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INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

- The fundamental challenge facing Indian foreign policy is to ensure that India engages with the international community in a manner that is both consistent and responsive to contemporary realities.
- In other words, our foreign policy has to be one of continuity and change. The current international environment is particularly challenging.
- What began as a health emergency has expanded into an economic disruption, a geopolitical shock and a social challenge of unprecedented magnitude. How we deal with these immense difficulties—and whether we are able to transform some of them into opportunities — will influence our future trajectory as a nation.

Our Strengths

- We have one of the **largest and most able Diasporas**. Our economy, and therefore our material wellbeing, is plugged on to global supply chains.
- We are a **powerhouse in the services sectors**. We look at the world as a borderless economy with an interlinked marketplace.
- India has been a constructive actor in **developing an international system** that is human-centric. We have undertaken humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief operations over a geographical area spanning from the Pacific to the Atlantic.
- We have assisted a number of our friends and partners during the current pandemic. We have been a net security provider.
- We have catalysed the **emergence of international organisations** with constructive, forward-facing agendas such as **International Solar Alliance** and **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure**.
- We believe not just in “Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam”- the world is one – but also in the principle of “**Nishkama Karma**”, that good needs to be done for its own sake.

Various Tools to Achieve Foreign Policy Goals

- India has been at the forefront of **digital diplomacy during the current crisis**. India has had virtual summits with Australia and the European Union. It has participated at the Ministerial level in BRICS, SCO and RIC meetings.
- Its most important foreign policy objective is ‘**Neighbourhood First**’. It underlines the renewed primacy to neighbouring countries to comprehensively upgrade and strengthen our relationships.
- **Look East has been upgraded to Act East** under which ties with ASEAN countries are being strengthened through improvements in road, maritime and air connectivity with a special focus on connecting our north-eastern states to these countries.
- We have a growing dialogue with ASEAN through multiple channels We remain actively engaged in other formats such as the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Defence Minister’s Meeting (ADMM) Plus.
- In the last five years, **Think West** — our outreach to the Gulf and West Asian countries — has become an increasingly important pillar of our foreign policy.
- Our engagement with Africa, both in political and economic terms, has intensified. Over **two-thirds of India’s Lines of Credit** in the past decade have been offered to African countries.

Relationship with Different Countries

- **India-US** relationship has been elevated to a **Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership** in recent years. Defence, security and counter-terrorism are important pillars of our partnership. Our

Strategic Energy Partnership with the US has emerged as an important contributor towards our energy security.

- The **European Union** is an important friend with whom we have a many layered and vibrant relationship. The **15th India-EU Summit** held in July 2020 showcased the firm resolve and vision of the two sides towards realizing a multifaceted partnership. The commitment is ingrained in the “**India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025**” issued after Summit.
- Our relationship with **Russia** has expanded to include non-traditional and new areas of cooperation like **energy, investments and cooperation** between states. This year marks the **20th year of India-Russia Strategic Partnership** and **10th year of ‘Special and Strategic Partnership’**.
- India firmly believes that the path to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity is through multilateralism. However, **multilateralism needs to represent the reality of the contemporary world**. India believes that only reformed multilateralism with a reformed United Nations at its centre can meet the aspirations of humanity.
- We will join the UN Security Council for a two-year non-permanent term on January 1, 2021. We are also due to hold the Presidencies of G20, BRICS and SCO.

Steps During the Present Crisis

- All crisis is followed by the periods of growth. This crisis too will create opportunities and we would like to be in a position to benefit from them. One of our foreign policy priorities is to make India the “**never centre of global supply chains**”.
- This is also in line with the vision of ‘**Aatmanirbhar Bharat**’. Through building capacities at home, we also intend to contribute to mitigating disruptions in global markets.
- India has demonstrated through the current crisis that it is a responsible member of the global community.
- We were able to supply, large volumes of drugs like HCQ and Paracetamol to friends and consumers across the world. In the face of daunting logistical challenges imposed by the lockdown, India provided **these drugs and medical supplies to more than 150 countries**.
- Through initiatives such as **Operation Sagar, Operation Sanjeevani**, the deployment of medical Rapid Response Teams in several countries, the linking of health professional and the pooling of health capacities, we reinforced our credentials as **providers of net health security and first responders**.
- More than a million Indians have returned to India through the **Vande Bharat Mission** by land, sea and air.

Conclusion

- In this fast-evolving environment, Indian diplomacy has shown the necessary agility and adaptability to effectively respond to the emerging challenges, while also cementing India’s credentials as a responsible and constructive member of the global community.

GEOPOLITICAL AND GEO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF COVID-19

The pandemic has reinforced these pre-existing trends and contradictions. The pandemic itself is a classic global public health issue. However, we see very little by way of a coherent, well-coordinated global response using instruments of global governance such as the World Health Organization. Countries have mostly responded at the national level.

Trends and Contradictions in Global Order Before Pandemic:

- Shift in the centre of gravity of economic power to the trans-Pacific from the trans-Atlantic.
- Emergence of a more loosely structured multipolarity.
- The upsurge of nationalist and parochial sentiments in countries across the world stalling the trend towards globalisation.
- Parallel weakening of multilateral institutions.

Behavioural Trends During the Present Crisis

- Adoption of digital technologies; extensive spread of work-from-home (WFH), the rapid adoption of tele-education and tele-medicine and the use of teleconferencing and online meetings in place of physical gatherings.
- Newer technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things and the use of big data will advance faster than envisaged.

Main Trends in Geopolitics

- **China's** regional and global profile has **continued to expand**. It has steadily **narrowed the power gap with the US**. It has also accumulated high-technology assets such as in Artificial Intelligence and 5-G telecom networks.
- Although the Covid-19 virus first erupted in China, it is China which first managed to bring it under control. It is the **first largest economy to register steady recovery**.
- Its leadership believes that the pandemic has provided China with an opportunity to advance its interests vis-a-vis other powers particularly the US.
- This may be seen in the **recent coercive actions** in the South China Sea, the passage of a highly restrictive National Security Law in Hong Kong, **virtually abandoning the One Country Two System policy** granting high degree of autonomy to the key international financial centre in Asia.
- There are more threatening military provocations against Taiwan. The numerous **transgressions on the Indo-China border**, point to a new orientation in China's external behaviour.
- In Chinese perception, the US is a declining power, and the dysfunctionality of the American response to the Covid-19 crisis reinforces this perception.
- Chinese leadership believes that it can **serve as a development path that other developing countries could emulate**. The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is an instrumentality through which China may spread its model using its financial and technological heft.
- This also enables the **adoption of Chinese standards and specifications** in a number of important domains. Tele-communications is one such domain.

