

24 Jan 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Biden govt. to review U.S.-Taliban deal

Context:

- The new US administration under President Joe Biden has expressed its intention to review the landmark U.S. deal with the Taliban.

Background:

The US Taliban peace deal:

- The US had struck a deal with the Taliban in Qatar in late 2020, to begin withdrawing its troops in return for security guarantees from the Taliban.
- The Taliban had committed to cut ties with terrorist groups, to reduce violence in Afghanistan, and to engage in meaningful negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders in a bid to kick start peace talks with the Afghan government.
- The deal envisaged a peace process with a robust and regional diplomatic effort, to help achieve a durable and just political settlement and permanent ceasefire in Afghanistan.

Post deal scenario:

- There has been recent progress made on women and minority groups' rights as part of the peace process.
- However, violence across Afghanistan has surged despite the ongoing negotiations. Deadly attacks and high-profile assassinations have increased in recent months, particularly in Kabul where several journalists, activists, judges and politicians have been murdered. Though the Taliban has denied responsibility for these killings, but Afghan and U.S. officials have blamed the group for the attacks. This has led to accusations of the Taliban not living up to its commitments.

Details:

- The newly appointed US National Security Adviser has stated that the US wants to ascertain if the Taliban is living up to its commitments agreed as part of the deal.

Afghan government's response:

- The US's move to review the deal has been welcomed by the Afghan government, given the speculation surrounding the new US administration's Afghan policy.
- The Afghan government has been stating that the agreement had failed to achieve its stated goals given the Taliban's failure to live up to its commitments under the deal.

2. Settling the frontiers

Context:

- China has been undertaking development of border villages and resettling new residents along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that separates India and China.

Details:

- The development of new villages has been part of the Chinese state plan to build moderately well-off villages in border areas. Under the plan, 628 “first line and second line villages” referring to those right on the border and others in remote areas slightly further within would be redeveloped in the prefectures of Ngari, Shigatse, Shannan, and Nyingchi, along China’s borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.
- In some areas, small hamlets, with one or two herding households are being expanded into larger permanent settlements.
- China has been building necessary supportive infrastructure to support the increasing population in these border areas. This includes new houses as well as a hydropower generator and transmission infrastructure that connects the villages to the national grid.

Concerns:

Disputed borders:

- Some of the settlements China builds on the border are in disputed territories. This could have serious consequences for India and Bhutan, which share disputed borders with China.
- The new village of Pangda, built in 2020 is 2-3 km into what Bhutan sees as its land.
- Recently another newly built village, barely 30 km from Yumai and 4-5 km into what India sees as its territory in Arunachal, came to light via satellite images.

Chinese unilateralism:

- National security appears to be the abiding priority behind this developmental plan. This seems to be a deliberate policy of the Chinese state to use these settlements as guardians of Chinese territory and boost their national security.
- These civilian settlements would allow China to solidify its territorial claims and effectively settle the dispute unilaterally.

C. GS 3 Related

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. More flash droughts in India by end of century

Context:

- A new study has pointed out that India could experience increasing number of flash droughts by the end of this century.

Background:

Flash droughts:

- Flash droughts are those that occur very quickly, with soil moisture depleting rapidly. Normally, developing drought conditions take months, but the flash droughts happen within a week or two. This increases the vulnerability of the human beings by lessening the time available to react to the developing drought.
- Several factors including atmospheric anomalies, anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions play an important role in the occurrence of flash droughts.

Flash droughts in India:

- The top five flash droughts based on the overall severity score occurred in 1979 followed by 2009, 1951, 1986 and 2005.
- In 1979, India faced a severe flash drought, affecting about 40% of the country and taking a toll on agriculture. Big agricultural production states like Uttar Pradesh and Andhra were affected, and the country suffered a loss of about ₹5,000 crores.

Details:

- The study sought to predict the future flash droughts using a Community Earth System Model which simulates the summer monsoon precipitation, sea surface temperature, role of El Nino Southern Oscillation, and air temperature over India.
- The study also examined the role of greenhouse gas emissions, industrial aerosols, and land-use/land-cover change in the advent of flash droughts.

Concerns:

Increased risk:

- The ongoing climate change has caused a significant increase in global temperature and this can lead to more and more flash droughts in the coming years.
- The duration, intensity, and area vulnerable to the flash drought are expected to rise.
- The study showed a considerable rise in the frequency of extremely dry and hot years in the coming three decades. The frequency of concurrent hot and dry extremes is projected to rise by about five-fold, causing an approximately seven-fold increase in flash droughts like 1979 by the end of the 21st century.

