipment going to Iranian-backed Hezbollah group. Russia launched its campaign in Syria to support President Bashar Assad in 2015 and though the involvement turned the tide of war in favor of Syrian government forces, Moscow has since played a careful balancing act, maintaining good ties both with Iran and Israel.

Russia send S-300 missile to Syria

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Russia will send the newer S-300 missile defence systems to Syria. Earlier in the war, Russia suspended a supply of S-300, which Israel feared Syria could use against it. Shoigu said Russia is now going to go ahead with the shipment because “the situation has changed, and it’s not our fault.” The supply of S-300s to Syria will calm down some hotheads” whose actions “pose a threat to our troops.



SINGAPORE

Singapore re-sanctifies 148-year-old Hindu temple

Why in news?

Communications and Information Minister S Iswaran and priests flown in from India led some 10,000 devotees at a ceremony to re-sanctify a 148-year old Hindu temple. The ceremony marked the start of a 48-day consecration process of the temple that underwent renovation for over four years at a cost of nearly SGD 4 million.

Maha Samprokshanam

Maha Samprokshanam, as the ceremony is called, is organised every 12 to 15 years in Singapore's Hindu temples, many of which were built by Indian migrants over 100 years ago. In the four-year process, the temple committee collaborated with artists and technical advisers to review and endorse ideas for the renovation.

About the dome and statues

The dome and the statues around it were clad in gold-plated copper, while decorative works on the pillars required two sculptors crafting them on site for over three years. In the main hall, eight cement shrines were replaced with onyx sanctums. The stone, chosen for its durability, were sourced from India and tested at the National University of Singapore for authenticity and hardness. The Sri Krishnan Temple was established in 1870 in Waterloo Street, which was then known as Church Street. The temple remains at its original site and was gazetted for conservation in June 2014.



SRI LANKA

What is the Sri Lanka political crisis all about?

What is it?

Late on November 9, President Maithripala Sirisena dissolved the Sri Lankan Parliament and called a snap general election for January 5. The announcement came within hours of his party spokesman publicly admitting to lacking a majority in Parliament. Mr. Sirisena's front was aiming for a majority to push its controversially installed Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa through the legislature.

How did it come about?

Sri Lanka has been facing a political crisis for a fortnight now, with Mr. Sirisena abruptly sacking his Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replacing him with Mr. Rajapaksa, a former President, apparently defying the Constitution or more specifically, its 19th Amendment a 2015 legislation that clipped the powers of the President significantly. Resisting Mr. Sirisena's move, Mr. Wickremesinghe maintained that he was the legitimate Prime Minister and challenged Mr. Rajapaksa to a vote in Parliament to test their claims to majority. Mr. Sirisena had earlier suspended Parliament until November 16, possibly to muster strength for his front, but summoned the House for November 14, amid growing pressure.

Why does it matter?

Both decisions of Mr. Sirisena sacking Mr. Wickremesinghe and dissolving Parliament have raised serious questions about constitutional validity. As for the dismissal of Mr. Wickremesinghe, the 19th Amendment removed the President's authority to arbitrarily sack his Prime Minister. Under the Constitution, the Prime Minister's office does not fall vacant unless in circumstances of his death, voluntary resignation or loss of majority in a crucial votes in Parliament. Since none of these is true in the current situation, a new

appointment by the President is constitutionally ruled out. Some lawyers point to a discrepancy between the English and Sinhala texts of the Constitution and claim the President, as per the Sinhala version, still has the power to remove a Prime Minister. Other constitutional lawyers have argued that while there is a discrepancy in language and framing, the import and essence of the Sinhala text is consistent with that in English, especially when read along with the rest of the Constitution in Sinhala. On the dissolution of Parliament, the President does not have the powers to dissolve Parliament within four-and-a-half years of its convening, unless requested by two-thirds of its members, as per the 19th Amendment. The President's side has invoked Article 33(2) C that lists the powers to summon, prorogue and dissolve Parliament, in addition to his existing powers. All the same, critics have noted that while the Article is a general enumeration of his powers, it is the 19th Amendment's specific provision that must prevail in such a situation.

What lies ahead?

The political flux over the past two weeks was the culmination of a bitter power struggle between Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe within the ruling coalition. The two leaders, from traditionally rival parties and with incompatible ideologies, had joined hands to form the government in 2015, ousting Mr. Rajapaksa. In about three-and-a-half years, they fell apart. Amid the pressure of a Rajapaksa comeback, Mr. Sirisena chose to side with him. The conduct of elections will depend on the Election Commission's position on the development and possible legal hurdles, since Mr. Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) has vowed to move the Supreme Court on the "illegal" dissolution of Parliament. From the time the 19th Amendment capped the Presidency at two terms, Mr. Rajapaksa has been eager to return as Prime Minister. But he is now with Mr. Sirisena, who brings with him at least part of his unpopular coalition government's incumbency. Mr. Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, is faced with a dual challenge — some within his party have been demanding a new leader for some time, while those backing him are aware of his falling political stock amid a growing economic crisis.

Report on constitution proposals tabled

Why in news?

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe tabled an experts' report on the proposals to draft Sri Lanka's new Constitution at the Constitutional Assembly sitting held in Parliament. The move enables a discussion in the Constitutional Assembly, which in turn could help authorities present a draft of the Constitution in Parliament in the coming months, according to legislators. Once debated in Parliament, the draft would have to be passed by a two-thirds majority in the House, and later endorsed by citizens in an island-wide referendum.

Political solution

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main political grouping of minority Tamils of the north and east, has been at the forefront of a campaign for a new constitution that its legislators, say, could pave way for a political solution to Sri Lanka's national question. Pointing to the government's pledge to enact a new Constitution which, among other things, promises to devolve more powers to all provinces, including in the north and east, the TNA has underscored the need to expedite the process. However, as the government stepped into the fifth and final year of its term that too after a political crisis that left the country without a legitimate government for nearly two months, the national political terrain remains fragile. With few signs of the power struggle between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe having been resolved, and the resistance to some proposals from sections in the south and north, enacting a new Constitution appears a challenging task. Apart from its delayed process of drafting the Constitution, the government came under sharp attack on the accountability front, when TNA parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran accused it of being "complicit" with the former Mahinda Rajapaksa regime in "covering up" crimes.

War crimes

He raised the issue in Parliament in the context of slain editor Lasantha Wickrematunge's 10th anniversary observed recently. While perpetrators had not been brought to justice in the high-profile case, investigators were yet to begin probing even one of the several killings of Tamil journalists in the last decade, he noted. Pressing for international investigations into war crimes, he said that if politicians in the south had no fear, then they would be willing to face any tribunal. Since the war was waged by the Sri Lankan armed forces against the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, an arm of the Sri Lankan state must not investigate the crimes, he argued, underscoring the need for a "neutral umpire".

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia to host Gulf conference on supporting Jordan

Saudi Arabia says it will host a meeting among several Gulf Arab countries to offer support to Jordan after it faced mass protests over the kingdom's economic problems and its plans to tax its citizens. The Saudi Royal Court said the meeting in Mecca would include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. Likely means cash from the oil-rich nations to Jordan, which has experienced an economic downturn. Rising unemployment has hurt Jordan's economy, as has taking in a large number of refugees from war-ravaged Syria and Iraq.



Saudi Arabia could be testing ballistic missiles

Why in news?

A military base deep inside Saudi Arabia appears to be testing and possibly manufacturing ballistic missiles, experts and satellite images suggest, evidence of the type of weapons it has long criticised its arch-rival Iran of possessing. Further raising the stakes for any such programme are comments by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who said the kingdom wouldn't hesitate to develop nuclear weapons if Iran does. It focuses on a military base near the town of al-Dawadmi, some 230 km west of Riyadh. The base was first identified in 2013, suggesting that its two launch pads appear oriented to target Israel and Iran with ballistic missiles the kingdom bought from China.

Satellite images

The November satellite images show what appear to be structures big enough to build and fuel ballistic missiles. An apparent rocket-engine test stand can be seen in a corner of the base — the type on which a rocket is positioned on its side and test-fired in place. Such testing is key for countries attempting to manufacture working missiles. Chinese military support to the kingdom would not come as a surprise. China has sold armed drones to Saudi Arabia and other nations in the region, even as the U.S. blocks sales of its own to allies over proliferation concerns.

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bin Salman, who said last year the kingdom wouldn't hesitate to develop nuclear weapons if Iran does. The images, first reported by The Washington Post, focus on a military base near the town of al-Dawadmi, some 230 km west of Riyadh. Jane's Defence Weekly first identified the base in 2013, suggesting that its two launch pads appear oriented to target Israel and Iran with ballistic missiles the kingdom bought from China.

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INDIA AND SAUDI ARABIA

We'll meet your oil needs

Why in news?

Saudi Arabia stands committed to meeting all of India's energy needs, especially in oil, its Energy Minister Khalid A. Al-Falih. Al-Falih said Saudi Aramco's investment of \$44 billion in the Ratnagiri refinery was "just the start" and that the company was keen to invest in an integrated downstream business, including on the retail side, as well as in storage capacity. According to him, the ongoing belief that the rise of electric vehicles would mean the decline of oil missed the reality of the situation. Conventional vehicles, still represented 99.8% of all vehicles in the world. Electric vehicles, he pointed out, are in the passenger vehicle segment, which accounts for only a quarter of oil demand. The majority of oil demand comes from sectors like heavy vehicles and commercial vehicles, and this demand will remain for a long time to come.

A look at the relation between India and Saudi Arabia

The relation between India and Saudi Arabia is generally strong and close, especially in commercial interests. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest trade partner after China, US and UAE. It is a major source of India's energy security requirement that counts for almost 1/5th of India's crude oil requirement. Saudi Arabia is India's top supplier of crude oil. As of now the relations between India and Saudi Arabia revolves around two important areas – trade and investment; defense and security cooperation.

India relies on Gulf countries for investments

India heavily relies on the gulf countries for foreign Investments to expand the Indian market. The Indian government is focused on improving the infrastructure sector in taking efforts like – to improve the ease of doing business in the country and to simplify and rationalize existing rules and relax the foreign direct investment norms in key areas, including railways, defense and insurance has made Saudi Arabia to invest in Indian market.

Defence and security sector

The other sector where India-Saudi relations have been strengthened significantly is in the defense and security sector. India and Saudi Arabia share common grounds when it comes to maritime security, defense cooperation, fight against extremism and terrorism. However, India maintains neutrality because Saudi Arabia has close military and strategic ties with Pakistan which is often a source of continuing strain for India.

India's exports to Saudi Arabia

India's major exports to Saudi Arabia include basmati rice, textiles and garments and machinery, while it imports organic and inorganic chemicals, metal scrap, leather, gold and oil from Saudi Arabia. Both nations

are expected to expand trade and cooperation and joint ventures in telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, health services, information technology, biotechnology, agriculture, construction projects, energy and financial services. Both countries agreed to launch joint ventures for developing gas-based fertilizer plants in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi Crown Prince visit highlighted the complexities in bilateral ties

Progress of India-Saudi relations

They have tried to 'de-hyphenate' their relations from ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Their relations were strengthened into a strategic partnership in 2010 after Riyadh Declaration.

The Outcomes of the Visit

Announcements were made for measures to:

- upgrade the defence partnership,
- create a "Strategic Partnership Council"
- institute regular talks between the two national security advisers

Saudi Arabia has expressed its interest in investing in infrastructure projects. Saudi agreed to insert an extra clause calling on states to renounce the "use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy". It acknowledged that disputes between India and Pakistan must be resolved bilaterally. It agreed to increase Haj quotas and release 850 Indians from Saudi jails.

SAUDI ARABIA AND QATAR

Saudi threatens military action if Qatar deploys anti-aircraft missiles

Why in news?

Saudi Arabia's King Salman has threatened to take military action if Qatar installs a Russian air defence system.

Issue between Gulf countries with Qatar

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates severed diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar last year, accusing Doha of supporting terrorism, which it denies. Qatar and Russia signed an agreement on military and technical cooperation recently. Qatar's ambassador to Russia was quoted as saying in January that it was in talks to buy the Russian S-400 missile air defence systems. Le Monde said that Saudi King Salman had written a letter to French President Emmanuel Macron, expressing his profound concern over negotiations between Doha and Moscow and the possibility that Qatar could deploy the missiles.

INDIA AND SOUTH KOREA

S. Korea wants to elevate ties with India

Why in news?

South Korea recently announced a 'New Southern Policy' to develop its relations with South-East Asia and ASEAN.

Reasons for the 'New Southeastern Policy'

To manage the challenge of North Korea, lesser focus earlier on Southeast Asia compared to Northeast Asian States like China and Japan, advancement of Seoul by its middle power diplomatic efforts, building an inclusive regional architecture in Asia. South Korea, as part of this strategy, wants to build stronger ties with ASEAN and India on multiple fronts like economic, bilateral and strategic.

Engagement with India

There is convergence of approach between India and South Korea towards regional issues. Both sides are concerned about maritime security in the region. The increasing influence of China in South China Sea and India Ocean region is also being watched. South Korea sees India as the main partner in expanding their economy. Both sides have agreed to boost bilateral trade to \$50 billion by 2030 from \$20 billion now. South Korea wants to elevate diplomatic ties with India to the level of four other major powers around the Korean Peninsula namely the U.S., China, Russia and Japan.

South Korea's approach towards Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

South Korea favours BRI but accuses China's unilateral approach and pursues for more open and transparent policy. South Korea also warned to countries borrowing from China for big ticket infrastructure projects of possible debt trap later.

SOUTH KOREA AND NORTH KOREA

S.Korea suspends civilian drills to help talks with N.Korea

Why in news?

South Korea has suspended its summertime civil defence drills aimed at preparing against a North Korean attack to keep alive a positive atmosphere for nuclear diplomacy with the North. Seoul's decision on July 10 to "temporarily suspend" the nationwide civilian drills had been anticipated since the United States and South Korea halted their annual military exercises following a summit last month between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Ulchi drills

Streets in South Korean cities froze at the sound of air-raid sirens every year during the Ulchi drills in August with cars stopping on roads, pedestrians moving into buildings and subway stations, and government workers evacuating from their offices. Kim Boo-kyum, Minister of the Interior and Safety, said the suspension of the civilian drills was a follow-up to the suspension of the military exercises amid recent changes in "South-North relations and other security situations."

New civil defence programme

He said the government and military will work to design a new civil defence programme to be launched next year that will be aimed at preparing people for natural disasters and terrorist attacks in addition to military attacks. The Ulchi civilian drills were launched in 1968, a year after a failed attempt by North Korean commandos to assassinate then-South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee.

Civilian exercises

There had been criticism on whether the civilian exercises were adequately preparing South Koreans from North Korean threats. For most South Koreans, there's no real training, with people standing around in gathering spots, staring into their phones or looking frustrated. Many schools didn't participate in the air-raid drills. While South Korea has nearly 19,000 evacuation shelters, mostly in subway stations and parking garages, surveys have shown most people did not know which shelters were closest to their homes.

Leaders of two Koreas meet in Pyongyang for talks on ending war

Why in news?

South Korean president visited North Korea, to discuss on denuclearisation and ending the Korean War.

Inter-Korean summit

The inter-Korean summit will be seen as decisive steps between North Korea and U.S relationship. US threat to impose U.N. sanctions (aimed at choking off funding) has pressurised the North Korea to conclude recent Summit. U.S demand North Korea to focus on denuclearisation before getting engaged into ending war with South Korea. After meeting a separate military pact designed to defuse tensions and prevent armed clashes to be announced. North Korea says it has destroyed its main nuclear and missile engine test site, and has halted atomic and ballistic missile tests but U.S. officials and analysts believe it is continuing to work on its weapons plans. Both countries also proposed meeting to strengthen economic relations.

North ready to abolish missile sites if U.S. takes matching action

Why in news?

North Korea had agreed to "permanently" abolish its key missile facilities in the presence of foreign experts, and is willing to close its main nuclear complex if the United States took reciprocal action, South Korea's President Moon Jae-in said.

Agreement between both leaders

Mr. Moon and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un said they agreed to turn the Korean peninsula into a "land of peace without nuclear weapons and nuclear threats". They also agreed to pursue a bid to co-host the 2032 Summer Olympic Games, and actively work together in other international competitions including the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. The latest summit will be a litmus test for stalled negotiations on the North's nuclear programme between Pyongyang and Washington, and for another meeting Mr. Kim recently proposed to U.S. President Donald Trump following their historic meeting in June in Singapore.

Mr. Moon was seeking to engineer a proposal that combines a framework for the North's denuclearisation and a joint declaration ending the 1950-53 Korean War. Mr. Kim pledged to work toward the "complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula" in his first encounter with Mr. Moon, and at his summit with Mr. Trump in June.

But discussions over how to implement the vague commitments have since faltered, with Washington demanding concrete action towards denuclearisation by North Korea before agreeing to a key goal of Pyongyang - declaring an end to the war. North Korea has given no indication it is willing to give up its nuclear arsenal unilaterally and is seeking relief from crippling international sanctions.

Pyongyang has offered to stop nuclear and missile tests but did not allow international inspections for a dismantlement of its only known nuclear site in May, drawing criticism that its action could not be verified and could be easily reversed.

Washington's hope

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert told that Washington hoped the latest inter-Korean summit would bring about "meaningful, verifiable steps towards the denuclearisation of North Korea", and called it a "historic opportunity" for Mr. Kim to follow through on commitments he made with Mr. Trump. Later Mr. Moon's delegation is scheduled to tour the Mansudae Art Studio, the North's largest producer of art where state artists build statues and produce propaganda at a sprawling complex in Pyongyang.

The institution was sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council last year as part of global efforts to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programmes by drying up its revenue sources. Mr. Moon is also scheduled to watch the North's signature "Brilliant Fatherland" Mass Game, which was reintroduced this year following a five-year hiatus, with a formation of glowing drones, lasers and stadium-sized gymnastics shows designed to glorify the country.

The United States is pressing countries to strictly observe international sanctions, which will likely be a key theme when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hosts a Security Council meeting on North Korea on Sept. 27 on the sidelines of the annual U.N. General Assembly. This week's summit is intended to craft concrete steps to implement the Panmunjom Declaration, named after the border village where they first met, officials in Seoul said.

Military accord

The two Koreas also adopted a separate military accord aimed at preventing armed clashes between the old foes, which are technically still at war because the Korean War ended with a truce, not a peace treaty. The neighbours have already agreed to withdraw some guard posts and equipment, in a bid to transform the world's most heavily fortified border into a no-weapons area. Pyongyang says it has destroyed its main nuclear and missile engine test site, and has halted atomic and ballistic missile tests, but U.S. officials and analysts believe it is continuing to work on its weapons plans clandestinely.

South Korea is pinning high hopes on Mr. Kim's remarks to Mr. Moon's special envoys earlier this month that he wanted to achieve denuclearisation within Mr. Trump's first term in office ending in early 2021. Mr. Kim, at the same time, stressed that Washington must reciprocate his initial "goodwill" gestures. Anwita Basu, an analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit, said, "While Moon has expressed his desire to agree on a concrete plan on denuclearisation, we believe that the two nations still differ on this concept."

In previous, failed talks, North Korea has said it could consider giving up its nuclear programme if the U.S. provided security guarantees by removing troops from South Korea and withdrawing its so-called nuclear umbrella of deterrence from the South and Japan. U.S. officials involved in the latest negotiations have said North Korea has refused to even start discussions about defining denuclearisation.

Moon, Kim visit 'sacred' mountain in show of unity

Why in news?

Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in visited the spiritual birthplace of the Korean nation for a show of unity after their North-South summit gave new momentum to Pyongyang's negotiations with Washington.

Sacred peak

The 2,744-metre peak is considered sacred by all Koreans as the birthplace of Dangun, the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom. The North Korean leader agreed to shutter the Tongchang-ri missile-testing site in the presence of international observers, a move the U.S. welcomed by saying it was ready for immediate talks aimed at denuclearising the North.

Pyongyang also said it could dismantle its best-known nuclear facility at Yongbyon, if the U.S. takes "corresponding measures", as Mr. Kim and the South Korean President held their third summit this year. It is an important caveat — Mr. Moon told reporters on his return to Seoul that the U.S. would need to "end hostile relations with North Korea and provide security guarantees for the North Korean regime".

It would be the first such trip by a North Korean leader since the Korean War ended in an armistice, leaving the peninsula divided and technically still in a state of war, and Mr. Moon said the historic journey could happen later this year. The two leaders also agreed to open a permanent facility for family reunions, work towards joining up road and rail links, and bid jointly for the 2032 Olympics.

SOUTH KOREA AND JAPAN

S. Korea urges Japan to remove ‘rising sun’ flag

Why in news?

South Korea reiterated a demand that Japan remove its “rising sun” naval flag from a warship participating in an international fleet review at Jeju Island. Many South Koreans associate the symbol with Japanese military aggression during the Second World War and have expressed anger over its potential display during the October 10-14 event.

Rising sun flag

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said Japan should be more considerate about how South Koreans remember its brutal colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula before the end of the war. South Korea’s Navy has asked all 14 countries participating in the fleet review to display only their national flags and the South Korean flag on their vessels, a request apparently aimed at preventing the invited Japanese destroyer from flying the “kyokujitsuki.” The Foreign Ministry also conveyed Seoul’s position to Tokyo through diplomatic channels.

But Japan has balked at the demand, with then Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera saying that the ship’s display of the flag would be mandatory under Japan’s laws. The flag also serves to identify the nationality of Japanese naval vessels, he said.

INDIA AND REPUBLIC OF KOREA

MoU for strengthening cooperation in the field of Tourism

The Ministry of Tourism signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Government for the Republic of Korea for strengthening cooperation in the field of Tourism in New Delhi. The MoU was signed by two parties desiring to strengthen and further develop the established relationship for strengthening cooperation in the field of Tourism.

- The main objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding are:
- To expand bilateral cooperation in tourism sector
- To increase Exchange of information and data related to tourism
- To encourage cooperation between tourism stakeholders including Hotels and Tour Operators
- To establish exchange programmes for cooperation in Human Resources Development
- To encourage Investment in the Tourism and Hospitality sectors
- To exchange visits of Tour Operators / Media / Opinion Makers for promotion of two way tourism
- To exchange experience in the areas of promotion, marketing destination development and management
- To encourage participation in travel fairs/exhibitions in each other’s country
- To promote safe, honorable and sustainable tourism
- The Republic of Korea is one of the leading tourists generating market for India from East Asia. Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) from the Republic of Korea in 2017 were 1, 42, 383 and during January- September were 1, 08,901(provisional figure). The signing of Memorandum of Understanding with Korea will be instrumental in increasing tourist arrivals from this source market.

INDIA AND SINGAPORE

India, Singapore begin sea drills

Why in news?

25th edition of the India-Singapore bilateral naval exercise, SIMBEX, had begun at the tri-services command in Port Blair. The two countries have vastly expanded their military cooperation in recent years under India's Act East policy. Late last year, the two countries signed a naval agreement which has a provision for mutual logistical support and gives India access to the Changi naval base.

Do you know?

Started as basic Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) exercises in 1994, today these exercises have graduated to complex maritime combat drills, including missile and torpedo firings, and shore-based intensive professional exchanges. India and Singapore are working on a trilateral exercise with an Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) country, likely Thailand, and eventually plan to scale it up to a multilateral format.



INDIA AND UAE

MoU between India and the UAE on Development cooperation in Africa

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and the United Arab Emirates on Development Cooperation in Africa. The MoU entails setting up of a framework of cooperation between the two countries for implementing development partnership projects and programmes in Africa.

Benefits

The proposal will help strengthen political and economic linkages between India and the countries of Africa and serve our broader strategic interests.



YEMEN

Yemen peace talks

Why in news?

Yemeni government representatives were expected to join a rebel delegation in Sweden for high-stakes peace talks aimed at ending four years of devastating war. A 12-member team from the Saudi Arabia-backed government headed by Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani left Riyadh, a day after rebel delegates landed in Stockholm accompanied by the UN envoy.



Yemen talks

The first Yemen talks since 2016 are widely seen as the best chance yet for peace, as the international community throws its weight behind efforts to resolve a conflict that has pushed the Arab world's poorest country to the brink of famine. The government delegation was carrying the "hopes of the Yemeni people to achieve sustainable peace. The delegation had delayed its departure until the rebels had arrived in Stockholm after they failed to show up for the last UN bid to convene peace talks in September, sources close to the government said. On that occasion, the rebels complained that they had received insufficient guarantees of safe passage through the blockade enforced by the Saudi-led coalition since March 2015.



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AUSTRALIA

AUSTRALIA

Australia considers moving embassy to Jerusalem

Why in news?

Mr. Morrison said Australia remained committed to finding a two-state solution to Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. Australia has raised the prospect of following the United States by relocating its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in a policy shift that critics described as a desperate grab for domestic political gain to win a crucial by-election.

INDIA AND AUSTRALIA

Australian Wheat to India

Why in news?

The Government of India have been in communication with His Majesty's Government with a view to arranging for the sale to India of Australian wheat, considerable quantities of which are expected to be shortly on passage to Europe.

Royal Commission of wheat supply

The Royal Commission of wheat supplies have not expressed their willingness to sell at cost price any of these cargoes of Australian wheat and the shipping controller is willing to supply tonnage at freight rates based on actual cost. His Majesty's Treasury have agreed to this specially low rate of freight in view of the assistance which India has rendered in the past regarding wheat exports and on the understanding that wheat will not be sold at a profit. The Government of India proposed to utilise these cargoes of wheat firstly for supplying as far as possible military requirements of wheat products and secondly for sale to mills in Calcutta and Bombay which agree to sell their products at suitable rates.



AFRICA

AFRICA

Leaders of rivals Ethiopia, Eritrea finally meet

Why in news?

The leaders of longtime rivals Ethiopia and Eritrea met for the first time in nearly two decades amid a rapid and dramatic diplomatic thaw aimed at ending one of Africa's longest-running conflicts.

About Ethiopia

Ethiopian used the visit to announce that flagship Ethiopian Airlines would soon begin flights to Eritrea. While Ethiopia is Africa's second most populous nation and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, tiny Eritrea is one of the world's most closed-off nations, ruled by Mr. Afwerki since gaining independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after years of rebel warfare.

But the two countries share close cultural ties.

Eritrea

Eritrea has become a major source of migrants fleeing toward Europe, Israel and African nations in recent years as human rights groups criticize its harsh military conscription laws. Observers of the diplomatic thaw have asked whether peace with Ethiopia would lead Eritrea to loosen up and drop its long defensive stance. Not everyone has welcomed Ethiopia's embrace of the peace deal, with some residents in the northern Tigray region bordering Eritrea holding protests.



Kofi Annan mediator and humanist

Why in news?

Former United Nations Secretary-General and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kofi Annan, who died recently, will be remembered as a dedicated humanitarian whose career was tarnished by ugly conflicts that spun out of control.

About Annan

Mr. Annan was unable to bring peace to Syria and bring to rest the failures of diplomacy in Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, Cyprus, Somalia and Iraq, which are likely to drown out the plaudits for his softly spoken mediation and efforts to eradicate poverty and AIDS that won him the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize. Mr. Annan was brought up in an ethnically divided culture in his native Ghana, but one where dialogue was prized and outright conflict rare. His reputation as a mediator was burnished by his success in halting a spiralling conflict in Kenya in 2007, when rival claims to the presidency caused ethnic massacres in which more than 1,200 died. Mr. Annan put the rivals in a room and told them: "There is only one Kenya". He then persuaded one of them to accept the post of prime minister in a joint government. The violence ended.

Rwanda massacre

But earlier in his career, Mr. Annan's record was less successful. He was head of U.N. peacekeeping in 1994, when he acknowledges he should have done more to help prevent the slaughter of 8,00,000 Rwandan Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The greatest reproach was that Mr. Annan failed to act on a telegram from the U.N.



peacekeeper commander, General Romeo Dallaire, urging a move against arms caches being built up by Hutu extremists. In a book scathing about the world's failure to act, Gen. Dallaire however, had only praise for Mr. Annan, describing his "humanism and dedication to the plight of others".

Rwanda announces 'gender-balanced' Cabinet

Why in news?

Two days after Ethiopia announced one of the world's few "gender-balanced" Cabinets with 50% women, Rwanda has done the same.

Gender balanced

The East African nation announced that women now make up half of the slimmed-down, 26-seat Cabinet. Rwanda joins a handful of countries, mostly European, where women make up 50% or more of ministerial positions. The country has received international recognition for female representation in government, with women making up 61% of Parliament members.

Ethiopia's move was the latest in a series of dramatic political and economic reforms under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who took office in April. Mr. Abiy reportedly told lawmakers that women are less corrupt than men. A higher number of women in decision-making roles have led to a decrease in gender discrimination and gender-based crimes.



An African island's troubled waters

Why in news?

A rounded, rocky outcrop covered with metallic shacks, Migingo Island rises out of the waters of Lake Victoria like an iron-plated turtle. The densely populated island is barely a quarter of a hectare large. There's little else but a few bars, brothels and a tiny port. Nevertheless, for over a decade, Migingo has been a source of tension between Uganda and Kenya, who have been unable to decide to whom it really belongs.

The 'smallest war'

They were once pushed to the brink of what some said would have been Africa's "smallest war" over the island. While fishing communities around Lake Victoria have seen their catches slowly diminish over the years, the deep waters surrounding Migingo abound with catch such as Nile perch. It was in the early 2000s when the island was barely inhabited — then situated within Kenya on all maps — that it began drawing the attention of Ugandan authorities who sent officials to Migingo to tax fishermen and offer protection against pirates. Kenyan fishermen in return began complaining they were being shaken down by the Ugandans in their own waters and chased from the island. They called on Kenya's government, which deployed security forces to Migingo in a move that nearly brought the two nations to blows in 2009.

Kenya and Uganda

Kenya and Uganda then decided to create a joint commission to determine where the watery border is, relying on maps dating from the 1920s whose interpretation is a key point of contention. But nothing has come of the commission, and in the absence of any decisions on the boundary, the island is co-managed by both countries. Faced with mounting complaints from their constituents, local Kenyan politicians have called on Nairobi to ask the International Court of Justice to intervene and make a decision on the border — to no avail. On the island, some taunt each other good-naturedly.

Future of Kenya Asians

East Africa is not willing to be turned into a refugee camp for British citizens of Asian origin. Speaking as the Secretary of the Kenya delegation to the Commonwealth conference, Mr. Mboya stated, "if this subject comes up at the conference we shall want to know why, Britain is discriminating against its own citizens. This is a British problem because Britain is refusing its own citizens the right to return to their home." Meanwhile, the Committee on U.K. Citizenship in London is convinced that the London conference will discuss immigration and in particular the future of Asian Britons in East Africa.

INDIA AND AFRICA

Extradition Treaty between India and Malawi

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the signing and ratification of the Extradition Treaty between India and Malawi. The Treaty would provide a legal framework for seeking extradition of terrorists, economic offenders and other criminals from and to Malawi.

