



# IAS PARLIAMENT

*Information is a Blessing*

A Shankar IAS Academy Initiative

## GIST OF IDSA

### NOVEMBER 2018



**Shankar IAS Academy™**

Door No 18, New Plot No 259 /109,  
AL Block, 4th Avenue, Shanthi Colony,  
Annanagar, Chennai - 600040.



## **I N D E X**

### **IDSA – NOVEMBER 2018**

1. Bhutan National Assembly Elections 2018 .....	3
2. Expectations on India-Bhutan Relations .....	5
3. Strategic Petroleum Reserves .....	7
4. Sri Lanka's Political Crisis.....	8
5. India's Mission on New Variants of Terrors.....	10
6. Significance of Kartarpur Corridor.....	12
7. India's North-South Connectivity Platform .....	13
8. India's Non-Alignment in Multipolar World.....	15
9. Azov Sea Dispute.....	16



## **IDSA – NOVEMBER 2018**

### **1. BHUTAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2018**

#### ***Why in news?***

- Bhutan completed its third National Assembly elections to the lower house of the Parliament.

#### ***What are the highlights of Bhutan elections?***

- The DrukNyamrupTshogpa (DNT) party won in the run-off election of the two phase system.
- LotayTshering, the president of DNT will be the new Prime Minister of Bhutan.
- The DNT, which was formed in 2013 and had secured third position in that year's National Assembly elections, has now secured a comfortable majority with 30 out of 47-seats in the 2018 elections.
- The DrukPhuensumTshogpa (DPT), loosely translated as Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party, has bagged 17 seats and will assume the role of the main opposition party for the second consecutive term.
- The voter turnout was over 71.61 percent in the election which is about 5.5 percent above the turnout in the 2013 elections.

#### ***What are the insights on political developments in Bhutan?***

- The system of multi-party democracy has functioned very smoothly with the parties sticking to their constitutional obligations, and new political parties entering the electoral scenario and operating without any hindrance.
- From two registered political parties in 2008, Bhutan had five registered political parties by June 2013.
- Bhutan has been holding elections on regular basis without any political violence and the electoral campaigns have been conducted in a fairly disciplined manner.
- Voters have shown their political maturity by changing governments every five years, which is an indicator of growing political awareness about their rights and their role in holding governments to account.
- Media has acted fairly responsibly and made good use of the freedom guaranteed to it under the new constitution.
- Issues like rural development, agriculture, economic development and incentives to civil servants dominated all the manifestos.
- These manifestos were mostly designed to attract the attention and



confidence of three important sections of the population, i.e., farmers, civil servants and private sector employees.

### ***What are the challenges before the new government?***

- The DNT's election manifesto was a mix of populist and ambitious developmental promises, it has pledged to implement at least 25 of its promises in the first 120 days.
- The new government could face challenges in implementing its popular programs as promised in the party manifesto due to shortage of resources and lack of experienced Parliamentarians.
- Most importantly, the DNT has promised to "narrow the gap" between rich and poor in the next five years, which is a herculean task.
- This policy of the DNT could force it in a developmental direction which can indirectly challenge the GNH (Gross National Happiness).
- Another challenge could be to win the trust of both China and India to resolve its long-standing border disputes with China.
- Besides, the new government could face problems in tackling growing regionalism over language and developmental issues, natural

disasters and sources of budget funding.

- Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the region, Bhutan struggles to complete major hydro projects and other infrastructure projects like internal road connectivity, public transportation system, airports, schools and hospitals.
- Although India contributes 68 percent of the total external assistance, it would be a testing time for the new government to generate funds from other sources, given the smaller market and its strong, almost non-negotiable policy on environmental protection.

### ***What are Bhutan's expectations from India?***

- Since the DNT is a new political party and it did not have much focus on Bhutan's foreign policy in its manifesto, there was speculation in the media that the new government could follow a Nepal-like rebalancing policy between India and China.
- While the new government has articulated its policy towards India and the latter has welcomed the electoral results, India now needs to wait and watch the new government's approach towards it.



- Ever since the diplomatic relationship was established in 1968 between Bhutan and India, it has emerged as one of the most celebrated success stories of India's neighbourhood policy in South Asia, characterized by mutual trust and understanding.
- India will need to establish linkages with all political forces in Bhutan to bring development and prosperity to the people in the Himalayan country and cement ties between the two countries further.

