

09 Apr 2019: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. SC increases VVPAT verification

Context:

The Supreme Court increased voter-verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) verification to five random Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in each Assembly segment/constituency.

Background:

21 Opposition parties wanted — VVPAT verification in 50% or 125 polling booths in each constituency. The Supreme Court had asked the Election Commission to submit an affidavit on the same issue.

ECI's views on increase in VVPAT verification:

- The ECI had said that a 50% random physical verification of VVPATs would delay Lok Sabha poll results of 2019 by six whole days, quoting a March 22 report of the Indian Statistical Institute, which had said that a sample verification of 479 EVMs and VVPATs out of a total 10.35 lakh machine would lift public confidence to 99.9936%.
- Appearing for ECI, senior advocate pointed out that VVPAT counting is a manual job. The risk of error multiplies with an increase in human intervention.
- It was inferred that both said a 50% VVPAT verification would require a huge increase in extra personnel in each of the polling stations. A verification team in a polling booth is composed of three counting officials, a returning officer and a general observer.
- The ECI affidavit had said increased VVPAT slip counting would require extensive training and capacity building of election officials in the field. VVPAT slip counting takes place in specially erected VVPAT counting booths under the close monitoring of the returning officer and direct oversight of the observer.
- The ECI said its confidence in EVM-VVPATs is sourced from their secure designs, elaborate procedural safeguards adopted for their usage, and finally the fact that there have been zero errors in sample verifications so far.

Details:

- The following changes will be implemented as per the recent ruling of the Supreme Court.
- In case of general elections, VVPAT slips of five EVMs in each Assembly segment of a Parliamentary Constituency would be subject to physical counting.
- In State Assembly elections, the VVPAT verification would extend to five random EVMs in each Assembly constituency.
- The Supreme Court order would be implemented in the Lok Sabha polls, scheduled to commence from April 11, 2019.
- The ruling came in order to ensure the greatest degree of accuracy, satisfaction in election process.
- Not only political parties but the poor and the illiterate should be satisfied, the apex court observed.
- Earlier, under the ECI guideline 16.6, only the VVPAT slips from one EVM in every Assembly segment/constituency was subjected to physical verification.
- However, SC decision is a far shot from what 21 Opposition parties wanted — VVPAT verification in 50% or 125 polling booths in each constituency.
- The increase to five EVMs from one would only increase the VVPAT verification percentage from 0.44% to less than 2%.
- The court said that this change would not be a drain on the ECI's infrastructural resources and manpower as the Opposition's idea would have been. Neither would counting VVPAT slips of five EVMs take any substantial amount of time.

2. IIT-Madras tops Centre's higher education rankings

Context:

President Ramnath Kovind announced the rankings of higher educational institutions carried out as per the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF).

Details:

- The rankings, published annually since 2016, are based on multiple parameters, including teaching, learning and resources; research and professional practice; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and the perception of the public, academics and employers.

- Overall, 3,127 institutions applied for different categories of the NIRF this year.

National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF):

- Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) launched the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2015. NIRF has laid down a methodology for ranking institutions across India.
- In addition to excellence in teaching, learning and the research culture, the framework also includes parameters such as inclusiveness and diversity.
- Ranking of institutions of Higher Education will be an annual exercise as decided by the MHRD.

Parameters covered:

- **Teaching Learning and Resources** – the core activities of any place of learning are considered. Emphasis is laid on measuring the number and quality of faculty, lab resources, library and other such facilities needed for the development of the students. These parameters are further classified into the following sub-parameters:
 -
 - Student Strength including Doctoral Students
 - Faculty-student ratio with emphasis on permanent faculty (FSR)
 - Combined metric for Faculty with PhD (or equivalent) and Experience (FQE)
 - Total Budget and Its Utilization (CBTU)
- **Research, consulting and collaborative performance**– These parameters measure the research culture in the organization as seen through generation of IPR, international databases and interface with industry and fellow professionals.
- **Graduation outcomes**– It is the test of the level of effectiveness of the core teaching-learning activity in the institution. It measures the rate of students graduating and their success in finding appropriate placement in the industry, government inclusive of the rate of students taking up higher studies.
- **Outreach & Inclusivity** – A special emphasis is laid on the representation of women and socially challenged persons in student and faculty populations. It is also considered as a parameter in the outreach activities of the institution. Example:
 - Percent Students from other states/countries (Region Diversity RD)
 - Region Diversity
 - Percentage of Women
 - Economically and Socially Challenged Students (ESCS)
 - Facilities for Physically Challenged Students (PCS)
- **Perception**– significant importance is given to the perception of the institutes by its stakeholders. This will be ascertained through Stakeholder Surveys.

