

BIMSTEC AS KEY TO A NEW SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL ORDER

Context

- As the SAARC Charter Day is observed on 8th Dec, the article discusses the need to look at other regional instruments such as Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (**BIMSTEC**), because the **chances of reviving SAARC are slim** in the current scenario.
- On December 8 in 1985, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Charter was adopted in Dhaka, during the first summit of the grouping.

About SAARC



- **Composition:** It is an intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of 8 South Asian countries founded on December 8, 1985, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
 - SAARC also includes 9 formally recognized observers including the European Union, the US, Iran and China.
- **Secretariat:** The SAARC Secretariat is located in Kathmandu (Nepal) to promote economic growth in South Asia.
- **Objective:** The prime focus of SAARC is to work collectively to promote the welfare of people in the region and to improve their standard of living through social progress and economic development.
- **Summits:** The SAARC summits are usually held biennially and hosted by member states in alphabetical order. It has organized 18 summits since 1985 and the first SAARC Summit was held in Dhaka (Bangladesh).

Present status of SAARC

- SAARC, with 21% of the world population and a gross GDP of approx. USD 3 trillion, has been in existence for 38 years, **but its influence** as compared to other regional cooperation such as the European Union, ASEAN, and the African Union **is lacking**.

- Despite close age-old geographical, historical, cultural, social, and economic ties, SAARC is currently considered as the **least integrated regional cooperation**.
- Few achievements of SAARC are SAFTA in 2006, SAARC Development Fund, Integrated Programme of Action (2012), SAARC Satellite, etc.

Reasons behind poor integration of the region

- **Lack of political will:** The lack of political will of India and Pakistan hinders progress and development of the regional grouping.
- **Indo-Pak rivalry:** SAARC's functioning and activities have virtually stalled because of the strained relations between India and Pakistan. For instance, since 2014, no SAARC summit has taken place leaving the organisation practically expired.
 - The 2016 SAARC summit that was to be hosted by Pakistan was also stalled after India pulled out of the summit in the aftermath of the Uri terror.
 - Hence, the deterioration in India-Pakistan relations has coincided with the incapacitation of SAARC as a regional organisation.
- **Terrorism:** SAARC Region is also one of the most terror prone regions of the world with frequent tensions and unrest within the member countries as well as amongst the members.
- **Lack of economic integration:** SAFTA launched in 2006 has not been able to achieve success due to continued tension and cold Indo-Pak relations.
 - With the gross GDP of SAARC nations being approx. US \$3 trillion, it is one of the most emerging development regions in the world.
 - However, the enormous market demand of the world across sectors such as industry, services like hospitality and IT, agriculture and health have not been met with similar thrust by SAARC nations due to lack of economic integration.
 - This has resulted in market exploitation by **China** and other global market players.
- **Recent developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan:** For example, the **evolving socio - economic situation in Afghanistan** with the establishment of Taliban regime.
 - Pakistan's recurring economic crisis, continuation in FATF grey list, limited financial support from Islamic and Western countries may fuel a serious humanitarian crisis in times to come.

- **China's diplomacy:** China which earlier wanted to be a member of SAARC was prevented by India in becoming a member. Therefore, China never wants SAARC to be a strong organization. And is trying to establish relations with the member states of SAARC excluding India.

Conclusion

- The bilateralism can at best complement, not substitute, regional or multilateral efforts that can deliver prosperity in the South Asian region
- Thus, India can successfully use the instrument of bilateralism and stop looking at SAARC through the lens of Pakistan to pursue its interests. Simultaneously, reviving SAARC by infusing political energy into it is required from India.
- However, in the current scenario, this is too idealistic. Therefore, strengthening BIMSTEC by updating its Charter will be an ideal way forward for India.

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (ILO)

Big industry do not follow labour standards in India, representatives of worker unions said at the ongoing Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting of the International Labour Organization (APRM of ILO).



About:

- The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the United Nations agency for the world of work.
- **Mandate:** Its mandate is to advance social and economic justice through setting international labour standards.
- **Motto:** ILO's mandate as the basis for peace is expressed today as Decent Work for all.
- **HQ:** Geneva, Switzerland.
- **Parent organization:** Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.
- It is also a member of the United Nations Development Group (UNDP), a coalition of UN organization aimed at helping meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

- **History:**It was created in 1919, as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, to reflect the belief that universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if it is based on social justice. In 1946, the ILO became a specialized agency of the newly formed United Nations.
 - **Members:**The ILO has 187 member states: 186 out of 193 UN member states plus the Cook Islands.
 - **Structure:**It is the only tripartite U.N. agency, that brings together governments, employers and workers' representatives of 187-member States.
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RIGHT OF PRISONERS

The State of Punjab has recently furthered the cause of right to life and personal liberty of prisoners by allowing conjugal visits for inmates.



