INSIGHTSONINDIA

INSIGHTS into EDITORIAL

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20/06 - Qatar's isolation

Summary:

The recent diplomatic rift between Qatar and other Arab states — like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt — has again highlighted the geopolitical significance of the region beyond the oil factor. It emerged **as a result of an allegation that the small gas-rich country supports and funds terror through its support of Iran and Muslim Brotherhood**, a Sunni Islamist political group outlawed by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Historical reasons:

Qatar's **foreign policy has always been rather different than that of the rest of the Gulf States**. While Bahrain largely follows Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, Qatar has diverged from other members of the GCC. After the Arab Spring, Qatar aligned itself with Islamist political parties such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood which has been declared as a terrorist group by Saudi Arabia and United States.
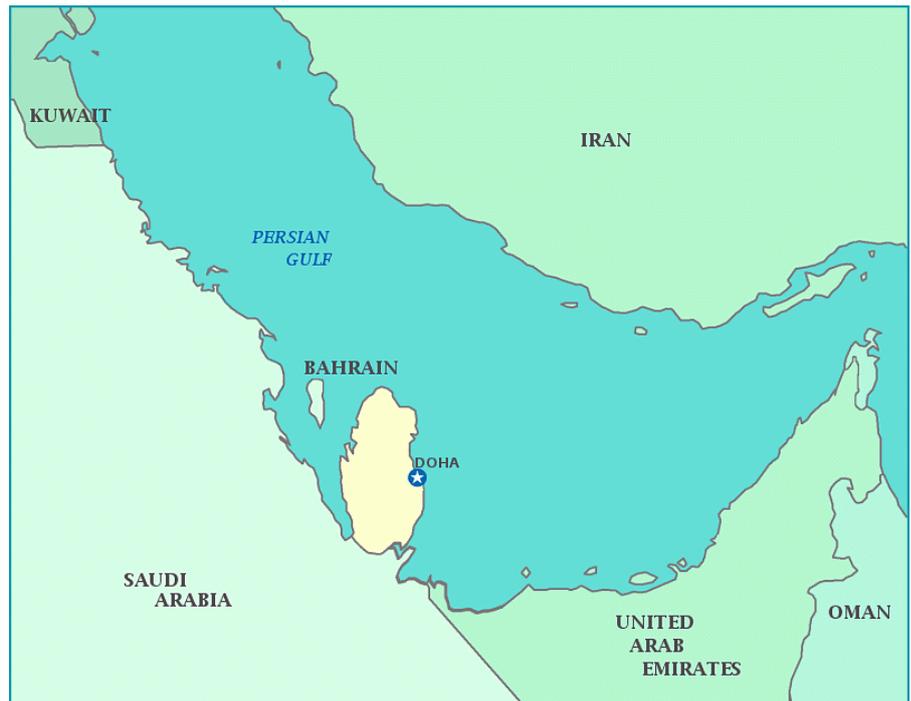
- Qatar's state funded news network Al Jazeera also seems to support these groups as champions of democracy. Qatar was also amongst the most active backers of Islamist fighters in rebellions in Syria and Libya. This coupled with the fact that Qatar enjoys close ties with Tehran, has bothered the Saudi led bloc.

- Egypt also considers the Brotherhood to be dangerous. During the 2011 Arab Spring, Qatar backed the Brotherhood and the protestors against the then-President Hosni Mubarak.

- Qatar has also been accused of backing Yemen's Houthi rebels which is a startling claim given that Qatar, until the day before the crisis, was part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthi rebels, who are allegedly backed by Iran and ex-President Saleh.

How will it affect the rest of the world?

Any kind of instability in the Middle East **tends to send up oil prices**, and the longer prices stay high, the more likely it is that it will cost more to fill up your tank. So far, oil and gas markets have been taking the crisis in their stride.

- The row has also **fanned concerns about the liquefied natural gas (LNG) market**. **Qatar is the world's biggest supplier of LNG** and Egypt and UAE are key recipients. Although Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain have all closed transport links with Qatar, the state can still ship out both LNG and oil to other countries by sea.

- The diplomatic crisis is also **the latest complication for the 2022 World Cup**, which Qatar is preparing to host. If the travel restrictions remain in place long term, they could keep supplies, workers and eventually soccer fans from moving freely in and out of the country. The tournament is already facing allegations of worker misconduct, and it had to slash the budget for the soccer tournament by more than 40% because of the falling price of oil.

Impact on India:

As regards the impact of sanctions on India, it depends on Qatar for 90% of its natural gas requirements and hence is likely to maintain its good relationship with the monarchy. A few days after the crisis began, the External Affairs Ministry had made it clear that India didn't foresee any issues caused to its own relations with countries in the region. However, the Qatar Airways flights between India and Doha will be affected as following the UAE's decision to not allow its air space to be used, the flights will now have to get routed through Iran.

Why is Qatar important for India?

- While the current volume of Qatari FDI in India is modest, **Qatar's Sovereign Wealth Fund and other state-owned entities, as well as Qatari private investors, are looking at investment options in infrastructure in India**, including in real estate, roads and highways, airports amd airlines, ports, LNG, petrochemicals and fertilizers, and tourism/hospitality.

- **There is vast potential for Qatar Investment Authority to substantially increase its investments in India**, given India's huge needs — $ 1 trillion in the next 5 years in infra alone — investment friendly policies, and QIA's keenness to diversify its global portfolio. India has made efforts to actively engage with QIA and other state-owned and private entities in Qatar, highlighting policies such as 'Make in India' and the advantages of investing in India.

- **India's corporate sector too is increasingly pursuing business opportunities in Qatar**. A number of reputed Indian companies, particularly in construction/infrastructure and IT, have operations in Qatar.

- While business has been the focus of the relationship, **India's ties with Qatar have largely been founded on energy and economic links, and the presence of the Indian community**, which in Qatar numbers over half a million and, as in other GCC countries, is the largest expatriate community. The interest of citizens living and working in Qatar, many of them engaged in projects related to the FIFA World Cup in 2022, is paramount for India.

Conclusion:

The crisis shows deep rooted and complex divisions in the Middle East which the west often tries to downplay by portraying it as nothing more than tensions between Saudi-led Sunni bloc and Iran led Shiite bloc. There seems to be no easy solution to the crisis in the foreseeable future. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries need to negotiate and find a solution, keeping the group's collective agenda in mind. A diplomatic freeze will only allow non-state actors like the Islamic State (IS) to strengthen their presence. Cooperation between Iran and Sunni Arab countries is also desirable for the benefit of both. Qatar needs to choose between aligning its policies with those of the regional heavyweights or greater isolation. It is not yet strong enough to have its own independent regional doctrine.

