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GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

1. India with Indonesia

Context: Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's visit to India, as chief guest at the Republic Day parade, was replete with the symbolism of historically important ties between the two countries, albeit short on concrete outcomes. India and Indonesia's ancient ties, that rest on trade and travel to the spread of an adapted form of Javanese Hinduism, as well as the use of Vedic scriptures and Sanskrit works, have given the two countries a formidable engagement. India and Indonesia were united by their aversion to great power politics and the creation of the non-aligned movement (NAM), beginning with the Bandung Conference.

India-Indonesia relations

- **Overview:** Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto arrived in India ahead of the 76th Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi, where he will be the chief guest.
- **Historical and Cultural Bonds:** India and Indonesia share a relationship that spans over two millennia, rooted in deep cultural and historical ties. Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam traveled to Indonesia from India, shaping its cultural and religious landscape. Post-independence, both nations shared aspirations for political sovereignty, economic self-sufficiency, and independent foreign policies, becoming significant voices in the Non-Aligned Movement.
- **Strategic and Diplomatic Engagements:** High-Level Visits and Agreements. Recent years have witnessed enhanced diplomatic exchanges-
 - *2018* - Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Jakarta led to the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and a shared vision on Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation.
 - *2024* - Prime Minister Modi and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto held discussions on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, emphasizing economic and security cooperation.
- **Defence and Security Cooperation:** India and Indonesia have a long-standing defense relationship, formalized in 1951 and further strengthened by agreements in 2001 and 2018. Key initiatives include-
 - *Joint Military Exercises* - Exercises like Garuda Shakti (Army), Samudra Shakti (Navy), and coordinated patrols (IND-INDO CORPAT).
 - *Defence Industry Collaboration* - The inaugural India-Indonesia Defence Industry Exhibition in 2024 showcased opportunities for cooperation in defence technology and manufacturing.
- **Bilateral Trade:** Indonesia is India's second-largest trading partner in ASEAN. Trade between the two nations was \$29.4 billion in 2023-24, driven by-
 - *Indian Imports* - Coal, crude palm oil, and rubber.
 - *Indian Exports* - Refined petroleum, telecommunication equipment, and agricultural products.
- **Investment and Connectivity:** *Indian Investments* - Indian businesses have invested over \$1.56 billion in sectors like mining, textiles, and infrastructure.
Connectivity Boost - Direct flights between major cities like Mumbai-Jakarta and Delhi-Bali have strengthened people-to-people ties and boosted tourism.
- **Cultural and Educational Collaboration:** *Cultural Engagement* - India operates two cultural centers in Jakarta and Bali, promoting yoga, classical dance, and music. Joint celebrations of International Yoga Day and conferences on shared heritage underscore the cultural bond.
Educational Cooperation - Indonesia is a key recipient of Indian scholarships under programs like ITEC and ICCR. Discussions on higher education MoUs aim to deepen collaboration in knowledge sharing.
- **Future Prospects:** India and Indonesia commemorate 75 years of diplomatic relations in 2024, with numerous initiatives celebrating their shared history and future aspirations. Strengthening trade, defence, and cultural cooperation remains central to their relationship, ensuring mutual growth and stability in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Conclusion:** The India-Indonesia bilateral relationship exemplifies a blend of historical camaraderie and strategic collaboration. As two vibrant democracies and emerging economies, their partnership is pivotal in shaping the regional and global landscape. With shared values and mutual respect, India and Indonesia continue to deepen their ties, fostering a prosperous and peaceful future.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

2. An enduring commitment to the Indo-Pacific

Context: The inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States marks an unparalleled comeback in American political history. The presence of the foreign ministers from India, Japan, and Australia — America's key Quad partners — at the inauguration underscores the strategic importance of this grouping in Mr. Trump's foreign policy vision. With the Indo-Pacific being central to U.S.'s strategic priorities, Trump 2.0 signals a renewed focus on deepening defence, economic, and technological cooperation with 'like-minded' nations to address persisting and emerging challenges, while ensuring regional stability.