Extradition Agreement between India and Morocco

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved signing and ratifying the Extradition Agreement between India and Morocco. The Agreement will be signed during the proposed VIP visit from Morocco from 11-18 November 2018.

Benefits

The Agreement will provide a strong legal base for the extradition of fugitive offenders who are accused of economic offences, terrorism and other serious offences in one Contracting State and found in another Contracting State. This Treaty will also strengthen bilateral relations to deal with criminal elements acting against the national interest of both India and Morocco.

MoU for setting up of a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the MoU between India and Morocco for setting up of a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter-Terrorism. Setting up of the JWG on Counter Terrorism by India and Morocco would help cases relating to terrorist attacks. The MoU would, thus be the basis for obtaining / exchanging information on terrorist activities.

Agreement on simplification of visa requirements

The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, has approved the signing of Agreement between India and South Africa on simplification of visa requirements for travels of certain categories of citizens. The Agreement aims to facilitate issuance of multiple entry visa to nationals of the two countries who wish to travel to the territory of the other country for tourism, medical, business and official purpose. Such visas are normally required to be issue for a period of up to five years within a specified time limit of five days. In cases where further scrutiny is required both sides may inform the application accordingly.

MoU on the Reciprocal facilitation of procedures for issue of Business Visa

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given ex-post facto approval to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Morocco on the Reciprocal facilitation of procedures for issue of Business Visa.

Benefits

The MoU aims to facilitate issuance of multiple entry business visa to nationals of the two countries who wish to travel to the territory of the other country to make a business deal, establish an industrial / business project, buy/sell industrial products, or set up other business / investments related to these activities. Such visas are normally required to be issued for a period of up to 12 months within a specified time limit of 7 days in regular cases. In cases where further scrutiny is required, both sides may inform the applicant accordingly.

South Africa commemorates 125th year of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha

Why in news?

The screening of the biopic Making of a Mahatma marked the opening of a three-day series of events to commemorate the historic incident 125 years ago when Mahatma Gandhi was evicted from a train because the compartment he was in was reserved for whites only.

About Gandhi

On the night of June 7, 1893, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a young lawyer then, was thrown off the train's first class compartment at Pietermaritzburg station for refusing to give up his seat. The incident led him to develop his Satyagraha principles of peaceful resistance and mobilise people in South Africa and in India against the discriminatory rules of the British.

About the film

The film, a co-production between India and South Africa, was made in 1996, soon after Nelson Mandela ascended to the position of South Africa's first democratically-elected President. Directed by Shyam Benegal and based on the book Apprenticeship of a Mahatma by the late freedom activist Prof. Fatima Meer, the film recalls the incident and developments thereafter as Gandhiji decided to forego worldly life and started up the Phoenix Settlement commune in Phoenix near Durban and also Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg. A.B. Moosa, CEO of the Avalon Group, at whose Cine Centre cinema the film was shown, told PTI it was a moving moment as he recalled the relationship of his forefathers with the Mahatma.

Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Civil and Commercial Matters

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the Agreement between India and Morocco on Mutual Legal Assistance in Civil and Commercial Matters.

Salient features

- Service of summons and other judicial documents or processes;
- taking of evidence in civil matters;
- production, identification or examination of documents, recordings;
- The execution of a Letter of Request for taking of evidence in civil matters; and
- Recognition and enforcement of arbitral awards.

Benefits

The Agreement will be beneficial for the citizens of both the countries. It will also fulfill the desire of both the countries to strengthen the bonds of friendship and fruitful cooperation in the Civil and Commercial matters, which is the spirit, essence and language of the agreement. This agreement between India and Morocco will enhance co-operation in the service of summons, judicial documents, letters of request and the execution of judgments decrees and arbitral awards.

Background

Ties of India and African countries are from pre-independence era. India and Morocco have enjoyed cordial and friendly relations and over the years bilateral relations have witnessed significant depth and growth. Both nations are part of the Non-Aligned Movement. In the United Nations, India supported the decolonization of Morocco and the Moroccan freedom movement. India recognized Morocco on June 20, 1956 and established relations in 1957. India believes in the necessity of enhancing the domain of mutual co-operation with Morocco and realizing the importance of broadening the aspects of cooperation between both the countries in Civil and Commercial Matters.

India, South Africa seal partnership deal

Why in news?

India and South Africa agreed on a three-year strategic partnership agreement to boost relations. The agreement, signed during the visit of President Cyril Ramaphosa, will cover defence and security, blue economy cooperation and sustainable development. At the end of the delegation-level talks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the scope for cooperation.

Working together

Our countries have compatible world views. We have strong partnership in platforms such as the BRICS, the G-20, the Indian Ocean Region Association and the IBSA Dialogue Forum. India also invited South Africa to join the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and congratulated it on securing the non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council for 2019-20. A joint statement acknowledged the growing interaction between the Navies of the two countries, and the Indian leader welcomed the South African participation in the India-Africa Field Training Exercise next March.

Common struggle

The statement reiterated the role of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) that ensures freedom of navigation by keeping sea lanes free and secure. Speaking at the first IBSA Gandhi-Mandela Freedom Lecture, organised by the Indian Council of World Affairs, Mr. Ramaphosa highlighted the common heritage of struggle and the common aspiration of non-discriminatory national and international politics.

CHINA AND AFRICA

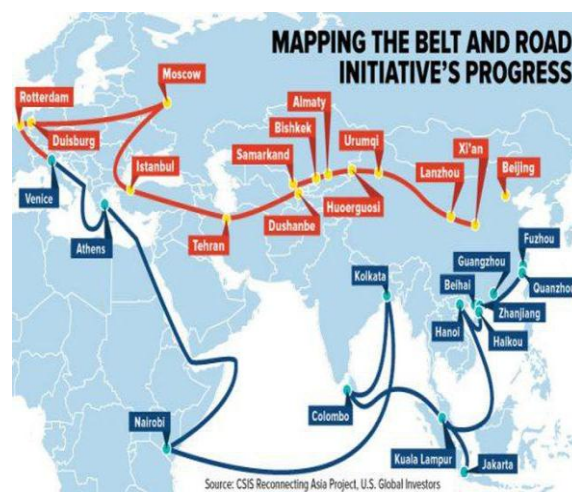
China's big 'Belt and Road' push in Africa

Why in news?

In another era, White colonisers had landed on Africa's coast in search of resources and slaves. The traumatic epoch of slave trade and European colonisation, with its horrific human consequences, formally ended in the 1960s and 1970s. But arguably, the basic equation of Africa's resource-rich periphery serving the metropolitan industrial centres in Europe and North America remained fundamentally unchanged.

African Union

It is not that Africa has not progressed. The African Union (AU) — the culmination of the pan-African dreams of an earlier generation of leaders such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and Algeria's radical ideologue Frantz Fanon — is a dynamic reality. South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt, among others, are regional powerhouses. Rwanda has made a courageous comeback after an inter-ethnic genocide in the early 1990s. Yet, industrialisation has been patchy. Civil war, terror attacks and disease outbreaks have all undermined the efforts. While the threat of terror was epitomised by the mass abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria, repeated outbreaks of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo have only added to the instability of the Central African region. In this matrix, China has emerged as a game-changer in the 21st century. This is despite acerbic criticism from its detractors that Beijing is spearheading a second wave of colonisation through financial enslavement and other tools present in its well-stocked armoury. The Chinese establishment is dismissive of these accusations.



The connectivity angle

It argues that China has launched a destiny-changing phase of industrialisation in Africa, led by massive infrastructure development. Officials say Africa will draw unprecedented benefits from China's next phase of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — Beijing's giant transcontinental connectivity flagship.

In tune with the BRI, Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to host scores of African leaders in Beijing. In early September, they will assemble under the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation — a platform that Beijing created three years ago. Ahead of the Beijing summit, Wang Yi, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister, sought to demolish the perception that China was Africa's post-colonial hegemon.

Part of BRI

It is as part of the BRI that Beijing has funded a 470 km railway line. Last year, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta green-lighted the train from Nairobi to the coastal city of Mombasa. Once networked fully, the line will provide a viable linkage to the landlocked states of South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, giving them access to the Indian Ocean. Besides, Ethiopia is building a 756 km track from Addis Ababa to Djibouti. Once the \$4 billion project is complete, it will link the Ethiopian capital with the Red Sea. Following the arrival of the train in Mombasa, Mr. Kenyatta contrasted China's intent to the motivation of former European colonisers. "A history that was first started 122 years ago when the British, who had colonised this nation, kicked off the train to nowhere... it was then dubbed the 'Lunatic Express'."

China-Africa ties have benefited both'

Why in news?

As foreign guests begin their visit to Beijing for an Africa-China mega conference, Chinese officials and state-media have gone into overdrive to showcase that ties between Africa and Beijing have benefited both. At the heart of the Chinese counteroffensive against allegations of "predatory" behaviour in Africa, is a myth-breaking report of the American consulting firm McKinsey.

McKinsey report

Titled, “Dance of the lions and dragons: How are Africa and China engaging, and how will the partnership evolve?”— it demolishes the fable about China’s resource driven “neocolonial” practices. Chinese officials cited McKinsey’s findings ahead of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), during which 54 leaders and high-level representatives from Africa will conduct a three-day dialogue with their Chinese counterparts from September 3. Last year’s McKinsey report, which said that 89% of the workforce employed by Chinese companies was African, nearly two-thirds of Chinese companies have provided skills training, while half offered apprenticeships, and a third had introduced a new technology for the local community.

3,00,000 jobs

The study that covered eight African countries says that Chinese firms created nearly 3,00,000 African jobs, suggesting that “Chinese owned business employ several million Africans”. Officials also rejected the perception that Chinese banks are pushing their African recipients into a “debt trap”.

Xi Jinping offers \$60 bn Africa aid*Why in news?*

China has pledged a \$60 billion fund to bolster industry, counter hunger, and enhance security in Africa, a continent that has been chronically plagued by piracy and terrorism.

Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

In his inaugural address at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), President Xi Jinping was authoritative in messaging that Beijing had become the locomotive of Africa’s all-round progress. He listed eight focal areas of funding that would premise the emergence of the “China- Africa community with a shared future in the new era”. Ahead of the presidential address, Chinese officials had cited a 2017 study by McKinsey, a U.S. consulting firm, which had spotlighted that China has become Africa’s most important and unrivalled economic partner.

Across trade, investment, infrastructure financing, and aid, no other country has such depth and breadth of engagement in Africa. Among the eight verticals flagged, President Xi highlighted China’s intent to set up additional economic and trade cooperation zones to promote industrialisation in Africa. Local currency settlements, instead of hard currency usage such as the U.S. dollar, would be encouraged to settle transactions.

‘Debt trap’ diplomacy

For financing, China will nudge African countries to tap new multilateral lenders such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) of the emerging economies, as well as the Silk Road Fund marshalled by China. The Chinese have taken umbrage against allegations of involvement in “debt trap” diplomacy, by saddling smaller countries with unplayable loans, and using them as levers for political gain. President Xi stressed that out of the \$60 billion that were on offer, \$15 billion would be disbursed as aid, interest-free loans and concessional loans. A \$20 billion credit line would be established, while another \$10 billion would be channelled into a special fund for China-Africa development. A \$5 billion special fund will also be set up only for African imports.

China would also support Africa to achieve “general food security by 2030”. He pointed out that energy, transport, telecommunications and tapping cross-border water resources would be on China’s radar in the next phase of Africa’s infrastructural forays. Unlike the past, President Xi openly flagged Beijing’s intent to bolster African security.

Peace and security fund

China, he said, would set up a peace and security fund in partnership with Africa. Apart from military aid to the African Union, Beijing will support countries in the Sahel region and others bordering the piracy-ridden Gulf of Aden and Gulf of Guinea. China has already established a naval base in Djibouti on the edge of the strategic Gulf of Aden, which links the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. Mr. Xi said 50 China-Africa security assistance programmes will be launched under the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He also flagged a China-Africa “green envoys programme” that would muscle Africa’s capacity for environmental management, pollution prevention and control, as well as green development. A China- Africa environmental cooperation centre will be set up where research on environmental issues will be conducted. Amid loud applause, President Xi announced that China will train 1,000 high-calibre Africans, provide 50,000 government scholarships, sponsor seminars and workshop that would benefit 50,000 Africans, and invite 2,000 African youths to visit China for exchanges.



SOUTH AMERICA

VENEZUELA

Venezuelans deserve refugee status

Why in news?

Venezuela is in the news again. Through unprecedented treachery, President Nicolás Maduro awarded himself victory in the presidential election on 20 May. Given that the blatantly pro-government electoral council had delisted the three main opposition parties and disqualified two major political leaders, much of the opposition boycotted the process. The two other candidates who participated did not recognize the result, given the many violations that took place. Neither did the US, Canada, the European Union and most Latin American countries.



Despite official efforts at intimidation—for example, voters were forced to identify themselves in official party booths at the risk of being disqualified from social programmes—abstention reached record levels. While the outcome of the election was never in doubt, the event destroyed any pretence of legitimacy by Maduro.

Economic collapse

In the meantime, Venezuela's catastrophic economic collapse is continuing at an astonishing rate. Food prices have soared by a factor of 100 in the year to April 2018, and by more than 200% in the last month alone. The price of the dollar has increased by a factor of over 100 since July 2017. According to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (Opec's) monthly report, oil production has declined by 27% in the 12 months to April of 2018. It now stands at 1.4 million barrels per day (bpd), two million bpd below where it was when Maduro's predecessor and patron, Hugo Chávez, took power in 1999. The minimum wage, which is earned by the median worker, buys less than 900 calories a day—not enough to feed a person, let alone a family, the Catholic charity Caritas Venezuela projects that 280,000 children will die of hunger this year.

People moving to other countries

Under these conditions, it should come as no surprise that Venezuelans are stampeding out of the country at a pace that is unprecedented in the Americas. While people once left in planes to destinations such as the US, Spain, and Panama in the hope of a better life abroad, today they walk across the border to Colombia and Brazil, or try to reach Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago by boat, motivated by sheer desperation.

Venezuelans in Colombia

Estimates of the outflow abound. Colombia has tried to impose some order on the process by asking Venezuelans who have entered the country legally to register. 203,000 did so this past month. But how many have not registered yet? Colombia's government believes that some 550,000 Venezuelans were in the country as of the end of 2017.

Emigration indicator using twitter

The scale of the outflow is hard to gauge. To assess it, the two of us have been working with Muhammed Yildirim of Koç University in Istanbul to devise an emigration indicator using Twitter data. Twitter is

particularly appropriate because over 28% of Venezuelans had an account in 2016, and because the platform allows us to identify account-holders' current location. While Twitter users are not a random sample of the population, they are quite representative, as their geographic footprint is highly correlated with that of the population as a whole. Given that Venezuela is a country of 30 million people, this represents 2.9 million people per year. Moreover, the geographic footprint of these migrants is different from previous ones: 24% are in Colombia, 15% in both Chile and Argentina, and about 5% each in the US, Spain, Peru and Ecuador. Because the economic situation continues to deteriorate rapidly, it is reasonable to expect that this massive exodus will accelerate.

How should countries deal with the outflow of Venezuelans?

The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has been urging countries to grant Venezuelans refugee status. The 1984 Cartagena Declaration commits them to it. But countries in the region, fearing a large number of refugees and the impact they might have on government budgets, have opposed such a move. To the dismay of the UNHCR, Trinidad and Tobago has even deported Venezuelan refugees. The international community may need time to resolve Venezuela's political crisis, but that is time that Venezuelans cannot afford. Countries can argue that they have actively sought a diplomatic solution and have even offered humanitarian assistance, only to be rejected by the Maduro regime. But countries are committed by international law and basic morality to call a spade a spade and grant Venezuelans refugee status. Doing so will not only right a wrong, but will also benefit them, thanks to the energy and creativity of good people who want nothing more than to live and work productively and without fear.

INDIA AND LATIN AMERICA

Latin America seeks more missions

India should respect the promise it made in 2010 to open embassies in three more Latin American nations, a group of Ambassadors has urged Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale. The demand for more Indian missions had intensified after Prime Minister Modi announced during his July visit to Africa that India would open 18 more embassies on the continent by 2021. India does not have missions in Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica and El Salvador, though they have missions in India.

NORTH AMERICA

CANADA

Canada Senate votes in favour of legalising recreational marijuana

Why in news?

Canada's Senate voted to legalise recreational marijuana, clearing a major hurdle that puts the country on track to become the first Group of Seven nation to permit national use of the drug.

Senate voting

The upper chamber Senate voted 56-30 in favour of the legislation but included amendments that the House of Commons will need to decide on before the law can be passed. While there is not yet a definite date for when marijuana will be available for sale, the Senate was one of the last significant obstacles standing in the way of legalisation as a number of Conservative senators oppose the Bill.

The amendments proposed by the Senate include tighter advertising restrictions and giving the provinces say over whether Canadians can grow marijuana at home. The government's legislation would allow Canadians to grow up to four plants at home for personal use. Although legalisation has already been delayed from the government's initially planned July launch, some provinces and police forces have argued they need more time. The provinces have been left in charge establishing how and where marijuana will be sold. Canadian marijuana companies like Canopy Growth Corp, Aphria Inc, Horizons Marijuana Life Sciences ETF and Aurora Cannabis Inc have been at the centre of investor frenzy surrounding attempts to legalize marijuana for recreational use nationwide.



Canada could cancel Saudi arms deal

Canada is looking into ways to cancel a giant 2014 weapons deal with Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said, as criticism mounts over the kingdom's role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the Riyadh-led war in Yemen. The murder of a journalist is absolutely unacceptable and that's why Canada from the very beginning had been demanding answers and solutions on that. The penalty for breaking the contract could exceed Can\$1 billion.

UNITED STATES

U.S. lakes see rise in algal blooms

Why in news?

Across the U.S., reservoirs that supply drinking water and lakes used for recreation are experiencing algal blooms with growing frequency. The trend represents another impact of global warming and raises looming questions about the effects on human health.

Cyanobacteria

Technically called cyanobacteria, the ancient class of organisms that create the blooms are present nearly everywhere water is found but thrive in warm, still bodies like lakes and ponds. They also create a unique

class of toxins, the impact of which on humans is only partly understood. Long linked to animal deaths, high doses of the toxins in humans can cause liver damage and attack the nervous system. In the largest outbreaks, hundreds have been sickened by blooms in reservoirs and lakes, and officials in some areas now routinely close water bodies used for recreation and post warnings when blooms occur. But less is known about exposure at lower doses, especially over the long term. Technically called cyanobacteria, the algae create toxins that can harm human health. In Utah, a 2016 algae bloom in a recreational-use lake left more than 100 people sick.

Other blooms

Other blooms, including flare-ups affecting drinking water, have been logged in recent years in New York, Florida and California.



Illegal migrants won't be referred for prosecution

Why in news?

The director of U.S. border control has said that migrant parents crossing in from Mexico illegally will for now no longer be referred for prosecution, effectively suspending a key plank of the “zero tolerance” policy. U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan, who made the announcement to reporters in Texas, and other officials, insisted however that the policy remains in effect.

Lack of detention space

Mr. McAleenan said that he stopped referring parents for prosecution shortly after President Donald Trump signed an executive order ending the policy of separating families entering the country illegally. Mr. McAleenan said the reason for suspending prosecution of parents was in fact Mr. Trump's order and that his agency does not have detention space for all the families coming across the border.

Gearing up for space wars

American plans for a space weapons corps

The announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump in June about the creation of a “space force” or a sixth branch of the American armed forces has taken many by surprise within and outside the U.S. The imperative by America to build space weapons is not new and has had its roots going back to the Cold War. The creation of the new force represents an important shift at an institutional level.

The militarization of space & international response

The purpose being stated is to deny the Russians and the Chinese advantages in space. The intention is to see that the U.S. establishes and maintains dominance in space. China has announced that it opposes the weaponization of space. China's space military programme has been dedicated to building “Assassin Mace” technologies (an array of kinetic and non-kinetic means of attack).



Impacts of this move on India

Beijing's reaction could be much stronger than its seemingly muted official response. It possesses a formidable space military programme that far exceeds current Indian capabilities.

Conclusion

New Delhi would do well to come out with an official white paper on space weapons. The government needs to engage with multiple stakeholders directly about the role space weapons will play in India's grand strategy.

U.S. threatens sanctions on ICC

Why in news?

US has threatened to prosecute International Criminal Court (ICC) officials if Americans are charged with war crimes committed in Afghanistan. Hague-based court's response – As a court of law, will continue to do its work undeterred, in accordance with those principles and the overarching idea of the rule of law.

ICC

The Hague-based ICC was set up in 2002 with a jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute the world's worst crimes, including genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court, however, does not have the capacity to arrest suspects and depends on member states for their cooperation. The United States has not signed up to the court and in 2002, its Congress passed a law enabling Washington to invade the Netherlands to liberate any U.S. citizen held by the court.

Birthright citizenship has to end

Why in news?

President Donald Trump has said that he is planning to sign an executive order ending the birthright citizenship provision the automatic conferral of U.S. citizenship on any individual born in the country. It is factually incorrect that the U.S. is the only country in the world with birthright citizenship laws, although only a minority have such laws.

Legal challenges

Mr. Trump said he has consulted his counsel on this and plans to proceed with the executive order, which is almost certain to face legal challenges as have his executive orders banning the entry into the U.S. of citizens from certain Muslim-majority countries. It is by no means clear that the President has the legal authority to effect such a broad legal change through an executive order. The concept of jus soli (right of the soil) derives from the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, enacted in 1868 after the Civil War, in order to grant legal rights to former slaves. It says: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside." Therefore, individuals born in the U.S., to parents on temporary visas or here without a valid visa, are also U.S. citizens. This has been central to motivating Republicans who want to end birthright citizenship.

Illegal immigrants

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security put the number of foreigners without legal status in the U.S. at a little above 12 million in 2014. Mr. Trump has been talking tough on borders, security and immigration, highly divisive topics in the U.S. these days, in the run-up to November 6 midterm elections.

Democrats pass Bills to end impasse

Why in news?

U.S. Democrats swept back to power in the House of Representatives with veteran Nancy Pelosi at the helm, but they came face to face with what may be a new divided government normal in Washington: legislative gridlock. After a historic opening session of the 116th Congress in which Ms. Pelosi was elected as Speaker for the second time in her career, lawmakers took aim at a bipartisan priority of ending an embarrassing partial government shutdown that was stretching into its 13th day. The House passed two measures that would re-open government agencies whose funding had lapsed, but provide no money for a border wall demanded by Donald Trump. They are all but dead on arrival in the Senate, where the Republican leadership has vowed not to bring them up for a vote.

No wall funding'

Mr. Trump has demanded that Congress approve \$5.6 billion for construction of a wall on the southern U.S. border with Mexico — an oft repeated pledge from his 2016 presidential campaign. The Bills that passed the House contain no wall funding. A wall is an immorality between countries. It's an old way of thinking, it isn't cost effective, arguing that money would be better spent on border security technology such as drones and cameras, and on hiring more border agents. Republican leaders immediately blasted the vote as a pointless political gimmick that would do little to provide the resources necessary to secure the border, and said Democrats were not negotiating in good faith.

Shift in power

Democrats' new majority in the House of Representatives marked a dramatic power shift on Capitol Hill less than two years before Mr. Trump's re-election bid. Ms. Pelosi will preside over the most diverse Congress in history. One hundred House freshmen took the oath of office, including trailblazers like New York's Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who at 29 is the youngest woman ever elected to Congress. The first two Native American women and first two Muslim women were also elected. "It's a new day in America," tweeted Ilhan Omar, a former Somali refugee elected from Minnesota.

U.S. AND INDIA

H1B Visa

Why in news?

Donald Trump administration is moving ahead with a proposal to end work permits for spouses of H-1B workers in the United States.

What is H1 B visa?

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa. It allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries such as India and China. The H1-B visa has an annual numerical limit cap of 65,000 each fiscal year, as mandated by the Congress. The first 20,000 petitions filed on behalf of beneficiaries with a US master's degree or higher are exempt from the cap. According to the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), between 2007 and 2017, it received the maximum number of 2.2 million H-1B petitions from high-skilled Indians. India was followed by China with 301,000 H-1B petitions during the same period.

What is H4 Visa?

Dependents of H-1B visa holders get H-4 visas. In 2015 US Citizenship and Immigration Services passed the Employment Authorization for Certain H-4 Dependent Spouses rule. Certain H-4 Dependent Spouses means

spouses of H-1B visa holders whose green card applications have reached a certain milestone. Aftermath the rule thousands of H-4 spouses applied for H4 visa EAD (Employment Authorization Document). More than 90% of the 1.26 lakh Employment Authorisation Documents (EAD) issued for H-4 visa beneficiaries since 2015 went to Indians.

What's the H4 EAD Lawsuit?

A lawsuit was filed against the H4 EAD rule to stop it from going into motion. Save Jobs USA filed its lawsuit against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) even before the rule was about to go live. Save Jobs USA' is an organization comprised of IT workers who claim they lost their jobs to H-1B workers.

It claimed two things:

- The new rule has no protections for US workers and increases the pool of workers looking for jobs
- DHS never had the authority to grant EADs to H-4 visa holders.

What if the EAD rule is ended?

The Trumps administration has said to a federal court that it is planning to end the work permit for the spouses of H1 B visa holders. The issue has cast its shadow over the job prospects of the H4 visa holders. Also, the uncertainty over their legal status has stalled the job prospects of hundreds of H-4 visa holders. The majority of the H4 visa holders are Indian Americans and Women.

H-1B spouse work permits to end, says Trump administration

Why in news?

The Donald Trump administration is moving ahead with a proposal to end work permits for spouses of H-1B workers in the United States, a federal court has been told. Spouses of H-1B visa holders, whose green card applications have reached a certain milestone, can get employment authorisation under a 2015 executive order. Dependents of H-1B visa holders get H-4 visas. After the new regulations are published, there will be time for public comments and revisions before they come into effect. However, the uncertainty over their legal status has already stalled the job prospects of hundreds of H-4 visa holders.

About H-1B Visa

The H-1B category is an expedient and lawful method to bring foreign-born professionals temporarily to the United States, and therefore one of the most widely sought after visa classifications for employment in the United States. The H-1B is a non-immigrant visa in the United States; it allows U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations. H-4 visa is a work permit issued to the spouses of H1-B visa holders under a special order by the previous Obama administration. H-4 visa allows work permits for spouses who otherwise could not be employed without waiting for their spouses to receive permanent resident status, a process that can take a decade or longer.

Three-fourths of H1B visa holders in 2018 are Indians

Nearly three out of every four H-1B visa holders as of October 5 are Indian citizens. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, there were as many as 4,19,637 foreign nationals working on H-1B visas as on October 5. Of these, 3,09,986 were Indians.

H-1B visa holders prone to abuse: U.S. think tank

Why in news?

A U.S. think tank has claimed that H-1B workers are “underpaid, vulnerable to abuse” and frequently placed in “poor working conditions”. In a report, the South Asia Center of the Atlantic Council also sought

safeguards like higher wages, fair working conditions and greater employment rights for those working under the visa programme. The H-1B visa, popular among Indian IT professionals, is a non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Trump promises reform

The report comes days after U.S. President Donald Trump said he would soon come out with reforms that would give H-1B visa holders certainty to stay in America and an easy pathway to citizenship. The think tank report has been authored by Ron Hira from Howard University and Bharat Gopaldaswamy, head, South Asia Center of the Atlantic Council.

STA-1 status from U.S. welcome, says India

In a major boost to India, the U.S. eased export controls on high-technology product sales to it by designating it as a Strategic Trade Authorisation STA-1 country. This comes after the U.S. recognised India as a "Major Defence Partner" in 2016, a designation that allows India to buy more advanced and sensitive technologies from the U.S.

2+2 dialogue postponement not linked to trade, Iran sanctions

Why in news?

The much anticipated dialogue, between the defence and foreign ministers of India and the United States scheduled for July 2018, has been postponed "for unavoidable reasons".

Talks were postponed

The Ministry of External Affairs said the message postponing the talks came from the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, even as U.S. President Donald Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, met Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The talks were postponed earlier once when the previous Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was asked to quit by President Trump in March 2018. It was previously scheduled for April 2018.

However the latest postponement which is also being considered as cancellation by some quarters comes in the backdrop of growing differences between India and the U.S. over the Iran nuclear deal. In June 2018, External Affairs Minister Swaraj met her French counterpart Jean Yves Le Drian where both sides agreed to "maintain" the Iran nuclear deal that allows for global trading with Tehran. The latest reports suggest that the U.S. has given a November 2018 deadline to Indian and Chinese companies that continue to trade with Iran disregarding U.S. Treasury's sanctions.

Mattis, Pompeo to travel to India in September for 2+2

The first 2+2 dialogue between Defence and Foreign Ministers of India and the U.S. will take place in September 2018 in New Delhi. The dialogue was scheduled for July 6 in Washington, but was postponed due to changes in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's schedule. Mr. Pompeo was in Pyongyang for denuclearisation talks with the North Korean regime on July 6. Defense Secretary James Mattis had offered to host Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on the same day, but India did not warm up to the idea of a truncated meeting.

Negotiations are under way on the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). A communications agreement is key to the forward movement of the pending proposal for India to buy armed drones from American company General Atomics. India has reservations about the standard text of the

COMCASA agreement that the U.S. enter into with allies. While the U.S. would prefer the standard agreement, it is open to an India-specific agreement as well. Both sides have exchanged drafts of the agreement, and negotiators are hopeful of its conclusion in time for the dialogue.

U.S., India may not sign security pact at 2+2 meet

The 2+2 dialogue between India and the U.S. has been scheduled to happen on September 6. In the dialogue, the countries will be discussing the issue of India's defence cooperation with Russia and the looming sanctions under CAATSA.

It is expected that the following announcements are likely to make in the dialogue:

- About the agreement between the two sides on the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) could be made. But signing the pact is doubtful.
- About the cross-posting of officials at the US Defence Innovation Unit Experimental (DIUx) and India's recently created Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) to work on joint development projects.
- About the US sale of MH-60 Romeo maritime helicopters and armed drones through the Foreign Military Sales programme. The US has already cleared the legislative hurdles to sell armed drones to India.
- About a joint tri-service amphibious Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercise.

At mini 2+2, India, U.S. review progress on pacts

Why in news?

Recently, India-U.S. held their 2+2 Inter-Sessional or mini 2+2 meeting to review outcomes of maiden 2+2 Ministerial meet, held in September 2018. They also reviewed the progress on finalising two key agreements:

- Industrial Security Annex (ISA)
- Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA)

About Industrial Security Annex (ISA)

The ISA allows sharing of classified information from the U.S. government and American companies with the Indian private sector, which is so far limited to the Indian government and the defence public sector undertakings.

Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation (BECA)

This agreement would facilitate exchange of geospatial information between India and United States for both military and civilian use.

2+2 Dialogue

The 2+2 Dialogue was held between India and US in September 2018. It replaced the earlier India- US Strategic and Commercial Dialogue. The dialogue is aimed at enhancing strategic coordination between both countries and maintaining peace and stability in Indo-Pacific region. It puts strategic, defence and security relationship between two countries at forefront and centre stage.

