



CHROME IAS

Giving Wings To Your Dreams !!!

EDITORIALS

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THE PROBLEM WITH RE-BASING GDP ESTIMATES

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Context

In the next few months, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) proposes to replace the gross domestic product (GDP) series of 2011-12 base year with a new set of National Accounts using 2017-18 as the base-year.

Background to the dispute

- For the past four years there has been a raging controversy over the current GDP figures on account of questionable methodologies and databases used.
- Studies have suggested that the annual GDP growth rates during the last few years may have been overestimated by 0.36 to 2.5 percentage points.
- To understand the origins of the dispute, one has to go back to early 2015 when the CSO released a new series of GDP with 2011-12 as base-year, replacing the earlier series with the base-year 2004-05.
- Periodic rebasing of GDP series every seven to 10 years is carried out to account for the changing economic structure and relative prices.
- Such re-basing usually led to a marginal rise in the absolute GDP size on account of better capturing of domestic production using improved methods and new databases.
- However, the underlying growth rates seldom change, meaning that the rebasing does not alter the underlying pace of economic expansion.
- After the 2011-12 base year revision, the higher growth estimates recorded by the new series did not square with related economic indicators such as bank credit growth, industrial capacity utilisation or fixed investment growth. Thus began the questioning of the new GDP series.

The root of the problem

The source of the problem, according to many economists, is the underlying methodologies for calculating GDP (in the 2011-12 series) which they claim are deeply flawed, as well as the new dataset used in estimating the private corporate sector's contribution. Some of the recent, prominent criticisms are as follows.

- In a first, the CSO estimated value addition in the private corporate sector using the statutory filing of financial results with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. The private corporate sector accounts for about a third of GDP. It is possible that the private corporate sector output has been overestimated.
- State domestic product (SDP) estimation uses many of the same databases and methodologies used in all-India GDP estimation. However, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs data does not have factory identifiers which has distorted distribution of the SDP estimates across States. Further, for estimating value-added in the informal or unorganised sector, State-specific labour productivity estimates are unavailable in the 2011-12 series. Hence the method used distorts output estimation.

Can a new base year solve the problem?

The proposed change over to a new base-year of 2017-18, is, in principle, a welcome decision. However, considering the methodological disputes and data related questions relating to the current national accounts series, rebasing would prove futile.

- Doubts will persist so long as the underlying methodological apparatus remains the same; feeding it with up-to-date data is unlikely to improve its quality.
- If a new rebased series is introduced without any changes it will only entrench the existing methodological problems, and ensuring that the debate will continue for the next half decade.

Way forward

In view of the problems with the current series, experts have proposed setting up an independent commission of national and international experts to review the GDP methodology. The ideal time to do this would be now so that solutions could be found and incorporated into the new GDP series.

AFTER RCEP RETICENCE, NEED FOR REFORM RECALIBRATION

Category: GS 2 (International Bodies)

Context

Recently, the Prime Minister announced that India would not sign on to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement.

Inference from withdrawal

India's decision to withdraw at this stage, particularly in light of India's own articulation of its national interest and its ambitions internally and on the world stage, reflects an inability to translate ambitions into action.

Defence of withdrawal from RCEP

In defending India's withdrawal from the RCEP, the government has articulated three key concerns.

- The first is the negative impact of joining the agreement in key constituencies in India, particularly farmers and small business owners.
- The second is the lack of concessions within the final agreement on key demands for India such as work visas and liberalisation in services.
- The final is regarding India's trade deficit, and how those deficits would expand under the RCEP, given that India currently runs deficits with 11 of the 15 other member states. This concern is particularly acute when it relates to China, with India fearing an influx of cheap Chinese imports into India.

Is India's withdrawal from RCEP justified?

- These concerns, particularly on the fears of Chinese imports and its impact on Indian domestic manufacturers, are legitimate and well-founded. However, the answer to these concerns is not India's withdrawal from the agreement.

- India had already won concessions, including implementation delays stretching into decades and safeguards to protect sensitive sectors like agriculture.
- Moreover, as Arvind Panagariya, former Vice Chairman of NITI Aayog, stated that existing WTO rules allow us to impose safeguard duties and anti-dumping which India has used and can continue to use against China when it comes to unfair trade practices.
- India's ambitions to become a global hub for manufacturing means that it is the country's long-term national interest to be integrated into global value chains which economic structures like RCEP will determine in near future. Thus, India will continue to remain unintegrated in such supply chains and will see its ambitions of becoming a global manufacturing hub further delayed.
- This delay in integrating with global value chains will impact India's internal and external ambitions. The World Bank found that when coupled with domestic reforms, joining such global value chains can "boost growth, create better jobs, and reduce poverty". India's own evidence shows that jobs linked to global value chains earn one-third more than those jobs focused on the domestic market.
- Moreover, India's absence in Asia's key economic architecture will take away from India's goals as a regional and Indo-Pacific power, as well as a prospective global power.
- Given India's own ambitions to generate growth and jobs through spurring manufacturing within India, and becoming a key player and rule-maker on the world stage, India's decision to withdraw from the RCEP is not ideal.

Conclusion

India now faces a choice: does it translate this withdrawal from the RCEP into a commitment for domestic reforms to prepare itself for the next opportunity to integrate itself into the global value chains and unleash Indian manufacturing? Or does it revise its ambitions and remain isolated and sitting alone in a corner? Hopefully, India chooses the former path.

LETTING IN LIGHT

Category: GS 2 (Polity)

Context

The Supreme Court has given a decision to open the office of chief justice of India to scrutiny under the Right to Information Act.

A remarkable decision

- The ruling comes nine years after the Delhi High Court ruled in favour of bringing the CJI's office under RTI.
- It is a remarkable case where the Court, in its administrative avatar, appeared as a litigant before its judicial avatar, argued against transparency and eventually ruled against itself.
- For an institution that has insulated itself from public scrutiny and one that gives little insight into its own functioning, the verdict pushes the envelope on greater judicial accountability.

Secrecy of the court

- The tug of war between the executive and judiciary on appointments is often complicated by the reluctance of the court to make the reasons and compulsions behind its decisions public.
- While the government discloses its reasons for not accepting the collegium's recommendations, the judiciary's defence remains absent from public debate.

The loopholes in the verdict

- The verdict binds the court to accept applications seeking information but the process of obtaining it may not be easy.
- The ruling allows for an ordinary citizen to seek information on appointments, transfers of judges to the high courts and Supreme Court but the reasons behind these recommendations could still be clouded in secrecy as the decisions of the collegium are largely based on reports of the Intelligence Bureau which is exempted from providing information under RTI.
- The verdict itself asks information commissioners to keep in mind the right to privacy and the independence of the judiciary while deciding on RTI requests.
- Justice NV Ramana, in his separate opinion, cautions that the RTI must not be used as a tool of surveillance against the court.

Conclusion

The transition to transparency may not be easy and hinges on the actions of the chief justice of India, as administrative head of the court.

SUBSTANCE ACROSS THE ARABIAN SEA

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Theme of the article

Amid turbulence in West Asia, India-Saudi Arabia ties have not only remained steady but kept their positive trajectory.

Introduction

Southwest Asian sub-region has lately been unusually turbulent, as reflected in issues ranging from India-Pakistan tensions to the approaching denouements of crises in Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan. Against this disorderly context, it is no small wonder that India-Saudi Arabia relations have not only remained steady, but kept their positive trajectory.

Acknowledging core interests

- Politically, New Delhi and Riyadh acknowledged each other's core interests and accommodated them. Thus, Saudi Arabia showed an "understanding" of recent Indian actions in Jammu and Kashmir and India "strongly condemned" the various attacks on Saudi civilian facilities.
- Their bilateral defence, security and anti-terror cooperation has intensified and the first naval exercise is to be held soon.

The Riyadh summit

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- The third Riyadh summit was recently held. It demonstrates the two nations' maturity and strategic construct.
- The Riyadh Summit acquired added importance as it coincidentally preceded two domestic developments in India with considerable traction in the Islamic world: the conversion of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories and the Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya dispute.

The issues in the relations

- Despite vigorous efforts, the bilateral commercial and economic ties have still remained range-bound. Trade has drifted downwards largely due to lower crude prices.
- The bilateral trade in the first nine months of 2019 stood has fallen by 9.2% over the corresponding figure in 2018. It was 5:1 in kingdom's favour and was dominated by the traditional commodities, revealing the need for greater Indian export promotion efforts.
- The Saudi investment in India, too, remains far below potential. The kingdom's cumulative investments in India are only \$229 million, or 0.05% of the total inbound FDI.

