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Weekly Editorial Analysis (WEA)

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Note -

- The Newspaper clippings pasted in PDF are important from Mains point of view as it contains the fodder material for Mains Answer Writing.
- Also watch DND video lectures everyday @ 4 PM on Sleepy's YouTube channel in order to understand how to get the most out of everyday's Newspaper .

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1. A virus, theories of origin, and a place for science

Hypothesis and evidence

- **One school of thought** is convinced that the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a leading coronavirus research centre, is responsible for introducing a new coronavirus that it was secretly creating in its laboratories.

Evidence

- This hypothesis is driven by evidence ranging from **reports of documents missing** from the website of the Wuhan Institute, to the re-naming or re-numbering of a virus originally discovered in a mine in 2012 that is the closest known ancestor to SARS-CoV-2, to **reports of researchers** mysteriously falling ill at the Wuhan Institute in late 2019, and other reports of a researcher who has reportedly gone missing.
- The fact that the outbreak occurred in Wuhan, home to the institute, is seen as additional evidence of where the virus emerged from.
- This hypothesis is greatly favoured by those who believe China is responsible for the pandemic, but lacks evidence that would stand up to rigorous scientific scrutiny.

The second hypothesis

- The virus emerged through a natural “spillover” event, where a bat coronavirus jumped species and infected humans either directly or through intermediary animals that in turn passed it to humans.

Past evidences

- **SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), the predecessor** of this current pandemic, started similarly in late 2002 when a bat coronavirus probably infected animals and then humans in the markets of Guangdong province in southern China.
- New viral infectious diseases, whether it is HIV/AIDS, Ebola, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) or Nipah, have all arisen from spillovers of animal viruses to humans.
- As with SARS, many of the early cases of COVID-19 were associated with animal markets, particularly the Huanan market in Wuhan, which sold a variety of live and frozen animal meat. This could be one route the SARS-CoV-2 virus took. But no evidence has been found so far to support this hypothesis either.

Challenges

Family tree construction

- For virologists and molecular epidemiologists, it is very difficult to find virus samples from the earliest stages of the outbreak in Wuhan, reconstructing their **genetic sequences**, and then fitting them to a **family tree that will hopefully lead to the common ancestor** of the diverse strains and variants of SARS-CoV-2 that have spread globally.

Finding patient zero

- The earliest detected cases and the earliest viral samples came from those who were hospitalised in Wuhan in December 2019.

- But none of them is likely to have been patient zero, the first person to have been infected by the virus.
- Most people with COVID-19 display very mild or no symptoms, so for every hospitalised case, there are likely to have been many earlier cases that were not detected

Tracing strain A

- It is known that two strains, an A strain and a B strain, were circulating in Wuhan in the early stages of the outbreak.
- But most of the samples and cases were of the B strain, which caused the first recognised disease cluster in people associated with the Huanan market
- A strain could have been an earlier strain. But these cases were never identified or sampled, and they will forever remain unknown.

Samples from live animals

- The other source of evidence are samples from the live animals sold in all the markets in Wuhan in the last months of 2019
- This too is also not available, since the animals have long been sold and **slaughtered**, and the markets more often than not sanitised.

The entry of politics

- Truth will only come out after an investigation of the Wuhan laboratory and its staff by international investigators with a wide mandate to search the lab and question staff.
- This is not going to happen as china will not allow this.

Way forward

Chinese cooperation crucial

- The only solution is to work with China.
- Widespread sampling of animals in farms across China that supplied the markets in Wuhan in the search of ancestor viruses to SARS- CoV-2.
- Workers in farms need to be tested as well for exposure to SARS- CoV-2 or related viruses.

Antibody test

- Another suggested step is for **blood banks across China** to test blood samples from 2019 to see whether they carried **antibodies** for SARS- CoV-2.
- This could provide a clue to how early the virus was circulating in human populations.
- None of this can happen without Chinese cooperation.

