

19/04/2024

TOPICS COVERED

1. Impossible to tamper with EVMs at 'any stage', EC says in SC (19 April) (GS Paper II: Election)
2. 'Sugar content high in Nestlé baby food sold in India (19 April) (GS Paper II: Governance)
3. A world in disarray, a concern about the future (19 April) (GS Paper II: IR)
4. War of attrition (19 April) (GS Paper III: Internal Security)
5. India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea (19 April) (GS Paper II: IR)

'Sugar content high in Nestlé baby food sold in India (19 April) (GS Paper II: Governance)

- A report by a Swiss NGO, the Public Eye, and the International Baby Food Action Network found that Nestle's baby food sold in India, Africa, and Latin America has more sugar than the same products sold in Europe.
- The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, which sets food safety standards, is investigating the report.
- This means that the baby food products sold in certain regions might have higher sugar content, which could raise concerns about health and nutrition for babies.
- Nestle's baby food products sold in India, Africa, and Latin America have more sugar than those sold in European markets.
- A report by the Swiss NGO, Public Eye, and the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN) revealed this.
- Around 150 baby products from Nestle were tested in a Belgian laboratory.
- For example, Cerelac products for six-month-old babies, which have no added sugars in the UK and Germany, contained 2.7 grams of added sugar per serving in India.
- In Ethiopia and Thailand, the same products had nearly 6 grams of added sugar per serving.
- This raises concerns about the health impact of higher sugar content in baby food in certain regions.

Cutting back on sugar

- Despite WHO recommendations against added sugar in foods for children under three, Indian regulators allow limited sucrose and fructose in baby food.
- Nestle India responded to allegations, stating that reducing added sugars is a priority.
- Over the past five years, Nestle India claims to have reduced added sugars by up to 30% in its infant cereal products.
- Nestle India emphasizes that its products ensure proper nutrition with protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and iron for early childhood.
- The company pledges not to compromise on nutritional quality and compliance with global and local standards.
- They regularly review their portfolio and innovate to reduce added sugars without sacrificing nutrition, quality, safety, or taste.
- The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India is investigating the IBFAN report.
- Experts like Arun Gupta from the Breastfeeding Promotion Network of India warn against giving children under two any additional sugar or salt due to health risks.
- The WHO cautions that adding sugar to baby foods can lead to addictive eating habits and a preference for sweet tastes from a young age.

'Double standards'

- Hepatologist Cyriac Abby Philips, known as The Liver Doc on social media, accused Nestle of "double standards."
- He specifically mentioned Nestle's baby food product, Cerelac, which has global retail sales over one billion U.S. dollars.
- Philips pointed out that a significant portion of Cerelac sales, especially 40%, are in low- and middle-income countries like Brazil and India.
- He criticized Nestle for having different standards for their products in Western markets compared to Asian markets.
- This suggests that Nestle may have different product formulations or quality standards for Cerelac depending on the region, which Philips views as unfair.

Impossible to tamper with EVMs at 'any stage', EC says in SC (19 April) (GS Paper II: Election)

- The Election Commission (EC) stated that electronic voting machines (EVMs) cannot be tampered with at any stage.
- This assurance was given by the EC just before the first phase of the Lok Sabha election.
- The Supreme Court is considering pleas from various groups, including the Association for Democratic Reforms, arguing for a more transparent electoral system, with or without EVMs.
- During the hearing, ideas such as returning to paper ballots or implementing bar codes for candidates were discussed.

- Advocates highlighted the importance of voters being able to confirm that their votes are cast correctly.
- Petitions sought 100% cross-verification of EVM votes with Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) paper slips.
- Currently, only five randomly selected polling booths in a constituency undergo cross-verification of EVM-VVPAT.
- The EC reported that there have been 41,629 instances of random verification so far, with over four crore VVPAT paper slips matched, and no instances of mismatch were found.

Huge effort

- The Election Commission (EC) stated that manually counting Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips for a single polling station would take an hour.
- Each polling station typically requires counting around 1,000 VVPAT slips.
- The small size and specific nature of the paper make the slips sticky, which adds to the manual counting process's complexity.
- The EC emphasized that the process cannot be sped up or rushed due to its cumbersome nature.
- The EC noted that both the number of electors and voting machines have increased from 2019 to 2024.
- Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) consist of ballot units, control units, and VVPATs, all of which are sealed in the presence of candidates or their agents and stored in strong rooms for 45 days after voting.