How Realistic are Chinese Aspirations?

- China's GDP is destined to overtake the US. However, its **per capita GDP is only a quarter** of the US. The world's **financial and currency markets** are still **dominated by the US** and the US dollar.
- As long as China remains reluctant to make the Chinese currency, the Renminbi (RMB), fully convertible; it is unlikely to replace the dollar as an international currency.
- In military terms, China remains significantly behind the US. It has set up a **base in Djibouti** at the Horn of Africa and has acquired the use of ports in several parts of the world which could conceivably serve as military facilities in due course. The **Pakistani port of Gwadar** and the **Sri Lankan port of Hambantota** belong to this category.

- The BRI is putting in place a worldwide infrastructure and transportation platform which could also be transmuted over time into a military network. But this is **no match for the American network of naval bases** across the world including at the doorstep of China itself.
- Most analysts believe that the US still retains its technological lead over China but this may not be sustained if current trends continue.

Overall Assessment

- China has **significantly narrowed the power gap with the US** but remains behind the latter in several important indices of power.
- This points to a prolonged phase of confrontation and tension between these two countries. This situation may continue **until one power overcomes the other** and emerges as a hyper-power.
- Alternatively, in the case of a relatively stable impasse between the two powers, they may well decide to **reach a mutual accommodation with respective spheres of influence**. This could mean a **China-dominated Asia** which would be unacceptable to India.

India's Opportunities

- While the Covid-19 pandemic has led to serious economic disruptions in India, this may also prove to be a propitious geopolitical moment for India.
- There could be a significant flow of capital, technology and advanced knowledge to India if an efficient economic and regulatory environment could be put in place.
- The size of the Indian market is an asset as is its political stability and democratic traditions. Economic reforms may be politically difficult but the pandemic is a crisis which could provide an opportunity to drive them.
- A coherent and well-thought-out strategy and a determination to follow through with effective implementation is the need of the hour. The objective of Aatmanirbhar Bharat should be to create a globally competitive and high-quality economy. **What gives confidence to Indian business and industry to invest in India is what will attract foreign investors as well.**

EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S TRADE NEGOTIATIONS

Multilateral Trade Under GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade)

- The GATT of 1948 was the first multilateral agreement under UN aimed at boosting economic recovery by reducing barriers to trade. Even though India was one of the 28 founding members of GATT, it was not a serious stakeholder in multilateral trade negotiations.
- In the eight GATT Rounds, India and developing countries were primarily concerned about **safeguarding their agriculture interests against largescale agriculture subsidies** of developed countries.

World Trade Organization

- India, along with 76 countries, was a founder member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 which subsumed the Uruguay Round GATT negotiations from 1986-1994.
- India believes that WTO is in the best interest of developing and Least Developed Countries. The **Dispute Settlement Body**, makes trade rules enforceable and effective.

Agreement on Agriculture (AoA)

- Under AoA, the domestic support policies, subject to reduction commitments, were calculated by the total **Aggregate Measurement of Support (AMS)** on the base years of 1986-88.

- Accordingly, input subsidies known as '**Amber box**' have been calculated for exclusion from reduction commitments **at less than 5% of the value of** production for developed countries and **less than 10% for developing countries**.
- India and other developing countries have argued that developed countries have taken undue advantage of the huge domestic support provided under other boxes namely, '**Green**' and '**Blue**' that have been tacitly kept outside the reduction commitments. Efforts to bring **balance in AoA negotiations remained unsuccessful till date**.

Trade and Development

- WTO recognised the *causal link between trade and development*. This recognition led to the launching of '**Doha Development Round**' in 2001 putting, development at the centre of global trade.
- India scored a major victory at the Bali Ministerial Conference in 2013 when it successfully negotiated a '**permanent peace**' clause on **domestic support for agriculture** as a trade-off for agreeing to WTO Agreement on Trade Facilitation.
- The 'permanent peace' clause **allows India to pursue its agriculture domestic support programs**, without the risk of being challenged in the WTO Dispute Settlement Body, until the issue is resolved collectively by all members.
- India's accession to the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement in April 2017 also proved beneficial to it for improving logistics efficiencies and bringing down trade costs for its exports.

Reform of WTO

- Developed countries are seeking to graduate few emerging countries like India, China, Brazil, South Africa etc. from the **status of 'developing countries'** by withdrawing Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT). The principles of S&DT were based on the premise that developing countries and LDCs, faced with developmental challenges, require certain buffer to cope with external competition.
- Another challenge in WTO for developing countries is effort by plurilateral groups to push for new issues on the WTO Agenda for rulemaking such as **e-commerce, investment facilitation, MSME and gender**.
- For India and developing countries, Doha Development Round remains unfinished and new issues run the **risk of undermining development agenda**.

Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers

- The game of tariffs in trade negotiations has always been deceptive. While developed countries have seemingly cut down their tariffs, they have surreptitiously erected **nontariff barriers** in the form of standards, regulations, testing etc., ostensibly to deny market access to others and protect their domestic industry.
- WTO Agreements on **Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (SPS)** and **Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT)** have defined rules on standards but these are not enforceable. As Standards are voluntary in WTO, countries tend to **take advantage of the ambiguity in the Article 20** of GATT.
- This article allows governments to restrain imports in order to protect human, animal or plant life or health, provided they do not discriminate or use it as disguised protectionism. For developing countries coping up with these high standards is hard as they add up costs.

India's Share in World Trade

- Currently, India's share in **global exports is 1.7%**. In contrast, countries such as Japan, Korea, China and even ASEAN enjoy much greater share in global trade as a consequence of their open economic policies with significant thrust on exports.

- **India's total trade in 2019-20, was about \$787 billion.** A worrisome factor for India is the **ever-widening trade deficit with China**, which is feared to be dumping its goods in India indiscriminately through a deliberate state-sponsored unfair trade practices, while insulating its markets through highly cumbersome non-tariff measures.
- In South Asia, India is the most dominant economy with total trade at about \$25.7 billion in 2019-20, of which India's exports were \$22.8 billion. India's **export product profile more or less remained constant** for several years; petroleum products, Gems & Jewellery, machinery, organic chemicals, pharmaceuticals, electronics, leather, etc. have been consistently leading the chart.
- **Diversifying export basket with value added products** would help to expand its global market share. India's export of services trade has been gradually growing in the last two decades.
- However, **India's share in world services trade is only 2.6%**, mostly concentrated in IT and IT-enabled services. With a view to **diversifying services trade**, India identified 12 champion services sectors with emphasis on realising their potential for employment generation.

