

Current Affairs of the Day

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China Parliament approves 5-year plan

News: China on Thursday formally approved the outline of its 14th five-year plan (2021-25), which highlights a number of key strategic projects to be pursued as a priority, including the first dam in Tibet on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo or the Brahmaputra, a Sichuan-Tibet railway line near the India border, and a push for self-sufficiency in emerging industries such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).

A hydropower base on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo:

1. The draft outline of the five-year plan (FYP) and objectives through the year 2035 were passed by the National People's Congress, the ceremonial legislature, as it closed its six-day annual session.
2. Among the key projects is the building of a hydropower base on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo, which refers to the sections of the river in Tibet just before it enters India in Arunachal Pradesh. While four dams have been approved on the upper and middle reaches, this is the first project in the lower reaches of the river.
3. India has expressed concerns over the four previously announced dams on the upper and middle reaches, the first of which, in Zangmu, was operationalised in 2015. The impact of the dams on downstream flows is not clear, and Indian officials have said they are monitoring the flows of the river closely, both through independent assessments and using the hydrological data that China provides under a bilateral arrangement.
4. The Brahmaputra is not entirely dependent on upstream flows with an estimated 35% of its basin in India, according to officials.

High-priority project

1. Dams on the lower reaches and at the Great Bend of the river near the border, which has been cited as a possible location for the new project, would raise worries because of the location across the border from Arunachal Pradesh in an ecologically sensitive canyon.
2. The Sichuan-Tibet railway plan will be extended to build a cross-border railway link connecting China and Nepal.
3. The FYP also emphasised opening up access to key border highways, including the strategically important G219 national highway that runs along the entire length of the India-China border in Xinjiang and Tibet.



Aiming high-tech

1. Beyond the strategic infrastructure projects, the broader goal of the FYP and the 2035 outline emphasised establishing China's self-sufficiency in key high-tech industries.
2. While the FYP for the first time did not outline a growth target, it listed an annual target to increase R&D spending "by more than 7% per year".
3. It said China "will take self-reliance in science and technology as a strategic underpinning for national development" and "will focus on the development of strategic emerging industries including information technology, biotech and new energy".

PM to attend first Quad Summit today

News: Access to COVID-19 vaccines, cooperation on technology, and climate change are on the top of the agenda as Prime Minister Narendra Modi will join U.S. President Joseph Biden, Australian PM Scott Morrison and Japanese PM Yoshihide Suga for a virtual summit of the Quadrilateral Framework (Quad) on Friday — the first time leaders of the Indo-Pacific grouping are meeting.

Highlights:

1. The meeting is also one of Mr Biden's first multilateral engagements, which the White House said denoted the importance of the U.S.'s cooperation with "allies and partners in the Indo Pacific".
2. The Quad meeting, which China has referred to as an "Indo-Pacific NATO", will be watched most closely for signals on how the grouping will deal with the challenge from Beijing's recent moves in the Pacific as well as at the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh.
3. Also of interest is whether the four leaders will issue a joint statement at the end of the meeting, which would be another first, as all Quad engagements thus far have come out with four separate readouts indicating differences in their positions.

Vaccine Diplomacy

1. India, the world's largest manufacturer of vaccines, that has already shipped out more than 48 million doses worldwide, is expected to request Quad investment to scale up its outreach further.
2. In addition, India would like to see Western countries, led by the U.S., dilute their opposition to its proposal at the World Trade Organisation to waive



Trade-Related Intellectual Property (TRIPS) guidelines, so that more vaccines can be produced generically.

India, Japan space agencies review ties

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News: Indian and Japanese space agencies reviewed cooperation in earth observation, lunar cooperation and satellite navigation, and also agreed to explore opportunities for cooperation in “space situational awareness and professional exchange programme”.

Highlights: Space Diplomacy

1. This was agreed upon during a bilateral meeting between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) held virtually.
2. India and Japan are already working on a joint lunar polar exploration (LUPEX) mission and the two space agencies have been working on the mission that aims to send a lander and rover to the Moon’s south pole around 2024.
3. Earlier, India and Italy decided to explore opportunities in earth observation, space science and robotic and human exploration.
4. India and Australia also signed an amendment to the MoU which will build on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Both countries are also in discussions for Australia to host a vital tracking infrastructure to support the Gaganyaan manned space flight mission.

Saving the sea giants

News: A study reveals the global population of sharks and rays have crashed by over 70% in the past five decades. But a few conservation initiatives in India show that well-crafted policies and awareness programmes can make a difference

India: the second-largest shark fishing nation

According to a report by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, India is now the second-largest shark fishing nation in the world, following Indonesia. This makes present-day, grassroots conservation efforts — by NGOs and State Forest Departments alike — all the more worthy of the spotlight.



Shark Economy

1. However, enforcing the fishing regulations for these sharks was not straightforward, as whale sharks were usually hauled in as bycatch when fishermen were targeting economically benefiting species.
2. The meat of whale sharks is not very edible, it is the liver that is the most important for commercial trade, while oil from the fish is used for water-proofing boats.
3. Irrespective of their size or habitat, humans have found a way to hunt most of the sharks and use every part of them. The skin is used for leather which is made into boots and bags, and liver for oil.
4. The fins were earlier harvested for shark fin soup, a sought-after delicacy in Southeast Asia and China. However, exporting shark fins was banned in India in 2015.
5. It was easier raising awareness about whale sharks as the fish is protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act but this could not be done for others.

Starting steps: Conservation Efforts

1. It was in 2001 that, in a conservation attempt, whale sharks were included in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972, rendering the capture and killing of the fish a cognisable offence.
2. Despite the protection, whale shark landings were common on India's West coast, especially in Gujarat. This is when Wildlife Trust of India, decided to launch awareness and conservation programmes in the State to educate the fishermen about the species.
3. The decision of protecting the species was taken at an apex level but the information never trickled down to the fishermen. That is why we launched our Whale Shark Conservation Programme in Gujarat in 2004.
4. Workshops were conducted in villages and street plays were written and enacted to convey the consequences of hunting whale sharks.
5. Due to the consistent efforts of WTI, whale shark landings in Gujarat reduced and fishermen started releasing the fish during accidental encounters. But, the sharks that were saved in Gujarat were hunted down South on the coasts of Maharashtra, Kerala and Lakshadweep.
6. Once WTI realised this, it launched awareness campaigns in Kerala and Lakshadweep. It is due to these efforts that the last whale shark landing from



Gujarat was reported in 2005 and the incidents have reduced drastically in Kerala and Lakshadweep.

From Barrel to Vhali

Two decades ago, the coastal communities of Gujarat knew the 'barrel,' but not the whale shark. It was a commonly used name for the fish, not because of its size but because harpoons and barrels were used while hunting it. But today, they are referred to as **vhali** which means "dear one" in Gujarati. The change in perception is due to the conservation efforts of the Wildlife Trust of India.