Reasons for optimism

- Though the kingdom's Indian community has come down marginally to 2.6 million, they, nevertheless, are still the largest foreign community and their annual homeward remittances remain steady at \$11 billion.
- The kingdom's Vision 2030, a strategic document, lists eight major partner countries including India, the world's third largest oil importer.
- Saudi Aramco is to be one of the two strategic partners in the proposed \$44 billion, 1.2 mbpd PSU refinery at Raigarh on India's west coast. It is also to acquire a fifth of the Reliance refinery at Jamnagar and to participate in India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves. If realised, these investments could total nearly \$30 billion, catapulting the kingdom to fourth position among countries investing in India.
- Earlier, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had committed to investing \$100 billion in India.
- Setting up of a bilateral Strategic Partnership Council (SPC) to be co-chaired by the Indian Prime Minister and the Saudi Crown Prince is a defining development. Given the centralised nature of executive at both ends, it would, hopefully, expedite the decision-making process.

Way ahead

- Among the potential areas for next stage of bilateral cooperation could be greater bilateral synergy in Indian infrastructure, agriculture, start-ups, skilling and IT.
- Shifting some labour-intensive establishments from Saudi Arabia to India would serve the respective national priorities by reducing the kingdom's expatriate population and boosting 'Make in India'.

Conclusion

The World Bank's recently published "Ease of Doing Business" rankings included both India and Saudi Arabia in its ten "most improved economies". When the sub-region's two largest, top-performing and complementary economies join hands, shouldn't the sum be greater than the total of the parts?

CRAMPED PRISONS

Category: GS 2 (Governance)

Theme of the article

Jails in India remain crowded as few States have implemented reforms for decongestion.

Introduction

With an average occupancy rate of 115% of their capacity, Indian jails continue to remain congested and overcrowded, numbers in the National Crime Records Bureau's "Prison Statistics India – 2017" report have revealed.

Facts on jail on congestion

- In 16 of the 28 States covered in the report, occupancy rate was higher than 100% with States and Union Territories such as Uttar Pradesh (165%), Chhattisgarh (157.2%), Delhi (151.2%) and Sikkim (140.7%) faring the worst.
- Despite the Supreme Court and other institutions regularly raising the issue of prison reforms and decongestion in jails, it is evident that the measures taken have been piecemeal in most States.
- While overall occupancy rates have come down from 140% in 2007 to 115% in 2017, only a few States have, in this period, gone about building more jails or increasing capacity in prisons in line with the changes in inmate population.
- Some States such as Tamil Nadu have reduced their prison occupancy rate (to 61.3%) by increasing the number of jails and their capacity besides reducing arrests for actions unless there is a cognisable offence made out.
- Rajasthan and Maharashtra have not managed to augment jail capacity to fit in the increased inmate population in the past decade, while States such as U.P. continue to have high occupancy rates because of increased inmate population despite a relative increase in prison capacity.
- More than 68% of those incarcerated were undertrials, indicating that a majority were poor and were unable to execute bail bonds or provide sureties.

Law Commission recommendations

- There were a series of recommendations made by the Law Commission of India in its 268th report in May 2017 that highlighted the inconsistencies in the bail system as one of the key reasons for overcrowding in prisons.
- Clearly, expediting the trial process for such prisoners is the most important endeavour, but short of this there are ways to decongest prisons by granting relief to undertrials.
- The Commission recommended that those detained for offences that come with a punishment of up to seven years of imprisonment should be released on completing one-third of that period and for those charged with offences that attract a longer jail term, after they complete half of that period.
- For those who have spent the whole period as undertrials, the period undergone should be considered for remission.
- It also recommended that the police should avoid needless arrests, while magistrates should refrain from mechanical remand orders.

Conclusion

It is imperative that these recommendations are incorporated into law soonest. A system of holding undertrials for too long without a just trial process in overcrowded prisons that suffer problems of hygiene, management and discipline, is one that is ripe for recidivism. There is a greater chance of prisoners hardening as criminals rather than of them reforming and getting rehabilitated in such jail conditions.

FUSING TRADITIONAL MEDICINE WITH THE MODERN

Category: GS 3 (Health)

Theme of the article

Taking cues from the Chinese experience, India can integrate the education, research and practice of both systems

Introduction

Revival of the Indian systems of medicine, which comprises Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH), served as one of the sub-themes of the cultural nationalistic reassertion in the early 20th century against the imperialistic British reign.

Initiatives to promote AYUSH

- There are high hopes that the Narendra Modi government and its seeming nationalistic ardour will spell good times for the perennially neglected alternative medicine sector, especially Ayurveda.
- A number of initiatives to promote AYUSH have been recently announced. This includes:
 - ❖ creating AYUSH wings in defence and railway hospitals;
 - ❖ giving soft loans and subsidies for the establishment of private AYUSH hospitals and clinics; and
 - ❖ building institutes of excellence in teaching and research in AYUSH.
- Also, 12,500 dedicated AYUSH health and wellness centres are planned to be set up under the Ayushman Bharat mission.

A fraught relationship

- It is common knowledge that AYUSH's relationship with modern medicine has been fraught with multiple issues — including
 - ❖ quackery by AYUSH practitioners;
 - ❖ ridicule of AYUSH treatments and procedures by many; and
 - ❖ mindless cosmeticisation and export promotion of AYUSH products.
- However, little strategy has been devised to address these concerns. These issues are reflective of a sharp status gap between modern medicine and AYUSH that is highly detrimental for the optimal deployment of AYUSH resources. Merely expanding AYUSH's framework will only expand the present list of problems.

Integration of AYUSH with modern medicine

- True integration would require a concerted strategy for facilitating meaningful cross-learning and collaboration between the modern and traditional systems on equal terms.

This is the only way to address the subservient status of AYUSH and to foster its legitimate inclusion into mainstream health care.

- The Chinese experience of integrating Traditional Chinese Medicine with Western medicine makes for a good example.
- An Indian parallel could envision the integration of education, research, and practice of both systems at all levels. This can include training of AYUSH practitioners in modern medicine through curriculum changes and vice versa.
- However, this would entail substantial groundwork with respect to the prerequisites of such integration: namely,
 - ❖ building a strong traditional medicine evidence corpus;
 - ❖ delineating the relative strengths, weaknesses, and role of each system;
 - ❖ negotiating the philosophical and conceptual divergences between systems;
 - ❖ standardising and regulating AYUSH practices and qualifications; and
 - ❖ addressing the unique issues associated with research into AYUSH techniques.
- Recently, the National Medical Commission Act, 2019 was passed in the face of much opposition from the orthodox medical community, apparently signifying political will. There is no reason why the opposition to integration of traditional and modern systems cannot be nullified, particularly in view of the vast potential of AYUSH to contribute to universal health-care in India.
- In keeping with the recommendations of the Chopra Committee (1948), baby steps were taken to integrate the teaching of traditional and modern systems of medicines, proposals that were later scrapped. While the AYUSH lobby feared a loss of identity following such integration, the allopathic lobby alleged that standards of medical care would be diluted.
- This kind of isolationist approach goes against the cherished ideal of modern medicine to embrace concepts that are backed by evidence. In the case of traditional medicine, an isolationist attitude could deter scientific scrutiny and block some potential value addition.

Conclusion

An integrated framework should create a middle path — fusing the two systems, while still permitting some autonomy for each. Accordingly, a medium- and long-term plan for seamless integration should be developed expeditiously in view of the massive drive for achieving universal health care already under way in the country.

QUALITY ON TAP

Category: GS 3 (Environment)

Theme of the article

Empowering consumers with rights is essential in improving quality of water supply.

Context

The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution has released a report red-flagging tap water quality in major Indian cities.

Findings of the report

- Delhi has abysmal water quality,
- Chennai and Kolkata rank very low, and
- Mumbai is the only city with acceptable results.

Factors responsible for poor water quality

- City water systems are normatively required to comply with the national standard for drinking water, IS 10500:2012, but most obviously feel no compulsion to do so.
- Their lack of initiative could be attributed partly to the expanding footprint of packaged drinking water, especially in populous cities, coupled with the high dependence on groundwater in fast-growing urban clusters where State provision of piped water systems does not exist.
- On paper, the Indian standard has a plethora of quality requirements, including absence of viruses, parasites and microscopic organisms, and control over levels of toxic substances. But in practice, municipal water fails these tests due to the lack of accountability of the official agencies, and the absence of robust data in the public domain on quality testing.

