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INDEX

1. INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOODS ..2

PAKISTAN2

- 1.1 Gilgit-Baltistan Dispute..... 2
- 1.2 Disengagement Agreement in Eastern Ladakh... 3
- 1.3 Revival of India-Pakistan Trade Relations..... 5
- 1.4 Pakistan's Flip-Flop on Trade with India..... 6

CHINA.....7

- 1.5 India-China Relations 7
- 1.6 A year after Galwan - India-China Relations..... 9
- 1.7 Chushul Sub-sector..... 10
- 1.8 China's Evergrande Crisis 11

NEPAL.....12

- 1.9 India-Nepal relations 12

SRILANKA.....13

- 1.10 Tamil Nadu Fishermen's Death..... 13
- 1.11 India Out of Colombo Terminal Project..... 15
- 1.12 Sri Lanka's National 'food emergency'..... 16

MYANMAR16

- 1.13 Fear of Coup in Myanmar..... 16
- 1.14 Ethnic Armed Organizations against the Junta in Myanmar 17
- 1.15 India does have a refugee problem..... 19
- 1.16 Refugee Policy..... 20

AFGHANISTAN23

- 1.17 All about Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan..... 23
- 1.18 Taliban's Surge 25
- 1.19 Recognising Taliban Regime 26
- 1.20 Intra-Afghan Talks 28
- 1.21 India-Afghan Relations after Taliban Takeover.....29
- 1.22 India's Engagement with Taliban..... 30
- 1.23 Greece's Wall - Afghan Refugee Crisis..... 31

2. BILATERAL RELATIONS33

ASIA33

- 2.1 Relook at India's Act East Policy 33
- 2.2 India-Taiwan ties..... 34
- 2.3 India-Japan Relations 35

WESTERN COUNTRIES.....36

- 2.4 Indo-U.S. Ties..... 36
- 2.5 India - Expanding Ties with the West 37
- 2.6 Italian Marines Case 38

3. INTERNATIONAL ISSUES39

- 3.1 Reframing India's Foreign Policy Priorities.... 39
- 3.2 Changed Geopolitical Realities in West Asia... 41
- 3.3 US-North Korean Missile Diplomacy..... 42
- 3.4 South Korea's Falling Population..... 43
- 3.5 China's Falling Population..... 45
- 3.6 Saudi Arabia ended its Blockade with Qatar.... 46
- 3.7 Ending the War in Yemen 47
- 3.8 Suez Canal Blockage 48
- 3.9 Saving the Iran Deal..... 49
- 3.10 Clashes at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa 50
- 3.11 War Crimes in Gaza 52
- 3.12 Terror in the Sahel..... 53
- 3.13 Fruits of incitement - US Capitol Hill Violence 55
- 3.14 U.S.'s 1776 Commission Report..... 55
- 3.15 Immigration conundrum - U.S.-Mexico border 57
- 3.16 Opposition to Critical Race Theory 58
- 3.17 U.S.' Decision to Block Iran-linked Websites.. 59
- 3.18 US Recognition of Armenian Genocide 59
- 3.19 Abraham Accords..... 61
- 3.20 US Cuts Troops in Iraq..... 62
- 3.21 Biden-Putin Summit in Geneva..... 63
- 3.22 Alexei Navalny and Russia 64
- 3.23 France's draft law against 'Islamism'..... 66
- 3.24 Canada's Residential School Graves 67
- 3.25 UK-EU Trade Deal..... 68

4. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS .70

- 4.1 Kashmir, India and the OIC 70
- 4.2 Shanghai Cooperation Organization..... 72
- 4.3 Culture and Peace - UNAOC Resolution & India's Concerns 73
- 4.4 Russia's Exit from Open Skies Treaty..... 74
- 4.5 G7 meeting -Rebuilding the West..... 75
- 4.6 Carbis Bay Declaration - G7 Summit..... 76
- 4.7 UNSC Debate on Maritime Security..... 77
- 4.8 UN Reforms 79
- 4.9 Militarisation of Quad..... 79
- 3.27 Multilateralism at Davos 81

MAINSTORMING 2021

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

(DECEMBER 2020 to SEPTEMBER 2021)

1. INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOODS

PAKISTAN

1.1 Gilgit-Baltistan Dispute

Why in news?

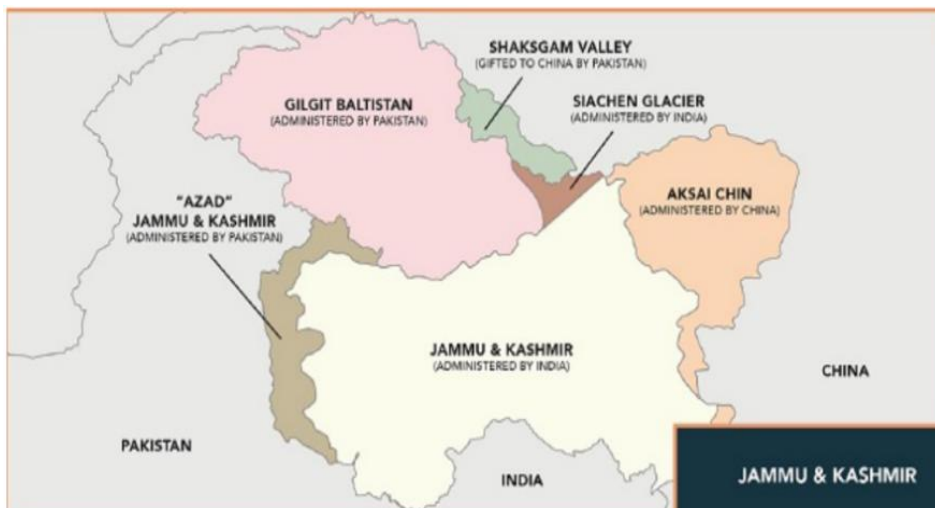
Pakistan's Law and Justice Ministry has finalised a draft legislation to incorporate Gilgit-Baltistan, the region known before 2009 as Northern Areas, as a province of the country.

Why is it a concern for India?

- India has for long asserted that Gilgit-Baltistan is an integral part of India.
- It is claimed by virtue of the legal, complete and irrevocable accession of Jammu & Kashmir to the Union of India in 1947.
- The area's strategic importance for India has particularly increased in light of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement.
- Under the CPEC, China is investing hugely to develop the Gilgit-Baltistan area as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.
- Suggestively, Pakistan's decision is under pressure from China to make clear the Gilgit-Baltistan's status so that it does not undermine the legality of its projects there.

How did the dispute originate?

- Gilgit was part of the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir, but was ruled directly by the British.
- When Hari Singh (the Hindu ruler of the Muslim-majority J&K state) acceded to India in October, 1947, the Gilgit Scouts rose in rebellion, led by their British commander.
- The Gilgit Scouts also moved to take over Baltistan, which was then part of Ladakh, and captured Skardu, Kargil and Dras.
- In battles thereafter, Indian forces retook Kargil and Dras in August 1948.
- Before that, in November, 1947, a political outfit called the Revolutionary Council of Gilgit-Baltistan had proclaimed the independent state of Gilgit-Baltistan.
- It also declared it was acceding to Pakistan.
- Pakistan accepted the accession only to the extent of full administrative control.



- It chose to govern it directly under the Frontier Crimes Regulation, a law devised by the British to keep control of the restive tribal areas of the northwest.
- Following the India-Pakistan ceasefire of January, 1949, Pakistan entered into an agreement with the “provisional government” of “Azad Jammu & Kashmir” to take over its defence and foreign affairs.
- [The AJK covers the parts that had been occupied by Pakistani troops and irregulars.]
- Under this agreement, the “AJK” government also ceded the administration of Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistan.

What is unique with the Gilgit-Baltistan area?

- In 1974, Pakistan adopted its first full-fledged civilian Constitution, which lists four provinces - Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- The Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) and Gilgit-Baltistan were not incorporated as provinces.
- [This was because Pakistan wanted the resolution of the Kashmir issue to be in accordance with UN resolutions that called for a plebiscite.]
- In 1975, PoK got its own Constitution, making it a self-governed autonomous territory and the people having rights and freedoms.
- However, Northern Areas continued to be administered directly by Islamabad (the Frontier Crimes Regulation was discontinued in 1997 but repealed only in 2018).
- The people of the minority Shia-dominated ‘Northern Areas’ did not have any political representation.
- They were considered Pakistani, but remained outside the ambit of constitutional protections available to those in other provinces and PoK.

What were the later administrative arrangements?

- In the 2000s, Pakistan began considering changes to its administrative arrangements in the Northern Areas.
- The post-9/11 dynamics of the region and increasing Chinese strategic moves necessitated this.
- In 2009, Pakistan brought in the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order, 2009.
- It replaced the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) with the Legislative Assembly and the Northern Areas got back the name of Gilgit-Baltistan.

What are the recent developments?

- A draft legislation for making Gilgit-Baltistan a province has been finalised as the 26th Constitutional Amendment Bill of Pakistan.
- Given its status as part of the unresolved Kashmir issue, Gilgit-Baltistan is expected to be given provisional provincial status.
- A separate set of amendments would be introduced to give Gilgit-Baltistan representation in Pakistan’s parliament, besides establishment of the Assembly.

1.2 Disengagement Agreement in Eastern Ladakh

Why in news?

Chinese and Indian troops on the southern and northern shores of Pangong Tso began “synchronized and organized disengagement.”

What is the significance?

- The move comes as the first major breakthrough in talks to resolve the 9 month military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.
- The disengagement began in line with the consensus reached at the 9th round of China-India Corps Commander Level Meeting.

What is the new disengagement plan in eastern Ladakh?

- Troops from both sides have started disengaging from the Pangong Tso area in eastern Ladakh.
- As of now, the disengagement process seems restricted to the north and south banks of Pangong Tso.

- The process has started with the pulling back of certain columns of tanks from the south bank region by both sides.
- At the moment, there is no pullback of troops from the friction points and the heights they are positioned on.
- That will happen in a phased and verified manner.

What does this disengagement process entail?

- Both sides will remove the forward deployment in a phased, coordinated and verified manner.
- China will pull its troops on the north bank towards the east of Finger 8.
- Similarly, India will also position its forces at its permanent base at the Dhan Singh Thapa post near Finger 3.
- Actions will be taken by both the parties in the south bank area as well.
- Both sides have also agreed that the area between Finger 3 and Finger 8 will become a no-patrolling zone temporarily.
- Further, all the construction done by both sides on the north and south banks of the lake since April 2020 will be removed.
- The process will send Indian and Chinese troops back to their traditional bases on the north bank.
- While India has its traditional base at the Dhan Singh Thapa Post, just west of Finger 3, China has had its base east of Finger 8.

Why is this area important?

- The north and south banks of Pangong Tso are two of the most significant and sensitive regions when it comes to the current standoff in the Ladakh.
- The clashes here marked the beginning of the standoff, which makes the areas around the shores of the lake so sensitive and important.
- It is one of the areas where the Chinese troops had come around 8 km deep west of India's perception of the LAC.
- China had positioned its troops on the ridgeline connecting Fingers 3 and 4, while according to India the LAC passes through Finger 8.
- Further, in the south bank of the lake, Indian forces in an action in late August 2020 had gained strategic advantage by occupying certain peaks, outwitting the Chinese.
- Indian troops had positioned themselves on heights of Magar Hill, Mukhpari, Gurung Hill, Rezang La and Rechin La, which were unoccupied by either side earlier.
 - Since then, the Chinese side had been particularly sensitive.
 - This is because these positions allowed India to dominate Spanggur Gap.
 - The Spanggur Gap is a two-km wide valley that can be used to launch an offensive, as China had done in 1962.
 - The positions also allow India a direct view of China's Moldo Garrison.
- After this action India had also re-positioned its troops on the north bank to occupy heights overlooking Chinese positions on the north bank as well.

Why has an agreement taken so long?

- Since September 2020, China has insisted that India first pull its troops back from the south bank of Pangong Tso, and the Chushul sub-sector.
- However, India has been demanding that any disengagement process should include the entire region.
- It also insisted that the troops should go back to their April 2020 positions.
- However, it seems that for now both sides have agreed to first disengage from the Pangong Tso area only.

What delays a permanent resolution?

- Two of the main hurdles in finding a permanent resolution are **lack of trust & lack of clarity on intent**.

- The events of 2020 have notably left enormous distrust.
- Any permanent resolution will include -
 - i. disengagement of troops from the frontlines from all friction points
 - ii. de-escalation that will entail sending the troops from the depth areas to their original bases
- Both sides have around 50,000 troops in the region, along with additional tanks, artillery and air defence assets.
- So, a resolution has to include sending these troops and military equipment where they came from.

1.3 Revival of India-Pakistan Trade Relations

What is the issue?

- The recent trade restriction and the level of trade despite this are indicative of a possibility of resumption of India-Pakistan trade relations.
- This gives a reason to push for the revival of trade dialogue between the two countries.

What was the recent restriction on trade?

- In 2019, India and Pakistan undertook trade-restrictive measures against each other, perhaps the most severe in several decades.
- The Pulwama terror attack in Kashmir in February 2019 and cross-border air strikes played a role in this.
- After these, India withdrew the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status of Pakistan.
- India also imposed a customs duty hike of 200% on imports.
- Later, when India revoked the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan suspended bilateral trade.

Is this the first time?

- Trade curbs have been applied several times in the past too.
- But, such measures have been reversed to create a trade enhancing environment.
- Most notable is the protocol on resumption of trade in 1974 after a hiatus of 9 years following the India-Pakistan war in 1965.
- Both countries worked on a positive list of commodities for some years, which expanded over the years.
- This helped stabilise domestic prices and take care of seasonal shortages and food security.
- So, despite the current trade ban setback, the Indo-Pak history offers some optimism towards reviving the trade dialogue.

What is the present condition?

- Trade has been recorded in the first 11 months of the financial year 2020-21.
- During 2020-21 (April-February), the recorded bilateral trade was \$280 million.
- Of this, India's exports to Pakistan were \$278 million and imports were \$2 million.
- Nearly 77% of India's exports comprised vaccines, pharmaceutical products and products of chemical and allied industries.
- Interestingly, despite the trade ban, sugar was already being exported to Pakistan.
- It was the second most important item, accounting for 15% of India's total exports.
- Dates were the most important item being imported from Pakistan, accounting for 31% of total imports, followed by ethyl alcohol, which accounted for 17% of total imports.

What does this indicate?

- The overall value of trade with Pakistan may not be significant. But the number of items traded is certainly significant.

- Within a month of suspending bilateral trade with India, Pakistan lifted the ban on the import of medicines and raw material from India.
- This was to avert any crises and ensure that there is no shortage of essential drugs.
- In essence, there is more concrete evidence of trade between the two countries even after the imposition of restrictions.
- Thus, even under restrictive trade conditions, there are interdependencies between India and Pakistan.

1.4 Pakistan's Flip-Flop on Trade with India

What is the issue?

- Pakistan's double U-turn on resuming trade with India highlights the internal differences within Ministries, between business and political communities.
- All these hint at the reality that the shadow of politics looms over trade and economy.

What is the recent trade decision that was reversed?

- Pakistan's Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) recently decided to import cotton, yarn, and 500,000 metric tons of sugar from India.
- Pakistan's new Finance Minister Hammad Azhar announced this decision.
- The media dubbed it as a political breakthrough.
- But the ECC's decision was based on Pakistan's immediate economic needs and not on bilateral trade.
- It was only about importing three items - cotton, yarn and sugar.
- It was not designed as a political confidence-building measure to normalise relations with India.
- Despite this, a day later, Pakistan's cabinet overruled the decision.
- It was also made clear that as long as India did not review the unilateral steps it took on August 5, 2019, normalising relations with India would not be possible.
- The Finance Minister accepted the cabinet's decision as the working of "economic and political interface in a democracy."
- It was left with the Prime Minister and the cabinet to "endorse, reject or modify" the ECC's proposals.

Why was the ECC's decision inevitable?

- For the textile and sugar industries in Pakistan, importing from India is imperative, practical and is the most economic.
- **Textile industry** - Yarn, cotton cloth, knitwear, bedwear and readymade garments form the core of Pakistan's textile basket in the export sector.
- In 2020, there was a steep decline in the textile sector due to disruptions in supply and domestic production, as well as a sharp decline in cotton production.
- Notably, Pakistan is the fifth-largest exporter of cotton globally.
- The cotton-related products (raw and value-added) earn close to half of the country's foreign exchange.
- The projected decline means Pakistan's cotton export would reduce, creating a domino effect on what goes into Pakistan's garment industry.
- So, for the textile industry, importing cotton yarn from India is an immediate need; otherwise, it would impact their export potential.
- Pakistan's textile industry has thus not taken the cabinet's decision kindly.
- **Sugar Industry** - For the sugar industry, the problem stems from different issues - the availability for local consumption and the steep price increase.
- The sugar industry has prioritised exports over local distribution.
- But there was increased government subsidy.

- Also, a few related administrative decisions resulted in the sugar industry attempting to make a considerable profit by exporting it.
- However, by early 2019, the sugar prices started increasing, and in 2020, there was a crisis due to shortage and cost.
- The subsidies, cheap bank loans, a few administrative decisions, manipulation and greed, especially by the sugar mill owners, meant high cost paid by the consumers.
- As a result, importing sugar from India would be cheaper for the consumer market in Pakistan.
- Clearly, the crises in cotton and sugar industries played a role in the ECC's decision to import cotton, yarn and sugar from India.
- It would not only be cheaper but also help Pakistan's exports. This is also imperative for Pakistan to earn foreign exchange.

What does the cabinet's decision imply?

- **Politics** - For the cabinet, the interests of its own business community and its export potential have become secondary.
- This implies the supremacy of politics over trade and economy, even if the latter is beneficial to the importing country.
- However, Pakistan need not be singled out; this is a curse in South Asia, where politics play supreme over trade and economy.
- The meagre percentage of intra-South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) trade would underline the above.
- Trade is unlikely to triumph over politics in South Asia; especially in India-Pakistan relations.
- **Kashmir link** - Another aspect is the emphasis on Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan to make any meaningful start in bilateral relations.
- The latest statement by Pakistan's cabinet is that unless India rescinds the decision of August 5, 2019 in J&K, there would be no forward movement.
- This position hints at Pakistan's precondition (revoking the August 2019 decision) to engage with India.
- Pakistan has been saying that the onus is on India to normalise the process.
- It is perhaps New Delhi's turn now to tell Islamabad that it was willing, but without any preconditions, and start with trade.

CHINA

1.5 India-China Relations

What is the issue?

- It has been a year since the news of tensions between Indian and Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh first broke (May-June 2020).
- With this, here is an assessment of the developments so far, the present conditions and the future challenges.

What happened back then?

- The crisis involved Chinese ingressions and violent clash with soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in mid-June 2020.
- It eventually involved seven places: Dopsang plains, Galwan, Gogra, Hot Springs, North bank of Pangong Tso, Kailash range and Demchok.
- With agreements to disengage from the Pangong lake area, it was planned to convene meeting of the senior commanders to address and resolve all other remaining issues.
- The last such meeting of commanders was held in April 2021, but the Chinese have refused to even discuss the remaining issues.

- Modi government seemed keen to announce a closure of the border crisis by creating the impression of an honourable solution against a major power.
- But, no such closure is in sight yet.

What is the current situation?

- The PLA troops deny India access to territories it controlled by patrolling.
- With this, the government's asserted aim of restoring the status quo ante as of April 2020 remains unfulfilled.
- Even on the north bank of Pangong, a new status quo has been created where the patrolling rights are yet to be restored.
- Similarly, the Kailash range has seen neither de-escalation nor de-induction so far.
- So, in all, there have been no further deaths after June 2020 and no firing after early September 2020.
- But, the peace on the border is both unstable and unsustainable.
- Ongoing tensions, with massive deployments on each side, belie any hope of tranquillity.
- Cognisant of the volatility and risk, Indian Army has undertaken a major reorientation of its units and formations towards the China border.
- China-India ties are thus moving into a zone of problems even as New Delhi grapples with pandemic-related issues.

How is COVID-19 and geopolitics playing now?

- India's geopolitical concerns have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the mismanagement of COVID-19.
- Through its 'Vaccine Maitri' programme, New Delhi was presenting itself as a better alternative to Beijing's vaccine diplomacy, particularly in South Asia.
- But this trust was shaken, as the government has backtracked on existing contractual commitments to supply vaccines to its friendly neighbours.
- So, countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have started procuring vaccines from China.
- They are further casting doubts on India's reliability as a partner and raising questions about its ability to act as a counter to China.
- Sensing the opportunity, Beijing also moved in quickly, organising a meeting with all South Asian countries except India, to deal with the pandemic.
- New Delhi was also the lynchpin of the Quad's pledge to deliver a billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine throughout the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022.
- But, India is now trying to import vaccines for its own population.
- Failing on its commitments to other poor countries under GAVI's COVAX scheme, the proposal now seems to be on a weak footing.

What is the larger impact?

- The failure of the government to anticipate and deal with a public health crisis has affected India's image as an emergent power.
- A weaker India is not only less attractive as a partner globally, it makes New Delhi more dependent on the US to deal with China.
- This will only confirm China's presumptions that India had been acting at the behest of the U.S. and further strain India-China ties.
- Meanwhile, the threat of a two-front collusive threat after the Ladakh crisis forced the Modi government to seek peace with Pakistan.
- This led to the announcement of the ceasefire on the Line of Control, and Pakistan awaits the steps on Kashmir promised by the Modi government.
- But no political environment has been created in India for any such step so far.

- It is hard to predict the Pakistani course of action hence.
- In all, an assertive China and a vengeful Pakistan acting in concert on the land borders is a serious threat to India.

How are the pandemic-related India-China terms?

- Beijing's efforts to offer aid to India to deal with the pandemic have been largely confined to private companies and donations from the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.
- These are largely commercial contracts between private companies and not that of the Chinese government.
- Nevertheless, the fact remains that India is heavily dependent on China for crucial medical supplies.
- State-owned Sichuan Airlines had suspended cargo flights to India, but the supply chains have since been kept open by Beijing.
- This is in tune with the Indian demand from Beijing that the supply chain should remain open.
- But the other demand to ensure stable product prices has not been met.

1.6 A year after Galwan - India-China Relations

What is the issue?

- On June 15, 2020, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) witnessed its first deaths after 1975, in a violent clash with China in Galwan in Ladakh.
- After an year, here is an assessment of the military and geopolitical situation.

What is the current situation?

- Militarily, the current situation in Ladakh is not bad.
- There is a continued deployment of 50,000-60,000 soldiers.
- With this, the Indian Army has been able to hold the line to prevent any further ingress by the China's People's Liberation Army (PLA).
- The Chinese presence on the Indian side of the LAC in Gogra, Hot Springs and Demchok gives the PLA some tactical advantage.
- But the area which majorly jolts Indian military plans is the Chinese control of Depsang Plains.

What are the shortcomings in India's approach?

- Militarily, Chinese incursions in Ladakh have shown that the idea of deterrence has failed.
- Many retired military officers feel that the Indian Army had only weakened its negotiating position during the talks with the PLA.
- In any case, there has been no progress in talks after the disengagement at Pangong lake and Kailash range in February 2021.
- There is no record of the Cabinet Committee on Security being convened to discuss the Ladakh border situation.
- No official briefing or press conference about the situation in Ladakh has taken place in the last 13 months since the Ladakh crisis.
- The official excuse was operational security, but the actual reason was to avoid political embarrassment for the government in power.
- This is because PLA soldiers remain in control of what was hitherto in Indian control.

What is the recent policy in this regard?

- Defence Minister recently approved a revised policy on how India compiles, archives and disseminates its war documents and related history.
- As per the new policy, once an operation/war is completed, the first cut of history is to be prepared.
- It will be disseminated for internal circulation within 5 years.

- Whether this first draft of history is to be placed in the public domain or not, will be determined on a case by case basis.
- It will depend on the sensitivity of the operation/war.
- [Predictably, the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat report relating to the 1962 war with China, which is still under wraps, will not be part of the new policy.
- Apparently, another committee will take a view on previous wars.]

How does the future look?