Conjugal rights:

- Conjugal rights are rights created by marriage, that is, the right of the husband or the wife to the company of their spouse.
- In the context of prisons, however, conjugal visits refer to the concept of allowing a prisoner to spend some time in privacy with his spouse within the precincts of a jail.
- **Impacts:**
 - It is often argued that conjugal visits can have positive impacts in the form of psychological health benefits for prisoners, preservation of marital ties and, reduction in the rates of homosexuality and sexual aggression within prisons.
- Aside from the above, it is also argued that conjugal visits are a **fundamental right of the spouses of the prisoners.**
- Prisoner rights are internationally recognised through the **United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights etc.**
- Through such instruments, prisoners are guaranteed the right to life and inherent dignity.
- The right to maintain family relations including conjugal visits are included in these treaties.

- Most prison Acts and Rules across the country accept the importance of maintenance of continuity in family and social relations.
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INDIA'S NUCLEAR POWER PROGRAMME

According to the Union Government, India plans to build more nuclear power plants to increase the production of clean energy. The government has recently approved five new sites for nuclear power plants and given the financial go-ahead to build 10 700-MW pressurized heavy water reactors.



India has a 3-stage nuclear programme.

- The 3-stage nuclear programme is developed with the aim of utilizing the vast Thorium reserves in India (about 25% of the world)
- Besides India has limited availability of Uranium reserves (about 2% of the world's uranium reserves)
- **1st Stage**
 - Pressurized Heavy Water Reactors are based on natural uranium that contains 99.3% U-238 and 0.7% U-235.
 - U-235 being fissile sets up the chain reaction and U-238 being non-fissile gets converted to Pu-239 as a byproduct (spent fuel) which is in turn used in the Fast Breeder Reactors in the 2nd
- **2nd Stage**
 - Fast Breeder Reactors are primarily based on Plutonium.
 - Further the breeder reactors use mix of Plutonium-239 produced in the 1st stage and U-238 that is abundantly found on earth to produce Plutonium inside the reactor.
 - **Note** that U-238 is not fissile material and thus cannot set up chain reaction.
 - Since the amount of Plutonium produced inside the reactor is more than that initially used, it is called Breeder reactor.
 - In order to increase the probability of neutron hitting U-238, these reactors do not use a moderator to slow down neutrons and thus they are called Fast Breeder Reactors.

- Once the Plutonium-239 is completely used, Thorium is introduced in the reactor to convert it into U-233 that will be used in 3rd
- **3rd Stage**
- Thermal Breeder Reactors uses U-233 that is produced in the 2nd stage using thorium-232.
- Thorium is also not radioactive and thus not fissile.
- Since these reactors also produce U-233 out of Thorium-232 they are called breeder reactors.
- India has abundant thorium reserves in the form of monazite sand, and therefore the 3rd stage is critical for India's nuclear energy basket.

ONLINE BETTING

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry has recently asked Google to comply with its advisory to refrain from publishing or broadcasting advertisements of online betting platforms or any surrogate product depicting them.



About:

- The latest guideline was issued by the Ministry in October after it noted violations of a previous advisory in June 13, 2022, as some online offshore betting platforms had started using news websites as a surrogate product to advertise betting platforms on television channels.
- Online betting platforms were advertising themselves as professional sports blogs, sports news websites, etc. while providing an indicative list of online betting platforms which were using news for surrogate advertising.
- In view of the Guidelines for Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements for Misleading Advertisements-2022 under the Consumer Protection Act, read with the Advertising Code under the Cable TV Network Regulation Act, advertisements of the news websites that were in fact surrogate promotions, did not appear to be in strict conformity with the laws.

Betting and gambling:

- Betting and gambling, illegal in most parts of the country, pose significant financial and socio-economic risk for the consumers, especially youth and children, the advisory states.

- These advertisements on online betting are misleading and have the effect of promoting this largely prohibited activity.
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WILDLIFE PROTECTION AMENDMENT BILL INTRODUCED IN RAJYA SABHA

In News:

- Environment and Forest Minister Bhupender Yadav introduced in the Rajya Sabha a Bill to amend the **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972** to strengthen protection for endangered species and enhance punishment for illegal trade in wildlife.