Approach to deal with poor water quality

- The Centre's approach to the issue relies on naming and shaming through a system of ranking, but this is unlikely to yield results, going by similar attempts to benchmark other urban services. Making it legally binding on agencies to achieve standards and empowering consumers with rights is essential, because State governments would then take an integrated view of housing, water supply, sanitation and waste management.
- A scientific approach to water management is vital, considering that 21 cities — including many of those found to have unclean tap water — could run out of groundwater as early as 2020, as per a NITI Aayog report.
- On the issue of regular testing, there is a case to entrust a separate agency with the task in each State, rather than relying on the same agency that provides water to also perform this function.
- If data on water are made public on the same lines as air quality, it would ratchet up pressure on governments to act.
- For too long, the response of water departments to the challenge has been to chlorinate the supply, as this removes pathogens, ignoring such aspects as appearance, smell and taste. It is time to move beyond this and make tap water genuinely desirable.

AS THE SEAS COME CLOSER

Category: GS 3 (Environment)

Theme of the article

Large portions of coastal cities like Mumbai could be fully submerged by 2050.

How many people will be forced to migrate as a result of climate change?

Figures range from tens of millions to hundreds of millions, but the multiple entanglements of climate change make it difficult to get accurate estimates. People may move because of drought, violence, degradation of local ecosystems, war or job loss. Poverty, adverse effects

of globalisation and conflict may get worse with climate change, which is why it is often referred to as a “threat multiplier”.

Sea Level Rise

- Getting accurate sea level rise (SLR) projections has also always been difficult. Along with expansion of warm waters and melting of glaciers, subsidence of land also increases relative SLR.
- Models for glacier melt are not as well developed as other models that study global warming. SLR projections going beyond 2050 are therefore not as accurate as those until mid-century.
- There is broad agreement that if high emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) were to continue, average global SLR could be as high as two metres by the end of this century.

Effects of sea level rise

- Past studies, which used NASA’s Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) database, underestimated the land and people affected by SLR because tree-tops and tall buildings caused errors in assessments.
- A new study that uses neural networks to improve accuracy and finds that the area affected by SLR will be substantially more than previously estimated. This means that the various effects from SLR: coastal flooding, salt water intrusion into land, destruction of coastal infrastructure, communities and ecosystems will be much more than anticipated.
- While earlier measures suggest that five million people in India will be annually affected by coastal flooding, the new estimates point to 36 million; similarly, in Bangladesh instead of five million, 42 million will be threatened.
- By 2050, in a scenario that limits warming to 2°C above average pre-industrial temperatures, about 150 million people worldwide will be permanently below the high tide line along the coast and, by 2100, the numbers will rise to 360 million people.
- The new estimates indicate that about a billion people reside on land along the coast going up to an elevation of 10 metres (the low elevation coastal zone) and the bulk of them, more than two thirds, are below the five-metre elevation.
- Most of the people found to be at risk from coastal events live in Asia — residing in countries like China, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Japan. Very large fractions of coastal populations in these countries will be vulnerable.
- Other than Asia and the Netherlands, there are 20 countries (13 of which are small island nations) in which more than a tenth of their population are expected to reside below the high tide line by 2100.
- Coastal cities, such as Alexandria, Ho Chi Minh City, Basra and Shanghai are among the most vulnerable and large portions of Mumbai and Kolkata will be fully submerged by 2050.
- The effects on the economy, coastal communities, infrastructure and land will be immense and people living along the coast will be forced to move inland, probably to nearby towns and cities. When this is not possible, such as on small island nations or in low-lying delta regions like Vietnam, people will be forced to move across borders, thus affecting political stability.

What should India’s policies be?

- Preparing for SLR will entail protecting the coast through measures such as natural barriers, levees, flood barriers and even hard barriers.
- Stopping infrastructure construction along the coast and integrating anticipated SLR effects into coastal planning are essential.
- The government should not be in a situation of moral hazard where it ends up bailing out investors, insurers and others who have increased their exposure to risk.
- Planning for retreat from the most vulnerable areas well ahead of time is essential.
- Urban policies, especially in mid-size towns, should integrate proposals for new migrants.
- Turning border regions into fortress worlds will also not be justified, both in practical and ethical terms.
- What is required is preparation in advance with regional policies for labour, regional agreements for migration and for advance skill development.
- Given that South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change and the countries here share ecological zones, borders and coastlines, in addition to language and family histories, coordinated management of extreme events, advance preparation for migration into mid-size towns and better ecosystem support in the hinterland are useful ways to collaborate and build regional partnerships.
- And, since migrants in general cannot, for the most part, be distinguished from climate migrants, rights, services and policies need to be applied to all migrants. Otherwise, countries will create multiple classes of migrants — as many have accused Australia of doing — based on their reasons for moving and places of origin.

Conclusion

It is tempting to assume that these are impossible goals to set for India, but that is a short-sighted perspective. The protests across the world show that there is fervour for transformation to deal with the climate crisis. This is our historic moment to act decisively.

SECURITY COMPROMISED

Category: GS 3 (Security)

Theme of the article

India's claims to being a legitimate power in cyberspace have come under doubt following the recent revelations.

Context

Recently, it was identified that a DTrack data dump linked with the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant — indicating that a system (or more) in the plant had been breached by malware. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) confirmed the breach. Separately, WhatsApp sued the Israel-based NSO Group for the use of its 'Pegasus' spyware on thousands of WhatsApp users in the lead-up to the general elections.

Doubts in India's claims

These two incidents cast serious doubts on the India's claims to being a legitimate power in cyberspace, both due to the vulnerability of its critical information infrastructure and blatant disregard for the fundamental rights of its citizens online.

The Pegasus attack

- As for Pegasus, it appears that over a two-week period in May 2019, an as-yet unknown number of Indian journalists, academics and activists were among those targeted by a government agency using Israeli spyware bought off the shelf.
- Following a lawsuit, the NSO Group, the Israeli company that created the spyware, released a statement claiming that it licenses its product “only to vetted and legitimate government agencies”.
- There are but a handful of agencies that are authorised under the Information Technology Act, 2000 to intercept, monitor and decrypt data. Should the fingers point to the National Technical Research Organisation, the country’s foremost TECHINT gathering agency?

Important issues highlighted by these cases

- There are three glaring issues highlighted by these cases.
 - ❖ First, contrary to what the NPCIL may claim, air-gapped systems are not invulnerable. Stuxnet crossed an air gap, crippled Iran’s nuclear centrifuges and even spread across the world to computers in India’s critical infrastructure facilities. It is also not enough to suggest that some systems are less important or critical than others — a distributed and closed network is only as strong as its weakest link.
 - ❖ Second, with the Indian military announcing that it will modernise its nuclear forces, which may include the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence and other cybercapabilities, the apparent absence of robust cybersecurity capability is a serious cause for concern. If it cannot secure even the outer layer of networks linking its nuclear plants, what hope does the government have of inducting advanced technologies into managing their security?
 - ❖ Third, the surveillance of Indian citizens through WhatsApp spyware in the lead-up to the general elections highlights once again the government’s disregard for cybersecurity.
- Ironically, these instances point out to a weakening of India’s cybersovereignty: the government comes across as incapable of protecting its most critical installations and, by rendering digital platforms susceptible to spyware, limiting its own agency to prosecute and investigate cybercrime.
- These incidents also fly in the face of the country’s claims to being a responsible power as a member of export control regimes such as the Wassenaar Arrangement.

Conclusion

If India plans to leverage offensive and defensive cybercapabilities, which are of course its right as a sovereign power, it needs to get serious about cybersecurity. The security of a billion hand-held devices are of equal strategic value to the country’s nuclear assets.

TURNING THE POLICY FOCUS TO CHILD UNDERNUTRITION

Category: GS 2 (Social Sector)

Introduction

The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) report, brought out recently by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, assumes salience, especially against two important factors.

- One, the latest Global Hunger Index (GHI), 2019 ranks India at the 102nd position out of 117 countries.
- Two, India's past performance in reducing child undernutrition has been rather mixed: there was a moderate decline in stunting but not in wasting..

Educated mothers

Stunting among children under four years came down from 46% to 19%, a whopping 27% points decline, when maternal education went up from illiteracy/no schooling to 12 years of schooling completed. This phenomenal decline was also true for the number of underweight children.

Decline in wasting

- The extent of decline in wasting is larger than that of stunting: about 4% points within 22 months.
- Uttarakhand, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana have reduced wasting by 10% points or more within just 30 months or less, the best performer being Uttarakhand that has reduced wasting by 14% points.
- Surprisingly, these States have not performed equally well in reducing stunting, despite the fact that wasting and stunting share many common causes.

What can be done?