Important Decisions:

- COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Arrangement) foundational agreement that gives India access to encrypted American technologies was signed.
- Setting up of a hotline between External Affairs Minister and Defence Minister with their American counterparts.

- The two nations also decided to conduct a tri-services joint exercise off the eastern coast of India in 2019.
- They also committed to start exchanges between US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) and Indian Navy.
- To further defence innovation, a Memorandum of Intent was signed between the U.S. Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) and the Indian Defence Innovation Organization – Innovation for Defence Excellence (DIO-iDEX).
- Both countries also announced their readiness to begin negotiations on Industrial Security Annex (ISA).

Foundational Defence pacts

LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Arrangement) and BECA, or Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-spatial Cooperation, are the three foundational defence pacts that a country needs to sign to obtain cutting-edge weapons and communications systems from the US. Among these, India has already signed the LEMOA and COMCASA with the US. India hopes to move ahead on BECA too in near future.

Why Inter-sessional meeting?

The inter-sessional meeting was set up to follow up on the decisions taken during the India-U.S. Ministerial 2+2 Dialogue, and to make continued progress on bilateral cooperation on cross-cutting defence and foreign policy issues of interest to both sides.

Significance of Indo-US Partnership

While India can play a crucial role in America's Indo-Pacific strategy, the US can help India stand up to China's assertiveness for promoting peace, prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Expanding fair and reciprocal trade would contribute to the prosperity of both nations. In the present geopolitical situation, India and US can be the two pillars of a rules-based world order.

U.S. move to set up base in Indian Ocean

The United States is quietly surveying the possibility of establishing some military presence in the vast area of the Indian Ocean, once dominated by Britain's Royal Navy. There is no desire to fill the military vacuum created by the British withdrawal from the area east of Suez. The purpose of surveying small, mostly uninhabited islands is mainly to get a clear picture of possibilities and for emergency planning. There was once an embryonic plan to set up a joint British-U.S. Base, in fact, only a "staging airfield" as the military call it, on Aldabra island, north of Madagascar. The plan was dropped when the British announced austerity measures and diminishing interest in the defence of the area.

India, U.S. set to mend trade ties

Why in news?

The ongoing negotiations between India and the U.S. on multiple trade tussles are progressing smoothly and a deal could be announced when an Indian delegation visits America in mid-July.

Background

Trade tussle:

The U.S. had invoked Section 232 (b) of the U.S. Trade Expansion Act of 1962 to impose 25% duties on steel and aluminium from India. India had taken the issue to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The U.S. is

also challenging India at the WTO for its export subsidy programmes. American companies are also protesting data localisation requirements that India has announced.

GSP status:

The USTR has launched a process to terminate the Generalised System Preferences (GSP) status for India, partly in response to complaints from U.S. manufacturers of medical devices. The Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) is a U.S. trade program designed to promote economic growth in the developing world by providing preferential duty-free entry.

Package deal

After recent delegation visits led by senior authority of trade and commerce of both countries, a package deal may be announced to ease multiple trade tussles. As part of a package deal, America is likely to maintain the Generalised System Preferences (GSP) for India, which allows many exporters to enjoy lower tariffs on specific exports to the U.S. India is likely to change the price restrictions imposed on medical devices imported from America to trade margin rationalisation, a more acceptable global practice being demanded by American manufactures. The deal is likely to involve bringing down the duty on high-end Harley-Davidson motorcycles to zero, addressing an issue that President Donald Trump continues to raise publicly and privately about trade relations with India. India imports only a few dozen fully assembled motorcycles in the high capacity category that attracts highest duties. Other market access issues are also on the table.

Fresh energy

Even partial resolution of the pending trade issues could infuse fresh new energy in bilateral ties, which have taken a hit by the abrupt postponement by the U.S., of the 2+2 dialogue between the Defence and Foreign Ministers of both countries.

In tightrope walk, India schedules talks with Iran and U.S.

Why in news?

India's tough situation vis-à-vis its relations with Iran and the U.S

Regarding Meeting

Ahead of the first set of U.S. sanctions on Iran, the Indian government is planning to hold talks with Iranian and American officials. This would be the first face-to-face meeting with the U.S. since sanctions were reimposed. The official's team would also clarify the U.S. position on the Rupee-Rial mechanism it put into place in 2012, which allowed it to import oil from Iran and supply essential foods and necessities to Iran from a UCO bank-operated fund created with up to half of the import figure in rupees.

America's stand

As a part of sanctions, America wants several countries including India to cut down oil imports from Iran to "zero" as well as cutting off trade ties. The first set of U.S. sanctions will target Iran's automotive sector, trade in gold, and other key metals. The remaining sanctions will include targeting Iran's energy sector and petroleum-related transactions, as well as transactions with the Central Bank of Iran. Recently, U.S. also withdrew from the JCPOA, multilateral nuclear deal with Iran. Recently, the U.S was also responsible for a decision to "greylist" Pakistan for supporting the LeT and JeM among other terror groups. During her recent visit to India, U.S. envoy Nikki Haley's asked India to "revise" its relationship with Iran.

Iran's stand

Iran's deputy envoy had warned that India would face a "deprivation of all other privileges Iran has offered to India", if it chose to replace Iranian oil from other sources. Iran's role in supporting terror groups in West Asia would be brought up strongly, and they will highlight the U.S's support to India on fighting terror.

India's status

India appears to be caught in a tough situation vis-à-vis its relations with Iran and U.S. India's oil imports from the U.S. in June have doubled since last year. Imports from Iran declined 16% in June despite India's commitment during President Hassan Rouhani's visit in February this year. India is the second largest buyer of Iranian crude last year, second only to China. The U.S. sanctions on Iran in order to isolate it after the Trump administration withdrew from the multilateral nuclear deal, have brought back into focus India's trade relations with the country. For India, its decision on procuring Iranian crude will have a cascading effect on its bilateral relations with both Iran and the U.S. If it ignores U.S. pressure, it could invite sanctions of its own-powerful friend and defence partner. If India caves in to U.S. diplomatic pressure to cut its imports of Iranian crude to zero by November 4, it risks its relationship with its traditional partner Iran, as well as access to important trade routes through the Chabahar port and the International North South Transport Corridor, as well as its international reputation.

India plans to procure missile shield from U.S.*Shield for NCR*

India is in talks with the U.S. to procure an advanced air defence system to defend the National Capital Region (NCR) from aerial attacks. The process for procuring the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System-II (NASAMS-II) has been initiated.

About the project

India is deploying a multi-tiered air defence network to fully secure its airspace from incoming fighter aircraft, missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). NASAMS is a "highly adaptable mid-range solution" for any operational air defence requirement and provides a tailorable, state-of-the-art defence system. It can maximise the ability to quickly identify, engage and destroy current and evolving enemy aircraft, UAV or emerging cruise missile threats. NASAMS-II is an upgraded version of the NASAMS and features new 3D mobile surveillance radars and 12 missile launchers for quicker reaction. India is also in an advanced stage of talks with Russia for the procurement of very long range S-400 air defence systems. India is also developing an indigenous Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system.

**India taps Antigua for Choksi extradition**

India has handed over a request to Antigua for extradition of the fugitive diamond trader Mehul Choksi, who has obtained citizenship of the Caribbean nation. Mr. Choksi is one of the alleged masterminds of the Rs. 13,700-crore scam in Punjab National Bank and is an uncle of co-accused diamondaire Nirav Modi. He is wanted in India by the CBI and Enforcement Directorate probing the fraud, the biggest banking scam in the country. Repos say Antiguan authorities cleared his citizenship in November 2017 after India did not give any adverse repo to stall his application. Mr. Choksi fled India on January 4 and took oath of allegiance in Antigua on January 15.

Ties with India critical for growth of Texas*Why in news?*

Expansion of trade ties with India was his top priority in office, Texas Governor Gregg Abbott told a gathering of the State's business leaders. Texas and India aligning economically will be enormously

beneficial for both. Houston and surrounding areas are emerging as a magnet for several Indian companies expanding their operations in North America. Texas is now the second largest exporter of goods to India and the fourth largest importer of Indian goods, among American States.

Oil imports

India has started importing crude and natural gas from America this year, and Texas, as the country's petroleum hub, stands to benefit. Texas energy can fuel the growth that is coming to India. Incidentally, the very first shipment of LNG from Texas of a 20-year contract for natural gas going to India, Petroleum imports from America has begun to reduce India's trade surplus with it, partially blunting an irritant for the Donald Trump administration.

The Texas State and cities such as Houston have been on a drive to attract Indian investors, and buyers. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said he would be leading a business delegation in October to India. Trade between Houston and India is now worth \$ 8.5 billion and we want to grow it more.

Rising Hindu nationalism is eroding India's secular culture

Hindu nationalism has been a rising political force in India in recent decades, "eroding" its secular nature, a U.S. Congressional report has claimed, as it warned that social media platforms provide "both tacit and overt sanction" for rising incidents of "majoritarian violence" in the country. In its report, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) — an independent and bipartisan research wing of U.S. Congress — mentioned specific areas of alleged religiously-motivated repression and violence including cow protection vigilantism and perceived assaults on freedom of expression. The report, titled 'India: Religious Freedom issues', said: "Religious freedom is explicitly protected under its Constitution. Hindus account for a vast majority (nearly four-fifths) of the country's populace. Hindu nationalism has been a rising political force in recent decades, by many accounts eroding India's secular nature and leading to new assaults on the country's religious freedom."

U.S. hearing on religious freedom in India postponed

A bipartisan hearing on religious freedom in India, has been postponed due to an "overwhelming response" from stakeholders. The hearing, titled 'Freedom of Religion or Belief in India: Rising Challenges & New Opportunities for U.S. Policy', was announced on December 4 by its organisers, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan, independent federal government commission.

The hearing had to be rescheduled for May 13 due to the overwhelming response we received. We want to be able to accommodate more attendees and participants. The 2018 USCIRF Annual Report placed India in Tier 2, which is a list of nations in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government during 2017 are serious and characterised by at least one of the elements of the 'systematic, ongoing, and egregious' CPC [country of particular concern or a Tier 1 country] standard. India has been in this category as per the Commission since 2009.

"[I]n 2017, actors tied to Hindu extremist groups regularly harassed, intimidated, and perpetrated violence against Hindu Dalits, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. "Anti-conversion and anti-cow slaughter laws were routinely used to discriminate against religious minorities or as a pretext for extra-judicial violence... These and similar issues have continued in 2018," USCIRF says on its website as part of the reasoning for holding a hearing. The commission will hear from "witnesses representing a broad array of perspectives" about India.

U.S. hard-sells its almonds to India

Direct shipments of almonds from California to India grew by 68% from 53,965 tonnes to 90,500 tonnes between 2011-12 and 2017-18, according to the Almond Board of California (ABC). The board was now targeting to sustain 20% year-on-year growth rate of almond exports to India. ABC Nutrition Research senior manager Swati Kalgoankar said that currently three studies were being conducted in India on role of almonds in glucose regulation. California is the world's largest almond producer and exporter, accounting for 81% of the global supply, and India is among its top five export destinations. In 2017-18 almond production in California stood at 10,00,171 tonnes as against a production 80,800 tonnes in Australia, 50,954 tonnes in Spain and 15,000 tonnes each in Iran and Tunisia.

Special forces in India-U.S. exercise

Why in news?

The first India-United States tri-services exercise is likely to take place in 2019 in India. It will include all services of both countries and talks are on to include Special Forces. US will second country after Russia with whom India conducts tri-services exercise.

Key Facts

The Indo-US joint tri-services drill was formally announced after first 2+2 dialogue between principals of External Affairs and Defence Ministries of two countries which was held in New Delhi in September 2018. The drill will focus on United Nations-based scenario and overarching mission of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief measure. It will be also in line with India's ambition of being natural humanitarian disaster relief hub in the Indo Pacific region. *Background*

The three forces of India and US already take part in multiple bilateral exercises separately. Moreover, armies of both countries are also participating in annual drill called Yudh Ayaas, whose latest edition took place in September 2018, and Air Forces take part in bilateral drill called Cope India. Navies of both countries also participate in exercise called Malabar which also involves Japan. But this will be first time, three services of India and US will participate in drill together. Indian Army has Para SF, Navy has Marcos while Air Force has Garud as their respective special forces

Iran oil: India to get U.S. sanctions waiver

Why in news?

Eight countries will be given exemptions and "weeks longer to wind down" their trade with Iran, once U.S. sanctions against Iran kick in on November 5. This was clarified by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo during a conference call with some members of the press.

EU not on list

Mr. Pompeo said the list of eight "jurisdictions" would be released recently, two of which have already reached zero levels of Iranian oil imports. He also clarified that the European Union (EU) — which consists of 28 countries including the U.K. — will not be one of the jurisdictions granted a temporary exemption. India — for whom Iran is the third largest source of oil after Iraq and Saudi Arabia — is expecting to be on the list as The Hindu recently reported.

SWIFT services

In terms of entities granted exemptions, there would be no exemption for Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), a global financial messaging service. SWIFT — which does not hold money itself but transmits information on transactions — has a network that spans 200 countries and some

11,000 financial institutions, as per the data released by the company. If it is sanctioned, that will have a significant impact on organisations that use it. SWIFT has been told it will have to cut off from sanctioned entities as soon as technologically feasible or could face sanctions.

The EU, which remains party to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or the 'Iran Deal') has been frustrated by the U.S.'s withdrawal, and has been searching for ways to work around the sanctions, including through the use of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV). The U.S. plans to bring any SPV within its sanctions net as well.

India, U.S. will sort out sanctions waiver

India and the U.S. are planning to "sort out" issues around a U.S. sanctions waiver related to India's purchase of the S-400 Triumf missile defence system from Russia. The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) was signed into law by U.S. President Donald Trump in April 2017. However, the President may make an exemption to CAATSA as per the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY19 — Mattis was pivotal in pushing for this part of the legislation, citing India and other countries as examples of those with historic ties to Russia now wanting to purchase U.S. defence equipment.

US Supreme Court revives India power plant lawsuit

The US Supreme Court revived a lawsuit by villagers in India seeking to hold a Washington-based international financial institution responsible for environmental damage they blame on a power plant it financed. The justices ruled 7-1 that there are limits to immunity for entities like the one involved in this case — the International Finance Corp (IFC) — under the 1945 International Organizations Immunity Act, just as there are for foreign countries under a 1976 law called the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act.

The court, in a decision written by conservative Chief Justice John Roberts, overturned a lower court's ruling that the IFC, part of the World Bank Group, was categorically immune from such lawsuits under US law. The IFC provided \$450 million in loans in 2008 to help construct the coal-fired Tata Mundra Power Plant in Gujarat, India. IFC loans included provisions requiring that certain environmental standards are met. Lead plaintiff Budha Ismail Jam and other fisherman and farmers living near the plant sued in federal court in Washington in 2015, accusing the IFC of failing to meet its obligations.

Roberts dismissed concerns that a ruling favoring the villagers would open the door to a flood of litigation against international organizations and hurt their mandate, saying that plaintiffs would still have to overcome a series of hurdles to bringing suit. Justice Stephen Breyer, a liberal, was the lone dissenter, saying that when the 1945 law was written, international organizations enjoyed broad immunity.

President Donald Trump's administration had backed the plaintiffs, saying international organizations should not be given anything more than the limited immunity foreign countries are accorded. Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a Trump appointee who joined the court last October, did not take part because he was involved in the case in his prior role as a federal appeals court judge.

The villagers said the plant's construction and operations did not comply with the environmental plan set out for the project. The local environment has been devastated, according to the plaintiffs, with marine life killed by water discharges from the plant's cooling system and coal dust contaminating the air.

No zero-sum games

Why in news?

In India over a possible decision by the U.S. Trade Representative to withdraw the Generalised System of Preferences status, under this, India is able to export about 2,000 product lines to the U.S. under zero tariff. The revocation of the GSP, which was first extended to India in 1976 as part of a global concession by the U.S. to help developing countries build their economies, will be a blow to Indian exporters, and the biggest in a series of measures taken by the Trump administration against India to reduce its trade deficit. President Donald Trump's case on what he calls "unequal tariffs" from India rests on the trade relationship in favour of India. Indian exports to the U.S. in 2017-18 stood at \$47.9 billion, while imports were \$26.7 billion.

Beginning of the imposing tariffs

In March 2018, the U.S. began imposing tariffs on several Indian products, and in April, the USTR began a review of India's GSP status, based on complaints of trade barriers from India it had received from the dairy industry and manufacturers of medical devices. In November the U.S. withdrew GSP status on at least 50 Indian products. India proposed tariffs of about \$235 million on 29 American goods, but has put off implementing these five times in the past year in the hope that a negotiated trade settlement will come through. The latest deadline expires on March 1. India has also attempted to address the trade deficit with purchase of American oil, energy and aircraft. There have been dozens of rounds of talks between officials over the past few months, but no breakthrough. U.S. officials say the decision on data localisation for all companies operating in India, and the more recent tightening norms for FDI in e-commerce have aggravated the situation. Both sides should work towards calling a halt to trade hostilities and speed up efforts for a comprehensive trade "package", rather than try to match each concern product by product. The U.S. must realise that India is heading into elections, and offer more flexibility in the next few months.

What is GSP?

Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) is a preferential tariff system under which developed nations extend reduced MFN tariffs (Most Favoured Nation) or duty-free entry of certain goods into their markets, to the developing nations.

Conclusion

India must keep in mind that the larger, global picture is about U.S.-China trade issues, and if a trade deal with the U.S. is reached, India could be the biggest beneficiary of business deals lost by China. The visit of U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to India this week will be watched not as much for substance, as for signals that New Delhi and Washington understand the urgency in breaking the deadlock.

U.S. AND RUSSIA

U.S. President met with Putin

Why in news?

U.S. President Trump recently met with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin at Helsinki in Finland for a bilateral. While it was a historic opportunity of sorts, its outcomes are uncertain.

What is the context in which the Helsinki summit took place?

A tense cold war was fought between the blocs lead by the U.S. and Russia (Soviet Union) for over 5 decades, which polarised the entire world. While tensions of the cold war have presently subdued, the recent summit nonetheless was an important for both the countries. It was an opportunity to discuss areas of shared interest, find ways to dial down mutual tensions and work together to address global issues. Notably, the past few years have seen a significant spike in Russia's international confrontations with the west and the U.S.

Despite these tensions, the threat posed by nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles, were discussed at the Helsinki summit. But it's not clear whether the talks will lead to any significant change in policies due to the lack of consistency in Mr. Trump's approach.

Did the events of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections affect the summit?

Trump openly called for bettering ties with Russia in his campaigns, and some of his campaign aides also established contacts with Russians. In that backdrop, allegations were rife that Russia had deployed hackers to prop up Trump's chances in the elections and weaken his opponents. After the elections, an inquiry was set up to probe the case, and recently, 12 Russian intelligence officials were indicted by the U.S. justice department. Due to the mounting evidence, Trump had earlier stated that, "while Russians might have hacked emails, it didn't influence the election results". Hence, even before the summit began, there were concerns that the alleged Russia interference in the presidential elections could cloud the meet. After the summit Trump had stated that he believes in Mr. Putin's assertion that Russia had no role in the electoral meddling. This in turn implicitly means that Trump has accepted Mr. Putin's version over the one stated by the U.S. intelligence, which has caused an uproar. Mr. Trump could have certainly managed the summit better by addressing genuine concerns in the U.S. over allegations of Russia's election meddling.

Why is Russian engagement essential?

The resolving the civil war in Syria, and the saving the "Iranian nuclear deal", are important areas that require Russia-US cooperation. Cold war triggered the massive expansion of the nuclear and other arsenal of both the US and USSR (Russia), which was a scary trend. In this context, "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty" (START) was signed as a mutually declared disarmament treaty between the U.S. and Russia in 1991. This was subsequently renewed as "New START" in 2010 to further the cause and this renewed deal is set to expire by 2021. While Russia has displayed willingness to renew it, high-level talks between the U.S. and Russia are needed to seal the agreement.

Ukraine Crisis

Ukraine was one of the republics within the USSR during the cold war days, and has remained a strong ally of Russia ever since till 2013. While it was planning to sign an association agreement with the European Union in 2013, Russia sternly objected to it, leading to tensions. Russia subsequently annexed "Crimea" (Russian speaking province in Ukraine) by force and declared its sovereignty over it with people's support. Currently, the issue remains unresolved and the various approaches adopted by the international community have come a cropper.

Conclusion

Many of Russia's rough actions were internationally condemned and several economic sanctions were imposed as a pressure tactic. Although, these made the Russian economy stumble for breath, Russia's international ambitions have only grown stronger and more aggressive. Hence, as isolating Russia is proving to be fruitless and abrasive, the international community needs start engaging Russia to smoothen things. Russia, in turn, will have to shed its rogue attitude and be more open to address the bitterness of the past in order to build a better future.

U.S. sanctions Act no hurdle

Why in news?

Kudashev hints at more defence deals with India after the conclusion of the S-400 Triumf missile purchase. India and Russia's defence deals won't be affected by the United States' threat of sanctions, and several more

defence deals are expected to be completed after the S-400 Triumph missile deal concluded recently. Mr. Kudashev also advocated that India sign a military logistics agreement with Russia.

Trump threat

The Ambassador's remarks come just hours after U.S. President Trump's words, seen as a sign of possible punitive action, that "India is going to find out Sooner than you think," about U.S. sanctions as a result of the \$5.43 billion missile deal signed during the Putin-Modi summit in Delhi. The [S-400] is the largest deal in the history of our bilateral military and technical cooperation of 60 years. It was negotiated very fast, so don't believe those who speak of protracted negotiations. In fact it was the speediest negotiation we have had so far. India is too big, too large to depend on somebody or to be afraid of anybody," Mr. Kudashev added, detailing more defence deals to be announced by the two countries in the next "two-three months". These include a production licence for Kalashnikov AK-103 Assault Rifles, and four stealth frigates. The deals could also attract sanctions from the U.S., as the only exceptions the White House has announced it will make so far are for "things such as spare parts for previously purchased equipment", not new purchases. The S-400 is the largest deal in the history of our bilateral military cooperation of 60 years.

U.S. to pull out of Russia missile pact

Why in news?

U.S. has confirmed that it would pull out of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia. INF is a crucial Cold War-era treaty banning the development, testing and possession of short and medium range ground-launched nuclear missiles with a range of 500-5,000 km. The treaty, signed in 1987, was central to ending the arms race between the two superpowers, and protected America's NATO allies in Europe from Soviet missile attacks.

Amid allegations

At issue is Russia's alleged development and deployment of the Novator 9M729 missile, also known as the SSC-8 that could strike Europe at short notice. The U.S. administration, under Obama raised the issue of Russia testing a ground-launched cruise missile with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2014. The Russians denied the allegations and raised counter-allegations of the U.S. installing missile defence systems in Europe. While the two countries failed to find a resolution using the dispute resolution mechanism in the treaty, the U.S. continued to remain party to the treaty under pressure from its European allies.

Implications of US's unilateral Move

A withdrawal will allow the U.S. new weapon options in the Pacific in its efforts to counter China's growing influence. There are also concerns that the treaty's end could mark the beginning of a new arms race between the U.S. and Russia. The US has been unilaterally withdrawing from all sorts of agreement and mechanisms from the Iran deal to the International Postal treaty.

Bolton arrives in Russia for talks on nuclear treaty

Why in news?

White House National Security Advisor John Bolton began two days of meetings with senior Russian officials following Washington's announcement of its withdrawal from a Cold War-era nuclear weapons treaty.

Bolton's visit

The Moscow visit by Mr. Bolton was planned before announcement by President Donald Trump that the U.S. was ditching the three-decade-old Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, known as the INF, a move

Moscow has already denounced as “dangerous”. The treaty, banning intermediate-range nuclear and conventional missiles, was signed in 1987 by then U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader. Mr. Gorbachev said that “dropping these agreements shows a lack of wisdom” and was a “mistake”. Mr. Bolton arrived in Russia and is set to speak with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

U.S. eroding the pact

Mr. Peskov told journalists that ditching the treaty “will make the world more dangerous” and rejected U.S. claims that Moscow has violated the pact, instead accusing Washington of doing so. It is the United States that is eroding the foundations and main elements of this pact with its missile defense capabilities and drones. The Trump administration has complained of Moscow’s deployment of Novator 9M729 missiles, which Washington says fall under the treaty’s ban on missiles that can travel distances of between 310 and 3,400 miles (500 and 5,500 km). The INF resolved a crisis over Soviet nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles targeting Western capitals.

Russia, US diplomats discuss bilateral ties, international issues

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have discussed prospects of Russia-US relations and possible cooperation on Syria and the Korean Peninsula. During a telephonic conversation Lavrov and Pompeo exchanged views on the prospects for further normalizing relations between the two countries "on an equal and mutually beneficial basis. The diplomats also discussed a number of pressing international issues, including, in particular, possible interaction of Russia and the US with other countries to address humanitarian problems in Syria as well as to promote the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. On July 16, Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump held a full-fledged summit in Finland's capital Helsinki, at which the two leaders discussed a wide range of topics including Russia-US relations, national security and top international issues. Pompeo on Friday confirmed Trump's continuing of talks with Putin and said that the two leaders began discussing the return of millions of Syrian refugees.

Missile’s range does not violate INF treaty

Russia insisted that the range of a missile system, 9M729 that has prompted Washington to say it will withdraw from a key Cold War arms treaty is allowed under the agreement. Russian artillery Chief Mikhail Matveevsky told a briefing that the missile’s maximum range is 480 km. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty bans missiles with a range above 500 km. In December 2018, Washington gave Russia a 60-day deadline — which ends on February 2 — to dismantle the 9M729 or the U.S. would begin the six-month process of formally withdrawing from the treaty.

Russia suspends participation in N-Pact

Why in news?

The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty required the United States and the Soviet Union to eliminate and permanently forswear all of their nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. The treaty marked the first time the superpowers had agreed to reduce their nuclear arsenals, eliminate an entire category of nuclear weapons, and utilize extensive on-site inspections for verification. As a result of the INF Treaty, the United States and the Soviet Union destroyed a total of 2,692 short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles by the treaty's implementation deadline of June 1, 1991.

Compliance Report

The United States first alleged in its July 2014 Compliance Report that Russia is in violation of its INF Treaty obligations “not to possess, produce, or flight-test” a ground-launched cruise missile having a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers or “to possess or produce launchers of such missiles.” Subsequent State Department assessments in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 repeated these allegations. In March 2017, a top U.S. official confirmed press reports that Russia had begun deploying the noncompliant missile. Russia denies that it is in violation of the agreement and has accused the United States of being in noncompliance.

Terminate the INF Treaty

On Oct. 20, 2018 President Donald Trump announced his intention to “terminate” the INF Treaty, citing Russian noncompliance and concerns about China’s intermediate-range missile arsenal. On Dec. 4, 2018 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States has found Russia in “material breach” of the treaty and will suspend its treaty obligations in 60 days if Russia does not return to compliance in that time. On Feb. 2, the Trump administration declared a suspension of U.S. obligations under the INF Treaty and formally announced its intention to withdraw from the treaty in six months. Shortly thereafter, Russian President Vladimir Putin also announced that Russia will be officially suspending its treaty obligations as well.

Brokered by U.S. President Ronald Reagan with last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the treaty ended a superpower build-up of warheads that had frightened Europeans. It banned ground-launched missiles with a range of 500 km to 5,500 km. The deal addressed Soviet nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles targeting Western capitals, but put no restrictions on other major military actors such as China. Washington’s decision to withdraw from the INF could jeopardise the extension of the New START treaty. That agreement, which caps the number of nuclear warheads held by Washington and Moscow, expires in 2021.

Treaty Structure

The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms also known as the New START Treaty. Strategic Offensive Reductions: The Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms, also known as the New START Treaty, entered into force on February 5, 2011. Under the Treaty, the United States and Russia must meet the Treaty’s central limits on strategic arms by February 5, 2018; seven years from the date the Treaty entered into force. Each Party has the flexibility to determine for itself the structure of its strategic forces within the aggregate limits of the Treaty. These limits are based on the rigorous analysis conducted by Department of Defense planners in support of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review.

Aggregate limits

- 700 deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments;
- 1,550 nuclear warheads on deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and deployed heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments (each such heavy bomber is counted as one warhead toward this limit);
- 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, SLBM launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments.
- China has predictably criticised the U.S.’s decision to walk out of the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, which was signed in 1987 by U.S.

- Of all countries following the crumbling of the major arms control treaty, China seems to be the most impacted. The Chinese expect that the Americans will now reinforce their tactical missiles, both nuclear and conventional, in Guam, a large military base in Micronesia, at the heart of the U.S. deterrent in the Pacific.
- By doing so, the U.S. would be able to virtually box in the movement of Chinese naval ships in the West Pacific, especially by safeguarding strategic gateways to the open sea, such as the Miyako Strait in Japan.
- China is aware that the post-INF missile deployments can significantly undermine its own deterrent, especially its mid-range missiles. Currently, the Americans have no answer to China's DF-21D missiles. These weapons have been tailored to destroy U.S. aircraft carriers even at a distance of 1,450 km. China recently flaunted its DF-26 ballistic missiles, which can deliver a strike on Guam.
- By taking the miscalculated step of walking out of the INF treaty, the U.S. may have dragged China, as well as Russia, into a new and unpredictable arms race, with the potential of destabilising the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The INF Treaty prohibited all U.S. and Soviet missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. The official figures above show missiles deployed November 1, 1987, shortly before the INF Treaty was signed. The treaty also required destruction of 430 U.S. missiles and 979 Soviet missiles which were in storage or otherwise not deployed. The treaty prevented the planned deployment of an additional 208 GLCMs in the Netherlands, Britain, Belgium, Germany, and Italy. The Pershing IAs, under joint U.S.-German control, were not formally covered by the INF Treaty but were also to be eliminated by U.S. and West German agreement.

U.S. AND IRAN

U.S. slams Iran's 'nightmare regime'

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump's threat against Iran came hours after his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a speech to the Iranian diaspora in California, slammed the "nightmare Iranian regime".

Reduce imports of Iranian oil

Mr. Pompeo asks all countries to reduce their imports of Iranian oil by November 4, or face U.S. sanctions. He announced an intensified American propaganda campaign, with the launch of a multimedia channel with 24-hour coverage on television, radio, and social media. Mr. Trump has made Iran a favourite target since his rapprochement with nuclear-armed North Korea. In May, he pulled the U.S. out of a hard-won agreement with Tehran, also signed by Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, which lifted sanctions in exchange for curbs on Iran's nuclear programme. The 2015 agreement was in response to fears that Iran was developing a nuclear bomb. Iran president Mr. Rouhani repeated his warning that Iran could shut down the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping lane for international oil supplies.

