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GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Linking the East with the West

Context:

- The grounding of a container ship in the Suez Canal has blocked off traffic along the critical shipping lane.
 - The 193-km-long **Suez Canal across Egypt's Isthmus of Suez connects the Mediterranean Sea in the north and the Red Sea in south.**
 - The man-made channel has been a critical artery for global trade since 1869

Background:

Construction of Suez Canal:

- In the mid-19th century, French diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps won permission from Egypt's Ottoman-appointed ruler to start building the canal.
- In 1858, Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was formed to execute the project and construction work began a year later. Britain, which controlled the route around the African continent, continued to oppose the project as a new waterway would hurt its interests. But in 1869, the canal was officially opened for traffic.
- The Egyptian government, straddled with financial problems, sold its stake in the canal to London in 1875. Since then, France and Britain operated the canal, until **Egypt's socialist President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez canal in 1956.**

Suez crisis:

- Three months after Nasser nationalised the canal, Israeli troops attacked the Egyptian Sinai. French and British troops joined in later. The plan was to retake control of the canal and remove Nasser. By March 1957, the invading troops were fully withdrawn and Egypt's authority over the canal was recognised. The **Suez crisis** marked Great Britain's dwindling influence in West Asia, a region it controlled since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the arrival of the U.S. as the new great power in the region.

- The canal was closed again during the **1967 war**. It would be reopened only in 1975 after Egyptian-Israeli relations started warming following the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Details:

- About 19,000 ships passed through the Suez Canal in 2020 carrying 1.2 billion tonnes of cargo. As much as 13% of all maritime trade, from oil to automobiles, pass through the canal every year.
- **A delay in reopening the channel will have a huge impact on export businesses, commodities, ship and cargo companies and even Egypt's national economy.**

2. China, Iran sign a 25-year 'strategic pact'

Context:

- China and Iran signing of a 25-year "**strategic cooperation pact**".

Details:

- The agreement covers '**political, strategic and economic**' components and seeks to deepen cooperation.
- The agreement would establish a blueprint for reciprocal investments in the fields of transport, ports, energy, industry and services.
- The agreement comes amid a major push from China to back Iran, as it deals with the continuing weight of sanctions from the U.S. administration.
 - Recently China and Russia called for the U.S. to unconditionally return to the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** as soon as possible and revoke the unilateral sanctions against Iran.
 - The two nations have proposed the establishment of a **regional security dialogue platform** to converge a new consensus on resolving the security concerns of countries in the region.

China's West Asian push:

- The agreement came during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's ongoing six-nation tour to West Asia including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman.
- China has proposed a **five-point initiative** on achieving security and stability in the Middle East advocating mutual respect, upholding equity and justice, achieving non-proliferation, jointly fostering collective security, and accelerating development cooperation in the West Asian region.

- China has been keen to deepen its Belt and Road Initiative in the region. China is looking to conclude a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council.
- China's trade with Arab States reached \$240 billion last year, establishing it as the region's largest trading partner and a major buyer of crude oil.

3. Amid Bangladesh liberation anniversary, role of India, U.S. in 1971 in spotlight

Context:

- Bangladesh commemorates 50 years of its Liberation movement.

Background:

- On March 26, 1971 **Bangladesh Liberation movement** began with the declaration of Independence by the **Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters)** led by **Sheikh Mujibur Rahman**.
- Following which Pakistani troops launched **Operation Searchlight** that targeted Bangladeshi freedom fighters and activists brutally, with millions of casualties.
 - Approximately 2 to 3 million people were killed, over 200,000 women were raped in organised rape camps, and over 10 million people were displaced, most finding refuge in India.