2. In defence of India's noisy democracy

- Over the last century has been spectacular.
- No country in history has ever grown faster and more dynamically.
- Not only have hundreds of millions been lifted out of poverty, but social indicators have improved dramatically.

India's development

- India's developmental record has been much more mixed.
- Since the 1990s, the Indian economy has grown impressively, but it remains far **behind China** in its global competitiveness.
- Poverty has come down, but employment prospects for the majority remain limited to low-wage informal sector jobs
- Improvements in basic social development indicators have lagged, so much so that as Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have pointed out, India has actually **fallen behind Bangladesh and Pakistan**.

The 'too democratic' line

- India's problem is that it is just too democratic.
- Unlike China, making and **implementing key decisions** about public investment and various reforms is impossible in the din of multiple and contradictory democratic voices.
- What is needed are firmer and more independent forms of decision- making that are insulated from this cacophony.

Democratic Vs Non democratic regimes

- The claim that less democracy is good for development does not stand up to comparative, theoretical and ethical scrutiny.
- Contrary to those who believe economic management cannot be left to the whims of democratic forces, the comparative evidence clearly shows that democratic regimes have on balance performed better than non- democratic regimes.
- China, with a history of state-building going back two millennia, and an exceptionally well-organised, disciplined and brutal form of authoritarianism, has done especially well in transforming its economy.
- **Africa and West Asia**, where authoritarian governments of every stripe have dominated, **remain world economic laggards**.
- The **Latin American military dictatorships** of the 1960s and 1970s had a **terrible economic and social record**, and it was with the return of democracy and the "pink wave" of Left populist parties that **prosperity and social progress were ushered in**.
- **Taiwan and South Korea** are also instructive. Their economic take-offs happened under military regimes and relied on labour repression. Their **transitions to democracy saw their economies move up to the next level and become much more inclusive**.

Democracy and development

- Most pointedly though, one only has to look within India to understand **how development and democracy can thrive together**.
- **Kerala and Tamil Nadu** have done more to improve the lives of all their citizens across castes and classes **than any other States** in India and it is no coincidence that both have also had the longest and most sustained popular democratic movements and intense party competition in the country.
- In contrast, in Gujarat, where single party Bharatiya Janata Party rule has been in place for nearly a quarter century, **growth has been solid** but accompanied by **increased social exclusion and stagnation in educational** achievement and poverty reduction.
- The comparative record leaves little doubt that on balance, democracies are better at promoting inclusive growth.
- In contrast, in Gujarat, where single party Bharatiya Janata Party rule has been in place for nearly a quarter century, **growth has been solid** but accompanied by **increased social exclusion and stagnation in educational** achievement and poverty reduction.
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Significance of democracy

- Authoritarianism presumes that those in command will serve the general interest rather than catering to the powerful
- Whereas democracies are more likely to meet the necessary conditions for successful decision making.
- Elected representatives, no matter how venal, have to win re-election, which means answering to a broad swath of the electorate.
- The conflicts and noise that democracy generates may complicate things, but in the end, having to respond to a broad spectrum of interests and identities not only **protects against catastrophic decisions**, but actually allows for forms of negotiation and compromise that can bridge across interests and even balance otherwise conflicting imperatives for growth, **justice, sustainability and social inclusion**.
- **Examples**-The remarkable progress the United Progressive Alliance governments made in building a welfare state (**National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Right To Information, the right to food and other programmes**) is a testament to how a democracy can master even the most complex policy goals.

China Vs India

- One might like to measure or evaluate China's development successes, there is **no way to discount the human cost** of the party-made great famine that took some 35 million lives, a cultural revolution that made enemies out of neighbours, a **one child policy** that devastated families and erased a generation or the violent, systematic repression of the **Uyghur Muslim** and Tibetan minorities.
- **India's democracy** has been quarrelsome, cumbersome and often dominated by elites, it has also **opened social and political spaces** for subordinate groups and has built a sense of shared identity and belonging in the world's largest and most diverse society.

