

## 11 Mar 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

#### **1. Indo-Pacific is key priority: White House**

### Context:

- The first-ever **Quad** leaders' summit-level meeting under the Biden administration.

### Details:

- The planned meeting would be a virtual meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan.
- A range of issues is likely to be discussed, including **COVID-19, economic cooperation and the climate crisis.**

### Significance:

#### **Reiterating U.S.'s commitment to Indo-Pacific and the Quad:**

- This would be one of President Biden's earliest multilateral engagements. The early scheduling of the Quad summit signifies the group's importance for the Biden administration and also the importance the administration places on the Indo-Pacific.
- It signals the **U.S.'s commitment to the Indo-Pacific.** It portrays the U.S intent to deepen its engagement with the Quad nations.

#### **Scope for cooperation and collaboration:**

- The Quad carries the potential for the member nations to pool their capabilities and build habits of cooperation to address some of the common interests, with **maritime security** being the foremost.

#### **The China angle:**

- Despite labelling China as its biggest competitor, the Biden administration has been careful to not portray the Quad as being China focussed. However, the Quad provides a unique platform to **counter the increasing assertiveness of the Chinese in the Indo-Pacific.**

## **2. What does Biden's peace plan mean for Afghanistan?**

### Context:

- The Joe Biden administration has proposed a new peace plan to the Afghan government and the **Taliban.**

### Background:

### U.S.-Taliban deal:

- According to the agreement signed between the U.S. and the Taliban in February 2020, **American troops are set to leave Afghanistan by May 1.**

For more information on this refer to:

[CNA dated Mar 2, 2020.](#)

- The Taliban and the Afghan government started **peace talks in Doha** in September last year but reached no breakthrough. Violence has continued unabated.
  - The talks are aimed at reaching a consensus on Afghanistan's future constitutional and governing arrangements with the formation of a **new “inclusive government”** and **“permanent and comprehensive ceasefire”** being the top agenda.

### Details:

#### American proposal:

- The U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has proposed a **UN-led conference of representatives** of Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the U.S. to discuss a unified approach to support peace in Afghanistan. Mr. Blinken has also proposed a senior-level meeting of the Afghan government and the Taliban in Turkey.
- The U.S. would try to accelerate the ongoing talks between the Afghan leadership and the Taliban by **sharing written proposals through the U.S.'s special envoy for Afghanistan.**
- The U.S. administration has made a **renewed push for an interim unity government.**
  - As per the Biden administration's own assessment, the Taliban are on the ascent. The new administration believes that the best way to prevent a complete Taliban takeover is a regional peace process and an interim unity government.

#### The Afghanistan government's stand:

- The Afghanistan administration has consistently been critical of the U.S.'s direct outreach to the Taliban and making concessions to the Taliban.
- It has been vocal about the right of the elected representatives as being the only legitimate representatives of the Afghan people in making decisions related to Afghanistan. The administration has reiterated its opposition to any transfer of power except through elections.

### Concerns:

#### Worsen security situation:

- If American troops are pulled out of Afghanistan, it is very likely that the security situation will worsen and that the **Taliban could make rapid territorial gains.**

#### **Ascent of the Taliban:**

- Despite the Afghan government's opposition to sharing power with the Taliban, it seems to have very less options.
- If the Afghan government rejects the American offer, the war will continue. The withdrawal of the U.S. troops will place the Afghan government in a tough spot. If the government accepts the proposal, it will have to share power with the Taliban and discuss amendments to the Constitution and the future governance framework. **Either way, the Taliban are set to make gains.**

#### **Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE**

##### **1. Kerala HC restrains Centre on IT rules**

#### **Context:**

- Online legal news portal challenges the new IT regulations.

#### **Background:**

- The government recently notified the [IT \(Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code\) Rules, 2021](#) regulating digital news media, curated content (OTT platforms), and social media intermediaries.

#### **For more information on this refer to:**

[CNA dated Feb 28, 2021.](#)

#### **Details:**

- The Kerala High Court has restrained the Centre from taking coercive action against Live Law Media Private Ltd., which owns a legal news portal, for not complying with the new IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

#### **Petitioner's stand:**

#### **Excessive regulation:**

- The petition claims that Part III of the rules imposing a three-tier complaint and adjudication structure on publishers would make it virtually impossible for small or medium-sized publishers to function.
- The petition also claims that the creation of a grievance redressal mechanism, through a governmental oversight body amounted to excessive regulation.

#### **Against constitutional rights:**

- Rule 4(2), which makes it mandatory for every social media intermediary to enable tracing of originators of information on its platform violates Article 19(1)(a) ([freedom of speech and expression](#)).
- The rules obligating messaging intermediaries to alter their infrastructure to “fingerprint” each message on a mass scale for every user to trace the first originator were violative of the **fundamental right to privacy** of Internet users.