- A return to the status quo ante of April 2020 in Ladakh remains a far from reality.
- The Chinese side refuses to engage meaningfully.
- India argues that there could be no normalcy without restoration of status quo ante at the borders.
- With the widening power gap between New Delhi and Beijing, the challenge is as much economic as it is geopolitical.
- A new reset in bilateral ties is difficult because China is now in a different league, competing with the U.S.
- India will never be comfortable taking sides in a new Cold War between the U.S. and China.
- Beijing seems as keen as New Delhi to avoid a military conflict, though accidents such as Galwan can never be ruled out.
- India thus has to live with this tense and uneasy calm with China for some time, a challenge brought to the fore by the Ladakh crisis.
- The Ladakh crisis has also led India to relook external partnerships, particularly with the United States.
- The military importance of the Quad remains arguable.
- The choices made in New Delhi will have a significant impact on the future of global geopolitics.

1.7 Chushul Sub-sector

Why in news?

Chushul sub-sector has come into focus in the Indo-China standoff following the movement that took place on the night of August 29-30, 2020.

What is the Chushul sub-sector?

- The Chushul sub-sector lies south of Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh.
- It comprises high, broken mountains and heights besides passes such as Rezang La and Requin La, the Spanggur Gap, and the Chushul valley.
- It is situated at a height of over 13,000 feet close to the LAC.
- The Chushul Valley has a vital airstrip that played an important role even during the 1962 War with China.
- Chushul is one among the five Border Personnel Meeting points between the Indian Army and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China.
- The recent brigade-level meetings between the two sides were held here.

What is its strategic importance to India?

- Chushul enjoys tremendous strategic importance because of its location and terrain, which make it a centre for logistics deployment.
- This sector has plains that are a couple of kilometres wide, where mechanised forces can be deployed.
- Its airstrip and connectivity by road to Leh add to its operational advantages.
- Indian troops have now secured the ridgeline in this sub-sector.
- This will allow India to dominate the Chushul bowl on the Indian side, and Moldo sector on the Chinese side.

- They have a clear sight of the almost 2-km-wide Spanggur gap, which the Chinese used in the past to launch attacks on this sector in the 1962 War.
- India's move has neutralised the advantage that China gained when it secured areas between Finger 4 and 8 on the bank of the Pangong Tso.

How is Chushul important to China?

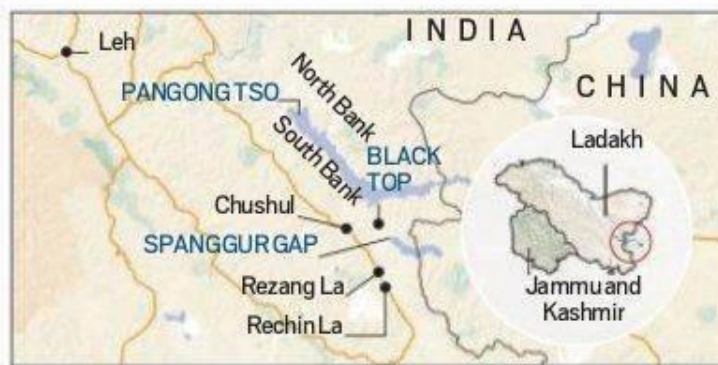
- Simply put, Chushul is the gateway to Leh.
- If China enters Chushul, it can launch its operations for Leh.

Did the Chinese try to capture Chushul in the 1962 War?

- After the initial attacks in October 1962, the PLA troops prepared to attack Chushul airfield and the valley to get direct access to Leh.
- However, just before the attacks were launched, the area was reinforced by the 114 Brigade in November 1962.
- This brigade had under its command two troops of armour and some artillery.
- It's important to note that the heights secured by Indian soldiers on the intervening night of August 29-30 were held by them in 1962 as well.
- These included Lukung, Spanggur Gap, Gurung Hill, Rezag La, Magger Hill and Thatung Heights.

What are the future challenges in this area?

- An immediate challenge is of a **flare-up** as troops of the two countries are deployed within a distance of 1 km of each other at Black Top and Rezin La.
- **Logistics** also pose a major challenge.
- Porters are needed to carry water and food to the top.
- The troops shouldn't do that. If they do, they will lose fighting strength.
- At this point, villagers of Chushul are helping by ferrying water and essential commodities to the Indian troops deployed at Black Top.
- The **harsh winter** that lasts for 8 months of the year poses a challenge.
- It is very difficult to dig in, and make shelters on the ridgeline.
- The mercury plummets to minus 30 degrees Celsius, and there are frequent snowstorms.
- The Pangong Tso also freezes, making movement between its north and south banks possible.



1.8 China's Evergrande Crisis

What is the issue?

Chinese real estate conglomerate Evergrande Group has been in the news recently over its inability to pay interest on its huge debt obligations.

What is the trouble at Evergrande?

- The Evergrande Group is China's second-largest real estate company in terms of total sales and employs over 200,000 employees.
- Its core business deals with buying land, developing them into houses, restaurants and so on and selling them to interested buyers
- The company uses large amounts of debt from banks and investors as well as short-term loans to fund its business.
- It has total liabilities worth over \$300 billion and has to pay around \$37 billion in interest and maturing debt over the next year.

- Its share price has dropped over 80% in the last one year and hit a 10-year low.
- The company has also taken money in advance from buyers and from its own employees but has defaulted on these products

Why is the company in trouble?

- Almost a third of the Chinese GDP is made up of the property sector with Chinese authorities traditionally encouraging businesses to take on huge amounts of debts
- But the recent Chinese government's rules for property developers called '**three red lines**' that states how much a property developer can borrow given its financial position as measured by three debt metrics
- This policy practically cut off Evergrande from taking on any more debt on its balance sheet
- Some analysts argue that the company's business model has been unsustainable for a long time.
- It was said that the company held properties that it could not sell on its balance sheet as inventory to avoid booking of losses.
- The company was also accused of running a ponzi scheme as it needed constant inflow of funds to prop up a business model that is fundamentally unsustainable
- Many have called the Evergrande crisis **China's own 'Lehman moment'** where the failure of U.S. bank Lehman Brothers precipitated the 2008 financial crisis

What lies ahead?

- Any bailout by Chinese government will require the creation of a fresh supply of money which in turn will debase the value of the Chinese currency.
- Foreign investors with exposure to Evergrande may experience losses.
- Any slowdown in the Chinese economy in the course of rebalancement away from the property sector will have effects on the global supply chain.
- For instance, metal stocks in India have witnessed a sharp correction in attribution to fears of a slump in Chinese demand.
- Some critics have warned investors to refrain from investing in China pointing to the absence of the rule of law.
- Some analysts believe that Chinese growth could drop to as low 1-2% as the country massively rebalances its economy.

NEPAL

1.9 India-Nepal relations

Why in news?

Amidst Nepal's political chaos, Nepal's Foreign Affairs Minister visited New Delhi for the 6th meeting of India-Nepal Joint Commission.

What was discussed in the meeting?

- It was more focused on confidence-building measures- exchange of remarks on progress made since last meeting, how to take forward several bilateral initiatives.
- They discussed about the expanding the **Motihari-Amlekhganj petroleum pipeline** to Chitwan & establishing new pipeline on the eastern side connecting Siliguri to Jhapa in Nepal.
- They discussed about the operating procedures for commencing the upgraded 1st passenger railway line between India & Nepal from Jaynagar to Kurtha via Janakpur.
- Other cross-border rail connectivity projects, including Raxaul-Kathmandu broad gauge railway line were also discussed.
- Nepal expressed its support for India's permanent membership of an expanded UN Security Council.

- It also emphasised on the need for facilitating cross-border movement of people & goods leading to sub-regional cooperation.
- However Nepal's demand to include the boundary issue in the Meeting was not supported by India.

How is India-Nepal relationship on the development front?

- The recently inaugurated Integrated Check Posts (ICPs) at Birgunj and Biratnagar helps in seamless movement of people and trade between two countries.
- The construction of 3rd ICP at Nepalgunj was already commenced & the new ICP at Bhairahwa will begin shortly.
- Since Nepal relies on India's seaports for trade and its goods are transported by road, ICP are expected to ease trade and transit.
- India supported to develop 2 more cultural heritage projects in Nepal-Pashupatinath Riverfront Development & Bhandarkhal Garden Restoration in Patan Durbar.
- This is significant at the time when China is exploring all avenues to disrupt Nepal's natural choice in policy-making.
- The joint hydropower projects, including the proposed Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project, will get positive momentum following this round of meeting.

How is Nepal's democracy functioning?

- There is growing disenchantment among the Nepali masses over the increased centralisation of power.
- The failure of the Provincial System to address developmental issues, misuse of Presidential authority & unprecedented corruption calls for re-setting Nepal's democracy.
- Large sections of the people wish to restore the cultural Monarchy in place of Presidential system and to re-establish the certain traditional ways to governance.
- In late December 2020, he dissolved the House of Representatives which was termed unconstitutional by the experts.
- The country's Supreme Court is hearing writ petitions against Mr. Oli & the Court has called for serious constitutional interpretation.

SRILANKA

1.10 Tamil Nadu Fishermen's Death

What is the issue?

- The news of the bodies of four Tamil Nadu fishermen washed ashore in Sri Lanka has triggered anger in coastal Tamil Nadu.
- This has again brought to the fore the issue of TN fishermen being killed by the Sri Lankan Navy.

What are the reasons for their death?

- Fishermen in the Tamil Nadu say the four were killed in an attack by the Sri Lankan Navy.
- But Sri Lankan Navy mentions that they died when their trawler collided with a naval vessel while trying to avoid getting seized.
- India has lodged a strong protest with the Sri Lankan authorities & sought the early release of fishermen arrested in their water and their boats.

Why such incidents are recurring?

- Poor fishermen's are driven by their trawler owners who force them to enter into Sri Lankan waters.
- They get killed or arrested when they caught by Sri Lankan Navy thereby leading to conflict.
- Even Political leaders in Tamil Nadu rarely acknowledge that the fishermen's contribute immensely to the problem by crossing the territorial waters.

What is the long-standing issue?

- In July 1983, there was a massive campaign against the Tamils in Colombo.
- Several hundred Tamils were killed and several thousand went into exile.
- That was the starting point of the influx of Tamil refugees to India through the Palk Strait.
- It was also the time when the militant groups demanding a separate state of Tamil Eelam were gaining popularity among both the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.
- India was providing training to different militant groups on Indian soil.
- It is against this backdrop that Sri Lankan personnel opened fire on the Indian fishermen in August 1983.
- In the event, one fisherman from Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu was killed.

What are the conflicting views?

- Fishermen, from both the countries, crossing borders were common which might happen by mistake or intentionally for a better catch.
- But this had never been an issue until 1983.
- So, the killing of a fisherman was seen in Tamil Nadu as a reaction to the move by India to support the Tamil militant groups.
- It was also seen as a move to stop the Tamil refugees from travelling to India.
- But Sri Lanka stated that their navy opened fire because the Indian fishermen had crossed into their waters.

How serious has the issue evolved?

- More such incidents continued, and the Indian fishermen from Tamil Nadu were attacked by the Sri Lankan navy too often.
- Some media reports claim that more than 500 fishermen were killed from 1983 onwards.
- The TN government in one of its submission to the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court has submitted that 83 fishermen were killed from 1991 to 2011.
- An MP from TN has recently mentioned in his submission in the Rajya Sabha that 245 Indian fishermen have been killed by Sri Lankan personnel over the decades until now.
- This is only those who were killed while in water.
- Apart from those killed, the condition of those who have survived injuries is precarious.

What does Sri Lanka's navy say?

- One of the reasons that the Sri Lankan navy gave for opening fire was that they suspected the Indian fishing boats as LTTE boats.
- But though the Sri Lankan government announced in 2009 that it has wiped out LTTE, it continues to shoot at Indian fishermen.
- Today, the reason given is that Indian trawlers are trespassing into Sri Lankan waters.
- The reasons have been changing. But the attacks continue.

What are the steps taken to resolve this issue?

- Some years ago, both the countries decided to create a Joint Working Group to find a permanent solution to this issue.
- They agreed that there would be no violence or loss of life in handling the fishermen and a hotline would be established between the respective Coast Guards.
- Unfortunately, the hotline is yet to be operationalised and deaths continue to occur.
- Less than a month ago both the countries resumed discussions through their Joint Working Group after a three-year gap.
- Attempts are also made to arrive at negotiated settlement through direct talks involving fishermen from both sides but this remained stand-still.

What are the limitations in addressing this?

- International maritime law gives clear directions on what should be done if people are found crossing borders on the sea.
- Nowhere does the law give the authority to open fire on trespassers.
- Till today, there is no protocol or procedure specified in India on what the fishermen should do when they are surrounded or attacked by the Sri Lankan navy.

What can be done now?

- This unresolved fisheries conflict in the Palk Bay is causing unacceptable toll of lives.
- Sri Lanka favours joint patrolling by both countries and a ban on unsustainable fishing practices such as bottom trawling by Tamil Nadu fishermen.
- But fishermen demand for a lengthy phase-out period.
- Hence these bottom trawlers should be replaced with deep sea fishing vessels to avoid exploiting the remaining fishery resources on the Sri Lankan waters.
- A comprehensive solution which will curtail unauthorised fishing and help in orderly sharing and sustainable use of resources by fishermen from both sides needs to be arrived.

1.11 India Out of Colombo Terminal Project

Why in news?

Sri Lanka decided to overturn tripartite agreement to develop Colombo's East Container Terminal.

What is the importance of this project?

- This project was a key marker for infrastructure investment in the Sri Lanka, where Chinese projects are most prominent.
- More than 2/3rd of trans-shipment at this port is tied to India, making it an important trade and connectivity link.
- Joint venture between India and Japan to invest in the ECT project provides South Asia with viable and sustainable alternatives for financing and development.

Why was this project overturned?

- This was due to growing pressure from port union groups which opposed any foreign participation.
- It is worrying that whether the country will honour the commitments made by the previous government.
- Also there is suspicion that there is a Chinese hand behind this decision & it is curious that despite Sri Lanka's financial difficulties it took this decision upsetting donors.

How has India responded to this?

- It continues to engage Sri Lanka on the ECT issue but it remains silent on Colombo's alternative offer of developing the West Container Terminal.
- Over the past years, Indian government has invested much time and resources Sri Lanka- new credit line, currency swap agreement, COVID-19 assistance and vaccines.
- NSA Ajit Doval and EAM S. Jaishankar have visited Colombo more than once and Mr. Modi has hosted President Gotabaya and Prime Minister Mahinda.
- India has also set much store by its partnership with Japan as a counter to China's BRI & there is much at stake for all three countries to derail the partnership.
- A compromise formula to restore a deal needs to be arrived.

1.12 Sri Lanka's National 'food emergency'

Why in news?

Sri Lankan government has announced food emergency to check the soaring prices of food and hoarding of essentials by a food mafia.

What are the issues hampering the Sri Lankan government?

- Huge foreign debt burden
- Decline in tourism industry since the 2019 Easter attacks
- Pandemic hit tea and garment industries
- Decreasing foreign exchange reserves
- Devaluation of currency by 10.1% against the dollar this year
- Imports became costlier
- Increase in liquidity due to Rs 800 billion printed by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka
- Sharp spike in inflation
- Fixation of prices of all essential items made traders reluctant to buy at high prices internationally
- Restrictive import licensing regime
- Ban on chemical fertilisers to grow only organic food aggravated the shortage

What is the current emergency about?

- The emergency has been declared under the legal framework of the Public Security Ordinance (PSO).
- It empowers the President to declare a State of Emergency in two situations when the President is of the opinion that it is
 1. in the interest of public security and the preservation of public order
 2. for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community
- President is now able to promulgate Emergency Regulations dealing with any subject at any given time
- While the emergency has to be taken to Parliament for renewal every three months, the President is empowered to bring in regulations that do not need parliamentary oversight or approval
- It must be recognised as a **temporary** conferral of extraordinary power for the government during times of acute crisis and not a substitute for the normal legal regime

What are the counter arguments against the proclamation of emergency?

- Opposition members argued that other legislations were available to check hoarding and cap food prices
- The appointment of a serving major general as the Commissioner General of Essential Services has raised concerns of bypassing the civilian administration
- It was alleged that emergency was proclaimed to violate the freedom of expression, movement, etc
- Ill-timed decision to switch from chemical to organic fertilizer might lead to food crisis.

MYANMAR

1.13 Fear of Coup in Myanmar

Why in news?

Political tensions flare in Myanmar which can mount to coup as military refuses to accept election results.

What is the issue?

- On the November 2020, general election was conducted & National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the election.

- However the military says that this general election is full of irregularities and therefore results are not valid.
- The military has demanded that United Elections Commission (UEC) of Myanmar which oversees elections to prove at a special session of new parliament that the elections were free and fair.

How has Myanmar Constitution evolved?

- It was the military that drafted the 2008 Constitution and put it to a questionable referendum in April that year.
- The military made sure that it safeguards its own role and supremacy in national affairs present in the Constitution.
- Under its provisions, the military reserves for itself 25% of seats in both Houses of Parliament, to which it appoints serving military officials.
- Also a political party which is a proxy for the military contests elections.
- However the NLD had boycotted the referendum, as well as the 2010 elections that were held under the Constitution.
- In the recent election, military share of seats fell because of the NLD's sweep.

What does military say about election results?

- A military spokesman said they found 8.6 million irregularities in 314 areas across all states and regions.
- They indicated the possibility that people had voted more than once or had engaged in some other voting malpractice.
- However the UEC has said it had found no evidence of any voting malpractice or fraud & each vote was counted transparently and it was witnessed by election candidates, the media, observers etc.

Why there exists a fear of coup?

- Myanmar's democratic transition is in progress & 2020 election results are seen by the NLD as a mandate for its plan of constitutional reform.
- NLD wants to do away with the military's role in politics and governance however this will not be easy given the tight constitutional restrictions for amendments.
- But the hybrid system that exists now is a huge shift away from what it was until 2011, the year military decided to release Suu Kyi from her nearly two-decade-long house arrest.
- And Suu Kyi is more reconciliatory towards the Army & she went to the extent of defending the military at the International Court of Justice against accusations of atrocities on the Rohingya.
- The army's assertion about election results has created a fear of coup in the Nation.

How did World Nations respond to the army assertions?

- Joint statement was issued by the USA, the European Union & diplomatic missions of 15 other countries in Yangon excepting India & China.
- They supported democratic transition in Myanmar and efforts to promote peace, human rights, and development in the country.
- They demanded peaceful convening of Parliament & urged the military, and all other parties in the country, to adhere to democratic norms.
- They opposed any attempt by the military to alter the outcome of the elections or impede Myanmar's democratic transition.

1.14 Ethnic Armed Organizations against the Junta in Myanmar

Why in news?

- Protests against the military coup in Myanmar have assumed new dimensions.
- Some "ethnic armed organisations" (EAOs) are mounting their own resistance against the junta (a military or political group that rules a country after taking power by force.)

What are the recent tensions?

- The generals are hitting back the EAOs with airstrikes, a sign that they are ready to use the most brutal means to crush opposition.
- The Myanmar military bombed villages on its border with Thailand.
- It carried this out in retaliation for the loss of one of its outposts in the southeastern Karen (now renamed Kayin) state that the Karen National Union (KNU) had seized earlier.
- The air strikes sent hundreds of Karen, one of Myanmar's many ethnic minority groups, scattering across the border.
- Some 24,000 Karen people have been displaced in fighting in the past one month.
- Another area of tension is in the north, in Kachin state bordering China and forming a trijunction with India.
- Aerial bombardment has been going on here for days since the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) attacked two police outposts and a military base.
- Some 5,000 people are displaced with this.
- In Myanmar's western Chin state, which borders Mizoram, 15 soldiers were killed in two separate incidents.
- This was claimed by a new ethnic armed militia called the Chinland Defence Force (CDF).
- **Impact** - The resistance by the EAOs seems to have taken the Myanmar army by surprise.
- In all, 21 EAOs, and several more militias, are active in the border states of Myanmar.
- Many of them have been waging armed resistance against the state for decades now.

What is the unfulfilled Federation dream of Myanmar?

- One of Aung San Suu Kyi's priorities when her party was governing Myanmar from 2015 to 2020, was to take forward the efforts of her father, Gen Aung San.
- Gen Aung San led the movement for independence from the British.
- He aimed for building a federal Myanmar of the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities, who form one third of the country's 54 million population.
- But after a ceasefire agreement with 12 EAOs in 2015, the NLD (National League for Democracy) government was unable to make much further progress.
- At least four more meetings held to bring the other groups on board were not successful.
- By the end of her first term, Suu Kyi was convinced that unless the army could be tamed through reforms to the country's constitution, Myanmar would never become the federation that her father had envisioned.

Who are the Bamars and the ethnic minorities?

- The army draws its power from the divisions between the majority Bamar and the minority ethnic groups, and the hostilities between the ethnic groups themselves.
- However, since the February 1 coup, some EAOs, including some that had signed the ceasefire agreement, have expressed solidarity with the pro-democracy protesters.
- The military had offered a ceasefire to all groups, but this was rejected by many of the influential groups.
- Reportedly, in a throwback to protests of the 1980s and 1990s, many Bamar youth are now in Karen state for arms training.
- This belies the notions of divisions between the Bamars and the ethnic groups.
- The troubles in the three border states have distracted the army's attention for the moment from the pro-democracy protests in the central regions, including in Yangon.

Will it be a challenge for the army?

- More EAOs are likely to rise up against the army, joining hands or even fighting separate battles.

- If this happens, Myanmar's armed forces may find themselves engaged in multiple mini wars in the border regions.
- And all this would happen at a time when it would like to focus on entrenching itself in the same way as it had done in the 1990s.
- Reportedly, the combined strength of the EAOs and other militias is about 1,00,000, while the Myanmar army is 350,000 strong.
- The use of air power by the military could be a warning to the EAOs to "back off".
- It is perhaps due to the outbreak of fighting in these places that the junta has said it will "consider" a plan put forth by ASEAN.

What is the ASEAN's plan for peace?

- This would work for a resolution in Myanmar, but only "when stability is restored".
- The five-point ASEAN consensus plan was put to the head of the Myanmar army, Gen Min Aung Hlaing, in Jakarta.
- The five points are:
 1. immediate cessation of violence by the Myanmar army
 2. peaceful resolution through dialogue between all parties
 3. mediation by an ASEAN special envoy
 4. a visit by the special envoy
 5. humanitarian assistance from ASEAN
- The protesters have dismissed the plan, since it does not include the release of Suu Kyi and others arrested by the junta.
- The new generation of protesters have also demanded that the 2008 constitution, drafted and voted in by the military, should be scrapped.

1.15 India does have a refugee problem

Why in news?

Recently large numbers of Myanmar citizens are moving towards Indian border which has revived the debate about refugee protection.

What is the problem with refugees?

- In India, the issue of refugees tends to get subsumed under illegal immigration.
- Illegal immigration is a threat to the socio-political fabric of the country and it has potential security implications.
- India has argued over time that illegal immigration from the neighbouring countries to India must come to an end.
- Moreover the policies and remedies to deal with these issues suffer from a lack of clarity and policy utility.

Who are Refugees?

- Refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.
- There is a customary international law norm of non-refoulement which means no State can send individuals back to a situation of danger, which is clearly the case in Myanmar.
- Non-refoulement principle applies to all countries irrespective of whether they signed or not.

What are the ambiguities in dealing with refugees?

- In India, illegal immigrants and refugees are viewed as one and the same and are covered under the Foreigners Act, 1946.
- The act defines foreigners as a person who is not a citizen of India.
- Though there are fundamental differences between illegal immigrants and refugees, India is legally ill-equipped to deal with them separately due to a lack of legal provisions.

- Moreover India is not a party to the **1951 Refugee Convention** and its **1967 Protocol** which pertains to refugee protection.
- Its refugee policy is guided primarily by ad hocism which often has its own political utility.
- These ad hoc measures enable the government to pick and choose what kind of refugees it wants to admit and what kind of refugees it wants to avoid.
- This opens the door for geopolitical considerations while deciding to admit refugees or not.
- If India admits Myanmar migrants, China would use the opportunity to hurt India's interests in Myanmar which prompted India not to admit the refugees.
- There are some flaws in the International convention too.

Why India should not join the Refugee convention?

