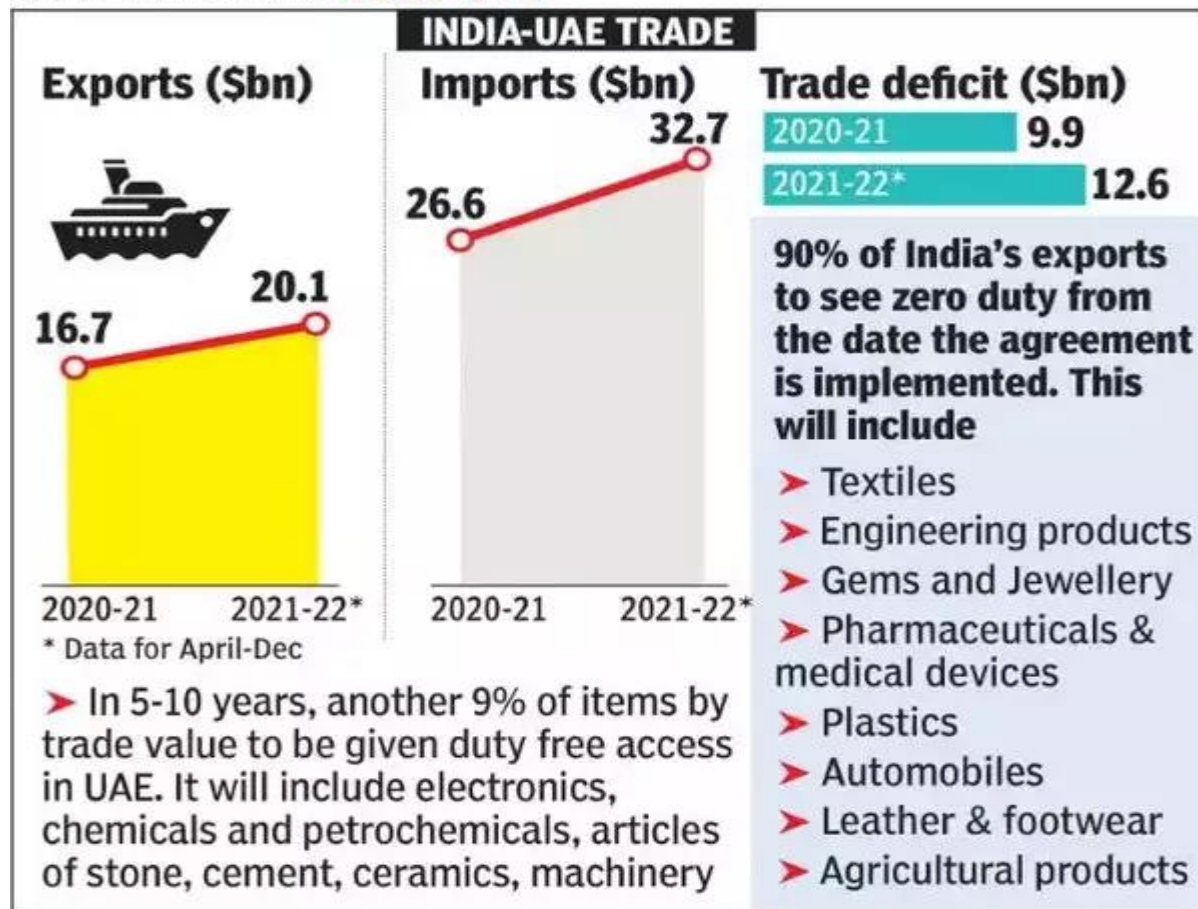


Turning to trade winds

India has an opportunity to reset its trade ties with others, one accord at a time.

THE ROAD AHEAD



Highlights:

1. A little over two years after it turned its back at the last minute on a major multilateral trade agreement it had spent years negotiating, India last week announced the signing of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
2. The free trade pact is a tacit acknowledgement that India needs to strengthen its trade ties with existing partners by lowering tariff walls and obtaining more favourable access for its exports in order to boost trade and economic output.

24.02.2022

Thursday



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3. With the COVID-19 pandemic having thrown into sharp relief the public health and economic vulnerabilities of an increasingly interconnected world, a reflexive urge to turn inward was evident in the last two years as nations imposed tight travel and entry restrictions in a bid to protect their populations.
4. And ironically, even as India sought to promote atmanirbharta or self-reliance, the pandemic also depressed domestic consumption demand, dragging down overall economic output.
5. Exports on the other hand have rebounded strongly, with growth outpacing even the pre-pandemic levels.
6. It is in this backdrop that the Government's renewed push to negotiate its bilateral free trade agreements is a welcome change in tack and signals that India is keener to strengthen trade ties with individual partner countries on equitable terms rather than be tied into multilateral pacts that do not necessarily address its key concerns.