- It has preserved **individual liberties, group identities** and religious and thought freedoms, all the things that confer recognition on human beings.

3. The bar on criticism that muzzles the advocate

- On June 25, 2021, **amendments to the Bar Council of India rules** which govern the professional conduct and etiquette of advocates were notified.
- They render advocates **liable for disciplinary proceedings** for making disparaging statements about a court, judge, the Bar Council of India (or State Bar Councils) or its members.
- The consequences include suspension and disbarment.
- The amendments clarify that “... healthy and bona-fide criticism made in good faith, shall not be treated as a ‘misconduct’”.
- The amendments also require the **Chief Justice of India’s** approval before coming into effect, which has **not yet been obtained**.

Recent incidents

Migrant crisis case

- Recently 22 senior advocates addressed an open letter urging the Supreme Court of India to intervene in the migrant crisis.
- A retired judge of the Supreme Court also wrote an article & condemning the Court’s inaction in this regard.
- In response, the Bar Council of India issued a press release characterising the criticism as a “**sustained and synchronized attack on Supreme Court** (sic)” by “disgruntled members of the bar and some **unhappy and disappointed former judges**”.

Attack on a legal news portal (Live Law)

- An attack on a legal news portal (Live Law) for an article that was critical of the Bar Council of India Chairman, Manan Kumar Mishra.
- The article noted how the Chairman accused certain advocates of politicising the Bar, while himself openly professing his allegiance to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

A chance for a review

- It was in this backdrop that on June 3, 2020, while India was in the throes of an unprecedented novel coronavirus pandemic, and access to justice was severely impaired owing to the limited functioning of courts, the Bar Council of India convened a meeting and proposed amendments to the rules for professional conduct.

Analysis

- At a time of COVID-19, Court carved out an inordinate amount of time to charge individuals (including advocate Prashant Bhushan) with criminal contempt for critical remarks about the Supreme Court.

- Today, the Court under the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, along with the Committee reviewing the new rules, have an **opportunity prevent a further assault on free speech by rejecting the amendments.**
- State institutions derive their authority from the power vested in them by the law, and nothing else. Criticism (no matter how trenchant) is essential to hold these **institutions accountable, and strengthen them**

4. Troubling prospects in Afghanistan + The surge

- Last week, the United States handed over the Bagram airbase to the Afghan authorities, marking a symbolic end to its military presence, as U.S. forces complete their withdrawal well ahead of the September 11 deadline, announced by American President Joe Biden on April 14.
- Afghanistan's immediate neighbours are now faced with a new challenge – **how to persuade the Taliban against overplaying their military hand?**

Costly lessons

- The war effort has cost \$980 billion, over 2,400 U.S. soldiers (plus 1,144 allied troops) and 388 private military contractors have lost their lives.
- It also spent huge amount on reconstruction , Afghan army, police and other security forces etc

Price paid by Afghans

- Yet, the real price has been paid by the Afghans.
- The 20-year war has claimed the lives of nearly 50,000 Afghan civilians and nearly 70,000 Afghan security forces (a majority during the last seven years)

Positives

- In 2001, there were 9,00,000 boys in school. Today, **eight million children** attend school and **a third are girls.**
- **Literacy** is up from 12% in 2002 to 35%
- **Life expectancy** from 40 to 63 years.
- **Urbanisation** is 26% and 70% of the population watch TV.
- **Infant mortality** rates are down from 20% by over half.

Concern

✓ Today, they bear the brunt of 130 daily Taliban/IS Khorasan (IS-K) attacks, the highest since the U.S. ended combat operations in end-2014. Tomorrow, even these limited gains are at risk.

Taliban gains legitimacy

- For U.S. President Bush, the objective was to build a stable, strong, effectively governed Afghanistan that won't degenerate into chaos
- Eventually, U.S. President Barack Obama diluted the objective to preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for global terrorism.

