

INTERNATIONAL RELATION**India and Oman**

The Secretary General of the Ministry of Defence of the Sultanate of Oman is on a visit to India. He will be in Delhi to co-chair the Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC) with India's Defence Secretary.

Key Points**Background:**

- The two countries across the Arabian Sea are linked by geography, history and culture and enjoy warm and cordial relations, which are attributed to historical maritime trade linkages.
- While people-to-people contact between India and Oman can be traced back 5000 years, diplomatic relations were established in 1955 and the relationship was upgraded to Strategic partnership in 2008. Oman has been a key pillar of India's West Asia Policy. The Sultanate of Oman is a strategic partner of India in the Gulf and an important interlocutor at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Arab League and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) fora.
- Gandhi Peace Prize 2019 was conferred on Late HM Sultan Qaboos in recognition of his leadership in strengthening the ties between India & Oman and his efforts to promote peace in the Gulf region.

Defence Relations:

- **Joint Military Cooperation Committee:**
 1. The JMCC is the highest forum of engagement between India and Oman in the field of defence.
 2. The JMCC is expected to meet annually, but could not be organised since 2018 when the meeting of the 9th JMCC was held in Oman. The 10th JMCC is expected to comprehensively evaluate the ongoing defence exchanges and provide a roadmap for further strengthening defence ties in the coming years.
- **Military Exercises:**
 1. Army exercise: Al Nagah
 2. Air Force exercise: Eastern Bridge
 3. Naval Exercise: Naseem Al Bahr

Economic & Commercial Relations:

- Institutional mechanisms like Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) and Joint Business Council (JBC) oversee economic cooperation between India and Oman.
- India is among Oman's top trading partners. For Oman, India was the 3rd largest (after UAE and China) source for its imports and 3rd largest market (after UAE and Saudi Arabia) for its non-oil exports in 2019.
- Major Indian financial institutions have a presence in Oman. Indian companies have invested in Oman in sectors like iron and steel, cement, fertilisers, textile etc.
- India-Oman Joint Investment Fund (OIJIF), a JV between State Bank of India and State General Reserve Fund (SGRF) of Oman, a special purpose vehicle to invest in India, has been operational.

Indian Community in Oman:

- There are about 6.2 lakh Indians in Oman, of which about 4.8 lakh are workers and professionals. There are Indian families living in Oman for more than 150-200 years.
- There are many Indian schools offering CBSE syllabus catering to the educational needs of about 45,000 Indian children.

Oman's Strategic Significance for India**About:**

- Oman is India's closest defence partner in the Gulf region and an important anchor for India's defence and strategic interests. Oman is at the gateway of Strait of Hormuz through which India imports one-fifth of its oil imports.
- Defence cooperation has emerged as a key pillar for the robust India-Oman strategic partnership. Defence exchanges are guided by a Framework MOU which was recently renewed in 2021.
- Oman is the only country in the Gulf region with which all three services of the Indian armed forces conduct regular bilateral exercises and staff talks, enabling close cooperation and trust at the professional level.

- Oman also provides critical operational support to Indian naval deployments in the Arabian sea for anti-piracy missions.
- Bilateral training cooperation between the two sides is also robust with Omani forces regularly subscribing to training courses in India both at professional as well as higher command level. Indian armed forces also subscribe to the Staff and Command courses conducted in Oman.
- Oman also actively participates in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).
- India has supplied rifles to Oman. Also, India is considering setting up a defence production unit in Oman.

Port of Duqm:

- In a strategic move to expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean region, India has secured access to the key Port of Duqm in Oman for military use and logistical support. This is part of India's maritime strategy to counter Chinese influence and activities in the region.
- The Port of Duqm is situated on the southeastern seaboard of Oman, overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- It is strategically located, in close proximity to the Chabahar port in Iran. With the Assumption Island being developed in Seychelles and Agalega in Mauritius, Duqm fits into India's proactive maritime security roadmap.
- The Port of Duqm also has a special economic zone, where about USD 1.8 billion investments are being made by some Indian companies.

