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Topic 1

China-Maldives FTA agreement

Relevancy

- GS Prelims, GS Mains paper II
- International relations
- Free Trade Agreements
- China-Maldives FTA
- Concerns for India

Recently

- There has been an announcement of a free trade agreement between the Maldives and China.

Background of China's trade efforts in Asia

- Before this China pushed for maritime linkages across the Indian Ocean, including naval exercises and port projects.
- It did so to provide for enhancement of regional connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative.
- Since a few years, China is trying to ramp up business ties across South Asia.
- It is another sign of China's success in its outreach in South Asia.
- China already has an FTA with Pakistan, and is negotiating FTAs with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.
- The negotiations with the Maldives were completed this year.

China-Maldives ties

- The rapid growth in China-Maldives ties has been driven by massive infrastructure projects.
- These projects include:
 - the development of Hulhule island
 - the "Friendship" bridge connecting it to Male
- There are proposed Chinese investments of \$1 billion in Maldives.

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- Chinese companies are also exploring tourism prospects in the Maldives which include leases to resort islands and reclamation projects.

Concerns for India

- India is concerned about the speed and stealth with which the negotiations were completed.
- The Government of Maldives is also not satisfied with the working of the FTA with India.
- Government of Maldives is keeping India out of the loop on the FTA talks.
- It is because of India is following a new policy of engaging with the Maldivian opposition government.
- India is also worried that the FTA will draw the Maldives more closely into China's security net.
- Maldives Government has affirmed that the Maldives will remain a "demilitarised zone".
- But still there are concerns that the Chinese Navy will build a military base in the islands.
- These islands are linked to projects in Djibouti, Gwadar and Hambantota.
- As an example, last year three Chinese naval warships were docked in Male harbor.
- It raises concerns on security issues in Indian ocean through such gestures by Maldives to China.

Conclusion

- China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean presents a challenge to India.
- It is creating worries as India is trying to define its place in the U.S.-led "Indo-Pacific" realignment.

Topic 2

Pros and Cons of “One Nation, One Election”

Relevancy

- GS Prelims, GS Mains paper II
- Polity, Governance
- Elections to Parliament and states
- One nation one election
- Pros and Cons

Recently

- There has been much discussion on simultaneous elections to Parliament and all State Assemblies under the banner of “one nation one election”.

Reasons cited by the Government in favour?

- Massive expenditure
- Diversion of security and civil staff from primary duties
- Impact on governance due to the model code of conduct
- Disruption to normal public life

Why analysts are against this concept?

- **Cost factor misleading:**
 - The Election Commission incurs a cost of ₹8,000 crore to conduct all State and federal elections in a span of five years.
 - It costs ₹27 per voter per year to keep India an electoral democracy.
 - According to the data, all the States and the Centre combined incurred an expenditure of nearly ₹30 lakh crore in FY2014.
 - Analysts say that 0.05% of India’s total annual expenditure is not a large price to maintain democracy.

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- The notion of elections being prohibitively expensive is false and misleading.
- **Code of conduct and polls**
 - The model code of conduct for elections was agreed to by political parties in 1979.
 - It prohibits the ruling party from incurring capital expenditure for certain projects after elections are announced.
 - For India to establish “cooperative federalism” then more such projects will be undertaken by each State and not by the Centre.
 - So elections in one State should not hinder governance in the rest of the States.
 - Even if political parties feel the need to reform the code they can do so.
 - Because the ultimate solution is to reform the code and not the electoral cycle.
- **Hindrance in Governance:**
 - Governance paralysis due to State elections is not a true statement.
 - The real reason is that the two national parties are excessively dependent on their national leaders’ campaigns in State elections.
 - Example is Gujarat.
 - This is certainly a drain on the Central minister’s time and a distraction from governance.
 - Depending on their national leaders is the main problem of the national parties.
 - It is not the fault of the electoral system.
- **Voter behaviour**
 - Research on all simultaneous elections to State Assemblies and Parliament between 1999 and 2014 shows that simultaneous elections have an impact on voter behaviour.
 - Research shows that 77% voters chose the same political party for both State and Centre in simultaneous elections.
 - When elections were held even six months apart, only 61% chose the same political party.
 - Therefore, most Indian voters tend to choose the same party when elections are held simultaneously to both Centre and State.
 - And the relationship is diminishing as elections are held farther away.
- **Political autonomy**

