

14 Oct 2020: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. eVIN network to handle COVID-19 vaccine supply

Context:

The Union Health Ministry has said that the eVIN network is being repurposed for the delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Details:

- eVIN is an indigenously developed technology system in India that digitizes vaccine stocks and monitors the temperature of the cold chain through a smartphone application.
- eVIN network can track the latest vaccine stock position; the temperature at a storage facility; geo-tag health centres; and maintain a facility-level dashboard.

This topic has been covered in the [3rd August 2020 PIB Summary and Analysis](#).

2. Single SBI branch for all FCRA accounts: govt.

Context:

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2020 was passed in the Parliament in September 2020.

Read more about this topic covered in the [22nd September 2020 CNA](#) and [25th September 2020 CNA](#).

Details:

- The Home Ministry has directed all NGOs seeking foreign donations to open a designated FCRA account at the State Bank of India's New Delhi branch by March 31, 2021 – as per the recent amendments.
- The Ministry's order has made it clear that the NGOs registered under FCRA shall not receive any foreign donations in any other bank account from April 1, 2021.
- All persons/associations/NGOs who are already registered under FCRA will get sufficient time to transition to the new system and can open accounts at NDMB (New Delhi Main Branch) till March 31, 2021.
- All fresh applicants for a certificate of registration or prior permission under the FCRA, 2010, shall have to first open the FCRA account in the NDMB to receive any foreign contribution.

3. Mehbooba Mufti released after 14 months

Context:

- The Jammu & Kashmir administration has revoked the detention of former Chief Minister and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti under the Public Safety Act (PSA).
- She had been under arrest for more than 14 months.

Public Safety Act has been covered on [17th September 2019 CNA](#). Also read about the changes made to PSA covered [in 2nd April 2020 CNA](#).

4. Court convicts 25 for lynching Assam doctor

Context:

A court in Assam's Jorhat has convicted 25 people for lynching a 73-year-old doctor more than a year ago.

The issue has been covered in the [21st April 2020 CNA](#). Also, read more on [the need for Comprehensive Law to protect Doctors](#).

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ECONOMY

1. Centre allows additional borrowing by 20 States

Context:

- The GST Council has failed to arrive at a consensus on the mode of borrowings to meet compensation shortfalls facing the States.
- Finance Ministry has permitted 20 States to raise ₹68,825 crore through open market borrowings.

Details:

- These 20 States had conveyed their acceptance of the first borrowing option offered by the Centre to meet GST compensation shortfalls.
- Under this, States could borrow ₹1.1 lakh crore from the market with principal and interest payments to be paid out of GST cess collections whose levy has been extended beyond 2022.

This topic has been comprehensively covered in [28th August 2020](#) and [30th August 2020](#) Comprehensive News Analysis.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. A concerted attack on RTI

Context:

- The year 2020 marks 15 years of the enactment of the [Right to Information \(RTI\)](#) law in India. In this context, the article analyzes the significance of the RTI Act and also evaluates some concerns regarding the weakening of the right to information regime.

Background:

Right to information as a fundamental right:

- The right to information has been upheld by the Supreme Court as a [fundamental right](#) flowing from **Article 19 of the Constitution (right to freedom)**.

- Article 19 guarantees every citizen the right to free speech and expression. Without access to relevant information, people's ability to formulate opinions and express themselves meaningfully is curtailed.
 - This observation was made in the **Kulwal v/s Jaipur Municipal Corporation case (1986)**.

RTI law in India:

- Every year nearly six million applications are filed under the RTI Act, making the RTI act of India, the most extensively used transparency legislation in the world.

Significance of the RTI law:

Increasing government accountability:

- The RTI law has allowed the citizens to hold governments accountable by seeking information. RTI has empowered citizens to question those who govern and hold them to account.
 - Example: During the COVID-19 crisis, the RTI law has been widely used to seek information about the availability of medical facilities, like ventilators and ICU beds.

Increasing transparency:

- Example: RTI applications have been filed to obtain information about the anonymous electoral bonds funding the political parties.
- **Increased transparency can help improve decision making by public authorities** by removing unnecessary secrecy.