## **2. EXPECTATIONS ON INDIA-BHUTAN RELATIONS**

### **What is the issue?**

- The recent regime change in Bhutan as created expectations on deepening Indo-Bhutan ties.

### **What is the status of India-Bhutan relations?**

- In 1949 Bhutan and India signed the Treaty of Friendship, calling for peace between the two nations and non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
- India re-negotiated the 1949 treaty with Bhutan and signed a new treaty of friendship in 2007.
- The new treaty replaced the provision requiring Bhutan to take India's guidance on foreign policy with

broader sovereignty and not require Bhutan to obtain India's permission over arms imports.

- The treaty also provides for perpetual peace and friendship, free trade and commerce, and equal justice to each other's citizens.

### **Why Bhutan is significant to India?**

- Bhutan is a buffer state between India and China, and the nation shares 470 km long border with China.
- The Chumbi Valley is situated at the trijunction of Bhutan, India and China and is 500 km away from the "Chicken's neck" in North Bengal, which connects the northeast with rest of the country.
- Bhutan has in the past cooperated with India and helped to flush out militant groups like United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) from the Himalayan nation.
- Bhutan is strategically important for both India and China as Chinese territorial claims in western Bhutan are close to the Siliguri Corridor.
- Hydro-electric power generated by Bhutan's run-of-the river dams is the economic bedrock of the India-Bhutan relationship.



due to the difficult terrain and poor connectivity.

### **What are India's infrastructure and economic plan on Bhutan?**

- India and Bhutan have signed an Agreement on Trade, Commerce and Transit in 2016, which provides for a free trade regime between the two countries aimed at boosting the bilateral trade for mutual benefit.
- The Agreement also aims at facilitating Bhutan's trade with countries through an improved procedure for containerized cargo, striving towards use of electronic means to facilitate the movement of transit cargo, additional entry/exit points in India, etc.
- India is planning to build a mini dry port in the border town of Phuntsholing to promote exports that are plagued by logistical difficulties

- A scheme titled "Comprehensive Scheme for Establishment of Hydro-meteorological and Flood Forecasting Network on rivers Common to India and Bhutan" is in operation.
- The network consists of 32 Hydro-meteorological/ meteorological stations located in Bhutan and being maintained by Bhutan with funding from India.
- The data received from these stations are utilized in India for formulating flood forecasts.

### **What are India's expectations from Bhutan?**

- Bhutan could consider leaving the tri-junction (Doklam) unresolved while settling the remaining border issues



and proceeding towards diplomatic relations with China.

- This could trigger heightened Sino-India economic and diplomatic competition in Bhutan without eroding the substance of India-Bhutan relations.

### **3. STRATEGIC PETROLEUM RESERVES**

#### ***Why in news?***

- India has announced its plan on expansion of its existing Strategic Petroleum Reserves along establishing new ones.

#### ***What are Strategic Petroleum Reserves?***

- SPRs were introduced by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in the aftermath of the 1973 oil shock when Arab countries cut production by around five million barrels a day (mbd) from 20.8 mbd to about 15.8 mbd, and OPEC raised prices by some 400 per cent.
- Subsequently, to ensure that OECD countries, which were the largest oil consumers at that time, would not be caught flatfooted in the event of any supply disruptions, the IEA was formed in 1974 and tasked to coordinate policies and advise member countries on protecting their energy interests.
- A core condition for the 30 member countries is for each to maintain 90 days' worth of net oil imports, which

would be used collectively in the event of a supply disruption.

- Oil could also be released under exchange arrangements with private firms, which, in turn, could be repaid in kind within a certain date with additional premium barrels.

#### ***What is India's plan on SPR?***

- India's 2004 decision to construct a strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) in the wake of increasing demand, stagnating domestic production, rising international oil prices and dependence on the unstable West Asian region for imports.
- At that time, the decision was to create reserves for 15 days partly because it was reckoned that any supply disruption would not last longer and partly due to the huge costs it entailed.
- In 2018, the government announced that it would increase the size of the SPR to 87 days' worth of the country's net crude oil imports by 2020.
- This includes 12 days' worth of imports plus 67 days' worth of commercial stocks held by refineries (apart from the armed forces stocks).
- There is also a plan to construct two additional reserves at Bikaner and Rajkot, taking the tally to 91 days' worth of net imports, akin to those held by developed countries which are members of the International Energy Agency (IEA).