22/06 - Bringing GM to the table

Summary:

Anti-GM groups have been opposing the recent decision of GEAC which allowed for the commercial production of GM Mustard in the country. The row over the introduction of GM crops in the country for commercial production is not new. It has been here for years now.

GM crops in India:

The Indian GM crops saga is a convoluted one. Currently, **it has the world's fourth largest GM crop acreage on the strength of Bt cotton, the only genetically modified crop allowed in the country**. But the introduction of Bt cotton has been both highly successful and controversial. Cotton yield more than doubled in the first decade since its introduction in 2002, according to the Economic Survey 2011-12—by which point it accounted for 90% of cotton acreage. But it was also shadowed by controversy, with a tangle of pricing and intellectual property rights (IPR) issues followed by government price interventions and litigation.

GM food crops have fared worse. An agreement to develop Bt brinjal was signed in 2005 between Mahyco—American agricultural biotech giant Monsanto's Indian Bt cotton partner—and two Indian agricultural universities. Following the study of biosafety data and field trials by two expert committees, Bt brinjal was cleared for commercialization by India's top biotech regulator, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, in 2009. But nothing came of it, with moratoriums imposed by then Union environment minister Jairam Ramesh and his successor Jayanthi Natarajan following opposition from civil society groups and brinjal-growing states.

What is the science behind GM crops?

Ever since the discovery of **the DNA double-helix model by Watson and Crick**, scientists realised it was possible to manipulate the DNA features of an organism to create new traits in them by borrowing genes from other organisms and mixing it with theirs. In the case of GM food, scientists **insert into a plant's genome one or several gene from another species of plant or even from a bacterium, virus or animal**. This is to inject desired traits such as pest-resistance or Vitamin A (as in the case of golden rice).
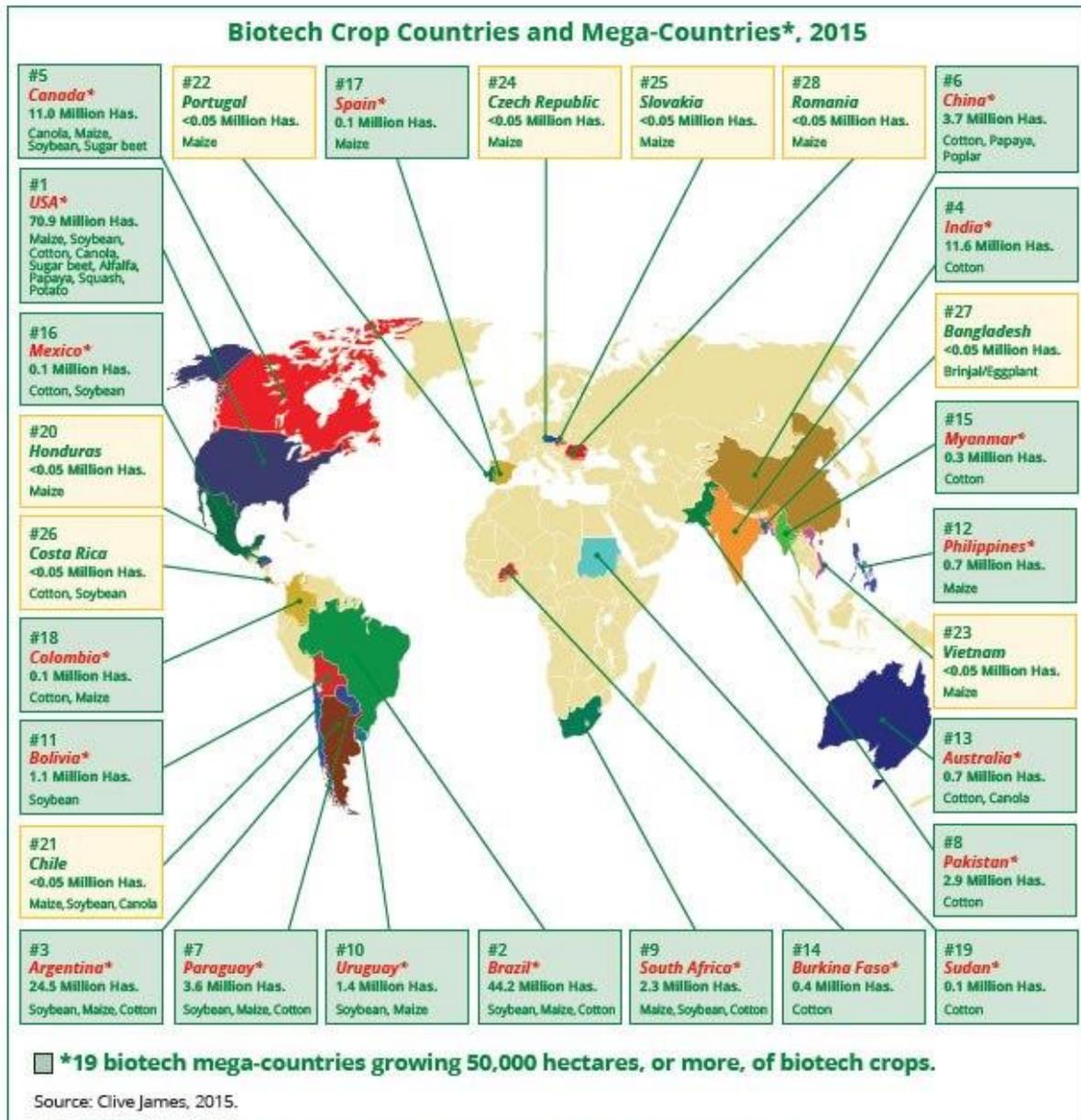
Biotech Crop Countries and Mega-Countries*, 2015

| #5 **Canada*** 11.0 Million Has. Canola, Maize, Soybean, Sugar beet | #22 *Portugal* <0.05 Million Has. Maize | #17 *Spain** 0.1 Million Has. Maize | #24 *Czech Republic* <0.05 Million Has. Maize | #25 *Slovakia* <0.05 Million Has. Maize | #28 *Romania* <0.05 Million Has. Maize | #6 **China*** 3.7 Million Has. Cotton, Papaya, Poplar |

#1 **USA***
70.9 Million Has.
Maize, Soybean, Cotton, Canola, Sugar beet, Alfalfa, Papaya, Squash, Potato