Global Value Chains

- Global Value Chains (GVCs) or Supply Chains are a **reflection of fragmentation of production processes** that have assumed a high degree of sophistication and specialisation. It denotes an underlying principle that companies source raw materials and intermediate products at qualitative and competitive prices from wide ranging sources across the world.
- GVCs reduce input costs, it makes **finished products competitive** in the global markets.
- Some sectors of India, especially Pharma, Auto and Textiles are well-integrated into GVCs while those of China, Japan, Korea, Singapore etc, are not only extensive but also deeply entrenched in several countries around the world lending their products competitive edge.

Free Trade Agreements

- Partner countries take advantage of liberalised investment climate under FTAs to set up production units as part of Supply Chain networks to feed into finished products.
- **GATT Article 24 of WTO** allows member countries to enter into bilateral/regional preferential trade arrangements in order to achieve higher level of trade liberalisation, notwithstanding that this **provision amounts to derogation of GATT Article 1 'Most Favored Nation' (MFN)** that stipulates non-discriminatory treatment on trade preferences to all countries.
- India's most notable bilateral FTAs are with Japan, Korea, Chile, Singapore and regional FTAs are SAFTA, ASEAN, Mescosur, APTA, etc.
- Traditionally, India has been conservative to opening its economy through Free Trade Agreements for fear of exposing domestic industry to external competition.
- Not being part of preferential trade architecture could be detrimental for a growing economy like India as it would amount to inevitable erosion of its market share.
- Therefore, the way to go about an FTA negotiation is to seek longer staging phase out of its tariffs with a partner country while at the same time seek immediate phase outs in areas of core interest.

Conclusion

- India's trade negotiating approach would need to take a broader long-term view of things to come in future. Increasing volume of trade is more important than trade deficit because trade need not be a zero-sum game.
- Ultimately, combination of quality and price determines the staying power of a product in the market. Understanding the evolving linkages between trade, investment, services and technology, GVCs is

critical. India should consciously develop a wide-angle approach to these evolving global trade dynamics.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

- The five largest exporting countries for Goods are: China, USA, Germany, Japan, S. Korea **India ranks 19th globally with US\$313 billion exports.**
- The five largest importing countries for Goods are the USA, China, Germany, Japan, England. **India ranks 10th globally with US\$473 billion of imports.**
- In April 2020, WTO has warned that the **world merchandise trade in 2020 is set to plummet by between 13 and 32%** in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

India's Trade Snapshot

In 2019-20, exports were US\$313.2 billion, while imports were US\$473.9 billion. Exports have grown faster than the GDP over these years.

India's Trade Support System

Infrastructure

- The **Sagarmala initiative** aims to reduce logistics cost for domestic and export-import cargo.
- **Bharatmala Pariyojana** focuses on freight and passenger movement across the country for the highways sector.

Institutions

- Indian Commercial missions located in important countries are geared to promote trade, technology, tourism and investments. Sector-specific Export promotion Councils, Federation of Indian Export Organisations, and several Trade Associations engage with exporters to resolve day-to-day and development issues.
- Export Cum Guarantee Corporation provides insurance facility while Exim bank extends long-duration loans to long-duration projects located in specified countries. India Brand Equity programme activity promotes Indian brands.
- Council for Trade Development and Promotion has been created for making states active partners in boosting India's exports. Board of Trade engages with leaders of industry in promoting India's trade interests.

Ease of Doing Business and IT Initiatives

- The **number of mandatory documents** required has been **reduced to 3** each for export and import.
- Earlier, seven documents were needed for exports and 10 for imports. Persons from small and medium enterprises, industrial clusters, small exporting firms have been trained by DGFT under the **Niryat Bandhu program**.

Schemes for Export Promotion

A. Duty Refund/Neutralisation Schemes

1. Schemes for competitive sourcing of Raw Material Advance Authorisation and Drawback Schemes

- **Advance Authorisation (AA) Scheme:** Allows duty-free raw material import for making of export products, with at least 15% value add.

- **Duty-Free Import Authorisation (DFIA) Scheme:** Same as AA, except that it allows imports after the exports.
- **Duty Drawback Scheme:** Refunds customs / other duties paid on inputs used for making export products.

2. Scheme for competitive sourcing of Capital Goods

Export Promotion Capital Goods (EPCG) Scheme: Allows duty-free import of Capital Goods.

B. Incentive Schemes

- Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS)
- Services Exports from India Scheme (SEIS)
- The Government will soon withdraw MEIS and **introduce the Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Product (RODTEP)** scheme.

C. Other Major Schemes

- **Special Enclave for Exports** like SEZ & 100% Export Oriented Units (EOUs)
- Additional benefits through **Market Access Initiatives** for supporting participation in trade fairs, **Trade Infrastructure for Export Scheme (TIES)** for creation of trade infrastructure, and Clusters schemes

Imports

The import duties are within the ceiling limits agreed at the WTO. The simple average effective duty rate is 13.9% while the standard rate is 17.1%.

Firm and Product Structure of India' Exports

1. Weak firm-level structure

- Few large firms and thousands of small informal firms dominate the Indian export scene. There is **little presence of mid-size entrepreneurial firms** that dominate the export sector in developed countries and are known to be most enterprising.
- Export to turnover ratio is less than 10% for the top 50 public limited companies in the food, beverages, mining etc.

2. Weak Export Product Profile

- **Category A products** include electronics, computers, telecom, factory machinery, and high-end engineering products. **India's global share in such products is 0.4%.**
- India has a **high global share (4.1%) in Category B products.** The small size of the category B basket limits the growth potential. While few products like medicines, auto components of category B require high sophistication, most category B products being labour- intensive, low technology are prone to competition and price-cutting from low-cost countries.

Seven Strategies for Increasing India's Exports

- **Expand manufacturing and trade of the products**, the world buys most—Electronics, Organic Chemicals, Machinery, Telecom, etc._This will need **reforms in duty structure, building efficient ports, and online systems.**
- Avoid critical dependence on any country.
- **Define "Made in India" standards** and make it a quality label. This will require setting up Design Studios, Innovation labs, and strengthening of Standards and Quality infrastructure.
- **Open large product exhibition centers** cum markets.