India-UAE Pact:

1. That the accord was finalised in less than six months' time, from the start of negotiations in September, is a testimony to the strength of the bilateral ties and the recognition that there is more to gain from a deepening of the relationship.
2. The UAE is already India's third-largest trading partner with bilateral trade in 2019-20 valued at \$59 billion. While India's exports amounted to about \$29 billion in the pre-pandemic fiscal year ended March 2020, the UAE supplied India with \$10.9 billion worth of crude oil in that period and counts New Delhi as its second-largest trading partner.
3. The two partners now aim to leverage the free trade deal to lift bilateral merchandise trade to \$100 billion over the next five years.
4. While the fine print of the tariff concessions on both sides is yet to be spelt out, India has made it clear that a range of exports including textiles and jewellery are set to benefit from a zero-duty regime once the accord is formally operationalised by May.

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5. Two-way investment flows and remittances — a major source of foreign exchange earnings for India given the largely Indian workforce in the UAE — are also expected to receive a fillip.
6. With multiple other FTAs in the pipeline, India has a fresh opportunity to reset its trade ties with the international community, one accord at a time.

Drafting a new Constitution is impossible

That the Centre is suppressing the powers of the States is not reason enough for a new statute.

The context:

1. Recently, the Chief Minister of Telangana said India needs a new Constitution, as, according to him, governments at the Centre over the years have been suppressing the powers of the States.
2. Being a citizen and a constitutional head of state, he was not wrong in exercising his fundamental right to express his views freely. Nor was what he said wrong: Central governments have indeed been suppressing the powers of the States in various ways.
3. The Supreme Court, in judgments such as S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994) and Govt. Of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India (2018), has castigated governments at the Centre for this.

Why is it impossible

1. Noted jurist Fali S. Nariman, in a lecture titled 'The Silences in Our Constitutional Law', delivered in 2005, rightly said, "We will never be able to piece together a new Constitution in the present day and age even if we tried: because innovative ideas — however brilliant, howsoever beautifully expressed in consultation papers and reports of commissions — cannot give us a better Constitution.
2. In Constitution-making there are other forces that cannot and must never be ignored — the spirit of persuasion, of accommodation and of tolerance — all three are at a very low ebb today". We can add a few more forces that cannot be ignored today, such as casteism, nepotism and corruption.



Trusting the talent of dissenter:

1. This article highlights a few events that took place while India's Constitution was drafted to argue how these events may never take place in the present scenario.
2. The first is the appointment of B.R. Ambedkar as chairman of the Drafting Committee. Ambedkar was fighting to ensure rights for the depressed classes and, in his own words, he came to the Assembly to "safeguard the interests of the Scheduled Castes". But he was trusted for his passion and talent and elected chairman of the Drafting Committee by the Constituent Assembly, which was dominated by Congress.
3. The result is the Constitution we see today, which safeguards the rights of majority and minority communities. Today, when caste and nepotism play a pivotal role in electing even a ward member, consensus over a new Constitution would be impossible.

Value of time:

1. It took two years, 11 months and 18 days to draft the present Constitution. During this period, the members read the constitutions of other nations, consulted constitutional experts, drafted the Constitution, debated it, redrafted it and approved it.
2. During Constituent Assembly debates, if five minutes were wasted one day, the House would assemble five minutes earlier the next day and sit until night to complete pending work.
3. This showed value for time, and value for work done for the nation. Now, all we see is ruckus and noise in Parliament, with little debate or discussion taking place on Bills.

Debate and Dissent:

1. During Constituent Assembly debates, dissenters and hard-core critics were tolerated and their suggestions, if found apt, were accommodated. If their suggestions were not found apt, there would be a healthy debate.
2. Now, Bills are passed without allowing Opposition members to express their views completely, let alone accommodating their suggestions.



Nation first

1. Members of the Constituent Assembly chose the nation first; today's leaders tend to choose their party first
2. Fourth, the Constitution states that India is a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic". It protects the rights of every section of society. On the other hand, today's leaders give priority to particular ideologies and castes.
3. Given this, drafting a new Constitution will be a chaotic exercise and will shut the voices of some sections, especially the vulnerable.

A strong Centre

1. Before independence, India comprised over 550 princely States, suffered from the problems created by Partition and faced a looming economic crisis. Thus, the Constituent Assembly's members tilted towards a strong Centre with a blend of cooperative federalism.
2. It is true that the governments at the Centre abuse their powers to cripple the Opposition-ruled States, but that does not call for creating a new Constitution.
3. It calls for seeking a mandate from the people to elect regional parties in general elections so that States can have dominance in the Union, besides approaching the Supreme Court under Article 131 whenever the need arises to resolve conflicts between the Centre and State.