Way Forward

- India does not have enough energy resources to serve its current or future energy requirements. The rapidly growing energy demand has contributed to the need for long term energy partnerships with countries like Oman.
- Oman's Duqm Port is situated in the middle of international shipping lanes connecting East with West Asia.
- India needs to engage with Oman and take initiatives to utilise opportunities arising out of the Duqm Port industrial city.
- India should also work closely with Oman to enhance strategic depth in the region and add heft to its Indo-Pacific vision in the Western and Southern Part of Indian Ocean.

2.China-Lithuania Tensions

Recently, the European Union launched action against China at the World Trade Organization (WTO) for targeting Lithuania over its stance on Taiwan.

Key Points**About the Issue:**

- In November 2021, a Taiwanese Representative Office was opened in Lithuania, notable because it is for the first time that Taiwan was allowed to use its own name to open an office within the EU.
- Following this, China has downgraded its diplomatic relations with Lithuania, calling it a violation of the "One China Policy". China has also unofficially boycotted products from Lithuania, whether it is sourced directly or indirectly from the country.
 1. China alleges that Lithuania is acting in concert with the American efforts of containment by using the Taiwan card, and to spread discord between China and Europe.
 2. 'One China Policy' means that countries seeking diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC, Mainland China) must break official relations with the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan) and vice versa.

Action at WTO:

- By going to the WTO, the EU lent support to accusations by Lithuanian business leaders and officials that the row has resulted in China blocking imports from Lithuania and other economic restrictions.
 1. China's crackdown on Lithuanian imports affects other European nations as well.
 2. The country has also imposed trade restrictions on goods from countries like France, Germany and Sweden, which include parts from Lithuanian supply chains.
 3. The EU is currently China's largest trading partner, and about 80-90% of Lithuania's exports are based on manufacturing contracts with the rest of the EU.
- A 60-day window was launched for the two sides to come to a solution before moving the dispute to a panel.

Reasons for taking on China by Lithuania:

- **Domestic Reasons:**
 1. Lithuania's current wave of assertive moves against China to a certain extent have been attributed to the change of government in 2020.
 2. The new Government of Lithuania espouses a "values-based" foreign policy based on democracy and freedom, and had explicitly offered support to the cause of Taiwan in 2020 itself.
- **Geopolitical Reasons:**
 1. It is also due to growing geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe over EU and NATO's fallout with Lithuania's adversarial neighbours, Russia and Belarus. Lithuania, being the first constituent of the Soviet Union to break out as an independent state, has its own historical context and ideological rationale for standing up to China.
 2. The growing Sino-Russian partnership against the West has also made Lithuania wary of China.

Others:

- Lithuania has been one of the biggest critics of China within the EU on the Xinjiang and Hong Kong issues.
- Lithuania supported Taiwan's pitch to become an observer at the World Health Organization in 2020 against China's opposition in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Moreover, Lithuania's rationale that economic relations can be sustainable only with democratic regimes, has heightened tensions between Lithuania and China.
 1. In May 2021, Lithuania quit China's 17+1 cooperation forum with central and eastern Europe, by calling it "divisive", now it is 16+1.
 2. Lithuania is the first country in that group to have done so and stated economic non-reciprocity of China and threats to European unity as reasons for its exit.
- Citing security reasons, Lithuania has advised its population to avoid buying smartphones made in China, and has kept China away from acquiring controlling stakes in its Klaipėda seaport, as well as from its 5G infrastructure bids.