- The U.S. may have decided that it had no military options but the Taliban are still pushing ahead militarily

Taliban's control

- From less than a fifth, today, over a third of Afghanistan's over 400 districts are under Taliban control.
- The day after the exit from Bagram, 13 districts, in Badakhshan, Takhar, Paktia and Kandahar fell to the Taliban, adding to the 50 that have fallen since May.

Questions about the future

- Gen. Austin S. Miller, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, indicated in a recent press conference, **"Civil war is certainly a path that can be visualised if it continues on this trajectory."**
- Ironically, the most vocal critics of the U.S. overstaying in Afghanistan and hinting that the U.S. would never leave are the ones now blaming the U.S. for a hasty and irresponsible withdrawal.
- In coming months, as uncertainties mount, there will be **increasing Taliban presence** in the countryside as the Kabul government concentrates on ensuring security in urban areas and of the road networks.
- The Taliban military strategy has been to target districts that enable them to surround provincial capitals.

As the reality of the U.S. withdrawal takes hold, how events unfold by end-2021 depends on three factors.

- **First**, have the Taliban changed their ideological colours? The U.S. in recent years, and Pakistan for much longer, have been pushing this line but the Taliban leadership have given no clues about it.
- Related to this is the question of **Taliban unity**.
- Distances have grown between the Quetta shura, the Doha negotiators and the fighters who want to guard their individual preserves.
- **Second**, can the Kabul regime present a unified front?
- If the leaders in Kabul and the government continue sniping at each other, it will adversely impact the integrity of the chain of command of the Afghan security forces.
- **Finally**, is Pakistan still seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan or has it realised that a Taliban-dominated Kabul will be a magnet for its own home-grown extremists as well as those from the neighbourhood?
- Can it persuade the Taliban that its legitimacy will be at risk unless it shares power?
- Pakistan's influence will weaken once the Rehbari Shura decides to move back from Quetta to Afghanistan.
- History tells us that in Afghanistan, there have only been winners and losers, seldom any lasting compromises.

5. Challenging negative social norms

Developmental goals

- India's population growth is now stabilising.
- The decline in **overall fertility notwithstanding**, the population will **continue to grow** because of the effect of 'population momentum'. It is like a Jumbo Jet that has started to descend but will take some distance to stop.
- The Total Fertility Rate (TFR), presently at 2.2 children, will soon reach replacement level (2.1).
- However, the TFR remains higher than the national average of 2.2 children among women who live in **rural areas**, have little formal education and are in the lowest income quintile – a majority of them live in the poorer States.
- Changing social norms is one of the biggest challenges for India to address the needs of the next generation.
- For example, India's population stabilisation strategy must be adjusted keeping in mind the rights of women and girls.
- **Women must have a greater say** in choosing their family size.
- Prescriptive or coercive methods, such as one- or two- child norms, have rarely worked well anywhere for long.
- On **World Population Day** this year, the United Nations Population Fund (**UNFPA**) India recognises that even if **health systems are understandably strained, the provision of these services cannot wait**.
- Any further delays will curtail the health and well-being of women and girls, the consequences of which can last a lifetime.

India's progress on sexual and reproductive health (SRH).

- In the last two decades, India has made substantial gains with SRH indicators.
- Progressive policies for maternal health have resulted in improved rates of institutional delivery and a **decline in maternal mortality ratio (MMR) from 327 in 1999-2001 to 113 per 100,000 live births in 2016-18**, as per Sample Registration System (SRS) data.
- National Health Family Survey 5 for the year 2019-20 (NFHS-5) show how contraceptive prevalence has improved in most States. We ought to celebrate India's success, as it significantly contributes to global progress.
- The current government, with programmes such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), has made some efforts to challenge existing social norms and has underlined that investments in social causes must go alongside economic progress.
- All sections of society must embrace this call for positive change, each doing their part, from the individual to the institution level.