- Ending open defecation and enhancing access to safe water and sanitation are indeed appropriate policy goals, which need to be sustained. However, ending open defecation alone will not reduce stunting phenomenally, as is evident from the experience of Bangladesh.
- One aspect, which is yet to be firmly embedded into nutrition policy, is dietary diversity. It is important to move away from the present focus on rice and wheat, which studies denounce as 'staple grain fundamentalism,' of Public Distribution System (PDS), to a more diversified food basket, with an emphasis on coarse grains.

THE MYTHS AROUND FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS

Category: GS 3 (Foreign Trade)

Theme of the article

FTAs can ensure market access to only the right quality products at competitive prices

Introduction

India's decision not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has led to an avalanche of write-ups, editorials and interviews. Most looked at the effect of the decision around four issues: exports, investments, integration into the global value chain (GVC) and domestic industry. Let us use another source for insights — experiences countries have had with free trade agreements (FTAs).

Impact on exports

- First, do FTAs lead to an increase in exports? Few economists have argued that by not signing the RCEP, Indian exporters would miss on exporting to RCEP countries.
- However, India has FTAs with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, South Korea, and three-fourths of the bilateral trade already happens zero duty. India also has a small preferential trade agreement with China.
- But the mere signing of an FTA does not guarantee an increase in exports. Chances of exports increasing are low if import duty of the partner country is low at 1-3%.
- Thus, FTAs are of no use for exporting to Singapore, Hong Kong, as regular (Most Favoured Nation) import duties are zero.
- FTAs with Malaysia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, etc. benefit few product groups only as more than 60% of imports into these countries happen at zero duty for all countries. There is little additional market access.
- Even the high import duties coming down to zero through the FTAs do not guarantee exports. Japan reduced duty from 10% to zero for Indian apparels through an FTA in 2011. But India's apparel exports to Japan have nosedived from \$255 million in 2010 to \$152 million in 2018.
- To summarise, FTAs cut import duties, but this is only one of many factors that decide if exports will increase.

Investment Flow

- Does a lower import duty regime help in getting significant investments? Most experts have argued in its favour.
- Let us look at evidence from the automobile industry in Australia and India. Australia, in 1987, produced 89% of the cars it used. It protected the car industry through a high 45% import duty. But the share of locally produced vehicles came down as the duties were reduced. Today, Australia imports nearly all cars as tariffs came further down to a 5% level. Most manufacturers such as Nissan, Ford, General Motors, Toyota, Mitsubishi, etc. which produced cars in Australia shut shop.
- But, India could attract significant investments in the car sector on account of high import duties. This resulted in the development of an indigenous car and auto component industry. Now, with the car industry maturing, India can think of lowering import duties to promote competition.
- Most investments are a result of the package such as tax cuts, cheap land, power, etc. offered by the host country. The quality of investments increases as a country moves towards becoming a more efficient economy. Such countries are in an ideal position to become manufacturing and services hubs.

Global Value Chains (GVCs)

- Third, do FTAs ease entry into GVCs? Most commentators have lamented that by not signing RCEP, India will miss becoming part of GVCs. It is not so simple.
- Actual value chain activities are time critical. And a country cannot become a significant part of such value chains unless it has efficient ports, customs, shipping, roads and a regulatory compliance infrastructure. GVC production also requires harmonisation of product and quality standards.

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- For these reasons, FTAs alone do not make a country part of a value chain, which will be disrupted if a shipment is delayed or is of non-standard quality. ASEAN, Japan and Korea constitute the core of the Asian regional value chain. But despite FTAs with these countries, India has a weak presence in the electronics, machinery or apparels value chains.

Protectionism

- Four, is Indian industry protectionist? Cheaper imports may replace products from domestic industries. But, if the duty on a product is low at say 3%, the local industry may not care much about the duty elimination through any FTA.
- India ranks higher than the U.S., Japan, and China in the trade openness ratio, the globally accepted measure. The ratio is the sum of all imports and exports as % of GDP.

Steps to have an effect

An FTA's possible impact on the economy or exports is subject to many caveats.

- Improvement in firm-level competitiveness is a must.
- The government can help by ensuring lower duties on raw materials and intermediates than on the concerned finished products.
- It can set up an elaborate quality and standards infrastructure for essential products. Most countries regulate imports through such requirements and not through tariffs.

PUSH FOR THE BETTER

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Context

Recent, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved the strategic disinvestment of five public sector enterprises, namely, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL), Container Corporation of India Ltd, Shipping Corporation of India, Tehri Hydro Power Development Corporation (THDC) and the North Eastern Electric Power Corporation (NEEPCO).

Reasons behind these disinvestments

- The proceeds from these stake sales will help the Centre move closer to achieving its disinvestment target of Rs 1.05 lakh crore for this year.
- So far this year, the government has been able to garner only Rs 17,364 crore or 16.5 per cent of its budgeted disinvestment target.
- The Centre is facing huge shortfalls in both direct and indirect tax revenues, and its gross tax revenues have grown by a mere 1.5 per cent in the first half (April to September) of the current financial year.

The concern with the recent disinvestment

- With only four months to go, it is not clear whether these stake sales can be wrapped up by the end of the financial year.
- It should also not be another case of public sector firms stepping in to buy these entities in order to bail out the government.

Way forward

- The government would benefit from drawing up a more ambitious, better laid out, medium-term plan for disinvestment, rather than approaching it as merely an arrangement for plugging its revenue gaps.
- It should draw up a list of potential candidates and release an advance calendar, indicating the period of disinvestment. This would help draw in more buyers.
- Further, the proceeds from disinvestment should be used only for the creation of new assets, not to meet its revenue expenditure.

A CUT ABOVE

Category: GS 3 (Defence)

Context

Consequent to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement from the Red Fort, the proposed structure for the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has been deliberated upon. We should soon be seeing the first CDS take charge.

The debate

The proposed charter of the CDS, his powers and status, etc, has been debated intensely. One school of thought recommends an evolutionary, incremental expansion of the role, while some feel he should be given greater operational control ab initio.

What should be the answer to this dilemma?

- Retention of existing warfighting structures, while the CDS takes control of newer organisations being set up for tackling future threats, has some merit.
- Development of future technologies and means to face emerging threats in the cyber, space, missiles domain, nurturing of AI-based platforms, usage of drones for various roles and such modern conflict realities is indeed important. These advancements are extremely costly, and the CDS can facilitate optimal, cost-effective integrated development and deployment of such structures.
- Modern war and warfighting has tremendous economic costs. Defence budgets are invariably inadequate to meet the "wishlists", and intense prioritisation of capabilities is inevitable. The CDS can be the vital fulcrum to undertake such prioritisation and rationalisation, and, therefore, can play a stellar role in the perspective planning and development function.
- Considering the high cost of future technology, the CDS can also contribute towards optimisation of existing structures. Such review of existing establishments and manpower should also be an assigned task for him.
- Future conflict situations would possibly need integrated application of fighting formations and resources, with unitary operational control of deployed elements. The CDS would be better placed for integrated employment of war fighting potential, and therefore logically needs to be part of the operational control chain.

Way forward

- The CDS should not become another interposed level between the Raksha Mantri and the service chiefs, whose access to the minister should remain as prevalent.
- In effect, the CDS should be in charge of newer domains and organisations, and be well poised to optimise, cut costs and prioritise different service demands.
- He could be an effective mentor for realising our military-industrial power potential, and for modernisation and capability enhancement.
- His tri-service position makes him the most suited driver for the integrated application of warfighting resources and facilitates unitary control in integrated operations.
- The CDS also has a primary advisory role, and therefore should not be boxed into administrative efficiency roles, but must be in the operational control chain.
- In the interim, the CDS may not override the operational responsibility of the service chiefs, and in due course, his operational responsibility can expand and become more “hands-on”.

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that the CDS would play a far more critical role in the national security apparatus, than the three service chiefs. Our higher defence organisation would finally mature, and be more in tune with our rising power ranking.

THE OPACITY AROUND ELECTORAL BONDS

Category: GS 2 (Polity)

Theme of the article

If big money entirely funds elections in a secretive way, democracy as we know it will not exist.

Context

The recent disclosures that the Election Commission (EC) and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had expressed reservations about the Electoral Bonds scheme highlight the importance of this issue.

In 2017, RBI wrote to the Finance Minister that allowing any entity other than the central bank to issue bearer bonds is fraught with considerable risk. The EC warned that this would allow illegal foreign funds to be routed to political parties.

Need for funds

- Money plays an increasingly larger role in elections. This was not so about 50 years ago.
- Today, India spends more on elections than the U.S. with a per capita GDP that is 3% of the U.S.
- Today, having more money does not guarantee success, but, at the other extreme, having no money certainly guarantees defeat.
- Some party may win a one-off election by spending very little, but sustaining victory over several elections requires funds.

