

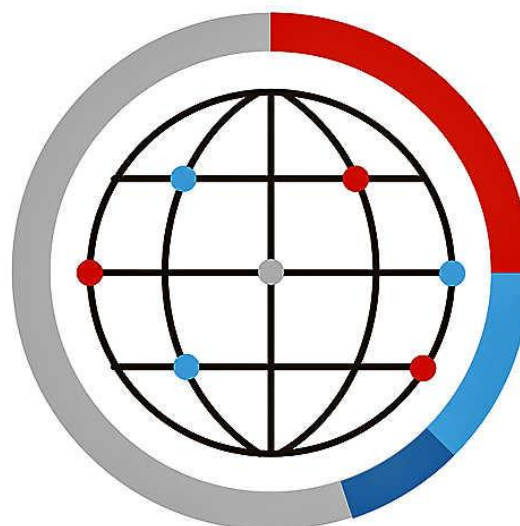


India's UN journey, from outlier to the high table

GS II: Important International institutions, agencies and fora - their Structure, Mandate.

Context: The 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations (UN) is an opportunity to look at the major trends, patterns and future challenges as far as India is concerned in terms of safeguarding its interests and promoting the common good. That the UN is indispensable is uncontested despite the clamour for reforms to strengthen its role. As Prime Minister,

Jawaharlal Nehru once observed in his address to the UN General Assembly on December 20, 1956, "Of course, even if the United Nations did not do anything wonderful, the mere fact of the United Nations itself has been of great significance to the world...."



Membership and phases

Seven and a half decades of India at the UN may be viewed with reference to roughly three distinct phases.

1. In the first phase until the end of the Cold War in 1989, India played a moderating force in easing armed conflicts in Asia and Africa by disentangling them from the superpower rivalry.
2. In parallel, the Indian leadership learned the hard way that the UN could not be relied upon to impartially resolve vital security disputes such as Jammu and Kashmir.
3. India strove to utilise the UN only to focus on common causes such as anti-colonialism, anti-racism, nuclear disarmament, environment conservation and equitable economic development.
4. India, in a clever way, seemed to claim the moral high ground by proposing, in 1988, a bold, but obviously impractical, three-phase plan to eliminate nuclear weapons from the surface of the earth.



5. India resisted attempts by neighbouring countries to raise bilateral problems. This was reflected during the Bangladesh liberation war and after. In essence, a loss of face for India in the 1962 border war against China meant a definitive redesign of the country's diplomatic style to privilege bilateral contacts over the third party role by the UN.

A demanding decade

1. The 1990s spelt the most difficult decade for India in the world body, as the years were marked by the sudden end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the resultant emergence of the United States as the unrivalled power in world politics.
2. Besides, the uncertain political climate caused by unstable coalition governments along with the balance of payments crisis constrained the country's capability to be active in various bodies, especially in the Security Council (UNSC) and the General Assembly.
3. Indian at this time shed away its Idealism and shifted towards pragmatism, as shown by the change in its stand on Zionism.
4. At the same time, growing militancy in Kashmir in the early 1990s emboldened Pakistan to internationalise the dispute with accusations about gross human rights violations by India. Clearly, India had to work hard to seek favours from Iran and China in the Human Rights Commission to checkmate Pakistan.
5. The threat posed to respect for sovereignty principle by NATO intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999 without the authorization of the UNSC deeply disturbed India, but its efforts, in partnership with Russia and China, to call for an end to aerial attacks did not garner much support in the UNSC.
6. This, however, did not mean that India could not draw red lines on questions of serious consequences to its security. India resolutely stood against the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995, and it stoutly rejected the backdoor introduction for the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996.
7. It is notable that these two developments at the UN perhaps pushed India to surprise the world in 1998 with its Pokhran nuclear weapon tests, ignoring the likely adverse reaction from the nuclear club.