- **Provide actionable trade intelligence.** Simple information like which country is buying what product at what price helps.
- **Promote trade-in services** - India's services exports are characterised by over-dependence on Software Services, which accounts for about 40% of India's services exports. To **diversify India's services exports**, Government has identified 12 sectors for focused development.
- **Reduce input costs**

WTO: The Road Ahead

Challenges Faced By WTO

- The **dispute resolution arm of the WTO has been rendered dysfunctional** as the US has blocked the process of nomination of members of the Appellate Body. The Appellate Body hears appeals on issues of law and legal interpretation arising from the findings of WTO panels constituted to resolve trade disputes among its members. Without a functional Appellate Body, no effective legal mechanism is available for WTO members to enforce their rights and obligations.
- The second challenge is the **failure of its negotiating arm to deliver substantial results**. WTO members had launched the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations in 2001. Almost two decades down the road, the outcome of the negotiation is extremely thin.
- To compound the woes, at the Nairobi Ministerial Conference of the WTO held in 2015, the developed countries walked off the Doha Round negotiating table.
- Countries are **gradually losing respect** for the rules of this organisation. This has considerably **eroded the multilateral trading system**. Nothing illustrates this better than the **protracted spat on trade issues between the US and China**.
- Another dark cloud on the WTO horizon is the **aggressive push by the developed countries**, particularly the US, to deprive India and many other developing countries **from benefitting from Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) provisions** in future negotiations. This concept recognises that developed countries do not expect reciprocity from developing countries in trade negotiations.
- There has been attempt by about 80 countries to negotiate rules in different areas, including electronic commerce and investment facilitation. These **negotiations are being undertaken without any mandate from the WTO membership**. Popularly referred to as Joint Statement Initiatives (JSI), these negotiations are an attempt by the developed countries to negotiate rules in areas of their economic and commercial strengths.
- What has heightened the concerns of the developing countries is the attempt by the participants in the **JSIs to get the new rules in these areas inserted into the WTO, without following the procedure laid down for it**.

THE INDIA-US H-1B VISA ISSUE

- India has acquired global recognition for its competitiveness in segments such as IT, business process outsourcing (BPO) and professional services, which currently constitute over 50% of India's services exports.
- An important feature of India's services exports is their reliance on certain GATS modes of supply, namely, mode 1 (cross-border supply) and mode 4 (movement of natural persons), reflecting India's

strengths in skill and knowledge-intensive services due to the availability of low-cost, skilled manpower.

Growing Protectionism

- Given the importance of mode 4 across several services and especially in ICT services **growing protectionism in mode 4** is a matter of concern for India. Due to changes in immigration and labour market regulations on visa caps and fees and other discretionary policies, **India faces growing mode 4 related** challenges which affect cross border mobility of its service providers.
- In the US market, India's services exports have been facing growing protectionism with respect to the **movement of its specialty occupation (H-1B visa holders) and intra-corporate transferees (L-1 visa holders)**.
- The frictions came to a boil when in **March 2016, India filed a complaint with the WTO challenging the US** over steep visa fee increases for H-1B and L-1 visas, citing discriminatory treatment of Indian IT companies and workers and inconsistency with the US' WTO commitments in mode 4.

Significance of Mode 4 in India-US Trade

- In 2018, India's IT and IT enabled services exports amounted to \$126 billion of which 62% was to the US market. **Apart from IT services, mode 4 is also important in India's professional services exports to the US.**
- For instance, **India has been among the top five source countries** for temporary skilled workers admitted into the US across professional services such as healthcare, architecture, engineering, and education service.
- India accounted for **nearly 70% of H-1B visas** issued by the US in 2019, up from 46.2% in 2000.
- There have been several changes in H-1B related legislation over the years with regard to visa caps, application fees, eligibility conditions and processes. There is a general trend towards making this program more restrictive over time.
- India has argued that the additional visa fee for selected petitioners targets Indian IT companies and is not original neutral.

H-1B Criticisms

- The most common concern is that the **program displaces rather than complements** American workers, as employers use it to **bring in cheap foreign labour** without proving to the Department of Labour that they tried to find an American to fill the job.
- Controls on the H-1B program lack effectiveness as **loopholes and lax enforcement** have led to **exploitation of both visa holders and American workers**.
- The program has been misused to **lay off domestic workers in the US** and hire cheaper foreign workers. Concerns have also been voiced about the **wage depressing effects** of the H-1B visa program and that the prevailing wage condition to protect US workers has been ineffective due to enforcement limitations and procedural problems.

Looking Ahead

- At this juncture, how India will pursue the matter, especially when the WTO Dispute Settlement Body is no longer functional, remains an open question.
- Recently, the US has suspended H-1B visas till December 31, 2020 in order to protect US jobs, extending an earlier 60-day ban on these visas, although exceptions have been made for health and essential workers.

- Given the economic contraction in the US, the **H-1B visa program is likely to see continued protectionist** challenges in the near future and India must be prepared for the same.
- On its part, India will have to continue emphasising the importance of transparent, non-discretionary, and predictable policies for non-immigrant visas in the US, through industry associations and government to-government dialogues.

NEPAL AND BHUTAN

The **India-Nepal Treaty for Peace and Friendship, 1950** marked the commencement of close bilateral economic and security cooperation.

India's Development Diplomacy in Nepal

- Through India's good offices, an Interim Coalition Government of Nepali Congress and Rana elite was established in February 1951 commencing a new era of democracy.
- Despite being short of technical manpower and material resources itself, India extended development assistance to Nepal. An **Indian Aid Mission was established in 1954**, later renamed Indian Cooperation Mission in 1966 and subsequently merged with the Embassy as the **Economic Cooperation Wing in 1980**.

Physical and Social Infrastructure

- The **first major project** under Indian aid was the **189 km Tribhuvan Highway** connecting Kathmandu with Birganj. The **first airport in Nepal**—the **Tribhuvan Airport** at Gaucher in Kathmandu—was also built with Indian aid in 1951.
- **Tribhuvan University**, the first to be set up in Nepal in 1959 received Indian assistance for infrastructure and faculty up to mid-1970s. Currently over **300 scholarships** are awarded annually to Nepali students.
- Starting from **Paropkar Maternity Hospital in Kathmandu** to the establishment of **BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences at Dharan** in Eastern Nepal, Indian contribution to Nepal's health sector has been vital and extensive.

Small Development Projects and Earthquake Reconstruction Assistance

- Indian assistance also extended to various sectors including agriculture, horticulture, animal — husbandry etc. In 2003 a **Small Development Projects Scheme** was launched focusing in areas of education, health and community development.
- Following a major earthquake in 2015 India has extended US\$1 billion as reconstruction assistance.

Water Resources

- The **Kosi and Gandak barrage projects** were implemented under agreements signed in 1954 and 1959 respectively. India commissioned the **21 MW Trishuli hydroelectric project** and transmission lines under grant assistance in 1967 to supply electricity to Kathmandu valley.
- The positive dimensions of water agreements between India and Nepal are unappreciated, because of **over politicisation** of the issue of water resources cooperation. Despite significant benefits to Nepal, the myth of India cheated Nepal has negatively impacted water resources cooperation.
- After several decades of stalemate, the **India-Nepal Treaty on the Integrated Development of Mahakali** was signed and ratified in 1996 but remains unimplemented.
- In May, 2018 SJVN Ltd., an Indian PSU, received a Generation License from the Government of Nepal to implement **900 MW Arun III Hydroelectric Project**.

