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B. GS 2 Related

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. India-Australia aim for ‘early harvest’ trade pact by Dec.

Context:
The trade ministers of India and Australia have agreed to speed up trade negotiations.

Details:
- Australia and India are in ongoing negotiations over the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) which is expected to provide a significant boost to two-way investment and further strengthen the bilateral economic relationship.
- Formal negotiations for the CECA were launched in 2011 and were advanced in 2017.
- A road map is being discussed for concluding a CECA, beginning with the early harvest accord.
- The aim is to reach an interim early harvest pact by December 2021 for liberalising the bilateral flow of goods and services.
- The negotiations take into account the views of business, industry and other stakeholders, and decided to start consultations on the potential opportunities and impacts of an interim agreement as a pathway to a full CECA.

Also read: [India – Australia relations](#)

2. Afghan situation uncertain, says India

Context:
External Affairs Ministry has noted that there is no clarity on any entity forming a government in Afghanistan.

Read more on this issue covered in [Aug 25th, 2021 CNA](#) and [Aug 27th, 2021 CNA](#).

C. GS 3 Related

Category: SECURITY

1. ISKP, the group behind Kabul blasts

Context:
Recently, several explosions were recorded at Kabul’s Hamid Karzai Airport.

Details:
The Afghan offshoot of the terror organization Islamic State, known as ISIS-Khorasan, ISKP or ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attacks.

It was one of its biggest attacks in Afghanistan, killing over 180 people in the capital.

**Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP):**

- ISKP gets its name from the Khorasan Province, an area that once included wide swaths of Afghanistan, Iran and central Asia in the Middle Ages.
- IS-K originally emerged in Pakistan as an armed student group belonging to the umbrella organization, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.
  - Fearing persecution at home, they fled across the border to Afghanistan and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and IS chief Baghdadi in 2014.
- IS officially absorbed the terrorists into their own network and announced its expansion into Central Asia as IS-K. At the time, IS was at the height of its power in Iraq and Syria and was able to provide financial and personnel support to its offshoot in Afghanistan.
  - That support has largely dried up.
  - However, according to the UN, the IS leadership in Syria and Iraq, which has since gone underground, still maintains contact with ISKP.

**ISKP v/s Taliban:**

- An ideological gulf separates the two militant groups. While the IS belongs to the Salafist movement of Islam; the Taliban adhere to the Deobandi school.
- Divided by ideology and goals, ISKP and the Taliban have been locked in bloody battles with one another for some time.
- The IS-K took arms against the Taliban in 2017 when they drove the Taliban out of the mountainous Tora-Bora region.
  - Tora-Bora’s deep tunnel system was where al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden had initially taken refuge from US retaliatory strikes following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.
- While the Taliban seems content with an emirate for themselves within Afghanistan, the Islamic State group in Afghanistan and Pakistan strives to establish a caliphate throughout South and Central Asia.
- ISKP has between 500 and 1,500 fighters in Afghanistan and has strengthened its positions in and around the capital, Kabul, where it carries out most of its attacks. The group hopes to broaden its ranks by recruiting disaffected Taliban fighters who reject the recent peace talks with the US.
- IS is also counting on an influx of fighters from Syria, Iraq and other conflict zones.

**Category: ECONOMY**

1. Centre to ease path for monetisation

**Context:**

The finance minister recently unveiled the National Monetisation Pipeline.

This topic has been covered in [Aug 27th, 2021 CNA](https://byjus.com).
Details:

- The finance minister will chair a meeting of the Financial Stability and Development Council (FSDC) to nudge financial regulators to relax and harmonise investment norms for instruments such as Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvITs) to be used to monetise public assets such as highways, gas pipelines and railway tracks.
- FSDC is entrusted with enhancing coordination among financial sector regulators — RBI, SEBI, IRDA and PFRDA.

Issue:

- The existing investment guidelines for insurance and pension funds limit the exposure of such funds to InvIT/REIT (Real Estate Investment Trusts) assets.
- The NITI Aayog has emphasised the importance of expanding the investor base and scale of monetisation instruments such as InvITs and REITs, and flagged concerns about regulators taking varying stances on such investments.
  - For instance, SEBI has recently reduced the minimum investment amount for InvITs and REITs to ₹10,000-₹15,000 to enable retail investors to participate.
  - The Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) as well as the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) have permitted investments of up to 5% of their corpus in InvITs, albeit with onerous conditions.
  - The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA) has allowed an exposure to InvITs and REITs up to 3% of insurers’ fund size or 5% of the units issued by a single trust, whichever is lower.
  - Mutual funds can invest up to 10% of their assets in a single InvIT/REIT.
- These need to be streamlined to ensure consistency.