Winds of change

1. Remarkably, the 21st century opened new avenues for India to shine at the UN. The impressive economic performance in the first decade, thanks to economic liberalisation and globalisation policies, helped a great deal in strengthening its profile.
2. This is only aided by its reliable and substantial troop contributions to several peacekeeping operations in African conflict theatres.
3. Alongside, India has emerged as a responsible stakeholder in non-traditional security issue areas such as the spread of small and light weapons, the threat of non-state actors acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and the impact of climate change.
4. In a related dimension, India has scaled up its contributions to the development and humanitarian agencies, while India's share to the UN assessed budget has registered a hike from 0.34% to 0.83%.
5. Finally, India's growing popularity is evident in the successful electoral contests for various prestigious slots in the UN bodies.
6. However, two major initiatives India has heavily invested in are stuck without much hope of a timely outcome. The first relates to the draft Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism it drafted and revised with the hope of helping consensus. But it encountered reservations from among Islamic and other countries on provisions regarding the definition of terrorist and the convention's application to state armed forces.

Security Council expansion

Equally important is the question of equitable expansion of the UNSC to enable India to attain permanent membership along with other claimants from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The move has been stuck for more than 25 years because of a lack of unity among the regional formations. It also includes stout opposition from some 30 middle powers such as Italy and Pakistan which fear losing out to regional rivals in the event of addition of permanent seats and the intrigues masterminded by one or two permanent members. Although India enjoys by far the greatest support, the only realistic possibility seems to settle for a compromise, i.e. a new category of members elected for a longer duration than the present non-permanent members without veto power.



Future

India's future role will probably depend on its ability to weather the impact of the multiple crises it now faces on account of an unabated economic slowdown and a troubled relationship with China. This is pertinent as India will soon begin its two-year term as a non-permanent UNSC member (January 1, 2021). Its areas of priority will continue to be the upholding of Charter principles, mounting effective punitive measures against those who support, finance and sponsor terrorists, besides striving for securing due say to the troop-contributing countries in the management of peace operations.

In the midst of the currently volatile situation as characterised by the Trump administration's disdain towards multilateral institutions, the changing U.S.-China equation, China's growing political isolation on account of the spread of the novel coronavirus, and China's aggressive territorial forays in eastern Ladakh and the South China Sea, India may face challenges and opportunities in the UNSC.

Taking on the Centre

GS II: Functions and Responsibilities of the Union and the States, Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Devolution of Powers and Finances up to Local Levels and Challenges Therein.



Bottom line: States aggrieved by central farm laws are adopting both legislative and legal measures

Challenges in liberalizing the Farm Sector

1. Punjab's efforts to enact State amendments to override the effects of the Centre's new agriculture laws epitomise the difficulties in managing the conflict between liberalising the farm sector and protecting the small and marginal farmer from the agonies of the transition.
2. The issue also flags the consequences of not having a wide and informed debate before introducing far-reaching changes.



3. Punjab has been the hub of the opposition to the Centre's legislative exercise to change the basics of trade and commerce in agriculture. The Akali Dal, the main opposition in the State, eventually withdrew its Cabinet minister and later walked out of the NDA government at the Centre.
4. Punjab argues that the central Acts would cause "grave detriment and prejudice" to agricultural communities. The Bills cite an agriculture census of 2015-16 to argue that 86.2% of farmers own less than five acres — a majority of them less than two acres — and that with limited or no access to multiple markets, they would be handicapped while negotiating fair price contracts with private players.
5. Making efforts to buy farm produce at less than the MSP or harassing farmers in a bid to persuade them to enter into such contracts have been sought to be made punishable offences, with a jail term of at least three years.
6. The Bills also seek to overturn the Centre's move to remove the fee on trade and transactions that take place outside markets functioning under APMCs.

The State List and the Concurrent List

1. A key issue raised by Punjab's proposed amendments is whether they are legally valid and where they stand in the teeth of the Centre's legislation.
2. States can indeed amend central laws enacted under the Concurrent List, subject to the condition that provisions repugnant to the parliamentary Acts will have to get the President's assent, without which they do not come into force.
3. The Punjab Bills note that agriculture is under the legislative domain in the States, as the subject falls under the State List in the Seventh Schedule.
4. The Centre has enacted its farm sector Bills by invoking Entry 33(b) in the Concurrent List, which concerns trade and commerce in, and production, supply and distribution of, "foodstuffs". By stretching the entry's meaning to include agriculture, Parliament has managed to pass laws in the domain of the States.
5. In these circumstances, States aggrieved by the farm sector laws will either have to go the Punjab way to adopt Bills that would require presidential assent, as Rajasthan has decided to do, or challenge the validity of the central laws in the Supreme Court, as Chhattisgarh is said to be considering.