Exposing corruption:

- The RTI Act by **reducing information asymmetries** has been instrumental in exposing corruption and arbitrary abuse of power by the state.
- By giving every citizen of India the right to access government files and records, the law has potentially created 1.3 billion whistleblowers and auditors.
 - RTI applications have helped expose wrongdoings in the organisation of the Commonwealth Games, and the allocation of 2G spectrum and coal blocks.

Empowering the marginalized:

- The RTI law has helped **empower the poorest and most marginalized sections of the society to access their basic rights and entitlements**, even in the absence of effective grievance redress mechanisms to address service delivery failures.
- National assessments have shown that a large proportion of the RTI applications are filed by the poorest and the most marginalised.
 - Example: The RTI Act has been used to hold government departments accountable for the delivery of foodgrains and social security benefits.

Empowering people vis-a-vis the highest authorities:

- People have used the RTI law to question the highest offices of the country.
 - Example: The Prime Minister's Office has been queried about the expenditure of the PM CARES Fund set up to provide relief during disasters like the current pandemic.

Deepening democracy:

- The RTI law has **enhanced people's participation in the democratic process** and has allowed the citizens to assert their citizenship.
- The right to information would be key to **strengthening participatory democracy and** ushering in **people-centred governance**.

Concerns:

- The article laments the recent amendments to the law and events, which it claims can have a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of the law and the institutions governing the law.

Amendment to RTI act:

- **The 2019 amendments to the RTI Act** has done away with the statutory protection of fixed tenure and high status conferred on the information commissioners. The new amendment allows the **Central Government to determine the tenure and salaries of all information commissioners**.
- This would have a negative impact on the **independence of the information commissioners**.
 - Information Commissions at the Centre and in the States are the final adjudicators empowered to act against violations of the RTI Act.

Also read: [Central Information Commission \(CIC\)](#)

Lack of timely appointments:

- The governments have not been appointing information commissioners in a timely manner.
 - Despite Supreme Court orders to fill all vacancies, six out of 11 posts of commissioners are currently vacant in the CIC, including that of the chief. Eight State Information Commissions are functioning without a chief. Two commissions — Tripura and Jharkhand — are totally defunct with no commissioners.
- This has severely **impeded the functioning of commissions**.
- Vacancies in Information Commissions lead to large backlogs of appeals/complaints and long delays in the disposal of cases, effectively frustrating the people's right to know.

Conclusion:

- The **right to question is the hallmark of a democracy** and any weakening of the RTI law or its implementation does not augur well for a democratic republic.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Quadrilateral home truths

Context:

- Recently, the **foreign ministers of Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. held a standalone meeting in Tokyo**. This move has been viewed in geo-strategic circles as a move towards formal recognition of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.
 - At the meet, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo singled out China as a threat to the region, highlighting its **increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea, the Mekong, the Himalayas and the Taiwan Straits**.

- The three other Foreign Ministers, including External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, did not directly mention China. They did, however, express broad concerns about **maintaining a rules-based order, freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes in the region.**

Background:

- The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the Quad) is an **informal strategic forum** between the United States, Japan, Australia and India that is maintained by semi-regular summits, information exchanges and military drills between member countries.
- The forum was initiated as a dialogue in 2007 by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan.
- It was often viewed as a loose, **consultative entente of like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific**. However, China's increasing assertiveness vis-a-vis in its neighbourhood and increasing differences with the U.S., Australia and the border skirmishes with India seems to have breathed fresh life into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

Details:

- The article argues that if the Quad is to prosper as a geopolitical construct, it should pay heed to the following aspects.

No Indo-Pacific system:

- There has been no such thing as an 'Indo-Pacific system'. There have always been two Asian systems — an Indian Ocean system and an East Asian system — with intricate sub-regional balances.
- Even the sprawling colonial powers like the British never managed to combine the Indo and the Pacific into a unitary system. The current efforts to artificially manufacture an Indo-Pacific system should be evaluated in this sense.