Infrastructure Investment Trusts (InvITs):

- Infrastructure Investment trusts (InvITs) are mutual fund-like institutions that enable investments into the infrastructure sector by pooling small sums of money from a multitude of individual and institutional investors for directly investing in infrastructure.
- The InvIT is designed as a tiered structure with a sponsor setting up the InvIT which in turn invests into the eligible infrastructure projects either directly or via special purpose vehicles.
- In India, InvITs are governed by SEBI (Infrastructure Investment Trusts) (Amendment) Regulations, 2016.

Category: ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY

1. Deepor Beel breathes easy after eco-sensitive zone notification

Context:
The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has notified the eco-sensitive zone of Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary on the southwestern edge of Guwahati.

Deepor Beel:

- Deepor Beel is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Assam.
- It is Assam’s Ramsar Site and an Important Bird Area.
Elephants regularly visit the wetlands from adjoining Rani and Garbhbanda Reserve Forest and the wetlands are an integral part of the elephant habitat.

Besides, 12 species of reptiles, 50 species of fish, six species of amphibians along with 155 species of aquatic macro-biota have been recorded in the sanctuary.

Read more on Deepor Beel Wetland, Wildlife Sanctuary

Issue:

- The wetlands have for decades been threatened by a railway track which is set to be doubled and electrified on its southern rim, a garbage dump and encroachment for human habitation and commercial units.
- Deepor Beel has been used as a sponge for Guwahati’s sewage via a couple of streams.
- The wetlands have also suffered from seepage of toxins from a garbage dump.

Eco-Sensitive Zones:

- Eco Sensitive Zones are fragile areas around protected areas declared by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC).
- They are areas notified by the MoEFCC around Protected Areas, National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries.
- The purpose of declaring ESZs is to create some kind of “shock absorbers” to the protected areas by regulating and managing the activities around such areas.
- Among activities prohibited in the eco-sensitive zone are hydroelectric projects, brick kilns, commercial use of firewood and discharge of untreated effluents in natural water bodies or land areas.
- No new commercial hotels and resorts shall be permitted within 1 km of the boundary of the protected area or up to the extent of the eco-sensitive zone, whichever is nearer, except for small temporary structures for eco-tourism activities.

Read more on Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ).

2. Ministries agree to allow 7 Himalayan hydel projects

Context:
As part of an ongoing case on the feasibility of hydroelectric projects in the aftermath of the 2013 Uttarakhand floods, seven projects have been allowed to complete construction primarily on the grounds that they were over 50% complete.

Details:

- The seven projects are the Tehri Stage 2, Tapovan Vishnugadh, Vishnugadh Pipalkoti, Singoli Bhatwari, Phata Bhuyang, Madhyamaheshwar and Kaliganga 2.
- No other new projects would be allowed in the upper reaches of the Ganga and those sanctioned would have to abide by environment regulations that prescribe a minimum flow in the river at all times.

Issue:

- Activists have raised concerns that two projects, Singoli Bhatwari and Phata Bhuyang, which were specifically linked to the Kedarnath tragedy have been allowed.
The Vishnugadh project damaged in the February 2021 floods too has been allowed to progress even though 200 plus people died due to the criminal negligence of there not being a disaster warning system.

Hydropower projects, dams and construction activities are affecting the fragile Himalayan region making them susceptible to disasters.

This issue has been covered in Aug 21st, 2021 CNA.

**Category: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY**

1. Indian astrophysicists spot rare merger of three jumbo black holes

**Context:**
A rare merging of three supermassive black holes has been spotted by a team of astrophysicists from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA).

**Note:**
- Many Active Galactic Nuclei (AGN), or supermassive black hole at the centre of a galaxy, pairs have been detected in the past, but triple AGN are extremely rare, and only a handful have been detected before using X-ray observations.

**Details:**
- All three merging black holes were part of galaxies in the Toucan constellation.
- The group observed these galaxies with a near infrared telescope in South Africa.
- The study used data from:
  - the Ultraviolet Imaging Telescope (UVIT) on board the first Indian space observatory ASTROSAT
  - the European integral field optical telescope called MUSE mounted on the Very Large Telescope (VLT) in Chile
  - infrared images from the optical telescope (IRSF) in South Africa.