Impact on human life:

- The increased frequency of flash droughts can have deleterious implications for crop production, irrigation demands and groundwater abstraction in India.

Way forward:

GHG mitigation:

- By meeting the 'Paris Agreement' goals and limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees C, the numbers and frequency of the projected flash droughts may go down.

Predicting flash droughts:

- Flash-drought prediction ahead of time using operational meteorological forecasts will help manage irrigation water demands and avoid considerable losses in agriculture.

Category: ECONOMY

1. Draft policy to help grow nano, micro enterprises

Context:

- Draft policy on the Udyog Sahayak Enterprises Network (USENET).

Details:

- The proposed Udyog Sahayak Enterprises Network framework draft has been put together by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and Azim Premji University.

USENET Framework approach:

- The approach is based on the belief that India rather than creating more nano-entrepreneurs, should rather focus on helping existing MSEs grow in size. The framework is aimed at providing a slew of growth-driven services to over 62 million nano and micro-enterprises that currently employ over 100 million people in India.
- The USENET framework aims to create a countrywide entrepreneurial network. The platform will give the nano and micro-enterprises, facing growth challenges, information on policies, government schemes and credit options, and visibility to lenders and customers and thereby help them grow. The framework will also create a support system to help these enterprises adopt new technologies, and increase productivity.
- The Union government is likely to sanction upto ₹5,000 crore to part-fund CAPEX to set up at least 19 lakh USENET centres. Each of these centres will be headed by a Udyog Sahayak, who will have a mandate to help and monitor the growth of 15 to 50 enterprises

Significance:

- This new policy may give a major fillip to the growth-stunted nano and micro-enterprises in India's informal sector.
- By enabling scale-up of nano and micro enterprises, USENET can aid in the creation of an additional 10.3 million jobs over five years, going up to nearly 56.9 million jobs over 10 years. Hence it holds the potential to grow and create a large number of jobs.
- The framework is expected to boost the value-added per worker potential and this alone could bring in a 12% nominal growth in GVA (gross asset value), amounting to an economic value of Rs. 2.16 lakh crore in five years and over Rs. 19 lakh crore at the end of 10 years.

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. U.S. & climate action

Context:

- After assuming office as President of the United States, Joe Biden has signed an order to restore U.S.A's participation in the United Nations Paris Agreement on climate change.

Background:

USA's changing stance on climate change talks:

- The U.S., under George W. Bush, had pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol, in 2001.
- Under President Barack Obama, the U.S. played an active role in climate negotiations. This culminated in the Paris Agreement of 2015 premised on voluntary targets for national emissions cuts.
- The US had withdrawn from the Paris Climate deal under the Donald Trump administration.
- The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement meant that the U.S. was no longer bound by its national pledge made under the pact: to achieve an economy-wide reduction of its GHG emissions by 26%-28% below the 2005 level in 2025.
- The U.S. also stopped its contribution to the UN's Green Climate Fund, to which it had pledged \$3 billion, after transferring an estimated \$1 billion.

Details:

Trump era policies:

- The Trump regime focused on relaxing controls on emissions from fossil fuel-based industries, diluting standards on air quality and vehicular emissions, hydrofluorocarbon leaking and venting from air-conditioning systems.
- It also restrained individual States such as California from setting higher standards, revoking protection for natural habitats, including the Arctic sought by the oil and gas industry, and for individual wildlife species.
- In all, more than 100 environmental rules were tinkered with by the administration. The ability of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to enforce the law was weakened.

Biden regime policies:

- Biden has formed a high-powered team to lead clean development and has placed climate change among the administration's priorities.
- The current administration has promised an enforcement mechanism to achieve net-zero emissions no later than 2050. The government would incentivize the shift by a planned federal investment that will total \$1.7 trillion over ten years, besides private investments.
- The plan also emphasizes on creating around 10 million well-paying clean energy jobs with a focus on solar and wind power. The plan envisages active support for carbon capture, utilisation and storage, and a renaissance in green transport.

Significance:

- There would be profound implications of U.S. President Joe Biden rejoining the Paris climate agreement.

Expected reduction in emission from the US:

- The U.S. accounts for 15% of global GHG emissions and is also the biggest legacy contributor of atmosphere-warming gases.
- Significantly, 10% of U.S. emissions are methane, which has a greater warming effect than CO₂, and 81% is carbon dioxide. The rest is made up of nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases.
- These emissions could be expected to reduce under the new administration.