#16 **Mexico***
0.1 Million Has.
Cotton, Soybean

#20 *Honduras*
<0.05 Million Has.
Maize

#26 *Costa Rica*
<0.05 Million Has.
Cotton, Soybean

#18 **Colombia***
0.1 Million Has.
Cotton, Maize

#11 **Bolivia***
1.1 Million Has.
Soybean

#21 *Chile*
<0.05 Million Has.
Maize, Soybean, Canola

#4 **India***
11.6 Million Has.
Cotton

#27 *Bangladesh*
<0.05 Million Has.
Brinjal/Eggplant

#15 **Myanmar***
0.3 Million Has.
Cotton

#12 **Philippines***
0.7 Million Has.
Maize

#23 *Vietnam*
<0.05 Million Has.
Maize

#13 **Australia***
0.7 Million Has.
Cotton, Canola

#8 **Pakistan***
2.9 Million Has.
Cotton

| #3 **Argentina*** 24.5 Million Has. Soybean, Maize, Cotton | #7 **Paraguay*** 3.6 Million Has. Soybean, Maize, Cotton | #10 **Uruguay*** 1.4 Million Has. Soybean, Maize | #2 **Brazil*** 44.2 Million Has. Soybean, Maize, Cotton | #9 **South Africa*** 2.3 Million Has. Maize, Soybean, Cotton | #14 **Burkina Faso*** 0.4 Million Has. Cotton | #19 **Sudan*** 0.1 Million Has. Cotton |

☐ *19 biotech mega-countries growing 50,000 hectares, or more, of biotech crops.

Source: Clive James, 2015.

Figure 1. Global Map of Biotech Crop Countries and Mega-Countries in 2015

GM food crops are mainly being opposed for the following reasons:

- Opponents believe GM crops have the potential for serious, irreversible damage to human health and the environment. This is especially relevant in the context of crops such as Bt brinjal which involve direct consumption by humans, unlike Bt cotton. The widespread havoc that chemical pesticides and fertilizers have caused since the Green Revolution only adds credence to these concerns.

- Lack of proper assessment has further reduced the trust. GM opponents cite the need for longer term assessment of adverse impacts and more concrete evidence of no adverse effects. Implicitly, GM opponents are invoking the precautionary principle, which is a widely incorporated one in several international agreements and treaties on the environment.

- The lack of transparency in the regulatory process further amplifies apprehensions stemming from a precautionary approach. All the safety tests for regulatory approvals are typically conducted by the same party that applies for commercialisation of GM crops. This conflict of interest was made worse by the refusal of GEAC to publicly release the safety testing data submitted for regulatory approval until GM opponents filed a Right to Information petition.

- There are also concerns regarding loss of food biodiversity if corporate food varieties begin to flood the markets.

Way ahead:

There is a need to start cultivating an environment of openness and transparency to allay genuine fears instead of dismissing GM opponents as being "irrational". On its part, the government should adopt a participatory approach to bring together all stakeholders to develop regulatory protocols that restore trust in the process. The burden of proof lies

with the promoters of GM technology to persuade consumers, farmers and activists that among various alternatives available for sustainable food production — e.g., organic farming, use of biopesticides — GM technology is at least a serious option that we should embrace.

Conclusion:

There is the need for the GEAC "to draw up a fresh protocol for the specific tests that will have to be conducted in order to generate public confidence". Given agricultural distress and the need for broad reforms in the sector—and the potential of GM crops to supplement those reforms with increased drought resistance and reduced pesticide dependence, among other benefits—opposition must be managed, not allowed to hold sway.

24/06 - Should elections be state-funded?

Summary:

State funding of elections is that apparition that cannot fructify but refuses to fade away. Indian political parties, unlike western democracies, are not mere platforms to put some people into elective public office but are like standing armies that need continuous nourishment. They provide a calling card to millions who otherwise may not have a worthwhile identity or independent standing in the social and economic milieu — the syndrome of whole-timers, pracharaks and party apparatchiks, respectively.

- Thus, there are two aspects to the financing of the democratic process: the financing of elections from the panchayat level to Parliament, and the funding of political parties that is not election-specific but is an exercise in perpetuity for reasons enunciated above.

What is state or public funding of elections?

This means that government gives funds to political parties or candidates for contesting elections. Its main purpose is to make it unnecessary for contestants to take money from powerful moneyed interests so that they can remain clean. In some countries, state funding is extended to meeting some specific forms of spending by political parties, not confined to electioneering alone. Countries keep changing laws relating to state funding depending on experience and financial condition.

Various proposals in this regard:

Some major reports on state funding include those given by the Indrajit Gupta Committee on State Funding of Elections (1998), Law Commission Report on Reform of the Electoral Laws (1999), National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2001) and the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2008).

- Except for the 2001 report, all other recommended partial state funding only, given the economic situation of the country.

- The 1998 report said that state funds should be given only to registered national and state parties and that it should be given in kind only.

- The 1999 report concurred with this but also recommended first putting a strong regulatory framework in place including internal elections, accounting procedures etc.

- The 2001 report said that first a regulatory framework needs to be established before thinking about state funding.

Why public funding is good?

- Political parties and candidates need money for their electoral campaigns, to keep contacts with their constituencies, to prepare policy decisions and to pay professional staff. Therefore, public funding is a natural and necessary cost of democracy.

- Public funding can limit the influence of interested money and thereby help curb corruption.

- Public funding can increase transparency in party and candidate finance and thereby help curb corruption.

- If parties and candidates are financed with only private funds, economical inequalities in the society might translate into political inequalities in government.

- In societies where many citizens are under or just above the poverty line, they cannot be expected to donate large amounts of money to political parties or candidates. If parties and candidates receive at least a basic amount of money from the State the country could have a functioning multi-party system without people having to give up their scarce resources.

Arguments against state funding:

There are divergent views on the efficacy of state funding of elections. Some have been dismissive of the idea. Those against this idea wonder how a Government that is grappling with deficit budgets, can provide money to political parties to contest elections.

- They also warn that state funding would encourage every second outfit to get into the political arena merely to avail of state funds.

- Also, given that state expenditure on key social sectors such as primary healthcare is "pitifully small", the very idea of the Government giving away money to political parties to contest polls, is revolting. Therefore, opponents ask the government to channelize public resources towards and not diverted from such essential services.

Why it is difficult to go for public funding?

The funds that a political party advances to its party candidates in an election vary from one candidate to another, and there is much variation across political parties in this regard. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, 263 members of the House claimed that they received a total of ₹75.59 crore from their parties, which averages out to roughly ₹28 lakh each. However, it is believed that an MLA spends on an average about ₹5 crore to get elected. The legal limit of ₹28 lakh is far off this mark.