'Balance of power' system:

- The Quad, though not officially declared, is aimed at containing China's increasing assertiveness by ensuring a **'balance of power' system**.
 - The post-18th century European 'balance of power' system involved the 'flanking powers' (Britain and Russia) resisting revisionist challengers to periodically restore the continent's equilibrium.
- The Indo-Pacific's 'flanking powers', India and Japan, have never balanced Chinese power throughout their histories. This seems to indicate the **growing asymmetry between China and its neighbours.**

India's dilemma:

- India's increasing alignment with the Quad and any decision to choke important sea lines of communication for the Chinese shipping and resource flows could invite overwhelming Chinese pressure against India's South Asian interests — to which the other Quad members possess neither will nor desire to answer.
 - The sea lines of communication constitute an important link between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific and India occupies a strategic location with respect to these sea lines.
- The Quad can offer very little leverage to **India's continental two-front dilemma** it faces vis-a-vis China and Pakistan.
- India needs to use the sea lines of communication chokepoint leverage judiciously on its own terms and not on the Quad's terms.

Utility of the Quad in the Indian Ocean region:

- The **Quad has a valuable role to play as a check on China's Indian Ocean ambitions.**
- India must develop interoperable cooperation with its Quad partners and, thereby, pre-emptively dissuade China from mounting a naval challenge in the Indian Ocean region.

Conclusion:

- Keeping with the views expressed by the Indian Prime Minister in his 2018 keynote address at the Shangri La Dialogue, where he emphasized India's willingness to work with its friendly nations individually or in group formats for a stable and peaceful region, and not as alliances of containment, India's aim of deepening its participation in the Quad should be to **nudge the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitics towards cooperation as opposed to conflict.**

For related information, refer to:

[CNA dated July 26, 2020: The confluence of four powers and two seas.](#)

2. Crisis in Caucasus

Context:

- The ongoing fighting between Armenian rebels and the Azerbaijani Army in [Nagorno-Karabakh](#).

Background:

For information on the historical background of the issue, refer to:

[CNA dated Sep 30, 2020: Why are Azerbaijan and Armenia fighting again?](#)

- Though Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a Russia-mediated ceasefire, the truce crumbled immediately amid a blame game.

Concerns:

- The **fighting risks becoming a wider regional conflict given the dangerous external interventions in the mostly regional issue.**
- Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, seems determined to press ahead with its offensive. Turkey has called Armenia a threat to peace in the region.
- Turkey under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been trying to expand its geopolitical reach to the former Ottoman regions and the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is an opportunity for it to enter the South Caucasus.
- **Armenia is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)** and houses a Russian military base. In a wider conflict, Armenia could trigger Article 4 of the CSTO treaty and ask for Russian help. And if Moscow responds favourably, that would pit Russia against Turkey, a [NATO](#) member.

Conclusion:

- There is an urgent need to understand the volatile situation and call off the hostilities. Instead, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Karabakh rebels should go back to the ceasefire and open up diplomatic channels.

3. The Arab World and the elusive two-state solution

Context:

- The article discusses the normalization of ties between Israel and the Arab nations of UAE, Bahrain and its impact on the Palestinian cause.

Details:

This issue has been covered previously in the following articles:

[CNA dated Sep 15, 2020: What's next for Palestine?](#)

[CNA dated Aug 16, 2020: How will the Israel - UAE pact impact the Gulf?](#)

[CNA dated Dec 4, 2019: One state push for Israel and Palestine](#)

F. Prelims Facts

1. Air quality dips in Delhi, Gurugram

What's in News?

The air quality of Delhi touched the 'very poor' category.

SAFAR:

- SAFAR – the state-of-the-art Air Quality and Weather Forecast system was launched by the Ministry of Earth Sciences.
- It is operationalized by the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

To know more about SAFAR System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting, [Click here](#).

G. Tidbits

1. India's economy to contract by 10.3% this fiscal, says IMF

What's in News?

The [IMF](#) has published the World Economic Outlook October 2020 report titled, "A Long and Difficult Ascent".

- Except for China, where output this year was expected to exceed 2019 levels, the advanced, developing and emerging market economies are expected to see lower output even next year.
- The labour market has become more polarised, with low-income workers, women and youth being hit harder.

2. Pak. likely to remain on FATF greylist

What's in News?

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF's) plenary session for October 2020 has been scheduled. The [FATF](#) plenary was earlier scheduled in June but was postponed due to Covid-19.