Impetus for climate action:

- The Plan for Climate Change and Environmental Justice advocated by the Biden camp during the election campaign promises the U.S.'s strong support for multilateralism. This bodes well for the global climate talks.
- The Plan for Climate Change and Environmental Justice also calls for accountability from other countries, including the top emitter, China, on GHG emissions. Nations that default could face carbon adjustment fees or quotas. This could force all nations to work towards climate action.
- 2021's UN climate conference in Glasgow could see the new administration engaging UNFCCC member-nations to raise global ambition.

Category: HEALTH

1. Testing the efficacy of a nasal SARS-CoV-2 vaccine

Context:

- Recently, the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation recommended granting permission for phase 1 human clinical trials for Bharat Biotech's nasal COVID-19 vaccine, BBV154.

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.

F. Prelims Facts

1. India-France air exercise concludes

- The India-France air exercise Desert Knight 2021 concluded recently.
- A first-of-its-kind bilateral exercise, Rafale aircraft from both sides along with Su-30 MKI and Mirage 2000 aircraft of the IAF undertook joint missions.

2. HAL to deliver three combat helicopters soon

- Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) is scheduled to deliver the first batch of three indigenous light combat helicopters (LCH) to the Army and the Air Force.

- The Army variant of the light utility helicopter (LUH) is a three-tonne helicopter positioned as replacement for the Cheetah and Chetak helicopters.

G. Tidbits

1. IAS officers in Odisha adopt schools to improve quality

- Senior IAS officers in Odisha have come forward to adopt Odia-medium schools to improve quality education and basic infrastructure.
- These around 20 IAS officers would be mentoring schools making the initiative one-of-its-kind in the country.

2. Punjab to build fiscal information platform

- The Punjab government has signed an agreement with the eGovernments (eGov) Foundation to build a first-of-its-kind fiscal information exchange platform. The platform will facilitate real-time availability of financial information to the stakeholders.
- This will aid in data-driven and efficient deployment of public funds and policy making.
- This will also help the state to better monitor and track its financial health and allow it to adapt to dynamic and evolving needs such that available funds can be deployed actively to meet its development agenda and priorities.

3. WHO chief thanks Modi for 'continued support'

- World Health Organization chief has thanked the Indian Prime Minister for his continued support to the global COVID-19 response.
- India has announced its assistance of vaccines to the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal and also countries like Brazil.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. The National Security directive deals with which of the following?

- a. Defence manufacturing
- b. Telecom sector
- c. Border protection
- d. Money laundering

Answer: b

Explanation:

- In a bid to tighten the security of the communications network, the Centre government of India had recently announced the National Security Directive for the telecom sector, which will mandate service providers to purchase equipment from trusted sources.

Q2. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to the Poona pact of 1932?

1. It was signed in the Yerawada jail.
2. It sought to provide separate electorate for the depressed classes.

Options:

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

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The Poona Pact was an agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on behalf of depressed classes and upper caste Hindu leaders on the reservation of electoral seats for the depressed classes in the legislature of British India government.
- The Poona Pact was signed in the backdrop of the communal award which sought to provide separate electorate for the depressed classes. This was opposed by the nationalists as this was viewed as a move by the British to divide the Indians on caste lines.

Q3. Which of the following is the correct explanation of 'SPICe+'?

- a. Promotion of export of spices from India
- b. The long endurance UAV developed by DRDO
- c. Electronic form for incorporation of companies
- d. Platform for global co-operation on vaccine development.

Answer: c

Explanation:

- SPICe+ stands for Simplified Proforma for Incorporating Company electronically Plus.
- SPICe+ aims to offers 11 services by three Central Government Ministries and Departments (Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Ministry of Labour and the Department of Revenue in the Ministry of Finance) and two State Governments (Maharashtra and Karnataka). The form is an integrated web form with a single-window for multiple services.

Q4. Which of the following is the name of the recently concluded India-France air exercise?

- a. Desert Knight
- b. Blue Flag

- c. Red Flag
- d. Dark Pitch

Answer: a

Explanation:

- The India-France air exercise Desert Knight 2021 concluded recently.
- A first-of-its-kind bilateral exercise, Rafale aircraft from both sides along with Su-30 MKI and Mirage 2000 aircraft of the IAF undertook joint missions.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. There would be profound implications of the U.S. rejoining the Paris climate agreement. Discuss. (10 marks, 150 words)[GS 3-Environment and Ecology]
2. An intranasal delivery mechanism for COVID-19 vaccines has several advantages over the injection and oral forms. Comment. (10 marks, 150 words)[GS 2-Health]