Iran rejects Trump's offer for talks

Iran waved away U.S. President Donald Trump's claims that talks with the country's leaders were imminent, saying "threats, sanctions and PR stunts won't work". With Washington pulling out of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal and set to reimpose full sanctions on Iran from August 6, Tehran has responded coolly to Mr. Trump's offer to talk "any time" without preconditions. The foreign ministry spokesman said Trump's offer to negotiate with Tehran contradicted his actions as Washington has imposed sanctions on Iran and put

pressure on other countries to avoid business with the Islamic Republic. Separately, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Mr Trump's repudiation of the accord reached in 2015 was "illegal" and Iran would not easily yield to Washington's renewed campaign to strangle Iran's vital oil exports.

Trump warns world against doing business with Iran

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump warned countries against doing business with Iran as he hailed the “most biting sanctions ever imposed”, triggering a mix of anger, fear and defiance in Tehran.

A run on the rial

Mr. Trump's withdrawal from a landmark 2015 nuclear agreement in May had already spooked investors and triggered a run on the Iranian rial long before nuclear-related sanctions went back into force. The sanctions reimposed targeting access to U.S. banknotes and key industries such as cars and carpets were unlikely to cause immediate economic turmoil.

Iran's markets were actually relatively buoyant, with the rial strengthening by 20% after the government relaxed foreign exchange rules and allowed unlimited, tax-free gold and currency imports. But the second tranche on November 5 covering Iran's vital oil sector could be far more damaging even if several key customers such as China, India and Turkey have refused to significantly cut their purchases.

Open to new deal with Iran

U.S. President Donald Trump has suggested he is open to a new comprehensive deal with Iran, saying that till then the toughest-ever sanctions on the West Asian country that kick off would continue. The U.S. remains open to reaching a new, more comprehensive deal with Iran that forever blocks its path to a nuclear weapon, addresses the entire range of its malign actions, and is worthy of the Iranian people.

Iran reached an agreement with the six world powers including the U.S. and the EU in 2015, which curtailed its nuclear programme in return for lifting of the international economic sanctions. In May, Mr. Trump announced the U.S.'s withdrawal from what he described as “the horrible, one-sided” nuclear deal. In his statement, Mr. Trump called on the regime to abandon its nuclear ambitions, change its “destructive behaviour”, respect the rights of its people, and return in good faith to the negotiating table. November 5, the termination of U.S. participation in the Iran nuclear deal will be complete. The last set of sanctions lifted under the terrible nuclear deal will come back into force, including powerful sanctions on Iran's energy, shipping, and shipbuilding sectors, and sanctions targeting transactions with the Central Bank of Iran and sanctioned Iranian banks.

Maximum pressure

Our objective is to force the regime into a clear choice: either abandon its destructive behaviour or continue down the path toward economic disaster. Later, a senior State Department official told reporters that that the U.S. was ready for talks with Iran.

Iran will proudly bypass sanctions

A defiant Iran said it will “proudly bypass” sanctions by the U.S. targeting the country's vital oil and financial sectors. The measures took effect. Described by Washington as “the toughest sanctions ever”, they come six months after U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial decision to abandon the multi-nation nuclear deal with Tehran.

U.S. exempts Chabahar port work from sanctions

Why in news?

Activities related to the development of the Chabahar port in Iran will be exempt from U.S. following the 180-day cool-off period after the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA or the 'Iran Deal') in May. This waiver will bring some measure of relief to India which had been discussing a sanctions exemption for Chabahar, having signed an agreement with Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 for the port's development. India has committed \$500 million to the project and \$2 billion to build a railway line from Chabahar to Hajigaj in Afghanistan.

Construction of railway

After extensive consideration, the secretary has provided for an exception from the imposition of certain sanctions under the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 (IFCA) with respect to the development of Chabahar port and the construction of an associated railway and for the shipment of non-sanctionable goods through the port for Afghanistan's use, as well as Afghanistan's continued imports of Iranian petroleum products," a State Department spokesperson said on background.

The IFCA was one of the laws under which sanctions on Iran were imposed by former U.S. President Barack Obama, with implications for non-U.S. companies working with Iran in various sectors, including shipping, shipbuilding, energy and insurance. Representatives of India, Afghanistan and Iran met a little more than two weeks ago in New Delhi, despite looming U.S. sanctions, to discuss operationalisation of the port, which is seen as key to connecting India and Afghanistan to Iran and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

The spokesperson said U.S. President Donald Trump's South Asia strategy was focussed on economic growth for Afghanistan and a "close partnership" with India, and the U.S. seeks to maintain a close relationship with both countries as they pursue a "policy of maximum pressure" against Iran. India was among eight countries that received a temporary waiver on U.S. sanctions with regard to Iranian oil imports.

Iran urges international condemnation of US withdrawal from n-deal

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has urged international condemnation of US attitude towards Iran's 2015 landmark nuclear deal. In letters to his counterparts of a number of countries, Zarif warned of the dangerous consequences of the US "illegal and unilateral" move to pull out of the nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Illegal withdrawal of the US government from the JCPOA... is challenging the goals and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the efficiency of international bodies. Likewise, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA was the country's biggest effort aimed at violating and weakening the nuclear accord and the UN Resolution 2231, adopted in July 2015 to endorse the historic deal.

Zarif further said the JCPOA put an end to an "unnecessary crisis" which lasted for more than one decade. He emphasized that the agreement's scope, regulations and time frame were the outcome of "accurate, sensitive and balanced multilateral" talks and it is impossible to make any changes on or hold new negotiations about them. US President Donald Trump announced on May 8 to pull out of the treaty, and vowed to re-impose sanctions on Iran, which was alleviated under the JCPOA. Iran has said that it will stay in the deal as long as the other five powers remain committed to it despite the US pullout.

Iran asks UN to act against 'economic strangulation' by U.S.

Iran demanded the UN's top court to suspend U.S. nuclear-linked sanctions against Tehran, accusing Washington of plotting its "economic strangulation". The Islamic Republic launched a suit at the International

Court of Justice over U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to reimpose the sanctions that had been lifted in a 2015 accord. Iran says Mr. Trump's move breaches a 1955 treaty.

Mr. Trump says the sanctions are needed to ensure Iran never builds a nuclear bomb. But Iran's representative Mohsen Mohebi branded them "naked economic aggression". His team of lawyers told the court in The Hague the measures were already devastating Iran's economy and threatening the welfare of its citizens. "The United States is publicly propagating a policy intended to damage as severely as possible Iran's economy and Iranian nationals and companies," said Mr. Mohebi. "Iran will put up the strongest resistance to the U.S. economic strangulation, by all peaceful means."

The sanctions target financial transactions and imports of raw materials, cars and aircraft among other things. A second wave of punitive measures is due to hit Iran in early November, targeting its vital energy sector including oil exports. Iran's lawyers said the sanctions would cause it "irreparable prejudice". They urged the court to order the suspension of the sanctions pending a definitive ruling.

U.S. AND TURKEY

Trump doubles steel and aluminium tariffs on Turkey

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump said that he had doubled steel and aluminium tariffs on Turkey, adding to the pressure on the nation's troubled economy amid a diplomatic row with Washington.

Lira against U.S. dollar

His announcement came as Turkey's embattled lira hit new record lows against the U.S. dollar and euro, losing nearly 9% in value as strains with America showed no sign of abating and fears grew over the exposure of European banks.

Direction of economy

Meanwhile, markets are deeply concerned over the direction of economic policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with inflation at nearly 16%, but the central bank reluctant to raise rates in response. Mr. Erdogan called on Turks to support their struggling currency.

U.S. is stabbing Turkey in the back

Why in news?

Turkey's Central Bank sought to calm markets rattled by the precipitous plunge of the Turkish lira as a defiant President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan chastised the U.S. for seeking to stab Ankara "in the back". A dispute between NATO allies Turkey and the United States which reached new intensity over the detention of an American pastor has hammered the lira and also raised questions over the future partnership between Washington and Ankara. As the latest developments caused the lira to plunge further in value, investors fretted over potential economic contagion from Turkey, particularly to European banks.

Lira's 16% tumble

The already embattled Turkish lira tumbled some 16% against the dollar as U.S. President Donald Trump said he had doubled tariffs on steel and aluminium from Turkey. After Mr. Erdoğan's speech, the lira was trading back at 6.9 to the dollar, a loss of 7% on the day, recovering from even sharper losses in earlier Asian trade where it struck a record low of 7.2362 to the greenback. Mr. Erdoğan indicated that he was in no mood to offer concessions to the United States in one of the worst spats between the two NATO allies in years. He said Turkey was facing an "economic siege", slamming the currency movements as an "attack against our

country". Mr. Erdoğan has been sanguine over the punitive measures announced by the U.S., saying that while Turkey's relationship with Washington is at stake, it will look for other partners.

U.S. AND CANADA

U.S., Canada agree on free trade pact

Why in news?

The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) updates and replaces the old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which Trump had threatened to cancel. The rewrite will result in freer markets, fairer trade and robust economic growth in the region.

About North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

The North American Free Trade Agreement is an agreement signed by Canada, Mexico, and the United States, creating a trilateral trade bloc in North America. The agreement came into force on January 1, 1994. It superseded the 1988 Canada–United States Free Trade Agreement between the U.S. and Canada. The treaty made NAFTA the world's largest free trade agreement with gross domestic product of its three members is more than \$20 trillion. NAFTA is the first time two developed nations signed a trade agreement with an emerging market country. The three signatories agreed to remove trade barriers between them. By eliminating tariffs, NAFTA increases investment opportunities.

The New Pact

On September 30, 2018, the United States, Mexico, and Canada renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement. The new deal is called the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. It must be ratified by each country's legislature. The new deal changes NAFTA in following areas:

- The most important is that auto companies must manufacture at least 75 percent of the car's components in the USMCA's trade zone.
- Canada will now open its dairy market further to U.S. producers, and in return U.S left unchanged the dispute settlement provisions.
- Alongside changes to the dairy market in Canada, it includes stronger protections for workers, tough new environmental rules, and updates the trade relationship to cover the digital economy and provides "groundbreaking" intellectual property protections.
- In addition, it adds provisions to prevent "manipulation" of the trade rules, including covering currency values, and controls over outside countries trying to take advantage of the duty-free market.

Functions of NAFTA

NAFTA grants the most-favored-nation status to all co-signers. That means countries must give all parties equal treatment. That includes foreign direct investment. They cannot give better treatment to domestic investors than foreign ones. They can't offer a better deal to investors from non-NAFTA countries. Governments must also offer federal contracts to businesses in all three NAFTA countries. NAFTA eliminates tariffs on imports and exports between the three countries.

- Tariffs are taxes used to make foreign goods more expensive.
- NAFTA created specific rules to regulate trade in farm products, automobiles and clothing.
- These also apply to some services, such as telecommunications and finance.

Exporters must get Certificates of Origin to waive tariffs.

- That means the export must originate in the United States, Canada or Mexico.
- A product made in Peru but shipped from Mexico will still pay a duty when it enters the United States or Canada.

NAFTA establishes procedures to resolve trade disputes. All NAFTA countries must respect patents, trademarks, and copyrights. At the same time, the agreement ensures that these intellectual property rights don't interfere with trade. The agreement allows business travelers easy access throughout all three countries. NAFTA has two other agreements that update the original. The North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation supports the enforcement of environmental laws. The North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation protects working conditions.

U.S., Canada seek to reassure China

The U.S. and Canada promised an "unbiased" legal process for a Chinese executive whose arrest in Vancouver at U.S. request has riled Beijing. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland discussed the arrest in a phone call in which they also voiced concern about the "arbitrary detentions" of Canadians in China, the U.S. State Department said. Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou was detained last month on a request by the U.S., which says she violated Washington's sanctions on Iran.

U.S. AND PALESTINE

U.S. to stop funding UN's Palestine agency

Why in news?

The U.S. government has decided to stop all funding it gives to a UN agency that provides assistance to millions of Palestinian refugees, ending a decades-long policy of supporting it.

Transfer of money

Each year, the State Department transfers money by the end of September to the UN Relief and Works Agency, known as UNRWA, which provides aid to Palestinian refugees across the West Asian region. Earlier this year, the State Department released \$60 million of the \$350 million allocated for the agency, but Mr. Kushner and Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, have decided not to give the remaining \$290 million, said Mr. Harden.

U.S. AND MEXICO

Trump suggested building a wall along Sahara

Why in news?

Spain's Foreign Minister revealed that U.S. President Donald Trump suggested building a wall along the Sahara desert to stem the arrival of migrants, as he plans to do on the Mexican border.

Point of entry

Spain is at the frontline of this issue, having overtaken Italy to become the number one point of entry for migrants coming to Europe by sea or by land from Africa. Many of these migrants cross the Sahara to Morocco and on to Spain across the Mediterranean, or over two high fences into the Spanish overseas territories of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco. Mr. Trump's proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, which spans 3,200 km, could cost up to \$20 billion according to some estimates. The Sahara desert, meanwhile, spans all of northern Africa from the Red Sea in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west, or close to 5,000 km.

U.S. AND CHINA

U.S. is trying to sow discord between the two nations

Why in news?

China has asked India to counter jointly the growing threat of trade protectionism championed by U.S. President Donald Trump. A statement issued by the Embassy of China in India said that attempts were being made to sow discord between China and India and they should not fall for such traps.

Trade protectionism

Under the current circumstances, China and India need to deepen their cooperation to fight trade protectionism. As the two largest developing countries and major emerging markets, China and India are both in the vital stage of deepening reform and developing economy, and both need stable external environment.

The Chinese response comes in the wake of the escalating U.S.-China trade warfare that has soured ties between the two countries. The Embassy said the U.S. has provoked trade disputes, and asked it to introspect about “interfering” in the internal affairs of China and India in the guise of religious freedom and human rights. The U.S. was promoting protectionism while trying to keep India away from China by planting ideas that China’s financial support for developing countries would lead to a “debt trap”. China wants to build on development partnerships with other countries in the region, the statement emphasised.

U.S.-China trade row not a threat to world economy

Why in news?

U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin pushed back against warnings that Washington’s trade fight with China imperils the world economy, saying that pushing Beijing to open up will be good for all.

IMF warned

The IMF had warned at annual meetings in Bali that the escalating U.S.-China trade confrontation would hobble global economic growth, as the fund lowered its forecasts for this year and next. But Mr. Mnuchin said here that President Donald Trump’s drive to punish China with tariffs to encourage it to adopt fairer trade practices would have the opposite affect.

Bilateral pacts will be void if U.S. imposes tariffs

Why in news?

China warned the U.S. that any agreements reached on trade and business between the two countries will be void if Washington implements tariffs and other trade measures, as the two ended their latest round of talks in Beijing. A short statement, made no mention of any specific new agreements after U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross met Chinese Vice Premier Liu He. It referred instead to a consensus they reached recently in Washington, when China agreed to increase significantly its purchases of U.S. goods and services.

Tariff threats

The United States and China have threatened tit-for-tat tariffs on goods worth up to \$150 billion each. Xinhua said China’s attitude had been consistent and that it was willing to increase imports from all countries, including the United States. Reform and opening up and expanding domestic demand are China’s national strategies. Our established rhythm will not change.

The achievements reached by China and the United States should be based on the premise that the two sides should meet each other halfway and not fight a trade war. If the United States introduces trade sanctions including raising tariffs, all the economic and trade achievements negotiated by the two parties will be void. There was no immediate comment or statement from the U.S. delegation or from Mr. Ross himself.

At the end of recent Washington talks the two countries released a joint statement. But just when it appeared a trade truce between the two economic heavyweights was on the cards, the White House last week warned it would pursue tariffs on \$50 billion worth of Chinese imports, as well as impose restrictions on Chinese investments in the United States and tighter export controls. Mr. Ross arrived in Beijing for talks after the Trump administration renewed tariff threats against China, and with key U.S. allies in a foul mood towards Washington after they were hit with duties on steel and aluminium.

U.S., China fire first shots in tariff war

The United States tariffs on 34 billion worth of US Dollar Chinese goods has come into effect, opening the way for an outright trade war between the two economic giants. The 25 per cent tariffs on Chinese machinery, electronics and high-tech equipment including autos, computer hard drives and LEDs mark a significant escalation in the trade dispute between China and US.

Meanwhile, China has said it has already imposed retaliatory measures on US goods after the US activated its tariff measures. Spokesman for the foreign ministry, Lu Kang said that China's measures against the US took with immediate effect. Beijing accused Washington of launching the largest trade war in economic history and vowed to take the case to the World Trade Organization.

The US trade deficit in goods with China ballooned to a record USD 375.2 billion last year, further stoking Trump's ire. But it remained to be seen whether the American president would carry out recent threats to respond to any Chinese retaliation with maximum pressure raising US duties on Chinese goods in increments of USD 200 billion until virtually all the goods America buys from its largest trading partner are subject to duties.

China tariffs to raise costs from cradle to grave in U.S.

Why in news?

New tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese imports will force Americans to pay more for items they use throughout their daily lives, from cradles to coffins.

Proposed duty

Six days of public hearings on the proposed duties of up to 25% will start in Washington as part of President Donald Trump's and the U.S. Trade Representative's efforts to pressure Beijing for sweeping changes to its trade and economic policies. Unlike previous rounds of U.S. tariffs, which sought to shield consumers by targeting Chinese industrial machinery, electronic components and other intermediate goods, thousands of consumer products could be directly hit with tariffs by late September.

The \$200 billion list targets seafood, furniture and lighting products, tires, chemicals, plastics, bicycles and car seats for babies. USTR's proposed tariffs on an additional \$200 billion of Chinese imports dramatically expand the harm to American consumers, workers, businesses, and the economy. The top U.S. business lobbying group said the administration lacks a "coherent strategy" to address China's theft of intellectual property and other harmful trade practices and called for "serious discussions".

China courts Europe to counter U.S.

Why in news?

China has begun to actively court Europe, as the trade war with Washington intensifies and the hunt for new supply chains and markets outside the U.S. accelerates. In Berlin, visiting Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang said that China and Germany must shift gears not only to consolidate their ties, but also to defend free and

open trade. Mr. Li's remarks followed China's open criticism of the U.S., which was officially described as a "trade bully", within hours of Washington targeting Chinese products with an additional 25% duty. China sees Germany as its key partner for transitioning its economy towards Internet-based "smart manufacturing". The Made-in-China 2025 strategy is based on Germany's Industry 4.0 model.

Safeguarding free trade

Mr. Li stressed that Beijing and Berlin should jointly map out their future "all-round cooperation from a new starting point". This was necessary to safeguard "free trade, multilateralism and a fair and just international order". Mr. Li will also hold talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Ms. Merkel had visited Beijing and Shenzhen China's hi-tech capital in May. The two leaders will also witness the China-Germany automated driving exhibition and attend an economic and technical forum.

China challenges U.S. tariff threat at WTO

Why in news?

China has filed a World Trade Organization (WTO) challenge against U.S. President's latest tariff threat, stepping up its diplomatic efforts to counter U.S. pressure in a spiraling technology dispute. The Trump administration has criticised the WTO as it was unable to deal with the problems posed by China.

Background

The U.S. imposed 25% tariffs on \$34 billion of Chinese goods in response to complaints that China pressurizes the companies to hand over technology. China responded immediately by imposing identical penalties on a similar amount of American imports. The recent move of China is unusually swift, coming less than one week after the U.S. proposed 10% tariffs on a \$200 billion list of Chinese goods. China has criticised the latest tariff threat but has only about \$80 billion of annual imports left for penalties. Beijing has stepped up diplomatic efforts to recruit support from Europe, South Korea and other trading partners but so far without success.

Why U.S. is imposing tariffs?

China introduced its strategic industrial promotion policy- Made in China 2025. The unfair intellectual property and technology transfer practices under it are said to cause harm to the US economy. They allegedly coerce US companies into transferring technology and intellectual property to domestic Chinese enterprises. The proposed list of products was thus based on an extensive inter-agency economic analysis of the harm. The measure thus targets products that benefit from China's industrial plans while minimizing the impact on the US economy. Also, the issue of US's huge trade deficit with China is highlighted as a reason.

U.S.- China Trade

The U.S. trade deficit with China was \$375 billion in 2017. The trade deficit exists because U.S. exports to China were only \$130 billion while imports from China were \$506 billion. The United States imports consumer electronics, clothing, and machinery from China. A lot of the imports are from U.S. manufacturers that send raw materials to China for low-cost assembly.

Trump calls Chinese trade practices 'vicious'

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump called Chinese trade practices "vicious", his latest blast at the world's second-biggest economy as the two sides slug it out in a deepening trade war.

Tit-for-tat tariffs

The U.S. earlier imposed 25% tariffs on \$34 billion worth of Chinese products, drawing a tit-for-tat response from Beijing which targeted politically sensitive U.S. agricultural products. Washington has since threatened tariffs on another \$200 billion in Chinese exports, then upped that to \$500 billion, prompting Beijing to vow further retaliation. Mr. Trump has also accused Beijing of manipulating its yuan currency to give its exporters an edge, a charge rejected by China. On another front, Mr. Trump's administration has hit even its close allies the European Union (EU), Canada and Mexico, with levies on steel and aluminium exports to the United States, prompting retaliation against iconic U.S. products, including bourbon whiskey and orange juice.

No winner in trade war

Meanwhile, China's President Xi Jinping said that there would be "no winner" in any global trade war, in a direct warning to Mr. Trump. A trade war should be rejected because there will be no winner. Unilateralism and protectionism are mounting, dealing a severe blow to multilateralism and the multilateral trading regime. Leaders of the BRICS emerging economies Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa are holding an annual three-day summit, with attention focused on the threat of a U.S.-led global trade war.

China, Russia warn U.S. of consequences over sanctions

Why in news?

Moscow and Beijing lashed out at Washington's new anti-Russian sanctions that also target China for the first time, warning the the United States could face consequences.

Washington playing unfair

Washington playing unfair and using new measures to squeeze Moscow out of the global arms market, after the United States slapped sanctions on China for buying Russian warplanes and missiles and threatened to target its other clients. This is unfair competition, dishonest competition, an attempt to use non-market methods that run counter to norms and principles of international trade to squeeze the main competitor of U.S. makers out of the markets.

Recently Washington placed financial sanctions on the Equipment Development Department of the Chinese Defence Ministry, and its top administrator, for the recent purchase of Russian Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. It was the first time a third country has been punished under the CAATSA sanctions legislation for dealing with Russia, signalling Donald Trump's readiness to risk relations with other countries over Moscow.

The U.S. actions have seriously violated the basic principles of international relations and seriously damaged the relations between the two countries and the two militaries. United in their resentment of America's global influence, China and Russia have sought in recent years to tighten their ties and this month conducted a joint military drill, Moscow's largest ever war games.

China steps up protest over U.S. sanctions

Why in news?

China has responded robustly to Washington's decision to impose military sanctions opening up key diplomatic channels to air its protest, and recalling its visiting naval official from the U.S. It has also cancelled an upcoming defence officials meeting in Beijing.

U.S. sanctions

A day earlier, the U.S. State Department had announced that it was sanctioning the Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission, and the department's director, for violating the Countering

America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The U.S. invoked the act because of China's purchase from Russia of S-400 missiles and the SU-35 fighter jets.

China resolutely opposes the U.S. move and will never accept it. China will immediately recall the Chinese navy commander Shen Jinlong who is in the United States attending the 23rd International Sea power Symposium and postpone the second meeting of a communication mechanism for the joint staff departments of China and the United States, scheduled for September 25-27 in Beijing. China demands the U.S. side to immediately correct its wrongdoing and withdraw the so-called sanctions. "

Tit-for-tat tariffs by U.S., China go into effect

Why in news?

The U.S. and China imposed fresh tariffs on each other's goods as the world's biggest economies showed no signs of backing down from an increasingly bitter trade dispute. Soon after the new duties went into effect, China accused the U.S. of engaging in "trade bullyism" and said it was intimidating other countries to submit to its will.

Call for respect

But Beijing also said it was willing to restart trade negotiations with the U.S. if the talks are "based on mutual respect and equality, citing a white paper published by China's State Council. U.S. tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods and retaliatory tariffs by Beijing on \$60 billion worth of U.S. products took effect at midday Asian time, though the initial level of the duties was not as high as earlier feared.

The U.S. will levy tariffs of 10% initially, rising to 25% at the end of 2018. Beijing has imposed rates of 5-10% and warned it would respond to any rise in U.S. tariffs on Chinese products accordingly. The two sides had already slapped tariffs on \$50 billion worth of each other's goods earlier this year. For U.S. consumers, the new duties could translate into higher prices for Chinese products ranging from vacuum cleaners to technology gear such as home modems and routers, while U.S. goods targeted by Beijing include liquefied natural gas and certain types of aircraft.

President Donald Trump is pressing China to reduce its huge bilateral trade surplus and make sweeping changes to its policies on trade, technology transfers and high-tech industrial subsidies. Beijing has denied that U.S. firms are forced to transfer technology and sees Washington's demands on rolling back its industrial policies as an attempt to contain China's economic rise. The U.S. administration has brazenly preached unilateralism, protectionism and economic hegemony, making false accusations against many countries and regions, particularly China, intimidating other countries through economic measures such as imposing tariffs.

No end in sight for trade war

Several rounds of Sino-U.S. trade talks in recent months have yielded no major breakthroughs and attempts at arranging another meeting in coming weeks have fallen through. A senior White House official said last week the U.S. will continue to engage China, but added there was no date for further talks. China, which has accused Washington of being insincere in the negotiations, has decided not to send Vice Premier Liu He to Washington.

News of Beijing's decision to skip the talks pushed China's yuan currency down 0.3 percent in offshore trade, reinforcing investors' fears that both sides are digging in for a long fight. Mainland China markets were closed for a holiday. Economists warn that a protracted dispute will eventually stunt growth across the globe. Companies on both sides of the Pacific are already reporting disruptions to their operations and are reviewing investment plans.

The trade tensions have also cast a pall over broader relations between Beijing and Washington, with the two sides butting heads on a growing number of issues. China summoned the U.S. ambassador in Beijing and postponed military talks in protest against a U.S. decision to sanction a Chinese military agency and its director for buying Russian fighter jets and a missile system.

Washington readying more measures

Trump reiterated a threat to impose further tariffs on Chinese goods should Beijing retaliate, suggesting that Washington may slap tariffs on virtually all imported Chinese goods if the administration does not get its way. China imports far less from the United States, making a dollar-for-dollar match on any new U.S. tariffs impossible. Instead, it has warned of “qualitative” measures to retaliate. Though Beijing has not revealed what such steps might be, business executives and analysts say it could withhold exports of certain products to the U.S. or create more administrative red tape for American companies operating in China. Some analysts say there is also a risk that China could allow its currency to weaken again to cushion the blow to its exporters.

China says opposes provocative U.S. military aircraft action in S.China Sea

China has labeled a recent mission by nuclear-capable U.S. B-52 bombers over the disputed South China Sea as “provocative.” Defense Ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang said at a monthly briefing that China would respond with all measures considered necessary to safeguard its rights and interests. Two B-52s flew over the strategic waterway claimed by China earlier this week in what the Pentagon called a routine mission. China has sought to strengthen its claim to the South China Sea by building seven islands on reefs and equipping them with military facilities such as airstrips, radar domes and missile systems. Five other governments claim territory in the area.

U.S. urging allies to shun Huawei

The United States is trying to coax wireless companies and internet providers in allied countries to shun Chinese telecoms giant Huawei, citing cyber security risks. The lobbying campaign, also targeting government officials, is taking place in allied countries where Huawei equipment is widely used such as Germany, Italy and Japan. One U.S. worry is over the use of Chinese telecom equipment in countries with US military bases, such as Germany, Italy and Japan. The U.S. is also mulling more financial aid for telecom development in countries that avoid using Chinese-made equipment, as per the Journal. Huawei – one of the world’s largest telecommunications equipment and services providers – has been under scrutiny in some countries, including the United States and Australia, over its alleged close links to Beijing. Huawei has long refuted accusations of security risks and links to the Chinese state intelligence services.

Huawei affair won't hit trade talks

Avoiding a knee-jerk response, China is delinking the detention of the daughter of the founder of Huawei in Canada from trade talks with the U.S. Meng Wangzhou - chief financial officer (CFO) of Chinese tech giant Huawei, and the daughter of the company’s founder Ren Zhengfei - was detained by the Canadian authorities during transit in Vancouver, on the behest of the U.S. Meng was arrested, apparently as part of a U.S. investigation into the use of the global banking system by Huawei to evade U.S. sanctions against Iran. The Asian Nikkei Review reported that Huawei plays a key role in the ‘Made in China 2025’ industrial modernisation initiative, which U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer seeks to scrap as the two countries vie for technological superiority.

U.S., China decide to hold off fresh tariffs for 90 days

Why in news?

China and the United States agreed to halt additional tariffs in a deal that keeps their trade war from escalating as the two sides try again to bridge their differences with fresh talks aimed at reaching an agreement within 90 days. President Donald Trump told Chinese President Xi Jinping during high-stakes talks in Argentina that he would not boost tariffs on \$200 billion of Chinese goods to 25% on Jan. 1 as previously announced. Beijing for its part agreed to buy an unspecified but “very substantial” amount of agricultural, energy, industrial and other products from the U.S.

New trade talks

The two sides will also launch new trade talks to address issues including technology transfer, intellectual property, non-tariff barriers, and agriculture. If no deal is reached within 90 days, both parties agreed that the 10% tariffs will be raised to 25%. China’s state-run media lauded the “important consensus” reached by the two leaders but did not mention the 90-day deadline. Mr. Trump had imposed 10% on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods in September. China responded with its own tariffs. The U.S. President has also threatened to slap tariffs on another \$267 billion worth of Chinese imports, as the relationship appeared set to worsen in the weeks ahead of the Argentina meeting.

Qualcomm-NXP deal

China “is open to approving the previously unapproved” deal for U.S. company Qualcomm Inc to acquire Netherlands-based NXP Semiconductors “should it again be presented. In July, Qualcomm —the world’s biggest smartphone-chip maker walked away from a \$44 billion deal to buy NXP after failing to secure Chinese regulatory approval, becoming a high-profile victim of the China-U.S. trade dispute. Qualcomm and NXP did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Beijing at best gets a temporary reprieve from additional tariffs, but was unable to get the U.S. to agree to return to ‘business as usual’.

China sounds optimistic on U.S. trade deal

Why in news?

China said that it would “immediately” implement measures agreed under a trade truce with the U.S., and was confident that it could reach a deal within 90 days. The Commerce Ministry’s remarks came days after U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping agreed to give negotiators 90 days to resolve their trade spat.

Bilateral consensus

China will immediately implement the consensus both sides already reached on agricultural products, energy, autos and other specific items. The two sides will also discuss intellectual property protection, market access and balanced trade, and “work hard to reach a consensus”.

2+2 talks to focus on China

The first U.S.-India 2+2 dialogue in New Delhi in September 2018 will discuss regional and strategic issues of Asia and “will also have some real outcomes”. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James Mattis will be travelling to India for the dialogue, which has been postponed twice. The Trump administration is mindful of India’s legacy ties with Russia, but does not appreciate its continuing defence cooperation with it, said Mr. Schriver, adding that he was not sure of granting a waiver to India from sanctions if it went ahead with the planned purchase of S-400 missile defence system from Russia. Mr. Schriver said the U.S. administration expected some concrete outcomes such as concluding an enabling agreement on communication and expanding the scope of military exercises. He also said that operationalising India-U.S. partnership in Asia would be part of the 2+2 agenda.