- Pakistan is unlikely to exit the Financial Action Task Force (FATF's) greylist, with six key areas outstanding where Pakistan has yet to show progress.
- As per its latest evaluation, Pakistan has cleared 21 of 27 action points laid down by FATF for it to be removed from the "grey list".
- If Pakistan comes out of the FATF 'Grey List', it will be easy for the country to get financial aid from the IMF, [World Bank](#), ADB and the European Union, helping improve its precarious financial situation.
- If not removed off the list, Pakistan may move to a blacklist of countries that face severe economic sanctions.
- The blacklist refers to countries for whom there has been a call to action or are placed under strict banking and international financial sanctions. The blacklist of FATF presently includes Iran and North Korea.
- In February 2020, the FATF had given Pakistan a four-month grace period to complete its 27-point action plan against money laundering and terror financing (ML&TF) committed to the international community.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Which of the following pollutants are considered by SAFAR to measure air quality?

1. Mercury
2. Carbon Dioxide
3. Ozone
4. Toluene
5. Benzene

Choose the correct option:

- a. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5
- b. 1, 3, 4 and 5 only
- c. 3, 4 and 5 only
- d. 2 and 3 only

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: b

Explanation:

Pollutants monitored by SAFAR to measure the air quality are: PM2.5, PM10, Ozone, Carbon Monoxide (CO), Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x), Sulfur Dioxide (SO₂), Benzene, Toluene, Xylene, and Mercury.

Q2. India is a member of which of the following?

1. Financial Action Task Force (FATF)
2. Eurasian Group (EAG)
3. Asia Pacific Group (APG)

Choose the correct option:

- a. 1 and 3 only
- b. 1 only
- c. 1, 2 and 3
- d. None of the above

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: c

Explanation:

- India is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Eurasian Group (EAG) as well as Asia Pacific Group (APG).
- India became an Observer at FATF in 2006. In 2010 India was taken in as the 34th country member of FATF.
- The Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (EAG) was established on 6 October 2004 in Moscow by the decision of the Inaugural Conference and at the initiative of the Russian Federation, supported by the FATF, IMF, World Bank and several other countries. The EAG is an FATF-style regional body and became an Associate Member of the FATF in June 2010.
- Pakistan is not a member state of FATF. It is an FATF Associate Member of the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG). FATF Asia-Pacific Group is one of the regional affiliates of the Financial Action Task Force.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to eVIN:

1. It is an indigenously developed technology system that digitizes vaccine stocks and monitors the temperature of the cold chain through a smartphone application.
2. It is an initiative by the Ministry of Health and Family Affairs that started in 2004 with the assistance of the World Bank.
3. It is being implemented under the National Health Mission (NHM).

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

- a. 1 and 2 only
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1 and 3 only
- d. 1, 2 and 3

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: c

Explanation:

- In 2015, in partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, UNDP supported the Government of India to launch the electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN), an electronic logistics management information system (eLMIS) that uses smartphone and cloud-based technology to capture real-time data across the entire vaccine cold chain, from the zonal store depots to the last-mile health facilities.
- Electronic Vaccine Intelligence Network (eVIN) is an indigenously developed technology system that digitizes vaccine stocks and monitors the temperature of the cold chain through a smartphone application.
- It is being implemented under the National Health Mission (NHM) by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Q4. "Aquaponics" refers to:

- a. The technique of cultivating, harvesting, freshwater and saltwater fish as well as shellfish in a controlled environment.
- b. The technique of growing plants without soil.
- c. The technique used for regulating water temperatures to prevent Coral Bleaching.
- d. The technique of growing both fishes as well as plants in an integrated manner.

CHECK ANSWERS:-

Answer: d

Explanation:

- Aquaponics is an emerging technique in which both fishes as well as plants are grown in an integrated manner.
- Aquaponics is a combination of aquaculture and hydroponics.
 - Aquaculture is growing fish and other aquatic animals.
 - Hydroponics is growing plants without soil.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the Right to Information (RTI) law and analyze how the recent amendments to it and the inefficient implementation of the Act has had a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of the law and the institutions governing the law. (15 marks, 250 words)(GS Paper 2/Polity and Governance)
2. India's aim of deepening its participation in the Quad should be to nudge the Indo-Pacific region's geopolitics towards cooperation as opposed to conflict. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)(GS paper 2/International Relations)