India-Bhutan Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship

- The Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship between India and Bhutan was concluded in August 1949 during the rule of King Jigme Wangchuck.
- It was premised on shared security interests. The treaty was updated by India-Bhutan Treaty of Friendship signed in February 2007 which committed the two countries to not allow use of their territory for activities harmful to the national security and interests of the other.

India's Development Diplomacy in Bhutan

India's development assistance to Bhutan commenced in 1961 nearly a decade after the start of Indian assistance to Nepal.

A. Physical and Social Infrastructure

- One of first major projects to be undertaken was the **179 km Western Highway** connecting the **capital Thimphu to Phuentsholing** and was completed in 1968.
- The journey which started from the first FYP 1961- 66 - which had a total outlay of Ngultrum 107.2 million totally funded by India - has reached 12th FYP 2018-23 outlay of Nu 280773 million, 77.56% funded by domestic revenues and 16% by Government of India assistance (INR 45000 million).

B. Hydropower Cooperation

- The agreement for **27 MW Jaldakha HEP** constructed on Indian side of the border was signed in 1961. The **336 MW Chukha HEP** was commissioned in 1986-88.
- Subsequently, joint projects totalling **1800 MW have been commissioned** and project **totalling 2800 MW are expected to be commissioned in next three years**. The ambitious framework agreement on **India-Bhutan hydropower cooperation envisages 10000 MW generation capacity**.

Conclusion:

- India's development diplomacy assumed that **what is good for Nepal and Bhutan is good for India**.
- To the question as to why the mutually beneficial water resources cooperation with Nepal did not develop, the answer lies in **cooperative bilateralism which infused Bhutan's approach and lack of it in case of Nepal**.

INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

The contemporary relations of India and Russia can be traced back to the early 20th Century, especially with 1905 revolt against the Czars in Russia which in many ways shaped the initial resistance to the British rule in India.

Early Phase

- Nehru's visit to the USSR in 1927 shaped many of his economic ideas which he implemented when he became the PM of India. Besides this, India's large-scale industrialisation, e.g. **Bhilai and Bokaro steel plants** and educational institutions such as **IIT Bombay** were the results of active support and cooperation by USSR.
- Initially, Soviet Union did not see India's independence positively and **called it as a "running dog"** and Indian leaders were described as **"clinging to the apron of the former colonial masters"** for many reasons. During cold war era, India and other third world nations forming Non-Alignment was doubted.
- Soviets **improved their relations from 1955-56** and came in a big way to help India's economic planning.

- A landmark treaty was signed between USSR and India known as the **India-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, 1971** which spoke about both the countries coming to each other's aid in case of external aggression.
- In 1968, when **USSR intervened in Czechoslovakia, India did not support** the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, always supported India on the Kashmir issue.
- The Soviet Union always vetoed such resolution that condemned India on the floor of United Nations Security Council. When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in 1979, India did not condemn the Soviet Union publicly.

India-Russia Relations Post-Disintegration of USSR

- With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Indian Foreign Policy towards Russia also underwent a paradigm shift. India and former USSR were one of the largest trade partners especially in defence supplies. Approximately, 70% of Indian army hardware, 80% of Indian Navy's hardware and 85% of Indian Air Force hardware were of Soviet origin.
- The immediate problem that India faced due to disintegration was of defence supplies. The **entire Military Industrial Complex had come to a standstill** as many of the defence hardware production units in the former USSR, on which India was dependent for its supplies, were now in Ukraine and Kazakhstan.
- There were also **problems related to currency**. During the existence of Soviet Union, Indian supplies were **mainly done in Indian currency**. After the disintegration, the subsequent trade that happened created problems for India due to severe depreciation in Rouble.
- The **prices of the defence products were also enhanced** and the "friendship rates" that were being offered earlier for the defence purchases also came to an end.
- the **Nuclear tests done in 1998 ended the cryogenic deal** between India and Russia because of sanctions imposed by the US.
- In 2000, The **Declaration on Strategic Partnership between India and Russia** was signed which became a milestone in institutionalising relationship between India and Russia.

India-Russia Relationship During the Last Decade

- The **falling prices of petroleum products** have reduced the income of Russia. India has also **tried to diversify** its defence purchase sources riding at the back of Civil Nuclear Deal with USA.
- Crimea's reintegration with Russia and alleged Russian intervention in the internal affairs of Ukraine has invited sanctions from the Western states.
- **Russia and China have come closer. Pakistan is also not far behind.** Russia has signed a **defence deal with Pakistan** where it has supplied four military helicopters besides having annual military exercises between Russia and Pakistan.
- India has also **reinforced its relations with Japan, Australia and the USA**. Russia has given open support for "Belt and Road Initiative" which India has refused to join for its own reasons.
- This has brought into focus the "Indo-Pacific Region" and has also meant clash of perceptions between India and Russia over the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

- India and Russia must look for active bilateral synergies for cooperation in the outer space, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism measures, exploring the Arctic region besides many new areas of mutual interest. The two states should also work towards creating more interconnectedness through

working on the transportation links like INSTC, using of the Chabahar port to transport goods to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

- There is an urgent need to look for avenues of India's participation in the development of Russia's far east which is mostly uninhabited and rich of natural resources. A long and sustained relationship cannot be sustained merely on the legacy of past and defence deals.

RELATIONS WITH THE WEST ASIA

India is inextricably bound to West Asia, its closest western neighbour across the Arabian Sea. The intensified engagement, now transformed into a '**Link and Act West Policy**', has seen defence and security cooperation emerging as a key pillar of the policy.

Importance of West Asia

- For India, Iran is the **gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia** and beyond through the strategic Chabahar port, the Arab states and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are **integral to India's energy** security and counter-terrorism efforts.
- Maintaining good ties is crucial for the **welfare of the huge Indian diaspora** in the region.
- West Asia occupies a pivotal position in international relations, because of its **geographical location**. It has **close proximity to South and Central Asia Europe, and Africa**. It is **favourably situated along major sea trading routes**.
- It has enormous energy resources— accounting for 34% of world crude oil production, 45% of crude oil exports and 48% of proven crude oil reserves.
- It is also where **Abrahamic religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism; originated**. India, with the world's second largest Islamic population, cannot ignore this region.