Geopolitical Fallout:

- Taiwan has made efforts to compensate the Lithuanian economy from China's coercion.
 1. About 20,000 bottles of Lithuanian rum that had been bound for China were bought by Taiwan offering a symbolic gesture of support.
 2. Taiwan has come up with a USD 200 million investment plan to help cover Lithuania's economic losses.
 3. This move is also supposedly designed to make Lithuania a gateway to Taiwan for accessing the EU market, especially given the current semiconductor supply shortages.
 4. Taiwan is also planning to introduce a USD1 billion credit program aimed at benefiting Lithuanian businesses.
- The US has expressed concerns about China's attempts to coerce Lithuania over Taiwan, along with EU countries like Germany who have expressed solidarity with Lithuania.

Way Forward

- China's response suggests an attempt to, as Chinese strategists like to say, "kill the chicken to scare the monkeys", and ensure other countries do not contemplate a similar move.
- Beyond the Lithuania-China tensions, of particular salience to India is how the EU, as a major power, will take forward ties with China as it similarly weighs strategic considerations against a booming trading relationship.
 1. China's use of trade as leverage and as a method of coercion, which stands in stark contrast to its declaration on the 50th anniversary of its UN membership, that it eschews "power politics" and "hegemony", is another matter of concern.
 2. Lithuania is an exception in having both a trade surplus with China and no pressing need to access the China market.
- India shall closely watch the EU move to assess the benefits and costs of taking on China on a core concern — the Taiwan issue.

ECONOMY**Forex Reserves**

According to recent data from Reserve bank of india (RBI), India's Foreign Exchange (Forex) reserves posted a decline of USD 678 million during the week ended 21st January 2022 to reach USD 634.287

billion. The slip in the reserves was on account of a drop in the Foreign Currency Assets (FCA), a vital component of the overall reserves. FCA declined by USD 1.155 billion to USD 569.582 billion in the reporting week.

- Gold reserves saw an increase of USD 567 million to USD 40.337 billion in the reported week.
- The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) fell USD 68 million to USD 19.152 billion.

Key Points

Foreign Exchange Reserves:

- Foreign exchange reserves are assets held on reserve by a central bank in foreign currencies, which can include bonds, treasury bills and other government securities. It needs to be noted that most foreign exchange reserves are held in US dollars.
- **India's Forex Reserve include:**
 1. Foreign Currency Assets
 2. Gold reserves
 3. Special Drawing Rights
 4. Reserve position with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Objectives of Holding Forex Reserves:

- Supporting and maintaining confidence in the policies for monetary and exchange rate management.
- Provides the capacity to intervene in support of the national or union currency.
- Limits external vulnerability by maintaining foreign currency liquidity to absorb shocks during times of crisis or when access to borrowing is curtailed.

Significance of Rising Forex Reserves:

- **Comfortable Position for the Government:** The rising forex reserves give comfort to the government and the RBI in managing India's external and internal financial issues.
- **Managing Crisis:** It serves as a cushion in the event of a Balance of Payment (BoP) crisis on the economic front.
- **Rupee Appreciation:** The rising reserves have also helped the rupee to strengthen against the dollar.
- **Confidence in Market:** Reserves will provide a level of confidence to markets and investors that a country can meet its external obligations.

Foreign Currency Assets

- FCAs are assets that are valued based on a currency other than the country's own currency.
- FCA is the largest component of the forex reserve. It is expressed in dollar terms.
- The FCAs include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves.

Special Drawing Rights

- The SDR is an international reserve asset, created by the IMF in 1969 to supplement its member countries' official reserves.
- The SDR is neither a currency nor a claim on the IMF. Rather, it is a potential claim on the freely usable currencies of IMF members. SDRs can be exchanged for these currencies.
- The value of the SDR is calculated from a weighted basket of major currencies, including the US dollar, the euro, Japanese yen, Chinese yuan, and British pound.
- The interest rate on SDRs or (SDRi) is the interest paid to members on their SDR holdings.
- Recently, the IMF has made an allocation of SDR 12.57 billion (equivalent to around USD 17.86 billion) to India. Now, the total SDR holdings of India stand at SDR 13.66 billion.