Reports of EVM error during mock poll in Kerala are false, EC tells SC (19 April)

- The Election Commission of India (EC) informed the Supreme Court that statements about four electronic voting machines (EVMs) erroneously logging votes for the BJP during mock polls in Kerala were false.
- **Advocate Prashant Bhushan, representing the petitioner Association for Democratic Reforms, brought attention to reports of malfunctioning EVMs during mock polls in Kasaragod district on April 17.**
- The Supreme Court Bench, consisting of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, asked senior advocate Maninder Singh, representing the EC, to verify the claims.
- After checking, a senior EC official, Nitesh Kumar Vyas, confirmed to the court that the news reports were false.
- The EC verified the allegations with the District Collector and found them to be untrue.
- The EC promised to submit a detailed report to the court regarding the matter.
- Senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, representing petitioner Arun Kumar Agarwal, clarified to the court that they had only alerted the court to media reports regarding the EVM issue, and their intentions were not adversarial.

- Justice Khanna pointed out that the petitioners had relied solely on media reports and had not personally verified the issue.
- The Supreme Court Bench is hearing petitions requesting 100% cross-verification of EVM votes with Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips.
- Petitioners, including the Association for Democratic Reforms, are urging the court to allow voters physical access to VVPAT slips to confirm the votes they cast before putting the slips into sealed ballot boxes.
- They argue that voters have a fundamental right to be confident about the accuracy of their votes.
- Petitioners express concerns that EVMs could malfunction or be manipulated with malicious software, possibly favoring a particular party, potentially the ruling one.
- Chief Electoral Officer (Kerala) Sanjay Kaul dismissed complaints that EVMs had registered extra votes for the BJP, stating that the misunderstanding arose from an additional slip released by the VVPAT machine during the mock poll.
- The additional slip, longer than the normal VVPAT slips, is used for an initial inspection before the mock poll and had 'Not to be counted' written on it, along with 'Standardization done' and VVPAT serial number.

Randomised control trials: (19April)

- Kamala Nehru, wife of Jawaharlal Nehru, died from tuberculosis (TB) in a Swiss sanatorium in 1936, despite her privileged social background.
- Nehru was imprisoned at the time and unable to be with her due to colonial shackles.
- M.A. Jinnah, who later became Nehru's political adversary, also died from TB, highlighting the disease's indiscriminate nature.
- Their deaths, along with millions worldwide, underscore the lack of effective treatments for TB, despite its discovery in 1882.
- Today, TB treatment has improved significantly, with efforts to eliminate the disease by the end of the decade.
- The theme of World TB Day in 2024 was "Yes, we can end TB," reflecting the progress made possible by medical advancements and the efforts of the medical community.

Revolution in treatment

- Tuberculosis (TB) is caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis and has existed for at least 3 million years, being a longstanding challenge for humanity.
- Before antibiotics, TB treatments focused on palliative care, such as providing fresh air and rest in sanatoriums at high altitudes or tranquil countryside locations.
- Surgical procedures like lobectomy, artificial pneumothorax, and pneumonectomy were also used but had limited success.
- Sir Alexander Fleming's discovery of antibiotics marked a turning point in TB treatment.
- Sir Austin Bradford Hill made significant contributions to TB treatment by pioneering medical statistics and introducing the randomized control trial technique at the British Medical Research Council (BMRC).

- Hill's work led to one of the first randomized clinical trials to evaluate the efficacy of antibiotics against TB.
- He also established early ethical guidelines for clinical trials, setting a new standard for scientific integrity in medicine.

