

CURRENT AFFAIRS

WEEKLY

WEEK - 2
JUNE, 2020

MAINS

- Russia declares emergency after Arctic Oil Spill

CONVERSATION

- Payment Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF)
- SEBI panel submits report on Social Stock Exchanges

ECONOMY

- Solar Corona Puzzle cracked

GEOGRAPHY

- Government launches 'SWADESH' to conduct skill mapping exercise
- Historic amendment to the Essential Commodities Act
- PM SVANidHI
- TULIP Project

GOVERNANCE

- Global Vaccine Summit: India Pledges \$15 Million to International Vaccines Alliance Gavi

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- India, Australia ink landmark Defence Pact to access Each Other's Bases

- Kohala Hydropower Project

- Philippines reverse course on ending US's VFA

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

- Plea in SC challenging imposing of 'Hindi' as official court language

POLITY

- Fusarium wilt TR4" devastated Banana plantations across the globe

- Immunoglobulin G (IgG) ELISA Test

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

- India Rating Downgraded by Moody

ECONOMY

- Mob Lynching

GOVERNANCE

- China opposing THAAD Defence Systems in South Korea

- US suggests a G7 Expansion to Include Australia, India, and South Korea

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PRELIMS

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The current affairs articles are segregated from prelims and mains perspective, such separation is maintained in terms of structure of articles. Mains articles have more focus on analysis and prelims articles have more focus on facts.

However, this doesn't mean that Mains articles don't cover facts and PT articles can't have analysis. You are suggested to read all of them for all stages of examination.

CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYST

WEEK- 2 (JUNE, 2020)

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SECTION: A

(MAINS)

CURRENT AFFAIRS

INDIA RATING DOWNGRADED BY MOODY

CONTEXT

Moody's Investors Service ("Moody's") downgraded the Government of India's foreign-currency and local-currency long-term issuer ratings to "Baa3" from "Baa2". It stated that the outlook remained "negative".

◎ BACKGROUND

- In November 2017, Moody's had upgraded India's rating to "Baa2" with a "stable" outlook.
- At that time, it expected that "effective implementation of key reforms would strengthen the sovereign's credit profile" through a gradual but persistent improvement in economic, institutional and fiscal strength.
- But those hopes were belied. Since that upgrade in 2017, implementation of reforms has been "relatively weak and has not resulted in material credit improvements, indicating limited policy effectiveness."
- In November 2019, Moody's changed the outlook on India's Baa2 rating to "negative" from "stable" precisely because these risks were increasing.
- Since many of the apprehensions that it had in November 2019 have come through, Moody's has downgraded the rating to "Baa3" from "Baa2", while maintaining the negative outlook.

◎ ANALYSIS

What is Moody's rating?

- Founded by John Moody in 1909, Moody's Investors Service or Moody's along with Standard & Poor's and Fitch Group is considered one of the Big Three credit rating agencies.
- Moody's is an organisation which in a way ranks the creditworthiness of the borrowers.
- In order to rank the borrowers, a **standardised rating scale** is used which measures the expected investor loss in the event of default.
- Thus, it is a bond credit rating business of Moody's Corporation which provides international financial research on the bonds which has been issued by the commercial and government entities.
- Moody's rates debt securities which include government/municipal/corporate bonds, money market funds and fixed income funds.
- It also rates banks and NBFCs.
- The ratings by Moody's Investors Service and its other competitors is useful for the investors and hence they play a key role in global capital markets as well where they work as credit analysis provider

for banks and other financial institutions and help in assessing the risk of particular securities.

How Moody gives credit ratings?

- Moody's uses a standardised rating scale from Aaa to C, where Aaa is the highest and C is the lowest. Thus, the rating process gathers information which may help the investors to evaluate the risk who might own or buy given security.
- The rating process informs the marketplace and participants of Moody's actions. It also monitors on an ongoing basis whether the rating should be changed.

Moody's credit rating (Investment grade)

Rating	Long-term ratings	Short-term ratings
Aaa	Rated as the highest quality and lowest credit risk	Prime-1 Best ability to repay short-term debt
Aa1	Rated as high quality and very low credit risk	
Aa2		
Aa3		
A1	Rated as upper-medium grade and low credit risk	Prime-1/ Prime-2 Best ability or high ability to repay short term debt
A2		
A3		
Baa1	Rated as medium grade, with some speculative elements and moderate credit risk	Prime-2 High ability to repay short term debt
Baa2		Prime-2/ Prime-3 High ability or acceptable ability to repay short term debt

Baa3	Rated as medium grade, with some speculative elements and moderate credit risk	Prime-3 Acceptable ability to repay short term debt
-------------	--	--

Moody's Credit Ratings (Speculative Grade)

Rating	Long Term ratings	Short term ratings
Ba1	Judged to have speculative elements and a significant credit risk	Not Prime Do not fall within any of the prime categories
Ba2		
Ba3		
B1	Judged as being speculative and a high credit risk	
B2		
B3		
Caa1	Rated as poor quality and very high credit risk	
Caa2		
Caa3		
Ca	Judged to be highly speculative and with likelihood of being near or in default, but some possibility of recovering principal and interest	
C	Rated as the lowest quality, usually in default and low likelihood of recovering principal or interest.	

Highlights

- Moody's has just cut India's sovereign rating to Baa3 from Baa2 (both with negative outlook) bringing it to the lowest investment grade.
- This was driven by risks of a sustained period of relatively low growth, further deterioration in the fiscal position and stress in the financial sector.
- Its negative outlook reflects dominant, mutually-reinforcing, downside risks from deeper stresses in the economy and financial system that could further erode fiscal strength.

- The cut brings Moody's rating on India on par with S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings Ltd., both of which have a BBB- rating.
- S&P and Fitch Ratings currently rate India at BBB- with stable outlook, that also happens to be the lowest investment grade.
- Reason behind the downgrade:**
 - Weak implementation of economic reforms since 2017
 - Relatively low economic growth over a sustained period
 - A significant deterioration in the fiscal position of governments (central and state)
 - And the rising stress in India's financial sector
- In its official statement, Moody's said, "The decision to downgrade India's ratings reflects Moody's view that the country's policymaking institutions will be challenged in enacting and implementing policies which effectively mitigate the risks of a sustained period of relatively low growth, significant further deterioration in the general government fiscal position and stress in the financial sector".
- Among other emerging markets, Moody's has downgraded sovereign credit ratings of Mexico and South Africa and maintained a negative outlook for these two countries, while it changed its outlook on Saudi Arabia to negative from stable.
- In case of Mexico and South Africa, Moody's cited deteriorating fiscal strength and structurally very weak growth

Current challenges faced by Indian Economy

- Prolonged period of slower growth relative to the country's potential
- Rising debt
- Further weakening of debt affordability
- Persistent stress in parts of the financial system

What does "negative" outlook mean?

- The negative outlook reflects dominant, mutually-reinforcing, downside risks from deeper stresses in the economy and financial system that could lead to a more severe and prolonged erosion in fiscal strength than Moody's currently projects.
- In particular, Moody's has highlighted persistent structural challenges to fast economic growth such as "weak infrastructure, rigidities in labor, land and product markets, and rising financial sector risks".
- In other words, a "negative" implies India could be rated down further.

© CONCLUSION

The Indian economy is facing a prolonged period of slower growth relative to the country's potential, rising debt, further weakening of debt affordability and persistent stress in parts of the financial

system. These are challenges "the country's policy making institutions will be challenged to mitigate and contain." With the country opening up its high-yielding debt market to foreigners, any downgrade would hurt inflows into a nation that relies on imported capital to fund investment.



MOB LYNCHING

CONTEXT

Following the killing of two people in Assam within a week, a pan-Northeast legal group has sought a law to deal specifically with mob lynching.

◎ BACKGROUND

- The word “lynching” originated in the United States in the mid-18th century.
- Many historians believe that the term was first used by a planter named Charles Lynch to describe extra-judicial authority assumed by private individuals.
- Although, the word lynching is of foreign origin, yet this does not mean that it is new to India. Since quite a few years there have been plenty of incidents of horrifying mob lynching.
- Single women have frequently been lynched through the centuries, branded as witches. Dalits have been lynched with enormous cruelty for millennia.
- Jhajjar, Khairlanji and Una are just three recent sites of ghastly lynching of Dalits.
- In recent years, Dalits have been lynched for growing a moustache, riding a horse, or building a two-storey home.
- The reasons for these incidents range from allegations of beef consumption or transportation to the practice of witchcraft and child-lifting.
- What is even more worrisome is that these cases are not limited to one state alone.
- Multiple cases of mob lynchings have been registered in Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh. Several cases have also been reported in the south Indian states of Karnataka, Telangana and Kerala. In other words, mob lynching has almost become a national phenomenon.