**Merging of supermassive blackholes:**
- It is explained that if two galaxies collide, their black holes will also come closer by transferring the kinetic energy to the surrounding gas.
- The distance between the black holes decreases with time until the separation is around one parsec (3.26 light-years). The two black holes, however, are then unable to lose any further kinetic energy to get even closer and merge. This is known as the final parsec problem.
- But the presence of a third black hole can solve this problem.
- The two can come closer when another black hole or a star passes by and takes away some of their combined angular momentum.
- Thus, the dual merging black holes merge with each other in the presence of a third.

**D. GS 4 Related**

Nothing here for today!!!
E. Editorials

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Near and present

Context:
Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) has claimed responsibility for the horrific explosions at Kabul’s Hamid Karzai Airport.

Concerns:

- The attack has proven the Taliban’s new regime is unable or unwilling to curb the terror threat stemming from the country.
- There are also suspicions of some collusion within the Taliban regime.
  - The Haqqani group that is securing Kabul and the airport periphery, (a UN-designated terror entity) has carried out attacks with the IS-K in the past.
- This suicide bombing has shattered the remaining optimism the world had that the West pulling out forces and handing the country over to the Taliban, as part of negotiations in Doha, would result in a more peaceful Afghanistan.

Impact on India:

- The U.S. maintains that it continues to coordinate with the Taliban on security.
  - This further sets the seal on any idea of investigations or operations against the Taliban.
- The situation will further pose challenges to India’s already hostile borders in consonance with threats from Pakistan at the LoC and support to cross-border terrorism, as well as China’s LAC aggressions.
- This is an alarming scenario, the Government must now acknowledge and prepare for the threats to India.

Way Forward:

- New Delhi must focus on diplomacy to highlight its concerns. The beginning must be with the UN where India will have a unique role.
  - As a UNSC member and President, India must ensure that the UN’s most powerful body does not appear helpless in the face of the Taliban’s challenge.
- India must assert the need for the Taliban regime to recognise human rights, adopt some form of representation for its people, and distance itself from terror groups, should it want recognition.
- India must ensure that the Haqqani group, including its chief Sirajuddin Haqqani who is the Deputy to Taliban chief Haibatullah Akhundzada, is not included in the official power structure.
  - The group has been responsible for terror and suicide attacks on Indian consulates and the Embassy in particular in 2008-09.
- As Chairman of the 1988 Sanctions Committee that lists 135 Taliban members as designated terrorists, India must stand firm on any move to ease sanctions on them, including travel, funds access and weaponry.
• The UN General Assembly (UNGA)’s accreditation committee must also decide on whether to allow a future Taliban-led government to occupy Afghanistan’s seat.
• It is important that India’s position on the Afghan situation and its impact on Indian security are articulated strongly.
• While the External Affairs Minister said the Government is pursuing a “wait and watch” policy, it must be taken into consideration that India does not enjoy the luxury of distance from the ticking time bomb in India’s neighbourhood.
• Developments in Afghanistan will have a significant impact on India too.

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. Filled to the nines

Context:
President of India has signed the recommendation for the appointment of nine new judges to the Supreme Court.

• The Centre has approved all names recommended by the Supreme Court Collegium led by Chief Justice of India NV Ramana for appointment as apex court judges.

Details:
• The President of India has signed warrants of appointment within days of the Collegium recommending eight High Court judges, including three women, and a lawyer for elevation.
• This is the first time nine names have been cleared at one go for judge’s assignments at the Supreme Court.
• The Supreme Court’s working strength has now risen to 33.
• The sanctioned strength is 34 judges including the Chief Justice of India.
• Judicial vacancies and delays in appointments have been a major cause of delays in justice delivery.
• It is nearly two years since Supreme Court appointments were made.

Significance:
• The latest round of appointments possibly signifies the onset of an era in which the two branches (executive and judiciary) agree more and agree faster on the Collegium’s recommendations.
• The presence of three women and the fact that different High Courts are getting representation are positive features and augur well for increasing diversity on the Bench.
• India might, in the near future see its first woman Chief Justice of India (CJI).
• The trend of appointing members of the Bar directly to the Supreme Court continues with the honour going this time to former Additional Solicitor-General, P.S. Narasimha.

Note:
Under the memorandum of procedure that governs the appointment and transfer of judges, the Centre can raise objections over collegium recommendations but has to accept if the collegium reiterates the names.

Read more on Colloquium System and NJAC for Appointment of Judges

Conclusion:
The opaque collegium system is sustained only by the belief that it is a protection against executive intervention. This most important purpose of its existence should not be lost sight of. Going forward, there must be lesser impasse in judicial appointments, quicker processing of names, and greater consideration to social and regional representation.