Critical role in research

- Randomized control trials (RCTs) have played a crucial role in modern medicine by providing an unbiased method to evaluate the effectiveness of various treatments.
- RCTs have led to numerous medical breakthroughs, such as discovering aspirin's role in preventing heart attacks, developing antiretroviral therapy for HIV, and applying cognitive behavioral therapy for mental health conditions, as well as the development of COVID vaccines.
- Sir Austin Bradford Hill's effective use of RCTs in testing streptomycin, the first antibiotic effective against TB, was groundbreaking.
- His work helped establish the optimal dosage of streptomycin, transforming it from a lab discovery to a practical solution for TB treatment.
- Hill's efforts broadened the management of TB from specialized surgeons to primary care physicians.
- Hill's contributions extended beyond TB to modern epidemiology, with his "Bradford Hill Criteria" forming the basis of establishing causal links between factors and health effects.
- The nine criteria provided a robust framework for examining evidence, such as establishing alcohol as a risk factor for cardiovascular diseases and linking smoking to lung cancer.
- Hill's research on smoking and lung cancer provided irrefutable evidence, challenging pseudoscience promoted by the tobacco industry and influencing public perception and policy towards tobacco.

Debt of gratitude

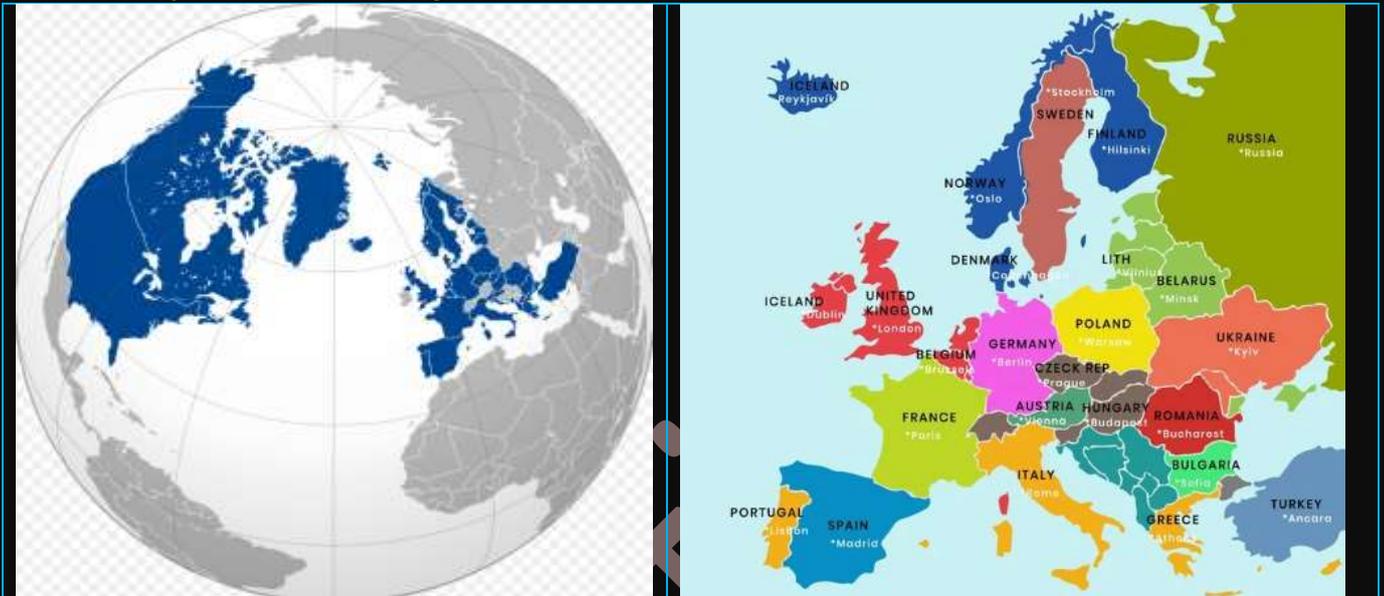
- Despite challenges like Multi-Drug Tuberculosis (MDR-TB) and Extensively Drug-Resistant Tuberculosis (XDR-TB), we are close to eliminating TB.
- We owe a significant debt of gratitude to Sir Austin Bradford Hill for his contributions.
- Hill's life and work demonstrate the importance of scientific inquiry and resilience.
- He inspires us as we work towards eradicating TB.
- Let's honor scientists like Hill for their invaluable contributions.
- Their research and pursuit of knowledge have paved the way for incredible change.
- Hill's work showcases the power of science to bring about positive change.
- His legacy continues to inspire researchers worldwide.