Importance of NIRF Rankings:

- It would enable parents, students, teachers, educational institutions and other stakeholders to rank institutions on the basis of a set of objective parameters and a transparent process.
- The NIRF will facilitate a level playing field in ranking for institutions.
- Institutions which have been working in languages other than English and excelled relatively in the recent past will be identified and will be benefitted.
- A national ranking system, and one that is as exhaustive as this one will propel institutions into higher world rankings.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Sri Lanka seeks enhanced military training from India

Context:

Sri Lanka has sought enhanced military training from India, according to President Maithripala Sirisena's office.

Details:

- Wide-ranging matters, including bilateral defence cooperation between the neighbouring countries and regional security, were reported to have been discussed.
- India and Sri Lanka agreed to increase cooperation in security and defence spheres in several areas, including regional security, curbing drug smuggling and human trafficking and training of members of the security forces.
- Thanking India for its partnership, The Sri Lankan President requested to increase the number of personnel trained by India. The Indian Defence Secretary agreed to look into the possibility of enhancing training facilities.

India - Sri Lanka defence relationship:

- Currently, over 60% of Sri Lanka's military personnel pursue their young officers' course, junior and senior command courses in India, according to defence sources in Colombo.
- 'Exercise Mitra Shakti', the sixth edition of the joint military training exercise between the Indian Army and the Sri Lankan Army, recently concluded in Sri Lanka
 - The contingents from the two countries jointly planned and executed a series of well-coordinated tactical operations based on scenarios that are likely to be encountered in rural and urban environment.
 - The two-week programme is part of an initiative that began in 2013 as part of military diplomacy between India and Sri Lanka.

2. U.S. designates Iran's elite military unit as a 'terrorist organisation'

Context:

President Donald Trump on Monday announced the United States is designating Iran's elite military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a terrorist organisation.

Details:

- The designation marks the first time Washington has branded a foreign government entity a terrorist group and came despite warnings from U.S. military and intelligence officials that other nations could use the designation as a precedent against U.S. action abroad.
- Trump said in a statement that the "unprecedented" move "recognises the reality that Iran is not only a state sponsor of terrorism, but that the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft."
- Following the announcement, Secretary of State warned all banks and business of consequences to dealing with the Revolutionary Guards.
- Businesses and banks around the world now have a clear duty to ensure that companies with which they conduct financial transactions are not conducted with the IRGC in any material way.
- A senior Trump administration official said the new measure would criminalise contact with the Guards and enable the prosecutors to bring charges to those that bring material support to the IRGC.
- S. officials have long said the IRGC's opaque structure and far-flung responsibilities provided a mask for terrorist activities that threaten Israelis, Europeans and U.S. forces.

- The move continues the administration's aggressive posture toward Iran, which includes U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.
- The administration had previously named the IRGC as a supporter of terrorism conducted by militias it supports, but stopped short of listing it as a foreign terrorist organization in 2017.
- In 2018, Trump withdrew the United States from the international nuclear deal with Iran.

Prospective consequences of the move:

- The move comes just one day ahead of the Israeli national election and could have an impact on the same.
- Trump also backed Netanyahu (Prime Minister of Israel contesting to be reelected), and appeared to put a thumb on the Israeli election scale, by recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the disputed Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967.
- The move may have unintended consequences. Among the possibilities are: that Russia and China may start designating U.S. agencies for punitive actions
- Iraq could be caught in a double bind, as it purchases electricity from Iran, including from entities tied to the IRGC.
- The designation is likely to complicate U.S. actions in Iraq, where U.S. troops work to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State and where Shiite militias tied to the IRGC operate close by. The IRGC is also tied to Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the political wing of the terrorist group is part of the government.
- The designation puts further distance between Trump's policies toward Iran and those of European allies who remain a part of the nuclear deal.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps:

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was formed after the 1979 Islamic revolution with a mission to defend the clerical regime.
- It is a military unit originally set up as security for Iran's clerical rulers.
- It has grown to be the country's most powerful security organization, with nearly unchecked political influence and interests in business, real estate and other areas of the economy.

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Category: SECURITY

1. Army gets Dhanush artillery guns

Context:

The Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) handed over the first batch of six Dhanush artillery guns to the Army.