6. Whatever the outcome, clear from the groundswell of opposition across the country is that a cavalier and centralised approach to issues that affect millions of farmers ill-serves a diverse country.

Hitting where it hurts

GS II: Effect of Policies and Politics of Developed and Developing Countries on India's interests, Indian Diaspora.

Bottom line: As the U.S. election nears, work visas have become policy targets for the White House

H-1B politics

1. The Trump administration has once again tightened the screws on the country's immigration system in a manner that is likely to directly impact Indian companies contracting with American firms for on-site work.
2. This week the State Department proposed to stop issuing temporary or B-1 business visas relating to occupations normally classified as falling under the H-1B speciality or skilled visa category.
3. The argument is that under the guise of the business-related entry of personnel, companies were sending their technology professionals for short-term stays to work on U.S. jobs, potentially undercutting the wages and employment prospects of U.S. workers.
4. The proposed policy action, just ahead of the November 3 presidential election, is significant for following closely on the heels of other, similar moves to tighten restrictions on the entry of foreign nationals, including raising the minimum salaries payable to those applying for H-1B visas and to stop the issuance of such visas entirely until December 31, 2020.
5. Taken together, it would be reasonable to expect a painful economic fallout on legal skilled migration from India. For example, the analysts predict that Mr Trump's June 22, 2020 ban on new H-1B visa issuance could impact up to 219,000 workers, who would be unable to take up potential jobs in the U.S.





Indian Response

To date, there have been no retaliatory policy from India, at most perhaps diplomatic parleys where South Block has sought to emphasise that technology and innovation via the trade in services remain a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership and highly-skilled Indian professionals working in the U.S. help bridge the skill gap there, imparting a technological and competitive edge.

Pandemic and Joblessness in the USA

1. In the backdrop of the steady clampdown on visa, issuance is Mr Trump's rhetoric on protecting U.S. jobs from foreigners, especially in cases where lower wages drive substitution effects.
2. The pressure on the White House to increase this form of "protectionism" has risen owing to the pandemic's job-killing effects.
3. U.S. joblessness spiked to an unprecedented 14.7% in April 2020. While it has dropped off since then, the country has entered the final phases of electoral campaigning, which has seen sharp attacks by Democratic challenger Joe Biden on Mr Trump's alleged failure to mitigate the economic crisis.
4. When considered alongside the fact that Mr Trump is steadily losing ground in federal and regional opinion polls, it is hardly surprising that areas of legal migration, including skilled workers entering the U.S. via the H-1B programme, have become policy targets for the White House.

Implications for India

It would be wise for Indian IT firms and others seeking to send their employees to the U.S. for short-term work to assume that regardless of who wins the election, it will be a long time, if ever before they can hope to return to business as usual.

The revenge of the lakes in Hyderabad

GS I: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies.

GS III: Disaster and Disaster Management.

Main argument: Over the past week, floods in Hyderabad have killed 33 people and destroyed property. A burgeoning population





and rapid infrastructural development have put tremendous pressure on the water bodies of the city, reducing their area, quantity and quality, leading to disasters.

Unprecedented Rain

1. On October 14, after night-long rain, the daily rainfall recorded at the weather monitoring station of the India Meteorological Department at Begumpet was 19.2 cm. It was the second-highest in the recorded history of rainfall in a single day at this station since 1891.
2. The water drowned the roads and inundated homes worth crores of rupees in the hub of the IT industry.

The sisterhood of lakes: Kuntas and Cheruvus

1. In Telangana's natural terrain, lakes exist in sororities. The State's undulating topography allowed the existence of a reported one lakh chain-linked lakes/ponds, locally known as Kuntas and Cheruvus, in Hyderabad and its peripheries in the pre-independence era.
2. Surplus water from each lake flowed down to the next water body in the basin, completing a chain link. The system worked well for the region in the Deccan Plateau where canal irrigation was not an option.
3. Owing to the linkages, flooding could be avoided during monsoons, and there would be enough water impounded for summer crops. The rulers recognised this fact, and through their diktats, maintained the lakes' health.
4. They also added new lakes, constructed strong bunds and drains to control the flows, and maintained and developed them.
5. After independence, the lakes came under the centralised command of the Irrigation Department, alienating the users from their water bodies. Since the 1970s, the pace of urbanisation has picked up, substituting the traditional value of subsistence placed on the land with that of real estate.
6. As the city spread, traditional vocations such as agriculture and fishing vanished. Concrete jungles took over within no time.
7. A unique aspect of the Asafjahi rule was its grant of titles to farmers in the lake beds so that when the water receded in summer, the alluvial soil offered them bounty crop. No activity apart from farming was allowed on the lake bed.