- The UNFPA is keen to take India's success models and strengthen the South-South Collaboration further.

Challenges

- There are many challenges on the path to 2030, the **goalpost for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.
- **Two million adolescent girls (15-19 years) each year had a pregnancy**, and of these, nearly **63% were unwanted** or unintended (Guttmacher Institute, 2021).
- In girls aged **15-19 years, 22.2% had an unmet** need for contraception, according to NFHS-4.
- Girls are still marrying too young – 26.8% of women aged 20-24 years are married before they turn 18, often having their first child within the first year of marriage.
- India has slipped 28 places to rank 140th among 156 countries, becoming the third-worst performer in South Asia in The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (2021).

Need

- India must hence choose its priorities carefully.
- Placing **youth, women and girls at the centre of policymaking** and services could trigger a positive ripple effect.
- If young people, and adolescent girls in particular, have access to **education, relevant skills, information** and services to make healthy choices, including related to SRH, are empowered to exercise their rights, and have access to opportunities for employment, then India will be on a clear path to achieve its goals.
- **Research and practical** experience show is that when women can make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health, and when they have access to services to support their choices, **societies are healthier and more productive**.
- A woman who has **control over her body gains not only in terms of autonomy but also through advances in health**, education, income and safety.
- She is more likely to thrive, and so is her family. The UNFPA calls upon stakeholders to help build a new set of social norms to drive this mission

6. Darkness at noon, felled by the judiciary + Other article

- **Fr. Swamy was sent to Taloja Jail** in October 2020 in the Bhima Koregaon case, where some of his co-accused have now spent more than three years without bail or trial.
- All have been charged under the **Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA)**, a **widely misused tool** for governments to criminalise lawful dissent and hold ideological opponents in prolonged incarceration.
- For all the talk by authorities of a terrorist conspiracy, Fr. Swamy was never interrogated in nine months of custody.

His life in a nutshell

- For many, Fr. Swamy will be remembered as an inspiration.

- He chose to make the upliftment of marginalised communities in Jarkhand his life's work.
- He lived and worked in a single room, prolifically writing (over 70 books are credited to him) on dispossessed people.
- He was an activist for most of his life, and used the legal system to fight for the rights of those who were being unfairly targeted, and thought that the Constitution would help in securing justice, even moving the Jharkhand High Court in a public interest litigation on undertrials.
- When doing all of this, surely, he would never have imagined that his fate would be decided by the very system he used and believed in.

Pointer to judicial decline

- This is the outcome also of the problematic Watali judgment.
- Supreme Court decision in Zahoor Watali's case, where the Court held that bail under section 43D(5) of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) can be denied by relying upon prosecution documents even though they would be inadmissible in evidence during the trial
- Repeated pleas for medical assistance by Fr. Swamy were consistently ignored or dismissed.
- Medical reports taken on record clearly showed that Fr. Swamy had the degenerative Parkinson's disease, and could not even do basic tasks, such as holding a spoon, writing, walking or bathing.
- Indeed, the court noted that he had a severe hearing problem, and was physically very weak. But even that did not move them.
- Every regular bail application that was filed by his lawyers was unequivocally rejected.
- When he applied for medical bail, the court kept adjourning the matter, and merely offered him the services of a private hospital.
- In my opinion, this demonstrates a lack of sensitivity on the part of the judges, which is deeply saddening.

Weak judiciary

- A key reason, undoubtedly, is the weak judiciary we have today.
- Indeed, our judiciary today suffers from a great **many flaws** besides mere weakness.
- In Fr. Swamy's case, the judges displayed **apathy** of a shocking order.
- The **Chief Justice of India** grandiloquently states that personal liberties and fundamental rights must be protected, and courts do precisely the opposite.