A world in disarray, a concern about the future
(19 April) (GS Paper II: IR)

The absence of leaders who command influence across the world, new alliances, economic issues and the progress of current technologies are some of the factors

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

- A military and political alliance founded in 1949 based on the North Atlantic Treaty.
- **Headquarters:** Brussels, Belgium



- **Current Membership:** 30 countries from Europe and North America.
- **Founding Principle:** Article 5 of the Treaty states an attack on one ally is an attack on all, embodying the concept of **collective defense**.

Core Objectives

- **Crisis Management:** Engaging in operations to stabilize conflict zones, including outside of NATO territory.
- **Cooperative Security:** Building partnerships and cooperation with non-member countries, promoting stability.

Recent Focus Areas

- **Russian Aggression:** Deterrence against increased Russian military activity, particularly in Eastern Europe after the annexation of Crimea.
- **Cybersecurity:** Strengthening cyber defenses and collaboration in this evolving threat domain.
- **Countering Terrorism:** Contributes to the global fight against terrorism and addresses instability that fosters terrorism.
- **Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs):** Examining the strategic implications of technologies like artificial intelligence and ensuring Allies maintain a technological edge.

- Many people are really worried about what's happening in the world right now.
- Leaders like **Zelenskyy (Ukraine)**, **Netanyahu (Israel)**, and **Putin (Russia)** are being criticized for not trying to end conflicts and not thinking about the consequences.
- The United States is in a tough spot because they wanted to use NATO to beat Russia, but it's not working out.
- Netanyahu is being accused of being too harsh on people in Gaza, which is making tensions worse in West Asia.
- Iran is becoming more important in the region because of all this.

Growing chaos, an absent leadership

- Since 2022, global politics has been chaotic.
- The "rules-based international order" created by the West is pretty much dead now, but it did help keep peace for a while.
- The West got weaker, and China got stronger, leading to new alliances forming, but none of them are strong enough to keep global peace.
- Today, many parts of the world are in chaos, with wars happening in places like Ukraine and Gaza.
- There aren't many leaders around who can bring calm and have influence over lots of countries, like Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, or Joe Biden.
- Most other Western leaders don't have what it takes to keep peace either, and they're struggling to keep their own countries stable.
- The way things are going, many of these leaders might end up being forgotten by history because of how fast things are changing.
- The situation in Ukraine isn't getting any better. Zelenskyy, Putin, and the West can't agree on a compromise.
- This has been going on for two years already, and it looks like it'll continue in 2024.
- There's a worry that if the stalemate keeps going, leaders might start thinking about using nuclear weapons.
- In West Asia, things are getting serious. Israel is acting aggressively, especially towards Gaza.
- Iran is now directly threatening Israel, and there's a fear that Iran could lead militant groups against the West and other non-believers.
- If Iran and Israel end up in a full-blown war, it could have really bad consequences.

A new set of alliances

- Great power rivalry seems less important compared to conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia.
- The U.S. and China are using proxies instead of direct confrontation.
- The U.S. is struggling after setbacks like Afghanistan, and Europe isn't able to do much either.
- China's economic problems have made it less of a superpower contender.
- China, Russia, and Iran are teaming up, questioning the tactics of the U.S. and the West in West Asia.
- World leaders aren't paying enough attention to the economy and technology, which are the main factors driving global politics.
- Experts warn of problems in the U.S., UK, Europe, and China's economies.

The disruptors

- The alliance between China, Russia, and Iran suggests that the politics of oil will become a major global issue soon.
- Economic sanctions are losing their effectiveness, and experts predict a major economic slowdown.
- Technology, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI), is becoming a big disruptor in warfare.
- Smaller countries are using AI to challenge bigger military powers like the U.S. and China.

- In Ukraine, new military technology like **drones and surveillance systems** is changing the way wars are fought.
- With arms control agreements breaking down, new nuclear weapons are possibly being developed, raising concerns about nuclear war.
- There's debate about whether the U.S. and the West should respond to the use of low-level nuclear weapons by Russia with their own nuclear weapons.