- Assuming that there are five contending candidates in a constituency, and even if each one of them does not spend as much, but just half of their elected counterpart, an amount of about ₹15 crore will be spent in each constituency, which with about 4,215 MLAs in India works out to an about ₹13,000 crore per annum.

- While the legal limit that a Lok Sabha candidate can spend is ₹70 lakh, a victorious candidate on an average does not spend less than ₹10 crore for the purpose. Suppose we assume again an average of five candidates per constituency, and halving the amount to losers, about ₹30 crore will be spent in each Lok Sabha constituency, and given 543 members of the Lok Sabha, about ₹3,300 crore per annum.

- Then there are elections to the Upper Houses, both at the Centre and in some States, and the local governing bodies. Hence, it is argued that public funding places unnecessary burden on the exchequer.

What needs to be done?

The government should consider state funding of political parties contesting elections. But such funding should be limited to parties recognised as 'national' or 'State' by the Election Commission of India, and to candidates directly fielded by such recognised parties.

- Budgetary constraints could come in the way. Therefore, a good start could be made with partial funding — that is, with the state taking care of certain expenditures of the recognised parties. The aim should be to discourage political parties from seeking external funding (except through a nominal membership fee) to run their affairs, carry out their programmes and contest elections.

- A separate Election Fund with an annual contribution of some Rs 600 crore by the Centre and a matching amount by all States put together should be created. Only those parties which have submitted their income tax returns up to the previous financial year could avail of state funding.

- Every candidate of the party eligible for state funding should be given a specified quantity of fuel for vehicles during an election campaign and a specified quantity of paper to prepare electoral literature.

Conclusion:

Poll funding has been a source of funnelling black money and cleaning up the poll process is necessary. Looking at the number of parties in India, it is easy to suspect that some of them have been floated by national or state parties to park their income from dubious sources, because such parties are not subject to the Election Commission's scrutiny. The current form of political funding has become a burden on the economy. Many parliamentarians have raised concerns over the use of excessive money in election campaigns. This presents the government with the best chance to carry out significant anti-corruption reforms in the history of independent India.

26/06 - Is it time to block and chain the EVMs?

Summary:

Blaming the electronic voting machine (EVM) for their electoral defeat has been common for political parties in India. Every time a party has a rough time in an election, the easiest way out for its representatives to console themselves is to blame the machine. This is a blame game indulged in periodically, notwithstanding the fact that the Election Commission of India (ECI) has time and again demonstrated, through increased and transparent measures, the reliability and fool-proof nature of the EVM.

How EVMs operate?

The ECI has issued a detailed press note reiterating that EVMs are standalone machines and are not networked either by wire or by wireless to any other machine or system. Hence, they cannot be influenced or manipulated by signals from mobile phones or any other source. The software in the machine is burnt into a one-time programmable chip or masked chip and can never be altered or tampered with. The source code of the software is not handed over to any outsider. The ECI also cited judgments of different High Courts and the Supreme Court of India that upheld the reliability of EVMs.

How security and transparency is ensured?

The ECI has prescribed a series of steps in its standard operating procedures to enhance transparency and provide an opportunity for political parties and candidates to participate in testing the reliability of the machines. During the first-level of testing before the machines are allotted to various constituencies from storage points, party representatives are invited. They can select at random 5% of the machines in which up to 1,000 votes will be polled to demonstrate the reliability and fidelity of the machines. A computer programme allocates, at random, machines to constituencies. The second-level of testing is done when, from the constituency headquarters, machines are allocated — again at random, using a computer programme — to polling stations. At this juncture, the candidates — who by now come on the scene — are allowed to test the machines at random. The serial number of the machine sent to each polling station is shared with the candidates, who can pass on this information to their representatives in the respective polling stations.

Finally, before the start of the polling process on the day of the election, each presiding officer conducts a mock poll to demonstrate the "correctness" the machine in recording votes. When absurd allegations were floated that the machine has been programmed to record votes to the same candidate who gets the first 50 votes, the ECI mandated using 100 votes in the mock poll on polling day.

### Use of blockchain technology:

Amid the controversy, some experts have suggested the use of blockchain technology. An emerging technology called blockchain is in various stages of implementation across the world for voting and other public services. Due to its unique attributes of trust, transparency and immutability, such a system is expected to mitigate issues like vote manipulation in political processes. In India, given the favourable conditions of improved infrastructure and interest, the time is ripe for the ECI to explore blockchain technology as a future alternative to EVMs.

What is blockchain?

Blockchain can be thought of as a public account ledger, an immutable, transparent and permanent one. Each transaction is recorded and stored in the ledger that is out on a public bulletin board. Every transaction adds a block to the chain of transactions and each one is evaluated by every user based on algorithms they've agreed upon. Rather than being kept in single location, a copy of the blockchain is stored on every user's server so that a user cannot alter it without other users finding out.

How blockchain voting takes place?

Even though blockchain was conceived for financial transactions, its characteristics make it an apt solution that can support voting systems. In blockchain voting, each transaction is similar to a vote and through the use of multiple blockchains along with public key encryption, the voting process is secured while protecting the anonymity of voters. The votes can then be randomized more than three times in the digital ballot box so that voters' identities are not revealed. After the polls are closed, a separate blockchain application is created for the counting of votes in the digital ballot box. That blockchain should match the public bulletin board's blockchain, proving that the online voting system has operated correctly.
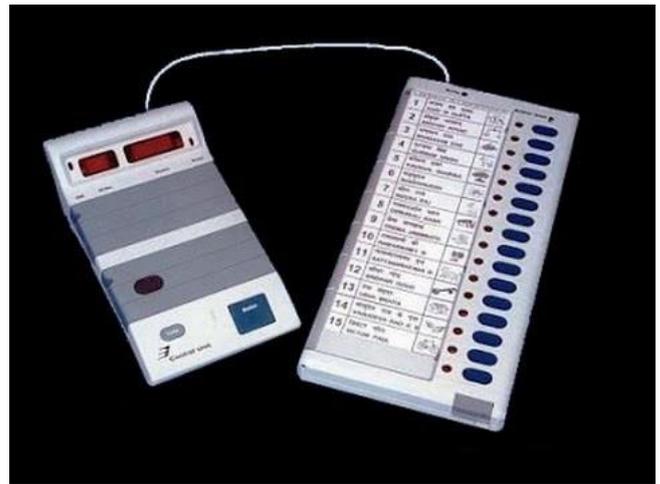
Advantages of blockchain voting:

Blockchains are transparent and designed to have a decentralized authority which ensures that control is not in one hand and the process is visible to the public always. Further, the audit trail of the transactions combined with public key encryption solves the issue of auditability.