Details:

India's response:

- A few days after the Mujib declaration, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi moved a resolution in Parliament condemning the Pakistani crackdown as "genocide".
- The government offered support to the Bangladeshi freedom fighters. The government was also involved in training and arming the Mukti Bahini cadres
- The then Prime Minister also played a significant role in garnering international support for the Bangladeshi cause.
- While the U.S. was against India's stand, Mrs. Gandhi found some support in Moscow, and the **Indo-Soviet treaty of Peace and Cooperation** was signed in August 1971. The Soviet treaty dented India's non-aligned policy, but Soviet naval support and military supplies assisted New Delhi in the 1971 war.

American response:

- The U.S. had a pro Pakistan policy. The U.S. under President Richard Nixon moved its “Seventh fleet” into the Bay of Bengal in an attempt to deter the Indian Army from advancing towards Dhaka (Dacca) during the two-week war in December 1971.

4. Will intranasal vaccine give sterilising immunity?

Details:

- An intranasal vaccine delivers a vaccine through a spritz through the nostrils.
- Previous trials with nasal vaccines, like the one developed by scientists at Washington University School of Medicine has been found effective in preventing infection in mice susceptible to the novel coronavirus.
- The nasal delivery approach has several advantages over the injection and oral forms.

Benefits:

Better immune response:

- The nasal route holds immense potential for vaccination due to the organised immune systems of the nasal mucosa. Intranasal candidates have shown good potential for protection in animal studies conducted thus far.
- Studies have shown that the nasal route of vaccine delivery eliciting robust antibodies and T-cell responses that were enough to be able to neutralise SARS-CoV-2.

Better targetted:

- Studies have shown that targeting the immune response to the upper respiratory tract provides critical protection, and intranasal vaccination induces protective mucosal immunity against the SARS-CoV-2.
- Given that the SARS-CoV-2 virus shows a proclivity to dwell in the upper respiratory tract for a prolonged period of time, a safe and efficacious nasal vaccine is well-placed to target the literal entry point of the virus into the body.

Will help reduce transmission of the virus:

- While the currently available injectable COVID-19 vaccines have been able to induce an immune response that prevented pneumonia, it did not prevent infection in the nose and lungs. Such a vaccine might reduce the severity of

COVID-19, but it could not prevent infected individuals from spreading the virus. Thus intranasal vaccines hold an upper hand in this respect.

Easy to administer:

- The intranasal vaccines are easier to give. This will help ensure faster vaccination. Hence this method comes with the guarantee of better compliance and the advantage of lower costs.

Concerns:

- So far, intranasal vaccination is being used only for influenza.
- The intranasal vaccines cannot be used on certain groups of people, particularly those who have compromised immune systems.

Conclusion:

- The nasal route can be used to deliver the safe antigen against which an immunological response would happen. But only further clinical trials can help determine whether such a vaccine with an easy delivery mechanism can be efficacious too.
- If it does work, it can be a game-changer in the fight against the pandemic.

5. The Afghan endgame

Context:

- S. Afghanistan Policy under the Presidentship of Joe Biden.

Details:

- As per the **S.-Taliban deal**, May 1 is the deadline for pulling out all American troops from Afghanistan. However, given the continued violence in Afghanistan, there are growing doubts over U.S. pull out from Afghanistan.
 - No U.S. troops have been targeted by Taliban militants in the past year, but **violence against Afghan civilians**, particularly women, journalists, students and activists has gone up manifold, and despite the peace agreement, more than 3,000 civilians were killed in 2020.

Options available for the U.S.:

- **The U.S. could negotiate with the Taliban for an extension of the agreement**, offering other incentives like the release of more prisoners and the delisting of sanctioned Taliban terrorists. The other option is that the U.S. could scrap the 2020 agreement and back the Ashraf Ghani government to

continue towards a negotiated settlement, even as U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan to stabilise the security situation.

- The recent statements by senior U.S. administrators make it clear that the U.S. is not in favour of completely scrapping the 2020 agreement. The U.S. has shown impatience with the Ghani government, believing that it is dragging its feet on intra-Afghan negotiations.
- Notably, the U.S. President has stated that he did not foresee U.S. troops staying in Afghanistan “for a long time” or until 2022, but that adhering to the May 1 commitment at this point would be “hard”.
- The U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has proposed a **new peace plan** to revive the ongoing talks.