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- To reach voters, candidates and parties use hoardings and advertisements on printed, electronic and social media. They hold election rallies. They travel and have to pay party workers.
- In India, there is the added expenditure of buying votes through distribution of gifts, money, liquor and so on.

Public funding

- Given that money is required, a central issue is whether a winning candidate or party will work for the public or for those who have funded them. So, some countries have public funding of elections.
- Campaign funding laws and reforms are a constantly evolving subject internationally. They focus on public funding, limits on expenditure, limits on donations, transparency in funding and penalties for non-compliance.

Issues with electoral bonds

- The voter does not know who is funding whom through electoral bonds.
- The bank knows the purchaser of the bonds as well as the party that cashed it. The law agencies can obtain this information. The ruling party can use this to demand donations for itself, prevent donations to others, and use the law enforcement agencies to harass those who donate to rival parties.
- Donation limits have been removed. In theory, a large corporate could buy the government using electoral bonds.
- It is true that black money cannot be used to buy electoral bonds. However, black money can be used outside the scheme during elections. The reduction in cash donations from ₹20,000 to ₹2,000 is not good enough. There are parties with hundreds of crores of declared income who claim that all the funds were received from small cash donations of ₹100 or less.
- The ruling party gets nearly all the funds.

Way forward

- Any political party can voluntarily choose to disclose its funds and sources. There is no law that prevents them from doing so. They can also state publicly that they will henceforth not use black money.
- Various commissions, including the Election Commission, have given detailed recommendations on suitable remedies. Government should act on them.
- We also need to benchmark ourselves against the best international practices and laws on campaign funding.
- There should be complete transparency in all funding.
- Political parties need to be under the Right to Information Act.
- There must be spending limits as well as donation limits, especially in a highly unequal society like ours, and strict penalties for flouting rules and the law.
- Public funding needs to be examined and introduced with proper checks and balances.
- Voters need to demand changes and we need voter awareness campaigns.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court is hearing a petition on the electoral bond issue. Let us hope Indian democracy survives without going through another crisis.

TOWARDS A COLOMBO RESET

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Theme of the article

With a strong government in Sri Lanka, it is time for Delhi to think boldly about its relationship with Colombo.

Introduction

Even before the new president of Sri Lanka, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was sworn in, the narrative about Colombo's renewed "tilt" towards China and against India had taken root. This, however, misrepresents the complex power play involving Beijing, Delhi and Colombo.

The Great Game

The Great Game in the Subcontinent is not limited to just India and China. It is quite easy to forget the considerable interests and influence of many other powers in the region, including the US, European Union, Japan and Russia.

Reset in India-SriLanka relations

- The reset involves addressing the structural factors that have complicated the relationship between Delhi and Colombo.
- One of them is the China question. India is acutely aware that China's economic and strategic salience in the Subcontinent will continue to grow and is not tied to the regime leadership in its neighbourhood.
- India can't expect its neighbours to shut down economic and commercial engagement with Beijing, notwithstanding the many questions about the terms of China's assistance on projects, including those under the Belt and Road Initiative. But Delhi will be right to ask Colombo not to take steps with Beijing that threaten India's security.
- Delhi and Colombo need a clear understanding of mutual red lines relating to national security and a political comfort level to discuss cases that fall within the orange zone. That should help prevent the recurrence of the controversy over Chinese submarines in Colombo port that generated so much bad blood between the two nations in 2014.
- As the world rediscovers the geopolitical value of Sri Lanka at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, Colombo has huge opportunities to leverage its location for national benefit. A prudent and important part of that strategy would be to avoid provoking India. Delhi too would be wise to be mindful of Colombo's security concerns and find ways to develop long-term strategic cooperation with Sri Lanka.
- Delhi needs to invest some political capital in resolving problems such as the long-standing dispute over fisheries.
- Beyond its objection to China's BRI projects, Delhi, either alone or in partnership with like-minded countries like Japan, should offer sustainable terms for infrastructure development.

- Delhi also needs to contribute more to the development of Colombo's defence and counter-terror capabilities.
- If the Tamil question continues to have a big impact on Sri Lanka's foreign policy, Delhi needs to look beyond old formulae to try and encourage reconciliation within Lanka and across the Palk Strait with Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

With a strong government in Sri Lanka, it is time for Delhi to think boldly about its relationship with Colombo.

GOING BEYOND KARTARPUR

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Introduction

The Kartarpur Sahib Corridor, which has materialised against all odds, is a political enigma. Some see it as a ray of hope amidst the darkness that has enveloped India-Pakistan ties. For others, it is very much part of the problem that afflicts the bilateral relationship.

The differences of opinion on Kartarpur

- For former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the corridor could be a harbinger of improved relations between Delhi and Islamabad. But his party colleague and chief minister of Punjab, Amarinder Singh, had consistently drawn attention to the possibility that the initiative is part of Pakistan's longstanding interest in stoking Sikh separatism.
- In Pakistan, too, differences have been manifest. Although Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Army have both been eager to promote the corridor, the differences between them have been open. The Army, for example, contradicted Khan's affirmation that Sikh pilgrims can enter through the border without passports. Many Islamic leaders in Pakistan have criticised the corridor as a violation of the nation's sovereignty.

Significance of the corridor

- There is no formal dialogue between the two countries for quite some time now. Nor is there any speculation about a back-channel dialogue that is sustaining a minimum level of communication between the two leaderships.
- Political and military tensions are running high since the Pulwama terror attack in February, India's bombing of the Balakot terror training camp in response, the skirmish between the two air forces that followed, and Pakistan's angry reaction to India's decision to change the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir.
- Thus, the corridor is a remarkable exception to the current dynamic between India and Pakistan.

The Punjab aspect of India-Pakistan relations

- The corridor has drawn attention to an important but neglected dimension of the relations between Delhi and Islamabad-the Punjab question.

- The Kashmir issue has long dominated the regional framing of India-Pakistan relations within the Subcontinent and beyond. The intractable nature of the dispute casts a pessimistic shadow over the region.
- But Punjab, in recent years at least, has often shown the possibilities for potentially transformative breakthroughs in bilateral relations.
- Unlike Kashmir, which is a loose collection of cantons that came together accidentally, Punjab is a coherent geographic and civilisational space.
- If the diverse regions of Kashmir have been marginal to the geopolitical evolution of the Subcontinent until the middle of the 20th century, Punjab has been very central to the ebb and flow of Indian history through the ages.
- In contrast to Jammu and Kashmir, there is shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity that binds the people of Punjab. This shared identity has indeed survived the unspeakable tragedies that Partition inflicted upon the province.
- It is the cultural bond as well as the shared sorrow that makes the region most eager in the Subcontinent for a reconciliation between India and Pakistan.
- While some in Pakistan might want to turn the Kartarpur corridor into the Khalistan card, India must focus on the possibility of strengthening what unites the people of the province — the idea of Punjabin.
- Since the late 1990s, the governments led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh in Delhi, as well as the Congress and Akali governments have actively sought to develop economic and cultural cooperation across the Radcliffe Line that divides the two Punjabs.
- There were moments in the last two decades when these initiatives appeared very close to fruition. The plans included the expansion of the scope of overland trade at the Attari-Wagah border, facilitating hydrocarbon and electricity exports from the Indian Punjab to Pakistan and expanding cultural contacts.

Way forward

- The fact that the Kartarpur corridor has been realised despite Pakistan's traditional logic on the relationship with India, should encourage Delhi to reconsider initiatives to promote cooperation across the Radcliffe Line.
- Even more important, Delhi must look beyond the formal dialogue with Islamabad and the para diplomacy between Chandigarh and Lahore.
- Delhi should recognise that the footprint of Punjab and its people goes beyond India and Pakistan — it has significant influence in many parts of the world.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi could add a new layer to his diaspora diplomacy if he promotes the celebration of 'Punjabin'.

Conclusion

We need to transcend the Kartarpur exception, facilitate the long-overdue collective reflection on what binds us together in the Subcontinent and how we might overcome our current divisions.

BRICS MATTERS

Category: GS 2 (International bodies)

Introduction

The only thing remarkable about this year's summit of the BRICS forum in Brasilia is that it took place at all.

Issues with BRICS

- If his recent predecessors promoted the BRICS as part of their left-wing agenda for Brazil, Brazil's president Bolsonaro seemed ready to dissociate Brazil from that tradition.
- The internal contradictions among the five member states — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa — are real and not easily overcome. None of them are sharper than the contradictions between India and China.