Details:

- Dhanush is the indigenously upgraded gun of the Swedish Bofors gun procured in the 1980s.
- Dhanush is a 155 mm, 45-calibre towed artillery gun with a range of 36 km and has demonstrated a range of 38 km with specialised ammunition.
- It is an upgrade of the existing 155mm, 39 calibre Bofors FH 77 gun.
- In army parlance, it is classified as 'medium artillery'.
- It is compatible with all North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) 155 mm ammunition system.
- The gun is fitted with inertial navigation system with global positioning system- (GPS) based gun recording and auto-laying, an enhanced tactical computer for onboard ballistic computations, an

onboard muzzle velocity recording, an automated gun sighting system equipped with camera, thermal imaging and laser range finder.

- Indigenisation to the extent of about 81%, has already been achieved. By the end of 2019, the indigenisation level of the gun will go up to 91%,” the Defence Ministry said in a statement.
- It is one of the “Make in India” marvels.

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E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. Open up the Supreme Court

Focus of the article:

This article takes the view that a judiciary confident of its place in a democratic republic must not worry about public scrutiny of judicial appointments.

A Brief Look at the Past:

- Almost 10 years ago, on September 2, 2009, the High Court of Delhi handed down a landmark judgment dealing with the fledgling Right to Information (RTI) Act.
- **It held that the Office of the Chief Justice of India (CJI) was a “public authority”,** and therefore, subject to the provisions of the Act. Information held by the CJI — including, in the context of the case, information about judges’ assets — could be requested by the public through an RTI application.
- In ringing words, Justice Ravindra Bhat declared that the RTI was a “powerful beacon, which illuminates unlit corners of state activity, and those of public authorities which impact citizens’ daily lives, to which they previously had no access”.
- The Supreme Court appealed against this judgment, and the case eventually wound its way to the Supreme Court, where a stay was granted, and matters remained in limbo for a few years.
- Earlier in the month of April 2019, however, a five-judge Bench of the court finally heard the case on merits, and reserved judgment. By this time, the issues under consideration involved not only Justice Bhat’s ruling on the status of the Chief Justice as a public authority and the disclosure of judges’ assets, but also the question of whether the correspondence of the Collegium (the body of judges that selects and makes appointments to the higher judiciary) was subject to the RTI.

Editorial Analysis:

A Fundamental question:

- Some experts opine that the basic question, i.e. whether or not the Office of the CJI is subject to the RTI Act, has an easy answer: yes.
- As Justice Bhat correctly observed in the High Court judgment, “all power — judicial power being no exception — is held accountable in a modern Constitution”.
- A blanket judicial exemption from the RTI Act would defeat the basic idea of “open justice”: that the workings of the courts, as powerful organs of state, have to be as transparent and open to public scrutiny as any other body.
- Nor would bringing the judiciary under the RTI Act destroy the personal privacy of judges: as the

High Court judgment noted, the RTI Act itself has an inbuilt privacy-oriented protection, which authorises withholding the disclosure of personal information unless there is an overriding public interest. While disclosure of assets is arguably justified by an overriding public interest, medical details or information about marital status, for example, are clearly not. There will always be borderline cases, of course, but that only calls for nuanced and fine-grained analysis of such cases, nothing more.

The Collegium: A Perspective

- During the hearings, however, the question most at issue involved the disclosure of the correspondence of the Collegium. The Collegium includes the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court, who collectively constitute the selection panel for judicial appointments to the Supreme Court (and the three senior-most judges when it comes to the High Courts).
- India is one of the few countries where judges have the last word on judicial appointments, through the mechanism of the Collegium.
- **The Collegium itself is not mentioned in the text of the Constitution: it arose out of a judgment of the Supreme Court, and in response to increased executive interference in judicial appointments, particularly during Indira Gandhi's regime.**
- The Collegium began life, therefore, as a tool to secure and guarantee the independence of the judiciary. In 2015, the Supreme Court struck down a constitutional amendment establishing a National Judicial Appointments Commission, which would have replaced the Collegium. A majority of the five-judge Bench held that judicial primacy in appointments was the only constitutionally-authorised way of securing/ensuring judicial independence against an increasingly powerful political executive.