### **What are the concerns with India's plan?**

- India's decision to increase the size of the Indian SPR came at a time when the US has been debating whether its strategic stockpile should be cut to half the current size of 727 million barrels, driven by the shale revolution and the country's dramatic resurgence as a net oil exporter.
- Moreover, globally, there are no perceived shortages envisaged in oil supplies, at least in the foreseeable future.
- Given that the global oil market is currently oversupplied with oil, India decision to undertake huge capital investment of Rs.4098.35 is considered to be unwise.

### **Why SPRs are actually significant for India?**

- Despite the government's stated intention to reduce dependence on oil imports, oil will remain in demand for the next few decades.
- Under these circumstances, having an expanded SPR would provide some relief from price hikes.
- This is certainly more practical than the earlier plan to construct an SPR that would cater for only 15 to 45 days of imports.
- Having a SPR option would offer India the leverage to be a serious player in the international oil market, as it will have the option to release supplies when prices spike and recharge the SPR when prices are low.

- Moreover, by maintaining adequate strategic stocks, India could use its SPR as an arm of energy diplomacy by providing joint stockpiling opportunities to friendly countries, both producers as well as net importers.
- Alternatively, countries which cannot afford to maintain SPRs could purchase crude from India in the event of a disruption, which, in turn, could strengthen bilateral relations.
- With India now an associate member of the IEA, it could coordinate with the Agency in times of supply shortages as well as manage demand.
- Thus for India an SPR may not suffice in the event of a long-term supply disruption, it could provide some relief from price spikes, albeit for a limited period, and allow the market time to adjust to price spikes and attain some balance.

## **4. SRI LANKA'S POLITICAL CRISIS**

### **Why in news?**

- Sri Lankan President dissolved the Sri Lankan Parliament and called a snap general election.

### **What is the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka?**

- Sri Lanka has been facing a political crisis for a fortnight now, with President Mr. Sirisena abruptly sacking his Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replacing



him with Mr. Rajapaksa, a former President.

- 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.
- The president's action has apparently defied 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.

#### ***What is the reason behind president's move?***

- 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.
- The announcement for general election 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.

#### ***What are the concerns with the actions of the President?***

- 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 vote 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 is the way forward?***

- 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.

### **5. INDIA'S MISSION ON NEW VARIANTS OF TERRORS**

#### ***What is the issue?***

- Indian security establishment after the 26/11 incident has upgraded

itself, given the emergence of new variants of terror.

#### ***What was the terror approach in 26/11?***

- The 26/11 attack in Taj Mahal place was carried out ill-trained terrorist group, but also backed by the resources of a state, viz. Pakistan.
- The Mumbai terror attack went on for nearly four days, from the evening of November 26 to the morning of November 29.
- Seldom has any terrorist group used such highly sophisticated, state-of-the-art communications, including Voice over Internet Protocol.
- A more unusual feature of the Mumbai attacks was the involvement of two U.S./Canadian nationals of Pakistani origin.
- They are David Headley (who at the time was a LeT operative) and Tahawwur Hussain Rana.
- Thus Planning for the attack involved the use of a third country address.
- The choice of the sea route aimed at deception and avoiding detection was again dictated by official agencies.

#### ***What was Pakistan's contribution to the attack?***

- The attack is seen as a case of 'war by other means', in which the authorities in Pakistan, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, the Pakistani armed forces, were involved.
- Handlers in Pakistan were given unfettered freedom to provide



instructions to the terrorists during the entire four-day siege.

- The training regimen dictated by the Pakistani Special Forces involved
- Psychological indoctrination by highlighting atrocities on Muslims in India and other parts of the globe
- Basic and advanced combat training
- Commando training, training in weapons and explosives, swimming and sailing.

#### ***What were the concerns with India's response then?***

- From an Indian standpoint, it was perhaps for the first time that an operation of this nature involved
- Rapid Action Force personnel
- Marine Commandos (MARCOS)
- the National Security Guard (NSG)
- The Mumbai Police.
- But Indian security establishment had failed to anticipate an attack of this nature and was not adequately prepared to deal with the situation.
- Secrecy was the very essence of this operation as plans were limited to a mere handful of persons.
- Indian intelligence also had failed to exploit all the information from U.S. intelligence.

#### ***What measures were taken by India in this regard?***

- Coastal security was given high priority, and it is with the Navy/Coast Guard/marine police.