Way ahead:

The technology is already being used by various countries. Such systems are already being used by Australia, Denmark, Norway, Malta, Spain and South Korea. In India, given the deep penetration of cellphones and the unique identification (Aadhaar) system, blockchain could be a practical and feasible tool to fight voter fraud and alleviate vote authentication and validation concerns. Aadhaar cards and electronic-know your customer (e-KYC) norms are already becoming mainstream. These critical infrastructure components can be leveraged to implement blockchain solutions in voting and public services such as land registrations, public-private contracts and other service level agreements (SLA).

Conclusion:

Keeping in mind the emerging and potential threats to the current system, it is essential to experiment with new technologies that can potentially secure the system. Conducting research, building proof of concepts and end-to-end pilots by leveraging the burgeoning activity in blockchain technology can be undertaken by the ECI. This will not only help in understanding the nuances of blockchain that can be adapted to the Indian voting system, but also answer critical questions regarding compliance with the norms and principles of voting.

28/06 - Important lessons for the Smart Cities Mission

Summary:

With the 26th UN-Habitat governing council conference (GC26) held last month, the new urban agenda (NUA) has once again come to the fore. As the world moves towards a globalized policy discourse, one wonders if the NUA is an improvement on the existing unratifiable global documents.

What is NUA all about?

The **New Urban Agenda aims to be the international community's foremost guide for sustainable urban development over the next 20 years**.

The New Urban Agenda represents a paradigm shift in global thinking, recognising what professionals have perhaps understood for some time: that our future is urban. From gender-equity to youth-empowerment, participatory planning to inclusive public space, The New Urban Agenda sets a high benchmark for the type of urban development

we should strive for and a global accountability framework for achieving it. Its catch-cry to "leave no one behind" commits to reducing urban inequality.

What's good about NUA?

- It establishes **an integrated approach to urbanization** by setting a clear vision of how urban economies, standards of living and climate sustainability are interconnected.

- The New Urban Agenda also promotes **a strong sense of inclusiveness**, both in the diversity of actors who helped forge the agenda and in the participatory roles it sets for national and local governments to create policies that support sustainable urbanization.

Key concepts highlighted in the New Urban Agenda:

The urban paradigm: By 2050 the world urban population is expected to nearly double, making urbanisation one of the 21st century's most transformative trends. NUA asks us to take advantage of this opportunity as the vehicle through which sustainable development can be realised. It urges not only the adoption of urban strategies and policies, but that all strategies and policies take into account urbanisation.

Everyone has a right to the city: The New Urban Agenda acknowledges that current urban development trends will not deliver equitable cities for all. Instead we need to adopt policies and practices that "leave no one behind". The New Urban Agenda encourages practices that work towards just, safe, healthy and resilient. Practices that end poverty in all its forms, end violence against women and girls (particularly in public spaces) and end all forms of discrimination, including people with disabilities.

Participatory and people-centered cities: The New Urban Agenda calls for people-centered planning, and to ensure that participation is integrated across all areas of practice. It urges professions to move beyond community engagement, to seek to empower all individuals and communities, particularly women and youth, as partners in creating the city.

Supporting local leadership: One of the major paradigm shifts is the call for decentralised decision making. This decentralisation is not only for local governments, however. The New Urban Agenda outlines that it is everyone's responsibility: individuals, communities, civil society to shape better cities.

Age and gender-responsive planning: Across all areas of city-making, the New Urban Agenda calls on professionals to seek to achieve gender equality. This includes women's full and effective participation at all levels of decision making, as well as eliminating all forms of discrimination, violence, and harassment against women and girls in private and public spaces.

Use public space to improve participation, safety and inclusion: Public space is a strong theme throughout the New Urban Agenda document, recognising that equitable city-making cannot be achieved without sufficient quality public space. The New Urban Agenda argues for improved public participation in shaping public space, and for improvements to safety of public space, particularly for women and girls.

Environment, disaster and resilience: Under the New Urban Agenda UN member states acknowledged the threat of climate change and committed to preserve and promote the ecological and social function of land in cities. UN member states also committed to facilitating the sustainable management of natural resources in cities and human settlements in a manner that "protects and improves the urban ecosystem and environmental services and reduces greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution".

Smart cities approach: Governments and partners are urged to make the most of digitisation and a smart cities approach as an independent point. Equally governments and partners are urged to work more closely with science and technology sector.

How is NUA related to Smart Cities Mission?

The smart city guidelines stipulate that the Indian smart city needs to adhere to 24 features in order to be "smart". The overlap between these features and the transformative commitments of the NUA are quite significant.

- With **an emphasis on promoting civic engagement and strengthening participatory local governance**, the NUA mirrors the commitment of the smart city for civic participation—where the citizens of the city have been involved in the mission at every step through polls and calls for suggestions to redevelop their cities.

- Similarly, the SCM has promoted **the concept of municipal bonds** in Indian cities. Further, with regard to the empanelment of special transaction advisers for each of the cities, the MoUD has also assigned credit ratings for most of the smart cities to facilitate the process of issuing municipal bonds for mobilization of resources. On the other hand, the NUA calls for sustainable financial frameworks for municipal finance and local fiscal systems.

- The **NUA aspires to integrated and vulnerable section—responsive housing policies, aspects that many of India's smart cities are paying close attention to**—with the lead city Bhubaneswar making these the prime focus of its redevelopment efforts. Furthermore, both the NUA and SCM guidelines pay close attention to infrastructure and services such as solid waste management, compact urban planning and energy resources.

- Therefore, **the SCM can be viewed as an extension of the strategy expressed in the NUA**.

Conclusion:

As India strives to leave a mark on a world that is becoming increasingly urban, we would do well to follow a comprehensive and well chalked out strategy for our cities. Though a commendable step in the right direction, the SCM

has its own pitfalls and shortcomings. With urbanization gaining prominence in the global policy discourse, it is important, now more than ever, to focus on local governance. Currently, there is an inadequate emphasis on the functioning of urban local bodies when it comes to centrally motivated schemes like the SCM. India is a signatory of the SDGs. Paying further **attention to the aspects of resilience and local governance outlined in the NUA and the allied action framework can ensure that Indian cities respond to more than just competitive sub-federalism. Indian cities, catalysed by learnings from the NUA, can become competitive global cities**.

30/06 - Blockchaining India's digital future

Summary:

Blockchain has been a buzzword for some time now. In addition to private companies and banks, blockchain has attracted interest from within the government as well.

What are Blockchains?