Criticism the Collegium Faced:

- Through this time, however, the Collegium had come under increasing criticism.
- A major point of critique was its opacity: it was increasingly being perceived that judicial appointments were too often made in an ad hoc and arbitrary manner.
- Perhaps the most vivid example of this was when former Supreme Court Justice Markandey Katju admitted that, as the Chief Justice of the Allahabad High Court, he had refused to recommend a High Court lawyer for judgeship because that lawyer was in a live-in relationship without being married.
- One may wonder what connection there is between a lawyer's marital status and his ability to discharge judicial functions, but this was, at any rate, a stark example of what the critics had in mind.
- Indeed, the Supreme Court's own NJAC judgment acknowledged this critique, and vowed to evolve a system where concerns of transparency were addressed.
- A small step towards this was made during Dipak Misra's tenure as CJI, when the resolutions of the Collegium began to be published online.
- It is in this context that we must examine the arguments of the Attorney-General of India, who represented the Supreme Court before the Constitution Bench.

Arguments of the Attorney General:

- The AG argued that disclosing the correspondence of the Collegium would "destroy" judicial independence.
- The CJI seemed to agree, noting that disclosing the reasons for rejection of a judge would "destroy" his or her life or career.
- This is, however, a bewildering argument, when we consider that the Collegium system was specifically put in place by the Supreme Court in order to guarantee judicial independence.
- It is rather self-serving to argue, first, that there is only one permissible method to secure judicial independence — and that is through ensuring judicial primacy in the appointments process — and then to argue that the only permissible way in which this system can work is by making it immune to

transparency.

- Some experts opine that the Supreme Court cannot eat its cake and have it too: if it has instituted a process of appointment that makes itself the final arbiter of judicial appointments, then it must also ensure that that same process meets the standards of accountability in a democratic republic.
- Indeed, a look at judicial appointments elsewhere suggests that transparency in appointments is integral to the process.

A Look at International Examples:

- In the United States, for example, candidates for judicial appointments in the federal judiciary are subjected to public confirmation hearings by the Senate.
- In Kenya and South Africa, the interviews of candidates taken by judicial appointments commissions are broadcast live.
- The public, thus, is in a position to judge for itself the selection process. This is crucial to maintaining public faith in the impartiality of the institution.
- The Collegium, however, has immunised itself from any form of public scrutiny.
- The nomination process is secret, the deliberations are secret, the reasons for elevation or non-elevation are secret.
- This creates an extremely unhealthy climate, in which rumours become staple, and whispers about executive interference are exchanged in court corridors. CJI Ranjan Gogoi's publicly stated concern that "in the name of transparency, you cannot destroy an institution" betrays a refusal to engage with the manner in which institutions are actually destroyed: in an insidious and incremental manner, through the slow drip-drip erosion of trust.

Concluding Remarks:

- "Sunlight is the best disinfectant" is a trite and overused phrase. In the context of public scrutiny of the Supreme Court, however, it is an apt one.
- The Collegium's recent decisions to recommend a set of names for elevation, and then hastily backtrack on them without any publicly stated reasons, dealt a serious blow to its reputation for impartiality and independence.
- The only way to salvage this is to open up the court.
- A judiciary that is confident of itself and of its place in the democratic republic should not be worried about subjecting judicial appointments to public scrutiny.
- The occasional discomfort that might come from the harsh public glare is more than outweighed by the cleansing value of transparency.

2. NaMo TV and the laws for DTH channels

Note to the Students:

- The issue concerning the new channel, NaMo TV has been in the news recently, and has also been the subject of controversy. The analysis points reflected here are from the points covered in an article titled, "NaMo TV and the laws for DTH channels", featured in the Indian Express on April 9th, 2019.

Editorial Analysis:

- The new channel NaMo TV has been at the centre of controversy during the poll season, with the Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress submitting complaints against it with the Election Commission.
- The Information & Broadcasting Ministry is learnt to have responded to the EC that NaMo TV does not fall under its purview since it is functioning as a special platform for DTH (direct-to-home) operators.

So, what is NaMo TV, and what is the controversy around it?

- The channel, also briefly named Content TV, emerged across major DTH platforms nationwide over the last fortnight. The channel is dedicated to speeches of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- In its complaint to the EC, AAP sought to know how permission was granted to a party to launch its own TV channel after the Model Code of Conduct was enforced.
- Separately, the Congress questioned if it had got clearance from the I&B Ministry.
- The channel is listed among Hindi News channels on some DTH platforms.
- However, no such channel is mentioned in the list of channels permitted by the I&B Ministry.
- All satellite-based channels require the ministry's permission to be downlinked in the country irrespective of the content, or the platform it is available on.