- India has been one of the largest recipients of refugees in the world in spite of not being a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.
- Given its track record of refugee protection and vulnerable geopolitical and socio-economic situation, India need not accede to the convention and the protocol in the way it currently stands.
- The definition of refugees in the 1951 convention pertains only to the violation of civil and political rights, but not the economic rights of individuals.
- If economic rights are included, it would cause major burden on the developed world and in South Asia, it could be a problematic for India.
- Secondly, India should not accede to the convention at a time when the Northern countries are violating it in both letter and spirit.
- India should accede only when western states commit to roll back their no entry regime which they have established for decades.
- This no entry regime has a range of legal and administrative measures-visa restrictions, carrier sanctions, interdictions, third safe-country rule.
- It also constitutes restrictive interpretations of the definition of refugee, withdrawal of social welfare benefits to asylum seekers, and widespread practices of detention.

What can be done now?

- Since the citizenship amendment act is deeply discriminatory nature and it cannot address the concerns of refugees who are fleeing their home country.
- In the absence of proper legal measures, refugee documentation, and work permit, they can end up in becoming illegal immigrants.
- Hence a domestic refugee law needs to be created which will offer temporary shelter and work permit for refugees.
- It must make a distinction between temporary migrant workers, illegal immigrants and refugees and deal them differently through proper legal and institutional mechanisms.
- Therefore there is urgent need to address the issue of refugee protection in India and put in proper institutional measures.

1.16 Refugee Policy

What is the issue?

- The Ministry of External Affairs has underlined the government's changing position on the Myanmar crisis.
- In this context, here is a look at the situation and an overview on India's refugee policy.

What is the current situation in Myanmar?

- There is increasing disorder in Myanmar which appears to be escalating as the civil disobedience movement (CDM) flares.

- The CDM has been innovative, energetic and driven by young people in the majority Burman and Buddhist-dominated heartland.
- Disobedience could lead to extensive civil disorder and worse.
- Already, telecommunications are cut, and curfews are in place.
- Nevertheless, daily shows of defiance occur, the banks are not functional, markets are shut.
- The only courts which appear to be open are those used to present detainees and those charged with violations of regime controls while the cases against Suu Kyi and her colleagues pile up.
- The battle-scarred armies of the ethnic groups had fought the Myanmar army to a standstill over nearly 70 years.
- They had recently signed a ceasefire with Suu Kyi.
- But these groups are now preparing for war again and are allying with each other.
- A provisional government of leaders who escaped detention has been announced.

What was India's response?

- On the one hand, India is supporting those who advocate for democracy in Myanmar & made supportive statements in UNSC and UNHRC.
- On the other hand, Indian government is simultaneously detaining and preparing to deport Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.
- It labelled refugees as infiltrators and said that they cannot be considered as refugees since India has not signed the UN Refugee Convention.
- Moreover, Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order to the Border States to check the illegal influx from Myanmar to India.
- The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in India was denied access to individuals detained in Delhi.

What are the recent remarks?

- India has moved to a more pro-active stand as concerns grow worldwide about growing internal strife and instability in Myanmar.
- After a closed-door UNSC meeting on Myanmar, Ambassador TS Tirumurti, India's Permanent Representative to the UNGA, responded.
- He condemned the violence in Myanmar and condoled the loss of lives.
- He also called for the release of detained leaders and urged maximum restraint.
- The messages underlined India's commitment to a democratic transition.
- There was a line about supporting peace efforts by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member).
- However, ASEAN has been tentative, even timid, in the face of China's support to the junta.

What is the significance with India's stance?

- The recent statement is the outright so far by India on Myanmar and a response to criticism of its earlier stand within and outside the country.
- This marks a welcome departure from the stance befriending the military (which has not always been friendly to India's interests) and engaging with the civilian government, which held office only for 5 years.

What are India's priorities now?

- India's concerns at this stage are mainly two.
- **People of Myanmar** - The people of Myanmar have tasted freedom of expression, assembly and association for the first time in decades under Suu Kyi.
- They are rightfully determined to hold on to this freedom.

- **North-East** - Another concern is the future stability and security of India's North-east.
- The policies that have been espoused at the highest levels of government should also be preserved.
- Notably, the Act East and Neighbourhood First policies are anchored in the eight states of the North-east.
- India should also keep in mind the various insurgent groups from the North-east.
- They have a history of relations with ethnic armed groups in Myanmar.
- The insurgents have taken shelter there and established bases and some still live there.

What is the impact on Centre-State relations?

- The Four states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram have long borders with Myanmar.
- The last two states have taken some 1,500 persons, including a number of junior police officials, fleeing from the crackdown in the bordering Chin State.
- This has raised issues of Centre-state relations.
- The New Delhi advised the states on the border not to allow Myanmar nationals fleeing the crackdown to enter Indian territory.
- But Mizoram CM Zoramthanga has rejected this approach, saying that his government will accept people fleeing, on humanitarian grounds.
- He wrote to the prime minister saying that as the world's largest democracy India could not stand aside.
- The Manipur government, too, has withdrawn its circular which had asked district officials along the border to "politely" turn back refugees.

Why is a refugee policy essential?

- The Chins in Myanmar and the Mizos and Kukis (and sub-groups) in Mizoram and Manipur are kin.
- A historical affinity connects them by ethnicity, religion, and language.
- In the aftermath of the 1988 army crackdown on the pro-democracy movement that killed thousands, many Chins and other refugees fled to Manipur and Mizoram.
- Local leaders and non-government groups, with the tacit support of central and state agencies, allowed them to live, work and even settle.
- The present situation thus must be utilised by India to develop a long-term approach to the issue of refugees fleeing political persecution in their homelands.
- India does not have a National Refugee Law nor is it a signatory to the UN Convention governing refugees.
- India has allowed Tibetans, Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, Chakmas of Bangladesh, the Lothsampas of Nepali origin from Bhutan, Afghans, Somalis and many others into this land.
- But these remain ad hoc approaches.
- This has been sought to be addressed for six "minority" communities of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan in a long-term manner by the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act.
- However, the CAA does not cover many of the cases listed above.

What was the international action towards this?

- UN and various states are voicing against the atrocities committed by Myanmar on the peaceful protest conducted by people.
- Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), an UN established body created in 2011 with a mandate to investigate cases of international crimes committed in Myanmar.
- It issued a public call to security personnel to reach out and provide information regarding illegal orders and policies.
- International legal proceedings are initiated by countries like Gambia, Canada, Netherlands and Maldives in the International Court of Justice w.r.t the violation of Genocide Convention.

- Simultaneously, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court is investigating international crimes against the Rohingya.
- These international legal proceedings are indications of the seriousness and gravity of the crimes against the Rohingya which India should heed to.
- The Rohingya are refugees who have fled years of atrocities and a genocidal campaign and must not be sent back to Myanmar where their lives are in certain danger.
- India must shelter these individuals and allow for IIMM access, indicate its willingness to cooperate in these international investigations.

AFGHANISTAN

1.17 All about Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan

Why in news?

With withdrawal of the U.S. forces, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan's capital Kabul, declaring end of war.

What led to the birth of the Taliban?

- Soviet invaded Afghanistan in 1979.
- "Mujahideen" fighters (separatist group), with the U.S.'s support, repelled Soviet forces in the 1980s.
- Soviet withdrew in 1989 and the government collapse.
- Subsequently civil war erupted for control of the country.
- Taliban was founded in 1994 by Mullah Mohammad Omar, a local imam in Kandahar, as a faction for gaining control.
- Afghans were weary of the mujahideen's excesses and infighting.
- Taliban rose to popularity due to successfully curbing corruption & lawlessness, making the roads and providing safety for commerce.
- Proclaimed an Emirate in 1996 with a harsh interpretation of Islamic law.
- Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE were the only three to recognise the Taliban government when it was in power [1996 – 2001].

Why did the U.S. come in?

- Sep 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S. by Al-Qaeda, killed nearly 3,000 people.
- Al-Qaeda's leader Bin Laden was in Afghanistan, under the protection of the Taliban who refused to hand him over.
- The US intervened militarily; US-backed forces in the north swept into Kabul and conducted heavy airstrikes.
- The US -
 - i. Removed the Taliban from power (who moved into remote areas)
 - ii. Vowed to support democracy and eliminate the terrorist threat
- NATO allies had joined the US and a new Afghan government took over in 2004.

How costly was the war (2001-2021)?

- Estimated 69,000 losses in the Afghan security forces
- Number of civilians and militants killed - about 51,000 each
- More than 20,000 US soldiers injured
- Afghanistan now has the third-largest displaced population in the world.

Why is the U.S. withdrawing now?

- Killed Osama bin Laden (2011 itself)

- Ousted Al-Qaida from Afghanistan.
- In 2014, NATO's international forces ended their combat mission, leaving responsibility for security to the Afghan army.

What was the Taliban doing meanwhile?


- Since 2011, despite a continued international presence and billions of dollars of support, the Taliban regrouped and gradually regained strength in more remote areas.
- They were engaged in insurgency against the Afghan government and its Western allies.
- After 2014, Taliban seized more territory.
- Peace talks between the US and the Taliban started in 2018.

How did the peace talks fare?

- In February 2020 the two sides struck a peace deal in Doha.
- It committed the US to withdrawal and the Taliban to preventing attacks on US forces.
- Other promises included not allowing al-Qaeda or other militants to operate in areas it controlled and proceeding with national peace talks.
- However, the Taliban continued to target Afghan security forces and civilians.
- The agreement on a US withdrawal came in February 2020 in Qatar.

What is the recent happening?

- In April 2021, Biden, declared that all US troops would leave the country by Sept. 11 2021.
- Taliban stepped up its campaign to defeat the the government in May as foreign forces started to withdraw.
- With a few troops left, the capital Kabul finally fell to the Taliban.
- President Ghani fled out of the country stating to avoid any more bloodshed.
- Many Afghan leaders formally handed over power to the Taliban.
- The Taliban have now -
 1. Declared the war is over as Afghan forces surrendered and President fled the country.
 2. Installed themselves in the presidential palace with little resistance.



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Taliban means "students" in the Pashto language.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TALIBAN TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

1979
Soviet invaded Afghanistan. Mujahideen fighters with U.S.'s support, repelled Soviet in 1980s. Subsequently, civil war erupted for control of the country.

1994
Taliban was founded by Mullah Mohammad Omar, a local imam in Kandahar, as a faction for gaining control.

1996
Proclaimed an Emirate with a harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

SEPTEMBER 9, 2001
9/11 attacks in the U.S. by Al-Qaeda, killing nearly 3,000 people.

2002
Transitional govt government led by Hamid Karzai is established in Kabul.

MAY 2, 2011
Bin Laden killed in Pakistan by US Special Forces.







2003-2008
Taliban regroups, Bush sends more troops.


JUNE, 2011
Obama announces troop withdrawal.

2014
NATO ended their mission leaving responsibility to the Afghan army. Taliban seized more territory.

APRIL, 2021
Biden declared US troops would leave Afghanistan. Taliban continued to target Afghan forces and were in full control of a number of districts.

AUGUST, 2021
Kabul finally fell to the Taliban.



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Why did the Afghan army fell so soon?



- Not effective without residual US air and ground support.
- Corruption and lack of local legitimacy.
- Lack of sound political and administrative backing.
- Soldiers don't receive regular pay, and not properly supplied and equipped with.

Who will preside now?

- Decision will be taken after a consultation among top Taliban leadership.
- Likely President candidate - Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar
 - i. Taliban's deputy commander and its most public face
 - ii. Chief negotiator
 - iii. Oversaw the signing of the agreement for the US troop withdrawal

A study in 2017 showed the Taliban were in full control of a number of districts. US intelligence assessment itself reported that the Afghan government could fall within 6 months of US departure.

What are the key concerns now?

- Fears of a worsening civil war in Afghanistan as the likely outcome.
- Return to the cruel and repressive practices as in Taliban's previous regime [1996 – 2001].

What is the Taliban's response to these fears?

- Denies claims that it would return to strict rule under the Islamic law
- Wants a "genuine Islamic system" for Afghanistan and build "an open, inclusive Islamic government".
- Pledges for national peace talks
- Promises to make provisions for women's and minority rights, in line with cultural traditions and religious rules
- However, there are already signs of the group prohibiting women from working in some areas, attending schools and universities, and leaving the house without a male escort.

1.18 Taliban's Surge

What is the issue?

- Since the start of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban has made rapid territorial gains.
- This calls for a proactive role by both the Afghan government and the regional powers who are invested in the country's long-term stability.

How is Taliban's control evolving?

- 90% of U.S. withdrawal is complete.
- With this, the Taliban have taken control of 195 of Afghanistan's 407 districts, and are contesting 129 others.
- Most of their recent victories are in the northern provinces of Badakhshan and Takhar.
- These had notably resisted Taliban rule in the 1990s.
- In several northern districts, Afghan troops have either surrendered or retreated.

What is the impending threat?

- The north is home to Afghanistan's elite power brokers and leaders.
- If this is lost, the risk of a total collapse of the government in Kabul would increase.
- The government still controls most of the provincial capitals and cities.
- But they are practically surrounded by the Taliban.
- The pace of the Taliban's advancement in the countryside is on the rise.
- It is thus possible that they could launch an offensive to take the population centres once the foreign troops are out.
- On the other hand, the Taliban's strategy is still not clear.
- Their political office in Doha started peace talks with Afghan government representatives in September 2020.
- It continues to say that they were committed to the dialogue.
- But on the battlefield in Afghanistan, they continue a relentless campaign aimed at capturing more territories.

Why is the situation so?

- Part of the problem was the total abdication of leadership and responsibility by the U.S., which invaded Afghanistan 20 years ago.
- When direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban began, the U.S.'s focus was on exiting the war.
- It was not into finding a peaceful settlement to the crisis that it partly created.
- Therefore, the U.S. failed to put pressure on the Taliban to extract concessions.
- Instead, it struck a deal with them, completely ignoring the concerns of the Kabul government.
- Now, the Taliban are much more powerful on the ground.
- Even if the peace process with the Afghan government is revived after American pull-out, they would negotiate from a position of strength.

1.19 Recognising Taliban Regime

What is the issue?

With the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, it is imperative to look into the issue of recognising an entity that claims to be the new government of a State.

Is State and Government the same?

- In other words, State is an organized political community acting under a government (particular group of people that controls the state apparatus).
- Clearly, recognition of a 'Government' is different from recognition of a 'State' under international law.
- In the current case, the issue is about the recognition of not Afghanistan (the State) but the present Taliban regime (the government).

- The State is a political and geopolitical entity.
- The Nation is a cultural or ethnic entity.
- Government is the means through which the State power is employed.
- Malcolm Shaw - A change in government, however accomplished, does not affect the identity of the State itself.

Why is recognition essential?

- Recognition of a government is vital in international law **to know who the governing authority of the State is.**
- Because, it is the governing authority that carries out domestic and international legal obligations relating to diplomatic relations, rights protection, etc.

What is the complexity in Afghanistan?

- State and government generally work in tandem.

- The recognition is easier if the change of government within a state occurs with political transfer of power through legal means.
- But the Taliban have ousted the sitting government using unconstitutional means / extra-legal methods.
- So, the recognition will now depend on the countries' political considerations and geo-strategic interests.

What are the different principles of recognition?

Test of 'effectiveness'

- To recognise a government means to determine **whether it effectively controls the state it claims to govern.**
 - i. Control over the territory (or a part of it), national institutions, the banking and monetary system, etc.
 - ii. Control over a majority of the population
 - iii. A reasonable possibility of permanence
- It is immaterial how the new government occupied office (whether through civil war, revolution, or a military coup).
- As per this, Taliban would be recognised as the government as it effectively controls Afghanistan.

Democratic legitimacy

- Recognition of a government depends on whether it is the **legitimate representative of the people it claims to govern.**
- So, governments that capture power through non-democratic means should not be recognised by states.
- The Taliban regime, despite exercising effective control over Afghanistan, lacks democratic legitimacy and thus would fail to be recognised as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan.

What is the international law on this?

- Under international law, there are two modes of State recognition that confer legitimacy upon the said State.
- De Facto recognition may be based on the effective control theory alone but it can be revoked at any time.
- But de jure recognition is non-conditional, final and irrevocable and a State will have absolute rights and obligations against other states.
- De jure recognition is largely based on the democratic legitimacy doctrine and on compliance with Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention.

- **De jure government** – The legal, legitimate government of a state and is so recognized by other states.
- **De facto government** – That which is in actual possession of authority and control of the state.
- Under Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, in order to acquire recognition, a state must have:
 - i) a permanent population,
 - ii) a defined territory under its control, which is governed by a particular government,
 - iii) the capacity to enter into relations with other states.

What are the options before the countries?

- The doctrine of democratic legitimacy is widely employed by countries who would refuse de jure recognition of the Taliban.
- Also, if the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani, who fled the country when the Taliban entered Kabul, were to announce a government in exile, it could be recognised as the de jure government.
- E.g., Many countries recognised Yemen's Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi government in exile since 2015 (de jure, not de facto) as rebellious separatists acquired power in Yemen through illegal means.
- Nicolás Maduro government in Venezuela is not recognised by several countries due to the alleged lack of democratic legitimacy.
- But it would still be consistent with international law if Russia and China formally recognise the Taliban regime due to its effective control of Afghanistan.
- Because there is no binding legal obligation on countries to recognise regimes based on democratic legitimacy.

What about India's decision?

- Given the Taliban's brutal past, its extremist ideology, and absence of democratic legitimacy, India may refuse legal recognition.

- However, India will still have to find a way to engage with the de facto Taliban government given India's huge investments in Afghanistan, and for multilateral dealings such as the SAARC.

1.20 Intra-Afghan Talks

Why in news?

The Afghan government and the Taliban announced that the "intra-Afghan" talks would begin on September 12 in Doha, Qatar.

What is the story behind?

- This announcement was made after the Afghan government released the last batch of six Taliban prisoners.
- The talks follow the February 29, 2020 US-Taliban agreement on the withdrawal of US troops.
- The Afghan government was excluded from these negotiations.

What happened since the February agreement leading to the talks?

- The talks were to begin on March 10, 2020.
- But, the Afghan government held back on the commitment, made by US Special Representative, to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners.
- It did so as there was no reduction of violence as promised by Taliban.
- But under US pressure, President Ashraf Ghani started freeing prisoners.
- Taliban released 1,000 government-side prisoners including soldiers.
- Over the last few days, a tussle over the release of the last few Taliban prisoners held up the talks by a few more days.
- The withdrawal of US troops has taken place alongside.

What will the discussions be on?

- The US-Taliban agreement said that a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire will be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue.
- The participants will discuss the date and modalities of a ceasefire, including joint implementation mechanisms.
- This will be announced along with the completion and agreement over the future political roadmap of Afghanistan.
- The two main goals are a **power-sharing settlement** between the Afghan polity and the Taliban, and a **ceasefire**.
- The immediate question is which should come first.

What does the Afghan government want?

- The Afghan government has said that it wants a **ceasefire first**.
- It is doubtful the Taliban would agree to a truce first before getting what they want out of a political settlement.
- While in talks with the US, the Taliban continued violent attacks, leveraging these to underline their demands.

What does the Taliban want?

- Taliban's wants out of a political settlement is **unclear**.
- In the past, they have denounced democracy as a western imposition on their vision of Afghanistan.
- They have dropped several hints of a return to the Taliban-run Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan of 1996-2001.
- But they have signalled they may accept some of the democratic gains Afghanistan has made in the last two decades.
- The expectation is that the two sides should agree on an inclusive interim government that will be entrusted with hammering out the way forward.

What is India's stake in all this?

- India has not been involved in the process since it began two years ago.
- But it has backed the Afghan government for an “Afghan led peace process”, which has been marginal to even regional discussions.
- **Proxy** - This is due to India's diffidence about engaging in a process in which it sees Pakistan playing to install the Taliban as its proxy in Kabul.
- **China filling the vacuum** - India's other big worry is that the vacuum created by the exit of the US may be filled by China.
- China has also begun building ties with the Taliban.
- **Extending the CPEC** - The other concern is the interest in Pakistan to extend the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan.
- Pakistan's stepped up role in Afghanistan will contribute to China's influence.
- China sees its role in Afghan security as indispensable as it is a neighbouring country with great power that cannot be ignored.
- The possibility of an enhanced Chinese presence in Afghanistan, in combination with Pakistan and the Taliban, is cause of worry for India.

1.21 India-Afghan Relations after Taliban Takeover

What is the issue?

With the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, here is what India's response should be, and the challenges and opportunities therein.

What is the response so far?

- The U.S. and European countries relocated their diplomatic outposts to the Kabul airport where Taliban control is lesser.
- Russia, China and Iran decided not to vacate their embassies there.
- The Indian government is **completely evacuating** Indian nationals in Afghanistan, including the entire embassy and security personnel.

Is complete evacuation by India a wise option?

- India had undertaken evacuations during the 1990s too when the Taliban first came to power.
- But the presence of Indian nationals was not as large and Indian stakes in Afghanistan were not as deeply rooted as it is now.
- Since 2001, India has built considerable interests in Afghanistan:
 1. Contributed to major infrastructure and development projects.
 2. Helped in scripting the Afghan Constitution and conduct of elections.
 3. Enabled the training and education of the next generation of officials, soldiers and professionals.
- The decision to pull up all stakes, despite such significant investments made in the past, raise concerns.

How much has India invested in Afghanistan?

- The 2011 India-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement recommitted Indian assistance to help rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure.
- Unlike in other countries where India's infrastructure projects have barely started, it has delivered in Afghanistan.
- India's development assistance is now estimated to be worth well over \$3 billion.
- Bilateral trade is now worth \$1 billion, with exports from India worth approximately \$900 million.

Projects

Why should India strengthen the relations?

- India has huge investments and stakes there.
- India should make use of the love that the Afghans have for India while Pakistan is not very popular.
- The Taliban of 2021 seems to be relatively mature and liberal than the former.
 1. It is holding talks with former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai.
 2. Negotiations are under way for a more inclusive coalition, including several former leaders of Afghanistan.

Salma Dam – 42MW hydropower and irrigation project also known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam.

Zaranj-Delaram Highway – 218-km highway built by BRO goes along the Khash Rud river. With Pakistan denying access, the highway provides an alternative route into landlocked Afghanistan through Iran's Chabahar port.

Stor Palace – Restored a Palace in Kabul, originally built in the late 19th century, which was the setting for the 1919 Rawalpindi Agreement by which Afghanistan became an independent country.

Other Projects – Parliament buildings, 220kV DC transmission line, reconstruction of a children's hospital, 400 buses and 200 mini-buses for urban transportation, Air India aircrafts, Sulabh toilet blocks etc.

Afghan exports – Fresh and dried fruit through the Wagah border.

Indian exports – Pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, computers and related materials, cement, and sugar through government-to-government contracts with Indian companies.



What are the risks involved?

- Taliban's Pakistan support is a particular security concern.
- Groups such as the LeT and JeM could use Afghanistan as a staging base for terror attacks in India.

What lies ahead for the government?

- Explain how it will approach the new regime in Afghanistan.
- Clarify its stance on Afghan people/refugees whose lives are in danger.
- A more open, liberalised visa policy, and more swift processing of the newly launched special "e-Emergency X-Misc" visas.
- Retain traditional and historic interests in Afghanistan and its people, despite the adverse events there.
- In all, India should adopt a "wait and watch" mode and be in no hurry either to recognise or dismiss the new Taliban regime.

1.22 India's Engagement with Taliban

What is the issue?

India adopted UN Security Council's (UNSC's) resolution 2593 that aims to address the New Delhi's key concerns regarding the country

What is UNSC resolution 2593 all about?

- The resolution demands that Afghan territory should not be used to threaten/attack any country or to shelter/train terrorists or plan/finance terrorist acts
- It was put forward by US, UK, and France and adopted after 13 council members voted in favour
- The permanent members Russia and China abstained from voting
- It specifically mentions individuals and entities designated by UNSC Resolution 1267, i.e., Lashker-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)

What is the significance of the resolution?

- Strong signal from the UNSC and the international community on its expectations in respect of Afghanistan
- Called on the Taliban to keep its commitments on preventing terror groups in Afghanistan
- Urged Taliban to assist the safe evacuations of Afghan nationals wishing to leave the country
- Addressed the concerns of anti-Indian terror outfits like LeT and JeM

- The UNSC 1267 Committee (also known as AlQaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee) was established as a result of resolution 1267 in 1999
- If an individual/organisation is included in the 1267 list, it helps in restricting their movement, financial penalties and assets freeze among others

Why did Russia and China abstain from voting?