Reserve Position in the International Monetary Fund

- A reserve tranche position implies a portion of the required quota of currency each member country must provide to the IMF that can be utilized for its own purposes.
- The reserve tranche is basically an emergency account that IMF members can access at any time without agreeing to conditions or paying a service fee.

PRELIMS FACT

Second ASEAN Digital Ministers Meeting

Recently, the 2nd ASEAN Digital Ministers' (ADGMIN) Meeting with India virtually, where two sides finalized India-ASEAN Digital work plan 2022 for future collaboration in the field.

Key Points**About:**

- ADGMIN is an annual meeting of telecom ministers of 10 ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) countries and dialogue partner countries—Australia, Canada, China, EU, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Russia, UK and US.
- ASEAN nations include Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

India-ASEAN Digital Work Plan 2022:

- India and ASEAN nations have jointly approved a work plan under which they will develop a system to combat use of stolen and counterfeit mobile handsets.
- Other areas of cooperation include wifi access network interface for nationwide public internet.
- Emphasis will also be given on the capacity building and knowledge sharing in emerging areas in the field of information and communication technologies such as Internet of Things (IoT), 5G, advanced satellite communication, cyber forensics.

Significance of the ICT:

- Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) enables and strengthens democratic systems and institutions through enhanced engagement between citizens and the state.
- Use of ICTs promote free speech, human rights and the free flow of information besides expanding citizens' opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and have potential to transform lives of people living in rural areas.
- Technology has emerged as a powerful tool to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which is not just a challenge for the public health system but is also adversely impacting the economy and social order of the countries.

Related Steps taken by India:

- The telecom ministry in December 2019 had launched a portal to help people in Delhi-NCR block and trace their stolen or lost mobile phones. The project is backed by the Central Equipment Identity Register (CEIR) system, which was undertaken by the telecom department for addressing security, theft and other concerns including reprogramming of mobile handsets.

Other Related Groupings**ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus:**

- It is an annual meeting of Defence Ministers of 10 ASEAN countries and eight dialogue partner countries.
- The ADMM-Plus countries include ten ASEAN Member States and eight Plus countries, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, and the United States (same as in the EAS).

ASEAN Regional Forum:

- Established in 1994, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is an important platform for security dialogue in the Indo-Pacific.
- It comprises 27 members: the 10 ASEAN member states, the 10 ASEAN dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Russia and the United States); Bangladesh, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste; and one ASEAN observer (Papua New Guinea).

East Asia Summit (EAS):

- Established in 2005, it is a forum of 18 regional leaders for strategic dialogue and cooperation on the key political, security, and economic challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region.
- It comprises the ten member states of the ASEAN which are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, along with 8 other countries namely Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia and the USA.

DAILY ANSWER WRITING PRACTICE

Qns. To what extent do you think Indian Society has progressed in addressing “menstrual hygiene”? Highlight few issues faced by women in this regard. (250 words)

Introduction

Menstrual hygiene continues to be amongst the most challenging development issues today. Menstruation is still considered a taboo in the Indian society. Even today, the cultural and social influences on people create a major hurdle in ensuring that the adolescent girls are given proper knowledge on menstrual hygiene.

The main reasons for this taboo still being relevant in the Indian society are high rate of illiteracy especially in girls, poverty and lack of awareness about menstrual health and hygiene. Only less than 18 per cent of Indian women use sanitary pads.

Body

Indian society in addressing menstrual hygiene

- According to the fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) in 2015-16, half the women in rural India (52%) do not use hygienic methods of protection during their menstrual period in India.
- Available data reveals that Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) remains deprioritized due to factors such as deep-seated social gender construct, cultural myths, and discriminatory traditions.
- In India, only 48% of adolescent girls are aware of what menstruation is before getting their first period.
- Young people do not have access to reliable and correct information about their reproductive health and rights.
- The stigma around menstruation leads to parents, teachers and other community stakeholders being reluctant to talk about periods.
- A 2016 landscape analysis titled Menstrual Health in India observed that of nearly 355 million girls in India who have reached menarche, 71 percent reported having no information about menstruation before their first period.