How is this channel allowed, then?

- The I&B Ministry has apparently told the Election Commission that NaMo TV is a 'platform service'. For such services, I&B permission is not necessary.

What is a platform service?

- There are several ways that viewers can receive a channel on their TV — cable TV services that can be received through Multi-System Operators and/or Local Cable Operators, DTH services, Internet Protocol Television services, Headend-in-the-Sky, and terrestrial TV services in smaller geographic regions. Together they are called Distribution Platform Operators (DPOs).
- Again, there are four types of channels on TV: private satellite channels, which are broadcast through satellites and need I&B permissions; Doordarshan channels run by public broadcaster Prasar Bharati; platform services channels, which are owned and operated by the DPOs and distributed exclusively to their own subscribers; ground-based channels that come with a strong local focus and are referred to as "local channels", usually an integral part of most cable TV networks.
- Platform services are certain channels that are provided by local cable operators and DTH operators, exclusively to their own viewers. **These are not offered by broadcasters (those that run satellite-based channels) and are outside the purview of regulations currently.** On the other hand, satellite-based channels can only be broadcast if they are registered with the Government of India, which means these have the I&B permissions.
- Platform services were defined by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India during a consultation on them in 2014 as: **"Platform services (PS) are programs transmitted by Distribution Platform Operators (DPOs) exclusively to their own subscribers and does not include Doordarshan channels and registered TV channels. PS shall not include foreign TV channels that are not registered in India."**

What can come under such services?

- Local cable operators often use such channels to show content relevant to their geographical area, and which includes local news. DTH operators, however, have used such platform services to offer subscribers access to content 'on demand', like movies-on-demand, video-on-demand, pay-per-view, and interactive services such as games, education, etc., which are paid for by the subscribers.

Is NaMo TV a platform service?

- While platform services have traditionally been exclusive offerings by each DTH operator, NaMo TV is available across DTH operators in the country. During the consultation processes of TRAI, in 2014 and earlier in 2006, DTH operators had argued against special regulations for such services. However, in 2014, TRAI recommended broad regulations for these services, regardless of whether they are owned by local cable operators or DTH service providers. In these recommendations, TRAI

said that all such services must be registered by the operator with the I&B Ministry along with the name of the entity, details of the company that is running the service and its beneficial owners. TRAI had also recommended that platform services should not be allowed to be shared with other networks (NaMo TV is running across many networks). No laws for platform services have, however, come into effect yet.

Are such services not regulated at all?

- Since these services do not require permissions from the I&B Ministry, they cannot be punished by that Ministry, which can take action only against conventional channels listed with it.
- However, regardless of who owns the service, two laws are still applicable: restrictions on free speech mentioned in Article 19 of the Constitution would come into play about what is being shown on such platform services, regardless of whether it is registered with the I&B Ministry or not; and the content on such services has to comply with the Advertisement and the Programme Codes of the Cable TV Act, 1994.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Playing politics over the Golan Heights

What's in the news?

- On March 21, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump upended another long-standing American policy, tweeting: **"After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel's Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!"**

Another pro-Israel step:

- This was another major pro-Israel step Mr. Trump has taken as President.
- On May 8, 2018, he had walked out of the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) with Iran, negotiated by the Obama administration with provisions for sanctions relief in response for Iranian restrictions on its nuclear programme.
- Israel had opposed the agreement and any sanctions relief for Iran, seeing a continuing threat to itself from Iran's growing presence in Syria, its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, its refusal to recognise Israel's right to exist, and its military capabilities.
- Before that, on December 6, 2017, in a speech from the White House, **Trump had declared: "I have determined that it is time to officially recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel."** He also proceeded to close the Palestinian office in Washington DC, as well as U.S. consulate in Jerusalem dealing with the Palestinian Authority.