Blockchains are a new data structure **that is secure, cryptography-based, and distributed across a network**. The technology supports cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, and the transfer of any data or digital asset. Spearheaded by Bitcoin, blockchains achieve consensus among distributed nodes, allowing the transfer of digital goods without the need for centralized authorisation of transactions. The present blockchain ecosystem is like the early Internet, a permissionless innovation environment in which email, the World Wide Web, Napster, Skype, and Uber were built.

How this operates?

- The technology allows transactions to be simultaneously anonymous and secure, peer-to-peer, instant and frictionless. It does this by distributing trust from powerful intermediaries to a large global network, which through mass collaboration, clever code and cryptography, enables a tamper-proof public ledger of every transaction that's ever happened on the network.

- A block is the "current" part of a blockchain which records some or all of the recent transactions, and once completed, goes into the blockchain as permanent database. Each time a block gets completed, a new block is generated. Blocks are linked to each other (like a chain) in proper linear, chronological order with every block containing a hash of the previous block.

How is it different from current systems?

Blockchain technology allows for instant recognition of the exact size of the block by all transacting parties in the chain since the block is simultaneously updated on all their databases, and has unique security features that do not allow tampering with the definition of the block.

- In addition, each block's movements across the chain have the ability to be verified by all parties in the chain since the block carries with it the digital imprint, or 'signature', of wherever it has been.

- Therefore, it creates instant trust without having to rely on a series of trustworthy banks to clear cheques. Here, various parties transacting regard their reputation as being more important than reneging on it. Unlike traditional banking system, cash transactions here are undertaken immediately.

Benefits of blockchain technology:

- As a public ledger system, blockchain records and validate each and every transaction made, which makes it secure and reliable.

- All the transactions made are authorized by miners, which makes the transactions immutable and prevent it from the threat of hacking.

- Blockchain technology discards the need of any third-party or central authority for peer-to-peer transactions.

- It allows decentralization of the technology.

How blockchain can be used in public administration?

Blockchain has the potential to optimize the delivery of public services, further India's fight against corruption, and create considerable value for its citizens.

- By maintaining an immutable and chronologically ordered record of all actions and files ("blocks") linked together ("chain") in a distributed and decentralized database, Blockchain creates an efficient and cost-effective database that is virtually tamper-proof. By doing so, blockchain promises to create more transparent, accountable, and efficient governments.

- In addition to creating a more efficient government, blockchain can also help create a more honest government. A public blockchain, like the one Bitcoin uses, records all information and transactions on the decentralized database permanently, publicly, and most importantly, securely. By allowing governments to track the movement of government funds, blockchain can hold state and local actors accountable for any misappropriations.

- Blockchain not only deters corruption through accountability, but it can also do so by bypassing the middleman entirely. Earlier this year, the World Food Programme began testing blockchain-based food and cash transactions in Pakistan's Sindh province. Refugees in Jordan's Azraq camp are now using the same technology, in conjunction with biometric registration data for authentication, to pay for food.

- With Aadhaar cards becoming nearly ubiquitous in India, adopting blockchain could be the next logical step in India's pursuit of becoming a digital economy. Blockchain can play an important role in storing individuals' data, helping conduct secure transactions, maintaining a permanent and private identity record, and turning India into a digital society.

Concerns associated:

Blockchain is still a (relatively) new technology and is not without its problems. For a start, there are ongoing concerns about privacy in the settlement and storage of securities – blockchain providers are working hard to address.

Banks are also at threat with blockchain, since more and more firms (using their IT service providers from India and elsewhere) will build systems that can create and exchange 'blocks' with one another completely legally, without ever having to use the banks as a financial intermediary.

Conclusion:

Blockchain, however, is not a panacea. While it can help enhance the delivery of government services, it cannot replace an inefficient system. Although it can deter corruption by making governments more accountable and transparent, it cannot prevent the entering of false information into the network. Yet, it presents the government with a powerful opportunity. By embracing blockchain, it can create a bureaucracy that focuses on innovation and experimentation, a government that seeks to maximize efficiency and governance, and an economy sustained on the promise of technology. Blockchain's applications in the public sphere, however, have yet to catch the eye of the Indian government. This is baffling; the technology is not only promising, but has even begun to be utilized by governments globally.

30/06 - Should the sedition law be scrapped?

Summary:

Dissent is the lifeblood of democracy. But today when the stench of fascism looms large, exercising this constitutional right can get one branded as anti-national, thrown behind bars or a lynch mob waiting outside to teach you a lesson. A law that has especially come in handy for the self-proclaimed nationalists of our times to suppress dissent is the archaic colonial era sedition law.

What you need to know about Sedition law?

The sedition law was incorporated into the Indian
Penal Code (IPC) in 1870 as fears of a possible uprising plagued the colonial authorities. Most of this penal code was retained intact after 1947. Despite demands to scrap it, the law of sedition remains enshrined in our statute book till today.

What is sedition?

Section 124A of the IPC defines sedition and says:

- Whoever by words either spoken or written or by signs or by visible representation or otherwise brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, the government established by law; or

- Whoever by the above means excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the government established by law, has committed the offence of sedition.

According to the law, disaffection includes disloyalty and all feelings of enmity. However, disapprobation of the measures or administrative action of the government to obtain their alteration by lawful means is not an offence.

Concerns:

- In the recent years the ease with which complaints of sedition or speech that allegedly hurts the sentiments of a community are brought before the police and criminal action initiated against the speakers is a cause of worry.

- Figures of the National Crime Records Bureau reveal that in the two years preceding the JNU case, there were a total of 77 sedition cases.

- Beyond the high-profile urban cases, the reach of Section 124-A has extended even to faraway places. An entire village in Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu had sedition cases slapped against it for resisting a nuclear power project. Adivasis of Jharkhand, resisting displacement, topped the list of those slapped with sedition in 2014.

Why should it be scrapped?

Draconian laws such as the Section 124-A only serve to give a legal veneer to the regime's persecution of voices and movements against oppression by casting them as anti-national.

What has Supreme Court ruled?

The Supreme Court has persistently held that for the offence of sedition to be satisfied, there has to be a causal relationship between speech and acts of violence, and mere speech, regardless of how subversive it is, does not amount to sedition.

Is it time to scrap these laws?

- People concerned with the misuse of these laws often ask for them to be repealed or struck down on the grounds that they violate Article 19(1)(a). But herein lies the problem. Most of these laws have, in fact, been challenged and their constitutional validity has already been upheld.

- Section 295A ("deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs") was found to be constitutional in the Ramjilal Modi case (1957) and Section 124A (sedition) was held to be constitutional in the Kedarnath case (1962).

- Both these were Constitution benches and even though the effect of these judgments has been subsequently watered down through more liberal judgments, these cases remain the law of the land.