Development of BRICS

- It was Russia that helped develop the forum and sustain it. The Russian objective was to mount international opposition to the United States in the unipolar moment that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- As China rose in the 21st century and found new tensions rocking its ties with the US, Beijing found much in common with Russia in limiting US dominance of the world.
- Beyond geopolitics, Beijing also found the BRICS a useful forum to promote a global economic agenda that is in sync with its emergence as the world's biggest exporter and the second largest economy all set to replace the US as number one.
- For both Russia and China, having three large developing nations — India, Brazil and South Africa — as partners in their enterprise makes eminent political sense.

India's gains from the BRICS

- India's gains from the BRICS are not obvious. Nor is it evident if India's interests are in alignment with the declared policies of the BRICS.
- Consider, for example, the thundering BRICS declaration on defending multilateralism. Many of India's problems in the multilateral domain are rooted in Beijing's opposition — it stalled efforts to join the UNSC as a permanent member and the Nuclear Suppliers Group.
- On trade, while it is easy to demonise President Trump's protectionist policies, Delhi's biggest trade deficit is with China. India has cited China's economic threat for not joining the Asian trading bloc — RCEP.
- On countering terrorism, which is a major foreign policy priority for India, China views the problem through Pakistani eyes.
- Delhi is also acutely conscious of two other factors. One is the eagerness of Beijing and Moscow to do bilateral deals with Washington. It is also aware of the profound imbalance of power within the BRICS. For, the Chinese economy is twice as large as the other four put together.

Conclusion

India's persistence with the BRICS says less about its ideological convictions. It is more about Delhi's strategy to hedge against the many great global uncertainties of the moment.

OVER TO THE STATES

Category: GS 2/3

Theme of the article

With the economic centre of gravity shifting to states, India's growth hinges on cooperative federalism.

Introduction

In the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index released last month, India ranked 63, an impressive jump from its lowly rank of 142. Yet, there is anecdotal evidence of investors being frustrated by venality, indifference and corruption at the operating level.

The growing importance of states in India's economic management

- In the early years of our republic, the Centre dominated across all domains — political, economic and administrative — and states, even those led by leaders with political heft, acquiesced to this unequal arrangement.
- The reaction to central dominance came in the early 1980s when strong regional leaders started agitating against "the hegemony of the Centre".
- As a consequence, the Centre yielded to the states, but largely in the political space. Much of the economic policy control stayed with the Centre which decided not just public investment but even private investment through its industrial and import licensing policies, leaving the states on the margins of economic management.
- That arrangement started to change with the onset of reforms from 1991. Three trends, in particular, have shifted the economic centre of gravity from the Centre to the states
 - ❖ The first is the change in the content of the reform agenda. The Centre could push through the reforms of the 1990s without even informing, much less consulting, the states. In contrast, the second-generation reforms on the agenda now shift the emphasis from product to factor markets like land, labour and taxation, which need, not just acquiescence, but often the consent of states.
 - ❖ The second factor driving the economic centre of gravity towards states is the changing dynamics of our fiscal federalism. Together, states collect 40 per cent of the combined revenue, but spend as much as 60 per cent of the combined expenditure. More important than the aggregates is the greater autonomy that states now enjoy in determining their expenditure. Thus, the states now not only get a larger quantum of central transfers but also get to decide on how to spend that larger quantum. And how states manage their public finances matters much more than before.
 - ❖ The third major trend behind the states' growing importance in economic federalism is their critical role in creating a conducive investment climate in the country. Much of the responsibility for improving the ease of doing business rests not with Delhi but with the states. This highlights the need for coordinated action.

Conclusion

India's prospects, including our aspiration for a \$5 trillion economy, depend on the Centre and the states working together. If ever there was an opportune moment for a big push on cooperative federalism, it is now.

NOT AS YOU SAY, BUT AS YOU DO

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Theme of the article

India will now find it difficult to tough-talk leaders in the neighbourhood, all with strong

Context

Within a day of his swearing-in as Sri Lanka's new President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa received a visit from Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar in Colombo, and accepted an invitation to visit India. It denotes a welcome proactiveness in India's relationship with countries in the region, which has come to mark the government's "Neighbourhood First" policy.

Similar initiatives by India on earlier occasions

- In February 2018, the late External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had made a similarly remarkable trip to Kathmandu, where she met K.P. Sharma Oli two weeks before he had even been sworn in as Prime Minister, to invite him to New Delhi.
- Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also travelled to Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka at the beginning of his tenure. He had, in 2018, attended the swearing-in ceremony of Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and, later, also invited leaders from the neighbourhood to his own ceremony this year.

Improving India-Sri Lanka relations

- Rapid improvement in intelligence sharing between the two countries, especially since the Easter Sunday terror attacks is needed.
- Another pillar of bilateral ties in the region rests on development projects and economic relations. On this, the task before both New Delhi and Colombo should be easier, as they only need to complete projects that have already been announced in the last few years to show a breakthrough.
- In the Eastern Province, little progress has been made on projects. That former Completion of these should become a priority, including India's plan to develop Trincomalee port and oil tank farms, and LNG terminals near Colombo.
- Finally, India's plans to counter Chinese investment will be tested by the pace of the joint India-Japan agreement to develop the East Container Terminal at Colombo harbour, and other projects like the offer to operate the Mattala Airport.

Challenges for India in the sub-continent

- Given that the countries in the subcontinent that India engages with now have elected leaders with big political mandates, New Delhi has a new set of challenges to its policy.
- Not just in Sri Lanka, but also across the subcontinent, India has lagged behind in investment figures.

- While India's Foreign Direct Investment in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal was more than that by China in 2014-2015, the order was reversed by 2017-2018.
- This is also true of the Maldives, where despite the ouster of the pro-China regime a year ago, and a four-fold increase in New Delhi's aid to Male since then, no Chinese project has yet been cancelled.
- In Sri Lanka, while Mr. Gotabaya has suggested that the lease that gave Beijing control of Hambantota port will be renegotiated, there is little indication that any other loan or project will be reversed.
- Nepal has, in fact, stepped up its engagement with China after President Xi Jinping's recent visit, with a number of road, rail, infrastructure projects and dry port access in the works.
- Bangladesh, arguably India's closest partner in the region, saw \$3.6 billion in FDI from China last year, along with 'Belt and Road promises' of \$50 billion.
- It will be harder for New Delhi to tough-talk leaders in the neighbourhood, as it once did, on investments from China, especially as the government itself seeks to attract the same into India.
- India's internal issues like the dilution of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Bill, the National Register for Citizenship and detention centres for illegal residents, and cases of mob lynching are all being discussed intensely in capitals in the neighbourhood and will impact their conversations with New Delhi.
- India's statement that it "expects" Sri Lanka to keep constitutional promises to bring "equality, justice, peace and dignity" to the minorities in Sri Lanka may, hence, not be taken seriously, amidst concerns over the treatment of India's own minorities.
- Similarly, protests that India made in the past with the Maldives over political arrests or efforts pushing for elections in Afghanistan will hold less water in the future, given the government's failure to hold elections in Jammu and Kashmir and the prolonged incarceration of the Valley's political leaders.
- And, it will be hard for New Delhi to lecture Nepal on constitutional rights for Madhesis; Pakistan and Bangladesh on treatment of their Hindu and Sikh minorities; and Myanmar on Rohingya, when the government is not seen upholding those ideals itself.

Conclusion

On most of the issues, strongmen (and women) in the region are likely to do not as New Delhi says, but as New Delhi does.

INDIA'S FOOD BASKET MUST BE ENLARGED

Category: GS 2 (Health) GS 3 (Agriculture)

Theme of the article

Agrobiodiversity can help improve the country's poor ranking in the Global.

Context

India is ranked 102 in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) out of 117 qualified countries.

Definition of hunger

Hunger is defined by caloric deprivation; protein hunger; hidden hunger by deficiency of micronutrients.

Extent of hunger in India

- Nearly 47 million or four out of 10 children in India do not meet their potential because of chronic undernutrition or stunting.
- This leads to diminished learning capacity, increased chronic diseases, low birth-weight infants from malnourished parents.
- The global nutrition report pegs 614 million women and more than half the women in India aged 15-49 as being anaemic.

Nutrition Garden

- Recently, the Ministry of Human Resources Development brought out school 'nutrition garden' guidelines encouraging eco-club students to identify fruits and vegetables best suited to topography, soil and climate.
- These gardens can give students lifelong social, numerical and presentation skills, care for living organisms and team work, besides being used in the noon-meal scheme.
- Students also learn to cultivate fruits and vegetables in their homes and this could address micronutrient deficiencies.