India's Scope in this region:

- The **Abraham agreement**, signed in August 2020, between the **UAE and Israel**, to establish full diplomatic relations and "normalise" their bilateral relations **provides India**, a close partner of both Israel and UAE, **a chance to become an important player in West Asia**.
- It also is a big step towards Arab de-hyphenation of the Israel-Palestine issue, which has kept the region unstable.
- India completed that De-hyphenation process in July 2017 when the **Prime Minister Modi visited Israel, the first visit ever by an Indian prime minister to that country**.
- India **maintains solidarity** with the cause of a **separate Palestinian state**. India voted at the UN against the United States resolution to move the Israeli capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.
- India has **proactively reached out to all these countries in the wake of the Covid-19** pandemic; sending doctors, medical teams, medicines and vital PPEs and other life-saving equipments to afflicted nations, including Iran, and sharing best practices.
- **The size of the Indian market and the diversity of products** manufactured here is another attractive proposition for the Gulf countries, and Israel.

Steps Taken by India

- A balanced relationship was formulated to cement relations with countries of the region, **converting the Look West policy to Link and Act West**.

- PM Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit UAE (Abu Dhabi), in 2015, after 34 years, followed by visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia and Iran during his first two years in office, and Israel in 2017, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations.
- In 2018, he became the **first ever Indian PM to visit Palestine**, where he was conferred the **Grand Collar of the state of Palestine**, the country's highest honour.
- This was followed by visits to UAE (Dubai) and Oman, not only enhancing the political and economic aspects of the relationships, but also the cultural, including the **foundation stone-laying ceremony of the first Hindu temple in UAE**.
- A major highlight of that visit was **the formalisation of base facilities to the Indian Navy by Oman at its port in Duqm**. India secured access to Duqm port for military use and logistical support to bolster its maritime strategy, prevent piracy and counter Chinese influence in the western Indian Ocean region.
- In 2019, the **PM visited UAE, for third time**, and received the country's top award, **Order of Zayed**. He became the first Indian PM to visit Bahrain, a conservative Sheikdom, where over 3000 Indian business ventures are located, and even launched the **renovation of the Sreenathji temple in capital Manama**.
- On his **second visit to Riyadh**, in October 2019, the PM briefed King Salman about New Delhi's thinking for the future development of J&K and attracted development funds for Kashmir. The visit also saw **formalisation of the bilateral Strategic Partnership Council**, headed by the Saudi Crown Prince and the Indian PM.
- The two Sunni bastions, **Saudi Arabia and UAE, along with Kuwait and Qatar**, are at the core of '**Link and Act West**' diplomacy with West Asia. India realises the role these countries play in its energy security and in the well-being of the over nine million Indians living in the region, annual remittances from whom top US\$60 billion.
- In 2018, the **Abu Dhabi National Oil Company** and the **Saudi giant Aramco** agreed to take a **50% stake in the \$44 billion refinery India** was building in Maharashtra. Both are interested in investing in India's natural gas sector and in building the Indian strategic crude oil reserve, with investments of tens of billions of dollars.
- The UAE is also the **first partner of India's National Investment and Infrastructure Fund** and invested US\$1 billion as the anchor investor.
- **India's 'soft power'** is also clearly visible in the region; with the cultural connect of language, food, music, yoga and, Bollywood movies. India's **democratic character**, its **neutrality** and **non-interference in internal affairs** of others and goodwill towards all have allowed the prime minister to rely on soft power diplomacy as his key foreign policy instrument.
- **Medical and health diplomacy** has also gained traction in these countries, with many preferring the Indian option over more expensive western medical facilities.
- The **International Solar Alliance initiative**, launched jointly by India and France, has become another major **area of convergence and cooperation** between India and West Asia.
- The way Pakistan has been distanced by the Arab nations like UAE and Saudi Arabia, in forums like the OIC, has been another major gain for India. Exceptionally close intelligence, de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism collaboration with all these countries has been a hallmark of recent agreements.

Conclusion:

- India has followed a policy of nurturing bilateral ties with all the countries in the region, without **getting entangled in their ideological or sectarian fault lines**, best serving and enhancing its national interests.
- Thus, even the Syrians are looking to India to play an enhanced political role, as honest broker, in the region. India's blooming relations with the Arab countries and with Iran could also be leveraged by New Delhi to offer a way ahead for those countries competing for primacy in the Islamic world, to cooperate and arrive at a workable relationship.

INDIAN DIASPORA: MAJOR ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- There is no doubt that the western countries like Canada, the US etc. are considered as the land of opportunities with a lot of promise.
- However, reality hits hard when a newcomer from India places a foot on foreign land. Language, education and common social behaviour that we took for granted are all up for recalibration.

Significance and Contribution

- It helps the **transfer of knowledge resources expertise** and also bridges the markets for the development of the country of origin and the rest of the world.
- The **soft diplomacy**—a vital role played by the Indian Diaspora—is critical in the success of the Indo-US nuclear deal.
- The country of their residence also has developed due to this Diaspora. **Silicon Valley**, for example, represents the success of the Indians in the US.
- The development of Science and Technology is mostly due to the role played by the Indian Diaspora.
- The Diaspora is the major source of trade investment in India.
- The world bank predicts Indian diaspora to be the **largest contributor and earner of inflows of remittances** which is helping the balance of the Current accounts.

Major Steps taken by the Indian Government to Handle the Issues of Diaspora

- An **online database** of emigrants and all stakeholders to make the whole emigration process faster and transparent.
- Indian Government has **signed MoU with six Gulf countries**, Jordan and Malaysia to enhance the protection and welfare of workers.
- Government has also started '**Madad**' portal for online lodging of the grievances of the emigrants, which are attended to on priority basis.
- The **rules of the PIO Card Scheme have been amended** so that new recipients of PIO cards will receive cards that will be valid for the duration of their life.
- New Embassies in Latin America and African country to help the Diaspora.
- Bilateral engagement with US, UK to address the concern of skilled labour.
- Programmes like "**Bharat Ko Janiye**" to help the Indians living abroad learn about India and also an opportunity to visit India.
- The "**Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas**" is an initiative started by the Government in 2003 to mark the contribution of the Indian community overseas in the development of India.
- The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs has been merged with that of the Ministry of External Affairs.

- The **Visa on arrival facility**.
- The India Government has **evacuated the Indian diaspora in Yemen** in 2015 through **Operation Rahat** and also from South Sudan through **Operation Sankat Mochan**.
- **Pravasi Kaushal Vikas Yojana** is promotes the growth and engagement of youth who target employment overseas.

Issues Faced by Indian Diaspora

West Asia

- Low oil prices owing to Shale gas boom and slower global growth is resulting in job cuts for Indians.
- Rising conflicts and instability due to the Shia-Sunni conflicts and the radical Islamism.
- Fierce competition from skilled labour from the Philippines and cheap labour from Nepal.
- Regressive and medieval policies like employer seizing the travel documents upon arrival known as **“Kafala” labour system** are exploitative.