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### **E. Editorials**

**Category: ECONOMY**

#### **1. A case for a revamped, need-based PDS**

##### **Context:**

- The recent [Economic Survey](#) has flagged the issue of **the growing food subsidy bill in India**. As per the government’s own admission the food subsidy bill is increasingly becoming unmanageably large.

##### **Background:**

##### **National Food Security Act:**

- The National Food Security Act ([NFSA](#)) came into force in July 2013.
- It extended **entitlements of food grains to almost two-thirds of the country’s population**.

- The law requires the authorities to provide to **each beneficiary 5 kg of rice or wheat per month.**

### Details:

- The withdrawal of food grains by States from the central pool under various schemes has increased over the years.
- During the last three years, the quantity of food grains annually drawn by States has hovered around 60 million tonnes to 66 million tonnes. However, by December 2020, the Centre set apart 94.35 million tonnes to the States under different schemes including the NFSA and additional allocation, meant for distribution among the poor free of cost.

### Concerns:

#### **Rising food subsidy:**

- Food subsidy has been on a perpetual growth trajectory.
  - During 2016-17 to 2019-20, the subsidy amount, clubbed with loans taken by the [Food Corporation of India \(FCI\)](#) under the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF) towards food subsidy, was in the range of Rs. 1.65-lakh crore to Rs. 2.2-lakh crore. **In future, the annual subsidy bill of the Centre is expected to be about Rs. 2.5-lakh crore.**
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded this with the revised estimate of the food subsidy pegged at about ₹23-lakh crore, excluding the extra-budgetary resource allocation of ₹84,636 crore.

#### **Issue prices:**

- Though the NFSA in 2013, envisaged a price revision after three years, **the Central Issue Price (CIP) has remained at Rs. 2 per kg for wheat and Rs. 3 per kg for rice for years now.**

#### **Political compulsions:**

- It would be extremely difficult to reduce the economic cost of food management in view of rising commitment towards food security and **the government's reluctance to not disturb the NFSA norms or increase the prices owing to political compulsions.**

#### **Financial viability:**

- The insistence of **keeping the retail prices of food grains at fair price shops at the present low levels**, even after the passage of nearly 50 years and achieving substantial poverty reduction in the country goes against the financial sustainability of the system.

- As per the **Rangarajan group's estimate in 2014, the share of people living below the poverty line (BPL) in the 2011 population was 29.5% (about 36 crore).**
- The mere increase in the CIPs of rice and wheat without a corresponding rise in the issue prices by the State governments would only increase the burden of States, which are already reeling under financial stress.

### **Way forward:**

- PDS is a **useful tool to counter the challenge of extreme poverty and hunger** and hence the dismantling of it is not a solution.
- Also, given the fact that the [PDS](#) system **helps support the farmers through government procurement of their produce**, it might not be advisable to replace the in-kind provision of food subsidy of the PDS system with Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT).
- The Centre should have a **relook at the overall food subsidy system.**

### **Revising NFSA coverage:**

- The centre should revisit NFSA norms and coverage. The government **could look at decreasing the quantum of coverage under the law, from the present 67% to around 40%.**
- For all ration cardholders drawing food grains, a “give-up” option, as done in the case of cooking gas cylinders, can be made available.
- Though the States have been allowed to frame criteria for the identification of PHH cardholders, the Centre can play a critical role in nudging the states into pruning the number of beneficiaries under the NFSA system.

### **Relook at the pricing mechanism:**

- With respect to the pricing mechanism, **the existing arrangement of flat rates should be replaced with a slab system.** Leaving the poor and needy sections, other beneficiaries can be made to pay a little more for a higher quantum of food grains.

### **Conclusion:**

- A revamped, need-based PDS is required not just for **cutting down the subsidy bill** but also for reducing the scope for leakages. There should be a political will to take the necessary steps.

### **Additional information:**

- Diversion of food grains and subsidy leakage is another serious cause of concern.



- Reforms implemented in the PDS through various steps, including end-to-end computerisation of operations, digitisation of data of ration cardholders, seeding of Aadhaar, and automation of fair price shops have helped address this concern to an extent.

**For related information refer to:**

**[CNA dated Oct 19, 2020.](#)**

**Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY**

## **1. Regulation redux**

### **Context:**

- The Supreme Court's notice to the Centre on a public interest plea to **set up a national environmental regulator under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.**

### **Concerns:**

#### **Government's reluctance to set up a national environmental regulator:**

- Successive governments have preferred to ignore the Supreme Court's observations on the need for a national environmental regulator.
- In 2011 and 2014, the Centre had rebuffed the apex court on the question of forming an independent regulator, contending that its orders in the **Lafarge mining case** were only in the nature of a suggestion.