Issues faced by women regarding menstrual hygiene

- **Access to toilet:** An estimated 355 million Indian women and girls must find ways to cope with monthly menstrual hygiene. Most of these women either have no access to toilets or are faced with unclean lavatory
- **Access and safety:** Moreover, they usually wait until night-time before using public toilets or fields, which exposes them to various forms of physical attacks.
- **Lack of awareness:** The main reasons for this taboo still being relevant in the Indian society are high rate of illiteracy especially in girls, poverty and lack of awareness about menstrual health and hygiene. Only less than 18 per cent of Indian women use sanitary pads.
- **Taboo:** In some families, menstruation is being perceived as an unclean or embarrassing thing, extending even to the mention of menstruation both in public and in private. Most girls even hide themselves out of fear or embarrassment on their way to a medical store, rather majority of them cannot afford to buy hygienic sanitary pads.
- **School dropout:** In some families, menstruation is being perceived as an unclean or embarrassing thing, extending even to the mention of menstruation both in public and in private. Most girls even hide themselves out of fear or embarrassment on their way to a medical store, rather majority of them cannot afford to buy hygienic sanitary pads.
- **Unclean ways of handling menstruation:** A majority of rural women in India employ clothes and rags for feminine hygiene. These materials might predispose women to reproductive tract infections since it may be difficult for them to keep their used napkins clean and free of harmful bacteria.
- **Affordability:** While commercially available sanitary napkins provide a possible alternative, only 12 percent of Indian women can afford this option

Measures needed

- As depicted in the figure, girls and boys should receive accurate, timely information on the biological and psycho-social aspects of puberty, menstruation, and MHM from all three channels—mass media, influencers, and targeted education.
- There are significant challenges across these three areas with supporting evidence. However, girl-targeted education and community influencers are particularly important enablers for improving menstrual health for women and girls in India.

Conclusion

Currently, MHM curriculums focus on period management, and do not provide the time or space to discuss psycho-social changes. This needs to be addressed for a comprehensive menstrual hygiene management. Both boys and girls must be educated on these aspects, so that there is healthy development of children and attitudes regarding menstruation.

DAILY QUIZ

Q1. Consider the following statements.

1. The absentee voter refers to a vote cast by someone who is unable to go to the polling station.
2. Any voter opting for postal ballot facility would not be able to cast a vote at the polling station.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. **Both 1 and 2**
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Q2. Consider the following statements with reference to Messenger RNA (mRNA):

1. It is a single-stranded RNA molecule.
2. It is created during the process of transcription.
3. The existence of mRNA was first suggested by James Watson and Francis Crick.

Which of the given above statements is/are correct?

- a. **1 and 2 only**
- b. 3 only
- c. 2 and 3 only
- d. 1, 2 and 3

Q3. Consider the following statements

1. The Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) is an intergovernmental agency that is organized under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
2. India is a member state of Nuclear Energy Agency.
3. India has capacity to produce 20,000 MW of electricity from nuclear installations

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a. **1 only**
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1 and 2 only
- d. 1, 2 and 3

Q4. With reference to India's Panna Tiger reserve, which of the following statements is/are correct?

1. It forms the northern most tip of the natural teak forests.
2. It forms the eastern most tip of the natural Kardhai forests.
3. It is dotted with two thousand year-old rock paintings.

Select the correct answer using the code below:

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. 1 and 3 only
- d. **1, 2 and 3**

Q5. Consider the following statements:

1. The Chief Election Commissioner can be removed from office only through impeachment by Parliament.
2. If elections are being held only for the State Legislature, the expenditure is borne entirely by the concerned State.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. **Both 1 and 2**
- d. Neither 1 nor 2