A weakened central principle

- The idea of the "presumption of innocence" – a central principle of criminal law and procedure – is on a terribly weak footing these days in our country, and this should worry all of us greatly.
- The source of this worry is the Supreme Court of India itself. Its April 2019 decision in **National Investigation Agency vs Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali** on the interpretation of the UAPA has affected all downstream decisions involving the statute.

- This decision has created a new doctrine, which is that effectively, an accused must remain in custody throughout the period of the trial, even if it is eventually proven that the evidence against the person was inadmissible, and the accused is finally acquitted.

Issues with decision

- According to the decision, in considering bail applications under the UAPA, courts **must presume every allegation made in the First Information Report to be correct.**
- Further, bail can now be obtained only if the accused produces material to contradict the prosecution.
- In other words, the **burden rests on the accused** to disprove the allegations, which is virtually impossible in most cases.
- The decision has essentially excluded the admissibility of evidence at the stage of bail.
- By doing so, it has effectively **excluded the Evidence Act** itself, which arguably makes the decision unconstitutional.
- With such **high barriers of proof**, it is now impossible for an accused to obtain bail, and is in fact a convenient tool to put a person behind bars indefinitely.

Abuse of UAPA

- This is being abused by the **government, police and prosecution liberally**: now, all dissenters are routinely implicated under (wild and improbable) charges of sedition or criminal conspiracy and under the UAPA.
- Due to the Supreme Court judgment, High Courts have their hands tied, and **must perform refuse bail**, as disproving the case is virtually impossible.
- The effect is nearly identical to the **draconian preventive detention laws that existed during the Emergency**, where courts deprived people access to judicial remedy.
- If we want to prevent the disasters of that era, this decision must be urgently reversed or diluted, otherwise we run the risk of personal liberties being compromised very easily

7. Fresh stirrings on federalism as a new politics

- Between vaccine wars, heated debates over the Goods and Services Tax (GST), personnel battles like the fracas over West Bengal's Chief Secretary, and the pushback against controversial regulations in Lakshadweep, is India ready for a new federal bargain?
- Federalism in India has always had political relevance, but except for the States Reorganisation Act, federalism has rarely been an axis of political mobilisation.
- This was true even in the days of coalition politics when State politics mattered to national electoral outcomes.
- **Fiscal and administrative centralisation persisted** despite nearly two decades of coalition governments.
- Ironically, rather than deepen federalism, the contingencies of electoral politics have created significant impediments to creating a political consensus for genuine federalism.

- When confronted with entrenched **centralisation of the present** regime, the challenge is, ironically, even greater.

Nationalism on strong wicket

- To accelerate progress, India must become 'one nation, one market', 'one nation, one ration card', 'one nation, one grid'.
- In this framing, federalism as a principle necessary for negotiating diverse political contexts and identity claims risks being equated with regionalism and a narrow parochialism that is anti-development and anti-national.
- Federalism in this rendition is reduced to a game of political upmanship and remains restricted to a partisan tussle rather than a regions' genuine demand for accommodation.
- **Example**-Take for instance, the downgrading of a full-fledged State in Jammu and Kashmir into a Union Territory in 2019, or more recently, the notification of the NCT of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2021.
- This blatant undermining of State's rights **hardly witnessed protest by parties** that were not directly affected by these.
- Upholding federalism requires political maturity and a commitment to the federal principle. This is lacking in our politics.
- **Third**, the increased economic and governance divergence between States.
- Across all key indicators, southern (and western) States have outperformed much of northern and eastern India resulting in a greater divergence rather than expected convergence with growth.
- This has created a context where **collective action amongst States becomes difficult as poorer regions of India** contribute far less to the economy but require greater fiscal resources to overcome their economic fragilities.
- Glimpses of these emerging tensions were visible in the debates around the 15th Finance Commission (FC) when the Government of India mandated the commission to use the 2011 Census rather than the established practice of using the 1971 Census to determine revenue share across States.
- This, Southern states feared, risked penalising States that had successfully controlled population growth by reducing their share in the overall resource pool.
- Rising of new forms of cultural alienation and associated regional tensions as occurred during the **Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests in Assam**.
- There is a very real possibility of the emergence of new forms of regional **sub-nationalism**, glimpses of which were visible during the recent Assembly elections particularly in West Bengal.