The Assam incident

- A college student in Assam was lynched by a mob of tea garden workers in front of his father and sister following an incident of a road mishap.
- Debashish Gogoi (22), a B.Sc final semester student, and Aditya Das (22) were brutally beaten up by a mob of hundreds of people leaving them grievously injured.
- This is the second incident of mob-lynching in Assam within a week.
- Sanatan Deka, a middle-aged vegetable vendor, was beaten to death by five people after his bicycle had hit a two-wheeler in Kamrup district.

◎ ANALYSIS

What is mob lynching?

- Mob lynching is an inhuman act which involves a group of violent people attacking and lynching a person or a group of persons, causing even their death.
- Mob lynching is slowly becoming a new norm and is disrupting the fabric of our society. They are all acts of utter violence and must be punished as such.
- The basic and most essential feature of a democracy is to protect the life and liberty of the people, but, today, in the largest democracy of the world, the life and liberty of the people are being infringed upon.
- In 2018, the Supreme Court described lynching as a “horrendous act of mobocracy”.
- The Court exhorted the Centre and State governments to frame laws specifically to deal with the crime of lynching and laid down certain guidelines to be incorporated in these laws including fast-track trials, compensation to victims, and disciplinary action against lax law-enforcers.

Laws dealing with mob lynching

- Mob lynching is an offence to the dignity of human being, the constitutional protection under Article 21 and a serious breach of **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**.
- Briefly alluding to the law, under Section 149 of the IPC, a mob exceeding 5 individuals would be prosecuted for causing the death of an individual in furtherance of a common object to cause such intentional killing, punishable under Section 302 of the IPC, if death has resulted on account of such mob violence.
- The victims of such violence or their family members would be compensated under Section 357A of CrPC 1973.

Major state laws

- **Manipur:** The Manipur government came up first with its Bill against lynching in 2018, incorporating some logical and relevant clauses. The Bill specified that there would be nodal officers in each district to control such crimes.

- **Rajasthan:** The Rajasthan government passed a bill against lynching in August 2019. The Rajasthan Bill defines lynching as ***"any act or series of acts of violence or aiding, abetting, or attempting an act of violence whether spontaneous or planned, by a mob on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, language, dietary practices, sexual orientation, political affiliation, ethnicity"***.
- **West Bengal:** West Bengal came up with a more stringent Bill against lynching. Punishment for lynching to death is punishable with the death penalty or life imprisonment and a fine of up to ₹5 lakh.

What's driving violence?

Factors driving violence include cow protection movements and penetration of social media.

- **Social media influence:** Lynchings, however, did not remain limited to religious hysteria over cow protection. The same conditions – easy spread of rumours using social media, an apathetic or incapable administration and a mercurial population – meant a spate of mob violence with varied motivations.
- **Fake news:** Fake news, misinformation and warmongering about the other community have

always been around in India. The same social media apps which carried reports of the cow mother being killed also transmitted rumours of children being kidnapped. And like in the case of gau raksha lynchings, social fissures played a key role here too.

- **Dirty Politics:** Mob lynching is not only a social problem but a political one too. Due to selfish political benefits, some leaders have destructively used the diversity of India and pitted groups against one another.

◎ CONCLUSION

The episodes of mob-lynching are rising in India. The state governments as well as the central government, have failed repeatedly to respond effectively to mob-lynchings and enact stricter laws despite being directed by the Supreme Court. The effects are significant with a near-collapse of the rural cattle trade and worsening law and order. The last Century has seen a concerted push towards setting up global institutions to safeguard human rights and establish democracy as the only acceptable mode for a nation. This faith in the democratic system has, however, been somewhat belied by recent events in the world's biggest democracies.

CHINA OPPOSING THAAD DEFENCE SYSTEMS IN SOUTH KOREA

CONTEXT

China issued a statement reiterating its long-standing objections to the presence of the US THAAD Missile Defence System in South Korea.

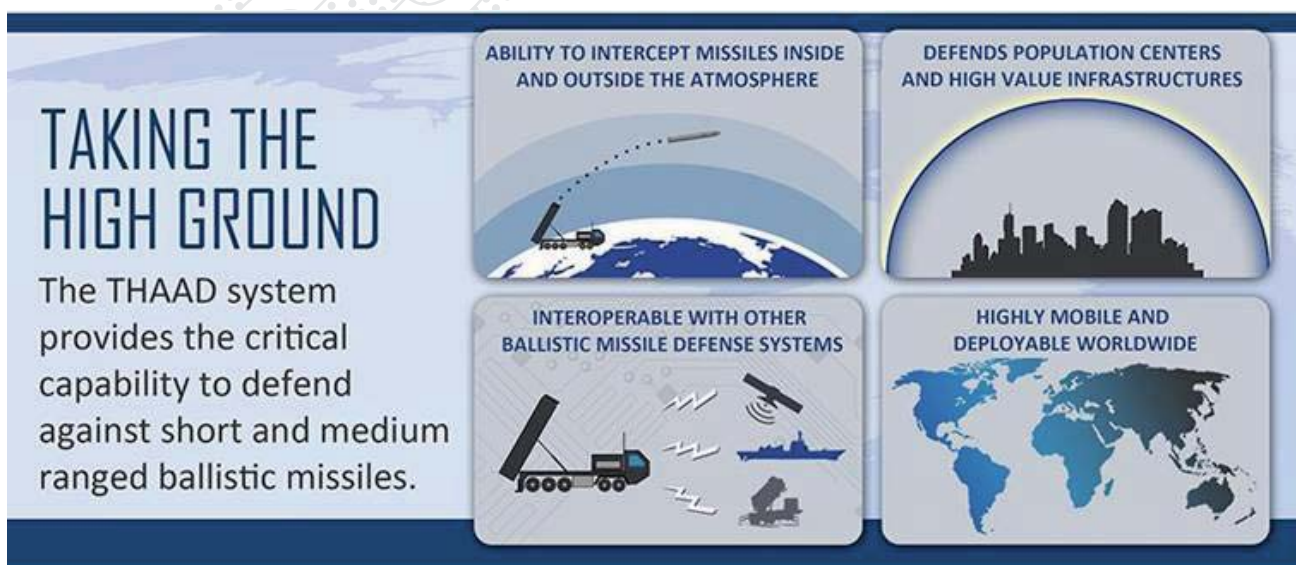
◎ BACKGROUND

- China has been objecting to the defence system since it was first deployed in South Korea three years ago, causing a deterioration in ties between the two countries.
- When the controversy first arose in 2017, China had hit South Korea economically. South Korean businesses found their diversified operations hampered.
- These included the shutting down of institutions and enterprises that had little to do with the defence and military, like golf courses and shopping malls.
- Post this development in 2017, tourism from China to South Korea fell drastically. Many Chinese tourists who are fans of Korean entertainment travel to South Korea — the tourism industry contributes significantly to South Korea's economy.
- South Korea's entertainment industry witnessed concerts, shows and other commercial ventures in China by K-pop stars being forced to cancel as a result of this controversy.
- South Korean cosmetics and beauty products that are extremely popular in China also witnessed their sales being impacted, due to calls on social media to boycott South Korean products. Hence, the impact of the controversy was not limited to a diplomatic level, but had far-reaching consequences.

- Three years on, it is yet to be seen if the latest development will have a similar effect on relations between the countries.
- China's recent opposition came following reports of an overnight operation to bring in new, replacement interceptor missiles to the US base in South Korea.

What is THAAD?

- THAAD is an acronym for Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, a transportable, ground-based missile defense system.
- THAAD is coupled with space-based and ground-based surveillance stations, which transfer data about the incoming missile and informs the THAAD interceptor missile of the threat type classification.
- THAAD is alarmed about incoming missiles by space-based satellites with infrared sensors.
- Key-features of the missile system-
 - Shoots down short- and medium-range ballistic missiles in the terminal phase of their flight
 - Uses hit-to-kill technology - where kinetic energy destroys the incoming warhead
 - Has a range of 200km and can reach an altitude of 150km



- US has previously deployed it in Guam and Hawaii as a measure against potential attacks from North Korea
- This anti-ballistic missile defense system has been designed and manufactured by the US company Lockheed Martin.
- South Korea is not the only country with the THAAD missile defense system. It has been previously deployed in the UAE, Guam, Israel and Romania.

What the US is doing?