A Brief Look at the Past:

- Hitherto, U.S. policy had been that any formalisation of status changes on the ground, following Israel's victory and gains in the 1967 Israel-Arab conflict, could only flow from negotiations among parties concerned.
- UN Security Council Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) had asserted inadmissibility of acquisition of territory by force, and called for Israeli withdrawal. UNSCR 497 (1981) had declared that "Israel's decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect"

U.S. and Israeli Domestic Politics: A Perspective

- **Trump's decisions have a bearing on U.S. and Israeli domestic politics.**
- The American Jewish community, traditionally around 65% Democratic, has grown in its support for him, despite an increase in anti-Semitism within the U.S. because of his encouragement to right-wing groups.
- His base among Evangelical Christians backs Israel. Some of the major contributors to his campaign are also ardent supporters of Israel.
- Further, it is important to note that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing a tough election on April 9, 2019, and under threat of indictment for corruption and misdemeanour, is touting his influence on Mr. Trump as having potential for further gains for Israel. To consolidate right-wing support for himself, he just announced that if re-elected he would not carry out any withdrawal of Israeli settlements from the West Bank, putting an end to the "land for peace" formula advocated since the Camp David Accords of 1979.

Israel's History of leveraging support from global powers:

- Faced with international opposition, Israel and its supporters have, in the past too, leveraged the support of the leading global power of the time to advance their cause. **On November 2, 1917, Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, declared that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people".**
- **This eventually led to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, despite Palestinian and Arab opposition.**
- In an April 14, 2004 letter to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that "in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949" (position before the 1967 conflict).
- This has been interpreted by many in Israel as beginning of the process of establishing the legitimacy of Israeli/Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and denting the viability of a fully sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state.
- Netanyahu's latest announcement would take this another step further. In Israeli political discourse, which has moved over time to the right, many now question the possibility of a two-state solution. The constraint for Israel is that its goal of a democratic and Jewish state would be difficult to achieve in a one-state solution with current near equal proportions of Arab and Jewish populations.
- Trump's announcement on Golan Heights goes a step further. **The Syrian Golan was part of the French post-World War I mandate, and hence technically not covered by the Balfour Declaration.**
- Importantly, **Trump is now seeking to extend recognition of Israeli sovereignty to an area beyond Balfour, beyond the UN partition plan for Palestine in the 1940s, and beyond the outcome of the 1948/49 Arab-Israeli conflict.**

Citing Israeli Security Interests and Regional Threats:

- In his proclamation of March 25, 2019, issued in presence of the visiting Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Trump cited Israeli security interests and regional threats.
- The present situation in Syria is no doubt a factor. The U.S. wants to draw down its military presence. Russia and Iran have significantly enhanced their presence and influence.
- Israel is concerned about Iranian presence beyond Golan in Syria and that of Hezbollah on the Lebanese side.
- It has repeatedly targeted Iranian positions and supplies, including to Hezbollah.
- Following Mr. Trump's announcement, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton tweeted that to allow Golan Heights "to be controlled by the likes of the Syrian or Iranian regimes would turn a

blind eye to the atrocities of Assad and the destabilizing presence of Iran in the region”.

Tepid global response:

- The new U.S. position has not received support from any other country, including its European allies.
- While Iran, Russia, Turkey, among others, have been critical, the Arab response has been assessed as insufficiently strident.
- This is no doubt a reflection of reduced influence in Washington, with greater U.S. leverage on oil supplies, divisions among Arab countries over Qatar, pressure on Saudi Arabia because of Yemen and the Jamal Khashoggi issue.

Concluding Remarks:

- India’s interests are not directly involved immediately.
- It has a strong and growing relationship with Israel, and has maintained its relations with Syria.
- Indian troops have been a part of UN peacekeeping presence on the Golan Heights.
- Trump’s move, however, is indicative of shifting geopolitics in the West Asian region, with longer-term implications for India.
- **It also asserts unilateralism, is a challenge to a rules-based international order, and is contrary to positions U.S. has taken elsewhere, as for instance in its response to Russia and Crimea.**

2. Maldivian wave

What’s in the news?

- The administration of Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has received a shot in the arm with the parliamentary elections held recently.

Editorial Analysis:

- President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih’s Maldivian Democratic Party is poised to garner more than 60 out of 87 seats, paving the way for easy passage of bills and a policy agenda with a realistic chance of implementation.
- Solih, whose pro-democracy government assumed power after a presidential election in September 2018, has sought to break with the regime of his predecessor Abdulla Yameen, which had propelled the Indian Ocean nation into Beijing’s economic embrace, described by some as “**debt-trap diplomacy**”.
- While Mr. Solih was quick to signal the shift in his government’s priorities, not least by ensuring that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief guest at the presidential inauguration, **his agenda has been hobbled by resistance from lawmakers on certain bills aimed at the previous administration.**

Instance of Speaker declining Support:

- Specifically, Parliament Speaker Qasim Ibrahim, the head of the Jumhooree Party, a coalition partner of the MDP, declined to support a vote on a bill aimed at recouping stolen assets and looking into unresolved murders.
- With the election throwing up a single-party majority, Mr. Solih can push through his agenda with fewer stumbling blocks.