Dialogue platforms:

- Apart from the **intra-Afghan negotiations in Doha**, there have been other ongoing efforts to resolve the deadlock in Afghanistan.
- “**Troika**” (U.S., Russia and China) along with Pakistan, Turkey, Qatar and Afghanistan and Taliban leaders.
- The U.S. secretary of state has also proposed another mechanism for regional envoys to be led by the United Nations, which would include India and Iran as well.

Afghanistan government’s plan:

- Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani has proposed his own peace plan.
- The plan would involve a **full ceasefire, inviting the Taliban to participate in early elections in Afghanistan**, and then the serving President Mr. Ghani would hand over power to the elected government.
- The Afghanistan government has **reached out to India for support**. The Current Afghan administration has repeatedly reiterated the significance of India in the peace process. India is an important development partner of Afghanistan.

India’s stand:

- India’s position has been to **back an “Afghan-owned, Afghan-led, Afghan-controlled” peace process**. It has always backed the elected government in Kabul, and it **has not yet held talks with the Taliban directly**. India has been pitching for constitutional methods that guarantees a democratic process and rights of women and minorities.
- Notably, India has not foreclosed the option of talking to the Taliban if it does join the government in Afghanistan.

- Though the Indian government has not yet announced a special envoy on Afghanistan who could be a part of the UN-led process for regional countries, India has made it clear that it seeks to be an integral part of the process.

GS 3 : Economy, Science and Technology, Environment

6. New species of red algae seen in west, south east Indian coast

- Two new species of seaweed named **Hypnea indica** and **Hypnea bullata** have been discovered by a group of marine biologists.
- While **Hypnea indica** was discovered Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, and Somnath Pathan and Sivrajpur in Gujarat, **Hypnea bullata** was discovered from Kanyakumari and Diu island of Daman and Diu.
- The seaweeds are part of the genus **Hypnea** or red seaweeds. The **genus Hypnea consists of calcareous, erect, branched red seaweeds.**
- They grow in the **intertidal regions** of the coast, namely the area that is submerged during the high tide and exposed during low tides.
- Species of **Hypnea** contain the biomolecule carrageenan, which is **widely used in the food industry.**
- Several recent studies have shown that algae with calcareous mineral deposits are prone for the damage from **ocean acidification** – an aftermath of climate change. As carbon dioxide in the atmosphere gets dissolved in ocean waters, the seawater becomes more acidic. Algae like **Hypnea** cannot survive in acidic seawater.
- The study also reports one other species of **Hypnea** for the first time in Indian coasts, **Hypnea nidifica.**

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

GS 2 : Polity, Governance, International Relations

1. Blockage of Suez Canal

Context: Global trade has been impacted after a container ship got stuck in the Suez Canal.

About Suez Canal

- Located in Egypt, the artificial sea-level waterway was built between 1859 and 1869 linking the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.
- It offers the shortest route between the Atlantic Ocean and lands around the Indian and western Pacific Oceans.
- The canal is one of the busiest waterways in the world, negating the need to navigate around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa and thus cutting distances by up to 7,000 km.
- **Economic Lifeline:** The canal continues to be the lifeline for all trade between the West and East as 10 per cent of the global trade passes through it every year. The average 50 ships that pass through it daily carry about \$9.5 billion worth of goods, every day.

Suez Canal's Long History

- The canal has existed in one form or the other since construction started under the reign of Senausret III, Pharaoh of Egypt (1887-1849 BC). Many kings who ruled later kept improving and expanding this canal.
- Construction picked up pace around 300 years back as maritime trade between Europe and Asia became crucial for many economies.
- In the mid-1800s, French diplomat and engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps convinced the Egyptian viceroy Said Pasha to support the canal's construction.
- In 1858, the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was tasked to construct and operate the canal for 99 years, after which rights would be handed to the Egyptian government.