War of attrition (19 April) (GS Paper III: Internal Security)

- The conflict against the Maoist insurgency, which peaked in the early to mid-2000s, has settled into a pattern.
- Recent attacks by paramilitary and police forces have dealt blows to the insurgents, including the killing of at least 29 Maoists in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh.
- The Maoists are largely **confined to the jungles of central India and areas with sparse tribal presence, where the developmental and welfare state is weaker.**
- While the Maoists have lost political-ideological influence, they still pose a threat to security forces, as seen in recent attacks on paramilitary personnel.
- Security forces are using unconventional military tactics and new routes to target Maoist cadres.
- However, these attacks alone cannot completely eradicate the Maoist threat, **as they operate in difficult terrain and have support from some discontented tribal sections affected by the civil war.**
- The Indian state has been fighting the Maoists for two decades, particularly after two Naxalite parties merged into the CPI (Maoist).
- Initially, strategies like arming tribals through campaigns like Salwa Judum backfired, leading to a change in approach.
- The focus shifted to **expanding the reach of the welfare state and bureaucracy into previously inaccessible areas, countering Maoist propaganda.**
- This expansion of welfare measures helped win over some tribal support and led to desertions from the Maoist ranks in other states.
- However, in Chhattisgarh, constant warfare has allowed the Maoists to tap into some discontent among tribals.
- **Civil society and peace activists have tried to initiate ceasefire talks between the Maoists and security forces and encouraged the insurgents to pursue tribal causes through democratic means.**
- Despite setbacks, the **Maoists have refused to give up their ideology and continue the war of attrition, unwilling to accept that many poor tribals seek better engagement and outcomes from the welfare and electoral system rather than violent overthrow.**

Pale green shoots (19 April)

- India's merchandise exports reached a 12-month peak of **\$41.7 billion last month.**

- This figure was slightly lower than March 2023 but higher than February's \$41.4 billion.
- **Imports decreased by 6% to \$57.3 billion**, resulting in the trade deficit reaching an 11-month low.
- The robust export numbers in the last two months contributed to outbound shipments totaling \$437.1 billion for the full year.
- This is just **3% lower than the record performance of \$451 billion in 2022-23**.
- The decline in commodity prices, averaging about 14% lower last year, contributed to this outcome.
- Demand in major markets proved more resilient than anticipated.
- The higher 4.8% decline in imports also helped cushion the trade deficit.
- Economists anticipate a small **current account surplus** for the January-March quarter.
- Services trade data for the full year is yet to be available, but the Commerce Ministry estimates total exports in 2023-24 to be slightly higher than the previous year at \$776.7 billion.
- Trade experts believe that **goods exports are experiencing a positive growth cycle despite global conflicts in regions like Ukraine and Palestine**.
- The **World Trade Organization (WTO)** revised its global trade volume growth projection to **2.6% from the earlier estimate of 3.3%, citing downside risks**.
- Despite the downward revision, export volumes from Asia are expected to increase by 3.4% in 2024, with imports climbing by 5.6%.
- In India, a healthy monsoon is anticipated to boost domestic demand, including discretionary imports.
- However, **persistent disruptions in key shipping routes like the Suez and Panama Canals, geopolitical tensions, and growing skepticism about the benefits of global trade pose potential risks**.
- Exporters are uncertain about the optimistic official outlook and may need to raise prices to **offset surging shipping costs**, leading to increased competitive pressures.
- Prolonged friction in the **Strait of Hormuz**, a vital supply route for Asia's oil and gas imports, represents a significant threat to trade and macroeconomic balances.
- The **spike in crude prices in March led to India's petroleum trade deficit reaching a record monthly high of \$11.8 billion**, while oil exports decreased to an eight-month low.
- India's high dependence on energy imports means that any rise in global energy and food prices could disrupt hopes for global interest rate cuts and improved demand.

India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea (19 April) (GS Paper II: IR)

UNCLOS

- Often called the "Constitution for the Oceans," UNCLOS is a comprehensive international agreement establishing a **legal framework for all marine and maritime activities**.
- The Convention was opened for signature in 1982 and entered into force in 1994.
- **Wide Participation:** Currently, 168 parties (167 states plus the European Union) have ratified the Convention.