#### **Ease of doing business over environmental conservation:**

- The current official policy seems to privilege ease of doing business over environmental conservation.
  - The environmental clearances under forest, wildlife, air and water quality laws seem to be heavily weighted in favour of promoters.
  - Prominent environmentalists have pointed out major concerns with respect to the **draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020.**
    - The 2020 notification **reduces civil society's role in the EIA process.** It does not encourage the public to voice its views and report violations. The EIA seems to overlook the views of communities that would be displaced, and are ill-equipped to assess the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services such as clean air, water and farm productivity.



- The EIA process even as per the 2006 notification has been critiqued for neglecting the **inherent conflict of interest** in its provisions given that the proponent of a project is itself responsible for producing the EIA report.
- There are serious questions being raised over the credibility of the EIA process, given the increasing instances of the EIA report being produced with the help of **dubious expertise and manipulated data**.

#### **Concerns with respect to regulations:**

- The **laggardly pace** at which the multiple departments process project proposals have not only resulted in the **raising of transaction costs** but also created a sense of uncertainty among the investors. This has aided in the clamour to dispense with regulation.

#### **Conclusion:**

- The government must **recognise the limits to extractive growth** and work towards preserving the integrity of the environment. India cannot afford to degrade its forests, rivers, wetlands and air, whose health is vital for its large population.
- The Centre and States must **acknowledge the conflict between the need for economic growth and environmental conservation**.
- **Administrative reforms** can aid in sustainable environment management and the setting up of a **neutral national environmental regulator** could be the first step in this direction.

#### **Category: HEALTH**

##### **1. Diagnosing gestational diabetes**

#### **Context:**

- The article discusses the concerns associated with gestational diabetes and makes relevant recommendations in this direction.

#### **Gestational diabetes:**

- **Pregnancy is a diabetogenic stress** and as a consequence, some **women develop a transitory form of diabetes during pregnancy called gestational diabetes**.
- Women of Indian (South Asian) origin are considered to be at the highest risk of gestational diabetes.
  - The International Diabetes Federation (IDF) estimates that up to 25% of pregnancies in South Asia may be affected by hyperglycemia in pregnancy. In India, it varies from about

10% in rural areas to about 30% in urban areas. **About 27 lakh to 30 lakh women develop gestational diabetes each year.**

### Concerns:

#### **Impact on health of mother and child:**

- Gestational diabetes is associated with a significantly increased **risk of complications during pregnancy** such as preeclampsia (fits during pregnancy), postpartum haemorrhage and sepsis, stillbirths, premature delivery, increased risk of neonatal deaths due to respiratory distress, neonatal hypoglycaemia and birth injuries.
- All these conditions contribute to **high maternal and newborn morbidity and mortality.**
- **Children born to women with gestational diabetes are also at very high risk of obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.**

#### **Impact on health of women post-pregnancy:**

- If a woman gets gestational diabetes, it **increases the risk of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases in such women.**
- Almost half the women with gestational diabetes go on to develop Type 2 diabetes within 10 years without preventive care.
  - Diabetes is a major public health problem in India with an estimated 7 crore adults with diabetes. Diabetes has a detrimental impact on our health system, economic productivity and the individual's life and family.

#### **Lack of awareness:**

- Despite the significant health threat posed by gestational diabetes, there is a lack of public awareness about gestational diabetes as well as low awareness and capacity within the health systems for testing and providing care.
  - Around 3.5 crore adults in India suffer from prediabetes and remain **undiagnosed till late complications set in.**

## **F. Prelims Facts**

### **1. Cabinet clears fund for health care**

- The Union Cabinet has approved the **Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi (PMSSN).**
  - The new fund collected from the proceeds of **Health and Education Cess** would function as a **single non-lapsable reserve fund for health.**

- In the 2018 Budget, the Central government announced the replacement of the existing 3% Education Cess by **4% Health and Education Cess**.
  - The administration and maintenance of the PMSSN is entrusted to the Health Ministry.
- The major benefits of PMSSN will be the enhanced access to universal and affordable health care through the availability of earmarked resources while ensuring that the amount does not lapse at the end of the financial year.

## 2. Modi to flag off Dandi March in Ahmedabad

- The Salt March, also known as the Salt Satyagraha, Dandi March and the Dandi Satyagraha, was an act of **nonviolent civil disobedience** in colonial India led by Mahatma Gandhi.
- The twenty-four-day march lasted between March and April in 1930.
- The march spanned almost 240 miles from **Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi**.
- It marked a direct action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the **British salt monopoly**.

Read more on the [Salt Satyagraha](#) in the linked article.

## 3. Navy inducts third Scorpene submarine

- The Navy inducted the **third Scorpene class conventional diesel-electric submarine, INS Karanj**, into service.
  - The Scorpene-class submarines are a class of diesel-electric attack submarines. It features diesel propulsion and an additional **air-independent propulsion (AIP)**.