- Demand of inclusion of groups like Islamic State (ISIL) and Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in the document
- Non inclusion of freezing Afghan financial assets in the document
- The resolution was alleged to be unbalanced and forcefully pushed through

What are the recent developments of India's engagement with Taliban?

- Ministry of External Affairs announced that its Ambassador to Qatar Deepak Mittal met with the head of the Taliban's political office
- Discussions were on safety, security and early return of Indian nationals stranded in Afghanistan
- Also focused on Afghan nationals, especially minorities
- Demanded that Afghanistan's soil should not be used for anti-Indian activities and terrorism in any manner
- Taliban leader assured that all the issues would be positively addressed

What would be India's future course of action?

- Concerns about the Haqqani group, which is a part of the Taliban who attacked the Indian Embassy in 2008-2009
- Being in touch with "various stakeholders" in Afghanistan and meeting with Taliban representatives
- "Wait and watch" the Taliban's actions with regard to human rights, treatment of women and minorities, attitude towards terror groups, etc.

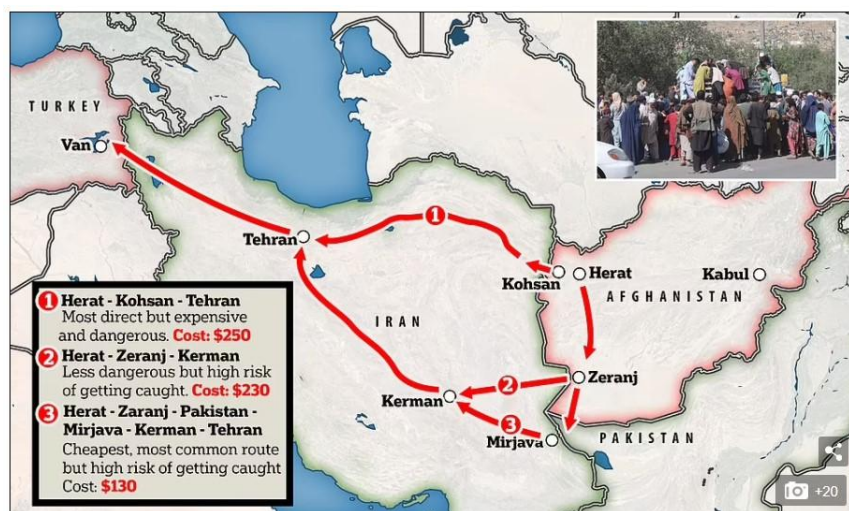
1.23 Greece's Wall - Afghan Refugee Crisis

Why in news?

- Greece has built a 40-km long wall and installed a hi-tech surveillance system on its border with Turkey.
- To avoid heavy migration of Afghan citizens into Greece via Turkey, and then further into Europe, following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

What is the Afghan refugee crisis?

- The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has given way to a new refugee crisis.
- 400,000 Afghans have fled their homes since the start of 2021, including almost 300,000 since May 2021.
- Afghan nationals enter Turkey from Iran and then, via land or sea enter Greece to eventually get into Europe.

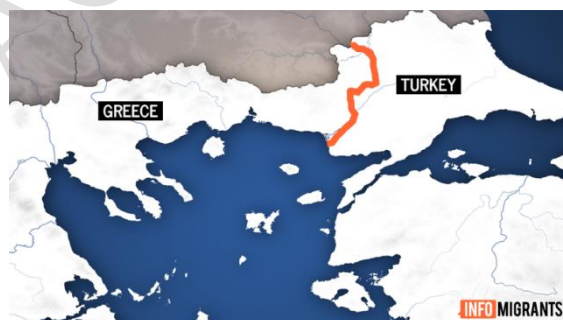


Thousands of Afghans are fleeing the country every day, smugglers have said, mostly on three routes all of which begin in Herat - a smuggling hub. The most direct, expensive, and dangerous route goes from there to Tehran via a crossing at Kohsan where migrants have to swim a deadly river, but stand the least chance of getting caught. A second route goes south to Zaranj before the crossing into Iran, to a safehouse in Kerman. From there, the migrants are taken to Tehran when the coast is clear of guards. The third and most-common route goes via Pakistan to Iran - it is the cheapest, but has the largest chance of capture

"e-Emergency X-Misc" visa is a special category of electronic visa introduced by India to fast-track urgent applications for entry to India (for those who are not covered in the available categories but need to visit India urgently due to an emergency.) It has been introduced especially for Afghans as the situation worsens after the Taliban takeover.

What is Greece's and Turkey's stance?

- The European Union and Greece have been in talks to help each other in the possibility of massive migration from Afghanistan.
- EU nations should collectively act towards supporting the countries in the region "which will be affected by the migration wave".
- EU should help the Afghan citizens in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries like Iran.
- But the cooperation on migration should be promoted based on mutual understanding and interests.
- Because, the EU is not ready and does not have the capacity to handle and afford another major migration crisis like the one in 2015.



What is the 2015 migrant crisis faced by Greece?

- The European Union faced a huge inflow of migrants from neighbouring countries, especially the middle-east, during the **2015 Syrian war**.
- More than 1.3 million people fled to Europe, seeking asylum in the EU, Norway and Switzerland.
- Over 75% of those arriving in Europe had fled conflict and persecution in Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq.
- Most of these people arrived in Greece and Italy.
- 800,000 refugees had entered Greece from Turkey via sea, which was 80% of migrants arriving in Europe by the sea in 2015.
- Of this, only 150,000 had entered Italy; the rest remained in Greece.
- In addition to the sea crossings, 34,000 crossed from Turkey into Bulgaria and Greece by land.

"In 2016, Greece and Turkey reached an arrangement to halt the inflow of migrants into Greece via Turkey in return for financial support for Turkey."

- Thereafter, any migrants who had not applied for asylum or whose applications were rejected were sent back to Turkey.
- In 2020, Turkey had opened its borders for migrants to move towards Greece, stating that it had "reached its capacity".
- The wall at the Greece-Turkey border now comes after a discussion on the Afghanistan crisis between Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

2. BILATERAL RELATIONS

ASIA

2.1 Relook at India's Act East Policy

What is the issue?

Despite the best intentions of an Act East Policy, India's standing and image in Southeast Asia have suffered.

What is the present scenario?

- Three developments over the past five years are testing Indian diplomacy in the region:
 1. the rising profile of China combined with growing China-India tensions
 2. disappointment in the region with India's economic under-performance
 3. rising concern in the region with India's approach towards its minorities, especially Muslims and Christians

What does a rising China mean?

- China's rise and growing assertiveness of the Xi Jinping regime initially generated a strong pro-India sentiment in the South-east Asian region.
- Many ASEAN countries wanted India to balance China's enhanced power.
- But, India's economic slowdown and inward orientation (decision to stay out of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement) disappointed regional business.
- ASEAN and Indian governments tried to maintain good relations.
- But Southeast Asia's powerful business groups, mostly ethnic Chinese, began losing interest in India.
- However, as recently as 2017, during the Doklam stand-off between China and India, many ASEAN governments conveyed their quiet support for India.
- This was in the hope that a robust response from India would keep China's geopolitical ambitions in the region under check.
- But between Doklam and Galwan tensions, there has been a change in the Southeast Asian assessment of China and India.
- It could be due to a willingness to accommodate Chinese interests, a growing admiration for China's assertion of power within the ethnic Chinese community in the region. Or, it could be due to a disappointment with India.

How have civil society attitudes changed?

- Ethnic Chinese loyalties define one segment of Southeast Asian civil society and Islamic faith defines another large segment.
- In most ASEAN countries, ethnic Chinese practise Islam, Buddhism or Christianity.
- Given this, growing concern on Hindu majoritarianism in India has impacted civil society attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.
- India deployed the soft power of "Buddhist diplomacy." But, Southeast Asian states and civil society seem less impressed by Indian hard and soft power even as their fear and/or admiration of China has gone up.
- [India was successful till a few years ago in holding China's rising hard power back with its own hard and soft power.]
- Both China's direct influence and that of ethnic Chinese in the South Asian region are on the rise.

What is the larger impact?

- All the above developments weakened the business-to-business (B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) connect between India and ASEAN.

- This was despite the best efforts of hard-pressed diplomats to maintain good government-to-government (G2G) relations.

2.2 India-Taiwan ties

Why in news?

Recently India and Taiwan are celebrating 25 years of their partnership.

What are the existing areas of cooperation?

- Both the countries have deepened the mutual respect which is underpinned by openness, democracy.
- They recognise diversity as the key principles for collective growth and share faith in freedom, human rights, justice and rule of law.
- India and Taiwan already collaborate in the area of traditional medicine.
- India's has been in the forefront in fighting against COVID-19 and Taiwan's handling of the pandemic and its support to other countries underlines the need to deepen cooperation in healthcare.
- Now both countries can expand cooperation in the field of healthcare.

How can Taiwan support India?

- Indian government is facing the huge challenge of maintaining air quality and stubble burning is an important reason for this.
- Taiwan could be a valuable partner in dealing with this challenge through its bio-friendly technologies.
- Such technologies can convert agricultural waste into value-added and environmentally beneficial renewable energy or biochemicals.
- This will help in dealing with air pollution and also enhances farmers' income.
- Further, they can undertake joint research and development initiatives in the field of organic farming.

What are the other areas that both countries can cooperate?

- Cultural exchange is the cornerstone of any civilisation exchange and India and Taiwan can deepen people-to-people connection.
- This will appreciate another culture and helps in overcoming prejudices and cultural misunderstanding.
- Tourism is another key tool in civilisation exchange and there are small numbers of Taiwanese tourists arriving to India.
- To accelerate the flow of Taiwanese tourists, connectivity in Buddhist pilgrimage can be strengthened in addition to showcasing India's incredible diversity.
- Taiwan Tourism Bureau partnership with Mumbai Metro can raise awareness about Taiwan and increase the inflow of Indian tourists.

How can economic ties be deepened?

- In 2018, both the countries signed a bilateral trade agreement in which was an important milestone in trade relations.
- India has a huge market which provides Taiwan a huge investment opportunity.
- Taiwan's is the world leader in semiconductor and electronics which can complement India's leadership in ITES (Information Technology-Enabled Services).
- There are around 200 Taiwanese companies in the field of electronics, construction, petrochemicals, machine, ICT and auto parts operating in India.
- Despite the huge potential, Taiwan investments have been meagre in India due to dismaying regulatory and labour regime.
- But India's recent strides in the ease of business ranking will provide Taiwan with lucrative business opportunities and mitigate its over-dependence on one country for investment opportunities.

- Policymakers can coordinate with the business community to help them in navigating the regulatory landscape for better ties.
- To make this relationship more meaningful, both sides can create a group of empowered persons to chart out a road map in a given time frame.

2.3 India-Japan Relations

Why in news?

Recent Japan PM's meeting with the U.S. can be seen as a preview for the upcoming Japan PM visit to India.

What were the talks between U.S. and Japan?

- The crux of the discussions revolved around China and agenda was set for the wider Indo-Pacific engagement of Japan.
- Both the countries negotiated on their joint security partnership for addressing China's territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait.
- They affirmed the centrality of their treaty alliance-long source of stability in East Asia and pledged to stand up to China in key regions such as the disputed Senkaku Islands and Taiwan.
- They also discussed on Chinese ambitions to dominate the development of new age technologies such as 5G and quantum computing.
- They earmarked billions in funding for the deployment of secure 5G networks, committed to build digital infrastructure in developing countries and collaborate in setting global digital standards.
- They want China to reform economic practices such as violations of intellectual property rights, forced technology transfer, excess capacity issues, and the use of trade distorting industrial subsidies.
- They emphasised their vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific that respects the rule of law, freedom of navigation, democratic norms and the use of peaceful means to settle disputes.

What India can expect from Japan?

- First, India can expect a continuation of the balancing security policy against China that began in 2014.
- Crucially, India's clashes with China in Galwan have turned public opinion in favour of a more confrontational China policy.
- Both nations will affirm for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and continued willingness to work with the Quad.
- Second, they will look to expand cooperation in sectors such as cybersecurity and emerging technologies.
- Earlier both the nations put forward a digital research and innovation partnership that included technologies like AI, 5G, Internet of Things and space research.
- With the U.S.-Japan summit, they might look to deepen cooperation between research institutes and expand funding in light of China's aforementioned technology investment programme.
- Third, economic ties and infrastructure development are likely to be top items on the agendas of the upcoming meeting.
- Japan has poured in around \$34 billion in investments into the Indian economy in the last two decades and it is India's 12th largest trading partner.
- But the trade volumes between the two nations stand at just a fifth of the value of India-China bilateral trade.
- After the summit, Japan's will reaffirm support for key manufacturing initiatives such as 'Make in India' and the Japan Industrial Townships.
- Further, India will be keen to secure continued infrastructure investments in the strategically vital connectivity projects in the Northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- Also, the upcoming India-Japan summit would devote much attention to evolving a joint strategy towards key third countries and multilateral bodies.

WESTERN COUNTRIES

2.4 Indo-U.S. Ties

Why in news?

Recently the visit of external affairs minister to U.S. is expected to deepen the strategic partnership and synergy between the nations.

What is the history of ties between the nations?

- During the Cold War, India and U.S. was ideologically divided which limited the possibilities for their international cooperation.
- After the Cold War, India rallied behind China and Russia on multilateral issues.
- The idea that multilateralism is a natural domain for India-China cooperation took a back seat when China blocked India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group and permanent seat in the UNSC.
- It was the U.S. which ended India's nuclear isolation and India's default position of opposing the West on multilateral issues reduced.
- In the last couple of years, India has actively backed the European Alliance for Multilateralism and is open to positive engagement with U.S. on global issues.

What will the talks about?

- One, is climate change which was the agenda when U.S. special envoy visited India last month.
- This will pave a way for the U.S. to support India's transition to green growth.
- Two, there exist serious differences on trade-related issues between the nations and there cannot be an unexpected convergence.
- But both the nations are convinced that overexposure to China has reduced their domestic manufacturing.
- Hence they will explore the possibilities for a new bilateral trade compact and potential cooperation to reform the global trading order.

What will be the other highlights of the talks?

- The conversation will go beyond the bilateral issues and will have regional and global dimensions.
- In the past, regional issues, including those in the subcontinent and broader Asia, were a major source of friction between the countries.
- The mechanism of the Quadrilateral Security Framework, which arose out of the India-US bilateral defence cooperation is emerging as instrument to shape the regional architecture in the east.
- U.S. has now embraced and reinforced the idea of an Indo-Pacific regional space which provides regional cooperation.
- India's principal national challenge today- combatting the virus through vaccination-is expected to be an important part of the talks.

How can both the nations engage in combatting the pandemic?

- U.S. has facilitated the release of essential items for vaccine production and delivering significant relief supplies.
- Even before the virus began to surge in April, U.S. saw the partnership with India as a critical element in the regional effort.
- This was to expand the production of vaccines and deliver them across the Indo-Pacific.
- As the second wave begins to recede and India's vaccine production revives, Indian and U.S. interlocutors must now plan to reboot the strategy to vaccinate the Indo-Pacific.
- Both the nations can pool their resources and strategies in boosting the global resilience against the pandemic and frame new international norms to combat it.

- India has welcomed U.S. move to reverse the earlier decision to move out of the World Health Organisation.
- This, in turn, brings us to the emerging possibilities for expansive India-US cooperation in the multilateral domain.

2.5 India - Expanding Ties with the West

What is the issue?

The summit of Group of Seven (G7) industrial countries is an opportunity for India to expand ties with the West.

Is the West on decline?

- Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the West is perceived to be in a terminal decline.
- Various factors have only added to this view:
 - the rapid rise of China
 - deepening divisions within the West during the Trump years
 - the chaotic response in North America and Europe to the Covid-19 pandemic
- But the US president Joe Biden wants to reverse the global perception of a declining West.
- Biden also calls for the normalisation of relations with Russia, suggesting a fresh look at the ties.

What does it mean for India?

- Biden is determined to strengthen US alliances and draw India into a new global architecture.
- The other factors generating convergence between the interests of India and the West includes -
 - i. the challenges from an increasingly aggressive China
 - ii. the urgency of mitigating climate change
 - iii. the construction of a post-pandemic international order
- Biden also made an elevation of the Quad (US, Australia, India and Japan) to the summit level recently.
- It is much about defining a new agenda for a particular geography, the Indo-Pacific, of which India is a part.

What about India's role in G7?

- This is not the first time that India is participating in the G-7.
- It is also not new to have G-7 leaders invite different countries to join them.
- But the difference this time is the conception behind UK PM Boris Johnson's invitation.
- UK, as the host, has invited leaders of India, Australia, South Africa and South Korea to the summit.
- This suggests the intention to build a coalition of leading democracies, based more broadly than the geographic West.
- India is at the very heart of this Western calculus of having a global democratic coalition.
- [India has been having strong bilateral strategic cooperation with the US, France, UK and the Quad.
- There is also the trilateral partnerships with France and Australia as well as Japan and Australia.
- India has also stepped up its engagement with the European Union.]

How significant is the West to India?

- China is trying to internationalise the Kashmir issue after the 2019 constitutional changes.
- And India has relied on Western support to fend off this effort of China.
- [The West is also supportive to India's aim to contain Pakistan's support for cross-border terrorism.]
- There is also a growing trade imbalance with China, leading to India walking away from the RCEP.
- In all, India is reluctant to integrate with the China-led Asian economic order.

- Importantly, it is also turning to the West - the US, UK, EU and others - for trade agreements.
- In essence, China is the greatest obstacle to India's global aspirations and the West is an emerging partner.

How about ties with Russia?

- Moscow has moved closer to Beijing in recent years.
- But India has been reluctant to abandon its longstanding ties with Russia.
- However, a deteriorating US-Russia relationship in recent years was a challenge to India.
- But, the renewed dialogue between Washington and Moscow has increased India's hopes now, to strengthen ties with Russia.

What are the challenges though?

- Between India and the West, there are many areas of continuing divergence.
- These range from the economic role of the state to the democratic regulation of social media and the technology giants.
- So, translating the broad convergences between India and the West into tangible cooperation require sustained negotiations.
- A productive partnership with the West helps India's national interests and adds strength to India's international relations.

2.6 Italian Marines Case

Why in news?

The Supreme Court ordered the closure of proceedings in India against two Italian marines, accused of killing two fishermen off the Kerala coast in February 2012.

What was the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling?

- [Permanent Court of Arbitration - a tribunal under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea]
- The Permanent Court of Arbitration had clarified that India and Italy had concurrent jurisdiction to try the case.
- However, it said that the Italian marines enjoyed immunity from Indian jurisdiction.
- This is because they were acting on behalf of a state.
- The UN tribunal had also ruled that the Indian fishing boat, St. Antony, and the victims were entitled to compensation.
- This is on the ground that Enrica Lexie had violated the boat's right of navigation under the Law of the Sea.

What next?

- The Supreme Court has issued the order of closure after Italy deposited compensation of Rs. 10 crore.
- The two marines are now likely to face trial in Italy.
- But as far as India is concerned, the monetary compensation may have to be treated as the only available form of closure for the moment.
- The legal heirs of the two victims are likely to get Rs. 4 crore each, and the owner of the fishing vessel, Rs. 2 crore.

ITALIAN MARINES CASE



What is the case on?

- On February 15, 2012, two Indian fishermen were returning from a fishing expedition near Lakshadweep islands onboard fishing vessel St Antony.
- They were gunned down by two Italian marines on board oil tanker Enrica Lexie.
- The incident occurred around 20 nautical miles off the coast of Kerala.
- Shortly after the incident, the Indian Coast Guard intercepted Enrica Lexie.
- They detained the two Italian marines, Salvatore Girone and Massimiliano Latorre.

Challenges in dealing with the case:

- i. the legal tangles over jurisdiction
- ii. the lawfulness of their arrest & location of their trial
- iii. the provisions of law under which they should be tried
- iv. legal accountability through a criminal trial



Why is the delay?

- India did not initially agree to Italy's offer of compensation and a trial in its own jurisdiction, which was what the UN tribunal's ruling also said.
- Back then, many in India believed it was an act of wanton killing.
- And those in Italy believed the fears of piracy were genuine.
- Meanwhile, India's efforts to assert criminal jurisdiction succeeded in national courts.
- In 2013, the SC ruled that prosecuting the marines was solely in the Union government's jurisdiction.
- The NIA invoked the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against Safety of Maritime Navigation and Fixed Platforms on Continental Shelf Act, 2002.
- This stringent anti-piracy law gave way to Italy's concerns.
- European nations objected to the trial taking place under this law that provided for the death penalty.
- The provisions of the Act were dropped, but this led to significant delay in prosecuting the matter.
- A lesson from the Italian marines case is that in such incidents, legal steps must go hand-in-hand with diplomatic efforts to find early resolution.

3. INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

3.1 Reframing India's Foreign Policy Priorities

What is the issue?

With new developments likely in international relations for 2021, here is a look at its dimensions and relevance for India.

What are the recent developments in international relations?

- Leadership change in the United States is perhaps the most awaited change.
- But it is unlikely to bring about a major power shift in the international arena.
- Even before the changeover, and despite the promise of a Biden presidency to invigorate the U.S.-Europe axis, Europe has only revived its China links.
- It has concluded in principle the negotiations for an EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.
 - This is an indication that Europe values its economy more than its politics.
- Many countries are likely to seek closer economic relations with China now. This would be a challenging aspect in India's relations.
- Major changes are afoot in Eurasia and West Asia which could lead to significant shifts.
- Russia is beginning to display greater interest in the affairs of countries on its periphery.
 - Together with strengthening ties with China and reaching an entente with Turkey, this seems to signal reduced interest in countries such as India.
- In West Asia, the Abraham Accords, leading to a realignment of forces in the Arab world, have sharpened the division between the Saudi Bloc and Iran-Turkey.
- The situation has not reduced the risk of a confrontation between Iran and Israel. This poses problems for India, since both have relations with it.
- Meanwhile, China demonstrates a willingness to play a much larger role in the region, with plans for a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Iran.
- Saudi Arabia could find 2021 challenging, with a Biden Administration taking charge in Washington.

What does a stronger China signify?

- China is the only major country which had a positive rate of growth at the end of 2020.

- Its economy is poised to grow even faster in 2021.
- Militarily, China has further strengthened itself. It now seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific Ocean with its announcement of the launch of its third aircraft carrier in 2021.
- Simultaneously, it is seeking to strengthen its military coordination with Russia.
- In effect, China's position across Asia is, if anything, stronger than in 2020.
- India cannot expect any Chinese concessions in Eastern Ladakh, until India 'makes amends'.

Is India isolated?

- As far as the above developments are concerned, at the start of 2021, India seems to be isolated.
- No breakthrough in Sino-Indian relations has, or is likely to occur, and the confrontation between the armed forces is expected to continue.
- India currently plays no significant role in West Asia. India-Iran relations today lack warmth.
- In Afghanistan, India has been marginalised as far as the peace process is concerned.
- India's charges against Pakistan of sponsoring terror have had some impact globally.
- But it has further aggravated tensions between the two neighbours.
- In the process, this also helped Pakistan to cement its relations with China.
- While hostility between India and Nepal appears to have reduced lately, relations continue to be strained.
- In all, as India-China relations deteriorate, India's neighbours are not averse to taking sides, increasing India's isolation.
 - India's foreign policy objectives are to widen its sphere of influence, enhance its role across nations.
 - It strives to make its presence felt as an emerging power in an increasingly disruptive global system.
 - But India's voice and counsel are seldom sought, or listened to at present due to some changing perceptions.

What are the changing perceptions?

- Indian diplomats conduct their activities with a high degree of competence, but they are possibly hampered by other factors.
- The kind of policy choices India has adopted in the recent period has possibly altered the perception of India in certain quarters.
 - E.g. India's closeness to the U.S. has resulted in the weakening of its links with traditional friends such as Russia and Iran
- There is possibly a shift in balance of power in the region in which India is situated.
 - The rise of China, and the enlarging conflict between the two biggest powers in Asia, compels many nations to pick sides in the conflict.
- A less obvious, but perhaps more relevant aspect, could also be that India's foreign policy suffers from an ideational vacuum.
- It is not the sharp decline in the economy, problems caused on account of the pandemic, or the growing polarisation in values across nations and societies.
- It is instead more due to India's inability or failure in the ideational realm that lies at the root of our foreign policy inadequacies.