- A specialized agency to deal with terrorist offences, the National Investigation Agency, was set up and has been functioning from 2009.
- The National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) has been constituted to create an appropriate database of security related information.
- Four new operational hubs for the NSG (National Security Guard) have been created to ensure rapid response to terror attacks.
- The Multi Agency Centre, which functions under the Intelligence Bureau, was further strengthened and its activities expanded.
- The Navy constituted a Joint Operations Centre to keep vigil over India's extended coastline.

#### ***What lies ahead?***

- Newer methodologies, newer daringly-executed concepts, and deeply laid plans of terrorist groups are a ground reality.
- So terrorism continues to be a major threat with modern refinements and terrorism mutating into a global franchise.
- One new variant is the concept of 'enabled terror' or 'remote controlled terror', viz. violence conceived and guided by a controller thousands of miles away.
- Internet-enabled terrorism and resort to remote plotting is thus the new threat.



- There are no ready-made answers to new forms terrorism, vigilance is important, but being ahead of these new age terror is even more vital.

## **6. SIGNIFICANCE OF KARTARPUR CORRIDOR**

### ***Why in news?***

- Foundation stone had been laid for Kartarpur Sahib Corridor to enable Sikh pilgrims to visit Pakistan.

### ***What is the Kartarpur corridor?***

- Kartarpur Sahib is revered as Guru Nanak's final resting place, the gurdwara stands on the bank of River 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.
- It will be developed from Dera Baba Nanak village in Gurdaspur, Punjab to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur.
- The length of the corridor is about 4 km, 2 km on either side of the International Border.
- The corridor is seen to be a big leap forward for people-to-people relations.
- It will facilitate easier access and smooth passage of Indian pilgrims throughout the year.

### ***How the corridor works?***

- Pilgrimages between India and Pakistan are governed by the 1974

Protocol on Visits to Religious Shrines.

- It includes a list of shrines in Pakistan and India open for visitors from the other country, and for which visas are required.
- The Kartarpur Corridor, which will provide visa-free access from India to the shrine inside Pakistan, may need a separate treaty.
- Officials from India and Pakistan are yet to discuss the logistics of the corridor and point of border crossing.
- The Kartarpur corridor will be implemented as an integrated development project with Government of India funding, to provide smooth and easy passage, with all the modern amenities.
- Government of India will put in place suitable facilities for smooth passage of pilgrims.
- Government of Pakistan will be urged to recognize the sentiments of the Sikh community and to develop a corridor with suitable facilities in their territory as well.

### ***What are the complexities involved?***

- The "corridor" would bring Pak infrastructure right up to the Indian border. Over the past year, Gurdwaras in Pakistan have been used for a pro-Khalistan campaign.
- Earlier this year, a Gurdwara displayed posters and distributed pamphlets for the so-called "Sikh Referendum 2020", and Pakistan



denied permission to the Indian envoy and diplomats to visit it.

- Pakistan's intent also remains suspect, and Indian officials are wary of the corridor being misused by both state and non-state actors in that country.

## 7. INDIA'S NORTH-SOUTH CONNECTIVITY PLATFORM

### Why in news?

- Trilateral meeting of the Coordination Council of the Chabahar Agreement held recently.

### What is INSTC?

- The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a multi-modal connectivity project establish transport networks (ship, rail, and road route) for moving freight between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia.

- The current INSTC project was initiated by Russia, India and Iran in 2000
- INSTC will link Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and then onwards to northern Europe via St. Petersburg in Russia.
- The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali and etc.
- The current members are India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Bulgaria (observer).
- Turkmenistan currently is not a formal member but is likely to have road connectivity to the corridor.