India’s Interests:

- So far as India's interests in the Indian Ocean Region are concerned, warm bilateral ties between New Delhi and Male are a high priority after five years of strategic drift that benefited Beijing considerably.
- According to some analyses, the surging influx of Chinese infrastructure investment under the Yameen administration may have caused the Maldives' national debt to balloon to nearly a quarter of its GDP.
- As it seeks to unravel this web of Chinese loans, the new leadership has promised that what is owed would be paid.
- However, the honouring of such debt, especially where it was linked to the grant of land, lease rights and mega-construction projects, will be complicated. As Mr. Solih grapples with these challenges, the assurance that the Maldives has New Delhi's backing would be vital.
- **Already, the elements of a strategic reset with India seem to be falling into place.**
- When Mr. Solih visited India in December 2018 a \$1.4 billion financial assistance package for the Maldives was announced, and the two governments agreed to exempt holders of diplomatic and official passports from visa requirements.
- MoUs on Indian grant aid for "high-impact community development projects" have been signed, as also agreements on clean energy and regional maritime security. So long as the new government presses on with the urgent task of rebuilding and deepening the Maldives' democratic credentials, there is hope for political stability and economic development across the 1,192-island archipelago and the wider IOR.

3. 'India-Maldives relations have never been better'

Note to Students:

The following paragraphs showcase the excerpts of a recently conducted interview where the Maldivian Foreign Minister shares his thoughts on India-Maldives relations.

Analysis:

Since your government came to power, India-Maldives ties have undergone a dramatic change, marked by renewed cooperation, close dialogue and multiple high-level visits from both sides. How do you view the changing dynamic?

- Since the new government came in, we have had very high-level visits. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended President Solih's swearing-in ceremony. I was in New Delhi a week after taking office, preparing for the visit of President Solih, who was in Delhi a month after being sworn in. The recent visit by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj cemented many aspects of the cooperation agenda we have been drawing up.
- The level of cooperation between the two countries has never been better.
- We are continuously in contact, we speak to each other at the highest levels whenever there seems to be any difficulty, which is very rare. That is because the leaders have shown where they would like the [relationship between the] two countries to go. And for us Ministers and staff of the ministries in both countries, it is a question of delivering. We have to deliver.
- **The generous development assistance provided by the Indian government is deeply appreciated by the people of the Maldives.**
- It is going into people-oriented projects like providing fresh water, sanitation, sewerage. Building roads and moving the Male commercial harbour to Thilafushi [island west of Male] are huge projects that are going to be major symbols of cooperation between the two countries.

Between 2013 and 2018, then-President Yameen's administration was seen as tilting heavily towards China amid growing tensions with India. Given that China has also been an important partner for the Maldives and the latter's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, how does the geopolitical tussle

between the two big powers affect the Maldives?

- The mistake President Yameen made was to play India against China and China against India. That is a childish way of dealing with international relations; it will blow up in your own face. And that is what happened. No one trusted him.
- For us it is very clear. India and the Maldives might be very different, but the respect we have for each other is the main factor behind the friendship. Look at people-to-people contact. You have so many Maldivians living in India. We have so many Indians living in the Maldives.
- At times of need, we have always seen India as the first respondent. And that is something that the people of the Maldives really appreciate. On November 3, 1988, when mercenaries attacked the Maldives, India was the first to respond. In 2004, when the tsunami hit us, Indian naval ships were despatched to assist us. During the last government's term, we had the Male water crisis. Within four hours we had Indian Navy and Air Force vessels deliver water.
- Of course, China has been a good friend, it has helped in many of the development projects in the Maldives. China is also going to be one of the largest economies in the world. We can't say that we will not have any relations with China because we have to appreciate what countries do for the people. If we have to choose between friends, or if we are forced to choose between friends, then we can't see our relationship go very far.
- **Because of the geopolitical location of the Maldives, the government has a huge responsibility, which is to provide freedom of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean.** The Eight Degree Channel is one of the major maritime lanes of the world. We need stability, maturity and democratic systems to function in the Maldives so that peace and security can be maintained in the Indian Ocean.

The issue of India-gifted helicopters in the Maldives has remained politically sensitive, especially since the Yameen government asked New Delhi to withdraw them. Among the people, is there a sense that a big neighbour might be trying to wield influence here?