Where all has India missed?

- Currently, India remains isolated from two important supranational bodies of which it used to be a founding member.
 - These are the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).
- Efforts to strengthen newer institutions such as the BIMSTEC have hardly been successful.

- India has opted out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (a majority of Asian countries are members).
- It has also failed to take advantage of the RIC (Russia, India and China grouping) even as relations with Russia and China have deteriorated.
- On the other hand, India's foreign policy imperatives, across Asia and South Asia in particular, seem to be a mixture of misplaced confidence -
 - excessive confidence (as in the case of Nepal)
 - a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of neighbours such as Bangladesh and long-time friends (such as Vietnam and Iran)
 - according excessive importance to the policy needs and pressures of nations such as the U.S

3.2 Changed Geopolitical Realities in West Asia

What is the issue?

- Iran's senior-most nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated recently near Tehran. Iran sees indications of Israeli role in this.
- In this context, here is how India, Pakistan and Bangladesh must deal with the changing geopolitical realities in West Asia.

What does the assassination signify?

- The murder underlines a familiar political truth in the Middle East.
 - It is not that important if you are right or wrong; what really matters is whether you are weak or strong.
- In this light, the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh highlights Iran's growing strategic vulnerabilities.
- It also points to a continuing regional realignment against Iran marked by the normalisation of ties between some key Arab states and Israel.
- This geopolitical turbulence in the Middle East has major consequences for the Indian subcontinent, which has intimate religious, economic, and strategic ties with the Middle East.

What are the emerging trends in the Middle East?

Iran's growing isolation in the region

- The U.S. under Trump administration, Israel and the Gulf Arabs have a shared interest in preventing Joe Biden from renewing nuclear diplomacy with Iran and ending its isolation.
- The assassination of Fakhrizadeh is about achieving that political objective.
- If Iran retaliates vigorously, it will invite an all-out confrontation with Israel and the US.
- This will kill the prospects for a productive engagement with the Biden administration.
- On the other hand, holding back will expose Iran's weakness.
 - It will also sharpen Iran's internal divisions between pragmatists who want to engage the US and the hardliners who want a confrontation.
- The frequent attacks on high-profile Iranian targets raise questions about the hostile penetration of Iran's society.
- The exposure of Iran's internal political weakness is compounded by the massive economic pain imposed by the U.S.

Rapid transformation of Arab relations with Israel

- The fear of Iran has been driving Gulf Arabs to embrace Israel.
- In the recent days, Bahrain and the UAE have normalised ties with Israel.
- There is speculation of an impending normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey

- Saudi Arabia and Turkey are in a tussle for the leadership of the Muslim world.
- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE want to return the Middle East towards political and religious moderation.
- But the once secular Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become the new champion of political Islam.
- Turkey's new religious zeal provides a good ideological cover for Erdogan's ambitions to expand its geopolitical influence in the Middle East.
 - Erdogan's Turkey is now hostile to India and has joined Pakistan in taking up the Kashmir question at international forums.
 - However, Saudi Arabia and UAE are not much on Pakistan's side in this regard.
 - More recently, there have been reports of UAE deliberately blocking Pakistani labour exports to the UAE.
 - If Pakistan continues its tilt towards Turkey, Saudi Arabia, which hosts more than 2 million Pakistan workers, could surely follow the UAE example.

Where do Pakistan and Bangladesh stand in this?

- **Pakistan** - Pakistani pragmatists long wanted to establish ties with Israel and neutralise Delhi's connection with Israel.
- But the growing weight of Islamist ideology, conspiracies, and relentless propaganda equating Palestine with Kashmir seemed to hold Pakistan back.
- However, the context has dramatically altered with the normalisation of ties between the Gulf Arabs and Israel.
- Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has talked of pressure, apparently from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on recognising Israel.
- Pakistan also knows the value of having a sensible relationship with Israel and its useful spinoffs in the U.S.
 - Pakistan is notably trying to limit U.S.'s current political tilt towards India.
- **Bangladesh** - If Pakistan recognises Israel, Bangladesh would not want to be left behind.
- Economic and technological collaboration with Israel will give Bangladesh's economy and foreign policy a big boost.
- Like Pakistan, Bangladesh, too, could use a new Jewish connection to cope with the mounting criticism in the U.S. of Bangladesh's political freedoms and human rights under PM Sheikh Hasina.
- Bangladesh and Pakistan, two of the world's largest Islamic nations, recognising Israel would be a great ideological and political bonus for it.

3.3 US-North Korea Missile Diplomacy

Why in news?

North Korea has resumed back its largest fissile material production reactor at the Yongbyon complex which was ceased back in 2018.

What are the developments in Pyongyang's Nuclear Programme?

During 20th century:

- In 1994, Pyongyang barred IAEA access to the Yongbyon complex
- A peace deal called **1994 Agreed Framework** was signed by President Bill Clinton, requiring Pyongyang to freeze all nuclear activity and allow inspection of its military sites in return for the construction of two light water reactors.
- But the accord broke down in 2002

During the tenure of President George W. Bush:

- North Korea unilaterally withdrew from Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) in 2003

- It is not a party to CTBT and Chemical Weapons Convention
- President George W. Bush referred North Korea as a part of the “axis of evil”
- North Korea was placed on the terrorism list after the 1987 bombing of a South Korean airplane
- In order to enforce its denuclearisation commitment, Pyongyang blew up the cooling tower at the Yongbyon complex in 2008
- Later it barred IAEA inspectors access to its reprocessing plant in the Yongbyon complex as in 1994

During the tenure of President Donald Trump:

- In 2017, North Korea successfully tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and conducted a thermonuclear weapon test
- In 2019 North Korea offered to fully dismantle in exchange for securing complete relief from international economic sanctions
- North Korea resumed its short-range ballistic missile tests after the bilateral talks stalled

During the tenure of President Joe Biden:

- The Biden administration has declared its readiness to resume negotiations with Pyongyang
- But Mr. Kim has overturned the offers until sanctions are removed
- Yongbyon complex resumed its operation to generate plutonium and highly enriched uranium for the development of atomic bombs
- Also, North Korea test fired its first strategic cruise missile with possible nuclear capability recently
- North Korea's missile capacity has been enhanced to strike even the territory of U.S.

How does U.S. perceive the North Korea's actions?

- North Korea holding to the **deterrence theory** that nuclear weapons are intended to deter other states from attacking appears hollow
- The UN treaty on complete abolition of atomic arms is the morally superior alternative
- The U.S.'s key goal in northeastern Asia is the de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and it views diplomacy as the only practical way to achieve this

3.4 South Korea's Falling Population

Why in news?

For the first time in history, the number of deaths recorded in South Korea over the past year exceeded births, causing the country's population to decline.

What is the current scenario?

- In 2020, around 3.07 lakh people died in South Korea, and only 2.75 lakh babies were born.
- The number of new births fell by 10% from 2019.
- At the end of 2020, the country's population was less by 20,838 from the year before.
- The growth rate of South Korea's population declined from 1.49% in 2010 to 0.05% by 2019.
- If this trend continues, the government predicts that the population will drop from the current 5.18 crore to 3.9 crore by 2067. Consequently, 46% of people will be above 64 years of age.

Why is South Korea's population declining?

- In many parts of the world, greater economic development and lower fertility rates often go hand in hand.
- South Korea is a highly industrialised nation.
- It already has the world's lowest birth rate at 0.92 as of 2019; the number represents the average number of children a woman has.

- This figure is substantially lower than the fertility rate of 2.1 required for replacement of the existing population.
 - In India, the fertility rate is 2.2, as per 2019 figures.
- Some of the reasons believed to be behind the low birth rate include reluctance to opt for maternity leave.
- Another reason said is the high real estate prices, which dissuade young couples from buying a house and starting a family.

What is the government response?

- South Korea's government has said that it would bring in "fundamental changes" to address this trend.
- In December 2020, President Moon Jae-in announced policies such as giving cash incentives for families.
 - The scheme, which starts in 2022, will provide a one-off payment of 2 million won (around Rs 1.35 lakh) for each child born, to help cover parental costs.
- Until the baby turns one, the government will pay an additional 300,000 won (around Rs 20,000) every month.
- After 2025, the incentive will be raised to 500,000 won (around Rs 34,000).

Is a dwindling population always undesirable?

- Dwindling population has mixed effects.
- When the young population in a country declines, it creates labour shortages.
- This would have a major detrimental impact on the economy.
- More older people could also mean an increase in demands for healthcare and pensions.
- This further burdens the country's social spending system when fewer people are working and contributing to it.
- However, on the other hand, low birth rates can improve the standard of living in low-income countries.
- In such countries, fewer children being born would mean greater access to already deficient public services such as health and education.
- Also, many experts are dismissing the notion that more number of aged people would cause healthcare costs to shoot up.
- This is because, around the world, not just life expectancy, but "healthy life expectancy" has risen.
- This means that on average, people would be spending more years in good health than ever before.
- Another effect of a declining population is that it would provide an impetus to migration.
- With labour shortages in such countries, they would have to open up borders and allow more immigrants to come in and work.
- This, in turn, would cause their society to become more cosmopolitan.

What is the projection for world population?

- In July 2020, a Lancet analysis said that the world population will peak at 973 crore people in 2064.
- It is said to decline from this peak to 879 crore in 2100.
- In India, the population is expected to reach a peak of 160 crore in 2048, up from 138 crore in 2017. It will decline by 32% to 109 crore in 2100.
- In the study, the global total fertility rate (TFR) is predicted to steadily decline from 2.37 in 2017 to 1.66 in 2100.
- The TFR is projected to fall below 2.1 in 183 countries.
- In 23 countries including Japan, Thailand, Italy and Spain, it is projected to shrink by more than 50%.
- In India, the TFR is projected to continue a steep decline until about 2040, reaching 1.29 in 2100.

3.5 China's Falling Population

What is the issue?

- Official census data on China's population was released recently by its National Bureau of Statistics.
- It showed that in the decade up to 2020, China's population grew at its slowest rate since the 1950s, indicating a falling population.

What are the highlights?

- **Population** - China's population has grown from 134 crore in 2010 by 5.34% over the past decade.
- It now stands at 141.2 crore people.
- **Growth rate** - The rate of population growth, however, has been steadily falling; falling for the fourth consecutive year.
- Annually, the country grew 0.53% in the last 10 years, down from 0.57% between 2000 and 2010.
- This is the slowest of any decade since the 1950s.
- **Age composition**—In 2020, 1.2 crore babies were born in China, down from 1.465 crore in 2019, a fall of 18% in one year.
- The country's fertility rate has dropped to 1.3.
- This is far below the replacement level of 2.1 required for a generation to have enough children to replace it.
- The country's working population (between ages 15 and 59) is now 63.35% of the total, down by 6.79% from 2010.
- The number of people above age 60 has also gone up to 18.7% of the population, up by 5.44% from the last census.
- A positive factor is the greater proportion of children 14 years or younger, now at close to 18% of the population, up by 1.35% from 2010.
- This rise has been credited to China relaxing its strict one-child policy in 2016 and allowing two children per family.
- [The controversial one-child policy was put into force in the late 1970s.
- Authorities claim that it helped the country avert severe food and water shortages.
- But, theoretically, it prevented up to 40 crore people from being born.]

What is unique to China here?

- China's slowing population growth is part of a trend seen in many countries in Asia and the West.
- It mirrors the trends seen in neighbouring South Korea and Japan.
- In 2020, South Korea saw its population decline for the first time in history.
- In the United States too, the birth rate has dropped to 1.6, the lowest on record.
- Prosperous countries like Japan and Germany face similar demographic challenges.
- But they can depend on investments in factories, technology and foreign assets.
- But China, despite being the world's second-largest economy, is still a middle-income society.
- So, unlike the other developed countries that are part of this population trend, this will be a problem unique to China.
- It still depends on labour-intensive manufacturing and farming.
- So, a drop in demographic dividend could hurt China and other developing nations like India more than those in the rich world.

What are the challenges ahead?

- The UN expects China's population to begin declining after 2030.
- But some experts say this could happen as early as in the next one or two years.

- By 2025, the country is set to lose its 'most populous' tag to India. [India, in 2020, had an estimated 138 crore people, 1.5% behind China.]
- It implies fewer young people joining the workforce and the existing population rapidly ageing.
- When the young population in a country declines, it creates labour shortages, creating a major detrimental impact on the economy.
- More older people also means that demands for healthcare and pensions can soar.
- This, in turn, will burden the country's social spending system further when fewer people are working and contributing to it.

What are the policy measures taken?

- Policymakers will now have to find ways of sustaining China's high growth despite the above.
- In an effort to overcome this challenge, the Chinese government announced recently that it would increase the retirement age by a few months every year.
- While some welcome the move, others are unhappy about being forced to continue working.
- For the past four decades, the retirement age in China has been 60 for men and 55 for women, or 50 for women in blue-collar jobs.
- The government is also expected to increase incentives for couples to have more children.
- This comes although such sops have failed in the past in the face of higher cost-of-living challenges and career choices.
- Authorities have also been urged to completely drop restrictions on the number of children allowed per family.

3.6 Saudi Arabia ended its Blockade with Qatar

Why in news?

In the recently held Gulf reconciliation summit at Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia & its allies decided to end their blockade with Qatar.

Why was the blockade imposed?

- In 2017, Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed the blockade and severed the diplomatic ties.
- It accused Qatar for supporting terrorism & issued 13 demands for the blockade to be lifted.
- This included shutting down the Qatar-funded TV network-Al Jazeera, closing a Turkish military base & reducing diplomatic relations with Iran.

How did Qatar react to this?

- It did not bend towards the Saudi's demand despite heavy economic cost.
- It invited more Turkish troops thereby strengthening its ties with Turkey.
- Moreover, it played an important role in the U.S.-Taliban deal & continued to host talks between Taliban representatives and the Afghan government.
- Iran offered Qatar global connectivity when the Saudi and Emirati airspaces were closed.
- Al Jazeera TV network is still functioning.

Why was the reconciliation made now?

- Saudi's plan to isolate Qatar backfired & in the last weeks of the Trump administration, MBS and his allies realised their strategic mistake.
- Qatar has to make few concessions to reach the reconciliation i.e. 13 specific demands were replaced by a broad agreement.
- This includes non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs and cooperating to ensure regional stability and security.

- However this statement can be open to different interpretations for different sides & after the summit Qatar's Foreign Ministry has said that it had no intention of altering ties with Iran and Turkey.

Why did Saudi resettled ties with Qatar now?

- The Saudi's U-turn could be the result of tactical rethink because the rift in the Gulf helped Iran and Turkey but failed to change Qatar's standing.
- Iran which was under U.S. sanctions got some financial relief from Qatari payouts for using its airspace.
- By lifting the air and sea blockades, the Saudis and the Emiratis could deny Iran of those funds.
- It can try to put up a united Arab regional front as Joe Biden is preparing to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal.
- It may also hope to bridge the Gulf between two American allies which would help in warming the relation with Biden administration.
- Though this end of blockade is welcome note, it cannot be overlooked since this crisis was born out of an ill-thought-out Saudi-Emirati strategy of coercion.
- Saudi should learn from the mistakes & build the ties based on mutual interests and cooperation not on threats and coercion.

3.7 Ending the War in Yemen

What is the issue?

- As one of the first key foreign policy decisions, U.S. President Joe Biden decided to end the U.S.'s support for Saudi Arabia's six-year-long war on Yemen.
- In this backdrop, here is a look at the course of the war over the years and the possible options for an end.

What are Biden's recent decisions?

- Biden halted weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.
- He appointed a Special Envoy for Yemen.
- He also removed the Shia Houthi rebels from the list of foreign terrorist organisations.
 - Shia Houthi rebels control the north-western parts of Saudi Arabia.
- Both former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump looked away from Yemen.
- Yemen was notably amidst a multipolar civil war and Saudi bombing.
- It descended into chaos and witnessed a humanitarian catastrophe.

What is the war in Yemen all about?

- Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their allies went to Yemen in March 2015.
- They had clearly defined objectives to -
 - i. drive the Houthi rebels, who are backed by Iran, out of the capital Sana'a
 - ii. stabilise the country under the government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi that they support
- The Saudi-led coalition imposed a blockade on Yemen. They hoped this would eventually weaken the Houthis.
- They also started a bombing campaign aimed at wrecking the rebels militarily.
- This campaign was however a failure.

How is it evolving?

- The 6 years of war prove that the Saudi strategy of blockade and bombing was a failure.
- The Houthis continued to amass weapons, even technologically advanced drones.
- They continue to use these to attack Saudi targets across the border, despite the blockade.
- The Houthis entrenched themselves in the north-west despite the military and economic challenges.
- The only success for the Saudis, seen tactically, was that the Houthis were limited to the north-west.

- But the Saudi-backed government failed to consolidate its position even in the south.
- A separatist group, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), has established its rule in southern Yemen.
- The UAE, which backs the STC, has pulled out of the Saudi-led coalition.
- All this is happening while the humanitarian situation in Yemen is worsening by the day.
- The war has killed over 10,000 people.
- It has pushed the country to the brink of a famine.
- According to the UN, 50,000 Yemenis are starving to death and 16 million will go hungry in 2021.
- They are depending on food assistance to survive.
- But the war is making it difficult for aid groups to operate in the country.
- Many more are dying due to preventable diseases.
- Yemen already lacks proper health infrastructure and essential medicines.

What should the priority now be?

- The crisis in Yemen is not only about the Saudi-Houthi conflict.
- It has many more dimensions such as humanitarian, civil, geopolitical and sectarian issues.
- Finding a solution to such a complex, multipolar conflict is challenging.
- The immediate focus of the international community should thus be on tackling the humanitarian situation in Yemen.
- The UN recently held a conference to raise up to \$2.41 billion for aid works in Yemen.
- But it got pledges only for \$1.35 billion, which means the aid operations would be impacted further.
- Even the limited humanitarian work cannot be sustained if there is no reprieve in the fighting.

3.8 Suez Canal Blockage

Why in news?

The Suez Canal has been blocked after a large cargo ship ran aground while passing through it, bringing traffic on the busy trade route to a halt.

Why is the Suez Canal blocked now?

- The vessel blocking Suez is the Ever Given, a Panama-registered container ship.
- It was on its way to Rotterdam in the Netherlands from China.
- The 2018-built vessel, which is 400-m long and 59-m wide, got stuck here due to a mishap caused by bad weather.
- It was passing northwards through the Suez Canal in order to enter the Mediterranean Sea.
- The ship weighing 2 lakh tonnes ran aground and got stuck sideways across the canal.
- It is suspected of being hit by a sudden strong wind, causing the hull to deviate and accidentally hit the bottom and run aground.
- It is thus blocking the path of other ships waiting to cross through on both sides.
- None of the crew members was injured.

WHY IS SUEZ CANAL SIGNIFICANT?

- Suez Canal is a critical shipping artery that connects the Mediterranean and Red Seas through Egypt.
- It carries over 12% of world trade by volume.
- A human-made waterway, the Suez Canal is one of the world's most heavily used shipping lanes.
- Built in 1869, it provides a major shortcut for ships moving between Europe and Asia.
- Before its construction, these ships had to sail around Africa to complete the same journey.



- The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) is now trying to refloat the Ever Given using rescue and tug units. Diggers are also trying to free the ship from the canal's bank, where it is lodged.

What are the implications?

- The Ever Given is the largest vessel to go aground in the Suez Canal.
- Incidents such as this are rare, but can have massive ramifications for global trade when they happen.
- The effort to remove the ship and make the canal fully functional again could take several days.
- The alternative route between Europe and Asia around Africa is a week slower than the Suez route.
- So, a daylong blockage could have a severe impact on global trade. Any such delay could also lead to a shortage of container vessels and boxes.
- This is because 30% of all container ships in the world pass through the Suez.
- As per SCA data, in 2020, nearly 19,000 ships, or an average of 51.5 ships per day, with a net tonnage of 1.17 billion tonnes passed through the canal.

How significant the canal is to Egypt?

- The 150-year-old canal was controlled by British and French interests in its initial years.
- But, it was nationalised in 1956 by Egypt's then leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.
- Over the years, the canal has been widened and deepened.
- In 2015, Egypt announced plans to further expand the Suez Canal. This was aimed to reduce the waiting times and double the number of ships that can use the canal daily by 2023.
- Egypt heavily depends on revenues from the canal. After the blockage, it is diverting the ships to an older channel to minimise disruption to global trade.
- The blockage has already led to a long queue of vessels waiting to cross the canal.

3.9 Saving the Iran Deal

Why in news?

Recently efforts are taken to revive Iran nuclear deal which has raised hopes after the unilateral termination by the U.S.

What are the details about the talks?

- The talks are held in Vienna with the remaining members of the Iran nuclear deal — China, Russia, U.K., France, Germany and Iran.
- The European and Iranian diplomats said efforts to revive the deal are on the right track.
- Though the American delegation participated in Vienna, they did not held direct talks with Iran.
- The aim of the talks is to produce a road map for the revival of the JCPOA by addressing two critical issues — Iran's nuclear enhanced programme and American sanctions.

What was the demand of U.S on Iran?

- The U.S. wants Iran to end its uranium enrichment and centrifuge development programmes and return to the 2015 agreement.
- It has displayed flexibility in its approach towards Iran and has appointed a special envoy.
- It has ended the U.S.'s support for Saudi Arabia's war against the Houthis- Iran-backed militants- in Yemen and promised to lift sanctions if Iran returns to JCPOA terms.
- It also made an offer to Iran to release \$1 billion of Iranian money frozen in South Korea as part of the sanctions in exchange for ending its 20% uranium enrichment.
- But Iran has demanded the U.S. lift all sanctions imposed by erstwhile President which is still in enforcement.

What are the challenges in taking forward the talks?

- Iran has rejected the offer now seeking more concrete measures from the U.S.

- Both the countries are facing time constraints in resuming the deal as Iran holds its presidential polls in June.
- If U.S.'s wants to revive Iran's nuclear programme, it can do so by reviving the agreement before the Iran's presidential election.
- There are external dangers as well:
 1. Iran-backed Shia militias in Iraq continue to target U.S. forces and bases in Iraq.
 2. The Israel-Iran shadow conflict is now being fought inside Syria and on the seas.
- Earlier, an Iranian ship was attacked in the Red Sea and if security tensions rise in the region, it could derail the diplomatic efforts.
- Both U.S. and Iran should exercise restraint, stay focused on talks and rebuild the lost trust.
- They must take measures to get the deal back on track that would resolve the nuclear crisis in return for dismantling the sanctions regime.

3.10 Clashes at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa

Why in news?

Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem, leaving a reported 300 people injured, on a day Israel observes Jerusalem Day.

What are the clashes over?

- The ongoing violence in Jerusalem is a culmination of the tensions building up since the start of Ramzan in mid-April, 2021.
- The unrest is over the eviction of Palestinian residents from two neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, to make way for Jewish settlers.
- A Jewish settlement agency has issued eviction notices to Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah.
- It claimed that their houses sat on land purchased by Jewish agencies in the late 19th century (when historic Palestine was a part of the Ottoman Empire).
- Arab families have been living in Sheikh Jarrah for generations.
- The Israeli Supreme Court postponed the hearing over the eviction, on the advice of the government.
- Israeli police set up barricades at the Damascus Gate, a main entrance to the occupied Old City of East Jerusalem.
- This move, aimed at preventing Palestinians from gathering there, led to clashes.

What happened?

- On the last Friday of Ramzan, more than 150 people were injured when Israeli forces broke up a massive gathering of Palestinian worshippers.
- They had gathered to pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque, revered as Islam's third holiest site.
 - This happened hours before the annual May 10 Jerusalem Day processions by Jewish groups through the Old City of East Jerusalem.
 - This marks the day the territory was captured by Israeli forces during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.
 - Israel annexed the territory later and incorporated it into West Jerusalem, captured earlier, in the 1947 war.
- The Palestinians sheltering inside the mosque threw stones and rocks.
- The Israeli Foreign Ministry said the incident was the "direct result of incitement by Palestinian terror groups".
- The ministry maintains that people inside the compound were planning to attack the May 10 processions of the Jews.