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- According to the research, simultaneous elections harm the political autonomy of States.
- Today any elected State government can choose to dissolve its Assembly and call for fresh elections.
- If elections are to be held simultaneously States will have to give up this power and wait for a national election schedule.
- This goes against the concept of political autonomy under Indian federal structure.

Conclusion

- There is much that is wrong with Indian concept of governance and elections.
- But disparate elections to States and Parliament are not one of them.
- Much need to improve lies in terms of efficiency of our governance.
- But “oneness” is not the desired path to efficiency in a diverse polity such as India.

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Topic 3

US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital city

Relevancy

- GS Prelims, GS Mains paper II
- International relations
- Jerusalem, Israel, Palestine
- US middle east policy
- Jews, Jew holy city

Recently

- U.S. President Trump recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
- The US administration would also begin a process of moving the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Significance of Jerusalem

- Jerusalem has the Western Wall which is a part of the mount on which the Holy Temple stood, containing the Holy of Holies.
- It the most sacred Jewish site where Jews believe the foundation creating the world was located.
- It also contains the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque.
- It is the third holiest site in Islam where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son.
- It also contains the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where Jesus is believed to have been crucified and where he rose again.

What is the history of the Jerusalem issue?

- Jerusalem is the symbol of the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- The fight is about who gets to control the ancient city which is sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians.
- Their fight is over both faith and civic space.

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- After the end of the First Arab-Israel War in 1948, Jerusalem was partitioned into West and East.
- The West was under the Israeli and East under the Palestinian control.
- But in 1967 there occurred a Six-Day Arab-Israel War.
- In this war the Israel snatched East Jerusalem from Jordanian forces.
- Israel's Parliament then declared the territory been "annexed to Israel" and Jerusalem been "reunited".

What is happening now?

- The predominantly Palestinian population in the east lives under full Israeli control.
- But it cannot vote in parliamentary elections.
- This has marginalised the Palestinians.
- Now the Palestinians want East Jerusalem to be their capital under the "two-state solution".
- Israel didn't agree to this demand even under the refusal of the international community to officially accept the annexation.
- It has added over 200,000 Jewish settlers to the once entirely Arab East Jerusalem.

International stand over the issue

- The positions of countries on the status of Jerusalem differs.
- But no country recognises the Israeli claim to the territory.
- The international community considers east Jerusalem illegally occupied by Israel.
- Also the UN reaffirmed that Jerusalem's Palestinian territories were under "hostile occupation".
- India has always backed a two-state solution to the issue.
- But most foreign embassies to Israel are in Tel Aviv and not Jerusalem.
- India has assured that the Indian embassy would stay in Tel Aviv.

What did US do?

- U.S. President Trump recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

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- The US administration would also begin a process of moving the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Significance of the US move

- **For Jerusalem:**
 - US's move reflects Jerusalem as the centre of Jewish faith.
 - It stresses on the fact that the city is the seat of the Israeli government.
- **For US:**
 - US has proposed to begin a peace process in the area.
 - US is doing all this to please the pro-Israel hardliners.
 - Also the overwhelming Jewish population in US cannot be ignored.
 - Secondly, according to analysts there appears to be a bigger regional game being played by the US.
 - This could be possibly a US-Saudi-Israel alliance against Iran which is seen as their common enemy.

What is the International response to the US step?

- The Islamic world is outraged by this step of United States.
- Many Arab leaders have warned of an upheaval in the already disturbed Middle East.
- Palestine too has warned of dangerous consequences.
- According to Palestine the decision was a declaration of war in the region.
- Neighbouring Jordan and Turkey have also cautioned the US.
- They have threatened to cut ties with Israel.
- Militant groups in the region could possibly take aggressive stances.
- The UN has said that the issue on the holy city must be resolved only through direct negotiations.