- I think there are a few people who are trying to spread hatred. All I have seen these two helicopters do is humanitarian work. They transport children, or elderly people, or someone who has suffered a stroke for immediate medical attention.
- Our islands are many and very widespread. We need this kind of assistance. I would ask the hate-mongers to go and speak to the families, who are very grateful. The helicopters are under the control of the Maldivian security services and much of what the hate-mongers say are lies.

What about the physical presence of the Indian military personnel? Is that a reason for discomfort for some?

- For these hate-mongers it is. But it is not the first time we are having technical people on the ground from different countries. These are not military personnel stationed in barracks. There is no military presence of any foreign force in the Maldives.

Earlier, you pointed to renewed dynamism in Male-New Delhi relations. More broadly, what is your vision for the Maldives's relationship with the rest of the world?

- The Maldives has been alienated in the past five years. The foreign policy of the [then] government was so one-sided that the credibility of the country was eroded.
- During the last three months, President Solih visited India and the UAE. Since I was appointed Foreign Minister, I have met Foreign Ministers, Ambassadors, Presidents, Prime Ministers and Vice-Prime Ministers of 50 countries so far. I utilise my travels to conferences, to the UN and other meetings to connect with other countries so that they will understand that the Maldives is back.

How do you see the political landscape in the region changing?

- We are a government that came to office promising reform and people-oriented development, both social and economic. Once we start implementing these reforms, they will realise that democracy functions. And in a democracy, we would have room for dissent, but you don't have to go to the extreme. You don't have to buy into hatred in order to attain power. Power comes from the people and once people in large numbers start saying no to ultra-nationalism and hate politics, then we will be able to move forward.

F. Tidbits

1. Voter awareness campaign at Banswara

- Doctors at government hospitals in Banswara district of Rajasthan have joined the voter awareness campaign.
- They affix the seal with the punch line, 'Vote Karo Banswara', on prescription slips to encourage voters to exercise their franchise on the April 29.
- Chief Medical and Health Officer said the hospitals have also joined the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation programme.

G. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

H. Practice Questions for UPSC Prelims Exam

Q1) Consider the following statements:

1. Bagru Block printing is traditional technique of printing followed in Rajasthan.
2. It is done by the Chippa Community.

Which of the statement/s is/are correct?

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

Answer: c

Explanation: Bagru Block printing is a traditional technique of printing with natural colour done by the Chippa community in Bagru village of Rajasthan. The motifs printed at Bagru are large with bold lines. The motifs include wildflowers, buds, leaves and printed geometrical patterns. The main colors used in Bagru are Red and Black.

Q2) Consider the following statements:

1. Artillery gun Dhanush is the first long-range artillery gun to be produced in India.
2. It is an upgraded version of the Swedish 155-mm Bofors howitzers.

Which of the statement/s is/are correct?

- a. 1 only

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

Answer: c

Explanation: Self-explanatory

Q3) Consider the following statements:

1. Konyaks are one of the major Naga tribes.
2. They have the least population among the Nagas.

Which of the statement/s is/are correct?

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

Answer: a

Explanation: Konyaks are one of the major Naga tribes. The Konyaks have the largest population among the Nagas. They inhabit the Mon District-- also known as 'The Land of The Anghs'. Aoleng, a festival celebrated in the first week of April (1-6) to welcome the spring is the biggest festival of the Konyaks. Another festival, 'Lao Ong Mo', is the traditional harvest festival celebrated in the months of August/September.

Q4) Consider the following statements about Bramble Cay Melomys:

1. It is an island rodent.
2. It is considered Great Barrier Reef's only endemic mammal.

Which of the statement/s is/are correct?

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

Answer: c

Explanation:

Australia officially declared a Great Barrier Reef rodent extinct, making it the first mammal believed to have been killed off by human-induced climate change. The rat-like Bramble Cay melomys -- whose only known habitat was a small sandy island in far northern Australia -- has not been spotted in a decade. The Melomys rubicola, considered the Great Barrier Reef's only endemic mammal species, was first discovered on the cay in 1845 by Europeans who shot the "large rats" for sport.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Business-politician nexus has undergone a major transformation. Compare this in reference to the pre and post – LPG era and also comment on its implication to democracy. (15 Marks)
2. “Climate change is considered as a blessing in disguise”. Illustrate with examples. (15 Marks)