Short term measures:

- All speech-related offences should be made bailable offences; this would lessen the harmful impact of using arrest and custody as a way of harassing anyone exercising their rights under Article 19(1)(a).

- The offences should be made non-cognisable so that there is at least a judicial check on the police acting on the basis of politically motivated complaints.

- In the case of offences under Sections 153A ("promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, etc, and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony") and 295A of the Indian Penal Code, it is mandatory under Section 196(1) of the Code of Criminal Procedure to obtain prior sanction of the government before taking cognisance of the offences. This needs to be extended to the offence of sedition under Section 124A.

- In the case of hate speech, it is important to raise the burden of proof on those who claim that their sentiments are hurt rather than accept them at face value. And finally, it is crucial that courts begin to take action against those who bring malicious complaints against speech acts.

Conclusion:

Democracy has no meaning without freedoms and sedition as interpreted and applied by the police and governments is a negation of it. Hence, before the law loses its potency, the Supreme Court, being the protector of the fundamental rights of the citizens has to step in and evaluate the law and may declare Section 124A unconstitutional if necessary. The word 'sedition' is thus extremely nuanced, and needs to be applied with caution. It is like a cannon that ought not be used to shoot a mouse; but the arsenal also demands possession of cannons, mostly as a deterrent, and on occasion for shooting.

Rajya Sabha TV: The Big Picture

Bumper Crops Expected this Year – Is it a Good News?

Link: https://youtu.be/M3_yqSy0JtI

Indian farmers are currently facing a new problem as a bumper crop has led to procurement prices plunging which is pushing them deeper into the debts of despair. Ironically, the bumper production which ought to have been a boon is proving to be a bane. The Agricultural Ministry estimates that 273 million tonnes of vegetables will be produced this year but it is unlikely that either the farmers or the consumers will benefit. Only middlemen stand to gain since the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee laws bar farmers from selling their produce directly in local markets. They can sell only through commissioned agents.

Analysis:

1. The traders and nation on the whole might benefit from bumper crops but for the farmers, there will be loss because they will be **compelled to sell their whole produce at throwaway price** which will make them debt ridden further.

2. Bumper crops doesn't always bring good money to the farmers and even consumers do not get benefit of this. They have to pay a higher price for the produce in general because of the **involvement of middlemen and traders.**

3. There needs to be **decentralized storages, cold storage chain** and there should be **food processing at the village gate level to reduce wastage** of food in long term specifically for perishable items like fruits and vegetables.

4. Whole agricultural produce marketing system has not kept pace with the way agriculture has changed. Farmers are now investing in new technologies, fertilizers, equipment, different varieties of seeds etc. Basically public procurement is only for 2 crops rice and wheat and that too in a few states. So, other states do not get any benefit from MSPs.

   Awareness about the MSP is limited to states such as Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh where such procurement takes place. According to the National Sample Survey's (NSS) Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households 2013, for paddy and wheat, less than 1/3rd of farmers were aware of the MSP and for other crops, such awareness was negligible.

5. **Post harvest infrastructure** has to be adequately created. A **proper policy framework** has to be there to ensure a **better coordination between efforts of Central as well as State Governments as agriculture is a state subject**. Export import policies have to be in place.

6. Milk model can be executed for perishable items in agriculture. SAFL has set an example. **Sustainable Agro-commercial Finance Ltd. (SAFL) is the first private sector NBFC in India providing agri-loans** with a wide and diverse range of financing options for almost every need of agricultural activity.

Everything is linked to WTO as well. When a commitment is given at international forum that MSPs will not be extended beyond a certain percentage, it affects procurement. 2 years back, 23 million tonnes of wheat was procured rather than 28 million tonnes. Later on, Government had to allow zero duty import of wheat which caused a lot of hue and cry because farmers were saying that there was enough heat in the country and import was not required. Therefore, policies are very skewed in terms of stability. Agriculture and farming cannot be changed according to the whims of the political party in power.

Conclusion:

Problem of Indian agriculture is not scarcity. It is the management of the good years in agriculture for future adversaries. There is an urgent need to address the **fundamental problems of crop and regional bias of MSP policy, government procurement and access to institutional credit**. Merely increasing MSP will not benefit most farmers in the country.

GM Mustard – Pros and cons

Link: https://youtu.be/f_2xkZviyLY

The regulator of the genetically modified crops has given the green signal for commercial cultivation of GM mustard in the country. In a submission to the Environment Ministry, Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee has given a positive recommendation but with certain conditions. With the **GEAC nod, the GM mustard developed by the Delhi University gets closer to become India's first edible GM crop.** Several groups are opposing the GEAC's decision as it might affect allied agricultural activities, health of the people etc. The Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants (CGMCP), Delhi University South Campus, had submitted an application to the GEAC for the environmental release of GM mustard (Brassica juncea) hybrid DMH-11 and the use of parental events (varuna bn 3.6 and EH2 mod bs 2.99) for the development of a new generation of hybrids.

Pros:

1. A system of genes from soil bacterium that makes mustard have been used by the scientists. This is generally a self pollinating plant and is better suited to hybridization than current methods.

2. **Local crop developers can more easily develop different varieties of hybrid mustard,** like GM cotton, and confer traits like pest resistance and potentially improving yield.

3. **India's dependence on edible oil imports** makes it necessary to harness GM-mustard. About $12 billion is spent by India annually on import of edible oil.

4. As the **population will increase**, India will have to **increase its productivity** of oilseed crops.

5. DMH-11 is claimed to be one of the **promising technologies** to improve mustard yield in India, which has been almost stagnant since the last two decades.

Cons:

1. India needs technological interventions in agriculture and other fields but the issue of genetically modified crops has always been controversial. Mustard is used for edible oil, their leaves are eaten and it is also used as ayurvedic medicine. Its **impact on health of the people, environment, soil, groundwater or food chain is not known yet**. The glufosinate-based herbicide to which the proposed GM mustard is tolerant will also have adverse impacts on health. A herbicide-tolerant crop promotes constant exposure to a single herbicide which eventually results in weeds becoming resistant.

2. There are social and economic concerns attached to any technology as well. In this case, farmers especially in Punjab and other mustard growing areas have said that they don't need new varieties. They need **better policy, pricing and to rationalize the input costs against the cost which they get after selling it in the markets**. If these problems cannot be solved, bringing in another technology might not solve the problem.

3. **GEAC needs to be a transparent body**e. it should put it in the public domain that on what grounds it has approved GM mustard for citizens to analyze and stay aware whether it is good for them or not. If there is a lack of trust on the part of people who are to use it, it will be like forcing something upon them. India is a **signatory to Cartagena Protocol** on biosafety where it has committed to public participation in decision making.