Fiscal management

- Moreover, the realities of **India's macro-fiscal position** risk increasing the fragility of State finances.
- **Weak fiscal management** has brought the Union government on the brink of what economist Rathin Roy has called a **silent fiscal crisis**.

- The Union's response has been to **squeeze revenue from States** by increasing cesses.
- Its insistence on giving **GST compensation to States as loans** (after long delays) and increasing State shares in central schemes.
- The pandemic-induced economic crisis has only exaggerated this.
- Risk & solution of creating political moment for a principled politics of federalism
- The politics of regional identity is isolationist by its very nature.
- An effort at collective political action for federalism based on identity concerns will **have to overcome this risk**.
- On the **fiscal side, richer States must find a way of sharing the burden with the poorer States**.
- States **will have to show political maturity** to make necessary compromises if they are to negotiate existing tensions and win the collective battle with the Union.
- An **inter-State platform** that brings States together in a routine dialogue on matters of fiscal federalism could be the starting point for building trust and a common agenda.
- The seeds of this were planted in the debates over the 15th Finance Commission and the GST.
- Finally, beyond principles, a renewed politics of federalism is also an electoral necessity.
- No coalition has succeeded, in the long term, without a glue that binds it.
- Forging a political consensus on federalism can be that glue. But this would require immense patience and maturity from regional parties.

8. Crafting a unique partnership with Africa (WED-26 June)

- Indian congruence with African countries in the agriculture sector is expanding.

Opportunities in Africa

Agriculture

- With 65% of the world's uncultivated arable land, employing over 60% of the workforce, and accounting for almost 20% of Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP, **agriculture is critical to Africa's economy**.
- The African Continental Free Trade Area agreement is expected to improve cost competitiveness by removing tariffs.

Analysing Chinese engagement

First

- Today, China is among **Africa's largest trading partners**. It is also Africa's single biggest creditor.
- Its corporations dominate the region's infrastructure market and are now entering the **agri-infra sector**.
- Increasingly **critical to China's global aspirations**, its engagement in African agriculture is taking on a strategic quality.

- Therefore, dismissing Beijing's engagement in African agriculture as inconsequential for New Delhi would be unwise.

Second

- Chinese-built **industrial parks and economic zones** in Africa are attracting low-cost, labour-intensive manufacturing units that are relocating from China.
- Chinese engineers interviewed spoke of how their operations in Africa are important to accumulate global experience in management, risk and capital investments.
- Not only are they willing to overlook short-term profits in **order to build 'brand China'**, but they want to dominate the market in the **long term**, which includes pushing Chinese standards in host countries.
- **Chinese tech companies** are laying critical telecommunications infrastructure, venture capital funds are investing in African fintech firms, while other smaller enterprises are expanding across the region.

Third

- In **Zambia**, Chinese firms are introducing **agri-tech to combat traditional challenges**, such as using drone technology to control the fall armyworm infestation.
- They have set up over **20 Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (ATDCS)** in the continent where Chinese agronomists work on developing new crop varieties and increasing crop yields.
- These ATDCs partner with local universities, conduct workshops and classes for officials and provide training and lease equipment to small holder farmers.
- Chinese companies with **no prior experience in agriculture** are setting out to build futuristic ecological parks while others are purchasing large-scale commercial farms.
- Furthermore, African agriculture experts, officials and farmers are provided opportunities to **augment skills and be trained in China**.