- In South Korea, the THAAD missile defense system is operated by the US army stationed in the country.
- The US had previously announced that the deployment of this missile defense system was a countermeasure against potential attacks by North Korea, particularly after the country had engaged in testing ballistic missiles.
- In 2017, matters escalated in the Korean Peninsula after North Korea test fired a few missiles in the direction of US bases in Japan.
- Following this incident, the US amended its plans and **moved the systems to its army base in Osan, South Korea** while the final deployment site was being prepared.
- These moves by the US and by extension, South Korea, particularly angered China. For a while the dispute has temporarily subsided, if not resolved. However, with the latest developments, it appears the controversy has resurfaced.

Why is China opposing?

- China's opposition is due to the system's inbuilt advanced radar systems that could track China's actions.

- The controversy also has much to do with the geo-politics and complex conflicts in East Asia, with the US having a presence in the region particularly through its many military bases in Japan and South Korea.
- According to some observers of East Asia, China believes the US exerts influence over South Korea and Japan and may interfere with Beijing's long-term military, diplomatic and economic interests in the region.

The current situation

- Following the deployment of replacement missiles, China had issued a statement urging the US not to harm bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul.
- China warned the US not to interfere in its "national interests".
- The US and South Korea have consistently maintained that these missiles are only to counter potential threats by North Korea.
- South Korea also issued a statement saying the number of missiles had not increased, but had only been replaced with newer versions.

◎ CONCLUSION

South Korea and the US have made the joint decision to deploy the THAAD system as part of a defensive action to guarantee the security of the Republic of Korea. THAAD is "critical" to the US' defensive strategy. The North's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction required that the allies made sure that they could defend themselves.

US SUGGESTS A G7 EXPANSION TO INCLUDE AUSTRALIA, INDIA, AND SOUTH KOREA'

CONTEXT

US President Donald Trump is keen to expand G7 to include India, Russia, South Korea and Australia.

◎ BACKGROUND

- The 46th G7 summit of the leaders of the Group of Seven was originally scheduled to be held on June 10 through June 12, 2020, at Camp David in US.
- However, US President Donald Trump postponed the summit until at least September 2020.
- The last time the US hosted the event was in 2012. President Barack Obama held it at a government-owned property, Camp David.
- The US President Donald Trump has announced his decision to postpone the G7 summit till September and has decided to invite India, Russia, Australia and South Korea to the meet.
- The decision to include India as part of the larger Grouping comes close on the heels of several face-offs between Indian and Chinese troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh.
- Both sides have been trying to resolve the issues as per the established mechanisms and communications channel.
- The US has recently released a new vision document on China in which it has accused that country of exploiting the rule-based world order and attempting to re-shape the international system which would favour the interests and ideology of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP).
- The report titled, 'United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China', has been released by the White House and it has declared that it is "responding to the CCP's direct challenge by acknowledging that the two major powers are in a "strategic competition and protecting" their "interests appropriately".

◎ ANALYSIS

What is G-7?

- G7 stands for "Group of Seven" industrialized nations.
- Comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Canada (and the European Union), the group meets annually to discuss a range of global issues, managing to usually find a common stance.

- It used to be known as the G8 (Group of Eight) until 2014 when Russia was excluded because of its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.
- The group includes the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, Japan, France and Italy. Together, the G7 countries represent 40% of global GDP and 10% of the world's population.
- It is an informal bloc and takes no mandatory decisions, so the leaders' declarations at the end of the summit are not binding.
- The G-7 does not have a formal constitution or a fixed headquarters. The G-7 nations meet at annual summits that are presided over by leaders of member countries on a rotational basis.

Origin of the group

- France, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States and West Germany formed the Group of Six in 1975 so that the noncommunist powers could come together to discuss economic concerns, which at the time included inflation and recession following an OPEC oil embargo.
- Canada joined the following year.
- Russia eventually joined in 1998 — and its inclusion was meant as a signal of cooperation between East and West after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

What is the need of such expansion?

- The G7, formed in 1975-76, comprises the US, Canada, the UK, France, Germany, Japan, and Italy.
- Not all of these countries are among the most advanced now.
- India is both a military and economic giant but isn't part of the G7.
- So, its expansion, just like that of the United Nations Security Council, is called for. However, there is more than that to Trump's moves.
- China has emerged as the new nemesis for the US and many other countries, particularly after the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan.
- Having India and others in the G7 is Trump's way of countering the rising influence of China on the world stage.

- On the decision to invite other countries including India, according to the US president "The G7 as a grouping is not representing properly what is going on in the world. And it is a very outdated group of countries."

Difference between G-7 and G-20

- They have similar names and similar functions. While the G7 mainly has to do with politics, the G20 is a broader group that focuses on the global economy.
- It's also known as the "Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy" and represents 80% of global GDP.
- It gathers leaders from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the European Union.
- Founded in 1999 after the Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998, the G20 started off as a meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors.
- However, as a response to the financial crisis of 2008, the G20 was upgraded to head of state level in an inaugural summit in Washington, D.C.

China's angle

- The tension between the US and China is escalating over the coronavirus pandemic, with Trump accusing Beijing of not divulging timely information about the disease and demanding a probe into the origins of the virus.
- However, China has rejected all US allegations of a cover up regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Trump is also aggressively pushing for decoupling China from global supply chains which could hurt the world's second-largest economy in the long run.
- The US currently holds the annual presidency of G7 countries. In view of the coronavirus pandemic, there were talks of the summit being held virtually. However, Trump had been suggesting that it be held in person.
- During the summit, the G7 president normally invites heads of states of one or two countries to attend the meeting as a special invitee.
- Last year, French President Emanuel Macron had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the G7 Summit. Prime Minister Modi attended the G7 meeting in the French town of Biarritz in August last.

- Trump's invitation to Russia is regarded as a source of concern for China as Beijing had built up close relations with Moscow ever since it was expelled from what was previously known as G8 in 2014 by Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, following Russia's takeover of Crimea.
- Since then, Russia has emerged as a close strategic ally of China.

G-7 & India

- Calling the existing Group of Seven (G-7) club a "very outdated group of countries", US President Donald Trump said that he wanted to include India, Russia, South Korea, and Australia in the group; although it was unclear whether he wanted the expansion to be permanent
- Last year, the G-7 summit was held on August 24-26 at Biarritz in southwestern France, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was invited to attend as a special guest of French President Emmanuel Macron.
- India joining an expanded G-7 that perceives China to be an imaginary enemy will result in India-China bilateral relations deteriorating.
- The US is keen on roping India in not only because the latter has become the fifth-largest economy in the world, but also because India is considered an important pillar for the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy.
- The US has long sought to strengthen India's role as a counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Significance for India

- The proposed G-11 grouping would recognise India's place amongst the world's richest nations, and acknowledge its global voice.
- A seat at the G-7 would go a long way towards solidifying India's commitment to fashioning itself as a key manufacturing destination in the coming years
- It would be in India's interests to adopt a foreign policy stance premised on multilateralism over isolation, to counter-balance the military power-divide between itself and China

The road ahead

The decision to expand the grouping, however, cannot be taken by the US alone. Other members such as the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Canada, have to not only agree to Trump's proposal to expand the grouping but also on the new members that he wants to add, said a diplomatic source of one of the G7 member countries.

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CURRENT AFFAIRS

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RUSSIA DECLARES EMERGENCY AFTER ARCTIC OIL SPILL

◎ CONTEXT:

Russia has declared a state of emergency, five days after a power plant fuel leak in its Arctic region caused 20,000 tonnes of diesel oil to escape into a local river, turning its surface crimson red.

How did the leak happen?

- The emergency measures were announced within Russia's Krasnoyarsk Region, located in the vast and sparsely populated Siberian peninsula.
- The power plant is located near the Region's Norilsk city, known as the country's **nickel capital**, around 3000 km northeast of Moscow.
- The thermoelectric power plant at Norilsk is built on **permafrost**, which has weakened over the years owing to climate change.

What is Permafrost?

- Permafrost is any ground that remains completely frozen—32°F (0°C) or colder—for at least two years straight.
- These permanently frozen grounds are most common in regions with high mountains and in Earth's higher latitudes—near the North and South Poles.
- Permafrost covers large regions of the Earth. Almost a quarter of the land area in the Northern Hemisphere has permafrost underneath. Although the ground is frozen, permafrost regions are not always covered in snow.
- Permafrost is made of a combination of soil, rocks and sand that are held together by ice. The soil and ice in permafrost stay frozen all year long.
- Near the surface, permafrost soils also contain large quantities of organic carbon—a material leftover from dead plants that couldn't decompose, or rot away, due to the cold. Lower permafrost layers contain soils made mostly of minerals.

