

1. India's 'return' to Central Asia

Why in News?

- The inaugural India-Central Asia Summit, the India-Central Asia Dialogue, and the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi — all held over the past four months — collectively indicate a renewed enthusiasm in New Delhi to engage the Central Asian region.

Significance of Central Asia for India:

- India has limited economic and other stakes in the region, primarily due to lack of physical access.
- And yet, the region appears to have gained a great deal of significance in India's strategic thinking over the years, particularly in the recent past.
- New geopolitical realities: India's mission Central Asia today reflects, and is responsive to, the new geopolitical, if not the geo-economic, realities in the region.

Factors Driving India's Engagement:

- One of the factors driving this engagement and shaping it is the great power dynamics there.
- Withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan: The decline of American presence and power in the broader region (due primarily to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan) has led to a reassertion by China and Russia seeking to fill the power vacuum.
- India-Russia relations: Moscow considers India to be a useful partner in the region: it helps it to not only win back New Delhi, which is moving towards the U.S., but also to subtly checkmate the rising Chinese influence in its backyard.
- For the U.S., while growing India-Russia relations is not a welcome development, it recognises the utility of Moscow-New Delhi relations in Central Asia to offset Beijing's ever-growing influence there.
- India's dilemma: In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, New Delhi faces a major dilemma in the wider region, not just in the pre-existing theatres like the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control.
- India's China challenge: India in the region might get further hemmed in due to the combined efforts by China, Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan.

- If so, it must ensure that there is no China-led strategic gang up with Pakistan and the Taliban against India in the region, which, if it becomes a reality, would severely damage Indian interests.
- Consolidation of Afghan policy: India's engagement of Central Asia would also help it to consolidate its post-American Afghan policy.
- Now that the Taliban have returned to Kabul, New Delhi is forced to devise new ways of Engaging Afghanistan.
- That's where the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Russia could be helpful.
- The announcement of a Joint Working Group on Afghanistan during the summit between India and the CARs is surely indicative of such interest.

Russia's Prominence:

- In India's current vision for a regional security architecture, Russia appears prominent
- Countering China: By courting Russia — its traditional partner, also close to China and getting closer to Pakistan — to help it re-establish its presence in the Central Asian region, India is seeking to work with one of the region's strongest powers and also potentially create a rift between China and Russia.
- Joint defence production by India and Russia has been on the rise and the CARs could play a key role in it.
- India's non-critical stance on developments in Ukraine and Kazakhstan: This growing India-Russia partnership also explains India's non-critical stance on the developments in Ukraine and Kazakhstan.
- Challenges in India's engagement with Central Asia
- China's dominance in the region: China, which shares a land border with the region, is already a major investor there.
- Iran's role: An even bigger challenge for India may be Iran.
- India's best shot at reaching the CARs is by using a hybrid model – via sea to Chabahar and then by road/rail through Iran (and Afghanistan) to the CARs.
- So, for New Delhi, the ongoing re-negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action are of crucial importance.
- While Iran getting close to the West is not preferred by Russia (but preferred by India), if and when it becomes a reality, India would be able to use it to its advantage and join Russia in engaging the CARs.

- Delivering on the commitment: Most importantly, India will have to walk the talk on its commitments to Central Asia.
- Does it have the political will, material capability and diplomatic wherewithal to stay the course in the region?

Conclusion:

- India's renewed engagement of Central Asia is in the right direction for the simple reason that while the gains from an engagement of Central Asia may be minimal, the disadvantages of non-engagement could be costly in the longer run.

2. TRIPS Agreement

Why in News?

- India runs the risk of being excluded from a proposal it co-authored at the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations, in 2020, to “temporarily waive” intellectual property rights (IPR) held, by primarily Western countries, on vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics for COVID-19.

What is the Case?

- India and China are two major global suppliers of medicine.
- A small group of WTO members were discussing suggestions to exclude drug manufacturers in India and China from prospective waivers to IPR obligations.
- IPR obligations are as a result of the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) which WTO members are committed to upholding.

What is the Agreement on TRIPS?

- The Agreement on TRIPS is an international legal agreement between all the member nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- It establishes minimum standards for the regulation by national governments of different forms of intellectual property (IP) as applied to nationals of other WTO member nations.
- TRIPS was negotiated at the end of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) between 1989 and 1990 and is administered by the WTO.
- It introduced intellectual property law into the multilateral trading system for the first time and remains the most comprehensive multilateral agreement on intellectual property to date.

Key Provisions:

- TRIPS require member states to provide strong protection for intellectual property rights.
- It seeks to provide copyright rights, covering authors and other copyright holders, as well as holders of related rights, namely performers, sound recording producers and broadcasting organisations.
- It provides for geographical indications (GI); industrial designs; integrated circuit layout-designs; patents; new plant varieties; trademarks; trade names and undisclosed or confidential information.
- It also specifies enforcement procedures, remedies, and dispute resolution procedures.
- TRIPS also has a most favored nation (MFN) clause.

Why TRIPS?

- The obligations of the main international agreements of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) that already existed before the WTO was created:
- Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (patents, industrial designs, etc)
- Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (copyright).
- Some areas are not covered by these agreements. In some cases, the standards of protection prescribed were thought inadequate.
- So the TRIPS Agreement adds significantly to existing international standards.