4. There has to be **strong liability laws** if there are any environmental hazards or if something goes wrong in future which are not there in India at present.

5. The pesticide industry's efforts to influence policymakers and regulators have obstructed reforms globally. Their business model aims only at making profit.

6. Allowing the cultivation of GM mustard would lead to a **direct attack on women involved in the mustard crop weeding.**

Conclusion:

Agriculture is a state subject therefore, it is important for the Centre to take into consideration the views of State Governments as well. It is expected that the Supreme Court will ensure protection of Indian consumers and farmers as giving a nod to GM mustard will pave the way for clearance to other GM crops as well whether the impact is good or bad.

Asia-Africa growth corridor – Can it be a game changer?

Link: https://youtu.be/O3COF71aDXg

Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi recently pushed for an **Asia-Africa Growth Corridor** supported by Japan and India coming up days after China launched its ambitious OBOR initiative taking off. An **annual meeting** of the African Development Bank (AfDB) was held recently in **Gandhinagar, Gujarat** where he released a vision document on the Asia Africa Growth Corridor.

The AAGC is a **roadmap for opportunities and aspirations in Asia and Africa.** It was launched with an aim to prioritize development projects in **health and pharmaceuticals, agriculture and agro-processing, disaster management and skill enhancement.** The idea of AAGC had emerged in the Joint Declaration issued by Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe in November 2016. It will focus on **people centric sustainable growth strategy** details of which would be evolved through a process of detailed consultation across Asia and Africa.

Analysis:

China's OBOR and AAGC are qualitatively different. AAGC aims to be an efficient and sustainable mechanism for **linking economies, industries and institutions, ideas and people in Africa and Asia in an inclusive manner.** There is vast and untapped potential in both Asia and Africa which needs to be explored for shared growth, development, peace, prosperity and stability of these regions.

Four main components of AAGC are:

1. **Development and cooperation projects**
2. **Quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity**
3. **Capacity and skill enhancement**
4. **People to people partnerships**

If Africa looks towards US or Europe for these things, it is very expensive. So, India and Japan are the best in terms of compatibility of interest for Africa. **China's OBOR is concentrated on Eurasian mainland for trade by creating trade infrastructure** because China has huge reserves built by trade surplus over the years which has to be balanced globally. **AAGC is Indian Ocean oriented initiative basically for the African people and their priorities.** India is willing to assist Africa as per its priorities and requirements whereas China is more self-centered approach.

As far as engaging more partners is concerned, South Africa is undoubtedly India's strategic partner. But **South Africa's relationship with China also needs to be monitored and its role in unfolding strategy of China in Africa**. Japan's major flagship conference took place in Kenya whereas China's major flagship conference took place in South Africa. So, these are the indicators for India to see which countries it can depend upon or bring in to AAGC.

Some of the expected outcomes are as follows:

1. Effective **mobilization of financial resources**

2. Alignment with **socio-economic development and development strategies of partner countries** and regions;

3. Application of **high-quality standards** in terms of compliance with international standards established to mitigate environmental and social impact

4. Providing quality infrastructure and taking into account various aspects of economic efficiency and durability, inclusiveness, safety and disaster-resilience, sustainability as well as convenience and amenities

5. Contribution to the **local society** and economy.

Conclusion:

China is rapidly expanding itself in Africa therefore, **India and Japan do not have luxury of time**. They both should immediately **initiate a few joint pilot projects involving the companies of India, Japan and a few African countries** in identified areas like health care, agriculture and blue economy.

Change of Guard in Saudi Arabia, Implications for West Asia & the World

Link: https://youtu.be/qOjsCHz9FNQ

In a surprise reshuffle at the top of Saudi Arabia's royal hierarchy, the country's king has removed his nephew as crown prince in favor of his son, Mohammed bin Salman. **Mohammed bin Salman will now be first in line to succeed his father King Salman as ruler of the Saudi Arabia**. The 31-year-old has been appointed deputy Prime Minister and will continue in his role as defense minister, according to a royal decree cited by state media. Despite his youth, Mohammed bin Salman has **long had a visible role in the government**, and has spearheaded the kingdom's attempts to wean itself off oil as part of an economic strategy announced last year.

Analysis:

1. While the announcement did come as a surprise, this move was bound to be made. The King had handed his son so much power internally in recent years that it already gave an impression that he was being groomed for leadership.

2. **Saudi-U.S. relations**: It did not gain much limelight under the Obama administration when US had a nuclear accord with Shia-ruled Iran and the Sunni-ruled kingdom of Saudi Arabia strongly opposed it. The **ties that emerged between the two countries under Trump administration may have helped accelerate Mohammed bin Salman's succession** as crown prince. There has been a joint defence deal of $110 billion along with other agreements.

3. **Middle East:** The Saudi political reshuffle has come amid the biggest crisis to hit the Middle East in decades i.e. **Saudi-led diplomatic freeze of Qatar** by key allies and neighbors based on the fact that it supports terrorism. **The prince has taken a hard line with Qatar, Iran and Yemen as defence minister**. US might get caught up in the region's ever increasing political tensions.

4. Saudi Arabia has **assisted the Yemeni forces in fighting off Iranian-backed Houthi rebels**. At present, Saudi stability is linked to Yemeni stability. Therefore, the kingdom needs to continue supporting Yemen. The conflict in Yemen is an Iran-Saudi proxy war and the new crown prince has been long involved here. This might take time to get resolved. Oman is out of all this conflict. However, these types of **conflicts create problems for expatriates** and these countries have a large population of expatriates residing there.

5. **2030 Vision:** It aims to **modernize Saudi economy, make the country less oil dependent by investing in the private sector and redistributing the work force.**

6. **Women:** New laws to **increase women's rights** including the right to vote and to run for office. There might also be laws for more women in the workforce which includes top job positions like head of the stock exchange.

India- Saudi Arabia:

On 5th June 2017, when Qatar issue broke out, it was said by India that it is an intra GCC affair which is not the case now. **Many Indians reside in Saudi Arabia and remittances are huge from these countries.** There is also close linkage in terms of energy, terrorism and security. India can be said to have largest stake in this part of the world

and therefore, it has a proactive role to play. It has to **secure its own people, counter terrorism and make sure that the geopolitical proximity to India remains intact without any major war in the region.**

Conclusion:

Though family discipline has been in place so far but what is still unknown in the present scenario is how the extraordinary powers in political, military, intelligence, energy, economic areas wielded by one young prince will be utilized without any kind of consultation and consensus-building within the family. How diplomacy and stability is assured for this country is yet to be seen.