Unplanned Urbanization

1. With urbanisation fast catching up, and infrastructure creation not apace with it, lakes became the handy receptacles of the city's sewage. Builders laid sewage lines up to the nearest lake or connected them to the stormwater drain network wherever it existed.
2. As a fallout, eutrophication soon set into the lakes, making the lakes rich with weed and poor in water-holding capacity and biodiversity. The fish died. The water became unfit for any kind of consumption. Slowly, but surely, the lake shrunk in area, quantity and quality.
3. Farmers and their descendants who had titles inside the lake beds sold the exposed land. Wherever the lakes became veritable sewage repositories, the urban poor settled in those areas. And where the waters were still pristine enough to proffer a 'lake view', the plots were sold at premium rates.
4. Gigantic infrastructure development projects taken up by the successive governments tampered with the topography of the capital region and altered the hydrology of the lake basins.
5. It would not be an exaggeration to state that there is not one lake in the limits of Greater Hyderabad which has been exempted from this fate, including the famed Hussain Sagar lake. The status of the lakes in the municipalities/corporations surrounding the State capital is worse.

Shrinking water bodies

From one lakh, the water bodies have drastically come down to 185 within the Greater Hyderabad capital region, and to 3,132 within the limits of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority (HMDA) as enumerated by its Lake Protection Committee till date.

The Lake Protection Committee was constituted in 2010 upon the High Court's directions responding to a PIL. The Committee had been inept in terms of enforcement. It has limited itself to counting lakes alone. It has failed to fulfil its mandate of identifying lakes, demarcating boundaries and buffer zones for them, fencing them with FTL (Full Tank Level) stones, and preserving them by preventing and removing encroachments. Of the 3,132 water bodies, all formalities have been completed with respect to only 224. This number has remained unchanged for the past year. Even where the FTL boundaries are



notified, encroachments within have remained untouched, owing to several sociopolitical dynamics.

A 2017 research paper on remote sensing study by ICRISAT and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Uppsala records the shrinkage of water bodies in the city and its surrounding areas over 16 years. In 2005, lakes recorded a total acreage of 12,535 ha. In 2016, this reduced to 2,283 ha. This means that all the floodwater that would otherwise have been impounded in these lakes, enriching the groundwater, quenching thirst and feeding biodiversity of the basin is now let berserk either into the surrounding lakes or into low-lying areas, inundating homes and killing the residents.

A long-term action plan needed

1. There is a need for a single authority dealing with the lakes in the city.
2. Two studies — one by Kirloskar Consultancy in 2002 for the erstwhile Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad and the other by the Voyants Consultancy in 2008 for GHMC — recommended widening and improving stormwater drains, and diverting sewage.
3. The Voyants' Master Plan divided the entire GHMC area into 16 hydraulic zones and identified 173 major drains, 391-km long, which needed decongestion and widening immediately.
4. Its implementation necessitates the acquisition of 28,800 properties encroaching on the drains, an insurmountable task. Only about 35 km of the drains could be cleared till 2016 when the city experienced inundation yet again in several areas, forcing the government to consider the proposals seriously.

When extreme single day rainfalls will become the norm

Caught in a difficult situation, the State government is blaming the problems on the unprecedented rainfall in a single day. As per a study by the Department of Civil Engineering, BITS Pilani, Hyderabad Campus, extreme daily rainfall in the city will be a recurring phenomenon in future too. The study has postulated that in 2040, 2045, 2068, 2088 and 2098, the city may experience intense rainfall in a day ranging between 27 cm and 69 cm. How the city prepares to mitigate the potential damage that it will bring is to be seen.