- This caused the pillars that supported the plant's fuel tank to sink, leading to a loss of containment.
- Around 20,000 tonnes of diesel oil was released into the Ambarnaya river, which has since drifted 12 km on its surface.
 - The Ambarnaya river, into which the oil has been discharged, is part of a network that flows into the environmentally sensitive Arctic Ocean.

The extent of the damage

- Environmentalists have said the river would be difficult to clean, given its shallow waters and remote location, as well as the magnitude of the spill.
- The most toxic components of diesel fuel are light aromatics (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene), which in significant quantities, will nevertheless dissolve in water and can in no way be collected.
- **It is the second-largest known oil leak in modern Russia's history in terms of volume.**
- The Russian chapter of activist group Greenpeace said damages to the Arctic waterways could be at least 6 billion rubles (over \$76 million), and has compared the incident to Alaska's 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster.
- Its estimate does not include atmospheric damage due to greenhouse gases and soil pollution. The clean-up effort could take between 5-10 years.

PAYMENT INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT FUND (PIDF)

◎ **CONTEXT:** The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is setting up a Payment Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF) with a corpus of Rs 500 crore, with an aim to give a push to digital payments nationwide.

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- The Payment Infrastructure Development Fund (PIDF) has been created to encourage acquirers to deploy **Point of Sale (PoS)** infrastructure, both physical and digital, in **tier-3 to tier-6 centres** and **north eastern states**.
 - Given the high cost of merchant acquisition and merchant terminalisation, most of the POS terminals in the country are concentrated in tier 1 and 2 cities and towns and other regions have been left out.
 - The dedicated fund for deepening digital payments infrastructure will receive recurring contributions to cover operational expenses from card issuing banks and card networks and the central bank will also contribute to yearly shortfalls, if necessary.
 - RBI will make an initial contribution of ₹250 crore to the PIDF, covering half of the fund, while the remaining contribution will be from card-issuing banks and card networks operating in the country.
 - This is in line with the measures proposed by the vision document on **payment and settlement systems in India 2019-2021**.

Payment and Settlement Systems in India: Vision 2019 - 2021

- Aiming at a 'cash-lite' society, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) released a vision document for ensuring a safe, secure, convenient, quick and affordable e-payment system in 219.
- The 'Payment and Settlement Systems in India: Vision 2019 - 2021', with its core theme of 'Empowering Exceptional (E) payment Experience', envisages to achieve "a highly digital and cash-lite society" through the goal posts of competition, cost effectiveness, convenience and confidence (4Cs).

- **Administration & management:** The fund will be governed through an advisory council but it will be managed and administered by the **RBI**.
- The whole premise of this fund is to make it easier for small merchants to accept digital payments across the country. This fund will subsidise the cost of a PoS device.

What was the need of such scheme?

- Over the years, the payments ecosystem in the country has evolved with a wide range of options such as bank accounts, mobile phones, cards, etc.
- To provide further fillip to digitisation of payment systems, it is necessary to give impetus to acceptance infrastructure across the country, more so in under-served areas.
- This move will make the economics more favourable and will significantly increase the merchant base accepting digital payments.

How this idea originated?

- The idea of a PIDF or an Acceptance Development Fund was first proposed in March 2016, when the RBI published a concept paper aimed at expanding the card acceptance infrastructure in the country.
- The main objective of the ADF program is to subsidise the cost of acceptance infrastructure such that it enables banks to speed up their merchant acquiring activities and increase penetration in both existing market segments as well as new markets.

- Such a fund would help address the thin margins that payments companies earn in certain areas of the country where the adoption and usage of digital modes of payments is weak.
- An ADF also helps in reducing the payback period of investment for acquirers.

SEBI PANEL SUBMITS REPORT ON SOCIAL STOCK EXCHANGES

◎ **CONTEXT:**

A working group set up by the capital markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has submitted the report on Social Stock Exchanges (SSE).

Key-highlights of the recommendations

- The 15-member group has proposed tax breaks and direct listing of non-profit organisations to encourage social stock exchanges through issuance of bonds.
- The other key recommendations include a range of funding mechanisms including some of the existing ones such as **Social Venture Funds (SVFs)** under the **Alternative Investment Funds**.
- An SVF is a category-I Alternative Investment Fund (AIF) that is allowed by SEBI to issue securities or units of social ventures to investors.
- The panel recommended widening the use of mainstream funding structures such as the SVFs and mutual funds by allowing such funds to become more than just grants-in, grants-out vehicles for charitable purposes.
- The group also recommended that investors be exempted from paying securities transaction tax (STT) and long-term capital gains tax (LTCG) on their trades and investments.
- The LTCG exemption will encourage investors to stay invested for a longer time and provide much-needed long-term capital for social enterprises.
- A new minimum reporting standard has been proposed for organizations which would raise funds under SSE.
- For-profit social enterprises can also list on SSE with enhanced reporting requirements.

◎ **BACKGROUND:**

- In September 2019, Sebi constituted a working group on SSE under the chairmanship of **Ishaat Hussain**, Director, SBI Foundation.
- The working group was constituted to examine and make recommendations with respect to possible structures and mechanisms, within the securities market domain, to facilitate the raising of funds by social enterprises and voluntary organizations.
- The decision came after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget announcement in July last year about setting up such exchanges to take the capital markets closer to the masses and meet various social welfare objectives.

Important terms

• **Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)**

- SEBI is a statutory regulatory body entrusted with the responsibility to regulate the Indian capital markets.
- It monitors and regulates the securities market and protects the interests of the investors by enforcing certain rules and regulations.
- SEBI was founded on April 12, 1992, under the SEBI Act, 1992.

- Headquartered in Mumbai, India, SEBI has regional offices in New Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and Ahmedabad along with other local regional offices across prominent cities in India.

Social Stock Exchange

- Social Stock Exchange is a novel concept in India and such a bourse is meant to serve private and non-profit sector providers by channelling greater capital to them.
- The SSE is envisioned as one of the possible solutions to this pressing problem as it will unlock large pools of social capital, and encourage blended finance structures so that conventional capital can partner with social capital to address the urgent challenges of COVID-19.

SOLAR CORONA PUZZLE CRACKED

◎ **CONTEXT:** A solar mystery known for decades may have finally been cracked by three Indian astrophysicists, who solve the puzzle with the help of the available data from Murchison Widefield Array (MWA).

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- The Sun's corona is the outermost part of the Sun's atmosphere. The corona is usually hidden by the bright light of the Sun's surface.
 - That makes it difficult to see without using special instruments. However, the corona can be viewed during a total solar eclipse.
 - During a total solar eclipse, the moon passes between Earth and the Sun. When this happens, the moon blocks out the bright light of the Sun.
 - The glowing white corona can then be seen surrounding the eclipsed Sun.
 - The corona reaches extremely high temperatures. However, the corona is very dim. The corona is about 10 million times less dense than the Sun's surface.
 - This low density makes the corona much less bright than the surface of the Sun.

How does the corona cause solar winds?

- The corona extends far out into space. From it comes the solar wind that travels through our solar system.
- The corona's temperature causes its particles to move at very high speeds. These speeds are so high that the particles can escape the Sun's gravity.

The mystery

- The corona's high temperatures are a bit of a mystery. Astronomers have been trying to solve this mystery for a long time.
- The corona is in the outer layer of the Sun's atmosphere—far from its surface. Yet the corona is hundreds of times hotter than the Sun's surface.

Highlights of the observation

- The scientists have likened the flashes to smoking guns of small magnetic explosions, which according to the researchers, is the first evidence of its existence.
- They have discovered tiny flashes of radio light emanating from all over the Sun.
- These radio lights or signals result from beams of electrons accelerated in the aftermath of a magnetic explosion on the Sun.
- These weak radio flashes are 'smoking guns' or the evidence for the same and hence bring us closer to explaining the coronal heating problem.

- These observations were the strongest evidence till date that the tiny magnetic explosions, originally referred to as 'nanoflares' by eminent **American solar astrophysicist Eugene Parker**, can indeed be heating up the corona (the aura of plasma that surrounds the sun and other stars).

About Murchison Widefield Array (MWA)

- The Murchison Widefield Array (MWA) is the world's newest telescope, built in Western Australia as part of the worldwide Square Kilometre Array (SKA) network.
- The MWA is located 315km northeast of Geraldton at the Murchison Radio-astronomy Observatory, a "radio quiet" area larger than Tasmania.
- Within this area, radio transmissions are strictly restricted and monitored, making it one of the quietest places in the world – perfect for carrying out radio astronomy.
- The main objective of the MWA are **to detect neutral atomic Hydrogen emission from the cosmological Epoch of Reionization (EoR)**, to study the sun, the heliosphere, the Earth's ionosphere, and radio transient phenomena, as well as **map the extragalactic radio sky**.

GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES 'SWADESH' TO CONDUCT SKILL MAPPING EXERCISE

◎ CONTEXT:

With the aim of making the best of our skilled workforce returning to the country due to the ongoing pandemic, the Government of India has launched a new initiative SWADES (Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support) to conduct a skill mapping exercise of the returning citizens under the Vande Bharat Mission.

◎ ABOUT:

- The initiative SWADES is a joint initiative of the **Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Civil Aviation and the Ministry of External Affairs**.
- The ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship (MSDE), under the **Skill India Mission**, has partnered with the ministry of civil aviation (MoCA) and the ministry of external affairs for the initiative.
- MSDE's implementation arm **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)** is supporting the implementation of the project.

How will it be done?

- The scheme aims to create a database of qualified citizens based on their skillsets and experience to tap into and fulfil demand of Indian and foreign companies.
- The collected information will be shared with the companies for suitable placement opportunities in the country.
- The returning citizens are required to fill up an online SWADES Skills Card.
- The card will facilitate a strategic framework to provide the returning citizens with suitable employment opportunities through discussions with key stakeholders including State Governments, Industry Associations and Employers.

What is Vandhe Bharat Mission?

- Vandhe Bharat mission is the massive repatriation operation planned by the Indian government to bring back stranded Indians in different parts of the world in the wake of the coronavirus crisis.
- Citizens in distress will be brought back on commercial aircraft and naval ships based on lists prepared by the India's embassies.

- India has dispatched four Naval ships as part of the first phase of Vande Bharat mission. Indian Navy's INS Jalashwa and INS Magar operated to bring back Indian citizens from Maldives while INS Shardul and INS Airavat sailed to the UAE. The Navy has named its evacuation effort '**Operation Samudra Setu**'.
- India has been under lockdown since March 25 to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. All commercial passenger flights have been suspended for this period.

The need

- The top countries from where the citizens have returned in maximum numbers are the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
- These have been primarily employed in sectors such as oil and gas, aviation, construction, tourism and hospitality and IT & ITeS. Most of these belong to states of Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka.
- The scheme aims at empowering the returning citizens with relevant employment opportunities.

HISTORIC AMENDMENT TO THE ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES ACT'

◎ CONTEXT:

The Union Cabinet approved an amendment to the 'Essential Commodities Act of 1955' to "deregulate" agricultural commodities like cereals, pulses, oilseeds, onions and potatoes besides promulgating an ordinance to allow farmers to engage with processors, aggregators, large retailers, exporters.

◎ ABOUT:

- The Essential Commodities Act 1955 aims to provide, in the interests of the general public, for the control of the production, supply and distribution of, and trade and commerce in, certain commodities.
- According to the Act, if the central government is of opinion that it is necessary for maintaining or increasing supplies of any essential commodity, securing their equitable distribution and availability at fair prices or securing any essential commodity for the defense of India, it may provide for regulating or prohibiting the production, supply and distribution and trade and commerce therein.

Highlights

- The ordinance has introduced a new subsection (1A) in Section 3 of The Essential Commodities Act, 1955.
- The amended law provides a mechanism for the "regulation" of agricultural foodstuffs, namely cereals, pulses, oilseeds, edible oils, potato, and supplies under extraordinary circumstances, which include extraordinary price rise, war, famine, and natural calamity of a severe nature.

What is essential commodity?

- There is no specific definition of essential commodities in The EC Act. Section 2(A) of the act states that an "essential commodity" means a commodity specified in the "Schedule" of this Act.
- The Act gives powers to the central government to add or remove a commodity in the "Schedule."
- The Centre, if it is satisfied that it is necessary to do so in public interest, can notify an item as essential, in consultation with state governments

- At present, the "Schedule" contains 9 commodities — drugs; fertilisers, whether inorganic, organic or mixed; foodstuffs, including edible oils; hank yarn made wholly from cotton; petroleum and petroleum products; raw jute and jute textiles; seeds of food-crops and seeds of fruits and vegetables, seeds of cattle fodder, jute seed, cotton seed; face masks; and hand sanitisers.
- The latest items added to this schedule are face masks and hand sanitisers, which were declared essential commodities with effect from March 13, 2020 in the wake of Covid-19 outbreak.

What was the need of such amendment?

- The Essential Commodities Act was originally enacted to stop the hoarding and black marketing of foodstuffs.
- The EC Act was legislated at a time when the country was facing scarcity of foodstuffs due to persistent abysmal levels of foodgrain production.
- The country was dependent on imports and assistance (such as wheat import from US under PL-480) to feed the population.
- But now the situation has changed.
 - production of wheat has increased by 10 times (from less than 10 million tonnes in 1955-56 to more than 100 million tonnes in 2018-19)
 - during the same period, the production of rice has increased more than four times from around 25 million tonnes to 110 million tonnes.
 - production of pulses has increased by 2.5 times, from 10 million tonnes to 25 million tonnes.
- In fact, India has now become an exporter of several agricultural products. With these developments, the EC Act has become anachronistic.

PM SVANIDHI

◎ CONTEXT:

The Union Cabinet announced PM SVANIDHI-Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi- a special Micro-Credit Facility Scheme for providing affordable loan to street vendors.

◎ ABOUT:

- PM SVANIDHI is a special micro-credit facility plan to provide affordable loan of up to Rs. 10,000 to more than 50 lakh street vendors, who had their businesses operational on or before 24 March.
- The scheme is valid until March 2022.
- It was announced aims to enable street vendors to resume their livelihoods, which have been hit hard due to the national lockdown.
- **Small Industries Development Bank of India** is the technical partner for implementation of this scheme and will manage the credit guarantee to the lending institutions through Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises.
- Under the scheme, vendors can avail working capital loan of up to Rs. 10,000, which is repayable in monthly instalments within one year.
- On timely/early repayment of the loan, an interest subsidy of 7% per annum will be credited to the bank accounts of beneficiaries through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) on six-months basis.
- There will be no penalty on early repayment of loan.

Applicability of the Scheme

- The scheme is applicable to vendors, hawkers, thelewalas, rehriwalas, theliphadwalas in different areas/contexts who supply goods and services.
- Street vendors belonging to the surrounding peri-urban/rural areas are also included.

The need

- Street vendors usually work with a small capital base taken on very high interest rates (sometimes as high as 1% per day- amounting to nearly 400% per annum) from informal sources.
- Further, they might have consumed their savings and high cost capital during the lockdown.
- Therefore, there is an urgent need to provide affordable credit for working capital through formal banking channel to street vendors to help them resume the business.
- A timely repayment will ensure that the vendor gets a credible credit score and are eligible for a higher loan.

TULIP PROJECT

◎ CONTEXT:

The Centre launched an urban learning internship programme — TULIP (The Urban Learning Internship Programme), for fresh engineering graduates, who will get an opportunity to work for 4,400 urban local bodies and 100 smart cities in the country.

◎ ABOUT:

- The Urban Learning Internship Programme, will provide internships to graduates and fresh engineers.
- The TULIP portal has been developed by **AICTE**.
- Under the internship programme students will get to work for 100 smart cities under ministry of housing and urban development.
- According to the TULIP portal, there are a total of 295,200 internships under 23,970 companies.
- It will allow applicants internship for up to one year in areas like urban planning, financing, environmental engineering, sanitation and infrastructure.
- The online portal would provide a common platform to interested candidates, ULBs and smart cities, who would post details of their requirements.
- A Steering Committee chaired by Secretary, HUA, including AICTE chairman and other officials from the MoHUA and the AICTE, has also been constituted to review the progress of the programme on a periodical basis.

Who is eligible?

- Students having a degree of B. Tech, B planning, B. Arch, BA, BSc, BCom, LLB can register for internships as per their interest.
- Open only to Indian citizens.

Objective of the scheme

- TULIP interns would get exposure in a large number of areas including but not limited to urban planning, urban design, different branches of engineering, information and technology, mobility, finance, social sector issues and environmental issues.
- The program will provide them with insight into policy formulation and implementation.

- On a day-to-day basis, they will interact with city officials/ members of the civil society. They will be oriented towards best practices, knowledge sharing and project implementation on ground.
- The interns will carry with them a rich experience in urban governance which will help them in their future endeavours.

Significance of the initiative

- **Improvising the system:** Both ULBs and smart cities could utilise the fresh ideas of the young people in improving services and making local bodies effective.
- **Solving urban challenges:** The new programme would lead to infusion of fresh ideas and energy with engagement of youth in co-creation of solutions for solving India's urban challenges.
- **Boosting engagements:** It would further government's endeavour to boost community partnership and government-academia-industry-civil society linkages.