What is the significance of the site?

- The clashes happened at one of the most revered and the most contested sites of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- The Al-Aqsa is located on a plaza at Temple Mount, which is known in Islam as Haram-e-Sharif.
- The Mount is also Judaism's holiest site.
- The most imposing structure on the compound is the Dome of the Rock, with its golden dome.
- The Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall sacred to Jews, is one side of the retaining wall of the Al-Aqsa compound.

What is the contention there?

- Al-Aqsa is central to the rival claims over Jerusalem.
- Both Israel and Palestine have declared Jerusalem their capital.
- For the present, the Palestinian Authority has its headquarters in Ramallah.
- Soon after the 1967 Six-Day War ended, Israel gave back to Jordan the administration and management of the Al-Aqsa compound.
- Non-Muslims have not been allowed to worship at Al-Aqsa.
- But Jewish individuals and groups have made repeated attempts to gain entry to the Mount Temple plaza.
- Since the late 1990s, around the time of the first intifada, such attempts began occurring with a regularity.
 - Intifada refers to the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The first intifada lasted from 1987 to 1993, and the second began in 2000.
- Jewish settlers began claiming the land in East Jerusalem and surrounding areas.
- It has led to repeated clashes and tensions at Al-Aqsa.
- Frequently, the Israeli police have backed such attempts.

What is the long standing conflict?

- Jerusalem has been at the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- Israel captured the western part of the city in the 1948 first Arab-Israel war and the eastern half in the 1967 Six-Day War.
- It thus claims sovereignty over the whole city.
- On the other hand, the Palestinians say East Jerusalem should be the capital of their future state.
- Most countries have not recognised Israel's claim over the city.
- Most of them are of the view that its status should be resolved as part of a final Israel-Palestine settlement.
- Israel's tactic till now has been to hold on to the status quo through force.
- A peace process is non-existent and the Palestinians are divided and weak.
- Now, the move to evict Palestinians from East Jerusalem is seen as an attempt to forcibly expand Jewish settlements in the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem.

What is the global response?

- The UN Secretary General and US National Security Adviser expressed concern over the clashes.
- UN Secretary General asked Israeli authorities to exercise "maximum restraint" and to uphold and respect the status quo at Al-Aqsa.
- The US wanted Israeli and Palestinian authorities to "act decisively to de-escalate tensions and bring a halt to the violence".
- The UAE has "strongly condemned" along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

- Saudi Arabia has notably given its tacit blessings to the “Abraham Accords” by not opposing Israel’s recognition by UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

3.11 War Crimes in Gaza

Why in news?

More than a week into their fourth war, Israel and the Hamas militant group already face allegations of possible war crimes in Gaza.

Which side is breaching international law??

- International law prohibits targeting civilians or using indiscriminate force in civilian areas.
- Israel says Hamas is using Palestinian civilians as human shields, and critics say Israel is using disproportionate force.
- It is hard to say who is right, especially in the fog of battle.
- The firing of hundreds of imprecise rockets into Israel by Hamas and other Palestinian groups is fairly clear-cut.
- But in Gaza, where 2 million people are packed into a narrow coastal strip, the situation is far worrying.

Why is the situation worse in Gaza?

- Both sides operate in dense, urban terrain because that is all there is.
- Tight space and intense bombardments is the reality there.
- So, there are few safe places for Gazans to go.
- A blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt after Hamas seized power in 2007 makes it virtually impossible to leave.

What role does Hamas play?

- As a grassroots movement, Hamas is deeply embedded in Palestinian society.
- Its political operation and charities are separate from its secretive armed wing.
- Israel and Western countries view Hamas as a terrorist organization.
- But it is also Gaza’s de facto government.
- It employs tens of thousands of people as civil servants and police.
- So just being connected to Hamas doesn’t mean someone is a combatant.
- In fact, there are many in Gaza who oppose the group.
- But all are equally exposed with nowhere to run.

What are the key violations of international law?

- Earlier in 2021, the International Criminal Court launched an investigation.
- This was to look into possible war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants during the last war, in 2014.
- Both sides already appear to be using the same tactics in this one.
- One of them is the urban combat. Palestinian fighters are clearly operating in built-up residential areas.
- They have positioned tunnels, rocket launchers and command and control infrastructure in close proximity to schools, mosques and homes.
- This is to benefit from protections afforded to noncombatants during war.
- Other issues are to do with proportionality and underground army.

What is the issue of proportionality?

- Israel’s critics often accuse it of the disproportionate use of force.

- Israel is an undeclared nuclear power, and it is the region's most powerful military.
- This is waging war on a militant group armed with little beyond long-range rockets.
- And the majority of such rockets are intercepted by Israel's anti-missile defenses.
- Given this disproportion, as in the past, the toll in the current conflict is dramatically lopsided.
- At least 200 killed were in Gaza, nearly half of them women and children, and 10 in Israel, all but one of them civilians.
- **Challenges** - Proportionality in international law also applies to individual attacks.
- But, proving a specific attack as disproportionate is extremely difficult.
- One would need to know what was targeted, what military advantage was gained.
- It is also to be shown whether it exceeded the harm inflicted on civilians and civilian property.
- So, in practice, only the most extreme cases are likely to be prosecuted under this.
- **Example** - Israel recently bombed a 12-storey building.
- It housed the Gaza offices of The Associated Press and the Al-Jazeera news network.
- The military says there was a considerable Hamas presence in the building.
- But it has provided no evidence.

What is the underground army tactic?

- The International Committee of the Red Cross defines a combatant as -
 - i. someone with a "continuous combat function" (or)
 - ii. those engaged in combat at the time they are targeted
- So even if a building were filled with die-hard Hamas supporters, it would not be considered a legitimate target unless they were actively involved in combat operations.
- Members of Hamas' armed wing rarely, if ever, wear uniforms or identify themselves in public.
- They go underground as soon as hostilities begin, along with the political leadership.
- The vast majority of Hamas supporters are not involved in fighting, which means they are not supposed to be targeted.

3.12 Terror in the Sahel

What is the issue?

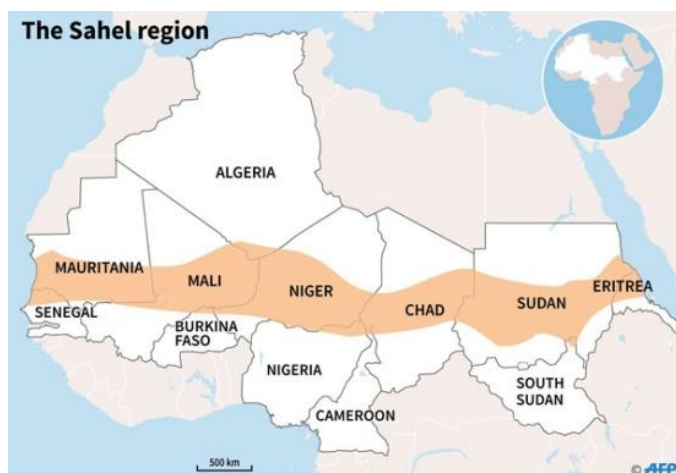
The recent massacre of at least 160 people in a border village in Burkina Faso is a grim reminder of the threat the *Sahel region* faces from Islamist terrorism.

What happened?

- The attack took place in Solhan village, in the Sahel's Yagha province.
- Nobody has claimed responsibility.
- But Burkinabe authorities have named the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).
- The ISGS has carried out hundreds of terror strikes in recent years.
- The Burkina Faso attack (June 2021) occurred after 137 people were killed by jihadists in Niger, in March 2021.

What is the long-drawn security concern?

- Burkina Faso saw its first major Islamist terrorist attack in 2015.



- The security situation there has deteriorated steadily, especially along the borders with Niger and Mali.
- This has been the case with much of the Sahel region, a 5,900-km-long semi-arid territory.
- It has seen terrorist groups expanding their networks and stepping up attacks on civilians and soldiers.
- In Nigeria, Islamists control swathes of territories.
- They have carried out abductions and attacks, including gunning down 27 people in a village.
- Mali has been fighting terror groups since 2013.

Which are the groups involved?

- **Terror groups** - Four main terror outfits operate in the region:
 1. the ISGS
 2. the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)
 3. the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam walMuslimin, the local al-Qaeda branch in Mali
 4. Boko Haram
- Of these, the ISGS and Jama'at Nasr are reportedly in alliance.
- Their aim is to expand the influence in the Burkina-Mali-Niger border region.
- They shoot down anyone in the region who does not declare their loyalty to the jihadists.
- Boko Haram and the ISWAP are fighting each other but control territories in northeastern Nigeria.
- **States** - France has deployed troops in the region for counter-insurgency operations.
- It is being helped by the U.S., which has a drone base in Niger.

What is driving the tensions now?

- The regime change policies of the U.S. and France are partly to be blamed for the problems the Sahel countries are facing today.
- A NATO invasion removed Muammar Gaddafi from power in Libya in 2011.
- Since then, the region lost a stable bulwark against militias and jihadists.
- Libya, having fallen into anarchy and civil war, became a jihadist breeding ground.
- When trouble spread to Mali, France made a military intervention in 2013.
- But it did not defeat the insurgency, which spread beyond Mali's borders.
- Now, jihadists find safe havens in the lawless deserts of the Sahel.
- The IS-militant infrastructure was destroyed in Iraq and Syria.
- Soon, their foot soldiers fled to Africa, regrouping themselves in the region.

What should be done?

- The recent attacks should serve as a warning to all stakeholders.
- Major global powers, which worked together with regional players to defeat the IS in West Asia, should not stay away from the growing threat from Africa.
- They should, along with the UN, help the Sahel countries build capacity and institutions, offer stable governance and adopt sustainable counter-insurgency strategies.

SAHEL

- Sahel is a semiarid region of western and north-central Africa stretching from Atlantic Ocean eastward, from Senegal to Sudan.
- In between, it covers southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River in Mali, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), southern Niger, northeastern Nigeria, south-central Chad.
- It forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south.

3.13 Fruits of incitement - US Capitol Hill Violence

Why in news?

An armed and angry mob of US President Donald Trump's supporters stormed Capitol Hill and clashed with police just as Congress convened to validate Joe Biden's presidential win.

What happened?

- The U.S., said to be the "greatest nation on earth," became hostage to an ugly attempted coup led by a mob, with slogans of support for outgoing President Trump.
- The mob was eventually ejected, and lawmakers went on to reconvene and formally certify the election results.
- Mr. Trump too finally committed to an "orderly transition."
- However, major social media platforms locked Trump's accounts for violating their civic integrity policies.
- This includes inciting violence with months of contentious posts that made baseless allegations about electoral fraud.

What was the immediate cause?

- The mob is said to have been methodically planned online via social media.
- The immediate trigger for the mob (Republican Trump's supporters) was the surprise victory of two Democratic candidates.
 1. Democratic candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won in the 5 January 2021 run-off election in Georgia.
 2. That election was necessitated by the fact that no candidate won 50% of the popular vote in the 3 November 2020 general election.
- Their win gives Democrats 50 seats in the Senate, which is tantamount to control of the upper chamber of Congress.
- The incoming Vice-President, Kamala Harris, will cast a deciding vote in a tie.

What is the larger concern?

- The January 6 [2021] mob attack exposes sheer viciousness.
- The event is an "unprecedented assault" on the very soul of democracy.
- Also, there was more than two months of hateful rage online and offline following the 2020 election.
- This is a proof that political America is deeply polarised, brimming with anger and disenchantment at the ground realities.
- At the core is a sense of frustration that grips Middle America, including the white middle class and blue-collar workers, over the inevitable changes to the U.S. economy and society.
- There is a view that the forces of immigration and globalisation have led to this explosive combination of racial prejudice and economic insecurity.
- In reality, Mr. Trump's harsh rhetoric exploited this sense of alienation and socioeconomic dysfunction for narrow political and personal gains.

3.14 U.S.'s 1776 Commission Report

Why in news?

The White House recently released the 1776 Commission report, just days before president-elect Joe Biden would take his oath in office.

Why was the commission set up?

- In September 2020, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order to set up a "national commission to promote patriotic education" in the country.
- The move was aimed at pleasing his conservative voter base in the run-up to the November 3 elections.
- The initiative, dubbed the '1776 Commission', is an apparent counter to The 1619 Project.

What is Trump's intent in countering it?

- By attacking The 1619 Project, Trump hoped to win the support of conservatives.
- The conservatives oppose its central idea that US history should be reframed around the date of August 1619.
- They insist that the nation's story should be told the way it has been over the years – beginning with the year 1776 or from 1788.
 - 1776 was when the Declaration of Independence was signed
 - 1788 was when the US Constitution was ratified
- Trump also threatened to withhold federal funding from public schools that used school syllabi based on the 1619 Project.
- He said The 1619 Project claimed that the US was “founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom”.
- He opines that the Left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story.

WHAT IS THE 1619 PROJECT?

- The 1619 Project is a Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of essays on African American history of the past four centuries.
- It explores the Black community's contribution in nation-building since the era of slavery to modern times.
- The Project is a special initiative of The New York Times Magazine.
- It was launched in 2019 to mark the completion of 400 years since the first enslaved Africans arrived in colonial Virginia's Jamestown in August 1619.
- The project was initiated by Nikole Hannah-Jones, a MacArthur Grant-winning journalist.
- The collection aims to reframe US history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as the nation's birth year.

What is the 1776 Commission?

- When he set it up, Trump was lagging behind president-elect Biden in polls for the presidential race.
- With this move Trump sought to activate his right-wing supporters by doubling down on what he described as “cancel culture”, “critical race theory” and “revisionist history”.
- Trump said then that students in their universities were inundated with critical race theory.
 - “This is a Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression, and that our entire society must be radically transformed.”
- Trump said a new “1776 Commission” would –
 - i. “encourage our educators to teach our children about the miracle of American history”
 - ii. “make plans to honour the 250th anniversary of our founding,”
 - iii. “teach the youth to “love America”
- Reportedly, the 18-member commission formed by Trump includes no professional historians.
- It however has a number of conservative activists, politicians and intellectuals.

What does the report say?

- The following is the declared purpose of the President's Advisory 1776 Commission:
 - i. to enable a rising generation to understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States in 1776
 - ii. to strive to form a more perfect Union
- The report mentions that the above required a restoration of American education.
- This can only be grounded on a history of those principles that is “accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling.”
- A rediscovery of the shared identity rooted in the founding principles is said to be the path to a renewed American unity and a confident American future.

3.15 Immigration conundrum - U.S.-Mexico border

Why in news?

The nearly two-month-old U.S. government under President Joe Biden is facing the highest number of migrants reaching its border with Mexico in 20 years.

What is the extent of the crisis?

- There is an unprecedented surge of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border in few weeks.
- The number of unaccompanied teens and children taken into U.S. custody along the border surged in few weeks to nearly 30,000 in February 2021.
- Migrant adults and families continue to be sent back to Mexico when they are caught.
- Unaccompanied children are being processed, and they get help resettling with U.S. relatives.
- Efforts are also stepped up to have children apply for asylum from their homes in Central America instead of making the dangerous journey to the U.S. border.

Why now?

- The former President Donald Trump adopted a “zero tolerance” policy toward undocumented immigrants.
- Trump-era emergency rule gave border agents the authority to summarily turn away most migrants other than unaccompanied minors.
- It denied them the right to have their asylum claims heard.
- In a sense, the mounting crisis now is related to a sweeping immigration reform proposal unveiled by Mr. Biden’s administration a month ago.
- The migrants are thus apparently encouraged to try to enter the U.S. by Biden’s rejection of Trump’s “zero tolerance” policy.

What are the other plans under way?

- There are smaller Bills that the Democrat-controlled Congress could pass with less resistance.
- These include measures to quicken the process for grant of legal status to agriculture workers and “Dreamers”, or undocumented immigrants who entered the U.S. as children.
- There are also plans under way to redress the ills of the legal migration system.
- Many obstacles to this were erected by the Trump White House.
- These include a controversial rule to raise mandatory minimum pay for foreign workers on the H-1B visa for skilled immigrants that is largely granted to Indian nationals.
- Mr. Biden’s broader, omnibus immigration legislation proposal includes an eight-year pathway to citizenship for the nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants.
- It also proposes the use of hi-tech systems for border patrol enforcement.
- [It is suggested that the Biden administration’s proposed immigration bill could potentially increase annual ‘green card’ or permanent residency numbers by 35%.]

What challenge does the immigration crisis pose?

- Undoing some of the damaging policies implemented by his predecessor is getting to be a real challenge for Biden and his administration.
- The immigration crisis now has pushed the need for a comprehensive reform.
- The numbers so far is already wearing federal resources thin.
- The issue has made a call to choose between -
 - the American Dream with an inclusive vision of economic growth premised on embracing diversity and skilled migration
 - the Trumpian ‘America First’ battle cry for nativist populism
- What Mr. Biden does in the months to come becomes truly significant.

3.16 Opposition to Critical Race Theory

Why in news?

Many state legislatures in the U.S. controlled by the Republican party are passing laws against the ‘critical race theory.’

What is the critical race theory?

- Critical race theory (CRT) is a way of thinking about America’s history through the lens of racism.
- It is an approach to grappling with a history of White supremacy.
- It began as a left-wing academic discussion in the 1970s and 1980s.
- These scholars were studying the lack of racial progress following the passing of landmark civil rights laws in the decade preceding.
- The CRT acknowledges that systemic racism is still part of the country’s society.
- **Key ideas** - Race is culturally invented, not biological.
- Racism maintains the dominance of affluent White people.
- So, many are not interested in doing away with it.
- And so, racism is an everyday experience for most people of colour in the US.
- Laws and institutions have, for years, promoted racial inequality.
- The CRT thus attends to law’s role in establishing the rights and privileges.

Why do the Republicans oppose CRT?

- The CRT kept expanding slowly in academic journals and books over the decades.
- But it became suddenly exposed to a large audience after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police.
- [Breonna Taylor, a Black medical worker, was shot and killed by Louisville police officers in March 2020 during a raid on her apartment.]
- These events sparked nationwide protests and discussions on racism.
- The following debates around CRT angered many conservatives, who saw it as an attempt to rewrite American history.
- Trump too lashed out against the educational curriculum teaching the impact of slavery in the US as “revisionist history” and “a crusade against American history”.

What are the recent moves?

- Eight Republican-ruled states have passed laws or brought administrative actions to limit how CRT or related concepts can be taught in the classroom.
- As many as 25 states have considered laws or steps to restrict how race and racism can be taught.
- Republican senators introduced a resolution that condemns the practice of requiring teachers to receive Critical Race Theory education.

What are the concerns?

- There is little to no evidence that CRT is being taught in America’s kindergarten to 12th grade public school system.
- But many schools do teach ideas central to CRT, such as the impact of slavery on the country.
- So, the laws passed against CRT would end up curtailing all discussions on racism in schools.
- It could lead to a whitewashing of American history.
- It is much a continuation of the decades-long opposition to gains from the civil rights movement.
- The coordinated action now by the conservatives could undermine the national conversation on race that had gained momentum in the recent years.

3.17 U.S.' Decision to Block Iran-linked Websites

Why in news?

The US government has blocked dozens of US website domains connected to Iran.

What is the rationale?

- The move is linked to what the US says are disinformation efforts.
- It has accused the sites, including Iran's state-owned Press TV, of spreading disinformation.
- In the past, the U.S. had cracked down on Chinese and Iranian media over similar allegations.
- The move comes days after Iran elected Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline cleric, as President.
- Mr. Raisi has been sanctioned by the U.S. for his alleged role in the execution of political prisoners and other rights violations.
- His elections as the President has already escalated tensions between the two countries.
- The U.S. wants Iran to return to the terms of the original Iran-U.S. nuclear deal.
- It also wants to discuss Iran's ballistic missile programme and its regional activities.
- Mr. Raisi, known for his hardline domestic and foreign policy views, has rejected such demands outright.

Is the move justified?

- Iran's sharp response to the move on the websites, has been that the U.S. was trying to "muzzle free speech".
- The U.S.'s move hardly serves its declared purpose of fighting disinformation.
- E.g. America seized the website of the semi-official Iranian news agency, Fars, in 2018.
- But it switched to an Iranian domain and was back online.
- It aids the Iranian narrative that America remains hostile.
- The U.S. decision could also create hitches in the diplomatic process under way.
- Notably, both countries are trying to revive the nuclear deal.
- So, the move by the U.S. now seems an unnecessary provocation.

What should be done?

- The way to fight disinformation campaigns is to promote information and strengthen independent journalism.
- Mr. Raisi would take over the presidency in early August 2021 (nearly a month to go).
- So, Mr. Biden's best chance to revive the nuclear deal is to do it before then.
- Both sides should focus on the diplomatic path.
- This should aim at achieving a pragmatic agreement first, that addresses the most critical issues such as Iran's expanding nuclear programme and America's sprawling sanctions regime.

3.18 US Recognition of Armenian Genocide

Why in news?

U.S. President Joe Biden has fulfilled a long-pending American promise by recognising the Armenian Genocide.

What happened during the Armenian Genocide?

- The Ottoman Empire suffered a humiliating defeat in the Caucasus in 1915 at the hands of the Russians.
- The Turks blamed the Armenians living on the fringes of the crumbling empire for the setback.
- The Turks accused the Armenians of treachery.
- The Ottoman government unleashed militias on Armenian villages.
- Armenian soldiers, public intellectuals and writers were executed.

- Hundreds of thousands of Armenians, including children, were forcibly moved from their houses in eastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) to the Syrian desert.
- Many died during this exodus and many others, after reaching the concentration camps in the deserts.
- Between 1915 to 1922, in the First World War, thousands of Armenians perished due to killings, starvation and disease.
- The Armenian Genocide thus refers to the systematic killing and deportation of hundreds of thousands of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks.

What are the conflicting claims?

- It is difficult to estimate the total number of Armenians who died during the genocide.
- But the Armenian diaspora says that approximately 1.5 million died.
- Turkey rejects that number and claims that some 300,000 Armenians may have perished.
- The International Association of Genocide Scholars estimates that more than 1 million Armenians may have died.
- Turkey has acknowledged that atrocities were committed against Armenians.
- But it is opposed to calling it a genocide, which it considers as an attempt to insult the Turks.

Why is the US acknowledgement significant?

- At present, 30 countries officially recognise the Armenian Genocide.
- Most countries including India have not formally recognised the Armenian Genocide.
- They have primarily adopted this stance in the interests of their wider foreign policy decisions and geo-political interests in the region.
- Former U.S. President Obama too failed to deliver on his campaign pledge to recognise the genocide.
 - This had been rooted in concerns about straining the US's relationship with Turkey.
 - U.S. needed Turkey's cooperation on its military and diplomatic interests in the Middle East, specifically in Afghanistan, Iran and Syria.
- Former President Donald Trump, like his predecessors, stopped short of a formal recognition of the genocide, mainly because of Turkish opposition.
- The acknowledgement by the US government now would have little legal impact on Turkey.
- But it would perhaps give other countries the impetus to also acknowledge the genocide.
- The US acknowledgement or wider acknowledgement of it in the international community may be unwelcome for Turkey.
- However, failing to remember or acknowledge the fact of a genocide only paves the way for future mass atrocities.
- The facts must be as clear and as powerful for future generations as for those whose memories are seared by tragedy.

What is the likely impact on US-Turkey ties?

- Mr. Biden's move comes at a time when the relationship between the U.S. and Turkey has been in steady decline.
- The ties had been strained over a range of issues.
- In 2016, Ankara accused the U.S.-based Turkish Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen of being the mastermind of a failed coup.
- It asked the U.S. government to extradite him, a demand Washington paid no attention to.
- Also, Turkey went with the decision to buy the S-400 missile defence system from Russia, despite strong opposition from the U.S.

- This prompted American leaders to oust Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet training programme and impose sanctions on their ally.
- Besides these, there are foreign policy differences between the two countries with regard to Syrian crisis.
- Now, Turkey's Foreign Minister has said that such moves (as the genocide recognition) would only set back the already strained relationship.
 - "Statements that have no legal binding will have no benefit, but they will harm ties."
- Notably, both are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

What is Turkey's response?