Key Provisions of UNCLOS

- **Maritime Zones:** Defines various zones extending from a nation's coastline and establishes rights and duties within each zone:
 - Territorial Sea (up to 12 nautical miles): Sovereignty of the coastal state.
 - Contiguous Zone (up to 24 nautical miles): Limited jurisdiction for enforcement of customs, immigration, and other laws
 - Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (up to 200 nautical miles): Rights to explore, exploit, and manage natural resources



- Continental Shelf: Rights over the seabed and subsoil resources, even beyond the EEZ if certain criteria are met.
- High Seas: Open to all states, with freedoms of navigation, overflight, fishing, etc.
- The Area (deep seabed): Declares it and its resources "the common heritage of mankind."
- **Environmental Protection:** Includes obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment.
- **Marine Scientific Research:** Establishes regulations and promotes marine research cooperation.
- **Dispute Settlement:** Provides mechanisms for peaceful resolution of disputes, including a dedicated **International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)**.

- In March 2024, India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, expressed full support for the Philippines in defending its national sovereignty during his visit to Manila.
- The statement comes amid the ongoing dispute over the **South China Sea between Manila and Beijing**, which experienced heightened tensions and diplomatic friction in 2023.
- In 2023, a **joint statement between New Delhi and Manila also urged China to adhere to the rules-based maritime order and respect the International Court of Justice ruling favoring Manila in 2016.**
- These statements indicate a shift from India's previous cautious and neutral stance on the South China Sea issue.

- India's evolving approach reflects a departure from its earlier position and aligns more closely with supporting international maritime law, sovereignty, and sovereign rights in the South China Sea.
- This shift in India's stance on the South China Sea reflects its broader strategic and economic aspirations on the global stage.

A policy evolution

- Initially, New Delhi's engagement with the region was primarily economic, driven by its Look East Policy.
- The Look East Policy aimed to enhance economic integration with Southeast Asia and secure energy resources to fuel India's growing economy.
- Indian state-owned enterprises, such as ONGC Videsh, participated in oil and gas exploration projects in Vietnam's exclusive economic zones, signaling India's economic stakes in the region.
- India supported the principle of freedom of exploration and exploitation of maritime resources within the bounds of international law, particularly UNCLOS.
- Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, India's policy orientation shifted from Look East to Act East, marking a more strategic and active engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.
- The Act East Policy emphasizes not only economic integration but also strategic partnerships and expanded security cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.
- India has strengthened its own capacities through measures like forward positioning, mission-based deployments, reinforced maritime domain awareness, and the development of deep-water maritime facilities.

India's complex ties with China

- Geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea have increased due to China's assertive territorial claims and militarization efforts.
- India's stance on the South China Sea issue has become more nuanced and less cautious over time.
- India's position is influenced by its complex relationship with China, which has a history of border disputes and territorial incursions.
- Tensions intensified after the Galwan Valley incident in 2020, which led to India demonstrating its military capabilities by sending a frontline warship to the South China Sea.
- China's assertive posture and territorial claims in the South China Sea and along India's land border have disruptive implications for regional stability.
- India has responded by engaging in strategic partnerships, including regular naval exercises and military cooperation with Southeast Asian nations.
- These engagements serve two purposes: they demonstrate India's commitment to regional security and act as a counter to China's unlawful assertions in the region.

The ASEAN factor

ASEAN

- **Regional Organization:** Founded in 1967 with the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN is a political and economic organization aimed at promoting stability, peace, and prosperity in Southeast Asia.



- **Headquarters:** Jakarta, Indonesia.
- **Current Membership:** 10 Southeast Asian Nations:
 - Brunei Darussalam
 - Cambodia
 - Indonesia
 - Lao PDR
 - Malaysia
 - Myanmar
 - Philippines
 - Singapore
 - Thailand
 - Vietnam

Core Objectives

- **Regional Peace and Stability:** Build trust and cooperation to prevent conflict and promote peaceful settlement of disputes.
- **Economic Prosperity:** Create a single market and production base through free trade, investment, and economic integration.
- **Socio-cultural Development:** Promote human development, social justice, and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

Key Mechanisms

- **ASEAN Summits:** Heads of state meet twice annually to set broad directions.
- **Sectoral Bodies:** Various ministerial and technical bodies responsible for cooperation in areas like trade, security, environment, and more.
- **ASEAN Community:** Established in 2015, it comprises three pillars:
 - Economic pillar (AEC)
 - Security pillar (APSC)
 - Socio-cultural pillar (ASCC)

Recent Focus Areas

- **Indo-Pacific Outlook:** Promoting ASEAN centrality in the region amidst rising geopolitical tensions.
- **Sustainable Development:** Addressing climate change, environmental concerns, and disaster resilience.
- **Technology and Innovation:** Harnessing digital technologies for economic growth and inclusivity.