GLOBAL VACCINE SUMMIT

◎ CONTEXT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged \$15 million as India's contribution to the Gavi, the international vaccine alliance, at the Global Vaccine Summit hosted by United Kingdom.

Highlights:

- PM Modi addressed the Global Vaccine Summit hosted by United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson.
- The summit was held virtually in view of the global lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Over 50 countries - business leaders, UN agencies, civil society, government ministers, Heads of State, and country leaders participated in the virtual summit.
- A \$2bn procurement fund aimed at ensuring that poorer countries can access doses of a potential coronavirus vaccine has been announced.
- The summit separately raised \$8.8bn, above the target of \$7.4bn, for the private-public alliance's general work on immunising millions of people worldwide from longstanding diseases such as measles.
- The summit, the third replenishment summit since Gavi was formed 20 years ago, took on an extra significance as world leaders battle to set up a mechanism to ensure that any effective coronavirus vaccine is produced at a scale possible to ensure it is not just distributed to the countries that either can afford it or have invested in its research.

What is Gavi?

- Created in 2000, Gavi is an international organisation - a global Vaccine Alliance, bringing together public and private sectors with the shared goal of creating equal access to new and underused vaccines for children living in the world's poorest countries.
- Since its creation, Gavi has helped vaccinate more than 760 million children in the world's poorest countries, preventing more than 13 million deaths.
- Gavi now vaccinates almost half of the world's children, giving it tremendous power to negotiate vaccines at prices that are affordable for the poorest countries and to remove the commercial risks that previously kept manufacturers from serving them.

What is Gavi doing to fight COVID-19?

- Health systems across the developing world face their biggest test in living memory, and Gavi is helping them to meet it.
- Gavi has committed to providing an initial amount of over US\$42 million in urgent funding to 30 countries, which will support countries in their response to COVID-19 by enabling them to protect healthcare workers with PPE, perform trainings, and fund diagnostic tests.
- Gavi is seeking to provide additional support to its beneficiary countries and funding up to US\$200 million is likely to be approved in the near future.

Role of vaccination

- Vaccines are one of the most successful developments in modern medicine, averting up to an estimated 3 million deaths every year.
- Vaccination has made possible the eradication of smallpox, and it is close to doing the same for polio.
- Annual measles deaths have been reduced from 2.6 million in the 1980s to an estimated 110 000 in 2017.
- Child mortality has declined by more than 50% since 1990, largely related to the reduction in disability and death from vaccine-preventable diseases.
- Immunization is the process whereby a person is made immune or resistant to an infectious disease, typically by the administration of a vaccine. Vaccines stimulate the body's own immune system to protect the person against subsequent infection or disease.
- India is also the World's foremost producer of vaccines and that it is fortunate to contribute to the immunization of about 60 percent of the World's children.

INDIA, AUSTRALIA INK LANDMARK DEFENCE PACT TO ACCESS EACH OTHER'S BASES

◎ CONTEXT:

India and Australia inked a landmark agreement for reciprocal access to military bases for logistics support besides firming up six more pacts to further broaden ties after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison held an online summit.

Highlights of the Summit

- The first-ever virtual bilateral summit between India Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Australian counterpart Scott Morrison saw inking of **seven agreements** in total, including the **agreement on access to military bases**.
- India and Australia forged a major defence alliance by signing an '**Arrangement concerning Mutual Logistics Support (MLSA)**'.
- The countries upgraded their relations to a '**Comprehensive Strategic Partnership**'.
- The other important agreements signed during the summit include-
 - a framework arrangement on cyber and cyber-enabled critical technology cooperation
 - a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in mining and processing of critical and strategic minerals
 - an implementing arrangement on cooperation in defence science and technology to the existing MoU on defence cooperation.

- Vocational education
- Water resources management
- The two countries also released a declaration on "Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" that advocated for a "rules-based maritime order that is based on respect for sovereignty and international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law".

What is Mutual Logistics Support Agreement?

- The Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) will allow militaries of the two countries to use each other's bases for repair and replenishment of supplies besides facilitating scaling up of overall defence cooperation.
- This cooperation includes the **Australia-India Framework for Security Cooperation**
- regular dialogues involving Ministers responsible for foreign, defence and trade policy
- a broad range of senior officials meetings, such as the **Defence Policy Talks, Australia-India Maritime Dialogue and Navy to Navy Staff Talks.**
- India has already signed similar agreements with the US, France and Singapore.

◎ CONCLUSION:

This Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) is expected to help in the interoperability and will help the military platforms to receive support and supplies in both countries. There is great potential in the future of the India-Australia relationship particularly in the maritime domain. The geographic location of both countries relative to each other provides the ability for effective Maritime Domain Awareness over a large swath of the Indo-Pacific.

KOHALA HYDROPOWER PROJECT

◎ CONTEXT:

China under the multi-billion-dollar CPEC will set up 'Kohala hydropower project', a 1,124-megawatt power project in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir despite India's objection to it.

◎ ABOUT:

- The project will be built on the Jhelum River and aims at annually providing more than five billion units of clean and low-cost electricity for consumers in Pakistan.
- This marks one of the largest investments of USD 2.4 billion in an independent power producer (IPP) in the region.

What is CPEC?

- The 3,000-km-long CPEC is aimed at connecting China and Pakistan with rail, road, pipelines and optical cable fiber networks.
- It connects **China's Xinjiang province** with **Pakistan Gwadar port**, providing access to China to the Arabian Sea.
- The CPEC passes through PoK, over which India has conveyed its protests to China.

India's view on the development

- India's stance against CPEC is Pakistan's illegal Occupation of Kashmir (PoK). China and Pakistan are jointly accelerating Construction under the Belt & Road Initiative.
- The project passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in PoK, which New Delhi considers its own territory.
- India has consistently objected to this, calling it a violation of its Sovereignty.
- The Chinese side is well aware of India's position that Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh are an integral part of India, and that the recent developments are entirely a matter internal to us.

PHILIPPINES REVERSE COURSE ON ENDING US'S VFA

◎ **CONTEXT:** The government of Philippines had suspended plans to cancel the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a deal that is important to Washington's moves to counter Beijing's rising regional power.

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- The U.S. military operates around the world. Similarly, the VFA spells out the rules, guidelines and legal status of the U.S. military when operating in the Philippines.
 - The two countries signed the VFA in 1998. It provides simplified access procedures to the Philippines for U.S. service members on official business.
 - It provides a series of procedures for how to resolve issues that may come up as a result of U.S. forces being present in the Philippines.
 - The VFA also affirms the **1951 Mutual Defense Treaty** as well as the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement — agreements that enable the U.S. military to conduct joint exercises and operations in the Philippines.
 - The MDT was established in 1951 between the United States and the Philippines to provide mutual support in case of foreign attack.

Why Philippines wanted to exit in the first place?

- In February this year, the Philippines announced it had given notice to the United States that it intended to withdraw from the VFA.
- The proximate driver of this change is that President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines is unhappy with the revocation of the U.S. visa of one of his key allies, Senator Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa.
- Senator dela Rosa was formerly Chief of the Philippine National Police and led a signature anti-drug effort of President Duterte, which has resulted in thousands of deaths of Filipinos suspected of being involved in illegal drugs.
- The U.S. State Department has reported a high level of extrajudicial killings as a result of the anti-drug campaign, specifically while dela Rosa was Chief.
- The broader context is that President Duterte has sought to create greater distance between the Philippines and the United States—what he calls an **"independent foreign policy."**
- Several elements of that approach include outreach to Russia for closer ties and potential arms sales and an effort to develop stronger economic and diplomatic ties with China even as the Philippines continues to push back (with diminishing force) against China's encroachment of its exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea.
- President Duterte is pursuing this approach despite high favorability ratings for the United States in polls of the Philippines' population.

Why VFA matters?

- In addition to ease of access and clear procedures for the two countries to follow, the VFA matters for various reasons as given below-
- **Simpler process:** It provides clear procedures and processes for how to handle issues that arise as a result of U.S. service members presence in the Philippines.
- **Signal of alliances:** It is a political signal of the closeness of the U.S.-Philippines alliance. Signaling close ties between the United States and Philippines supports efforts to deter China from further encroaching on Philippines' sovereignty.

What if Philippines terminated the deal?

- Terminating the VFA would leave the U.S. military without any legal or operational standing in the Philippines — and that's a problem for the alliance.

- Without a VFA, the U.S. military would not be able to support either of these defense agreements.