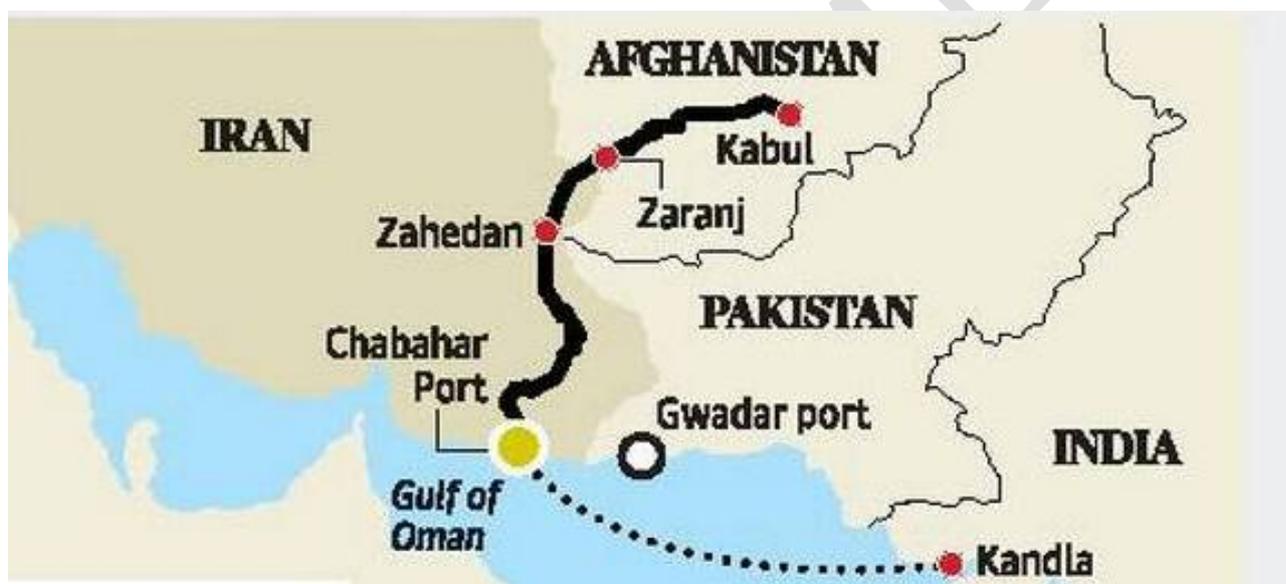




### **What is the role of Chabahar in INSTC?**

- Mumbai is at the southern hub of the route and the route extends to Bandar Abbas in Iran via sea which occupies a strategic position on the narrow Strait of Hormuz.
- India and Iran have a long-standing agreement, signed in 2002, to develop Chabahar into full deep sea port.
- Bandar Abbas port handles 85% of Iran's seaborne trade and is highly congested.

- Whereas, Chabahar has high capacity with plans to expand it from its current capacity of 2.5 million to 12.5 million tons annually.
- Unlike Bandar Abbas, Chabahar has the ability to handle cargo ships bigger than 100,000 tons.
- Industry Analysts have highlighted there are long term plans to integrate Chabahar with the NSTC.



### **What is the significance of the recent meeting?**

- This the first trilateral meeting of the Coordination Council of the Chabahar Agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan.
- The Coordination council meeting happened amidst the times of US's Sanctions on Iran.
- Detailed discussions were held between the three sides on full operationalization of the trilateral

Agreement for international transit and transport through Chabahar Port.

- All sides shared the view that full operationalization of trilateral Chabahar initiative will promote connectivity and economic development of Afghanistan and the region.
- The meeting aims to finalize protocol to harmonize transit, roads, customs, consular matters that was shared by the Indian side at the meeting for making the route attractive, decrease



logistic costs and pave the way for smooth implementation of the Trilateral Chabahar Agreement.

### **What lies ahead for India?**

- India is a nation more favorably situated than most to benefit from the maritime economy and the globalization of Central Asian trade.
- India must exploit the current momentum and place greater urgency on leveraging its robust bilateral relationships with Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan, to solicit a symbolic stakeholder in Chabahar.
- This would confirm, unequivocally, the port's Central Asian orientation and eliminate a contradiction absent from other regional connectivity initiatives

## **8. INDIA'S NON-ALIGNMENT IN MULTIPOLAR WORLD**

### **What is the issue?**

- United States agreed to grant India a special waiver from the trade sanctions on Iran.
- This instance is seen has a victory for India's skillful policy of non-alignment in the times of multipolar world.

### **What is India's deft diplomacy about?**

- Indian foreign policy has been primarily non-aligned in character.
- During the Cold War, when the international system was largely bipolar in nature, India's skillful diplomacy made sure that it doesn't

get trapped into the bipolar geopolitics.

- As a solution, the Non-Alignment Movement was conceptualized in which India was one of the leaders.
- India has always refrained from choosing or aligning completely with one side or the other.
- This gave India a much-needed maneuvering capability to build strong ties with almost all major powers in the international system.
- For instance, recently both the US and Iran were looking for India's support during their tussle after the scrapping of the Iran Nuclear deal by the Trump administration. India for its part refused to choose sides.