- Despite facing multiple problems ranging from financial difficulties and attempts by the British and Turks to halt construction, the canal was opened for international navigation in 1869.
- The French and British held most of the shares in the canal company. The British used their position to sustain their maritime and colonial interests by maintaining a defensive force along the Suez Canal Zone as part of a 1936 treaty.

Egypt takes over Suez Canal

- In 1954, facing pressure from Egyptian nationalists, the two countries signed a seven-year treaty that led to the withdrawal of British troops.
- In 1956, Egyptian President Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal to pay for the construction of a dam on the Nile. This led to the Suez Crisis with UK, France and Israel mounting an attack on Egypt.
- The conflict ended in 1957 after the United Nations got involved and was followed by the first instance of the UN Peacekeeping Forces being deployed anywhere in the world.
- In 1967, Nasser ordered the peacekeeping forces out of Sinai leading to a new conflict between the two countries. Israelis occupied Sinai and in response, Egypt closed the canal to all shipping.
- The closure lasted until 1975, when the two countries signed a disengagement accord. The canal was the focal point of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, with the Arab coalition led by Egypt and Syria.

Impact of longest-ever accidental closure of Suez Canal

- **Blocking of all Traffic:** On March 23rd, due to weather obstructions a giant container ship, MV Ever Given, en route from China to the Netherlands ended up getting stuck in one of the canal's narrow stretches, thus blocking all traffic.
- **Stress on Global Supply Chain:** Over 200 ships are stuck on both sides of the canal putting stress on global supply chains.
- **Increased Oil Prices:** The long-term impacts of this block will depend on how long it lasts, but some countries have already seen a rise in oil prices after the blockage.
- **India- the biggest importer via Suez Canal:** India is the top importer of crude oil and products via the Suez Canal, higher than China, South Korea or Singapore. If the issue is not solved early then it will start to have implications on the bigger trade flow and shipping sectors and will begin to affect refining operations on a broader scale
- **India-US relations:** For India, though, the main hit could be seen on the import and export of ethane with the US, and the imports of crude from Latin

America, the uptake of which was recently increased. The longer the closure, the more disruptive the impact is likely to be.

- **Global Dependence on this narrow waterway:** The incident also raises questions about finding solutions to prevent future accidents and reducing the global dependence on this narrow waterway.

2. Launch of Tribal TB Initiative

In news

- ‘Tribal TB Initiative’ in pursuit of TB Mukht Bharat was launched recently.
- **Ministry:** Ministry of Health
- A Guidance Note on Joint Action Plan for Tuberculosis (TB) Elimination, a Special Edition of Tribal Ministry’s Publication ‘ALEKH’ on TB, and a document on Tribal Tuberculosis (TB) Initiative was also released.
- Over 104 million tribal population lives in India, across 705 tribes, accounting for 8.6 % of India’s population.
- 177 tribal districts were identified as high priority districts where physical remoteness, malnutrition, poor living conditions and lack of awareness contribute to the vulnerability of the tribal population to TB.
- Initially, the activities of the joint plan will focus on 161 districts across 18 identified States.
- This would involve periodic TB active case finding drives and provision of TB Preventive Therapy (IPT) to identified vulnerable population and develop long term mechanisms for vulnerability reduction.
- Lakshadweep and district of Badgam in Jammu and Kashmir have been declared TB Free on World TB Day 2021.
- The government has already increased the Budget allocation for TB in India a four-fold in the last 5 years.

3. India-Bangladesh

Context: In the last decade, India-Bangladesh relations have warmed up, entering a new era of cooperation, and moving beyond historical and cultural ties to become more assimilated in the areas of trade, connectivity, energy, and defence.

Border Settlement

- Bangladesh and India have achieved the rare feat of solving their border issues peacefully by ratifying the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015, where enclaves were swapped allowing inhabitants to choose their country of residence and become citizens of either India or Bangladesh.