◎ **CONCLUSION:**

Security issues in the disputed South China Sea helped convince the Philippines to delay quitting the pact. Moreover, the VFA reversal showed Duterte had to decide between an aggressive China and United States, a historically helpful nation.

PLEA IN SC CHALLENGING IMPOSING OF 'HINDI' AS OFFICIAL COURT LANGUAGE

◎ **CONTEXT:**

The Haryana Government's decision to enforce use of 'Hindi' in all courts and tribunals across the state has been challenged in the Supreme Court.

◎ **BACKGROUND:**

- Recently, Haryana notified that 'Hindi' should be used in all Courts and Tribunals of the state.
- The state of Haryana amended Section 3 of The Haryana Official Language (**Amendment**) **Act, 1969**.
- The Act is now called **The Haryana Official Language (Amendment) Act, 2020**.
- According to the Act-
- "In all Civil Courts and Criminal Courts in Haryana subordinate to the High Court of Punjab and Haryana, all revenue Courts and Rent Tribunals or any other court or tribunal constituted by the State Government, work shall be done in Hindi language."
- Notified earlier this month, the amendment says the state government shall provide the requisite infrastructure and training of staff within six months for the commencement of the amended Act.

The petition

- Five lawyers have challenged the validity of Act, terming it "**arbitrary**" on the ground that it created an unreasonable classification between Hindi and non-Hindi speaking advocates.
- The amendment was with the assumption that everyone practising law in Haryana not only knew Hindi but was also fluent in it.
- To say that imposition of Hindi was for state's people and necessary to get justice was "wholly irrational."
- The amendment precluded the use of English which was used widely to conduct legal proceedings.
- This has impinged upon the right to freely practice the legal profession and earn a livelihood as guaranteed under Article 14, 19 and 21 of the Constitution.
- Imposition of Hindi was not fit for the state as it was an industrial hub and home to multi-national companies, where people from every strata of the society reside and majority of them were not fluent in Hindi.

Which language is actually used in the court?

- Under the Constitution of India, English is the language of the High Courts and the Supreme Court.
- However, through **Article 348 (2)** of the Constitution, the governor of a state, with the consent of the President, can allow the use of the local language in the High Court.
- Section 7 of the Official Languages Act, 1963, provides that the use of Hindi or official language of a State in addition to the English language may be authorized, with the consent of the President of India, by the Governor of the State for purpose of judgments etc. made by the High Court for that State.

- So far, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar have taken this route to do use Hindi in their High Court proceedings.

“FUSARIUM WILT TR4” DEVASTATED BANANA PLANTATIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE

◎ CONTEXT:

As the coronavirus disease outbreak rages on, “fusarium wilt TR4”, a novel fungus strain has devastated plantations across the globe. It is now setting up new hotspots and threatening output in India, the world’s largest producer of bananas.

◎ ABOUT:

- The strain, Tropical Race 4 (TR4), was first identified in Taiwan, and has jumped from Asia to the Middle East and Africa, reaching as far as Latin America.
- According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, TR4 is one of the “the most destructive of all plant diseases”.
- It is a common vascular wilt fungal disease caused by **Fusarium oxysporum**.
- **Hosts:** Tomato, tobacco, legumes, cucurbits, sweet potatoes and banana
- It cripples plantations by first attacking the leaves, which turn yellow from their trailing edges before wilting away. There is no effective remedy yet.
- TR4 has infected the most commonly sold variety: Grand Nain (musa acuminata), a curvy yellow fruit.
- Fusarium wilt is not new. It entirely wiped out Gros Michel, the dominant export variety of bananas in 1950s.

Quick facts on Banana

- A healthy snack, banana is the world’s most globally exported fruit, according to the FAO.
- India produces 27 million tonnes of bananas annually and grows about 100 named cultivars (varieties).
- One medium banana (126 gms) provides about 110 calories, 0 gram fat, 1 gram protein, 28 grams carbohydrate, 15 grams sugar (naturally occurring), 3 grams fiber and 450 mg potassium and trace quantities of vitamin C and B6.
- Most of India’s bananas are consumed domestically.
- Ecuador is the largest exporter of Banana.

Is there any treatment available?

- There is no effective treatment yet. So, scientists recommend biosecurity measures including “plant quarantine” to slow its spread.
- The spreading disease has jeopardised the \$26 billion global banana trade.
- Katihar and Purnea in Bihar and Maharajganj in Uttar Pradesh are the hotspots in India. In UP, several districts are thought to be affected.
- The Indian Council of Agricultural Research is advocating a set of measures, known as “biopriming”.
- Biopriming is a new technique of seed treatment that integrates biological (inoculation of seed with beneficial organism to protect seed) and physiological aspects (seed hydration) of disease control.
- It is used as an alternative method for controlling many seed-borne and soil-borne pathogens.
- It has asked farmers whose plantations have been affected to abandon them.

IMMUNOGLOBULIN G (IgG) ELISA TEST

◎ **CONTEXT:** The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has advised states to conduct ‘sero survey’ to measure the coronavirus exposure in a population by using the Immunoglobulin G (IgG) ELISA test.

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- Immunoglobulins, also known as antibodies, are glycoprotein molecules produced by plasma cells (white blood cells).
 - They act as a critical part of the immune response by specifically recognizing and binding to particular antigens, such as bacteria or viruses, and aiding in their destruction.
 - The body makes different antibodies, or immunoglobulins, to fight different things. For example, the antibody for chickenpox isn't the same as the antibody for mononucleosis.
 - Sometimes, the body may even mistakenly make antibodies against itself, treating healthy organs and tissues like foreign invaders. This is called an **autoimmune disease**.
 - The types of antibodies are:
 - **Immunoglobulin A (IgA):** It is found in the linings of the respiratory tract and digestive system, as well as in saliva (spit), tears, and breast milk.
 - **Immunoglobulin G (IgG):** This is the most common antibody. It's in blood and other body fluids, and protects against bacterial and viral infections. IgG can take time to form after an infection or immunization.
 - **Immunoglobulin M (IgM):** Found mainly in blood and lymph fluid, this is the first antibody the body makes when it fights a new infection.
 - **Immunoglobulin E (IgE):** Normally found in small amounts in the blood. There may be higher amounts when the body overreacts to allergens or is fighting an infection from a parasite.
 - **Immunoglobulin D (IgD):** This is the least understood antibody, with only small amounts in the blood.

What is an ELISA test?

- Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assays (ELISAs) are the most widely used type of assay. They have evolved from viral lysate tests to tests containing recombinant protein and synthetic peptide antigens
- ELISAs are designed specifically for screening large numbers of specimens at a time, making them suitable for use in surveillance and centralized blood transfusion services.
- It is an IgG Elisa-based test. This means that the test will be done to detect the Immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibody.
- The body produces Immunoglobulin M (IgM) and IgG antibodies to fight against a pathogen.
- The IgM antibodies are produced in four-seven days after pathogens enter the body
- The IgG antibodies are produced between 10-14 days of the pathogen's appearance.
- If the IgG antibody is detected, it can be concluded that the person was exposed to SARS-CoV-2.
- Those who test positive using these tests are usually tested with RT-PCR tests. RT-PCR tests are considered as the gold standard for confirming the presence of SARS-CoV-2.
- RT-PCR is a time consuming, lab-based test and involves the collection of throat and nasal swabs and is not a blood-based test.
- Why sero-surveys?

- According to ICMR, sero-surveys help to understand the proportion of population which has been exposed to the SARS-CoV-2 infection including the asymptomatic individuals.
- Depending upon the level of sero-prevalence of infection, proper public health intervention steps can be implemented, which will lead to the prevention and control of the infection.
- Sero-surveys are conducted using IgG ELISA test. The purpose of the test is to detect the presence of IgG antibodies in an individual, which represents a possible exposure to the COVID-19 infection. The immune system of a human body starts developing IgG antibodies after getting exposed to SARS-CoV-2.



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CURRENT AFFAIRS

‘#ICOMMIT’ CAMPAIGN

The Government initiated the ‘#iCommit’ campaign on the occasion of World Environment Day.

About the campaign

- The initiative is a clarion call to all stakeholders and individuals to continue moving towards energy efficiency, renewable energy, and sustainability to create a robust and resilient energy system in the future.
- The ‘#iCommit’ initiative, driven by Energy Efficiency Services Limited is uniting a diverse set of players such as Governments, Corporates, Multilateral and Bilateral Organisations, Think Tanks and Individuals.
- The initiative can bring together a diverse spectrum of government and private players to build a new energy future for India.

The initiative is centred around the idea of building an energy resilient future.