## 4. CISF celebrates its 52nd Raising Day in Ghaziabad

- The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) celebrated its 52nd Raising Day at Ghaziabad.
- The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) is a **Central Armed Police Force in India** and is governed by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs.
- It was set up under an Act of the Parliament of India.
- The CISF provides **security cover to industrial units, government infrastructure projects and facilities** and establishments located all over India. Industrial sectors like atomic power plants, space installations, mines, oil fields and refineries, major ports, heavy engineering, steel plants, barrages, fertiliser units, airports and hydroelectric/thermal power plants owned and controlled by Central Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), and currency note presses producing Indian currency are protected by CISF.

## G. Tidbits

### 1. Work on floating solar power plant in final stages

- The **country's biggest floating solar power plant till date**, by generation capacity, is being developed by the NTPC in the reservoir of its thermal plant at **Ramagundam in Peddapalli district, Telangana**.
- This plant has a generation capacity of about **100 megawatts**.

## 2. U.S. Defense Secretary to visit India

- **American Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin will be soon visiting India as part of his maiden visit abroad.** The Secretary will also visit Japan and South Korea and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii. The planned visit would help reinforce the U.S.'s commitment to the Indo-Pacific.
- Cooperation, regional security challenges are expected to be discussed. Issues surrounding the **deepening of the U.S.-India Major Defence Partnership** and advancing cooperation between the countries for a free, prosperous and open Indo-Pacific and Western Indian Ocean Region are high on the agenda.
  - India and the U.S. have witnessed a deepening of their security partnership. **Growing Chinese assertiveness has also brought them closer in terms of security cooperation.**

## H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

**Q1. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct with respect to the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi (PMSSN)?**

1. It constitutes a non-lapsable reserve fund for health.
2. It constitutes the proceeds from the Health and Education Cess.
3. It is administered by the Finance ministry.

**Options:**

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

**Answer: a**

**Explanation:**

- The Union Cabinet has approved the Pradhan Mantri Swasthya Suraksha Nidhi (PMSSN).
- The new fund collected from the proceeds of Health and Education Cess would function as a single non-lapsable reserve fund for health.

- In the 2018 Budget, the Central government announced the replacement of the existing 3% Education Cess by 4% Health and Education Cess.
- The administration and maintenance of the PMSSN is entrusted to the **Health Ministry**.
- The major benefits of PMSSN will be the enhanced access to universal and affordable health care through the availability of earmarked resources, while ensuring that the amount does not lapse at the end of the financial year.

**Q2. Which of the following is incorrectly matched?**

- a. Dandi March: 1930
- b. Rowlatt Satyagraha: 1920
- c. Launch of Quit India Movement: 1942
- d. Champaran Satyagraha: 1917

**Answer: b**

**Explanation:**

- The Salt March, also known as the Salt Satyagraha, Dandi March and the Dandi Satyagraha, was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in colonial India led by Mahatma Gandhi. The twenty-four-day march lasted between March and April in 1930. The march spanned almost 240 miles from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi. It marked a direct action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly.
- On 6 April 1919, Mahatma Gandhi started a non-violent Satyagraha against the unjust [Rowlatt Act](#) passed by the British government.
- On 8 August 1942, at the All-India Congress Committee session in Bombay, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi launched the 'Quit India' movement.
- The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 was the first Satyagraha movement led by Gandhi in India and is considered a historically important revolt in the Indian Independence Movement. It was a farmers' uprising that took place in the Champaran district of Bihar, India, during the British colonial period.

**Q3. Which of the following correctly describes the recently inducted INS Karanj?**

- a. Scorpene class submarine
- b. Nuclear submarine
- c. Fast Patrol vehicle
- d. Corvette

**Answer: a**

**Explanation:**

- The Navy recently inducted the third Scorpene class conventional diesel-electric submarine, INS Karanj, into service.
- The Scorpene-class submarines are a class of diesel-electric attack submarines. It features diesel propulsion and an additional air-independent propulsion (AIP).

**Q4. India's largest floating solar power plant till date is being set up in which of the following states?**

- a. Karnataka
- b. Rajasthan
- c. Gujarat
- d. Telangana

**Answer: d**

**Explanation:**

- The country's biggest floating solar power plant till date, by generation capacity, is being developed by the NTPC in the reservoir of its thermal plant at Ramagundam in Peddapalli district, Telangana.
- This plant has a generation capacity of about 100 megawatts.

## I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. The growing food subsidy bill in India is a grave concern. Discuss the reasons for the same and suggest measures required for cutting down the food subsidy bill. (15 marks, 250 words) (GS paper 3/Economy)
2. The setting up of a national environmental regulator under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 would be a critical step towards sustainable environment management in India. Analyze (10 marks, 150 words) (GS Paper 3/Environment and Ecology)