Kim Jong un visits China after warning of alternate path to U.S. talks

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un arrived in Beijing, China for consultations with ahead of a likely second round of talks with U.S. President Donald Trump. The talks are taking place amid signs that the dialogue between Mr. Kim and Mr. Trump could be held either in Hanoi, Bangkok or Hawaii. The two leaders had last met in Singapore for their first meeting in June 2018. Trump was emphatic recently in stating that both Pyongyang and Washington wanted another round of talks. Kim announced during his New Year message that his readiness to meet with Mr. Trump was linked to the lifting of sanctions that have been imposed on North Korea. The North Koreans say their earlier dismantling of an atomic weapon test site as well as their pledge to denuclearise, made explicit during the Singapore talks with Mr. Trump, was sufficient for the lifting of sanctions. But the Americans want Pyongyang to take concrete steps such as declaring the number of nuclear weapons in their arsenal, before sanctions can disappear. Experts say, the reason North Korea can take the daring step toward denuclearisation and engagement with the U.S. is mainly because of its trust in China.

China's hi-tech 'guerilla' war with the U.S.

The race for tech ascendancy between China and the U.S. is climbing new heights. The Americans want the Chinese to be dragged backwards, trying to keep them away from the crown jewels of digital technology — the tools for a new age of smart industrialisation, driven as much by data as by an army of clever robots. At the heart of the seething competition between the world's largest and second-largest economies is the race for ever-powerful computer chips. The U.S. has been a leader in the domain of silicon wafers. But driven by massive state support that is tangibly benefiting both start-ups and established titans, or anything in between, China is also on its way, ready to catch up.

China has couched its lofty aspirations, which range from mastering Artificial Intelligence (AI) to making driverless cars, under its Made-in-China 2025 plan. Unsurprisingly, U.S. officials have raged against the Made-in-China 2025 project, which, if it succeeds, can topple the Americans from their perch on the top of the world's hi-tech tree. Consequently, with so much bad blood flowing, a war to hurt China's tech advancement is turning nasty. The Chinese have been furious at the arrest in Canada of Meng Wanzhou, at Washington's behest. Ms. Meng is the daughter of the founder of Huawei. Her detention, and possible extradition to the U.S., have been widely interpreted in China as an assault on Huawei, which is widely seen as a global frontrunner in 5G technology.

In a move widely seen as a retaliatory measure, Beijing earlier this month sentenced to death Canadian national Robert Lloyd Schellenberg for drug-related crimes. This has embroiled Ottawa in ruthless proxy combat between Beijing and Washington over cutting-edge technology. The Chinese have so far shown the gumption to stand up to the fire and brimstone flaming from Washington. In October, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a famous mantra of technological self-reliance during a visit to Guangzhou, an icon in China's vast industrial heartland. "Manufacturing is a key to the real economy, and the core strength of manufacturing is innovation, or the control of core technologies," Mr. Xi said. China, so far, is pursuing guerilla tactics to fight its tech war. Chinese officialdom and media have been instructed to drop Made-in-China 2025 terminology from their lexicon, in order not to provoke Washington. Also, the state media has been asked to avoid references to China's 1,000 talents programme. This has been a successful scheme, where China's brightest graduates in foreign universities have been lured to return home, with offers of high salaries and a conducive environment for research and business.

State support

But beneath the radar, state-backed support for hi-tech development, especially advanced computer chips, has been relentless. The Asian Nikkei Review reported that an entrepreneur participating in this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas had received \$1.5 million last year in government subsidies for his chip-making start-up. Even Foxconn, well known as a giant iPhone assembler, apparently benefited from China's hi-tech largesse, with a \$9 billion local government infusion for its upcoming chip factory in Zhuhai. Some of the big guns in China's private enterprise universe are in the fray in developing silicon chips. They include Alibaba, the e-commerce goliath, which has set up an AI chip unit. It appears to be only a matter of time when China's hit-and-run tactics of the tech war give way to decisive pitched battles with the U.S., whose results, at this time are hard to predict.

U.S. AND NORTH KOREA

Very productive talks with North Korea

Why in news?

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted that the two days of talks with his North Korean counterpart on dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal had been "very productive". But, briefing reporters before flying on to Tokyo, he offered few new details as to how North Korea would honour its commitment to "denuclearise" in exchange for U.S. security guarantees.

Extremely regrettable

The North's Foreign Ministry said the "extremely regrettable" U.S. attitude during the meeting violated the spirit of the agreement reached between Mr. Kim and President Donald Trump at their historic summit in Singapore. The U.S. attitude and positions at the high-level talks were extremely regrettable.

The North's statement said officials had presented Mr. Pompeo with a personal letter to Mr. Trump to convey hopes that the "magnificent relations and feelings of trust" between the two leaders would be reinforced in further talks. Mr. Kim had agreed to "work towards complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula" in return for security guarantees and an end to a dangerous stand-off with U.S. forces. Mr. Trump hailed this as a successful resolution of the crisis, but the short joint statement was not a detailed roadmap to disarmament and it fell to Mr. Pompeo to follow up and put meat on the bones of the sparse commitment.

U.S., North Korean diplomats meet in Sweden

High-ranking diplomats from the United States and North Korea are currently holding talks in Sweden aiming to end the stand-off between the two countries. After the meeting in Singapore things have ground to a halt. The purpose of this meeting is to inject some energy and to take steps forward in the relations between U.S. and North Korea. Meanwhile, North Korea's lead negotiator in nuclear diplomacy is due to hold talks with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington and could also meet Mr. Trump during a visit aimed at clearing the way for a second U.S.-North Korea summit. Mr. Trump has spoken many times of having a second summit with Mr. Kim early this year.

U.S. AND EU

EU plans retaliatory tariffs against U.S.

Why in news?

The European Union (EU) expects to hit U.S. imports with additional duties from July, ratcheting up a transatlantic trade conflict after Washington imposed its own tariffs on incoming EU steel and aluminium.

Members given support to European Commission

EU members have given broad support to a European Commission plan to set 25% duties on up to €2.8 billion (\$3.3 billion) of U.S. exports in response to what it sees as illegal U.S. action. EU exports that are now subject to U.S. tariffs are worth €6.4 billion. The Commission expects to conclude the relevant procedure in coordination with member states before the end of June so that the new duties start applying in July.

That plan also includes duties of between 10 and 50% on a further €3.6 billion of U.S. imports in March 2021 or potentially sooner if the World Trade Organisation has ruled the U.S. measures illegal. U.S. products on the list include orange juice, bourbon, jeans, motorcycles and a variety of steel products. The European Union, Canada and Mexico have all responded after U.S. President Donald Trump ended their exemptions from tariffs of 25% for steel and 10% for aluminium. Canada has announced it will impose retaliatory tariffs on C\$16.6 billion (\$12.9 billion) worth of U.S. exports from July 1. Mexico put tariffs on American products ranging from steel to pork and bourbon.

U.S AND AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan ceasefire push in focus in U.S., Taliban talks

An Afghan peace negotiations team has arrived in Abu Dhabi, a day after talks attended by U.S. and Taliban representatives were held in the city aimed at ending the 17-year conflict. The 12-person team was first announced in November 2018 by President Ashraf Ghani as part of a diplomatic effort to bring the Taliban to the table for peace talks with the government in Kabul.

But the Taliban has not confirmed a meeting, and issued a statement reiterating its long-standing vow not to speak with Afghan officials. The militants said they had held “preliminary talks” with the U.S. State Department’s special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, with the discussions to continue. They also said they had held “extensive” meetings with officials from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, repeating demands for international forces to be withdrawn from Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan were the only three countries to have recognised the Taliban government during its five-year rule from 1996-2001.

U.S. to withdraw troops from Afghanistan

U.S. President Donald Trump has decided to pull a significant number of troops from Afghanistan, a U.S. official has said, but the Afghan presidency brushed off concerns that the drawdown would affect security. Reports suggested as many as half of the 14,000 troops in the war-torn country could be leaving. The move stunned and dismayed diplomats and officials in Kabul who are intensifying a push to end the 17-year conflict with the Taliban. Taliban already controls vast amounts of territory and is causing “unsustainable” Afghan troop casualties.

U.S. AND SYRIA

U.S. announces Syria troop pull-out

The U.S. has started bringing home troops from Syria as it moves to a new phase in the campaign against Islamic State (IS), the White House said, claiming that the militant Islamist group’s “territorial caliphate” has been defeated. The IS had declared its so-called “caliphate” in 2014 after seizing large swathes of Syria and Iraq.

The hardline Islamist group established its de facto capital in the Syrian city of Raqqa, using it as a base to plot attacks in Europe. According to U.S. estimates, the group oversaw about 100,000 sq. km of territory, with about eight million people under its control.

The decision to withdraw upends assumptions about a longer-term U.S. military presence in Syria, which Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and other senior officials had advocated to help ensure that IS cannot re-emerge. Trump declared victory against the group and made clear that he saw no further grounds for remaining in Syria.

The U.S. has about 2,000 troops in Syria, many of them special operations forces working closely with an alliance of Kurdish and Arab militias known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. The partnership with the SDF over the past several years has led to the defeat of the IS in Syria but outraged NATO ally Turkey, which views Kurdish YPG forces in the alliance as an extension of a militant group fighting inside Turkey.

A complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria would still leave a sizeable U.S. military presence in the region, including about 5,200 troops across the border in Iraq. Much of the U.S. campaign in Syria has been waged by warplanes flying out of Qatar and other locations in West Asia. Trump has previously lambasted his predecessor, Barack Obama, for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq that preceded an unravelling of the Iraqi armed forces. Iraqi forces collapsed in the face of the IS's advance into the country in 2014.

U.S. AND PAKISTAN

U.S. turned blind eye to Pak.'s nuke programme in 1970s

Why in news?

The U.S. acceded to Pakistan's demand to overlook its secretive nuclear weapons programme following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s after Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping convinced Washington to support Islamabad for "stability" in South Asia. The documents reveal that the then Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul Haq and Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping were successful in extracting this price from the U.S. in lieu of Islamabad's support to America against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In addition to the U.S. turning a blind eye to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, Deng also convinced the U.S. to start giving more military and financial aid to Pakistan, according to the U.S. Foreign Relations 1977-1980 volume on Afghanistan.

Pro-Soviet India

The voluminous document indicates that both Zia and Deng successfully convinced the then Jimmy Carter administration that India under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be pro-Soviet. There are limits on our ability to aid Pakistan because of their nuclear explosive programme. Although we still object to their doing so, we will now set that aside for the time being, to facilitate strengthening Pakistan against potential Soviet action," the then Defence Secretary Harold Brown said in a January 8, 1980 meeting with Deng.

The Chinese leader applauded the U.S. decision. That is a very good approach. Pakistan has its own reasons for developing a nuclear programme. We ourselves oppose the Pakistan effort on nuclear weapons because we believe it is meaningless to spend money on such a programme. Pakistan has its own arguments, i.e. India has exploded a nuclear device but the world has not seemed to complain about this. So now you have decided to put this aside and solve the question of military and economic aid to Pakistan. We applaud this decision. He also convinced the U.S. to not equate India and Pakistan when it comes to giving aid.

EUROPE

INDIA AND UK

MoU on the return of Illegal Migrants

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet approved the MoU between India and the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland on the return of Illegal Migrants.

Benefits of the MoU

Facilitation of the Visa Free Agreement for holders of Diplomatic passports and liberalization of UK Visa Regime for those who are travelling to the UK legally, ensuring the return of persons who have no lawful basis to be in the territory of the other Party after verification of nationality to its satisfaction, streamlining the procedure of return of nationals who are caught to be staying illegally, belonging to the other party in a specified time-frame.



MoU in the field of Biotechnology

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the MoU between India and Finland for collaborating based on mutual interest in the field of Biotechnology, for funding and implementing ambitious industry-led innovative and transnational projects within the broad scope of research development and innovation.

Benefits

The MoU will support creation of long-term Research, Development & Innovation collaboration mechanism and to establish and strengthen cooperative network between Indian and Finnish organizations. By funding need-oriented, ambitious joint projects of high international standards, the two countries aim to help reach world-class innovations beneficial to both countries. It will also facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge generation among scientists, researchers and industry in the two countries.

Details

Identifying innovation as the cornerstone of the collaboration, both DBT and Business Finland have agreed to cooperate with Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC), the Public Sector Enterprise of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India for funding and implementing ambitious industry-led innovative and transnational projects. Based on their mutual interest following research areas have been identified.

Mission Innovation;

- Biofuture platform: biofuels, bioenergy and biomass based products
- Environmental and energy applications of biotechnology;
- Business development of start-up and growth companies; and
- Education technologies and games in life sciences vi. Other fields of life science industry

Background

The MoU was signed in accordance with the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Finland and the Government of the Republic of India on Co-operation in the fields of Science and Technology, signed

in Helsinki on March 25th 2008, wherein, based on mutual interest it was agreed to promote long-term research and development and innovation (R&D&I) cooperation between Finnish and Indian organisations.

Lack of trust permeates India-U.K. bilateral ties

A “lack of trust” permeates the bilateral relationship between Britain and India, Britain’s former High Commissioner to India said, raising questions about the ability of the two countries to forge a closer relationship in the wake of Brexit. When it came to India, the British government “doesn’t have a strategy,” said Sir Richard Stagg, who was High Commissioner in New Delhi between 2007 and 2011, adding that rather than involving a joined up approach, “random interventions” were made by individuals within the British government that were “inevitably ineffective”.

Pointing to India’s concerns around Britain’s relationship with Pakistan, the recent efforts of the Indian government to extradite high net worth individuals such as Vijay Mallya back to the country (and reports that Nirav Modi may have sought asylum in Britain), and the recent row over student visas, Mr. Stagg, warned that the U.K. government had to “internalise” the reality of India’s shifting priorities, and recognise the areas where it sought cooperation, if it were to further the relationship. Not only is the U.K. quite a small dot but the U.K. government is also very distracted by other issues... the disjoint makes it very difficult to get the relationship working on shared interest and trust.

Among the key obstacles, he said were the perception in India that Britain was “too supportive” of Pakistan, and concerns about the impact of Britain’s visa regime. He also pointed to the growing perception in Indian government circles that the British were “not doing as much as they could or should to facilitate” the return of high net-worth “Bollygarchs” who had sought refuge in the U.K., though also noted there was little the British government could do on this count because most cases were within the judicial system.

Mr. Stagg, who had spent four and a half years working on the EU-India Free Trade Agreement while High Commissioner, also raised questions about Britain’s ability to forge a trade agreement with India. “The country that has been most difficult with the issues was the U.K.,” he said of the EU-India FTA negotiations, pointing to British demands around opening up of financial and legal services in India, and its opposition to India’s visa and mobility demands as part of any agreement.

Parliamentary panel to probe U.K.-India relations

A British parliamentary committee is looking into relations between Britain and India - including the impact of Britain's visa regime - as part of a wider examination of the future of "Global Britain". The inquiry comes at a time when tensions between the two countries have heightened amid Indian concerns about the U.K.'s reluctance to ease visa norms for students and professionals.

The committee will look at the issue of bilateral trade as well as the impact of Britain's visa policy, and cooperation on regional security, counterterrorism, technology, innovation and multilateral institutions. While India acknowledged that there are overstayers, it contested the scale of the problem. "I am sure there are many [overstayers] but where did this figure of 1,00,000 come from?" asked High Commissioner Y.K. Sinha in June 2018.

India rejects U.K. proposal on DNA tests for ‘illegal migrants

Govt. refuses to sign the pact citing ‘privacy issues’

India rejected a proposal by the U.K. to use DNA sampling to establish the nationality of illegal migrants living there citing privacy issues. Although a MoU on return of illegal migrants was initiated after due

approval of the Union Cabinet. As per the original MoU, security agencies in India were to verify the antecedents of illegal migrants without documents in the U.K. within 72 days and those with documents within 15 days. If no report was given within the stipulated time frame, the illegal migrant would be deported automatically.

DNA Sampling is unethical

The U.K. authorities have earlier suggested that the nationality of document-less illegal migrants suspected to be Indians could be established by matching DNA samples of their family members living here. India raised objections as this was a breach of privacy and unethical. According to the British government's estimates, there are around 1,00,000 Indians overstaying their visa in the U.K. India has contested this and said that as per their estimate, the number will not be more than 2,000.

Twists and turns

In January, Union Cabinet approved the contents of a MoU on "return of illegal migrants" to be signed with U.K. The pact was expected to be signed during the visit of PM to London, but it was not included in the official list of business. As per the original MoU, the security agencies in India were to verify the antecedents of document less illegal migrants in the U.K within 72 days and those with documents within 15 days. India pulled out of the pact citing the time frame was not feasible.

U.K. group slams Indian IT firms

A lobbying group, which pushes for greater curbs on Britain's immigration regime, has accused multinational IT companies, "typically based in India", of exploiting a "gaping" loophole in Britain's immigration system, and has called for the system to be overhauled. In a report published, Migration Watch said a small number of multinational IT companies were exploiting a system intended to post senior executives to and from the U.K. to bring thousands of migrant workers to fulfil contracts with private and public sector organisations.

This is known as third-party contracting and usually involves an international IT company, typically based in India, obtaining a contract to deliver a project or support services to a U.K. entity and then staffing it with workers from the company's home country. Though part of the Tier 2 visa category, intra-company transfers (ICTs) are not subject to a cap, and have over time represented an increasing share of the Tier 2 work visas. About 58,000 of 94,000 Tier 2 work permits issued in 2017 were via the ICT route, the group said. It accused the companies of undercutting British competitors and "reducing" opportunities for British IT professionals to work and develop skills. Trade body TechUK rejected the suggestion that international talent was cutting U.K. domestic skills. "Last year, there were more unfilled vacancies in IT than any other sector," said deputy CEO of TechUK.

Indians to be hit by U.K. immigration plan

Indian citizens and other non-EU citizens will have the same immigration rights as EU citizens in the U.K., under a system that will give priority to high skilled workers. However, the new system will introduce even further restrictions on the ability of Indian workers and their families to come to the U.K., requiring any family to be sponsored by the employer. The move would be the biggest shake-up of Britain's immigration system in decades.

Britain will end "freedom of movement once and for all", Ms. May told delegates, referring to the system which is a fundamental principle of the EU, and which allows its citizens to look for a job in other member countries, work there without a permit, reside there and stay on even after employment has ended. "It will be a

skills-based system where it is workers' skills that matter, not where they come from. It will be a system that looks across the globe and attracts the people with the skills we need."

However, successful applicants would be able to bring their immediate family only if they were sponsored by future employers, thereby increasing the potential costs of businesses and putting further obstacles in the way of people being able to bring their families to the U.K. Under the existing system, employees are able to bring family members with them if they meet certain criteria, including crossing a certain salary threshold.

Indians top list of overstayers in U.K.

India accounts for the largest number of individuals staying in the U.K. illegally, and the number of those subjected to forced returns to India has fallen by 50% in three years. The problem of "visa overstayers" was highlighted by the department in its submission to a British parliamentary committee's "Global Britain and India" inquiry into post-Brexit relations with India.

The focus on overstayers is significant, suggesting that there is little sign of change on an issue that has overshadowed bilateral relationships. Tensions came to a head earlier this year when Britain's Trade Secretary Liam Fox linked the decision on excluding Indians from a relaxation of student visa requirements to cooperation between the two countries on the return of illegal migrants, including India's failure to sign an MOU with the U.K. on the issue during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in April.

Subsequently, Indian High Commissioner Y.K. Sinha questioned Britain's focus and stance on overstayers. "I am sure there are many [overstayers] but where did this figure of 100,000 come from. Backing his concerns, the think tank Chatham House, in its submission to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry, pointed to Britain's visa regime for Indians as one of the key impediments to its relationship and highlighted U.K.'s emphasis on overstayers.

U.K. to test immigration proposals in India

British officials are set to test India's reaction to proposals for a new post-Brexit immigration system unveiled in December 2018. The immigration plans aim to create a level playing field for EU and non-EU workers, basing immigration opportunities on skills levels rather than which part of the world workers have come from. The government has positioned the new planned immigration system as a positive one for partners such as India.

Among the changes proposed are the removal of the current annual cap on the number of Tier 2 visas for skilled workers, as well as the requirement that employers demonstrate that they attempted to fill the role domestically before bringing in a person from abroad (the resident labour market test). The government will also allow international students six months after they graduate to find permanent skilled work and work temporarily during that period, while PhD graduates will have a whole year to do so.

There will be no post-study visa, however, as many student and university bodies have been lobbying for. The government has also said it is to consult on the salary threshold for the skilled visas which has been the subject of much debate in the U.K. While the Migration Advisory Committee has recommended setting it at £30,000 a year, business groups and others have warned this would leave businesses unable to access key skills at a time particularly crucial for the country. India has, however, raised concerns about Britain's immigration approach, including the focus given to those overstaying their visa, which India believes is given attention by the U.K. beyond levels it should be.

In 2018, the FCO warned in a submission to a parliamentary inquiry, that India accounts for the largest number of individuals staying in the U.K. illegally, and the number of those subjected to forced returns to

India has fallen by 50% in three years. Britain also faced criticism for failing to include India in a relaxation of student documentation requirements that were extended to other countries, including China. The discussions next week will focus on the issues in the white paper, rather than some of these outstanding concerns, which will be the subject of further bilateral discussions in the future.

Ahead of ‘Khalistan rally’ in London, India announces Guru Nanak celebration

Hours ahead of the pro-Khalistan rally in London, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj announced that all Indian diplomatic missions would celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of the founder of Sikh faith Guru Nanak. The move is seen as a counter to the rally, organised by a U.S.-based group. In July 2018, India issued a *démarche* over the ‘Khalistani rally,’ intended to drum up support for a non-binding referendum in 2020 for an independent Sikh nation.

The British government, however, said people had a right to gather and express their views, provided they did so within the law. The pro-Khalistan rally, and a counter-rally to support India, took place in Trafalgar Square, amid tight security. The rallies come in the wake of the controversy over the shredding of an Indian flag on Parliament Square during Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit earlier in 2018, for which the police had faced criticism for not intervening early enough. Guru Granth Sahib is the only holy book in the world which apart from the ten gurus of Sikh faith also contains messages (*vaanis*) of other learned saints and great souls (belonging to other faiths).

Tea Trade in England.

The Indian Tea Association announces [in London] that the Food Ministry has arranged that licences shall be freely issued for private import of tea provided that no portion of the tea is sold for home consumption and at least fifty percent of importations are offered to Food Ministry. Subject to grades, FOB prices will be as follows: India and Ceylon will be equivalent to present contract prices. Java Sumatra and Nyassa land will be analogous to Indian contract prices.

China and Formosa prices will be determined by Food Ministry in consultation with the trade within the limits of eight pence for fair common leaf to two shillings for the finest tea at the present rate of exchange on the basis that FOB costs, and prices will be paid by Food Ministry for their purchases of three million pounds. Tea not taken by the Ministry will be free for re-export without limitation of price subject to export restrictions. Quantities of tea which are at present available for re-export to blockaded countries are very small.

Hundreds of Indians confirmed as UK citizens under government’s Windrush scheme

Why in news?

More than 450 Indians have confirmed their British citizenship under the government’s ‘Windrush Scheme’, set up in the wake of an immigration scandal last year. In an update to Parliament, Home Secretary Sajid Javid said at least 455 Indians confirmed their nationality as British under the scheme

Windrush scandal

Windrush scandal or Windrush Generation is in news often. It deals with scandal over the ill treatment of Caribbean and other Commonwealth nationals by UK’s tough immigration policy. Windrush generation were migrants from the Commonwealth Caribbean who came to Britain before 1973 (1971 legislation no longer gave them automatic settlement after that date).

INDIA AND NORWAY

MoU on India-Norway Ocean Dialogue

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Norway on India-Norway Ocean Dialogue.

Benefits

The MoU will promote cooperation in the areas of mutual interest pertaining to the development of blue economy. Norway is a global leader in the area of Blue Economy and has cutting-edge technologies and expertise in areas such as fisheries, hydrocarbons, renewable energy, sustainable harnessing of ocean resources and maritime transport. The proposed MoU will contribute to create opportunities for collaboration in areas such as exploitation of hydrocarbons and other marine resources, as well as management of ports and tourism development for the mutual benefit of all stakeholders within the framework of the Joint Task Force (JTF). It will contribute to the objective of Food Security through infusion of new technologies in fisheries and aquaculture. It will further offer a platform for businesses in both countries to execute profitable ventures. Scientists and researchers may collaborate on studying ocean ecosystem also in the context of the Arctic region.



Norway streets grow quieter

As countries around the world, including China, the world's biggest auto market try to encourage more people to buy electric cars to fight climate change, Norway's success has one key driver — the government. It offered big subsidies and perks that it is now due to phase out, but only so long as electric cars remain attractive to buy compared with traditional ones. Some 30% of all new cars sport plug-in cables rather than gasoline tanks, compared with 2% across Europe overall and 1-2% in the U.S.

The plan supports Norway's CO₂ reduction targets under the 2015 Paris climate accord, which nations agreed to ensure emissions goals are met. Norway has pledged to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 40% by 2030, compared with 1990 levels. To help sales, the Norwegian government waived hefty vehicle import duties and registration and sales taxes for buyers of electric cars. Owners don't have to pay road tolls, and get free use of ferries and bus lanes in congested city centres.

These perks, which are costing the government almost \$1 billion this year, are being phased out in 2021, though any road tolls and fees would be limited to half of what gasoline car owners must pay. Gradually, subsidies for electric cars will be replaced by higher taxes on traditional cars. Using taxes to encourage consumers to shift to cleaner energy can be tricky for a government as protests erupted in France this autumn over a fuel tax that hurt the livelihood of poorer families, especially in rural areas, where driving is often the only means of transportation.

India and Norway launch initiative to combat Marine Pollution

India and Norway has signed a letter of intent establishing the India-Norway Marine Pollution Initiative. The initiative aims to combat marine pollution- one of the fastest growing environmental concerns in 21st century.

It envisages

- support to local governments in implementing sustainable waste management practices,
- develop systems for examining sources and scope of marine pollution,

- improve private sector investment to combat marine pollution,
- promote beach clean-up efforts and e) mass awareness campaigns.

It is the first joint initiative under the MoU between India and Norway on India-Norway Ocean Dialogue, signed in January 2019. MoU on India- Norway Ocean Dialogue provides for

- create opportunities for collaboration in areas such as exploitation of hydrocarbons and other marine resources,
- management of ports and tourism development,
- increase Food Security through infusion of new technologies in fisheries and aquaculture and
- study ocean ecosystem.

UNITED KINGDOM

U.K. told to release Blue Star papers

The British government has a month to appeal a decision by a U.K. information tribunal requiring it to declassify a number of documents relating to British involvement in the run-up to the 1984 Operation Blue Star. Campaigners in Britain said they hoped the judgment would strengthen calls from the U.K. Sikh community for a public inquiry into the U.K.'s role in the operation.

The judgment upheld an appeal by a freedom of information campaigner relating to three of four files which the U.K. government has resisted declassifying, requiring these to be published by July 12, 2018. The Cabinet Office is obliged under Section 1 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to disclose certain parts of the files. It rejected the government's use of exemptions relating to national security, international relations and personal information. The activities of Sikh separatists continue to represent a potential existential threat to the State of India as well as the continuing reverence with which the Gandhi family are seen by many. However, the judgement noted how documents that were released in error in 2014 had not triggered an adverse reaction from India, rejecting the British government's contention that the release of information would damage bilateral relations.

Bilateral relations

The Judge also rejected the argument by one of the U.K. government witnesses that releasing the documents would damage bilateral relations by showing that the U.K. government did not regard the activities of Sikh extremists with sufficient concern and was soft on them. During hearings held earlier this year, counsel for the Cabinet Office sought to argue against the documents being made public on the ground that they related to discussions involving intelligence services and that issues around separatism continued to be viewed as a threat to the existence of the Indian state and were of the highest sensitivity.

Operation Blue Star

It was an Indian military operation which occurred between 1 June and 8 June 1984, ordered by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in order to establish control over the Harmandir Sahib Complex in Amritsar, Punjab, and remove militant religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his militant armed followers from the complex buildings. The operation had two components—Operation Metal, confined to the Harmandir Sahib complex, and Operation Shop, which raided the Punjabi countryside to capture any suspects.

Following it, Operation Woodrose was launched in the Punjab countryside where Sikhs, specifically those carrying a kirpan and protesting, were targeted. The military action led to an uproar amongst Sikhs worldwide and the increased tension following the action led to assaults on members of the Sikh community within India. The operation is criticised on four main grounds: the choice of time of attack by Government, the heavy casualties, the loss of property, and allegations of human rights violations by Army personnel.

Theresa May says Britain will not compromise over Brexit plan

Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May said she would not compromise with Brussels over her plans for Brexit as a media report said rivals in her party were set to publish their own proposal calling for a cleaner break with the European Union. With under two months before Britain and the EU want to agree a deal to end over 40 years of union, Ms. May is struggling to sell what she calls her business-friendly Brexit to her own party and across a divided country. The EU has tentatively welcomed what has become known as the Chequers plan which is designed to protect cross-border trade, but difficult negotiations lie ahead.

The plan would keep Britain in a free trade zone with the EU for manufactured and agricultural goods. But some Brexit supporters have said that would mean parts of the British economy would still be subject to rules set in Brussels. Two of Ms. May's most senior lawmakers — Boris Johnson and David Davis — quit as Foreign Secretary and Brexit Secretary respectively in July in protest at Ms. May's plan, saying it did not go far enough and would let down the millions of people who voted to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum.

May hits back at EU, says govt. won't alter Brexit offer

British Prime Minister Theresa May said her government would not alter its Brexit offer, as she hit back at the rejection of her so-called Chequers Plan by EU leaders. She insisted that the EU's demand that Britain remain in the European Economic Area and customs union would "make a mockery" of Britain's 2016 referendum. The other option being presented by Europe, which would involve a basic free trade agreement, would maintain a hard border in Ireland and was unworkable, unacceptable and could never be agreed to by any British Prime Minister.

Following the two-day summit in the Austrian city of Salzburg, European Commission President Donald Tusk said Ms. May's proposals – dubbed the Chequers Plan after the Prime Ministerial retreat at which they were forged over the summer – which would keep Britain closely aligned to the EU's single market on agriculture and goods (but not services) via a common rule book "will not work" because it risked undermining the single market. The People's Vote campaign set out six scenarios in which a second public vote could be called, including through the rejection in Parliament of the deal negotiated with the EU, or if no deal had been reached by January 21.