Security & Insurgency

- The Bangladesh government has uprooted anti-India insurgency elements from its borders, making the India-Bangladesh border one of the region's most peaceful, and allowing India to make a massive redeployment of resources to its more contentious borders elsewhere.

Economic & Trade relations

- Bangladesh today is India's biggest trading partner in South Asia with exports to Bangladesh in FY 2018-19 at \$9.21 billion and imports at \$1.04 billion.
- India has offered **duty free access** to multiple Bangladeshi products.
- India extended three lines of credit to Bangladesh in recent years amounting to \$8 billion for the construction of roads, railways, bridges, and ports.

Act East Policy

- Bangladesh allows the shipment of goods from its Mongla and Chattogram (Chittagong) seaports carried by road, rail, and water ways.
- This allows landlocked Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura to access open water routes through the Chattogram and Mongla ports.

Tourism

- Bangladeshis make up a large portion of tourists in India.
- Bangladesh accounts for more than 35% of India's international medical patients and contributes more than 50% of India's revenue from medical tourism.

Concerns in India-Bangladesh relations

- Unresolved Teesta water sharing issue looms large.
- Border killings are yet to stop.
- National Register of Citizens across the whole of India reflects poorly on India-Bangladesh relations.

- China, in lieu of its cheque-book diplomacy, is well-entrenched in South Asia, including Bangladesh, with which it enjoys significant economic and defence relations.

GS 3 :Economy, Science and Technology,Environment

4. 2nd Tranche of Commercial Coal Mining

In news

- India launched its 2nd Tranche of auction for commercial coal mining offering 67 mines for sale of coal.
- Union Coal Minister launched the auction process.

Key takeaways

- This is the highest number of mines on offer in a particular tranche of auction after commencement of the auction regime since 2014.
- Out of the total 67 mines offered by the Ministry of Coal, 23 mines are under CM(SP) Act and 44 under MMDR Act.
- The coal mines on offer are spread across 6 States Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Rolling auction

- Government of India is moving towards adopting a 'Rolling Auction' mechanism for conducting future auctions.
- Coal is the first mineral resource where Rolling Auction mechanism is being implemented in which a pool of coal blocks will always remain available for auctions.

5. MoU signed for National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)

In news

- The MoU is signed by representatives of State Pollution Control Boards, Urban Local Bodies and Institutes of Repute (IoRs) for 132 identified cities for implementation of city specific action plans under [National Clean Air Programme \(NCAP\)](#).

- NCAP is a long-term, time-bound, national level strategy to tackle air pollution problem across India in a comprehensive manner.
- It targets to achieve 20% to 30% reduction in Particulate Matter concentrations by 2024 (with 2017 as base year).
- A National Knowledge Network comprising leading air quality specialists has also been constituted as a technical advisory group to support activities under NCAP and guide local IoRs in conducting air quality research.

6. AEG12 inhibits family of viruses

In news

- According to scientists at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) and their collaborator, a mosquito protein, called AEG12, strongly inhibits the family of viruses that cause yellow fever, dengue, West Nile, and Zika, and also weakly inhibits coronaviruses,
- The researchers found that AEG12 works by destabilising the viral envelope, breaking its protective covering.
- The protein does not affect viruses that do not have an envelope.
- At the molecular level, AEG12 rips out the lipids
- The findings could lead to therapeutics against viruses that affect millions of people around the world.
- While the researchers demonstrated that AEG12 was most effective against flaviviruses – the family of viruses to which Zika, West Nile, and others belong – they felt it is possible AEG12 could be effective against SARS-CoV-2.
- But, it will take years of bioengineering to make AEG12 a viable therapy for Covid-19.