- Ankara has challenged the "scholarly and legal" basis of Mr. Biden's announcement and has warned of consequences.
- But there may be little that Turkey can really do in retaliation without jeopardizing its own interests.
- Turkey's economy has also been suffering.
- A combination of these factors could result in a muted response from Turkey.

3.19 Abraham Accords

Why in news?

The Abraham Accords was signed by the UAE, Bahrain and Israel, under U.S. President Donald Trump's mediation.

What is the significance of the agreement?

- This accord clearly marks a new beginning in the relations between the Sunni-ruled Gulf kingdoms and the Jewish state.
- It is the first between Israel and Arab countries since the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty.
- Under the agreement, the UAE and Bahrain would normalise ties with Israel.
- This will herald better economic, political and security engagement.

Why did US mediate?

- The accords offer a rare diplomatic win to Mr. Trump, whose other foreign policy bets were either disastrous or stagnant.
- He has called the agreements "the new dawn of a new Middle East".

Who may or may not join?

- More Arab countries are expected to follow suit.
- The agreements have the backing of Saudi Arabia, the most influential Arab power and a close ally of the UAE and Bahrain.
- The ruler of the Kingdom is treading cautiously for now.
- But Riyadh has opened its airspace for commercial flights between the UAE and Israel.

Will the accord impact West Asia's conflicts?

- The Abraham Accords have historical and geopolitical significance.
- But, it is too early to say whether the accords will have any significant impact on West Asia's conflicts.
- Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties with Israel in 1979 and 1994, respectively.
- But, the Gulf countries are not frontline states in the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- They had established backroom contacts with Israel years ago; what is happening now is their normalisation.

Was the Palestinian question addressed?

- The agreements leave the Palestinian question largely unaddressed.
- Arab countries are signing diplomatic agreements with Israel bilaterally.

- Due to this, the Arab collective support for the Palestinian movement for nationhood is crumbling.
- But it does not mean that the Palestinian question would fade away.
- The vacuum left by the retreat of the Arab powers from the Israel-Palestine conflict is being filled by the non-Arab Muslim powers.
- These non-Arab Muslim powers include Iran, Turkey and their allies.
- The geopolitical sands may be shifting but the core issue concerning Israel is unresolved.

What is the region's emerging order?

- The UAE-Bahrain agreements are endorsing the region's emerging order.
- With the U.S. in retreat and Turkey and Iran pursuing more aggressive foreign policies, there is a three-way contest taking shape.
- Sunni-ruled Arab kingdoms, all American allies, are realigning their geopolitical interests with Israel.
- The Abraham Accords are likely to sharpen this contest.

What could be done?

- Mr. Trump and the signatories to the accords have claimed that they want to bring peace here.
- If so, they should address the more structural issues, which include the unresolved question of Palestine.

3.20 US Cuts Troops in Iraq

Why in news?

The U.S.'s decision to drawdown their troop in Iraq is both a relief and a challenge to the Iraqi government.

Why is it a relief?

- It is a relief because **public opinion in Iraq** is increasingly against the continuing presence of U.S. troops in the country.
- It is increasing, particularly after the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in January 2020.
- Iraqi lawmakers passed a non-binding resolution after the assassination, asking the government to oust the Americans.
- The new government of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has stated that it does not want U.S. troops in combat operations.
- But he has asked for training services and other assistance.
- Now that the U.S. is cutting troops, Mr. Kadhimi could argue that his government is committed to seeing the full withdrawal of the troops.

Why is it a challenge?

- It is a challenge because the U.S. troops had played a key role in the **war against the Islamic State (IS)**.
- With the drawdown, the Iraqi forces would have to share a greater burden in the fight against jihadists.
- The US political leadership has long wanted to pull troops out of Iraq.
- The US President Barack Obama had set a timetable for the pull back and withdrew most troops by 2011.
- But he had to send soldiers back to Iraq after the rise of the IS.

Why was the drawdown decision taken?

- The US's decision is part of the Trump administration's larger policy of bringing back American troops home.
- However, the local factors cannot be overlooked.
- The U.S. found it increasingly difficult to station troops in Iraq.
- At the height of the war, the U.S. had over 1,50,000 troops in Iraq.

- But in recent years, it found stationing even 10,000 troops risky.
- This is partly because of the **hostile political environment** and partly due to the **growing influence of Iran and Shia militias** in Iraq.

What was the recent trigger?

- The US killed Soleimani after Shia militias attacked its troops.
- Iran retaliated by launching ballistic missile attacks on a US air base in Iraq, injuring some 100 American soldiers.
- The Shia militias continued attacking U.S. troops.
- In March 2020, three of the coalition troops, two of them Americans, were killed in such an attack.
- Since then, the U.S. has repositioned troops.
- The drawdown will reduce risks of such confrontations in the future.

What could be done?

- The IS has been driven out of the major population centres of Iraq.
- Though the IS has been driven underground, according to UN assessments, at least 10,000 IS fighters are still active in Iraq.
- While the Americans leave, the Iraqi government should be careful of not letting any security vacuum being filled by jihadist groups.

3.21 Biden-Putin Summit in Geneva

What is the issue?

The Geneva summit between U.S. President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin has set a pragmatic tone for engagement between the two competing great powers.

Why is the meet so significant?

- Relations between the US and Russia have hit the lowest point in recent years since the end of the Cold War.
- The U.S. had accused Russia of interfering in its elections and launching cyberattacks.
- Russia was also criticised on stifling of internal dissent.
- On the other hand, Russia had slammed America's "interventionist" foreign policy.
- Given these differences, the summit gains significance.

What are the key outcomes?

- Despite the differences, the leaders held talks on all critical issues, bringing diplomacy to the centre-stage.
- Mr. Biden sought a more predictable, rational engagement, while Mr. Putin said relations were "primarily pragmatic".
- They have decided to return their Ambassadors to the Embassies.
- The leaders also announced "a strategic stability dialogue" to discuss terms of arms control measures.
- While there was no major breakthrough, they could at least demonstrate a willingness to strengthen engagement and reduce tensions.

What are the long-pending irritants?

- There are many structural issues in the U.S.-Russia ties.
- Russia ended its post-Soviet strategic retreat and adopted a more assertive foreign policy under Mr. Putin.
- It did this partly in response to NATO expansion into eastern Europe.
- The West saw this as a threat to its primacy.
- The 2008 Georgia war practically ended the good terms between "democratic Russia" and the West.

- The annexation of Crimea in 2014 again renewed the tensions.
- Russia was thrown out of the G8, and western sanctions followed.
- But such steps did not deter Mr. Putin.
- Ties hit rock bottom after allegations on Russian cyberattacks and role in US elections.
- Russia, which had amassed troops on the Ukraine border earlier in 2021, sees NATO's expansion into its border region as a threat.

3.22 Alexei Navalny and Russia

What is the issue?

- The latest happening in relation with anti-Putin activist Alexei Navalny is his detention on arrival from Berlin and the subsequent country-wide public protests.
- The events surrounding Navalny needs attention and here is a look at the likely impact of his presence and role in Russia.

Who is Alexei Navalny?

- Navalny is a lawyer-turned-activist.
- His political career started with the liberal opposition party, Yabloko, in the early 2000s.
- He subsequently broke away to form his own nationalist group.
- His anti-corruption campaigns began in the late 2000s.
- As a shareholder of large companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, he tried to seek greater transparency about their financial dealings.
- He followed this up with several exposes of key members of the Russian elite.
- He came to prominence in 2008 after he started exposing corruption in Russian politics through a blog.
- In 2018, he was barred from standing against Putin in the presidential elections.
- He has also been arrested on multiple occasions.
- Since he started his political campaigning, Navalny has spearheaded many anti-corruption rallies in Russia.
- The latest, now viral exposure, targets Russian President Vladimir Putin himself.
- Navalny is considered to be the face of the opposition in Russia, a country that has long been known to eliminate dissidents and spies by poisoning them.

What happened to him recently?

- In August 2020, Navalny was put on ventilator support in a Siberian hospital after he consumed a cup of tea that is suspected to be poisoned.
 1. While Navalny was returning to Moscow by air, he felt unwell as a result of which the plane made an emergency landing in Omsk.
 2. Navalny had toxic poisoning.
- Reportedly, Russian intelligence operatives trained in poisons, who had been trailing Navalny for years, were nearby him around this time.
- It was assumed that Alexei was poisoned with something mixed into the tea. It was the only thing that he drank that morning.
- At the request of his wife, he was taken to Germany where he completed his treatment and had a miraculous recovery.

What is the controversy around this?

- The German government felt that it had enough evidence to accuse the Russian security services of poisoning Mr. Navalny.
- The Germans claim that he was struck with the now infamous Novichok poison.

- This led to the European Union imposing sanctions on six Russian officials, including the head of the national security outfit, Federal Security Service (FSB) and a chemical research centre.
- Russia denies the accusations.
- But the Russian government still has many questions to answer about the poisoning.
- Also, this was not the first time that Navalny was faced with such a situation. As learnt, there had been several attempts to kill him.

What has Russia's reaction been?

- Russian authorities have denied playing a role in Navalny's poisoning.
- Last month, Russian president Vladimir Putin, who is entering his 22nd year in power, alleged that Navalny "relies on the support of US special services."
- Putin has even told journalists with a laugh that if Russian operatives wanted to kill Navalny, "they would have probably finished the job."

What is the significance of the current protests?

- The present charges against Navalny for detention include an old case in which he received a suspended sentence and a new case of fraudulent use of public money.
- Mr. Navalny denies all charges.
- The protests demanding his release are widespread, occurring in every major city, from the Pacific coast to the Baltic Sea.
- They resulted in about 3,000 people being detained and released.
- These are not the largest seen in Russia.
- However, what is different this time is that people from various strata and age groups joined the mostly peaceful protest actions.
 1. Normally, Navalny-related demonstrations attract primarily youth (15-25 years old).
 2. The fact that others joined the protest this time is significant.
- It is probably a reflection of the deep disillusionment with the drop in living standards.
 1. This is sparked off by years of Ukraine-related sanctions and lower energy prices.
 2. The conditions were worsened by the pandemic-driven economic downturn.

Why is it a challenge for the government?

- What would worry the government now is Navalny's call for 'smart voting' in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.
- All opposition voting for one person against the ruling party candidate is a cause of concern for the present government.
- Also, it is suggested that Navalny was used as a tool in the internal battles among the elites.
- This is supported by the fact that some of the information that Mr. Navalny uses in his anti-corruption campaigns would be difficult, actually impossible, to find in publicly available sources.
- This kind of knowledge would have to come from someone not just inside, but very high-up in the system.

What is the likely impact?

- The anti-regime protests expectedly sparked off mixed reactions.
- Some suggest that these are the beginning of serious moves for regime change.
- Navalny's return from Germany is even compared to a similar journey in 1917 in a sealed train by iconic Bolshevik leader (Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov) Lenin.
- This was the precursor to the October revolution of that year.
- Notwithstanding the euphoria, Alexei Navalny is unlikely to be the catalyst that will lead to 'regime change' in Russia

- And whatever the reasoning, Mr. Navalny is no Lenin, even if the protests for his release continue.
- His nationalist platform is not currently capable of appealing to all sections of Russian society or convincing the political opposition to coalesce around it.
- However, it is clear that now, Mr. Navalny will have a more prominent role in Russian politics.
- He is likely to emerge as a favourable figure of the western media.
- Navalny's presence and role is also an indication of serious churn among the Russian elites.
- To note, in Russia, historically, barring once, change usually begins in the upper echelons of power.

3.23 France's draft law against 'Islamism'

Why in news?

The French cabinet presented a draft law that targets "radical Islamism" (although the word "Islamist" is not part of the text).

What is the proposed rationale?

- The Bill is called as a law "to reinforce Republican principles".
- Prime Minister Jean Castex has said it is "not a text against religion, nor against the Muslim religion".
- It is rather said to be against radical Islamism the objective of which is "to divide French people from one another."
- At home, French President Emmanuel Macron largely enjoys the support of a French electorate that has hardened its position on terrorism.
- In a recent nationwide survey, 79% of respondents agreed that "Islamism is at war with France".
- The Bill comes in the wake of a series of terror attacks in recent years.
- Although it was under consideration for some time, the law is being seen as a response to the October 2020 beheading of school teacher Samuel Paty.

What does the proposed law aim to do?

- It envisages a range of measures including -
 - i. school education reforms to ensure Muslim children do not drop out
 - ii. stricter controls on mosques and preachers
 - iii. rules against hate campaigns online
- Once the law comes into force, French mosques could see increased surveillance of their activities, such as financing.
- The government would be able to exercise supervision over the training of imams.
- It could have greater powers to shut down places of worship receiving public subsidies if they go against "republican principles" such as gender equality.
- Moderate community leaders targeted by an extremist "putsch" (a coup) could receive protection.
- Under French secularism laws, or laïcité, there is already a ban on state employees displaying religious symbols that are "conspicuous", such as the crucifix or hijab.
- This ban would now be extended beyond government bodies to any sub-contracted public service.
- There would also be a clampdown on home-schooling for children over age three.
- Parents will thus be dissuaded from enrolling them in underground Islamic structures.
- Couples would be interviewed separately by city hall officials prior to their wedding to find out if they have been forced into marriage.
- Officials would be banned from granting residency permits to polygamous applicants.
- Doctors who issue "virginity certificates" would be fined or jailed.

- Stricter punishments would be introduced for online hate speech.
- This is seen as a direct response to the killing of Paty, who was targeted in an online campaign before he was killed.

What has the response been?

- The proposed law has raised concerns that it could stigmatise France's Muslim community, the largest in Europe.
- The sharpest criticism of the Bill has come from abroad.
- Turkish President Recep Erdogan has been strongly criticising French President Emmanuel Macron in recent months.
- He has called the proposed law an "open provocation".
- The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt's top cleric, has called Macron's views "racist".
- Critics have expressed alarm that the Bill could lead to the merger of the Islamic religion with Islamism, a political movement.
- This might lead to the alienation of French Muslims.
- Nevertheless, there have been members of the community who have come out in support of the law.

Why is it significant politically?

- Macron faces re-election in 2022.
- So, seemingly, he is appealing to France's right-wing voters after facing a series of electoral losses in 2020.
- Macron, who describes his politics as "neither right nor left" [he was with the Socialist Party until 2009] faces a challenge from right-wing politician Marine Le Pen.
- The President has also been facing protests over a proposed "global security" legislation.

3.24 Canada's Residential School Graves

What is the issue?

- Indigenous groups and officials have discovered hundreds of unmarked graves of indigenous children in parts of Canada.
- The discovery has brought back to light Canada's dark past when indigenous people faced systemic discrimination and violence.

What was the recent discovery?

- In May 2021, the remains of 215 children were found on the grounds of a former residential school in British Columbia.
- In July 2021, another 751 unmarked graves were found at the site of a similar residential school in the province of Saskatchewan.

What was the colonial system in place?

- The graves point to Canada's colonial practice of having special residential schools.
- These were funded by the federal government and run mostly by the Catholic Church.
- They have been in operation since the mid-19th century, with the last one closing only in 1996.
- Between 1882 and 1996, an estimated 150,000 children were sent to residential schools.
- Indigenous children were forced to attend these schools.
- Most of them were forcefully taken away from their families and many never returned.
- The children were not allowed to speak their languages or practise their culture.
- Many were abused.

- An estimated 4,000 children died, mainly due to TB, malnutrition and other illnesses resulting from the filthy conditions in the schools.
- In 1883, Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, defended the system of residential schools in Parliament.
- He said that indigenous students should be kept away from their parents, "who are savages".

What were the State's responses in the following years?

- In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology.
- The Government also set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- This was tasked to document the history and the lasting impact of the school system on the indigenous communities.
- In 2015, the commission called the violence against the indigenous students a "cultural genocide".
- It has made 94 "calls to action" to different levels of the government and communities.
- These included independent investigations and steps to protect Aboriginal rights and culture.
- It also asked the Catholic Church to apologise and take steps toward reconciliation.
- The Vatican is yet to formally apologise for the schools.
- Justin Trudeau (came to power in 2015) had promised that addressing the grievances of the indigenous communities was a core agenda.
- But 6 years later, the indigenous organisations do not find the State's actions assuring.

3.25 UK-EU Trade Deal

Why in news?

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has set October 15 as deadline for reaching a post-Brexit U.K.-EU trade deal.

What is the problem with this move?

- It has raised fears of a no-deal scenario.
- British Prime Minister's threat hangs like the sword of Damocles above the negotiating teams.
- The British government is reportedly planning a piece of legislation that would overwrite parts of the withdrawal agreement.
- [Withdrawal agreement - A divorce deal signed between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) last year.]

What is Northern Ireland protocol?

- The agreement had sought to avoid a hard border coming up between Northern Ireland (part of the UK) and the Irish Republic (EU member).
- The Northern Ireland protocol was signed alongside the agreement.
- According to this protocol, the region is expected to follow some EU rules in trade with the Irish Republic.
- The hard Brexiteers in Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party were critical of this clause, claiming that it endangers the U.K.'s sovereignty.

What is the UK doing domestically?

- The U.K.'s domestic legislation, Internal Market and Finances Bill, will allow the UK courts to follow new UK laws rather than the divorce agreement.
- Northern Ireland leaders have already called it a "betrayal".
- The real risk of cutting the region off the EU customs code is that physical checks could emerge between the two Irelands.
- This would threaten the Good Friday agreement that brought peace.

What is the challenge?

- Though the U.K. formally exited the EU, it continues to abide by the EU rules during the transition period, which ends in December 2020.

- The challenge is to reach a trade deal, in the absence of which WTO trade rules will kick in, starting January 2021.
- With weeks to go before the deadline, there is still no consensus on issues such as workers' rights, the Irish border, etc.

Why a deal couldn't be arrived so far?

- The EU wants the U.K. to adopt rules that are close to its own to ensure a level playing field in trade.
- But, the British government argues that the whole point of the EU divorce was to break free from common rules.
- Regarding Northern Ireland, the hard Brexiteers are opposed to any special treatment to the region.
- The new legislation suggests that the government is hardening its position on Ireland as well.

What would a no-deal exit mean?

- A no-deal exit will inflict severe economic costs on the British, at a time when the economy is in dire straits due to COVID-19.
- Besides, it risks disrupting peace in the island of Ireland.
- Driven by English nationalist fervour, the British leadership appears to be blind to the economic and political consequences of its hard line.

What could be done?

- Mr. Johnson and his cabinet should respect the withdrawal agreement, and be flexible in the talks as well as on deadlines.
- Both sides should focus on reaching a consensus on trade and other future relations, and not on ending the relationship at any cost.

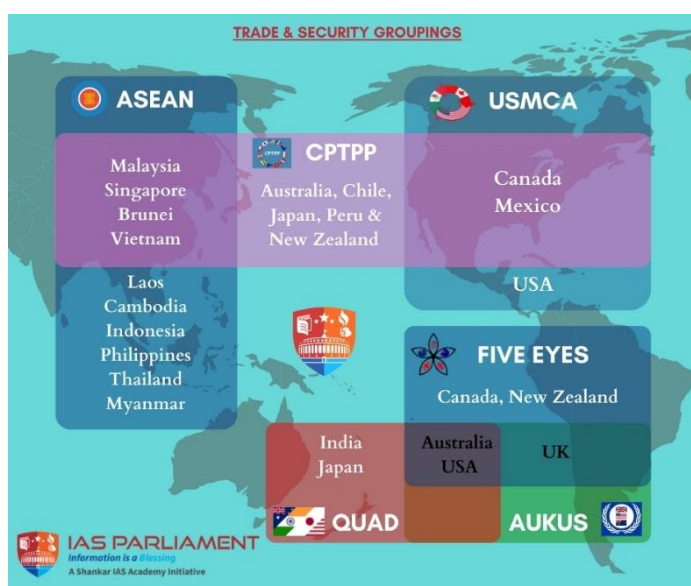
3.26 The AUKUS Agreement

What is the issue?

The ruffle over the AUKUS agreement continues to prevail as France has expressed its resentment at the Australian action at the G20 press conference.

What is AUKUS?

- AUKUS is a new trilateral security partnership among The United States, United Kingdom, and Australia for enduring freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Under the agreement, America and Britain proposed to transfer technology to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia within 18 months.
- The agreement aims to ensure that there will be enduring freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific region.
- With this Australia becomes the second nation after U.K. that the U.S. has ever shared its nuclear submarine technology with.
- The submarines are to be conventionally armed and are powered by nuclear reactors.
- It will give Australia naval heft in the Pacific, where China has been particularly aggressive.
- The partnership complements several pre-existing similar arrangements for the region like Five Eyes intelligence cooperation initiative, ASEAN, Quad, etc.



- The Five Eyes is an intelligence-sharing alliance consisting of the US, UK, Australia, Canada & New Zealand. The origins of the Five Eyes can be traced back to WW II

What are the concerns over the emergence of AUKUS?

- **The ASEAN factor** - There is a matter of ASEAN disunity over the emergence of AUKUS.
- Even though AUKUS is not a defence alliance, issues such as the strategic threats posed by China are a matter of concern for AUKUS.
- Australia has clearly assured its commitment to ASEAN centrality and its continued support for the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty and the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone.
- **The China factor** – The rise of China, particularly its rapid militarisation and aggressive behaviour, is undoubtedly the trigger for the emergence of the agreement.
- The China has criticised AUKUS as an “exclusive bloc” that gravely undermines regional peace and security and reflects a Cold War mentality.

What is the significance of this decades old partnership?

- The U.S. and the U.K. have enjoyed a special defence partnership for decades and have fought together as allies, together with Australia, in the Second World War.
- The U.S. shared nuclear weapons technology with the U.K. following the merging of the latter’s nuclear weapons programme with the American Manhattan Project as early as in 1943.
- The first U.K. test was conducted in 1952 in the Montebello Islands in Australia.
- The transfer of sensitive submarine technology by the U.S. to the U.K. is an arrangement based on their long-standing Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958.
- The other areas covered are cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies, apart from undersea capabilities.
- All three nations will also play a major role in U.S.-led programmes such as Build Back Better World, Blue Dot Network and Clean Network to meet the challenge of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

What is the status of their engagement with China?

- Australia had subordinated its strategic assessment of China to transactional commercial interests.
- China’s naval expansion and incursions into the Indo-Pacific has compelled Australia to revisit its defence and security policies.
- In 2017 and 2019, China’s *Dongdiao*-class Type 815 auxiliary general intelligence (AGI) vessel tagged the Talisman Sabre exercises (a biennial exercise that is led by either Australia or the U.S.).
- China also used the same type of vessel to monitor the multilateral Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2018.
- AUKUS provides an opportunity to the U.S. to place proxy submarine forces to limit China’s forays, especially in the Pacific Ocean.

4. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

4.1 Kashmir, India and the OIC

What is the issue?

- The 47th session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers was held at Niamey, Niger.
- India hit out at the OIC for making factually incorrect and unwarranted references to J&K; this necessitates a closer look at India’s relations with OIC and its member nations.

What is the OIC?

- The OIC is formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

- It is the world's second largest inter-governmental organisation after the UN, with a membership of 57 states.
- Its stated objective is "to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world".
- OIC has reserved membership for Muslim-majority countries.
- Russia, Thailand, and a couple of other small countries have Observer status.

What was India's statement?

- OIC had made a reference to India over its policies on J&K.
- To this, in a statement, India advised the OIC to refrain from making such references in future.
- It said it is regrettable that the grouping continues to allow itself to be used by a certain country "which has an abominable record on religious tolerance, radicalism and persecution of minorities".
- This was a reference to Pakistan.

How is India's relationship with the OIC?

- At the 45th session of the Foreign Ministers' Summit of the OIC in 2018, Bangladesh was the host.
- It suggested that India, where more than 10% of the world's Muslims live, should be given Observer status.
- But Pakistan opposed the proposal.
- In 2019, India made its maiden appearance at the OIC Foreign Ministers' meeting, as a "guest of honour".
 - India said then that the invitation was a "welcome recognition of the presence of 185 million Muslims in India".
 - It is also a recognition of the "Muslims' contribution to India's pluralistic ethos, and of India's contribution to the Islamic world".
 - This first-time invitation was seen as a diplomatic victory for New Delhi.
 - This happened especially at a time of India's heightened tensions with Pakistan following the Pulwama attack.
- Notably, Pakistan had opposed the invitation to India.
- Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi boycotted the plenary after the UAE turned down his demand to rescind the invitation to India.