What else is covered under TRIPS Agreement?

- Copyright terms must extend at least 50 years, unless based on the life of the author.
- Computer programs must be regarded as “literary works” under copyright law and receive the same terms of protection. Patents must be granted for “inventions” in all “fields of technology and must be enforceable for at least 20 years.

3. Golden Langur

Why in News?

- Recently, Assam villagers are opposing the sanctuary tag for golden langur habitat.

Highlights:

- The Assam Forest Department had issued a preliminary notification for converting the 19.85 sq. km. patch of forest into the Kajojjana Bamuni Hill Wildlife Sanctuary.

- Kakoijana Reserve Forest is one of the better-known homes of the golden langur.
- The villagers demanded that the “conventional idea of wildlife sanctuary” be dropped and the reserve forest converted into a community forest resource “using Forest Rights Act, 2006, to ensure community co-managed system of participation for sustainable conservation.
- The villagers pointed out that the conservation efforts of the locals had helped the authorities concerned to restore the forest canopy from less than 5% to more than 70%, and the golden langur population from less than 100 to more than 600 over almost three decades.
- Wildlife Sanctuary is the place that is reserved exclusively for wildlife use, which includes animals, reptiles, insects, birds, etc. wild animals, especially those in danger of extinction and the rare ones, so that they can live in peace for a lifetime and keep their population viable.
- The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 empowers the central and state governments to declare any area a wildlife sanctuary, national park or closed area.
- They are the most restricted forests and are constituted by the State Government on any forest land or wasteland which is the property of the Government. In reserved forests, local people are prohibited, unless specifically allowed by a Forest Officer in the course of the settlement.
- Golden Langur’s Scientific Name is **Trachypithecus geei**
- It can be most easily recognized by the color of their fur, after which they are named.
- It has been noted that their fur changes colors according to the seasons as well as Geography (region they live in).
- The color of the young also differs from adults in that they are almost pure white.
- They are highly dependent on trees, living in the upper canopy of forests. They are also known as leaf monkeys.
- Habitat is endemic to western Assam, India, and southern Bhutan.
- Their habitat is restricted to the region surrounded by four geographical landmarks: the foothills of Bhutan (North), Manas river (East), Sankosh river (West), and Brahmaputra river (South).
- **Habitat Fragmentation:** Their habitat in Assam has fragmented drastically especially after a thrust on rural electrification and massive deforestation.

- **Inbreeding:** Obstructions such as wires, and gaps in the forest due to felling, have increased the threat of inbreeding among golden langurs.
- Its Protection Status are IUCN List of Threatened Species: Endangered, Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES): Appendix I and Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 : Schedule I

4. Surety insurance bonds

Why in News?

- Recently, the government has allowed the use of surety insurance bonds as a substitute for bank guarantees in case of government procurement and also for gold imports.

Highlights:

- Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has also released final guidelines to ensure orderly development of surety insurance business in India.
- The IRDAI (Surety Insurance Contracts) Guidelines, 2022 will come into effect from 1st April, 2022.
- A surety bond is a legally binding contract entered into by three parties—the principal, the obligee, and the surety.
- The obligee, usually a government entity, requires the principal, typically a business owner or contractor, to obtain a surety bond as a guarantee against future work performance.
- Surety bonds are mainly aimed at infrastructure development, mainly to reduce indirect cost for suppliers and work-contractors thereby diversifying their options and acting as a substitute for bank guarantee.
- Surety bond is provided by the insurance company on behalf of the contractor to the entity which is awarding the project.
- Surety bonds protect the beneficiary against acts or events that impair the underlying obligations of the principal. They guarantee the performance of a variety of obligations, from construction or service contracts to licensing and commercial undertakings.
- Surety bonds, a new concept, are risky and insurance companies in India are yet to achieve expertise in risk assessment in such business.
- Also, there's no clarity on pricing, the recourse available against defaulting contractors and reinsurance options.

- These are critical and may impede the creation of surety-related expertise and capacities and eventually deter insurers from writing this class of business.
- The move to frame rules for surety contracts will help address the large liquidity and funding requirements of the infrastructure sector.
- It will create a level-playing field for large, mid and small contractors.
- The Surety insurance business will assist in developing an alternative to bank guarantees for construction projects.
- This shall enable the efficient use of working capital and reduce the requirement of collateral to be provided by construction companies.
- Insurers shall work together with financial institutions to share risk information.
- Hence, this shall assist in releasing liquidity in infrastructure space without compromising on risk aspects.

5. Hijab and its Religious Freedom

Why in News?

- Six students were recently banned from entering a college in Karnataka's Udupi district for wearing a hijab.

Highlights:

- The issue throws up legal questions on reading the freedom of religion and whether the right to wear a hijab is constitutionally protected.

How is Religious Freedom Protected under the Constitution?

- Article 25(1) of the Constitution guarantees the “freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion”.
- It is a right that guarantees a negative liberty — which means that the state shall ensure that there is no interference or obstacle to exercise this freedom.
- However, like all fundamental rights, the state can restrict the right for grounds of public order, decency, morality, health and other state interests.
- The implications of this are Freedom of conscience, Right to Profess, Right to Practice and Right to Propagate