- **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP):** Massive free trade agreement including ASEAN members and other Asia-Pacific nations.
- New Delhi's strategic shift is driven by recognizing the critical importance of the South China Sea to regional security and the global maritime order.
- Disputes in the South China Sea involve China and ASEAN countries, **affecting freedom of navigation and oversight, crucial for India's trade and energy transportation routes and global countries.**
- India, as a responsible Indo-Pacific stakeholder, must take clear positions on such critical matters, as its periphery extends beyond the Indian Ocean to the wider maritime domain challenged by China's rise.
- **Upholding ASEAN centrality is essential in India's Indo-Pacific strategy,** despite internal differences within the regional grouping posing challenges.
- India advocates for a rules-based international maritime order, emphasizing UNCLOS, **opposing unilateral actions threatening regional stability.**
- India's stance **indirectly challenges China's expansive territorial claims** and activities in the South China Sea, positioning India as a responsible stakeholder committed to regional stability.
- India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea aligns with its broader strategy to **safeguard its interests while contributing to peace, stability, and respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific region.**

MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION: GS PAPER II: IR

Question: Analyze India's evolving stance on the South China Sea issue, from a cautious approach to a more assertive position, particularly under the Act East Policy. How does India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia reflect its broader geopolitical interests and security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region? (250 Words/15 Marks)

ANSWER APPROACH

- Introduce answer with India's historical cautious approach toward the disputes and its initial focus on economic partnerships in the region.
- Then bring India's Evolving Stance on the South China Sea with coverage of following areas:
 - From Economic Focus to Strategic Engagement
 - Growing Assertiveness
 - Emphasis on UNCLOS
- Conclude by reiterating how this reflects India's desire to protect its own security interests, contribute to regional peace, and uphold international law against Chinese expansionism.

ANSWER

India's stance on the South China Sea issue has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from a cautious approach to a more assertive position, particularly under the Act East Policy. Initially, India's engagement with the region was primarily driven by economic considerations, as

evident from its Look East Policy, which aimed to enhance economic integration with Southeast Asia and secure energy resources to fuel India's growing economy.

- Indian state-owned enterprises, such as ONGC Videsh, participated in oil and gas exploration projects in Vietnam's exclusive economic zones, indicating India's economic stakes in the region.
- However, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, India's policy orientation shifted from Look East to Act East, marking a strategic and active engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.
- The Act East Policy not only emphasizes economic integration but also focuses on strategic partnerships and expanded security cooperation with countries in the Indo-Pacific, including Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines.
- This shift reflects India's broader geopolitical interests and security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region.
- India's evolving approach to the South China Sea issue also reflects its recognition of the critical importance of the region to regional security and the global maritime order.
- Disputes in the South China Sea involving China and ASEAN countries affect freedom of navigation and oversight, crucial for India's trade and energy transportation routes and global connectivity. As a responsible Indo-Pacific stakeholder, India must take clear positions on such critical matters, as its periphery extends beyond the Indian Ocean to the wider maritime domain challenged by China's rise.
- India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia aligns with its advocacy for a rules-based international maritime order, emphasizing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and opposing unilateral actions threatening regional stability.
- India's stance indirectly challenges China's expansive territorial claims and activities in the South China Sea, positioning India as a responsible stakeholder committed to regional stability.

- Furthermore, India's nuanced approach in the South China Sea, characterized by a departure from its earlier cautious stance and alignment with supporting international maritime law, sovereignty, and sovereign rights, underscores its commitment to peace, stability, and respect for international law in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Upholding ASEAN centrality remains essential in India's Indo-Pacific strategy, despite internal differences within the regional grouping posing challenges.

Thus, India's strategic engagement with Southeast Asia reflects its broader geopolitical interests and security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region, emphasizing the importance of a rules-based international order and cooperation among like-minded nations to address common challenges effectively.