Topic 4

Changes and suggestions to 'Skill India' initiative

Relevancy

- GS Prelims, GS Mains paper II,III
- Economy, Polity
- Skill India Programme
- India in 2022, IT sector employment
- National Skill Development corporation

India's youth and IT sector employment

- India's youth makes up about 40% of India's population.
- It is seen as the saviour and driver of future economic growth.
- Yet there is huge gap between the productive labour force and the employment opportunities available to them.
- India's status as an information technology (IT) powerhouse has put a false hope that the nation could be saved from future disruption.
- The global appeal of the Indian IT industry has been the labour cost arbitrage available to multinational corporations.
- MNCs are constantly looking to capitalize on a young, educated, English-speaking population of India.

Concerns regarding Indian IT sector employment

- Low wages cannot drive economic growth or foster innovation.
- The sector's professionals are easily replaceable if they ask for higher pay or wish to move up the ladder.
- IT sector has put the manufacturing and agricultural sectors in an even more precarious situation.
- India's workforce is hampered with outdated and irrelevant skills.
- As technology continues to move forward at a fast speed, both blue- and white-collar jobs will become difficult to get.

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What are the steps taken by India?

- Indian policymakers are trying to solve the problem and have taken steps to combat it.
- Its prime example is “Skill India” programme by Indian Government.

What is ‘Skill India’ Programme?

- Skill India is a flagship programme of government of India.
- This programme is aimed at accelerating the pace of skill development.
- It is made to create new employment opportunities.
- It also attempts to reform India’s archaic labour ecosystem.
- It includes various initiatives of the government like:
 - National Skill Development Mission
 - National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship
 - Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana
 - Skill Loan scheme
- It has aim to train impart skill to over 400 million people by 2022.

Challenges to Skill India

- The challenges faced by the ministry of skill development are complex and varied.
- **Unreal task:**
 - There is a huge challenge of skilling 400 million young Indians by 2022.
 - The MSDE is forced to coordinate with 22 departments and multiple ministries at the national level and sub-national levels.
- **Others:**
 - As populations react to new job opportunities, the MSDE also must account for certain possibilities as:
 - intra-state migration
 - rapid urbanization
 - possible changes in social fabric

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What are the changes that are needed?

- **Organisational changes:**
 - For India to avoid economic stagnation, additional policy measures must be undertaken to cut through bureaucratic red tape.
 - The concerned ministry should bring clarity to the policy framework.
 - There should be a coherent organizational structure.
- **In NSDC:**
 - The NSDC has been tasked with managing the financing processes while also implementing the skilling programmes.
 - The two tasks should be separated.
 - The ministry of finance should be allowed to manage the financial aspects.
 - It would allow the NSDC to focus on its core competencies, and become more effective and efficient.
- **Training programmes:**
 - MSDE should focus on implementing a multi-skilling aspect to its training programme.
 - Job markets evolve at unprecedented rates.
 - It is necessary for MSDE to provide its trainees with more than one way to earn a living.
 - Also the ministry should also look into skilling and reskilling older “educated” populations that might be left behind due to technological advances.
 - There should be targeted initiatives focused on updating skills to provide benefits to its intended audience.
- **A solutions-based approach:**
 - Instructors should employ case studies and present relevant problems.
 - It would provide students with a holistic education, allowing them to compete at both the national and international levels.
- **Regulatory measures:**
 - Implementation of licensing and regulation procedures can also help.

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- It could be a key difference marker for the Indian labour force moving forward.
- **Others:**
 - Cutting away excessive bureaucratic procedures
 - implementing structural changes to the skill training system
 - installing licensing and regulatory mechanisms

Conclusion

- Skill training should be viewed as a complementary part of mainstream education.
- It should not be regarded as an inferior alternative.
- Gainful employment through skilled trades needs to be accepted by the wider Indian public.
- It should be given the respectability and opportunity it deserves for true change to be brought about.
- Else India's youth will be subjected to the same conditions that their grandparents were subject to.