What is the OIC's stand on Kashmir?

- OIC has been generally supportive of Pakistan's stand on Kashmir.
- It has issued statements criticising the alleged Indian "atrocities" in J&K.
- These statements over the last three decades became an annual ritual, and of little significance to India.
- In 2019, after India revoked Article 370 in Kashmir, Pakistan lobbied with the OIC for their condemnation of the move.
 - To Pakistan's surprise, Saudi Arabia and the UAE [both top leaders among the Muslim countries] issued nuanced statements.
 - They were not as harshly critical of New Delhi as Islamabad had hoped.

How is India's relationship with OIC member countries?

- Individually, India has good relations with almost all member nations of the OIC.
- Ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, especially, have looked up significantly in recent years.
- The OIC includes two of India's close neighbours, Bangladesh and Maldives.
 - Indian diplomats say both countries privately admit they do not want to complicate their bilateral ties with India on Kashmir, but play along with OIC.

What is the significance of India's latest statement?

- India has consistently underlined that J&K is an “integral part of India and is a matter strictly internal to India”.
- It has maintained its “consistent and well known” stand that the OIC had no locus standi in this issue.
- This time, India went a step ahead. India now sees the duality of the OIC unsound.
- Many of OIC’s member countries have good bilateral ties and convey to India to ignore OIC statements.
- But their stances differ in the joint statements which are largely drafted by Pakistan.
- India also wants to challenge OIC in the Kashmir issue because of the change in administration in the US.
 - Joe Biden administration in the US may have a strong view on human rights in Kashmir.
 - So, it could possibly issue statements that may complicate India’s image at the global stage.
- New Delhi is also preparing to take over a non-permanent member’s seat at the UN Security Council.
- Given this too, India wants to use its diplomatic clout and goodwill to bury this issue at the global body in the next 2 years.
- India wants to bring up the Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism high on agenda.
- It is in the backdrop of all these perceptions that New Delhi’s recent statement targeting the OIC grouping as being led by Pakistan has to be understood.

4.2 Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Why in news?

Recently, India hosted the SCO heads of governments meeting for the first time.

What are the outcomes of the meeting?

- It aimed to develop a “**Plan of Priority Practical Measures for 2021-2022**” to overcome the socio-economic, financial and food consequences of COVID-19.
- In the final statement, members said that they are committed to strengthen multilateralism and the principles in UN charter.

What are the differences seen in the meeting?

- Neither Indian PM nor Pakistan PM attended the meeting.
- In the final statement, both the countries statement on terrorism was in deviation.
- India mentioned that cross-border terrorism is one of the biggest challenges & Pakistan’s representatives too spoke of the need to combat state terrorism in disputed areas in reference to J&K.
- Both India-Pakistan troops did not arrive to a conclusion on the issue of Regional Anti-Terror Structure.
- India also mentioned the need for maintaining transparency and trust in trade practices with reference to China over the BRI.

How important is SCO for India?

- SCO grouping referred as the “**Asian NATO**” though it did not have the mandate of security alliances.
- With the decline in India’s engagement with SAARC, BBIN and the RCEP, SCO is one of the few regional structures to



SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION (SCO)

A permanent Intergovernmental International Organization

- The SCO is the successor to the **Shanghai Five** a mutual security agreement formed in 1996 between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.



- SCO Charter was signed during the St.Petersburg SCO Heads of State meeting in June 2002, and entered into force on 19 September 2003.

MEMBER STATES

India, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan.

OBSERVER STATES

Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia

DIALOGUE PARTNERS

Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey, and Sri Lanka.

HEADS OF STATE COUNCIL (HSC)

- The Heads of State Council (HSC) is the supreme decision-making body in the SCO.
- It meets once a year and adopts decisions and guidelines on all important matters of the organisation.
- SCO’s official languages are **Russian & Chinese**.

SCO

SCO Secretariat

Beijing

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure

Tashkent

3/5

Covers 3/5th of the Eurasian continent

42%

Covers around 42% of World Population

20%

More than 20% of global GDP

engage in.

- It provides a convenient channel to maintain trade and strategic ties to Central Asian countries.
- It is seen as a platform to conduct bilateral discussions & resolve the issues between India & China, Pakistan.
- Amidst of LAC stand-off, India used SCO for talks with China.
- On the whole, it seen by India to retains its geopolitical balance & maintains robust relation with the western world.

4.3 Culture and Peace - UNAOC Resolution & India's Concerns

Why in news?

- At a UNGA session on 'Culture of Peace', India raised concerns over UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) resolutions.
- India criticised the UNAOC for what it called “selectivity” in seeking to protect Abrahamic religions - Islam, Christianity and Judaism - over others.

What is the UNAOC?

- The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) was established in 2005.
- It came as a political initiative of Mr. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General.
- It was co-sponsored by the Governments of Spain and Turkey.
- A High-Level Group of experts was formed by Mr. Annan to explore the roots of polarization between societies and cultures today.
- The Report of the High-Level Group provided analysis and put forward practical recommendations.
- This form the basis for the implementation plan of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations.

What were India's arguments at the recent session?

- The Indian delegate pointed out the previous resolutions of the UNAOC dating back to 2006.
- The resolutions had repeatedly criticized the hatred against Abrahamic religions - “Islamophobia, Christianophobia and anti-Semitism.”
- But they had not condemned the attacks on other religious groups including Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists.
 - These have notably suffered terror strikes and seen their shrines destroyed in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- In particular, India said, the UNGA statement welcomed the Kartarpur Gurudwara corridor agreement between India and Pakistan.
- But the UNGA failed to note that Pakistan's government has taken over the management of the Sikh shrine.
 - India called this a contravention of the agreement and a violation of Sikh beliefs.
- India's delegate also accused Pakistan of a “culture of hatred” against “religions in India” and fostering cross-border terrorism.
 - India emphasized that a culture of peace could not exist until this was changed.

How valid are India's concerns?

- India's concerns that UN resolutions portray only three religions as victims of religious hatred are completely valid.
- It is important that they are broadened to include every community that faces religion-based violence.
- It is also important that India thwarts Pakistan's attempts to create a controversy against India by pushing these resolutions as India steps to take its two-year seat at the UN Security Council.
- New Delhi has been concerned by an increase in intrusive language from the UN bodies concerned as well.
 - The UNAOC issued a statement of “grave concern” over the Delhi riots in February 2020 that it said resulted in casualties of “mostly Muslims”.

- India is keen to oppose the UNAOC and other UN arms, like the UNHRC, that have criticised the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

What is the need for caution?

- The Indian government must be careful about ensuring that in exposing the UN's "selectivity" it doesn't leave scope for a counter-charge against India.
- For example, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act has been criticised for offering fast-track citizenship to only a select group of religions, leaving out Muslims.
- India cannot call for a culture of peace while Indian States bring laws that seek to make difficult inter-faith marriages.
- In all, India's stance against the UN bodies gains force from its own secular credentials enshrined in the Constitution.
- It is high time that India preserves its own secular ideals and pluralistic ethos.

4.4 Russia's Exit from Open Skies Treaty

Why in news?

- Russia recently announced that it was leaving the Open Skies Treaty (OST).
- In November 2020, the United States left the OST first after accusing Russia of violating the pact.

How does it work?

- The OST aims at building confidence among members through mutual openness, thus reducing the chances of accidental war.
- Under the treaty, a member state can "spy" on any part of the host nation, with the latter's consent.
- A country can undertake aerial imaging over the host state after giving notice 72 hours before, and sharing its exact flight path 24 hours before.
- The information gathered, such as on troop movements, military exercises and missile deployments, has to be shared with all member states.
- Only approved imaging equipment is permitted on the surveillance flights.
- Officials from the host state can also stay on board throughout the planned journey.

WHAT IS THE OPEN SKIES TREATY?

- The OST is an accord with over 30 countries being part of it.
- It allows participants to fly unarmed reconnaissance flights over any part of their fellow member states.
- It was first proposed in 1955 by former US President Dwight Eisenhower as a means to deescalate tensions during the Cold War.
- The treaty was eventually signed in 1992 between NATO members and former Warsaw Pact countries following the demise of the Soviet Union.
- It went into effect in 2002 and had 35 signatories, including key players US and Russia, along with one non-ratifying member (Kyrgyzstan).

Why did the US leave the Treaty?

- The OST was envisaged as a key arms control agreement.
- But many in Washington had for over a decade accused Russia of non-compliance with OST protocols.
- They blamed Moscow of obstructing surveillance flights on its territory, while misusing its own missions for gathering key tactical data.
- Reportedly, the US President Donald Trump was also unhappy that a Russian reconnaissance flew over his golf course in New Jersey State in 2017.
- In May 2020, the Trump administration announced its intention of withdrawing from the OST, and eventually left it in November.

Why did Russia leave after the US?

- A contentious issue regarding Russia's compliance with the OST was its alleged reluctance to allow flights over Kaliningrad.
 - Kaliningrad is its exclave in Eastern Europe that sits between NATO allies Lithuania and Poland.

- Russia defended its position by saying that the restrictions were permissible under treaty rules.
 - It gave the example of the US imposing similar limits on flights over Alaska.
- After the US left the OST, Russia sought assurances from NATO allies who continued to remain on the treaty that they would not transfer data collected by their flights over Russia to Washington.
- Russia said that these requests were not backed by the NATO members, and so it had to leave the treaty.

What is the significance of the Open Skies Treaty?

- The OST was signed much before the advent of advanced satellite imaging technology which is currently the preferred mode for intelligence gathering.
- Yet, surveillance aircraft provide key information that still cannot be gathered by satellite sensors, such as thermal imaging data.
- Notable among them is the OST's utility for Washington, which, since 2002, flew over 200 surveillance missions over Russia and its ally Belarus.
- The OST data gathered during the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict was also significant.
- Overall, more than 1,500 flights is said to have been conducted under the OST.

4.5 G7 meeting –Rebuilding the West

What is the issue?

- The Group of Seven (G7) countries held its ministerial meeting in London recently.
- This comes as a signal that the West is rebuilding its unity and strength, as against the perception of a declining west.

What led to the notion of a declining west?

- The notion of a declining West has been around for more than a century.
- But its recent credibility is rooted in the dramatic rise of China and its presumed capacity to overturn prolonged western dominance of the international system.
- The following developments with China seemed to tilt the scales against the West:
 - i. rapid economic growth
 - ii. massive military modernisation
 - iii. impressive lead in new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence
 - iv. spectacular Belt and Road Initiative
 - v. growing capacity to shape international institutions
 - vi. enhanced political influence across the world
 - vii. a deepening strategic partnership with Russia
- Reinforcing this has been the chaotic developments in the US during the four years of the Trump presidency.
- Trump trashed US alliances, abandoned America's global leadership, walked out of global institutions, and tore up agreements signed by his predecessor.

How is the U.S at present under Biden's administration?

- US President Joe Biden has brought order and purpose to governance at home.
- The US economy is roaring back on the strength of a huge economic stimulus and mass vaccination.
- Biden has brought a new vigour to American foreign policy as well.
- He has revitalised old US alliances in Europe and Asia and is building new global coalitions.
- Promising "extreme competition" with China, Biden has signalled that America is not willing to go gently in that front.

Where does India stand?

- Britain made invitation to India, along with Australia, South Korea and South Africa, to join the G-7 ministerial meeting and the summit thereafter.
- These are rooted in the conviction that Delhi must be an integral part of a powerful coalition of democracies to shape the global order in the 21st century.
- India seemed well poised to seize the new strategic opportunities coming its way.
- But India's disastrous handling of the second wave of the coronavirus has set back hopes for an early rebound of the Indian economy.
- The situation has raised questions about its readiness to take a larger international role.
- Seen together with global dismay at Delhi's democratic backsliding in recent years, India's international prospects are dull.
- Despite this gloomy condition now, India's society is resilient enough to recover and redeem its global possibilities.

4.6 Carbis Bay Declaration - G7 Summit

Why in news?

The G-7 summit recently took place in the U.K., and the leaders jointly signed the Carbis Bay Declaration.

What are the highlights?

- **Vaccine** - The G7 pledged over the next 12 months to secure a further one billion COVID-19 vaccine doses.
- This will be either through donating surplus supplies or providing further finance to Covax.
- [Covax is the UN-backed scheme charged with distributing vaccines to low- and middle-income countries.]
- The G7 also committed to invest \$12 trillion in the combined pandemic recovery plan.
- It also pledged to reinforce global surveillance for potentially dangerous diseases.
- **Economy** - The joint statement set out plans to reduce roadblocks to production in Africa.
- On the controversial issue of enforced temporary waivers of patents, it said the leaders will support manufacturing in low income countries.
- They would engage constructively on the issue of intellectual property waivers in discussions at the WTO.
- The G7 also agreed to increase the special drawing rights (SDRs) in IMF of low-income countries by \$100bn.

What was the U.S.'s role?

- United States's new President Biden vowed that "America is back" to take the lead on global challenges.
- The G-7 commitments on vaccines and pandemic recovery depends on U.S. commitments for a large part.
- There was an invitation by the G7 to "fellow democracies" India, Australia, South Korea and South Africa.
- There was also special communiqué on "Open Societies" for the G-7 outreach.
- These are an extension of Biden's stated commitment to convening a Democracy Summit soon.

What is G7's stance on China?

- Consensus amongst the seven-member countries on countering China was an important message from the meet.
- The final G-7 communiqué holds no less than four direct references to China, each negative.
- It includes criticising Beijing for its -
 - i. rights record in Xinjiang and democratic freedoms in Hong Kong
 - ii. "non-market policies and practices"
 - iii. concerns over its actions in the China Seas

- The G7 also underscored “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait”.
- Besides, there was a demand for a transparent investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 virus.
- The G7 also vowed to cooperate with China on issues such as the climate.

What are the concerns?

- The bonhomie among the G-7 leaders was obvious.
- But the differences and contradictions in the grouping remain a challenge.
- Even two decades ago, questions were raised about whether the grouping (earlier, the G-8), could claim to be the world’s “richest” countries.
- This is especially true when emerging economies, China and India, are not included.
- On economic issues, the EU is a more representative unit than the individual European G-7 member countries.
- Finally, G-7 is much an exclusive club of the “haves” or “the best vs the rest.”
- This seems anachronistic in a world that is much more interlinked now than in 1975, when the grouping first came about.
- Given all this, G7 needs to be more open and less exclusive in an increasingly interlinked world.

Where does India stand?

- India is a special guest to the G-7/G-8 since 2003.
- It has maintained its independent course, especially on political issues.
- At the recent meet, India voiced concerns about some clauses in the joint communiqué on Open Societies.
- The communiqué condemned “rising authoritarianism”, net shutdowns, manipulation of information, and rights violations.
- These are areas the Indian government has often been criticised for in the recent years.
- However, India signed off on the joint statement by G-7 and guest countries on “open societies.”
- The statement reaffirms and encourages the values of “freedom of expression, both online and offline”.
- In the present, India will be expected to walk the talk on its commitments at the G-7 outreach, especially in the areas of information clampdowns.
- [Notably, India had the largest number of Internet shutdowns in 2020.]

4.7 UNSC Debate on Maritime Security

What is the issue?

- India convenes an open debate of the UN Security Council (UNSC) on enhancing maritime security.
- In this regard, here is a look at the challenges and priorities for India with respect to the security of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

What are the challenges?

- The Indian Ocean region transports 75% of the world’s maritime trade and 50% of daily global oil consumption.
- India has a long coastline of over 7,500 km.
- Climate-related events and piracy threats.

What is the SAGAR policy in this regard?

- India’s Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) policy, unveiled in 2015, proposes an integrated regional framework to meet the security objectives in the Indian Ocean.
- 5 pillars of the SAGAR policy are:
 1. India’s role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

2. Active engagement with friendly countries in the IOR.
3. Developing a network to take effective collective action for advancing peace and security.
4. More integrated and cooperative focus on the future of the IOR; enhance the prospects for the sustainable development of the IOR countries
5. The primary responsibility for peace, stability and prosperity in the IOR would be on those “who live in this region”.

What are the highlights of the UNSC debate?

- It revives focus on the enforcement of UNCLOS’s provisions on freedom of navigation, sustainable exploitation of maritime resources, and peaceful resolution of disputes.
- There were allegations of abuse of maritime resources and disrespect of territorial sovereignty rights of nations.
- These were mainly against the U.S., on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other.
- The debate brought to the fore new challenges to peace and security including from non-state actors.
- India brought to the forum a five-prong plan to enhance maritime security worldwide through cooperation. These are:
 1. removing barriers to legitimate maritime trade
 2. settling maritime disputes peacefully and based on international law
 3. jointly facing natural disasters and maritime threats created by non-state actors
 4. preserving maritime environment and resources
 5. encouraging responsible maritime connectivity

What are the key priorities in enhancing maritime security?

- **Securing the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs)** - The debate must focus on ensuring equal and unrestricted access to SLOCs by states, while resolving differences through peaceful means.
- In the Indian Ocean, 3 major SLOCs that play a crucial role in the energy security and economic prosperity –
 1. SLOC connecting the **Red Sea to the Indian Ocean** through the Bab al-Mandab (transports the bulk of Asia’s international trade with its major trading partners in Europe and America)
 2. SLOC connecting the **Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean** through the Strait of Hormuz (transporting the bulk of energy exports to major import destinations like India, ASEAN, and East Asia)
 3. SLOC connecting the **Indian & Pacific Oceans** through the Straits of Malacca (integral to the smooth flow of trade with ASEAN, East Asia, Russia’s Far East and the US)
- **Sharing data on threats to commercial shipping** - India established an International Fusion Centre (IFC) for the IOR in Gurugram in 2018.
- It is jointly administered by the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard, and works for generating Maritime Domain Awareness on safety and security issues.
- 40 international liaison officers from partner countries will eventually be located at the IFC.
- **Others** - Increasing role of the private sector
- Using the maritime domain to provide the critical submarine fibre-optic cables to support Digital Economy.

What lies ahead?

- UNSC should endorse a multiple stakeholder approach, which would set a paradigm for upholding “multi-dimensional” security
- UNCLOS is the only comprehensive framework of laws available to maritime powers to assert their rights.
- So India must advocate for ratification of UNCLOS by all major maritime powers, including the U.S.

4.8 UN Reforms

What is the issue?

- The United Nations commences the 75th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA).
- Now more than ever, the need for internal reforms to suit the 21st century is high.

What is the demand?

- Volkan Bozkir is the Turkish diplomat who is the incoming President of the UNGA.
- He has voiced concern that the structure of the 15-member UN Security Council (UNSC) ought to be more democratic and representative.

Why is the demand long overdue?

- The action has been long overdue on the demand, especially from the G4 countries, which advocate a permanent seat for all of them.
- [G4 countries - Brazil, Germany, India and Japan]
- Meanwhile, the veto powers that the UNSC's five permanent members enjoy are an anachronism in this age.
- This is wielded as a blunt weapon to shore up their geopolitical interests, regardless of the disastrous cost for the victims of armed conflict.

When did the demand get a momentum?

- The push for reform gathered momentum following the unilateral declaration of war by the US and the UK, against Iraq, in 2003.
- The UNGA's 122nd plenary meeting (2008) decided to facilitate the reform process through the Inter-Governmental Negotiations framework (IGN) on equitable representation as well as expansion of the UNSC.
- The UNGA's adoption of a 2015 resolution to allow the IGN on the basis of a framework document generated some enthusiasm.
- But, it was dampened by the U.S., Russia and China being opposed to serious reform of the Council.
- In early-2020, the G4 bemoaned that the IGN process might have outlived its purpose given the absence of a negotiating document.
- In any case, the exercise has been deferred in view of the pandemic.

Will India be a permanent member soon?

- India's election in June 2020 as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, obtaining 184 votes, was a diplomatic triumph.
- But the reforms to the UN are just a part of a broader vision in the declaration to commemorate the UNGA's 75th anniversary.
- This will make it difficult for India to achieve its ultimate objective to become a permanent member.

What is next?

- The UN remains unreflective of the current trajectory, especially in the strategic and economic arenas.
- The multilateral framework now faces a challenge to fashion a collective response to humanity's biggest problems, which include the pandemic.
- The post-war order faces an existential threat to its stability from the revival of nationalism across the globe.
- All countries must have the voice to influence policy.

4.9 Militarisation of Quad

Why in news?

The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat made a statement about the Quad.

What is the statement?

- The CDS stated that India believes the Quad would ensure 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' in the Indian Ocean and surrounding oceans.
- This will be seen as a significant shift of the government's posture towards the India-US-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral (Quad).

What are the suggestions?

- His suggestion is that India is prepared to join Quad military patrols.
- This marks a departure from India's earlier reticence and public statements by the leadership.
- The Indian Navy has not taken part in any joint patrols outside the Indian Ocean.
- In terms of the engagement with the Quad, India has not yet announced a decision to include Australia in the annual Malabar exercises.
- [Malabar exercises are held with the U.S. and Japan.]
- However, the move from conducting exercises together to joint operations would take time, something that makes the CDS's assertion significant.

What is the reference made about China?

- The CDS said that the Quad operations are needed to ensure that no other nation singularly tries to dominate the oceans.
- It is easy to surmise that his contention is a veiled reference to China.

What would be the outcome?

- India is convinced that it needs new strategies to deal with Beijing because of,
 1. The Line of Actual Control tensions and clashes,
 2. The PLA's refusal to implement border agreements.
- Even now, India is engaged with China diplomatically.
- India's External Affairs Minister and Defence Minister have spoken of the importance of a resolution through talks.
- But, an outcome of the tensions will be a strengthening of India's ties with global powers as well as formations like the Quad.
- An indication of this is the government's plans to host a ministerial-level meeting of the Quad soon.

How did India see the Quad earlier?

- While India considers its options, it is necessary to remember some of the reasons for its reticence in terms of militarising the Quad in any way.
- In 2018, Prime Minister said that India sees the Indo-Pacific as a "geographical concept", not a "strategy or a club of limited members".
- It would be important to know whether that formulation has changed.
- India is the only Quad member not already tied in a treaty alliance with the others.
- External Affairs Minister's statement that India would never be part of any alliance system would run counter to what the CDS suggests.

What is needed?

- India is the only Quad country that shares a land boundary with China.
- It is unclear how the militarisation of the Quad in Indo-Pacific waters would alleviate the territorial threat it faces.
- However, if India's view of its Quad engagement has shifted, clarity and an expansion of Gen. Rawat's statement are essential.

3.27 Multilateralism at Davos

Why in news?

Recently Chinese President attended the Davos summit virtually, a gathering seen as synonymous with global capitalism.

What did he speak at the summit?

- His speech carried many similar themes which he spoke about at the 2017 summit.
- He called for global unity, closer coordination on macroeconomic policy, and more equitable growth & carried two messages that appeared to be aimed at Washington.
- He reflected on the four turbulent years of a tariff and technology war between the world's two biggest economies.
- He said that each country is unique with its own history, culture and social system & none is superior to the other and differences in itself should not cause alarm.
- He reflected that arrogance, prejudice, and hatred are seen as an attempt to impose a hierarchy on human civilization.
- He also hit out at attempts to build small circles or start a new Cold War, to reject, threaten or intimidate others.
- He commented that a misguided approach of antagonism and confrontation, be it in the form of the cold war, hot war, trade war, or tech war, would eventually hurt all countries' interests.

Does China stand by his statements?

- Earlier President said the country is committed to international law and international rules instead of seeking its own supremacy.
- Indeed, only the day before the speech, military commanders from India and China spent over 16 hours in talks on border issues.
- The latest round of talks was an unsuccessful attempt to disengage the two forces after China's unprecedented military mobilization across the LAC starting in May.
- It is not only India that is dealing with a harder Chinese military posture in the midst of a global pandemic.
- On January 23, eight bombers and four fighters from China entered Taiwan's air defence identification zone, the latest warning to Taipei.
- Mr. Xi also said that decisions should not be made by simply showing off strong military might which is relevant to all the big, militarised powers & China is one among them.