Importance of Agrobiodiversity

- Agrobiodiversity — relating to diversity of crops and varieties — is crucial in food security, nutrition, health and essential in agricultural landscapes.
- Out of 2,50,000 globally identified plant species, about 7,000 have historically been used in human diets.
- Today, only 30 crops form the basis of the world's agriculture and just three species of maize, rice and wheat supply more than half the world's daily calories.
- Genetic diversity of crops, livestock and their wild relatives, are fundamental to improve crop varieties and livestock breeds. We would not have thousands of crop varieties and animal breeds without the rich genetic pool. India is a centre of origin of rice, brinjal, citrus, banana, cucumber species.
- Agrobiodiversity helps nutrition-sensitive farming and bio-fortified foods. For instance, moringa (drumstick) has micro nutrients and sweet potato is rich in Vitamin A. There are varieties of pearl millet and sorghum rich in iron and zinc.

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems

- Across the world, 37 sites are designated as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), of which three are Indian — Kashmir (saffron), Koraput (traditional agriculture) and Kuttanad (below sea-level farming).
- In India, over 811 cultivated plants and 902 of their wild relatives have been documented. Our promising genetic resources include rice from Tamil Nadu (Konamani), Assam (Agni bora) and Kerala (Pokkali), Bhalia Wheat and mushroom (Guchhi) from Himachal Pradesh and rich farm animal native breeds.

Development goals

- The UN Sustainable Development Goal 2 advocates for Zero Hunger and the Aichi Biodiversity Target focuses on countries conserving genetic diversity of plants, farm livestock and wild relatives.

- It emphasises that countries develop strategies and action plans to halt biodiversity loss and reduce direct pressure on biodiversity.

Recommendations to increase agrobiodiversity

- The Centre for Biodiversity Policy and Law (CEBPOL), a policy advocacy unit of the National Biodiversity Authority, came out with recommendations to increase India's agrobiodiversity in 2019.
- These include a comprehensive policy on 'ecological agriculture' to enhance native pest and pollinator population providing ecosystem services for the agricultural landscape.
- It suggested promotion of the bio-village concept of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) for ecologically sensitive farming; conserving crop wild relatives for crop genetic diversity; providing incentives for farmers cultivating native landrace varieties and those conserving indigenous breeds of livestock and poultry varieties.
- The recommendations also include encouraging community seed banks in each agro-climatic zone so that regional biotic properties are saved and used by new generation farmers; preparing an agrobiodiversity index, documenting traditional practices through People's Biodiversity Registers, identifying Biodiversity Heritage Sites under provisions of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002; and strengthening Biodiversity Management Committees to conserve agrobiodiversity and traditional knowledge.
- Developing a national level invasive alien species policy is required to identify pathways, mapping, monitoring, managing, controlling and eradicating the invasive species and prioritising problematic species based on risk assessment studies.
- The consumption pattern and culinary diversity must be enlarged to increase India's food basket.
- To conserve indigenous crop, livestock and poultry breeds, it is recommended to mainstream biodiversity into agricultural policies, schemes, programmes and projects to achieve India's food and nutrition security and minimise genetic erosion.

GETTING ORGAN DONATION TO TICK AGAIN

Category: GS 2 (Health)

Theme of the article

Addressing the trust gap and inequality that are impacting family consent for organ donation is crucial.

Introduction

Organ donation day (November 30) is observed with the primary objective of promoting organ donation and transplantation so that a number of persons suffering from organ failure, such as the kidneys and liver, can get a new lease of life using organs gifted by others who have lost their lives (such as in road accidents or other reasons).

Trust deficit

- India needs to reflect on certain negative perceptions that appear to be growing and undermining the altruistic donation mindset of donor families.

- A classic example of this is the steep drop seen in Kerala — from 76 deceased donors in 2015 to eight in 2018 — due to a perceived scandal that private hospitals were declaring persons brain dead when they were not really so, in order to harvest their organs and profit from them.
- Highly privatised health-care system in India and the growing trust gap between patients and doctors trapped in the profit-seeking business of tertiary care; seeking second and third opinion on patient treatment is commonplace today.
- While an organ comes free, as donated to society, transplanting it to another person costs anywhere between ₹5 lakh and ₹25 lakh, including profit to the hospital. Hence the unavoidable suspicion that unethical practices may take place.

The cost factor

A majority of accident victims who become donors are lower middle class and below, while the majority of organ recipients are from the small number of persons who can afford transplant surgery and costly lifetime medication thereafter. The cost factor is the key reason why more than three quarters of donated hearts and lungs do not get taken.

Public hospitals cannot help

- A common solution to this, advocated by many, is that public hospitals should chip in and help the poor.
- However, in a country where public spend on health care remains an abysmal 1.2% of GDP — less than a third of what even some developing countries spend — priority should be on spending the limited allocation on areas that would benefit the greatest number of persons.
- A given amount, if spent on organ failure prevention will save many more lives than if spent on organ transplant.

Solutions

- One usual approach is to regulate hospitals through acts and rules.
- In the 25th year of the Transplantation of Human Organs Act, 1994, it is time to revisit its effectiveness.
- Substitution of bureaucratic procedures for hospital and transplant approval by self-declaration and mandatory sample verification involving civil society will improve compliance — as proved in other countries — and will also help get more hospitals involved.
- Further amendment is needed to ensure full State autonomy in this area, avoiding the Central government's interference in organ distribution, which is now demotivating many hospitals.
- Apart from this, all State organ distribution agencies need to make their operations fully transparent.
- Steps such as making online organ distribution norms and the full details on every organ donation will help build public confidence in the system.
- One approach could be to mandate that every third or fourth transplant done in a private hospital should be done free of cost to a public hospital patient. This will amount to cross-subsidisation, with the hospital, the doctor and the recipient footing the bill for free surgery to the section of the population that donates a majority of organs.

RUSSIA RETURNS TO INDIAN OCEAN

Category: GS 2 (International Relations)

Theme of the article

Delhi needs to engage with Moscow on the unfolding Sino-Russian naval partnership.

Introduction

Russia, long seen as marginal to the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean, is rejoining the major power scrum in the contested littoral. This should compel Delhi to think of its consequences for India's own regional strategy.

Recent Russian events in Indian Ocean

Three recent events highlight Russia's growing strategic interest in the Indian Ocean:

- Perekop, a training vessel of the Russian Navy, arrived at the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka.
- Russian long-distance "Black Jack" nuclear bombers flew to South Africa. This is the first time these aircraft have been deployed to Africa.
- The Russian and the Chinese are conducting a trilateral naval exercise with South Africa in the strategic waters off the Cape of Good Hope. Called, Moris, this is the first time that the three countries (India's partners in the BRICS forum along with Brazil) are doing such a joint exercise.

Policy followed by India in Indian Ocean

- Until now, Delhi's discourse on the Indian Ocean has been focused on the growing competition with China. This, in turn, has led to the rapid expansion of India's naval cooperation with the United States and Japan, as well as with its regional partners like Indonesia, Singapore and other ASEAN countries in the east, many nations in the Gulf as well as the east coast of Africa.
- More recently, India has also been developing a partnership with France, a resident power in the littoral and a traditional security provider in the Western Indian Ocean and Africa.
- India also wants to develop similar intensive engagement with Britain and the European Union.

Implications of Russia's return to Indian Ocean

While Russian might never dominate the Indian Ocean, it certainly has the capacity to shape the strategic outcomes in the region.

- For one, Moscow is one of the world's major arms exporters and has turned that into an effective leverage in the Indian Ocean region.
- Second, the success of Russia's military intervention in Syria in saving the Bashar al Assad regime has got the attention of many countries in the littoral struggling to cope with civil wars. The recent reports on Russia's growing security role — including the use of hybrid forces — in the Central African Republic, Libya and Mozambique are a testimony to this.
- Third, Russia is using its new security role in the region to gain privileged military access. Although it does not have a naval base in the Indian Ocean, acquiring one is probably a high priority.

- Fourth, as a permanent member, Russia also offers diplomatic protection for many regimes in the UNSC against Western pressures on such issues as human rights. Moscow's strong support to the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs is of great value to many African nations.
- Finally, Russian energy and mineral companies do offer important options for resource development in many parts of the littoral.

Conclusion

The joint exercise with South Africa this week brings the unfolding Sino-Russian naval partnership closer home to India. Delhi needs an early and intensive dialogue with Moscow on its Indian Ocean collaboration with China.

THE MISSING PIECE

Category: GS 3 (Economy)

Theme of the article

New labour code was long overdue. Failure to push labour reform could further hurt India's economic growth.

Context

Recently, the Union cabinet approved the Labour Code on Industrial Relations, 2019, which will allow companies to hire workers on fixed-term contracts across all sectors, to provide more flexibility to industry while ensuring equitable treatment to workers on social security benefits.