My deal, no deal or no Brexit at all

Parliament's vote on British Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal will go ahead on December 11, despite a newspaper report that Ministers had sought a delay to prevent a defeat. The British Parliament is mid-way through a five-day debate on the Brexit deal, ahead of the vote which will define Britain's departure from the EU and could determine Ms. May's future as leader. "There are three options: one is to leave the European Union with a deal... the other two are that we leave without a deal or that we have no Brexit at all," she said. In one potential concession, she said she recognised that there were concerns among the MPs about the 'Northern Irish backstop' and she was looking at whether Parliament could be given a greater role in deciding whether to trigger it.

No more Brexit negotiations: Merkel

German leader Angela Merkel ruled out further negotiations on Brexit but said efforts were being made to give the U.K. reassurances after Prime Minister Theresa May abruptly pulled a vote at home because she faced defeat. With less than four months left until the United Kingdom is due to leave the EU on March 29,

Ms. May's Brexit deal is floundering, opening up prospects that run the gamut from a disorderly no-deal divorce to calling Brexit off.

Meet with EU leaders

A day after pulling the parliamentary vote in the face of ridicule from lawmakers, Ms. May rushed to The Hague for breakfast with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and then to Berlin to meet Chancellor Merkel before a trip to Brussels. The message from the EU was clear: it will give assurances about how it will interpret the exit treaty, but will not countenance reopening the text itself.

In rainy Berlin, a hitch with Ms. May's car door briefly trapped her inside, delaying her red carpet handshake with Ms. Merkel. According to two sources, Ms. Merkel told her own German conservative parliamentary group on Tuesday that there would be no further negotiations on Brexit but efforts were being made to give Britain reassurances. Ms. May had informed Ms. Merkel that the deal would have been voted down, and that it was in nobody's interest for Britain to leave with no accord, the sources said. The deal we achieved is the best possible. It's the only deal possible. There is no room whatsoever for renegotiation.

British women celebrate 100 years of right to vote

Why in news?

June 10, 2018 marked 100 years since the first women won the right to vote in Britain.

Background

The Representation of the People Act, 1918 granted property-owning British women over age 30 the right to vote.

EUROPE

Greece, Macedonia close to deal on name dispute

Why in news?

The Republic of Macedonia recently voted to change their country's name to the "Republic of North Macedonia".

What is the source of the dispute?

Macedonia broke away from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and declared independence. The country measures a little over 25,000 sq km, and has a population just over 2 million. A region of Greece bordering the Macedonian republic is also called Macedonia. Hence, Greece, being the neighbouring country, has objected to the adoption of this name and insisted that the name apply only to the Greek region. Greece also raised concerns that the adoption of this name implies the Macedonian republic's territorial aspirations over the northern region of Greece.

Consequently, the Greeks have been blocking the Macedonian republic's entry to NATO and EU membership. Greece's objections also forced the United Nations to refer to Macedonia as the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Since 1991, many suggestions have been proposed and then rejected. But a change of government in Macedonia in 2017 finally led to the deal reached last year. Under the proposed agreement, the country's language will be called Macedonian and its people known as Macedonians (citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia). Also, under the deal, Greece said it would drop its objection to the neighbouring country's entry into the EU and NATO if the changes are formally adopted. The new name will be used both internationally and bilaterally, so that even the 140 or more countries that recognise the name Macedonia will also have to adopt North Macedonia.

What is the consequence?

Though Macedonia voted in favour of the name change, the Greek Parliament still needs to vote. However, this will likely prove no easy task given how deeply divisive the issue remains in Greece. However, NATO and European leaders have welcomed the move. NATO strongly supports the full implementation of the agreement, which is an important contribution to a stable and prosperous region. Thus, Political leaders and citizens alike have shown their determination to seize this unique and historic opportunity in solving one of the oldest disputes in the region.

Greece ratify Macedonia name change deal

Greek lawmakers ratified an agreement to end a nearly three decade-long dispute over neighbouring Macedonia's name, a landmark vote intended to clear the small country that will be renamed North Macedonia on the path to NATO membership. The deal passed with 153 votes in the 300-member Greek Parliament, two more than needed.

It had faced fierce opposition and cost Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras his parliamentary majority after a right-wing partner in the governing coalition quit in protest. Tsipras' left-wing Syriza party holds 145 seats in parliament; independent lawmakers provided the votes needed for ratification.

Under the deal, Macedonia changes its name to North Macedonia and Greece will drop its objections to the country joining NATO and eventually the European Union. Greece has long argued use of the term Macedonia implied territorial claims on its own northern province of the same name.

The issue has been a contentious one for decades, and has whipped up nationalist and patriotic sentiment in both countries. Opposition was particularly fierce in the northern Greek region of Macedonia, which borders the former Yugoslav republic that claimed the same name after declaring independence in 1991. Critics claimed the deal signs away their identity and a cultural heritage dating back to Alexander the Great more than 2,300 years ago.

Greece emerges from eurozone bailout

Why in news?

Greece recently celebrated its exit from bailout plans that commenced in 2010. Nonetheless, some imminent risks persist, which Greece needs to handle.

What is the context of Greece's Bailout?

Recently, Greek PM Alexis announced the end of Greece's third and final of the multiple bailouts since 2010, that helped the country avoid a financial collapse. During the 8 year period since 2010, Greece borrowed over \$330 billion from multiple lenders - IMF, European Commission and European Central Bank. In return, Greece undertook structural reforms, submitting itself to a controversial and painful austerity programme. Notably, during that phase, Greek economy shrunk by a quarter, unemployment was at 28%, and government spending was slashed heavily. Further, salaries and pensions of employees were also cut, and hundreds of thousands of Greeks emigrated and a third of the country fell into poverty.

What are the other aspects that haunt Greece?

While Greece has sailed through the bailouts and is looking optimistically towards the future, the path ahead is far from clear. Greece owes a staggering 180% of GDP in debt and also, and has also agreed for stringent budgeting conditions to its lenders for getting bailed out. Notably, Greece will now need to maintain a 3.5% primary surplus (a budget surplus prior to interest payments) until 2022 and then around 2% until 2060. IMF has warned that such budget surpluses are rare and is especially challenging for a country with an ageing population. Further, with the country just emerging out after a decade of economic strife, maintaining such

high budgetary surpluses might impact its growth potential. This in turn might affect Greece's ability pay off its debt.

What are the pending reforms?

Many reforms were taken up during the bailout period, but a lot else remains to be done – like greater flexibility in the labour market. Simplified licensing processes for companies and banking reforms to reduce non-performing assets (NPA) on bank's balance sheets are other areas. Notably, almost half of all outstanding loans of banks are now NPAs. Further, the existing tax base needs to be reorganised to ensure that the bulk of the burden doesn't fall on the middle classes as it now does.

How does the future look?

Greece's Euro zone creditors agreed in June to a softening of debt repayment terms, including extended maturity periods. Delayed interest payments and buffer funds to stabilise and ease the country's re-entry into financial markets are also being mulled over. Despite all this, the IMF has cautioned that Greece is at risk of getting stuck in a debt trap with onerous surplus conditions having to be maintained. These conditions imply restraints on government spending programmes that could, for instance, be used to stimulate growth. The country's creditors need to consider reducing the mountain of debt, so Greece stands a solid chance of emerging out completely from its downfall.

Ireland to hold international conference of female parliamentarians

Named "The International Congress of Parliamentary Women's Caucuses" will be held at Dublin Castle on September 9-10 and the event will be attended by an estimated 300 delegates from over 27 countries. The conference is organised by the Irish Women's Parliamentary Caucus (IWPC), a cross-party forum for female parliamentarians within the Irish parliament.

EUROPEAN UNION

EU holds emergency talks over migration

European Union (EU) leaders headed to Brussels for emergency talks over migration as Italy's new populist Cabinet turned away another rescue ship, vowing no longer to shoulder Europe's migrant burden. The talks involving 16 of the bloc's 28 leaders aim to mend rifts over burden sharing. With four eastern anti-migrant EU countries snubbing the meeting, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other leaders have downplayed hopes of an EU-wide agreement, saying smaller ad-hoc deals may be the only way forward.

Rescue vessel

The urgency of finding a solution was highlighted by the plight of the Lifeline, the second rescue vessel left adrift in the Mediterranean after Italy and neighbouring Malta refused it permission to dock. The German charity operating the ship, which is carrying 239 Africans, took a swipe at Italy's far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini over his reference in a Facebook post to its consignment of "human flesh". In a sign of the growing tensions within the EU, French President Emmanuel Macron suggested that countries who refused to pull their weight on accepting asylum seekers should have their EU benefits cut.

He also riled Italy by saying that the migration emergency, which peaked in 2015, had passed and was now mainly a political issue. The immigration emergency continues in Italy, partly because France keeps pushing back people at the border.

EU to scrap time change rule

The European Union (EU) said that it would propose a legal change that would end the ritual of switching between summer and winter time, leaving it up to governments across the bloc to agree on whether to permanently use summer time or winter time. The proposal comes after a survey found that 84% of 4.6 million citizens across the EU's 28 member states opposed changing the clocks ahead in the summer or back in the winter.

In response, the EU's chief executive, Jean-Claude Juncker, said Brussels would propose scrapping an EU law requiring member states to change their clocks. Millions believe that summertime should be all the time. Since 1996, EU law has been moving clocks forward an hour on the last Sunday in March and back an hour on the final Sunday in October.

The proposal would drop that requirement, a spokesman said. He rebuffed suggestions that would lead to confusing variations in keeping time from one country to the next. Critics of the clock change say it can cause long-term health problems, especially among young children and elderly people. Supporters say making the switch to give extra morning daylight in winter and evening light in summer can help reduce traffic accidents and save energy. Any change would need approval from national governments and European Parliament to become law — a process that can take up to two years.

U.K., EU agree on Brexit agreement draft

Why in news?

The European Union and the United Kingdom have reached on a draft divorce agreement on Britain's exit from the EU.

What is Brexit?

In 2016, Brexit was announced in Britain after the referendum for exiting the European Union. This decision was taken due to various reasons such as –

- Limited space for Britain to negotiate trade agreements with non-EU nations.
- The trade deals with EU are more than the terms that can be made by UK with other countries.

After the referendum, the UK and EU provisionally agreed to settle financial, strategic and political issues over a transition period of 21 months.

What does the latest draft contain?

Britain will formally exit the EU on March 29, 2019, at which point it will cease to be involved at any level in EU decision-making. However, the UK will stay inside the bloc's single market and remain subject to EU laws and regulations until the end of December 2020 while the two sides attempt to iron out a new trade relationship. During this period, all existing EU "regulatory, budgetary, supervisory, judiciary and enforcement instruments and structures" will continue to apply within the UK, including rulings made in the Court of Justice of the EU. In effect, the transition period provides the two parties with additional time in which to continue negotiations. The transition period can be extended, by joint agreement before July 1, 2020, for an unspecified period of time if the negotiations need to be continued.

Ireland is an island to the west of Britain and has two major regions (north and south) with distinct demographic features. "Protestant majority Northern Ireland" (a U.K. territory) and "Catholic majority Irish Republic" (an independent country in the south), have had serious ethnic tensions within and between them. Since Irish Republic is an EU member, a porous border with it would mean a porous border with EU, which is not wanted by the pro-leave group in U.K. Thus it is agreed that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, at least in the short term.

If the transition period extends beyond 2020, the draft deal commits both parties to a single customs territory between the EU and the United Kingdom. The customs union would remove all tariffs, checks on rules of origin and quotas, and would cover all goods except fishery products. While part of the customs union, the UK will be bound by all EU international trade agreements. This would mean that countries outside the EU, such as the United States and China, would have access to the UK market under conditions set out in the EU's trade agreements. This provision can only be removed through the agreement of both parties, essentially preventing the UK from exiting the customs union without the approval of the EU.

Under the draft agreement, entities established in the United Kingdom shall be treated as entities located outside the Union by the EU after the deal. This will give London's vast financial centre only a basic level of access to the bloc's markets after Brexit. Currently, inside the EU, banks and insurers in Britain enjoy unfettered access to customers across the bloc in all financial activities. After Brexit, Britain would get only a similar level of access to the EU as major U.S. and Japanese firms, while tying it to many EU finance rules for years to come. This can potentially jeopardize London's attractiveness to international financial companies.

The draft document provides protections for the more than 3 million EU citizens in the UK, and over one million UK nationals in EU countries to continue to live, work or study as they currently do. Crucially, no exit visa, entry visa or equivalent formality shall be required of holders of a valid document issued for EU and UK nationals when crossing national borders within the bloc.

The UK will honor all existing joint commitments to EU programs as outlined in the EU budget until 2020. Under this, Britain agrees to cover contributions to staff pensions and commitments to EU programs the U.K. made while a member for the funding period that runs to 2020.

Where does India's interests lie?

The best-case scenario now is that Britain gets the draft bill through Parliament and then struggle with the complex nitty-gritty of the deal. Alternatively, Britain can crash out of the EU without a deal itself, which could affect everything from airline flights to food imports. A second referendum on leaving the EU is out of the question but that is looking increasingly likely as the other options are unable to find a permanent solution. For India, Brexit matters because London is the financial capital of the world and the bridgehead into Europe for many Indian companies. Hence for India, a second referendum that keeps Britain in the EU would be the best option.

EU, U.K. reach draft deal on post-Brexit relationship

The British government's Brexit process reached another milestone as the European Commission said that the U.K. and the EU had agreed at a negotiator level and in principle the draft political declaration on the future relationship between the two sides. In a summit on 25 November 2018, EU leaders are set to finalise details of both the exit process and outline of future relations.

Unlike the withdrawal agreement, which would be binding, the political declaration is more of a statement of future ambitions of what a new relationship — including when it comes to the movement of people and goods and services — would entail. Controversy over the terms of the withdrawal agreement led to several ministerial resignations and letters of no confidence in the Prime Minister, though an initiative to oust her through formal party processes appears to have been abandoned for now, for want of support from backbench MPs.

“The political declaration confirms that Britain is heading for a hard Brexit — if it can solve the Irish border problem and avoid the backstop... The language is warm but the message is brutal,” said Tom Kibasi, director

of the IPPR think tank. “It merely promises years of negotiations to an unknown destination,” said Anna Soubry, a Conservative MP and campaigner for a second referendum. However, the declaration appeared to live up to one point repeatedly stressed by U.K. authorities: their intention to end free movement and bring in “visa-free travel” for short visits only.

Ireland to seek EU aid over Brexit

Ireland will seek hundreds of millions of euros in aid from Brussels if Britain crashes out of the EU without a deal, the Agriculture Minister was quoted as saying. The emergency aid would aim to buttress sectors such as beef, dairy and fishing — those most exposed to customs and regulatory changes likely to arise if Britain severs all ties. Nearly 80% of Irish exporters deliver products to Britain, according to 2016 government figures.

INDIA AND CYPRUS

India, Cyprus vow to curb money laundering

Why in news?

India to sign agreement on money laundering and in the field of environment with Cyprus, India is the fastest growing major economy in the world with the rate of 8.2% in the third quarter. Cyprus has the niche (uniquely specific) expertise in financial services and investment banking which can provide much scope for deepen investment partnership. Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement was revised in 2016, which led to the expansion of opportunities for the investment ties between the two countries. Memorandum of Understanding has now been signed between Financial Intelligence Unit, India and Unit for Combating Money Laundering of Cyprus. It seeks to further strengthening the institutional framework to facilitate investment cross-flows. Mr. Kovind also held discussion on the prospects of promoting business collaboration in the field of IT and IT-enabled services, tourism, shipping and renewable energy. They not only reviewed bilateral ties but also their multi-lateral engagements on global issues.

INDIA AND FRANCE

India, France in talks to conduct tri-service exercise

Why in news?

India and France are in discussion for a bilateral tri service military exercise to take forward the strategic cooperation while also exploring ways to operationalise the logistics agreement. The tri services will likely be held next year. This will be India’s third such joint exercise. India has conducted first joint tri service exercise with Russia in October 2017. It has finalised second joint tri service exercise with USA to be held next year.

India and France currently hold bilateral exercises between individual services and are

- Shakti:- between Indian Army and French Army
- Varuna:- between Indian Navy and French Navy
- Garuda:- between Indian Air Force and French Air Force

Purpose of Joint Military exercises

Joint exercises are generally done by nations who share a similar strategic view with respect to an emerging threat. Its main purpose is

- To ensure the combat readiness of the garrisoned or the deployable forces.
- To build alliances with friendly countries.
- To test our communications, our planning, our decision-making, and our thinking.
- To show case their military strengths
- To make relation with other military forces of the world etc.

India, France review pact to build nuclear reactors

India and France reviewed the progress of a preliminary pact to build six nuclear power plants producing 10 gigawatts of energy to power Asia's third-largest economy. Le Drian's two-day visit comes a day after the Supreme Court ruled on Friday that it found no evidence of wrongdoing in the government's decision-making process to procure 36 Rafale aircraft from French company Dassault Aviation. The court also rejected petitions for an investigation into the ₹ 59,000 crore deal.

During talks, the two sides also agreed to "launch projects together in Africa, particularly in the area of sustainable development in connection with the International Solar Alliance (ISA). The ISA was launched by French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a summit earlier this year.

According to Le Drian, the six nuclear power reactors that France is planning to construct at Jaitapur in Maharashtra will "account for a total capacity of almost 10 GW, which is a significant contribution to India's aim of producing 40% of its electricity from non-fossil fuels by 2030, in keeping with its commitments made ahead of the Paris Climate Conference." The Jaitapur project will also contribute to Make in India as it involves transfers of production, technology, joint research and training.

France to Adopt International Definition of Anti-Semitism

The French government will adopt an international organization's definition of anti-Semitism and propose a law to reduce hate speech from being circulated online, French President Emmanuel Macron said. Macron, speaking at the annual dinner of a Jewish organization, said France and other parts of Europe have seen in recent years "a resurgence of anti-Semitism that is probably unprecedented since World War II."

Since the inter-governmental organization approved the wording in 2016, some critics of Israel have said it could be used to suppress Palestinian rights activists. The definition states anti-Semitism can take the form of "denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour."

Anti-Zionism is one of the modern forms of anti-Semitism," the French leader said in Paris at the dinner of Jewish umbrella organization CRIF. "Behind the negation of Israel's existence, what is hiding is the hatred of Jews." Macron mentioned anti-Semitism based on "radical Islamism" as a rampant ideology in France's multi-ethnic, poor neighbourhoods. Macron's speech came a day after thousands of people attended rallies across France to decry an uptick in anti-Semitic acts in recent months. On Tuesday morning, about 80 gravestones spray-painted with swastikas were discovered in a cemetery in a small village of eastern France. French President Emmanuel Macron observed a moment of silence Tuesday with parliament leaders at the Holocaust museum in Paris.

The Paris prosecutor's office said Wednesday that a man has been arrested over a torrent of hate speech directed at Jewish philosopher Alain Finkielkraut during a Saturday march by yellow vest protesters. The insults included words like "Zionist!" and "Go back to Tel Aviv!" and "We are France!" The man was taken into custody Tuesday evening after a police inquiry was opened into a suspected public insult based on origin, ethnicity, nation, race or religion.

In other incidents this month, swastika graffiti was found on street portraits of Simone Veil, a survivor of Nazi death camps and a European Parliament president who died in 2017, the word "Juden" was painted on the window of a bagel restaurant in Paris and two trees planted at a memorial honoring a young Jewish man tortured to death in 2006 were vandalized. "That's our failure", Macron said.

INDIA AND ITALY**MoU for continuing training and education in the fields of Labour and Employment***Why in news?*

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between India and Italy for training and education in the fields of Labour and Employment.

Benefits

- The MoU will facilitate expansion of the training and education activities to promote decent work in the world of work, through:
 - conducting joint training programmes on training methodologies and techniques;
 - developing new training modules for different social partners;
 - organizing customized training programmes in different themes on labour and employment;
 - undertaking evaluation of training methodologies;
 - exchanging of good practices in training programmes, particularly in the context of labour administration; assisting each other in the delivery and facilitation of the training modules and organizing study visits; and
 - exchanging of trainers for sharing of knowledge and information.



MISCELLANEOUS

Exemption from charging commercial rates for the plot of land

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved an exemption from charging commercial rates at the time of acquisition for the plot No. 31-B, measuring 2800 sq. meter in Chanakyapuri, Diplomatic Area to the Fijian High Commission in New Delhi and to extend the same terms and conditions as offered by Fiji for the land offered to the High Commission of India in Suva, Fiji.

Background

In August 2015, Government of Fiji offered a plot of land measuring 6695 sq. meters at a special lease of 99 year period with a rent of FJ \$ 100 per annum to be assessed every 5 years for construction of the High Commission of India in Suva, Fiji and proposed exchange of land on reciprocal basis. Given the special nature of bilateral relations with Fiji, exchange of plots on reciprocal basis by way of exemption from charging commercial rate for the plot of land allotted to High Commission of Fiji has been considered positively.

Proposal for withdrawal of Nalanda University (Amendment) Bill, 2013

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the proposal for withdrawal of Nalanda University (Amendment) Bill, 2013 pending in the Rajya Sabha.

Nalanda University

The Nalanda University was established on the basis of a Joint Press Statement at the 4th East Asia Summit held in Thailand in October, 2009, which supported its establishment as a non-state, non-profit, secular and self-governing international institution. Subsequently, the Nalanda University Act, 2010 was passed by the Parliament and came into effect from 25th November 2010.

The present proposal is for moving a motion in Rajya Sabha withdrawing the Nalanda University (Amendment) Bill, 2013 introduced in Rajya Sabha on August 26, 2013 to amend certain existing provisions of the Nalanda University Act, 2010 and add some new provisions. The Governing Board of Nalanda University has since been constituted as per section 7 of Nalanda University Act, 2010 with effect from 21.11.2016 with the approval of Hon'ble President of India. The Amendment Bill will need to be discussed with the current Governing Board of Nalanda University before a final decision could be taken on going ahead with the proposed amendments. Further, the current Governing Board may also look into the entire Nalanda University Act, 2010 afresh and suggest amendments/additions wherever necessary.

Cabinet approves creation of two posts equivalent to Joint Secretary level

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi has approved the creation of two posts equivalent to Joint Secretary level in the Interpreters' cadre of the Ministry of External Affairs. The decision will help in augmenting expertise of the Interpreters' cadre and help meet the specialized requirements for training of the Interpreters. This measure would be important in addressing the increasing requirements for interpretation in the backdrop of significantly enhanced high-level bilateral and multilateral engagements of the Government of India globally.

Cabinet approves Introduction of Registration of Marriage of NRI Bill 2019

Why in news?

The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the introduction of Registration of Marriage of Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Bill, 2019, for creating more accountability and offering more protection against exploitation of Indian citizens, mostly women by their NRI spouses.

Details

The Bill provides for amendment of the legal framework to act as a deterrent to the erring NRI spouses and creating more accountability and offer protection against exploitation of Indian Citizens married to NRIs. Once the Bill is passed, marriages performed by NRIs would be registered in India or Indian Missions & Posts abroad, and necessary changes would be carried out in the:

- Passports Act, 1967; and
- Code of Criminal Procedure 1973 by insertion of Section 86A.

Major Impact

Serving Judicial summons for Court proceedings in India is a major problem, which would be taken care of by this Bill by amending the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. Thus, the Bill would offer great protection to Indian citizens married to NRIs and serve as a deterrent to NRIs against harassment of their spouses. This Bill would benefit Indian women married to NRIs worldwide.

Sexual abuse 'endemic' in international aid sector

Sexual abuse of vulnerable women and girls by international aid workers is "endemic" and has been happening for years, with perpetrators easily moving around the sector undetected, a UK government report revealed. An inquiry heard "horrifying" stories of aid staff sexually exploiting the people they were meant to be helping, including one homeless girl in Haiti who was given \$1 by a worker for a nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and raped, CNN quoted the report by the House of Commons International Development Committee as saying.

The scathing report comes after historical allegations of harassment and sexual misconduct by employees of several top NGOs, including Oxfam and Save the Children, surfaced earlier this year. Those allegations prompted the Committee to launch the inquiry into abuse in the aid sector in February.

The report noted that sexual misconduct by aid workers and peacekeepers had a "documented history stretching back nearly 20 years". It also recounted the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls between the ages of 13 and 18 by UN and aid agency staff in refugee camps in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone in 2001.

Abuses ranged from unwanted sexual comments to rape. Victims suffered problems including abortions and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. "The power imbalance is predominantly, although not exclusively, men abusing women and girls," said the report, which warned that the cases that had come to light were likely just the "tip of the iceberg".

The committee also criticized aid groups for failing to tackle the problem despite being aware of reports of abuse for years. Repeatedly, reports of sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and/or peacekeepers have emerged, the sector has reacted, but then the focus has faded.

BIS International launches accelerator to nurture Indian start-ups

BIS International Services Ltd, one of the world's largest specialist service providers for outsourcing of visa and consular services, on Tuesday kick-started BIS Accelerator -- a start-up nurturing programme to help

innovative business attain the right mentoring and scale. Delhi-based BIS International plans to invest up to Rs 5 crore in the programme by the end of this year.

BIS Accelerator will support early stage start-ups with up to Rs 50 lakh seed funding, along with mentoring in areas such as technology, upgradation of citizen services, product ideation and development, and go-to-market strategy. Our decision to start BIS Accelerator is a way to support the future Indian business leaders on their initial journey and scale both in India and globally.

For start-ups at growth stage, BIS Accelerator will not only be an investor but also facilitate market exposure to more than 60 countries where BIS International currently operates, the company said in a statement. The first batch, part of the three-month programme, will have five start-ups based on their value proposition, market traction and team credentials. In the next two-three years, BIS Accelerator aims to target investment in more than 100 promising global and Indian start-ups. The vision of BIS Accelerator is to support the Indian businesses leverage BIS International's global and Indian presence and experience and develop global scale and competence.

Can Indian Ocean region power global growth?

The Indian Ocean is often at the centre of geopolitical conflicts, but it can also be central to the global economy. In a new research paper, Ganeshan Wignaraja and others at the Sri Lanka-based Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies analysed the region's economies to show how they could become an engine for global economic growth.

The Indian Ocean's waters reach 28 countries, together accounting for about 35% of the world's population and 19% of the gross domestic product. And given this connection, the Indian Ocean has emerged as an important trading channel. The region also hosts 23 of the world's busiest ports and accounts for 13% of world trade. A significant proportion of this trade is among countries in the region (30% of all exports and 25% of imports). However, this is still lower compared with other regions, such as the European Union and NAFTA. Nevertheless, the authors are optimistic about the region's future.

With increased trade and economic growth, they predict that the region's economy will account for about 22% of world GDP by 2025 and 16% of global trade. However, these projections are susceptible to potential obstacles. The authors highlight gaps in port infrastructure and customs procedures, which can act as barriers to trade. Regional governance is also weak. Currently, there is a network of 11 regional institutions, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association, which covers the majority of Indian Ocean economies, but, according to the authors, they suffer from limited powers and inadequate resources. To ensure that the Indian Ocean economy delivers on its potential, the authors suggest that policymakers invest in port development, reduce barriers to trade, strengthen regional governance and establish an Indian Ocean Development Fund to help developing countries participate in trade.

Google, FB, Twitter are biased

Why in news?

U.S. President Donald Trump took a swipe at America's tech giants, accusing them of having a liberal bias, and claiming that Twitter was making it more difficult for people to follow his account. Mr. Trump is a regular critic of social media and his criticism echoed another attack on Twitter as recently as October, when he again accused the platform of stifling the growth of his account. The Internet firms have consistently denied charges of political bias and many analysts have pointed to large social media followings of conservatives, including Mr. Trump.

True identity

Twitter said in a statement it has been working to weed out accounts that hide a user's true identity or seek to manipulate the platform. "Our focus is on the health of the service, and that includes work to remove fake accounts to prevent malicious behaviour," Twitter said in an emailed statement. "Many prominent accounts have seen follower counts drop, but the result is higher confidence that the followers they have are real, engaged people."

Criticism

The criticism came a day after a report for the Senate revealed Russian agents had used social media in an attempt to sway the 2016 election in Trump's favour. An analysis for the Senate Intelligence Committee described an organised campaign by the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) to hurt Hillary Clinton, the Democratic nominee. Troll accounts marshalled by the organisation had inflamed right-wing conspiracy theories and suppressed the vote of traditionally liberal-leaning groups such as African Americans, the report said. The IRA-created "Blacktivist" account sent out messages such as: "No lives matter to Hillary Clinton. Only votes matter to Hillary Clinton."

Separately, a portion of the 3,841 IRA accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube studied by the researchers sought to provoke Republican-leaning White Americans to get out and vote. The study showed the IRA campaign began in 2015, aiming to mobilise conservative voters, with no specific backing for Mr. Trump at the time.





INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION

BRICS

What it is?

BRICS is an acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. It is originally called as BRIC as South Africa was not included till 2010. The term "BRICS" was coined in 2001 by then-chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, Jim O'Neill. Common characteristics are large, fast-growing economies all developing or newly industrialized countries.

Importance of BRICS

As of 2018, these five nations have a combined nominal GDP of US\$18.6 trillion, about 23.2% of the gross world product, combined GDP (PPP) of around US\$40.55 trillion (32% of World's GDP PPP) and an estimated US\$4.46 trillion in combined foreign reserves.

Summits

1. Yekaterinburg Summit (2009)

Consensus on improving the global economic situation and reforming financial institutions. BRIC nations announced the need for a new global reserve currency, which would have to be "diversified, stable and predictable".

2. Brasilia Summit (2010)

South Africa officially became a member nation. Iran and nuclear weapons, development, the furtherance of the BRIC as an international body, the global economic situation at the time, reform of financial institutions, the financial G20, and cooperation and issues related to global governance.

3. Sanya Summit (2011)

Economics, anti-terror law under UN auspices, United Nations Security Council reform, decision to cease mutual trade payments in U.S. dollars and instead henceforth give credits to one another in their national currencies alone.

4. New Delhi summit (2012)

A proposal to create a joint BRICS development bank that would finance investments in developing nations

5. Durban Summit (2013)

Negotiations for setting up the bank

6. Fortaleza Summit (2014)

Creation of two financial institutions: the New Development Bank (NDB) to finance infrastructure and "sustainable development" projects, with \$50 billion in capital to start with, and the \$100 billion Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), to tide over members in financial difficulties.

7. Ufa Summit (2015)

BRICS Bank

Structure

New Development Bank will have an initial subscribed capital of \$50 billion which will be raised to \$100 billion. The five members will have an equal share for each in the bank, so no one member dominates the institution. Headquarters – Shanghai. Bank will have African Regional Center in South Africa. India will assume the first presidency of the bank. Chairman of Board of governance will be Russian. The emergency reserve fund - which was announced as a "Contingency Reserve Arrangement" will also have \$100bn and will

help developing nations avoid short-term liquidity pressures. It will have \$41 billion from China, \$5 billion from South Africa and \$ 18 billion from remaining nations.

Need of a BRICS bank

1. Global financial institutions like IMF and world bank are dominated by U.S and western countries
2. IMF and world bank follows different voting power based on quota system. Though China is second largest economy after U.S it has fewer voting rights.
3. The financial institution created by BRICS will reduce the importance of US dollar as a global currency and eventually it will increase importance of Yuan
4. IMF cash assistance program is conditional. If a country's foreign policy clashes with US then it will be difficult to obtain a loan.
5. It will provide resources for infrastructure development of developing countries.