Category: ECONOMY

1. Asset monetisation — execution is the key

This issue has been covered in Aug 27th, 2021 CNA.

F. Prelims Facts

1. India added 557 new species to faunal wealth in 2020, says ZSI

What’s in News?

As per a document published recently by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), India has added 557 new species to its fauna.

- The number of faunal species in India has climbed to 1,02,718 with the discovery of the new species.
- The 557 new species include 407 new species and 150 new records.
- Among the new species, some interesting species discovered in 2020 are:
  - Trimeresurus salazar, a green pit viper discovered in Arunachal Pradesh;
  - Lycodon deccanensis, the Deccan wolf snake discovered in Karnataka;
  - Sphaerotheca Bengaluru, a burrowing frog named after the city of Bengaluru.
  - Xyrias anjaalai, a deep water species of snake eel from Kerala;
  - Glyptothorax giudikyensis, a species of catfish from Manipur;
  - Clyster galateansis, a species of scarab beetle from the Great Nicobar Biosphere.

G. Tidbits

Nothing here for today!!!

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Consider the following statements:

1. Ten Degree Channel separates the Nicobar Islands from the Andaman Islands.
2. Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve is included in the list of Man and Biosphere Program of UNESCO.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

a. 1 only
b. 2 only
c. Both
d. None
Answer: c

Explanation:

- Ten Degree Channel separates the Nicobar Islands from the Andaman Islands.
- Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve is included in the list of Man and Biosphere Program of UNESCO.
- Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) is an intergovernmental scientific program, launched in 1971 by UNESCO that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments.

Q2. The Battle of Jamrud was fought between

a. British Empire against the Konbuang Dynasty
b. Timurids under Babur and the Afghans under Ibrahim Lodi
c. Gorkhali army of the Kingdom of Nepal and the British forces of the East India Company
d. Emirate of Afghanistan and the Sikh Empire

Answer: d

Explanation:
The Battle of Jamrud was fought between the Emirate of Afghanistan and the Sikh Empire in 1837. It was the last effort made by Emir Dost Mohammad Khan to recapture the former Afghan winter capital of Peshawar.

Q3. Consider the following statements:

1. Upstream Oil and Gas Industry includes the searching for potential underground or underwater crude oil and natural gas fields.
2. Companies that handle operations in the Upstream oil and gas sector are closest to the customers.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

a. 1 only
b. 2 only
c. Both
d. None

Answer: a

Explanation:
The oil and gas industry is usually divided into three major components: upstream, midstream and downstream.

The upstream industry includes searching for potential underground or underwater crude oil and natural gas fields, drilling exploratory wells, and subsequently drilling and operating the wells that recover and bring the crude oil or raw natural gas to the surface. The upstream is sometimes known as the exploration and production (E&P) sector.

The midstream sector involves the transportation (by pipeline, rail, barge, oil tanker or truck), storage, and wholesale marketing of crude or refined petroleum products.

Downstream operations are oil and gas processes that occur after the production phase to the point of sale. This sector of the oil and gas industry—the final step in the production process—is represented by refiners of refined products.
petroleum crude oil and natural gas processors, who bring usable products to end-users and consumers. They are closest to the customers.

Q4. A ‘black hole’ is a body in space which does not allow any radiation to come out. This is due to its

a. Large Size  
b. Small Size  
c. Low Density  
d. High Density

Answer: d

Explanation:
A black hole is a celestial body of extreme density and high gravitational pull that does not reflect or emit radiation. It is a body in space that does not allow any radiation to come out. This is due to its High Density.

Q5. With reference to Balance of Payments, which of the following constitutes/constitute the Current Account? (UPSC 2014)

1. Balance of trade  
2. Foreign assets  
3. Balance of invisibles  
4. Special Drawing Rights

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

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

Answer: c

Explanation:
- The nation’s current account is its imports, exports, net income, asset income, and direct transfers.
- It consists of Balance of Trade and Balance of Invisibles.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. The recent appointment of nine judges to the Supreme Court at one go is a welcome sign of cooperation between the judiciary and the executive. It augurs well for diversity and representation. Comment. (250 words; 15 marks)[GS-2, Polity]

2. India does not have the luxury of distance from the ticking bomb in its neighbourhood. Discuss in the context of emerging security dynamics in South Asia. (250 words; 15 marks)[GS-2, International Relations]