Significance of the Code

This Code marks the merging of provisions of the Industrial Relations Act, the Trade Union Act and the Industrial Employment Act, the third of a set of four codes the government has proposed as part of a broader labour reforms push early on in its second term.

Other labour reforms under process

Underway is the amalgamation of 44 national labour laws into four codes on wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare and occupational safety besides health and working conditions, to ease the burden on industry, and to protect the rights of workers.

Issues with the recent labour law changes

- The latest changes to labour laws follow a half-way house approach, with the threshold for government approval for sacking workers kept unchanged at 100, though there is flexibility for changing it through a notification.
- Getting these labour codes approved in the near term and persuading states, too, to come on board on a subject which is on the concurrent list, will be the next challenge.

Importance of labour reforms

- More than a quarter century after India's opening up, the missing piece has been labour reforms. That has had an impact on India's manufacturing sector — in terms of discouraging firms from making the next leap on productivity and in creating more jobs.

- This year's Economic Survey made the point that units in states that have made the transition towards more flexible labour markets were 25.4 per cent more productive than their counterparts in states which had rigid labour laws.

Way forward

- There is a strong case for greater flexibility on these laws to generate more jobs in an economy where 10 million young people enter the labour market annually and for easing the compliance burden for Indian industry.
- Vietnam, Indonesia and Bangladesh are far more competitive in labour intensive sectors, positioning their economies to take better advantage of the scenario unfolding in China because of a tariff war and with foreign companies moving out. India cannot afford to remain behind.

Conclusion

Given this competitive drive in the region to attract investment, any delay or failure to push through the proposed changes by a government which has the comfort of far more numbers this time could further hurt economic growth.

A POTENTIAL SEEDBED FOR PRIVATE PROFITS

Category: GS 3 (Agriculture)

Theme of the article

The new Seeds Bill is tilted against farmers' interests and loaded in favour of seed companies.

Context

After passing through at least two versions, Seeds Bill 2019 is now under Parliament's consideration. The earlier versions of the Bill, in 2004 and 2010, had generated heated debates.

International agreements

- In 1994, India signed the agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).
- In 2002, India also joined the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) Convention.
- Both TRIPS and UPOV led to the introduction of some form of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) over plant varieties.
- Member countries had to introduce restrictions on the free use and exchange of seeds by farmers unless the "breeders" were remunerated.
- In 1992, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) provided for "prior informed consent" of farmers before the use of genetic resources and "fair and equitable sharing of benefits" arising out of their use.
- In 2001, the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) recognised farmers' rights as the rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seeds. National governments had the responsibility to protect such farmers' rights.

PPVFR Act

- As India was a signatory to TRIPS and UPOV (that gave priority to breeders' rights) as well as CBD and ITPGRFA (that emphasised farmers' rights), any Indian legislation had to be in line with all.
- It was this delicate balance that the Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights (PPVFR) Act of 2001 sought to achieve. The PPVFR Act retained the main spirit of TRIPS viz., IPRs as an incentive for technological innovation.
- However, the Act also had strong provisions to protect farmers' rights. It recognised three roles for the farmer: cultivator, breeder and conserver. As cultivators, farmers were entitled to plant-back rights. As breeders, farmers were held equivalent to plant breeders. As conservers, farmers were entitled to rewards from a National Gene Fund.

The new Seeds Bill

- According to the government, a new Seeds Bill is necessary to enhance seed replacement rates in Indian agriculture, specify standards for registration of seed varieties and enforce registration from seed producers to seed retailers.
- While these goals are indeed worthy, any such legislation is expected to be in alignment with the spirit of the PPVFR Act. For instance, a shift from farm-saved seeds to certified seeds, which would raise seed replacement rates, is desirable. Certified seeds have higher and more stable yields than farm-saved seeds.

Role of private sector

- From the late-1980s, Indian policy has consciously encouraged the growth of private seed companies, including companies with majority foreign equity. Today, more than 50% of India's seed production is undertaken in the private sector.
- These firms have been demanding favourable changes in seed laws and deregulation of seed prices, free import and export of germplasm, freedom to self-certify seeds and restrictions on the use by farmers of saved seeds from previous seasons.
- Through the various versions between 2004 and 2019, private sector interests have guided the formulation of the Seeds Bill. As a result, even desirable objectives, such as raising the seed replacement rates, have been mixed up with an urge to encourage and protect the business interests of private companies.
- Not surprisingly, many of the Bill's provisions deviate from the spirit of the PPVFR Act, are against farmers' interests and in favour of private seed companies.

Issues with the Seeds Bill

- First, the Seeds Bill insists on compulsory registration of seeds. However, the PPVFR Act was based on voluntary registration. As a result, many seeds may be registered under the Seeds Bill but may not under the PPVFR Act.
- Second, as per the PPVFR Act, all applications for registrations should contain the complete passport data of the parental lines from which the seed variety was derived, including contributions made by farmers. This allows for an easier identification of beneficiaries and simpler benefit-sharing processes. Seeds Bill, on the other hand, demands no such information while registering a new variety. As a result, an important method of recording the contributions of farmers is overlooked and private companies are left free to claim a derived variety as their own.

- Third, the PPVFR Act, which is based on an IPR like breeders' rights, does not allow re-registration of seeds after the validity period. However, as the Seeds Bill is not based on an IPR like breeder's rights, private seed companies can re-register their seeds an infinite number of times after the validity period. Given this "ever-greening" provision, many seed varieties may never enter the open domain for free use.
- Fourth, while a vague provision for regulation of seed prices appears in the latest draft of the Seeds Bill, it appears neither sufficient nor credible. In fact, strict control on seed prices has been an important demand raised by farmers' organisations. They have also demanded an official body to regulate seed prices and royalties. In its absence, they feel, seed companies may be able to fix seed prices as they deem fit, leading to sharp rises in costs of cultivation.
- Fifth, according to the PPVFR Act, if a registered variety fails in its promise of performance, farmers can claim compensation before a PPVFR Authority. This provision is diluted in the Seeds Bill, where disputes on compensation have to be decided as per the Consumer Protection Act 1986. Consumer courts are hardly ideal and friendly institutions that farmers can approach.
- Sixth, according to the Seeds Bill, farmers become eligible for compensation if a plant variety fails to give expected results under "given conditions". "Given conditions" is almost impossible to define in agriculture. Seed companies would always claim that "given conditions" were not ensured, which will be difficult to be disputed with evidence in a consumer court.

The way ahead

- Given the inherent nature of seeds, farmer-friendly pieces of seed legislation need to be framed and executed.
- Inclination towards hybrids should be avoided as in hybrids, reuse of seeds is technically constrained.
- Public agricultural research systems should ensure that the choices between hybrids, varieties and farm-saved seeds remain open, and are not based on private profit concerns.
- Even if hybrids are the appropriate technological choice, seed prices can be kept affordable.

Conclusion

For the seed sector and its laws to be truly farmer-friendly, the public sector has to recapture its lost space.

RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Category: GS 2 (Governance)

Theme of the article

Punishments must reinforce people's faith in the rule of law, not undermine it

Context

The heinous rape and murder of a veterinarian in Hyderabad shook the collective conscience of India and resulted in an outcry for justice for the victim and outrage over the persisting lack of safety for women in public spaces.

Societal pressure for justice

- Such societal pressure for justice invariably weighs upon legal institutions, as the police are required to find the culprits with alacrity and the judiciary to complete the legal process without undue delay.
- But these institutions must uphold the rule of law and procedure even in such circumstances.

Is encounter justified?

The political sanction of “encounter killings” to deliver swift retribution would only be a disincentive for the police to follow due process and may even deter them from pursuing the course of justice. Far from ensuring justice to the victims, bending the law in such cases would only undermine people’s faith in the criminal justice system.

What should have been done?

The Telangana government had, in this case, issued orders for setting up a fast-track court to try the four accused and if the successful prosecution in the Delhi case had been applied as a precedent, this should have brought closure to the case in a time-bound manner.

People’s perception

The jubilation seen on social media platforms and on the streets over the killings by the police stems from the public anger and anguish over the burgeoning crimes against women. There is a perception that the legal institutions are ill-equipped to deal with such crimes and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Way forward

- The guidelines set by the Supreme Court to deal with such events, including the need for an independent investigation, must be strictly observed to get to the bottom of this sordid episode.
- Much more needs to be done in terms of registration and charge-sheeting of sexual crimes by police and addressing the pendency in court of such cases.
- Existing laws on sexual crimes and punishment need better application, but a recourse to brutal retribution as suggested unwisely by many is no solution.

Conclusion

Justice in any civilised society is not just about retribution, but also about deterrence, and in less serious crimes, rehabilitation of the offenders.