Why in news?

Sushma Swaraj says multilateralism, international trade facing strong headwinds

Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj underlined that multilateralism, international trade free of constraints and a rules-based world order were facing "strong headwinds" as she called for concerted action by the BRICS nations against money laundering, terrorist-financing and de-radicalisation.

Swaraj speech

- Called for joint action among the BRICS nations against challenges to long-term growth.
- Global growth has exhibited signs of recovery, the challenges to long-term growth continue to persist. Ensuring that the benefits of globalisation are shared widely remains a challenge.
- Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi had given a call for a BRICS Counter-Terrorism Strategy for joint-action with a focus on money laundering, terrorist-finance, cyber-space and de-radicalisation as our priorities.
- Our leaders have also called for making the UN Counter Terrorism framework efficient and effective.
- The five nations brought together almost 42% of the global population and had recorded impressive economic growth.
- BRICS meetings are keenly watched world over and our decisions have profound impact globally.

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION'S (SCO)

What it is?

- The SCO, in which China plays an influential role, is also comprised of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan.
- India and Pakistan were admitted into the bloc in 2017.
- It is Eurasian economic, political and security organisation headquartered in Beijing, China.
- Its main objective is military cooperation between member states. It is primarily centred on security-related concerns of Central Asian members with main threats being terrorism, separatism and extremism.
- It was established in June 2001 as a successor of Shanghai Five mechanism which was established in 1996 with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan as members.
- Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia enjoy observer status of SCO.
- Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Nepal are dialogue partners of SCO.

Why in news?

Qingdao Declaration

Key-Highlights of the Summit

The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit held on 9-10 June in the Chinese city of Qingdao. The summit is the first since its expansion when India and Pakistan were included as full members at the Astana summit in Kazakhstan last year. During the summit, the leaders of the SCO member countries signed 'Qingdao declaration'. During the two-day visit to China, PM Modi held nearly half a dozen bilateral meetings, including with President Xi Jinping. The Member States strongly condemn all forms of terrorism and consider it necessary to make efforts to promote a unified global counter-terrorism front with the central coordinating role of the United Nations on the basis of international law, without politicization or double standards.

Improving Relations with China

Soon after reaching Qingdao, PM Modi held a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, during which both the leaders explored ways to deepen ties, especially in areas of trade, investment, besides reviewing the overall cooperation between India and China. Both the leaders signed deals on the export of non-basmati rice and shared information on the waters of the Brahmaputra River, which runs between India and China. This visit is PM Modi's second visit to China, it comes after the two leaders held an informal summit in central China's Wuhan city during which they exchanged views on solidifying the relationship between the two countries.

Qingdao Declaration

The leaders of the SCO member states issued a declaration in which the members reiterated their commitment to the Treaty on Long-Term Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation of the SCO Member States and to continue to develop good-neighbourly relations and friendship in areas of common concern, including building shared borders into permanently peaceful and friendly ones. In the joint Qingdao Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, India was the only member in the eight-nation bloc to refuse to endorse Chinese Belt Road Initiative (BRI) project. This decision as India's first summit as a full SCO member was taken as a part of India's policy of not compromising on territorial issues. Chinese One Belt, One Road Initiative is a threat to India's sovereignty over concerns on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The CPEC, a 3,000-kilometre corridor is aimed at connecting China and Pakistan with road, rail, pipelines and optical fibre cable network.

Other Important Meetings

Prime Minister Narendra Modi met President of Mongolia Khaltmaagiin Battulga in Qingdao. Prime Minister Narendra Modi met President of Mongolia Khaltmaagiin Battulga in Qingdao. Indian PM held a meeting with President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. During the meeting, PM invited Kazakhstan to join the International Solar Alliance and the President of Kazakhstan responded positively to the invite. PM Modi and Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain shook hands and exchanged pleasantries after signing of agreements between SCO nations.

Benefits for India

The SCO summit 2018 will further enrich the goals of SCO while heralding a new beginning for India's engagement with the SCO. India's engagement and extensive talks will help improve its position and its relations with the member states, including China and Pakistan. India's participation in the SCO will also help

it further expand Indian footprints in Central Asia, a region which is abundant in energy resources. With eight members, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation represents approximately 42 per cent of the world's population, 22 per cent of land areas and most importantly 20 per cent of the GDP. SCO will enable India to engage with Central Asian countries and building a strong position.

QUAD

Quadrilateral

In a significant geostrategic move India, the US, Japan and Australia revitalized their quadrilateral grouping on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit in Manila. The 'quad' has endorsed a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region that isn't monopolised by a single country. The cooperation rests on a foundation of shared democratic values and principles.

Need for setting up of the Quad

The move to set up the quadrilateral comes in the backdrop of growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. It has also raised concerns regarding freedom of trade and navigation through the waters of the South and East China seas. China's aggressive posturing along land borders with countries like India and Bhutan.

Significance of Quad

Free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region serves the long-term interests of all countries in the region and of the world at large. Tackle common challenges of terrorism and proliferation. Upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and respect for international law, freedom of navigation and overflight. Cooperation "to curtail DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea)'s nuclear and missile programmes and unlawful acts. Involving the U.S. and Japan in development projects in South Asia will yield the necessary finances.

Significance for India

By joining the quad India has taken a significant turn in its policy for the subcontinent. It gives New Delhi a powerful platform to advance its interests in East Asia, coordinate strategies with powerful friends and add more strength to its Act East initiative. The geostrategic term "Indo-Pacific" as opposed to "Asia-Pacific" has been gaining currency. It will deepen India's ties with US, Australia and Japan with benefits in diplomatic leverage and sharing of burden in defence. Working with US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific will provide New Delhi significant leverage in shaping US policies in Afghanistan-Pakistan to the benefit of India.

Why in news?

Quad countries discuss ocean security

Report on regional stability launched

Key highlights of the report

Maintaining high-level consultations among the Quad countries aiming at free and open Indo-Pacific region, Australia, Japan, India and the US should work with countries in the IOR, Four countries Quad countries should work to oppose "the establishment of permanent Chinese military bases "in the IOR, The report calls the four countries to enhance sea land defence capabilities. For this naval fleet should evolve long range operations. This may require consideration in Japan of new options such as nuclear propulsion for its submarines

Japanese diplomat highlighted the following points

- The Quad grouping should not be in an exclusive context. It is one of the grouping for interaction.
- There are various modalities where Quad countries interact on bilateral and trilateral basis.
- Japan's Indo-Pacific policy is open and inclusive
- All four countries have used the word inclusive and so all are in agreement of the inclusiveness of the Indo-Pacific.

Other think tanks include

- Australia National University,
- Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan
- Sasakawa Peace Foundation, USA,
- VIF formed the Quadripartite Commission on Indian Ocean Regional Security, which provides recommendations for stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

On the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Manila last year, the Quad countries held discussion on reviving the grouping.

BIMSTEC

Introduction

BIMSTEC stands for Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. It is an international organisation involving a group of countries in South Asia and South East Asia.

7 members:

- Bangladesh
- India
- Myanmar
- Sri Lanka
- Thailand
- Bhutan
- Nepal

Established in 1997 in Bangkok, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand were founding members. Headquartered at Dhaka, Bangladesh. The main objective of BIMSTEC is technological and economic cooperation among south Asian and south east Asian countries along the coast of the bay of Bengal. Commerce, investment, technology, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, fisheries, transport and communication, textiles, leather etc. have been included in it. BIMSTEC uses the alphabetical order for the Chairmanship. Bhutan has never been chairman (Skipped itself). Current chairmanship: Sri Lanka.

Latest Summit

- Third Summit was held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar in March 2014.
- Fourth Summit was held in Kathmandu, Nepal in 2018

Why in news?

India committed to boosting BIMSTEC connectivity

India commitment to BIMSTEC

To working with the BIMSTEC member states to enhance regional connectivity, to work with in critical sector and addressing issue arising of terrorism and drug trafficking. Explore opportunity in trade, economic,

transport and people to people connectivity. Seeing BIMSTEC is the way to pursue “Neighborhood First and Act East Policy”.

Seeking coordination and cooperation in disaster relief exercise as BIMSTEC state are located between Himalaya and Bay of Bengal and more prone to natural disaster such as flood, cyclones and earthquake. They proposed Center for Bay of Bengal at Nalanda Universities for research on art, culture and other subjects. To enhance its national knowledge network in the field of digital connectivity in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. India also planned to extend Myanmar and Thailand. Co-operation among states is required to bring peace, prosperity and development in the region. Nepal PM said, BIMSTEC is not a substitute to SAARC and both organization will complement each other. He emphasized to implement Millennium development and Poverty elevation plan, stressing the need for deeper economic integration for speedy regional development.

Root out terror: BIMSTEC

BIMSTEC nation to hold state/non-states accountable that encourage, support terrorism and provide finance to them. They described the terrorism is a threat to international peace and security. On the second day of Summit, they declared act of any form of terror activity anywhere in the world will not be tolerated. Stressed on commitments for multilateral cooperation by India PM. Unanimously adopted declaration to fight against terrorism will not only include terrorist, terrorist organization but state that encourage or support such activities will also be held accountable. Declaration focused on multidimensional connectivity for better economic integration among the nation. MoU was signed to provide for better optimization and promotion of energy resources.

SOUTH ASIAN ASSOCIATION FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION (SAARC)

Introduction

An economic & geopolitical organization of 8 countries that are primarily located in South Asia. Established in 1985; Secretariat – Kathmandu, Nepal; Official language – English. Members are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Srilanka, Maldives, Afghanistan. 1st summit at Dhaka, only 1 new member added since birth i.e. Afghanistan. 19th SAARC summit → Pakistan + Cultural Capital → Bamyan (Afghanistan).

Evolution of SAARC

The idea of regional political and economic cooperation in South Asia was first raised in 1980 and the first summit was held in Dhaka on 8 December 1985, when the organization was established by the governments of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Since then organization has expanded by accepting one new full member, Afghanistan, and several observer members. The official meetings of the leaders of each nation are held annually whilst the foreign ministers meet twice annually.

SAARC Objectives

- SAARC policies aim to promote welfare economics, collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia, and to accelerate socio-cultural development in the region.
- To promote the welfare of the people of South Asia and to improve their quality of life.
- To cooperate with international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes.
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields.

- To contribute to mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems; & to maintain peace in the region.

South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)

The Agreement on SAARC Preferential trading Arrangement (SAPTA) was signed on 11 April 1993 and entered into force on 7 December 1995, with the desire of the Member States of SAARC (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and the Maldives) to promote and sustain mutual trade and economic cooperation within the SAARC region through the exchange of concessions. The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) is an agreement reached on 6 January 2004 at the 12th SAARC summit in Islamabad, Pakistan.

It created a free trade area of 1.8 billion people in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The seven foreign ministers of the region signed a framework agreement on SAFTA to reduce customs duties of all traded goods to zero by the year 2016. The SAFTA agreement came into force on 1 January 2006 and is operational following the ratification of the agreement by the seven governments.

SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme

SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme was launched in 1992 to allow certain categories of dignitaries to a Special Travel document, which would exempt them from visas within the region. Currently the list included 24 categories of entitled persons, which include Dignitaries, Judges of higher courts, Parliamentarians, Senior Officials, Businessmen, Journalists, Sportsmen etc. The Visa Stickers are issued by the respective Member States to the entitled categories of that particular country. The validity of the Visa Sticker is generally for one year. The implementation is reviewed regularly by the Immigration Authorities of SAARC Member States.

SAARCLAW Conference

It was established in Sri Lanka in 1991. Since then conference has provided a platform for legal professionals from South Asian region to meet and discuss issues of mutual interests pertaining to justice, legal reforms, good governance and enforcement over a span of 25 years. 14th Conference held in Colombo, SL in October 2017.

Why in news?

SAARC meet to allow India-Pak. Interface

The first face-to-face engagement between the new Pakistani government and India could come when External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi attend the SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) Council of Ministers' meeting in New York. However, they said there were no plans "so far" for a one-on-one meeting between the two Ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which begins on September 25.

The SAARC meeting, which will most likely include a lunch attended by the Foreign Ministers of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, is scheduled for September 27. The informal Council of Minister's meeting was also held last year on the sidelines of the UNGA, and is expected to be chaired by Nepal Foreign Minister Pradeep Gyawali, and organised by Pakistani diplomat Amjad Sial, who is the SAARC Secretary-General.

Nepal, which hosted the last SAARC summit in Kathmandu in November 2014, has been keen to pass on its chairmanship of the regional grouping, which it can do only when India and other members agree to attend the summit in Islamabad. Inaugurating the BIMSTEC summit, Mr. Oli reiterated that the newly revived BIMSTEC grouping would not replace the SAARC group.

India ups ante over SAARC meet spat

Taking its protest over the presence of a minister from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) at a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting to the next level, India has now demanded that the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) be “derecognised” by the South Asian grouping.

In a letter addressed to the SAARC secretariat, which is based in Kathmandu, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) accused the SCCI of having “violated” the SAARC charter and principles by inviting the Minister from PoK Chaudhury Muhammad Saeed to its event in Islamabad on December 8. An Indian diplomat attending the event had walked out in protest against Mr. Saeed’s presence.

Founded in 1992, the SCCI is formed from local chambers of commerce from all nine members of SAARC including the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). The group led by SCCI president Ruwan Edrisinghe meets regularly and is one of the SAARC’s most active bodies.

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC)

What is it?

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the organs of the United Nations and is charged with the maintenance of international peace and security. Its powers include the establishment of peacekeeping operations, the establishment of international sanctions, and the authorization of military action through Security Council resolutions; it is the only UN body with the authority to issue binding resolutions to member states.

Members

The Security Council consists of fifteen members. Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the United States—serve as the body’s five permanent members. These permanent members can veto any substantive Security Council resolution, including those on the admission of new member states or candidates for Secretary-General. The Security Council also has 10 non-permanent members, elected on a regional basis to serve two-year terms. The body’s presidency rotates monthly among its members.

Why in news?

U.S. totally isolated defending Israel on Palestine UNSC resolutions

The U.S. was completely isolated defending Israel during the voting on two resolutions on Palestine, one proposed by Kuwait and a counter-motion put forward by it. The unusual asymmetry in two consecutive votes came about because even its closest allies abandoned the U.S. while its Permanent Representative Nikki Haley stood defiantly vetoing a resolution put forward by Kuwait and proposing a countermeasure that received only her vote. Hamas was at the heart of the stand-off, with the U.S. demanding that the organisation should also be condemned.

The resolution drafted by Kuwait sought to condemn what it called the disproportionate use of force by Israel, including the firing of live ammunition by its forces on Palestinian protesters near the border with Gaza. It received 10 votes, while the sole vote against it by the veto-wielding U.S. killed it as Ethiopia, Netherlands, Poland and Britain abstained.

Indonesia wins UNSC vote

The Maldives and Indonesia had contested for the seat in the UN Security Council. Indonesia secured 144 votes whereas Maldives won 46 out of total 190 votes. Indonesia has been elected as a non-permanent member for a two-year term on the Security Council starting on Jan. 1, 2019. A total of 190 members participated in the UN Security Council voting. To be a member of the council the concerned country has to

get more than a two-thirds majority or 127 votes. Other newly elected non-permanent members include Germany, Belgium, Dominican Republic and South Africa.

G-4 for UN Security Council reform, multilateralism

G-4 countries have reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and called for the early reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

About G-4

The group consists of four countries India, Brazil, Germany and Japan. These countries support each other's bid for permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Outcome of the meeting of G-4 members:

They stressed on the importance of reforms at the UNSC according to the contemporary needs. They called to initiate text-based negotiations to safeguard the legitimacy and credibility of the UNSC. The ministers reiterated their support for Africa's representation in a reformed and expanded Security Council. They stressed that substantial progress has not yet been achieved at the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) for the reforms. Germany and Japan contribute one fifth of the UN budget while the four countries together have one fifth of the world population. S. and China have not been very keen on reforms at the UNSC and hence the reform process is lingering. Despite majority of UN member states supporting UNSC reform, the negotiations launched in 2009 have not produced substantive progress over the 10 years.

INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY (IAEA)

Introduction

It was established in 1957, Headquartered at Vienna, Austria. It seeks to promote peaceful use of nuclear energy, and to prohibit its use for any military purpose, including manufacturing of nuclear weapons. It reports to the UNGA and the UNSC (although it is an independent body)

IAEA

Promotes development of peaceful applications of nuclear technology, provide international safeguards against misuse of nuclear technology and nuclear materials, and promote nuclear safety (including radiation protection) and nuclear security standards and their implementation.

Three main areas of work that underpin the IAEA's mission are:

- Safety and Security;
- Science and Technology; and
- Safeguards and Verification

The IAEA executes this mission with three main functions:

- the inspection of existing nuclear facilities to ensure their peaceful use,
- providing information and developing standards to ensure the safety and security of nuclear facilities, and
- as a hub for the various fields of science involved in the peaceful applications of nuclear technology

Why in news?

Iran tells UN it will hike uranium enrichment capacity

Iran should cooperate with Europe and China to work around U.S. sanctions. Iran's notification to the UN that it would launch a plan to increase its uranium enrichment capacity illustrates the risks associated with the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, reached among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, besides Germany, the European Union and Iran, in 2015, curtailed Tehran's nuclear programme in return for the lifting of international sanctions. According to the deal, Iran can enrich uranium, but under tight restrictions.

Current Position

President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement and threatened to impose new sanctions on Iran, its survival is in question. For now, the other signatories say they remain committed to the agreement. The latest Iranian announcement is perhaps aimed at turning the heat up on European powers to come up with guarantees that the deal's benefits will be in place even with U.S. sanctions. Iran now says it would open a centre for the production of new centrifuges at its Natanz facility, which could be used for enrichment. Tehran could argue that it is not technically violating the agreement as long as it does not produce centrifuges.

Iran and Europe

Instead of such posturing, both Iran and Europe would do well to shift their focus to preserving the integrity of the agreement. If Europe remains politically committed to the agreement as it claims, there have to be proper measures to circumvent the impact of U.S. sanctions. It is not yet clear whether European companies will make any significant investments in Iran, or even continue to do business in the country, once U.S. sanctions start targeting them. Earlier, European countries had discussed providing companies that do business with Iran special financing from the European Investment Bank and passing legislation to protect them from U.S. sanctions — but no decision has been taken so far. The EU says it can create conditions for Iran to continue to benefit from the deal but is wary of giving any guarantee. Iran has made it clear that the U.S. withdrawal should not affect its oil exports and access to the SWIFT international bank payments messaging system.

Conclusion

The way forward is to continue a dialogue to find an economic and legislative package that would shield European companies and Iranian economic interests from U.S. sanctions. For that, Europe has to assure Iran it will stand up to U.S. pressure, as Iran remains cooperative and compliant with the terms of the 2015 agreement.

UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (UNHRC)

Introduction

It is an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system. It is responsible for promotion and protection of human rights around the globe and for addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them. It was created by UNGA on 15 March 2006 by adopting resolution 60/251 to promote human rights globally. It had replaced former UN Commission on Human Rights. It is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland.

Members

UNHRC is made up of 47 UN member states which are elected by UN General Assembly (UNGA) with specific number of seats allocated for each region of the globe. The term of each seat is three years, and no member may occupy a seat for more than two consecutive terms.

Functions

Members of the council work to engage countries on improving human rights. They make decisions ranging from exposing violations to recommending that UN Security Council make referral to International Criminal Court (ICC). UNJRC does not have authority to take action but can exert significant pressure on violating country. It can also set up special rapporteurs with mandate to investigate and report human-rights violations and abuses. The council works closely with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and engages the United Nations' special procedures. The General Assembly can suspend the rights and privileges of any Council member that it decides has persistently committed gross and systematic violations of human rights during its term of membership. The suspension process requires a two-thirds majority vote by the General Assembly. United States under President Donald Trump Administration had withdrawn from UNHRC after it questioned legitimacy of the council because of presence of several dictatorial regimes violating human rights.

Why in news?

U.S. pulls out of United Nations Human Rights Council

Another US withdrawal

The United States has announced that it was leaving the United Nations Human Rights Council. It was the latest withdrawal by the Trump administration from an international institution. The move extends a broader Trump administration pattern of stepping back from international agreements and forums under the president's "America First" policy.

Reason given for withdrawal

There has been longstanding U.S. complaint that the 47-member council is biased against Israel. The U.S. is Israel's biggest defender at other U.N. organizations.

Special mention of Israel at UNHRC

Israel is the only country in the world whose rights record comes up for discussion at every council session, under "Item 7" on the agenda. Item 7 on "Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories" has been part of the council's regular business almost as long as it has existed.

Other major withdrawals

Since January 2017, U.S. has announced its withdrawal from the Paris climate accord, left the U.N. educational and cultural organization and pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal.

India wins election to UNHRC

India gets re-elected

The 193-member UNGA held elections here for new members to the UN Human Rights Council. India is re-elected for a period of three years beginning January 1, 2019, getting 188 votes in the Asia-Pacific category, the highest number of votes among all candidates. India had previously been elected to the Geneva-based Human Rights Council for the 2011-2014 and 2014-2017 terms. Countries needed a minimum of 97 votes to get elected to the Council.

Other members from Asia Pacific

The 18 new members were elected by absolute majority through a secret ballot. India was vying for a seat in the Asia Pacific category. Along with India, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Fiji and Philippines had also staked a claim in the same regional group. All five of the UNGAs regional groups had submitted competition-free slates, meaning that all candidates, regardless of their rights records, were virtually assured seats on the council.

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO)

Introduction

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) based in Paris. Its declared purpose is to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through educational, scientific, and cultural reforms in order to increase universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights along with fundamental freedom proclaimed in the United Nations Charter. It is the successor of the League of Nations' International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation. UNESCO has 195 member states and ten associate members. UNESCO pursues its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social/human sciences, culture and communication/information. Projects sponsored by UNESCO include literacy, technical, and teacher-training programmes, international science programmes, the promotion of independent media and freedom of the press, regional and cultural history projects, the promotion of cultural diversity, translations of world literature, international cooperation agreements on secure the world cultural and natural heritage (World Heritage Sites) and to preserve human rights, and attempts to bridge the worldwide digital divide. It is also a member of the United Nations Development Group.

Why in news?

Korean mountain temples, Japan's Christian sites added to UNESCO list

The 42nd session of World Heritage Committee (WHC) meeting of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held in Manama, Bahrain has inscribed four cultural sites on the World Heritage List. These four cultural sites are Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensemble of Mumbai (India), Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars region (Iran), Hidden Christian Sites in Nagasaki Region (Japan) and Sansa, Buddhist Mountain Monasteries in Korea (South Korea).

Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensemble of Mumbai

These two ensembles bear testimony to the phases of modernization that Mumbai has undergone in course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Mumbai's Victorian ensemble includes Indian elements suited to climate, including balconies and verandas. Art Deco edifices are found in cinemas and residential buildings, having blend of Indian design with Art Deco imagery, creating unique style that has been described as Indo-Deco.

Sassanid Archaeological Landscape of Fars region

They are eight archaeological sites situated in three geographical parts in southeast of Fars Province of Iran viz. Firuzabad, Bishapur and Sarvestan. These fortified structures, palaces, and city plans date back to earliest and latest times of Sassanian Empire (from 224 to 658 CE). These sites bear witness to influence of Achaemenid and Parthian cultural traditions and of Roman art, which had significant impact on architecture and artistic styles of the Islamic era.

Hidden Christian Sites in Nagasaki Region

It is located in north-western part of Kyushu Island. The 12 components of the site consist of 10 villages, Hara Castle and cathedral, built between the 16th and 19th centuries. Together they reflect earliest activities of Christian missionaries and settlers in Japan. These sites also bear unique testimony to cultural tradition nurtured by hidden Christians in Nagasaki region who secretly transmitted their faith during period of prohibition from 17th to 19th century.

Sansa, Buddhist Mountain Monasteries in Korea

They are Buddhist mountain monasteries located throughout southern provinces of Korean Peninsula. They are spatial arrangement of seven temples that comprise site, (established from 7th to 9th centuries), present

common characteristics that are specific to Korea– “madang” (open courtyard) flanked by four buildings (pavilion, Buddha Hall, lecture hall and dormitory). They contain large number of individually remarkable structures, objects, documents and shrines. These mountain monasteries are sacred places, and have survived as living centres of faith and daily religious practice.

U.S., Israel officially quit UNESCO

The US had notified UNESCO of its decision to quit the organisation in October 2017 and had called for its "fundamental reform". Israel followed the US in quitting UNESCO. The Paris-based organisation has previously criticised Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem and granted full membership to Palestine in 2011. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was co-founded by the US after World War II with the mission of seeking to “build peace through international cooperation in Education, the Sciences and Culture.” UNESCO is best known for its work to preserve heritage, including maintaining a list of World Heritage sites, and programmes to promote education in developing countries. The US has pulled out of UNESCO before. The Reagan administration did so in 1984 because it viewed the agency as mismanaged, corrupt, and used to advance Soviet interests. The US rejoined in 2003.

NATO

Introduction

NATO is an alliance of 28 countries bordering the North Atlantic Ocean. It includes Canada, the United States, Turkey and most members of the European Union.

Members

Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States. Each member designates an ambassador to NATO. It supplies needed officials to serve on NATO committees. It will send the appropriate official to discuss NATO business. That includes its President, Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, or head of Defence.

History

The founding members of NATO signed the North Atlantic Treaty on April 4, 1949. NATO's primary purpose was to defend member nations against troops in pro-communist countries. The United States also wanted to maintain a presence in Europe. It sought to prevent a resurgence of aggressive nationalism and foster political union. In this way, NATO made the European Union possible.

Purpose

NATO's mission is to protect the freedom of its members. For example, on July 8, 2016, NATO announced it would send up to 4,000 troops to the Baltic states and eastern Poland. It will increase air and sea patrols to shore up its eastern front after Russia's attack on Ukraine. NATO considers an armed attack upon one... shall be considered an attack upon them all. The only time NATO invoked this was after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It responded to U.S. requests for help in the war in Afghanistan. It took the lead from August 2003 to December 2014. At its peak, it deployed 130,000 troops. In 2015, it ended its combat role and began supporting Afghan troops. NATO's second purpose is to protect the stability of the region. In those cases, it would defend non-members. On August 28, 2014, NATO announced it had photos proving that Russia invaded Ukraine. Although Ukraine is not a member, it worked with NATO over the years. Russia's

invasion of Ukraine threatened nearby NATO members. They worried they would be next because they were also former U.S.S.R. satellite countries.

Alliances: NATO participates in three alliances.

The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council allows partners a vehicle to become NATO members. It includes 23 non-NATO countries that support NATO's purpose. It began in 1991. The Mediterranean Dialogue seeks to stabilize the Middle East. Its non-NATO members include Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. It began in 1994. The Istanbul Cooperation Initiative works for peace throughout the larger Middle East region. It includes four members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. They are Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. It began in 2004.

NATO cooperates with eight other countries in joint security issues. There are five in Asia. They are Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mongolia and New Zealand. There are two in the Middle East — Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Why in news?

NATO stands by all its allies

The NATO insisted that every member-state is covered by its "all for one, one for all" collective defence pledge, after U.S. President Donald Trump appeared to undercut the alliance's core commitment. Mr. Trump added to the uproar over his summit with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin when he said on Tuesday that the people of the tiny Balkan nation of Montenegro were "aggressive" and capable of triggering World War III. In that case, would it be reasonable to go to their defence.

The President's comments were in line with his overall "America First" strategy and with longstanding U.S. doubts about the wisdom of coming to the rescue of smaller, troublesome allies in Europe at the risk of triggering a wider conflict. NATO's collective defence clause, Article 5, is unconditional and iron-clad. It means that an attack on one is an attack on all. President Trump has made clear that the U.S. is fully committed to NATO and our alliance is strong.

Macedonia becomes NATO's 30th member following its historic name change -Republic of North Macedonia

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) said that its 29 members cleared the way for Macedonia to become the alliance's 30th member, following its historic name change. Macedonia has been at odds with Greece since 1991 when the former broke away from Yugoslavia. For the Greeks, the name Macedonia has a powerful historical significance. It is the name of a region within Greece, and this name harks back to the ancient kingdom once ruled by Alexander the Great. The Greeks consider this period to be one of the highest points in their history, and have accused the neighbouring country of "cultural theft" in their choice of name. Macedonian PM agreed getting the country into the EU and NATO. Consequently it reached an agreement with Greece when Greece promised to drop its objections against their entry into the EU and the NATO.

EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

Introduction

EU is an economic and political partnership. It has 28 member countries. Law made in European Parliament is applicable and binding on all member states directly. Its member states are committed to same basic values: peace, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights. It is single market allowing the free movement of people, goods, services and capital within internal market. The union has its own currency, Euro established as monetary union in 1999 and being used by 19 member countries. Note: Not all members. Moreover, within

Schengen Area of EU, passport controls have been abolished. The capital of EU is located in Brussels, Belgium.

Why in news?

US, EU Agree to Ease Trade Tensions

United States (US) and the European Union (EU) agreed on a plan to defuse the festering trade dispute between the two major economies. The agreement is considered as a breakthrough that could avoid a trade war.

Highlights

As per the agreement the US will not follow through with a threat to impose tariffs on automobiles that would hurt the dominant car industry in the EU. US and EU will work to “resolve” the existing duties on steel and aluminum imposed by US, which had angered many countries within the EU. Work towards eliminating all tariffs, trade barriers and subsidies related to non-auto industrial goods. Reform the World Trade Organization and reduce trading costs and regulatory barriers across the Atlantic. They agreed to suspend any new tariffs while the negotiations were going on. EU has also agreed to start buying more US soybeans, one of the main commodities targeted by China in its response to US tariffs. The bloc also would become a massive buyer of US liquefied natural gas.

Background

The U.S. and EU account for about \$1 trillion in transatlantic trade, and tensions have spiked due to trade disparities. On March 9, 2018 the United States imposed a 25% duty on steel and 10% on aluminum imports for an unspecified period. The objective of imposing heavy tariffs on imported steel and aluminum is to boost the US industry that has been suffering from “unfair” trade business practices. Unlike the punitive tariffs that the United States imposes on ‘dumped’ or unfairly subsidized goods from specified countries, these steel and aluminum tariffs would apply to all countries unless countries are eligible to request for an exemption. The imposition of tariffs has been classified as ‘safeguard’ tariffs aimed to stop a sudden, unforeseen and damaging import surge that could seriously damage a particular industry and are legal under World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. In justifying the measure, the US administration invoked a national security law – wherein countries are allowed this kind of recourse under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in times of war and other emergencies.

Impact of new tariffs

The European Union is the top trading partner of the United States in goods, and it is the top U.S. export market. The EU has responded by warning that it will retaliate with tariffs on a range of US imports. It could once again revive protectionist sentiment which has been on the wane following the recovery from the global economic meltdown. As a result, the US’s traditional allies, who will be hit the most from the tariffs, have warned of bilateral retaliation on a range of US imports including agriculture and technology.