Prelims Practice Questions

1. Arrange the following from West to East:

1. Cape Agulhas
2. Cape Hanglip
3. Cape of Good Hope
4. Cape Point

Choose the correct option:

- a. 3, 4, 2, 1
- b. 3, 2, 1, 4
- c. 1, 2, 4, 3
- d. 3, 4, 1, 2

Answer: a

Explanation:

West to East: Cape of Good Hope, Cape Point, Cape Hangklip, Cape Agulhas.

2. The 'World Development Report 2021:Data for Better Lives' is published by which of the following?

- A United Nations
- B World Bank
- C International Monetary Fund
- D World Economic Forum

Answer : B

Explanation

- Recently, the **World Bank** has published the **World Development Report 2021: Data for Better Lives**.
- The World Development Report 2021 provides a blueprint on how to harness the power of data for development, to ensure no one is left behind.
- **Hence, option B is correct.**

3. The Tigray region, recently in news, is located in which country?

- a. Ethiopia
- b. Eritrea
- c. Sudan
- d. Somalia

Answer: a

Explanation:

The Tigray Region is the northernmost region of Ethiopia.

4. Consider the following statements:

1. Earth Hour is an initiative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).
2. It aims to encourage people to turn off the lights for one hour to refrain from the use of non-essential lighting.

Which of the statements given above is/are not correct?

- A 1 only
- B 2 only
- C Both 1 and 2
- D Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : A

Explanation

- **Earth Hour is the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF)'s annual initiative that began in 2007. Hence, statement 1 is not correct.**
 - It is held every year on the last Saturday of March.
 - It encourages people from more than 180 countries to **switch off the lights from 8.30 pm to 9.30 pm as per their local time.**
 - The idea is to **refrain from the use of non-essential lighting** to save energy in a symbolic call for environmental protection.
Hence, statement 2 is correct.
- Earth Hour has become a catalyst for positive environmental impact, driving major legislative changes by harnessing the power of the people and collective action. It has helped:
 - Create a 3.5 million hectare marine-protected area in Argentina.
 - Ban all plastics in the Galapagos in 2014.
 - Plant 17 million trees in Kazakhstan.
 - Light up homes with solar power in India and the Philippines.
 - Push new legislation for the protection of seas and forests in Russia.

5. Consider the following statements with respect to the SVEEP Program:

1. It is the flagship program of the Election Commission of India.
2. The program has been launched to tackle the menace of paid news and fake news during elections.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program, better known as SVEEP, is the flagship program of the Election Commission of India for voter education, spreading voter awareness and promoting voter literacy in India.
- SVEEP's primary goal is to build a truly participative democracy in India by encouraging all eligible citizens to vote and make an informed decision during the elections.

6. With respect to *Exercise Kavach 2021*, consider the following statements:

1. It is a joint military exercise between India and Thailand.
2. The exercise is being conducted under the aegis of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC).

Which of the statement(s) given above is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer : b

Exercise Kavach

- It is a large scale joint military exercise involving assets of Indian Army, Indian Navy, Indian Air Force and Indian Coast Guard.
- It is being conducted under the aegis of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), the only Joint Forces Command of the country.
- The joint force would execute multi domain, high intensity offensive and defensive manoeuvres in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal and carry out amphibious landing operations, air landed operation, helicopters-borne insertion of Special Forces from sea culminating in tactical follow-on operations on land.
- The tri-services exercise aims to fine tune joint war-fighting capabilities and SOPs towards enhancing operational synergy.

Mains Practice Questions

1. Discuss the schism between the developed and developing world in climate change negotiations and coming up with a collective global action.

Approach

- Start the answer by briefly discussing the context of growing Greenhouse gases emission.
- Discuss the various reasons for conflict between developed and developing countries.
- Conclude Suitably.

2. Including more women in science and applied technologies is critical for the advancement of society. Discuss.

Approach

- Start the answer by mentioning the status of gender equality in India.
- Discuss the status of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) fields.
- Suggest some measures to improve women's participation in STEM fields.
- Conclude Suitably.