Key points

- **Overview:** After Donald Trump's swearing-in, Quad foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to an open and free Indo-Pacific, opposing unilateral actions to alter the status quo through force or coercion.
- **Indo-Pacific:** The Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation. It is home to more than half of the world's population, and nearly 2/3rds of the global economy.
 - *Geo-spatial & strategic interpretation* - The Indo-Pacific is understood as an interconnected space between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, joined together by its main trading channel, the Malacca strait.
 - *India's definition* - The "Indo-Pacific" stretches from the Eastern coast of Africa to the Americas.
 - *USA's definition* - Indo-pacific extends up to the west coast of India which is also the geographic boundary of the US Indo-Pacific command to the Americas.
- **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD):** It is an informal multilateral grouping of India, the U.S., Australia, and Japan aimed at cooperation for a free and open Indo-Pacific region.
Recent initiatives - The Quad nations reaffirmed their commitment to a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific region in a joint statement commemorating 20 years of Quad cooperation.
- **Strategic Significance of Quad:**
 - Act East policy* - India's participation in the Quad emphasizing deeper engagement with East Asian nations and strengthening maritime security cooperation.
 - Military cooperation* - It provides a platform for military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises aimed at maintaining maritime security and ensuring the rule of law.
 - Counterbalancing China's Influence* - QUAD is crucial for India's interests in safeguarding its maritime trade routes and ensuring freedom of navigation in international waters.
- **Challenges Faced by the Quad:**
 - Divergent Priorities* - Each Quad nation has unique geopolitical and economic interests, leading to differences in prioritizing specific issues, such as trade, military cooperation, or climate change.
 - Navigating Regional Dynamics* - ASEAN nations have expressed concerns about the Quad overshadowing their centrality in Indo-Pacific security architecture.
- **Way Ahead:** With India set to host the Quad Summit in 2025, the group's renewed commitment and initiatives reflect its vision of an inclusive, prosperous, and stable Indo-Pacific. Clear communication about Quad's objectives is necessary to address concerns regarding its anti-China perception and ensure broader acceptance in the Indo-Pacific. Strengthening cooperation in emerging technologies, infrastructure, and climate resilience can help diversify Quad's agenda.

3. Environment Ministry panel clears new Sikkim dam despite its own concern

Context: Over a year after a glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) ravaged parts of Sikkim and washed away a 60-meter-high rockfill concrete dam of the 1200-MW Teesta-III hydel project. An environment ministry panel has cleared a proposal to build a new 118.64-meter-high concrete gravity dam in its place. This, without a fresh public hearing and even as the design aspects of the dam are yet to be approved. The proposal by M/s Sikkim Urja Ltd, the project operator, was approved by the Environment Ministry's expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) on River Valley & Hydroelectric Projects on January 10 under the provisions of 'expansion or modernisation'.

Key points

- **Overview:** The recent landslide in Sikkim affecting the Teesta-5 hydropower station raises concerns about the vulnerability of hydroelectric projects in the region, especially following the devastating impact on the Teesta-3 project last October. This recurring pattern of natural disasters impacting crucial power infrastructure highlights the need for a thorough reassessment of hydropower development in the area.
- **About Teesta River:** The Teesta River, with a total length of 414 kilometres, flows through the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal before entering Bangladesh. In India, the river covers approximately 305 kilometres, with around 172 kilometres flowing through Sikkim and the remaining 133 kilometres traversing West Bengal. The river then continues its journey in Bangladesh for about 109 kilometres before merging with the Brahmaputra River.
- **Environmental Impact:** Out of 47 initially proposed projects along the Teesta River in Sikkim and West Bengal, only five are currently operational, with 16 in various stages of consideration. The Teesta originates from Tso Lhamo Lake at an elevation of 5,280 meters in north Sikkim and flows through Sikkim, West Bengal, and Bangladesh before joining the Bay of Bengal. Unplanned construction and hydroelectric dams have made the Teesta more flood prone.
- **Poor design choices and catastrophic failures:** The Teesta-3 project developers chose a cheaper concrete-faced rock fill dam instead of a more durable concrete gravity dam, contributing to its complete destruction during the GLOF. A hardfill dam has much greater weight and a longer length for shear resistance compared to a conventional gravity dam, highlighting the importance of proper design choices.
- **Comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments:** Include detailed geological and hydrological studies, considering long-term climate change impacts. A study by Erlewein (2013) in Himachal Pradesh found that traditional EIA methods struggle to keep up with rapid hydropower development. The World Bank recommends Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) to address broader impacts of widespread hydropower development.
- **Improved Dam Design and Construction Standards:** Mandate the use of concrete gravity dams instead of concrete-faced rock fill dams for better stability. The Teesta-3 project's concrete-faced rock fill dam was completely washed away, highlighting the need for more robust designs.
- **Conclusion:** To address these challenges, it is imperative that environmental impact assessments for hydropower projects in the region provide clear and accurate cost estimates, including potential risks. By doing so, public confidence in these projects can be strengthened, and their environmental sustainability can be ensured, leading to more resilient and responsible hydroelectric development.

4. MSMEs: Centre may review import barriers that 'protect' big players

Context: The ministry of commerce in December initiated a safeguard duty probe on the import of certain steel items. This move came into effect after some intense pressure by Indian Steel Association (ISA), an industry body led by big steel companies. According to the Engineering Export Promotion Council (EEPC) told the government that domestic steel prices are much higher than imports. The decision has been taken weighing the unfavourable outcomes of past agreements and ensuring that FTAs do not adversely impact MSMEs or farmers.