Implications for the United States

American steel and aluminum manufacturers would certainly get a boost, but it's not clear if they actually have the capacity to meet a huge surge in demand. Other sectors of American manufacturing would be hurt by rising steel and aluminum prices for automakers and other industries that use steel and aluminum in their production. With increasing manufacturing cost, the companies that make these products could pass the increased cost of raw materials to their consumers.

Implications for India

India is a minor exporter of the two metals and with the market for steel consumption in India growing, the imposition of US tariffs would not have significant impact. However, the United States has been critical of

India's intellectual property rights standard and its high tariffs on certain products (Harley Davidson motorbikes) and has threatened to impose reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods (India ranks ninth on the list of trading partners that run a trade surplus with the US – it exports more to the US than what it imports).

INTERNATIONAL SOLAR ALLIANCE (ISA)

Introduction

The Paris Declaration establishes ISA as an alliance dedicated to the promotion of solar energy among its member countries.

Objectives

The ISA's major objectives include global deployment of over 1,000GW of solar generation capacity and mobilisation of investment of over US\$ 1000 billion into solar energy by 2030.

What it does?

As an action-oriented organisation, the ISA brings together countries with rich solar potential to aggregate global demand, thereby reducing prices through bulk purchase, facilitating the deployment of existing solar technologies at scale, and promoting collaborative solar R&D and capacity building.

When it entered into force?

When the ISA Framework Agreement entered into force on December 6th, 2017, ISA formally became a de-jure treaty based International Intergovernmental Organization, headquartered at Gurugram, India.

Why in news?

Myanmar joins International Solar Alliance

Myanmar joined the India-initiated International Solar Alliance (ISA) and it became the 68th signatory to the Framework Agreement of the ISA that aims for optimum utilisation of solar energy. Myanmar Minister for International Cooperation Kyaw Tin handed over the ISA Framework Agreement to External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj during a bilateral meeting on Delhi Dialogue 2018.

WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANIZATION (WIPO)

Introduction

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) is one of the 17 specialized agencies of the United Nations. It was created in 1967 "to encourage creative activity, to promote the protection of intellectual property throughout the world." It has currently 188 member states, administers 26 international treaties, and is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. Non-members are the states of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands, South Sudan and Timor-Leste. Palestine has observer status. India is a member of WIPO and party to several treaties administered by WIPO.

Why in news?

Sri lankan medicines to be protected under international intellectual property system

Sri Lanka has announced that it is moving its centuries-old folk medicine system for protection under the international intellectual property system. Minister of Industry and Commerce Rishard Bathiudeen said the government was working with the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) for the last five years to introduce intellectual property support to Sri Lanka's traditional, indigenous medicine system. Sri Lanka's very own indigenous medical practice is centuries old and co-exists with the country's Ayurveda practice.

Ayurveda practice is a long-standing tradition in Sri Lanka existing with our indigenous medicine system. Similar to our local medicine system, it supports our wellness and medical tourism development as well. We are expanding our intellectual property system to protect our traditional medicine system as well. For example, our historic local medicine system which is part of our Ayurveda can be placed under global traditional knowledge support. The minister also noted that the government's efforts would protect the valuable indigenous medicine practiced in Sri Lanka across many other countries and competitors. It would also ensure the government's continued efforts to develop medical tourism.

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS (IFJ)

Introduction

The organization aims to protect and strengthen the rights and freedoms of journalists. It is also dedicated to working for solidarity, social justice, labor rights, globalization, democracy, human rights, and fighting poverty and corruption.

First founded in Paris in 1926, the federation was relaunched twice in 1946 and in 1952. Today, the IFJ represents around 600,000 members in more than 100 countries. The main office is located in Brussels, Belgium. Its official languages are English, French, and Spanish.

Full membership is open to journalists' trade unions only. Other national organisations of journalists that are devoted to media freedom may be admitted as associate members. The IFJ has regional groups, such as the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) which organizes the Labour Rights Expert Group (LAREG) and the Authors' Rights Experts Group (AREG), the Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), and the Federation of Latin American Journalists (FEPALC). It has regional offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific Region, and Latin America.

The IFJ is a founding member of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange, a global network of non-governmental organisations that monitors press freedom and free expression violations worldwide, and defends journalists, writers, Internet users, and others who are persecuted for exercising their right to freedom of expression. The IFJ was also a founder in 2003 of the media safety coalition the International News Safety Institute.

Why in news?

Nepal's new law restricts press freedom: International journalists' body

Nepal's new Criminal Codes Act curtails freedom of expression and restricts press freedom, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The IFJ and its affiliates -- the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) and the Nepal Press Union (NPU) -- expressed concern over the restrictive provisions and demanded immediate amendments to the Act to ensure that they met the globally accepted standards of freedom of expression. The new act along with the Civil Codes Act 2018 became law on August 17, replacing 15 laws including 55-year-old civil and criminal laws. The international journalist body said that certain provisions of the Act, especially Sections 293 to 308 relating to privacy and defamation, were restrictive to the press freedom and criminalize expression.

These sections had provisions such as listening or recording conversations without consent, publicizing private information without consent, taking photos without consent, selling or publishing of photos for commercial purpose without the consent of the subject, and receiving/sending or publishing unauthorized information on an electronic medium. Violations were punishable between one and three years in prison and Rs 10,000 to Rs 30,000 (\$100 to 300) in fines.

More than 80 journalists faced criminal cases and harassment due to one provision in the Electronic Transaction Act for their news. The new act has dozens of such provisions that criminalizes written or spoken expression, and journalists face imprisonment up to three years for merely writing news. This is against the international standards and principles of press freedom as well as the Constitution of Nepal. The FNJ announced nationwide protests from August 28 to September 7.

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION (WTO)

Introduction

It was officially commenced on 1 January 1995 under the Marrakesh Agreement, replacing the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which commenced in 1948. It is an organization that intends to supervise and liberalize international trade. Headquartered at Geneva, Switzerland, Official language – English, French, Spanish.

Key Functions of WTO

Reduce above stated barriers to international trade – both tariff barriers and non-tariff barriers & Get the members enter into multilateral trade agreements. Provide forum for negotiation & dispute settlement for members, if agreements are violated. Ensure the developing countries benefit from world trade, especially the least Developed countries. Cooperate with UN, World and IMF for a global economic policy that improves livelihood, protects environment and promotes sustainable Development.

Why in news?

Trump's new threat: Will pull US out of WTO if it doesn't 'shape up'

President Donald Trump said he would pull out of the World Trade Organization (WTO) if it doesn't treat the US better, targeting a cornerstone of the international trading system. If they don't shape up, I would withdraw from the WTO. Trump said the agreement establishing the body "was the single worst trade deal ever made."

A US withdrawal from the WTO potentially would be far more significant for the global economy than even Trump's growing trade war with China, undermining the post-World War II system that the US helped build. US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer has said allowing China into the WTO in 2001 was a mistake. He has long called for the US to take a more aggressive approach to the WTO, arguing that it was incapable of dealing with a non-market economy such as China.

Lighthizer has accused the WTO dispute-settlement system of interfering with US sovereignty, particularly on anti-dumping cases. The US has been blocking the appointment of judges to the WTO's appeals body, raising the possibility that it could cease to function in the coming years. For all of his complaints about the WTO, Trump's administration has continued to file cases against other members. Earlier this week it launched a case against Russian duties on US products that it argues are illegal.

Countries that bring complaints to the WTO tend to prevail and defendants in trade disputes lose. But WTO data also shows that the US does slightly better than the WTO average in both cases it brings and that are brought against it. Of the 54 cases brought by the US over the life of the WTO, Washington won at least one finding in its favour in 49, or 91%, Lester said. Of the 80 cases brought against it, a WTO panel had ruled against it in at least one aspect in 69 cases, or 86% of the time.

The Trump administration has taken his complaints a step further by arguing that the WTO's dispute settlement system is broken and in need of a major overhaul. The EU has been leading an effort to propose reforms to try and defuse the conflict. Officials from the EU and Japan visited Washington last week to

discuss potential changes as well as joint efforts to take on China at the WTO. Since World War II, successive US presidents have led efforts to establish and strengthen global trading rules, arguing that they would bring stability to the world economy. The WTO was created in 1994 as part of a US-led effort by major economies to create a forum for resolving trade disputes.

WTO panels to review U.S. steel, aluminium tariffs

The World Trade Organization (WTO) agreed to hear complaints from a range of countries over new U.S. steel and aluminum tariffs, as well as complaints from Washington over retaliatory duties. The WTO's Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) agreed to establish panels to review U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to hit a long line of countries with tariffs of 25% on steel and 10% on aluminum. The DSB is to create separate panels for the complaints by the European Union (EU), China, Canada, Mexico, Norway, and Russia. This move will after the U.S. said it would not agree to a single panel to hear all of them.

INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT (ICC)

Introduction

It is an intergovernmental organisation and international tribunal. It sits in The Hague, The Netherlands. The ICC has the jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for the international crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. It was created by the 'Rome Statute'. It began its functioning on 1 July 2002, the date that Rome Statute entered into force.

The Rome Statute is multilateral treaty which serves as ICC's foundational and governing document. It has 123 member countries, India is not one of them (neither are China and the USA). The ICC has jurisdiction to prosecute individuals and is independent of United Nations (UN). But it may receive case referrals from UN Security Council and can initiate prosecutions without UN action or referral.

The ICC is intended to complement existing national judicial systems and it may therefore only exercise its jurisdiction when certain conditions are met, such as when national courts are unwilling or unable to prosecute criminals or when the United Nations Security Council or individual states refer investigations to the Court. So far, nine investigations have been opened, and 36 individuals have been indicted. All of the official investigations have been in Africa, and hence the ICC has been accused of selective enforcement of western imperialism towards African countries.

Why India is not a member of the ICC?

The issue of State sovereignty and national interests versus the powers of the ICC, the difficulty of collecting evidence, the problem of finding impartial prosecutors acceptable to the entire international community and the definition of crimes that would come within the ICC's jurisdiction emerged are some of the challenges that India cites for not accepting ICC's jurisdiction.

Why in news?

U.S. threatens sanctions on ICC, prosecution of officials

US has threatened to prosecute International Criminal Court (ICC) officials if Americans are charged with war crimes committed in Afghanistan. Hague-based court's response – As a court of law, will continue to do its work undeterred, in accordance with those principles and the overarching idea of the rule of law.

INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE (ICJ)

What is it?

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the principal judicial body of the UN. Established in 1946 to replace the Permanent Court of International Justice, the ICJ mainly operates under the statute of its predecessor, which is included in the UN Charter.

Primary functions

- to settle legal disputes submitted by States in accordance with established international laws, and
- to act as an advisory board on issues submitted to it by authorized international organizations.

Members of the Court

The International Court of Justice is composed of 15 judges elected to nine-year terms of office by the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council. These organs vote simultaneously but separately. In order to be elected, a candidate must receive an absolute majority of the votes in both bodies. In order to ensure a measure of continuity, one third of the Court is elected every three years. Judges are eligible for re-election.

Who nominates the candidates?

Every state government, party to the Charter, designates a group who propose candidates for the office of ICJ judges. This group includes four members/jurists of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (machinery which enables arbitral tribunals to be set up as desired and facilitates their work) also picked by the State. Countries not part of the statute follow the same procedure where a group nominates the candidates. Each group is limited to nominate four candidates, two of whom could be of their nationality. Within a fixed duration set by the Secretary-General, the names of the candidates have to be sent to him/her.

What are the qualifications of ICJ judges?

- A judge should have a high moral character.
- A judge should fit to the qualifications of appointment of highest judicial officers as prescribed by their respective states or.
- A judge should be a juriconsult of recognized competence in international law.

The 15 judges of the Court are distributed as per the regions:

- Three from Africa.
- Two from Latin America and Caribbean.
- Three from Asia.
- Five from Western Europe and other states.
- Two from Eastern Europe.

Independence of the Judges

Once elected, a Member of the Court is a delegate neither of the government of his own country nor of that of any other State. Unlike most other organs of international organizations, the Court is not composed of representatives of governments. Members of the Court are independent judges whose first task, before taking up their duties, is to make a solemn declaration in open court that they will exercise their powers impartially and conscientiously. In order to guarantee his or her independence, no Member of the Court can be dismissed unless, in the unanimous opinion of the other Members, he/she no longer fulfils the required conditions. This has in fact never happened.

Why in news?

International Court of Justice has ordered the United States to lift sanctions on Iran that affect imports of humanitarian goods and products and services linked to the safety of civil aviation. The ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is legally binding. Mr. Trump moved to restore tough U.S. sanctions in May after withdrawing from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers. Iran challenged the sanctions in a case filed in July at the ICJ.

Why lift imposed sanctions?

The U.S. sanctions "have the potential to endanger civil aviation safety" in Iran and sanctions limiting sales of goods required for humanitarian needs such as food, medicines and medical devices "may have a serious detrimental impact on the health and lives of individuals on the territory of Iran."

U.K. should hand over Chagos islands to Mauritius

The International Court of Justice has ruled that the United Kingdom should hand over the administration of the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean to Mauritius in order to legally complete its decolonisation. The British government ruled Mauritius from 1810 to 1968. But, under an agreement struck in 1965, in return for compensation to Mauritius and fishing rights, Britain has maintained control of the Chagos islands. It has continued to do so despite efforts by Mauritius to regain control, and UN resolutions requiring it to complete the decolonisation of Mauritius.

However, as the matter was referred to the Court by the UN General Assembly, it is not binding to either country but will remain only as an advisory for the UN to use in future. The UN General Assembly in 2017 had adopted a resolution presented by Mauritius and backed by African countries asking the ICJ to offer legal advice on the island fate and the legality of the deportations. India too supported Mauritius telling the court that a historical survey of facts placed the archipelago as part of Mauritian territory. The Chagos Islands are home to the U.S. military base of Diego Garcia, under lease from the United Kingdom since the 1960s.

ASIA PACIFIC ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION (APEC)

What is it?

The forum initially started as an informal dialogue of economic leaders in 1989 in Canberra, Australia. It was formally established in 1993 with 12 members. Currently, APEC has 21 member economies.

Goal and objectives

The primary goal of APEC is to support sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

Objectives

- Promote free and open trade and investment
- promote and accelerate regional economic integration
- encourage economic and technical cooperation,
- enhance human security,
- facilitate a favourable and sustainable business environment

Member countries

- The founding members of APEC were Australia; Brunei Darussalam; Canada; Indonesia; Japan; Korea; Malaysia; New Zealand; the Philippines; Singapore; Thailand; and the United States.
- China; Hong Kong, China; and Chinese Taipei joined APEC in 1991. Mexico and Papua New Guinea joined in 1993. Chile acceded in 1994. And in 1998, Peru; Russia; and Viet Nam joined.

Why in news?

U.S.-China discord dominates APEC summit in Papua New Guinea

The United States and China swapped barbs over trade, investment and regional security at the summit, as growing fault lines among members suggested little prospect of consensus.

What is Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation?

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is a regional economic forum to leverage the growing interdependence of the Asia-Pacific. It was established in 1989. APEC's 21 members aim to create greater prosperity for the people of the region by promoting balanced, inclusive, sustainable, innovative and secure growth and by accelerating regional economic integration. Headquartered in Singapore, the APEC is recognized as the oldest forum and highest-level multilateral bloc in the Asia-Pacific region.

What Does APEC Do?

APEC ensures that goods, services, investment and people move easily across borders. APEC works to help all residents of the Asia-Pacific participate in the growing economy.

How it works?

APEC operates as a cooperative, multilateral economic and trade forum. In APEC, all economies have an equal say and decision-making is reached by consensus. There are no binding commitments or treaty obligations. Commitments are undertaken on a voluntary basis and capacity building projects help members implement APEC initiatives. APEC's structure is based on both a "bottom-up" and "top-down" approach.

BASIC

Introduction

The BASIC countries are a bloc of four large newly industrialized countries – Brazil, South Africa, India and China – formed by an agreement on 28 November 2009. The four committed to act jointly at the Copenhagen climate summit, including a possible united walk-out if their common minimum position was not met by the developed nations. This emerging geopolitical alliance, initiated and led by China, then brokered the final Copenhagen Accord with the United States. The grouping is working to define a common position on emission reductions and climate aid money, and to try to convince other countries to sign up to the Copenhagen Accord. However, in January 2010, the grouping described the Accord as merely a political agreement and not legally binding, as is argued by the US and Europe. The four countries also said they will announce their plans to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 31 January 2010 as agreed in Copenhagen. This move was apparently intended to share richer nations into increasing their funding for climate mitigation in poorer nations.

Why in news?

BASIC nations push for 'climate finance'

Recently 27th BASIC Ministerial Meeting on Climate Change was held in New Delhi. The joint statement brought out at the conclusion of the BASIC summit reiterated:

- Political commitment to the effective implementation of UN Climate Convention and its treaties- Kyoto-Protocol (pre-2020) and COP 21 Paris Agreement (post-2020).
- Full support for upcoming Conference of Parties (COP) 24 in Polish Presidency for a successful outcome.

On global climate change

To promote a global green and low carbon transition, to work together with all parties in an open, transparent, inclusive and party-driven manner to achieve a balanced and comprehensive outcome to finalize the Paris Agreement Work Programme (PAWP) at COP 24.

On finance and technology transfer

It underlined that the developed countries need to step up their action on climate technology transfer which are part of the pre-2020 actions before the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) comes into effect. It urged developed countries to fulfill their climate finance commitments of mobilizing USD 100 billion per annum by 2020. It called on developed countries to scale up resources pledged to the GCF for mitigation and adaptation actions in developing countries. It urged developed countries to take urgent actions to close the pre-2020 implementation gaps by 2023 which can be a useful input for the first Global Stocktake (GST).

Other commitments

Other commitments taken are unequivocal commitment to support Egypt, as the Chair of the Group of 77 and China, with a view to advance the common interests of developing countries. They stressed that the GST process should be comprehensive, considering mitigation, adaptation, and means of implementation. That global climate action should promote Climate Justice and a just transition by recognizing the fundamental equality of all people in accessing economic growth and sustainable development.

UNITED NATIONS (UN)

Introduction

UN is successor of ineffective League of Nations and was established in 1945 after World War II in order to prevent another such conflict. Now, it has become world's only truly universal global organization and is foremost forum to address issues that transcend national boundaries and cannot be resolved by any one country acting alone. Its prime role is to maintain world peace, human rights, promote social and economic development and provide aid around the world in cases of famine, natural disaster and armed conflict.

The main organs of UN are:

- General Assembly (UNGA),
- Security Council (UNSC),
- Economic and Social Council (UNESOC),
- International Court of Justice (ICJ),
- UN Secretariat,
- Trusteeship Council.

League of Nations (LoN)

LoN was founded in January, 1920 as a result of Paris Peace Conference that ended World War I. LoN was first international organisation whose principal mission was to maintain world peace. But onset of World War II, demonstrated that LoN failed in its primary purpose of preventing another world war.

Why in news?

UN members sign Global Migration Compact

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

To mark the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the global leaders inked this historical accord to help millions of women and men who are not exercising their basic human rights. The first-ever Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was adopted by 164 countries in order to

help as many as 258 million migrants worldwide achieve a life of safety and dignity. The Conference was hosted by the Government of Marrakesh, Morocco as agreed to by UN member states in the ‘New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants’. The aim of the Global Compact is to improve the cooperation and management of cross-border movements of people. The Global Compact also makes clear that it is legally non-binding, fully respecting the sovereignty of all States.

Aim and Objectives of Compact

The Global Compact encompasses 23 objectives to help manage migration at all levels – global, national and local. The issues were discussed on these lines, adverse drivers that impede people from accessing sustainable livelihoods in their countries of origin. Risks and vulnerabilities faced by people during various stages of migration

- Concerns of states and communities
- The economic and social effects and implications migration may have on social and environmental levels as communities undergo demographic changes.

It strives to create conditions to help migrants add value to societies through their human, economic and social contributions to sustainable development.

4 key objectives of Global Compact for Migration

- Ease the pressures on host countries
- Enhance refugee self-reliance
- Expand access to third-country solutions
- Support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.

Why is it important to discuss the Global Compact for Migration?

It is, indeed, the need of the hour to discuss migration as the issue is becoming a global tension by giving rise to illegal activities across borders like smuggling, terrorism. Unregulated migration bears a terrible human cost: a cost in lives lost on perilous journeys across deserts, oceans and rivers; and a cost in lives ruined at the hands of smugglers, unscrupulous employers and other predators. More than 60,000 migrants have died on the move since the year 2000.

UN gets access to Rakhine for the first time since Aug. 2017

The UN began work inside Myanmar’s violence-torn northern Rakhine State. It is the first time its agencies have been granted permission to operate there since more than 7,00,000 Rohingya Muslims fled the area last year. The UN has been waiting for access to the epicentre of the military’s “clearance operations” against the Rohingya minority since June when its refugee and development agencies signed a deal with the government.

UN’s observation

The task is complicated further as the UN’s rights arm is expected to heavily censure Myanmar again in the coming days when it publishes in full the findings of its investigation into atrocities against the Rohingya. Specialists from the UNHCR and UNDP agencies were finally given permission to enter northern Rakhine before work began to assess local conditions. The team is on the ground and commenced with the first assessments. This first step of the UN’s “confidence-building measures” is expected to take two weeks and will cover 23 villages and three additional clusters of hamlets.

No Suu Kyi at UNGA

Aung San Suu Kyi will not be attending the UN General Assembly session. Instead, two senior Ministers in her government, Kyaw Tint Swe and Kyaw Tin — who in the past defended Myanmar’s former military regime on the global stage. It would attend and “explain current developments on repatriation and cooperation with international organisations”. The official, permanent secretary Myint Thu, was paraphrased as saying.

COP24 climate talks: World ‘way off course’

The world is “way off course” in its plan to prevent catastrophic climate change, the United Nations warned as nations gathered in Poland to chart a way for mankind to avert runaway global warming. COP24, also known as the Katowice Climate Change Conference, is a conference being held between 2 and 14 December 2018 in Katowice, Poland. The conference aims to finalize the practical implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement, part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Main agenda of CoP 24 meeting

- Leaders from at-risk nations such as Fiji, Nigeria and Nepal the COP24 climate talks, which aim to flesh out the promises agreed in the 2015 Paris climate accord.
- Poland — heavily reliant on energy from coal — will push its own agenda: a “just transition” from fossil fuels.
- The Paris deal saw nations agree to limit global temperature rises to below two degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit) and under 1.5C if possible.
- Officials from nearly 200 countries now have two weeks to finalize how those goals work in practice, even as science suggests the pace of climate change is rapidly outstripping mankind’s response.

Achieving climate change goals Under Paris, richer nations — responsible for the majority of historic greenhouse gas emissions — are expected to contribute funding that developing nations can access to make their economies greener. But US President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Paris accord has dented trust among vulnerable nations, who fear there is not enough cash available to help them adapt to our heating planet.

Climate talks deliver ‘rule book’

Nations struck a deal to breathe life into the landmark 2015 Paris climate treaty after marathon UN talks that failed to match the ambition the most vulnerable countries need to avert dangerous global warming. Delegates from nearly 200 states at COP24 at Katowice, Poland, finalised a common rule book designed to deliver on the Paris goals of limiting global temperature rises to well below 2°Celsius.

But states already dealing with devastating floods, droughts and extreme weather made worse by climate change said the package agreed in the mining city of Katowice lacked the bold ambition to cut emissions the world needed. At their heart, negotiations were about how each nation funds action to mitigate and adapt to climate change, as well as how those actions are reported.

Developing nations wanted more clarity

Developing nations had wanted more clarity from richer ones over how the future climate fight will be funded and pushed for so-called “loss and damage” measures. This would see richer countries giving money now to help deal with the effects of climate change many vulnerable states are already experiencing. Another contentious issue was the integrity of carbon markets, looking ahead to the day when the patchwork of distinct exchanges in China, the Europe Union, parts of the U.S. may be joined up in a global system.

Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement calls for setting up a mechanism to guard against practices such as double counting emissions savings, which could undermine such a market. Delegates eventually agreed to kick the issue down the road until next year. One of the largest disappointments for countries of all wealths and sizes was the lack of ambition to reduce emissions shown in the final COP24 text.

Future planning

Most nations wanted the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to form a key part of future planning. It had highlighted the need to slash carbon pollution by nearly half before 2030 in

order to hit the 1.5°C target. But the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Russia and Kuwait objected, leading to watered-down wording. Key questions on whether developed countries would come good on earlier commitments to make available \$100 billion annually by 2020 remained unsolved at the end of the Katowice climate summit. Moreover, a fundamental tenet that developed countries and developing countries have ‘differentiated’ responsibilities towards addressing emissions appeared to be threatened.

G20

Introduction

It is an international forum for the governments and central bank governors from 20 major economies. It was founded in 1999. Its aim was to review policy decisions to enhance international financial stability. It now deliberates on global economic issues and other important development challenges. First Head of State Summit was held in 2008 (Due to Economic Crisis)

20 Members (EU + 19 Countries) :

Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States.

G20 economies account for around 85% of the gross world product (GWP), 80% of world trade (or, if excluding EU intra-trade, 75%), and two-thirds of the world population. G20 replaced G8 as the main economic council of wealthy nations.

Latest Summit

- In 2017, held in Hamburg, Germany
- In 2018, held in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Why in news?

India to host G20 summit in 2022

India will host G20 Summit In 2022, when it celebrates its 75th year of Independence. It was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during ongoing G20 meet of international grouping in Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina. This comes after Italy accepted India’s formal request to host this summit in 2021 as earlier it was going to host it in 2022. During the Buenos Aires G20 meet, India presented a nine-point agenda to the G20 countries calling for strong and active cooperation among them to comprehensively deal with fugitive economic offenders.

GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC)

Introduction

It is a regional intergovernmental group. It deals with political and economic issues. It includes all Arab states of Persian Gulf except Iraq.

Members: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE

Established: 1981, HQ: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

All members are monarchies, including three constitutional monarchies (Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain), two absolute monarchies (Oman and Saudi Arabia) and one federal monarchy (UAE which is composed of seven member states, each of which is absolute monarchy with its own emir).

Bahrain criticises Qatar Emir for not attending GCC summit

Bahrain's Foreign Minister criticised Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad alThani for not attending a Gulf Arab summit in Saudi Arabia, an absence that suggests a rift between Doha and three Gulf Arab states is unlikely to be resolved soon. Qatar sent its State Minister for Foreign Affairs to the annual one-day summit that is overshadowed by the economic and diplomatic boycott of Doha since mid-2017. Qatar denies the charges. "Qatar's Emir should have accepted the fair demands (of the boycotting states) and attended the summit," Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa said in a tweet.

Why is Qatar sidelined?

Riyadh, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt alleges that Doha supports terrorism. Qatar vehemently opposed the same. UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt even imposed travel and trade sanctions on Qatar over accusations of supporting terrorism. They also wants to ban the Qatari news channel Al Jazeera as it is being used as a propaganda tool.

Widening Gulf

Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani's decision to stay away from the December 9 Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh is the latest reminder of the growing disunity among the Gulf countries. Qatar, blockaded by three GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, and their non-GCC allies, has said it will not discuss a compromise unless the blockade is lifted. The Saudi-led bloc imposed it in June 2017, accusing Qatar of funding terrorism. But as Riyadh came under increasing global pressure after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in its consulate in Istanbul, it has shown signs of reconciliation.

Background of this conflict

In October, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is believed to have ordered the Khashoggi hit, surprised observers by praising the Qatari economy. The personal invitation to the GCC meet from King Salman bin Abdulaziz to the Qatari Emir followed the Crown Prince's remarks. But Qatar, a tiny kingdom but the largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, remains defiant. Doha has announced its decision to quit OPEC, the first Arab nation to do so since the cartel was formed in 1960. Though Qatar said the decision was not political, clearly its exit from OPEC was a snub to Saudi Arabia, its de facto leader.

Implications of this blockade

The blockade has triggered tensions among other GCC countries as well. Saudi Arabia is upset that Oman and Kuwait did not join the embargo. Kuwait was trying to mediate between the rivals camps, which hasn't gone down well with Riyadh. The Crown Prince started a two-day tour of Kuwait but ties were reportedly so tense that he left the country within a few hours. Oman continues to be independent of Saudi influence by keeping ties open with both Qatar and Iran. The blockade has made Qatar only more independent in its foreign policy decisions.

Conclusion

It has stepped up assistance for Hamas in Gaza, accelerated a plan to allow Turkey to set up a military camp in the country and resisted calls to cut ties with Iran. The decision to quit OPEC and the Emir's absence at the GCC meet (a state minister was sent to represent the country) point to an increasingly confident Qatar. But the intra-Gulf quarrels have dampened hopes for the integration of the region. The bloc, which once talked about a common Gulf currency and robust connectivity projects, is now a ghost of its old self. After the summit, the GCC issued a customary statement, emphasising regional stability and economic challenges. Even as the summit was on, Bahrain Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa criticised the Emir's decision to skip the meet, while Doha slammed the communiqué for its failure to address the blockade. That is the state of affairs in the GCC.

ORGANIZATION OF PETROLEUM EXPORTING COUNTRIES (OPEC)

Introduction

OPEC stands for Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. It was founded in 1960 in Bagdad, Headquartered at Vienna.

15 members: Algeria, Angola, Congo, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Qatar (Will withdraw from OPEC in Jan 2019), Saudi Arabia(the de facto leader), United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela.

Gabon has rejoined OPEC in July 2016, Indonesia left OPEC in November 2016, It operates on the principle of unanimity, and one member, one vote. OPEC sets production targets for its member nations and generally, when OPEC production targets are reduced, oil prices increase. As of 2015, the 15 countries accounted for 43 percent of global oil production and 73 percent of the world's "proven" oil reserves, giving OPEC a major influence on global oil prices. OPEC decisions have come to play a prominent role in the global oil market and international relations.

Why in news?

Qatar will cease to be a member of OPEC from 1st January 2019

Qatar's Energy Minister Saad Sherida al-Kaabi on December 3, 2018 announced that the country will withdraw from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in January 2019. With this, Qatar will become the first Gulf country to leave the OPEC, the bloc of 15 oil-producing countries that account for a significant percentage of the world's oil production. Qatar's pure strength is the production of Gas. The nation is the world's biggest supplier of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), producing almost 30 percent of the world total. Qatar also shares the world's largest known natural gas field the 'North Field' with Iran. Qatar joined OPEC in 1961, one year after its establishment.

World monetary crisis: 'Group of Ten' meet

West German Economics Minister Karl Schiller that financial leaders of the 10 major non-Communist industrial countries were facing very difficult problems in their efforts to solve the current international monetary crisis. He told reporters after a three-hour session on the second day of the conference of Ministers and Central Bank Governors of the 'Group of Ten' that a lot of time would still be required to work out solutions. More than 100 delegates of the group began an emergency conference in a bid to end recent massive speculation against the French franc. The Group of Ten are the United States, Canada, Britain, France, West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden and Japan.