About Wild Life (Protection) Amendment, 2022:

- The Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2022 was introduced in Lok Sabha by the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change in December, 2021.
 - The Bill was passed by the Lok Sabha in August, 2022.
- The Bill amends the **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**.
 - The Act regulates the protection of wild animals, birds and plants.
- The Bill seeks to increase the species protected under the law, and implement the **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)**.

Key Features of the Bill include:

- **CITES –**
 - CITES is an international agreement between governments to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten the survival of the species.
 - The **Bill seeks to implement provisions of CITES**.
- **Rationalising schedules –**
 - Currently, the Act has six schedules for specially protected plants (one), specially protected animals (four), and vermin species (one).
 - The Bill reduces the total number of schedules to four by –
 - Reducing the number of schedules for specially protected animals to two (one for greater protection level),

- Removes the schedule for vermin species, and
- Inserts a new schedule for specimens listed in the Appendices under CITES.
- **Obligations under CITES –**
 - The Bill provides for the central government to designate Management Authority and Scientific Authority.
 - As per CITES, the Management Authority may use an identification mark for a specimen.
 - **The Bill prohibits any person from modifying or removing the identification mark of the specimen.**
 - Additionally, every person possessing live specimens of scheduled animals must obtain a registration certificate from the Management Authority.
- **Invasive alien species –**
 - Invasive alien species refers to **plant or animal species which are not native to India** and whose introduction may adversely impact wild life or its habitat.
 - The Bill empowers the central government to regulate or prohibit the import, trade, possession or proliferation of invasive alien species.
- **Control of sanctuaries –**
 - The Act entrusts the Chief Wild Life Warden to control, manage and maintain all sanctuaries in a state.
 - The Chief Wild Life Warden is appointed by the state government.
 - The Bill specifies that **actions of the Chief Warden must be in accordance with the management plans for the sanctuary.**
- **Conservation reserves –**
 - Under the Act, state governments may declare areas adjacent to national parks and sanctuaries as a conservation reserve, for protecting flora and fauna, and their habitat.
 - **The Bill empowers the central government to also notify a conservation reserve.**
- **Surrender of captive animals –**
 - **The Bill provides for any person to voluntarily surrender any captive animals or animal products to the Chief Wild Life Warden.**
 - No compensation will be paid to the person for surrendering such items.

- The surrendered items become property of the state government.

About CITES:

- CITES, which stands for the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, is a global agreement among governments to regulate or ban international trade in species under threat.
- In the mid-20th century, governments were beginning to recognize that trade in some wild animals and plants had a devastating impact on those species.
- These species were being driven toward extinction through unsustainable use for food, fuel, medicine, and other purposes.
- And while individual governments could control what happened within their borders, they did not have a way to address the impacts of international trade in these species.
- In **1973**, 21 countries addressed this issue by signing the CITES agreement.

About the Agreement:

- CITES remains one of the cornerstones of international conservation.
- There are **184 member Parties** and trade is regulated in more than **38,000 species**.
- Representatives of CITES nations meet every two to three years at a Conference of the Parties (or COP) to review progress and adjust the lists of protected species.
- The **protected species are grouped into three categories** with different levels of protection –
 - **Appendix I** –
 - Includes the world's most endangered plants and animals, such as tigers and gorillas.
 - **Appendix II** –
 - Contains species like corals that are not yet threatened with extinction, but which could become threatened if unlimited trade were allowed.
 - **Appendix III** –
 - Species whose trade is only regulated within a specific country can be placed on Appendix III if that country requires cooperation from other nations to help prevent exploitation.

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT (FDI)

The Foreign Direct Investment into India is continuously increasing since 2014-15. In the last seven financial years, over 443 US billion dollars' worth of FDI inflows have come into the country.



About:

- Foreign direct investment (FDI) is an investment from a party in one country into a business or corporation in another country with the intention of establishing a lasting interest.
 - With FDI, foreign companies are directly involved with day-to-day operations in the other country.
 - FDI enters in India through either of the two routes:
 - **Automatic route**
 - The non-resident or Indian company does not require prior nod of the RBI or government of India for FDI.
 - **Government-approval route**
 - The government's approval is mandatory and the company will have to file an application through Foreign Investment Facilitation Portal.
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