Current status of India

- India-Africa agricultural cooperation **currently includes** institutional and individual capacity-building initiatives such as the India-Africa Institute of Agriculture and Rural development in **Malawi**, extension of **soft loans**, supply of machinery, acquisition of farmlands and the presence of Indian entrepreneurs in the African agricultural ecosystem.
- Indian farmers have **purchased over 6,00,000 hectares of land for commercial farming in Africa**.
- **Sub-national actors** are providing another model of cooperation in agriculture.
- **Example-** Kerala government trying to meet its steep requirement for **raw cashew nuts amounting to 8 lakh tonnes** a year with **imports from countries in Africa** to complement its production capacity currently limited to 0.83 lakh tonnes.
- There are also proposals to create a jointly-owned brand of Africa-Kollam cashews.
- Similar ideas could encourage State governments and civil society organisations to identify **opportunities and invest directly**.

Need

- A thorough **impact assessment needs** to be conducted of the existing capacity-building initiatives in agriculture for India to stand in good stead.
- This could include **detailed surveys of participants** who have returned to their home countries.
- **Country-specific** and localised curriculum can be drawn up, making skill development demand-led.
- While India's Africa strategy exists independently, it is important to be cognisant of China's increasing footprint in the region.
- Beijing's model, if successful here, could be heralded as a **replica for the larger global south**.
- It is important for us to collectively craft a unique modern partnership with Africa.

9. The problem now with the military synergy plan

- Recently directions issued by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bring about jointness in military.
- It is also indisputable that the aim is to bring about a **synergy in operations** while economising through the elimination of duplication and wasteful practices or processes.

Issues

- In the current formulation of theatres, the **objections from the IAF** have essentially been due to air power being seen as an **adjunct to the two surface forces**, the Indian Army and the Indian Navy, and being **divided into penny packets** which would seriously degrade the effectiveness of air operations in any future conflict or contingency.
- We must remember that in war there is no prize for the runner-up. The nation would then end up paying a heavy price, with the **Air Force carrying the burden and blame for the failures**.

Political objectives

- If war is the continuation of politics by other means, then it is essential to first define the political objectives flowing into a national security strategy before any effective use of force can be truly contemplated.
- The failures of the mightiest militaries in **Vietnam, Afghanistan**, and even our own Indian misadventure in **Sri Lanka** bear testimony to the lack of clear political objectives and appropriate military strategies.
- It is, therefore, unfortunate that even after over seven decades after Independence, India still does not have a clearly articulated national security strategy.
- Only such a strategy **can define the types of contingencies** the military is expected to address, leading to appropriate military strategies, doctrines and required capabilities.
- That would define the structures required for the conduct of synergised operations with the requisite communications and training requirements.

The Army-Air Force silo

- Historically, the Indian Army has always kept the IAF out of the information loop and demonstrated a penchant to 'go it alone'.

- The charge that the IAF joined the party late during Kargil (1999) is also totally baseless and shows a lack of knowledge of events and a failure to learn from historical facts.
- Recorded facts and a dispassionate view would clearly show that the IAF began conducting reconnaissance missions on May 10 as soon as the Indian Army just made a request for attack helicopters, without sharing full information.

Echoes from Kargil

- Seen in this light, the Chinese incursion into Eastern Ladakh last year is reminiscent of Kargil.
- While the response has been swift, it is evident that a clear intent to use combat air power, as against 1962, has significantly **contributed in deterring China**.
- The continuing build-up of the infrastructure for the **Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in Tibet** further emphasises the need for an air-land strategy, with air power as the lead element to deter or defeat the Chinese designs at coercion.

Address the structural gaps

- Finally, theatre or any lower structure **requires an institutionalised higher defence organisation**, which has been sadly missing **since the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) became defunct in the 1950s**, leading to **little regular dialogue between the political and military leadership**, except in crises resulting in knee-jerk responses.
- In the current proposal, it appears that the **CDS, as the permanent chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC)**, would **also exercise operational control** of the theatre/functional commands, a move that is unlikely to be palatable to the politico-bureaucratic leadership and which has, perhaps, called for further deliberations.