US, Canada & UK

- Discriminative practices owing to a racist, colonial mindset persists.
- Stricter H-1B visa norms in the US Congress.
- President-elect Donald Trump’s call to channel more jobs to Americans.
- Revision of visa norms in UK post-Brexit might hit Indian diaspora hard, especially IT professionals.
- The disparity in jobs and racial abuse due to terrorist branding.
- Cultural integration due to various eating preferences, consumerism and nuclear society.

Dual Citizenship

- Majority of Indian diaspora want to retain their Indian citizenship along with the citizenship of the country of their residence.

Indian Diaspora: During Covid-19

- The Covid-19 pandemic has played havoc with the lives of Indians overseas. Some have lost their jobs while others are in fear of losing them. There is already a significant number of people who are seeking to return to India due to financial instability.
- The **“Vande Bharat”** was launched by our Government to **organise repatriation flights** to bring back the migrant India diaspora especially from Doha, Kuwait, Dammam and Riyadh where more Indians have migrated and wanted to come back home due to this crisis.

Way Forward

- The already affected migrants and diaspora need to be ensured to feel welcomed back home on arrival.
- The Government needs to address the problems of blue-collar workers working overseas like:
 - a. Negotiating a Standard Labour Export Agreements with the host countries.
 - b. Monitoring and supervision of our overseas workers by our Missions.
 - c. Compulsory insurance schemes covering the risks faced by our overseas workers.
- The diaspora’s financial and intellectual capital must be cashed by India and the major challenge before India is how it can tap this for mutual benefit.

Conclusion:

- The COVID-19 situation has threatened economic, social and the health of Indians working abroad. India has taken this responsibility positively and the Indian diaspora has been united with their families both for social and economic reasons.
- However, if there is a mad rush and panic coming home by the Indian diaspora then the problem may become more complex for India.
- New contingency plans must be set up to avert this crisis. Not just negotiating with the Governments to retain the Indians abroad but also arrange a livelihood for Indians coming home if the doors are shut in their migrant countries.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

- In the last decade of the 20th century, the rapid globalisation and regionalisation of economies, endowed with the requirements of the knowledge economy, created a huge push towards internationalisation of higher education.
- Some of the key elements that the last three decades has witnessed are: mobility and exchange of students/scholars/faculty, collaborative/twinning programs, reputation building and branding of universities through global and regional rankings.

How it Started?

- In the 20th century, USA and UK led the Internationalisation of Higher Education to attract talent pool from across the world. It added invaluable diversity of knowledge, content and culture in the universities leading to cutting-edge research and innovation.
- This in turn helped in the economic development and growth of the country. Realising the value of internationalisation of higher education, Canada, Australia, China, Singapore and several other countries have also given a thrust.

Key Trends:

- Increasingly driven by national and global rankings with **focus on internationalisation abroad than on “internationalisation at home”**.
- Mostly catered to a small segment of elite students and **not being inclusive** and intercultural.
- **Economic and political imperatives been the primary force** for promoting it as opposed to creating a global intellectual world order embedded with rich socio-cultural diversity.

Indian Scenario:

- The Indian higher education sector is the largest education system in the world. Despite this, our top talent goes to the developed countries to study, innovate, carry out research and add intellectual as well as economic value to these countries. On the other hand, **we have not seen many overseas students coming in to study in India**.
- An estimated 7,00,000 Indian students are studying abroad as opposed to just about 47,427 international students coming to India.
- Although maximum number of foreign students come from Nepal, the largest number of doctoral students are from Ethiopia followed by Yemen
- The **reason for large number of Indian students going abroad** to study can be attributed to large young population base in the country, supply demand gap of quality higher education, aspirations and career growth prospects and quality of life available in developed countries.

Recent Initiatives

- The **General Cultural Scholarship Scheme (GCSC)** implemented through Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) - encourages student mobility by providing scholarships to countries from Latin America, Africa and Asia,
- **Global Initiative for Academic Networks (GIAN)** - promotes interaction between scientists, entrepreneurs and students internationally
- **Connect to India programme by MHRD** which encourages student mobility by offering short-term programmes.
- The **CV Raman International Fellowship for African Researchers** was launched in 2010 by FICCI in partnership DST and MEA. The fellowship scheme was introduced under the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS)
- Several countries have also taken initiatives to promote **internationalisation through students and faculty exchange programmes**, academic and research collaborations in different disciplines.
- Some of such key initiatives include **UK-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI)**, the **Generation UK India initiative**, the **Indo-US 21st Century Knowledge Initiative**, the **Fulbright-Nehru programme** and the **Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration (SPARC)**.
- In 2018, Ministry of Education launched an ambitious “**Study in India**” program to project India as a higher education destination by attracting and facilitating inward mobility of foreign students from **34 target countries** (representing Africa, Middle East, and SAARC regions), thereby increasing India’s market share of global education exports.
- The recently released **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** has clearly emphasised the need to achieve global standards of quality in Indian higher education both in— class and distance learning modules.

Robust Framework for Collaboration with Foreign Universities & Export of Education Services: Way Forward

- **Provide autonomy** to Institutions of Eminence (IoEs) to design and run online programs for foreign students.
- Top NIRF & NAAC ranking Indian Universities should be encouraged to develop joint online programs with top 500 foreign universities with appropriate credits.
- The cap on intake of international students should be raised from the present 15% to 25% on supernumerary basis that will help in cross subsidising fee for Indian students.
- For twinning programs, the requirement of spending 1-2 semesters in a foreign university campus needs to be relaxed in the Covid-19 environment. The course should be allowed to be completed entirely in India with virtual support from foreign universities.
- Establish Indian Network for Internationalisation of Education (INIE) that will be in the form of a consortium of Universities that are ahead in internationalisation.

Robust Study in India program: Key Recommendation for effective implementation

- Appoint an **education counsellor at every Indian embassy** abroad in order to help promote India higher education and the benefits of studying in India.
- Create a **strong scholarship programme** that will encourage the best brains to choose India
- Develop “**student cities**” that should be safe along with adequate infrastructural support.

- Create **unique elective programs such as a yoga, arts & sciences**, traditional medicines, etc. that can be taken up by foreign students along with the mainstream courses such as engineering, management, etc.
- Effective industry engagement for apprenticeships and employment.

Facilitating Cross Mobility in Medical Sector: Way Forward

- The Indian government should have a dialogue with the foreign counterpart and collaborate with them to make the course at par with Indian standard.
- The 1.2 million doctors of Indian origin living abroad should be invited to practice in India even for few weeks and carry out teaching/mentoring programs and leadership trainings.
- To enable capacity building of healthcare workers and training for appropriate skill-sets, collaborative programs with various countries between healthcare institutions and universities at UG and PG levels should be organised.