Key points

- **Worsening Trade Deficits:** Between 2017 and 2022, while India's exports to FTA partners grew by 31%, its imports surged by 82% highlighting an unsustainable trade deficit.
- **Poor Manufacturing Competitiveness:** ASEAN's focus on research, innovation, government support, and value chain upgrades has boosted their global competitiveness by lowering production costs.
- **Non-Tariff Barriers:** The FTAs led to a reduction in tariff rates, enabling partners to penetrate deeper into the Indian market.
- **Negative Impact on MSMEs:** *Limited Global Reach* - Only 16% of Indian SMEs engage in international trade, with 13% involved in exports. This is significantly lower than the international average of 19%.

Vulnerability to External Shocks - Indian SMEs are vulnerable to global disruptions, as seen during the Covid-19 lockdown, which severely impacted supply chains.

Technical Barriers - Indian MSMEs often struggle with compliance to international standards, including sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and technical barriers to trade (TBTs).

Limited Networking Opportunities - MSMEs in India often lack connections with potential buyers abroad, which limits their market access and visibility.

Loss of Domestic Market Share - As cheaper imported goods flood the market due to lower tariffs under FTAs, domestic MSMEs may lose market share to foreign competitors, leading to a decrease in sales and revenue.

- **Way Forward:** *Investment in Infrastructure* - Streamlining logistics through digital tools and integrating transportation modes (road, rail, and ports) would reduce logistics costs and improve efficiency.

Relaxation of Rules of Origin (ROO) - To improve FTA utilization, India should work on making ROO requirements more flexible and commodity-specific rather than uniform across all sectors to lower transaction costs for exporters.

Re-negotiating Existing FTAs - For FTAs already signed, India should seek to renegotiate terms to focus on diversifying into high-tech and value-added products like chemicals, automotive components, and electrical apparatus.

Boosting R&D - Boosting R&D in Export-Oriented Industries to create high-value products that align with global demand.

Q. Critically analyze the impact of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) on India's agricultural sector and small-scale industries. (প্রশ্নঃ ভাৰতৰ কৃষি খণ্ড আৰু ক্ষুদ্র উদ্যোগৰ ওপৰত মুক্ত বাণিজ্য চুক্তি (এফটিএ) ৰ প্ৰভাৱ সমালোচনামূলকভাৱে বিশ্লেষণ কৰক।)

5. Indian space programme breaks into 2025 in 'mission mode'

Context: Just as 2024 was the year India developed a vision for its space programme, 2025 is likely to have the programme in mission mode. The PSLV-C60 mission, underway as the year began, laid the foundations for Chandrayaan-4 and the Bharatiya Antariksh Station. Forthcoming test flights will move India closer to human spaceflight, soon to receive a helping hand from a third launch pad approved for construction at Sriharikota, continuing work on the Next-Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV), and a change of guard at ISRO.

Key points

- **Overview:** ISRO has also contributed to science and science education in the country. The Department of Space oversees several dedicated research centres and independent organizations for remote sensing, astronomy and astrophysics, atmospheric sciences, and space sciences in general.
- **Communications satellites of India:** Communications satellites allow radio, television, and telephone transmissions to be sent live anywhere in the world. The purpose of communications satellites is to relay the signal around the curve of the Earth allowing communication between widely separated points.
 - *Indian National Satellite (INSAT) Series* - With nine operational communication satellites in Geo-stationary orbit, the Indian National Satellite (INSAT) system is one of the largest domestic communication satellite systems in the Asia-Pacific area.
 - *Indian Remote Sensing Satellite (IRS)* - ISRO has deployed numerous operational remote sensing satellites since IRS-1A in 1988. India now operates one of the largest constellations of remote-sensing satellites. Consists of CARTOSAT, OCEANSAT & RISAT (Resource Sat).
- **India's Manned Mission to Space:** Gaganyaan is a mission by the ISRO scheduled to be launched in 2026. The Gaganyaan system module, known as the Orbital Module, would house three Indian astronauts, one of whom would be a woman. For 5-7 days, it will circle the Earth in a low-Earth orbit at an altitude of 300-400 km.
- **New Space India Limited (NSIL):** It is a Central Public Sector Enterprise of the Government of India that was founded in 2019 and is managed by the Department of Space. It is ISRO's commercial arm, and its major purpose is to enable Indian enterprises to engage in high-technology space-related operations. HQ in Bangalore.
- **Indian Space Association (ISpA):** ISpA aspires to be the collective voice of the Indian Space industry. ISpA will be represented by leading domestic and global corporations that have advanced capabilities in space and satellite technologies.
- **Three Earth Observation Satellites (EOSs):** EOS-4 (Risat-1A) and EOS-6 (Oceansat-3) are launched using ISRO's workhorse PSLV, and the third one, EOS-2 (Microsat), was launched in the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) in 2022.
- **Upcoming Missions:** *Shukrayaan Mission* - The ISRO is also planning a mission to Venus, tentatively called Shukrayaan.
Own Space Station - India is planning to launch its space station by 2030, joining the league of the US, Russia, and China to an elite space club