### **What multipolar world expect from India?**

- The international system today is vastly different from what it used to be back in the Cold War period.
- Post-Cold War, when the international system has become multipolar, the relevance of India's non-aligned credentials have come under question.
- The global community expects India to take strong stands on global issues (often third-party issues), and even choose sides if needed.
- The great powers like the US and Russia don't want India to have the luxury of maneuvering itself in global politics.



### **What is the significance of India's diplomacy?**

- Indo-US diplomatic relations are in a tense situation due to India's refusal to bring down its Iranian oil imports to zero.
- Amidst of these tensions India managed to win its stand over the Iran's Chabahar port, by protecting its own sovereignty, Click [here](#) to know more.
- India has always carved out a middle path ('madhyammarg') for itself and has avoided getting into the 'Us vs Them' debate.
- This can be seen through many examples, be it choosing between the US and Russia, Israel and Palestine, or Saudi Arabia and Iran. India's track record has been to keep itself out of a position where it has to choose sides.

### **What are the doubts prevailing on India's diplomacy?**

- When a country's power and reputation rises in the international order, the international community starts expecting differently from that state and wants it to assume greater responsibility.
- Till now, Indian diplomacy has been fairly successful in doing that but the question is for how long can India continue to move on this tried and tested path of deft diplomacy.
- The question about India's foreign policy framework is whether the path

of non-alignment was taken out of a conscious 'choice' or out of 'necessity' to balance the bipolarity of the Cold War politics with the US on one side and Soviet Union on the other.

- Many experts on international relations consider the non-theorization of non-alignment policy as a missed opportunity on India's part as it would have solidified the Indian foreign policy even more concretely as well as making it well-defined and nuanced.
- Apart from this the question before India's foreign policy makers is whether non-alignment is serving India's self-interests as the non-alignment policy was product of a particular context and time.

## **9. AZOV SEA DISPUTE**

### **Why in news?**

- Russia had captured three Ukrainian naval ships in the disputed Azov Sea creating tremors in the region.

### **What is the conflict behind Russia and Ukraine?**

- 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.
- The resultant conflict has so far claimed about 10,000 lives and displaced millions with no lasting resolution in sight.
- Though the 2014-15 Minsk peace accords prohibited air strikes and heavy artillery firing, the dispute still prevails as a low-intensity combat.

**What is the significance of Sea of Azov for Russia?**

- Sea of Azov is a sea in Eastern Europe it is linked by the narrow Strait of

Kerch to the Black Sea, and it is sometimes regarded as a northern extension of the Black Sea.

- The Sea of Azov is the shallowest sea in the world, with the depth varying between 0.9 and 14 meters.
- The sea is bounded in the north and in the west by Ukraine, in the east by Russia.
- Russia has controlled the Kerch strait since annexing Crimea in 2014, which has made traffic significantly more difficult for Ukrainian ships.
- In May 2018, Russian opened a 12-mile-long bridge over the Kerch Strait, which has also become the physical gateway to the Sea of Azov.





### **What are the recent tensions in the Kerch Strait?**

- The Kerch Strait is the only connection between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, and the only way to reach two important Ukrainian ports, Mariupol and Berdiansk.
- To prevent the Ukrainian boats from passing under the bridge, Russia placed a cargo ship below it.
- In late September, two Ukrainian vessels had successfully travelled from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov, exercising Ukraine's maritime rights under international law.
- Recently, three more Ukrainian vessels attempted to make the same journey.
- But the Russian coast guard intercepted the Ukrainians saying that unlike the previous passage, the Ukrainian vessels had failed to request permission and ignored orders to stop.
- Ukraine and Russia accuse each other of violating international maritime law, they refer to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which both states joined in the 1990s.

- Ukraine insists on freedom of movement in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov in accordance with this agreement, while the Russian side is trying to draw territorial borders.
- The countries also have a bilateral agreement on the free use of the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov, an accord that Russia has never called into question.

### **What lies ahead?**

- UN Security Council and NATO called on both Russia and Ukraine to de-escalate tensions.
- Russia has not softened its stance, despite the hardships from the economic sanctions since its Crimea's occupation.
- Thus, greater diplomatic engagement between the two sides and the preference for dialogue over confrontation should be made for a speedy resolution of the conflict.