INDIA POST AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Foreign Post

- All the mail exported or imported from or to India, has to pass through the gateway called **Foreign Post**. There are **four such gateways** in India since long.
- These gateways are located at Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi and Chennai. In 2017, 13 more foreign post offices for the purposes of clearance of imported goods or export of goods.

India Post and UPU

- India Post (Dept. of Posts) is a **member of the Universal Postal Union (UPU)** since 1876. The UPU was formed in 1874 **at Berne in Switzerland** to **regulate interstate mail movement** and make rules that govern the mail movement.
- The UPU Conventions regulate the postal functions and although they **are not binding in nature**, all member countries adopt them as that helps in bringing about uniformity.
- For example, for tracking of consignment, India Post adopted the Barcoding system of 13 digits. The **first two digits represent the product** and the **last two represent the country**. This barcode formula is accepted by all member countries and there is uniformity in operation.
- It gives lot of technological support to the member countries and promotes exchange of ideas and knowledge.
- It **funds the projects for improvement of postal services** using the Quality of Service Fund (QSF) of the UPU. Recently, **India Post received financial assistance** from the QSF for providing vehicles for delivery of international imports and exports by post.
- The **Guide to Disaster Risk Management** produced by UPU has helped the member countries in developing a Disaster Risk Management plan for their own country.
- In current year, **India is the Co-Chair of the committee** that deals with the Integrated Supply Chain with USA as the other Co-Chair.

India Post and APPU

- India is also a member of Asia Pacific Postal Union (APPU). Its **headquarters is at Bangkok**.
- It aims to facilitate the postal exchanges in the region and promotes regional co-operation. The APPU runs a **college or Academy for its members at Laksi, Bangkok**.

Philately and International Cooperation

- Philately is an important area of international understanding and cooperation. Countries respect each other cultures and promote them by issue of stamps. During the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (2019-20), **87 countries issued postage stamps** on Mahatma Gandhi.
- Philately is a **great source of earning foreign exchange** and some countries like France and Bhutan consider it as a primary source of revenue.
- Exchange of postage stamps by clubs and at individual level **improves knowledge** about a country's culture and various other aspects.
- There are many **joint issues of stamps depicting the culture of both countries**. The **Indo-Armenia Joint issue** (2018) shows the Manipuri dance of India and HovArek Dance of Armenia.
- The **India-Russia joint issue** of 2017 showcased the **Bhavai folk dance of Rajasthan** and **Beryozka round dance of Russia**. In this sense, Post office is a **promoter of mutual acquaintance**.

NATIONAL RECRUITMENT AGENCY (NRA)

The Union Cabinet has approved setting up of NRA, with the vision of **creating a specialist body**, bringing the state-of-the-art technology and best practices to the field of Central Government recruitment.

Current Scenario

- Currently, **more than 20 Recruitment Agencies** invite applications and hold recruitment tests for various Group 'B', Group 'C' and equivalent posts separately.
- Job aspirants have to **apply against each such recruitment notification** and take multiple tests separately.
- Separate fees for each application and multiple travels to examination centres and stay arrangements for each test put a **huge burden on unemployed youth**.
- **Women and candidates with disabilities** who have to be escorted by some other family member and those from far flung rural areas; suffer the most.
- At times, the **examination dates also clash**. Preparing for different syllabi for each exam increases their difficulties and stress.
- SSC and IBPS conduct the exams only **bi-lingually in English and Hindi**. This puts the candidates from **regional linguistic background to greater disadvantage**.
- Qualifications being common, all the recruitment agencies tap more or less the same pool of candidates but each hold separate exams for them. This entails **replication of huge financial, infrastructural and other resources**.

Salient Features of NRA

1. Proposed Structure

- NRA will be a **multi-agency body**—a Society (under Societies Registration Act, 1860). It will have a 10-member apex Governing Body including a Chairman and a Member Secretary. NRA will have six Regional Offices in the North, East, West, South, Central and North East respectively.

2. Candidates' Centric Features

- a. **Single Platform for Multiple Posts** - Under the NRA, the candidates by appearing in one examination will get an opportunity to compete for many posts.

- b. **Common Application Portal**

- c. **Common Eligibility Test (CTETs)** - There will be Common Computer Based Eligibility Tests (CETs). There will be separate CETs for the Graduate, the Higher Secondary (12th pass) and the Matriculate (10th pass) candidates.
- d. **Benefits to Recruiting Agencies** - A single eligibility test would significantly reduce the recruitment cycle and will lead to huge saving of resources currently being incurred on holding multiple such exams separately. With reduced cycle time, vacancies will also be filled up expeditiously.
- e. **Bi-annual CETs** - NRA proposes to conduct two CETs every year for each levels. There will be no bar on number of attempts that a candidate can take.
- f. **Subsequent Stages for Final Selection** - Based on the scores obtained in the CET, final selection for recruitment shall be made through separate specialised Tiers (II, III etc) of examination. These may include subject-based tests, skill tests or physical tests. These later stages of recruitments will be conducted by respective Recruitment Agencies.
- g. **Validity of CET Scores** - CET scores shall be valid for three years.
- h. **Opportunity to Improve Scores** - CETs will not be a one-time make or break events for the candidates. Best score shall be treated as the current score.
- i. **Standardised Testing** - Under NRA, curriculum, exam pattern and standards of CETs would be uniform.
- j. **Taking Recruitments to Candidates' Doorsteps** - NRA will set up Examination Centres in every District of the country, **with special focus on 117 Aspirational Districts**. It would greatly enhance exam access to the candidates located in far-flung areas. Women candidates and candidates with disabilities will be specially benefitted with this move.
- k. **Scheduling Tests and Choosing Centres** - Candidates would have the facility of registering on a common portal and give a choice of Centres.

Outreach Initiatives by NRA

- **Multiple Languages** - The CET would be available in 12 Indian languages, including English.
- **Scores—Access to Multiple Recruitment Agencies** - Initially, the scores would be used by the **three major recruitment agencies—SSC, RRBs and IBPS**. However, over a period of time it is expected that other recruitment agencies in the Central Government would adopt the same. Further, it would be **open for other agencies in the public as well as private domain** to adopt it if they so choose.
- **Mock Test for Candidates from Rural and Backward Areas** - NRA will conduct mock tests for facility of such candidates. Besides mock tests, 247 helpline and grievance redressal portal will also be made available.

Conclusion:

NRA comes with a path-breaking reform, acknowledging the positive changes happening in New India and its aspirational youth.