AMERI ICE SHELF (AIS)

- Recently, the **National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR)** predicted an increase in the expansion of Ameri Ice Shelf (AIS) boundaries by 2021.
- Amery is the third largest ice shelf in Antarctica, and is a key drainage channel for the east of the continent.
- The shelf is essentially the floating extension of a number of glaciers that flow off the land into the sea.
- It is part of **Mac. Robertson Land**.
- It is located on the east coast of Antarctica, at about 70°S Latitude, 70°E Longitude.

Predictions

- There would be a 24 per cent increase in the expansion of the Ameri Ice Shelf (AIS) boundaries in Antarctica by 2021 and another 24 per cent by 2026 from its 2016 positions, the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) in Goa has predicted.
- The prediction made by NCPOR is based on a 16-year-long satellite-based observation that covered an area of 60,000 sq km across the AIS.
- This study would help understand the ongoing changes in the ocean and atmospheric forcing better.

CHANGTHANGI GOAT

- The Chinese Army's intrusion in Chumur and Demchok since January has left Ladakh's nomadic herding **Changpa community** cut off from large parts of summer pastures.
- In a cascading effect, this has resulted in a sharp rise in deaths of young Pashmina goats this year in the Korzok-Chumur belt of Changthang plateau in Ladakh.

About Changthangi goat

- The Changthangi goat is a beautiful animal found in the cold, arid region surrounding Ladakh in Kashmir, India.
- It is also known as *Pashmina goat* or *Changra goat*. The breed is raised mainly for its ultra-fine cashmere wool production.
- This cashmere wool is known as *Pashmina* once woven. The breed was also reared for meat production in the past.

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- Changthangi goat is a cashmere goat, and this type of goats grow a thick, warm undercoat which is the source of Kashmir Pashmina wool. And the Kashmir Pashmina wool is considered as the world's finest cashmere, measuring between 12-15 microns in fiber thickness.
- This wool is used for the Kashmir's famous Pashmina Shawls. Shawls made from Pashmina wool are exported worldwide at a very high price and considered as the finest of its kind.
- The Changthangi goat is usually domesticated and raised by nomadic communities called the Changpa in the Changthang region of Greater Ladakh, Kashmir. This region is one of the highest plateaus in the world.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO DECLARED A NEW EBOLA EPIDEMIC

Democratic Republic of Congo declared a new Ebola epidemic in the western city of Mbandaka.

What is Ebola Virus Disease?

- Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever, is a rare but severe, often fatal illness in humans.
- The Ebola virus causes an acute, serious illness which is often fatal if untreated. EVD first appeared in 1976 in 2 simultaneous outbreaks.
- The virus is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission.
- Ebola virus is a member of the Filoviridae family or filoviruses.
 - ▶ The virus family **Filoviridae** includes three genera: Cuevavirus, Marburgvirus, and Ebolavirus. Within the genus Ebolavirus, six species have been identified: Zaire, Bundibugyo, Sudan, Taï Forest, Reston and Bombali.
- The Ebola virus targets the host's (infected person's) blood and immune system, which can lead to bleeding and a weakened immune system
- The average EVD case fatality rate is around 50%. Case fatality rates have varied from 25% to 90% in past outbreaks.

DRDO'S DISINFECTION SYSTEM 'ULTRA SWACHH'

India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has come up with a disinfection system called 'Ultra Swachh'.

About Ultra Swachh

- This unit will disinfect a wide range of materials, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs), electronics items, fabrics, etc.
- Ultra Swachh uses an advanced oxidative process by using Ozonated Space Technology for the disinfection process.
- The product was developed by Institute of Nuclear Medicine & Allied Sciences (a Delhi-based DRDO laboratory), along with Gel Craft Healthcare Private Ltd which is based in Ghaziabad.
- The system consists of double-layered Ozone sealant technology that will trap the ozone particles as a prerequisite for the disinfection process. The unit is eco-friendly as it consists of a catalytic converter.
- The system complies with International Standards of industrial, occupational, personal, and environmental safety.
- **Variants:** There are two variants of Ultra Swachh:

- ▶ Ozonated Space
- ▶ Trinetra Technology
 - Trinetra technology is a combination of Ozonated space and radical dispenser. Treatment is optimised with automation for a quick disinfection cycle.
- It operates on 15 Ampere, 220 Volts, 50-hertz power supply.
- The dimensions of an Industrial Cabinet to disinfect large quantities at a time are 7'x4'x3.25'. Different sizes will be available soon.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC PROSPECTS

The World Bank has released the Global Economic Prospects June 2020 Report.

What is Global Economic Prospects (GEP)?

- The World Bank produces the GEP twice a year, in January and June, as part of its in-depth analysis of key global macroeconomic developments and their impact on member countries.
- The GEP provides intelligence in support of achieving development goals and is a trusted resource for member countries, stakeholders, civil organizations and researchers.

Key-highlights

- Global economic growth is forecast to edge up to 2.5% in 2020 as investment and trade gradually recover from last year's significant weakness but downward risks persist.
- Sixty million people could be pushed into extreme poverty this year.
- Longer term, there is a risk not just of a drop in the level of output but a lowering of potential output growth.
- The severity of the current recession has been unseen in eight decades.

GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM 'CHAMPIONS'

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the technology platform CHAMPIONS which stands for **Creation and Harmonious Application of Modern Processes for Increasing the Output and National Strength**.

What is CHAMPIONS?

- The portal is basically for making the smaller units big by solving their grievances, encouraging, supporting, helping and handholding.
- It is a real one-stop-shop solution of **MSME Ministry**.
- This ICT based system is set up to help the MSMEs in present difficult situation and also to handhold them to become national and international champions.

PETRAPOLE

West Bengal is going to resume bilateral trade with neighbouring Bangladesh through the Petrapole integrated checkpoint in North 24 Parganas district.

About Petrapole

- Petrapole is the Indian side of Petrapole-Benapole border checkpoint between India and Benapole of Bangladesh, on the Bangladesh-India border, near Bongaon in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

- Petrapole border is the only land port in south Bengal.
- It is also the largest land customs station in Asia.

PHARMACOPOEIA COMMISSION FOR INDIAN MEDICINE & HOMOEOPATHY (PCIM&H)

- Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine & Homoeopathy (PCIM&H) is an autonomous organization under Ministry of AYUSH, Govt. of India with a primary mandate of publishing Pharmacopoeias and Formularies for drugs/formulations used in Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani (ASU) and Homoeopathy (ASU&H) systems of Medicine.
- The Commission serves as an umbrella organization for Ayurvedic Pharmacopoeia Committee (APC), Siddha Pharmacopoeia Committee (SPC), Unani Pharmacopoeia Committee (UPC) and Homoeopathic Pharmacopoeia Committee (HPC).
- Pharmacopoeial Laboratory for Indian Medicine (PLIM) and Homoeopathic Pharmacopoeia Laboratory (HPL) are its supporting structures.
- The Commission was initially established as Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine (PCIM) in the year 2010.
- However, in pursuance to the decision of Central Government (dated 20th March 2014), Homoeopathy was incorporated and the Commission was renamed as Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine & Homoeopathy (PCIM&H).

PM ADDRESSES SPIC MACAY'S INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Spic Macay's International Convention via video conference.

What is SPIC MACAY?

- Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth (SPIC MACAY) is a non-political, nationwide, voluntary movement.
- The movement was founded in the year 1977 by **Dr Kiran Seth** who was awarded the Padma Shri for his contribution to the arts in 2009.

LIBYA GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES TAKING OVER TRIPOLI

- The UN-backed Libyan government announced taking over the entire capital Tripoli and expelling the rival eastern-based army.
- The eastern-based army has been leading a military campaign since April 2019, in an attempt to take over Tripoli and topple the UN-backed government.
- The violence killed and injured hundreds of civilians and displaced more than 150,000 others.

About Tripoli

- Tripoli is the capital city and the largest city of Libya.
- It is located in the northwest of Libya on the edge of the desert, on a point of rocky land projecting into the Mediterranean Sea and forming a bay.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

- World environment day is celebrated on June 5 every year. Focusing on pressing environmental issues, this day has been celebrated since 1974. This year, the theme is '**Biodiversity**'.
- The theme focuses on the need to save resources and reconnect with nature.
- The host for this year is Colombia in partnership with Germany.
- Due to the ongoing pandemic, over 100 countries virtually commemorated this day.

Humanity's unhealthy relationship with nature

Following is the story of the damage our species has wrought with a few facts-

- Humanity has altered 75 per cent of the Earth's ice-free surface.
- Since 1990, 420 million hectares of forest, equal to three times the size of South Africa, have been lost.
- Nearly one million species face extinction, while the illegal wildlife trade is the fourth largest illegal trade crime in the world.



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