

**GEOPOLITICS**

❖ **Saudi Arabia's quest for strategic autonomy**

➤ **CONTEXT:** Saudi Arabia, which had adopted an aggressive foreign policy in recent years seeking to expand its influence in West Asia and roll back that of Iran, its bitter rival, is now following a dramatic course correction.

- It's reaching out to old rivals, holding talks with new enemies and seeking to balance between great powers, all while trying to transform its economy at home.
- If the Saudi drive to autonomise its foreign policy and build regional stability through diplomacy holds, it can have serious implications for West Asia.

➤ **How is Saudi foreign policy changing?**

- For years, the main driver of Saudi foreign policy was the kingdom's hostility towards Iran. This has resulted in proxy conflicts across the region.

✓ **For example**, in Syria, Iran's only state ally in West Asia, Saudi Arabia joined hands with its Gulf allies as well as Turkey and the West to bankroll and arm the rebellion against President Bashar al Assad.

✓ In Yemen, whose capital Sana'a was captured by the Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in 2014, the Saudis started a bombing campaign in March 2015, which hasn't formally come to an end yet.

✓ One of the demands the Saudis made to Qatar when it imposed a blockade on its smaller neighbour in 2017 was to sever ties with Iran. However, the Qatar blockade came to an unsuccessful end in 2021.

- Recently Saudi Arabia announced a deal, after China-mediated talks, to normalise diplomatic ties with Iran. Soon after, there were reports that Russia was mediating talks between Saudi Arabia and Syria, which could lead to the latter re-entering **the Arab League** before its next summit, scheduled for May 2023 in Saudi Arabia.

- Earlier month of April 2023, a Saudi-Omani delegation travelled to Yemen to hold talks with the Houthi rebels for a permanent ceasefire. All these moves mark a decisive shift from the policy adopted by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman after he rose to the top echelons of the Kingdom in 2017.

- Aggressiveness makes way for diplomacy and loyal alliances make room for pragmatic realignments. This is happening at a time when Saudi Arabia is also trying to balance between the U.S., its largest arms supplier, Russia, its OPEC-Plus partner, and China, the new superpower in the region.

➤ **Why are there changes now?**

- These changes do not mean that the structures of Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran are undergoing a transformation.

✓ In fact, Iran would continue to drive Saudi Arabia's security concerns and strategic calculus. But Saudi Arabia's response to the Iran problem has shifted from strategic rivalry and proxy conflicts to tactical de-escalation and mutual coexistence. A host of factors seem to have influenced this shift.

- The Kingdom's recent regional bets were either unsuccessful or only partially successful. In Syria, Mr. Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has won the civil war. In Yemen, while the Saudi intervention may have helped prevent the Houthis from expanding their reach beyond Sana'a and the north, the Saudi-led coalition, which itself is now in a fractured state, failed to oust them from the capital. Also, the Houthis, with their drones and short-range missiles, now pose a serious security threat to Riyadh.

- In parallel, the U.S.'s priority is shifting away from West Asia. So the choices Saudi Arabia is faced with, is to either double down on its failed bets seeking to contain Iran in a region which is no longer a priority for the U.S., the kingdom's most important security partner, or undo the failed policies and reach out to Iran to establish a new balance between the two.

✓ When China, which has good ties with both Tehran and Riyadh, offered to mediate between the two, the Saudis found it as an opportunity and seized it.

➤ **Is Saudi Arabia moving away from the U.S.?**

- The U.S., which has thousands of troops and military assets in the Gulf, including its Fifth Fleet, would continue to play a major security role in the region.

- For Saudi Arabia, the U.S. remains its largest defence supplier. The Kingdom is also trying to develop advanced missile and drone capabilities to counter Iran's edge in these areas with help from the U.S. and others.

- But at the same time, the Saudis realise that the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia is altering the post-War order of the region.

- What Saudi Arabia is trying to do is to use the vacuum created by the U.S. policy changes to autonomise its foreign policy.

✓ The early signs of this autonomisation was visible in Saudi Arabia's recent decisions.

- Unlike most other American allies, Saudi Arabia refused to join anti-Russia sanctions.

✓ Despite protests from Washington, Saudi Arabia joined hands with Russia to effect oil production cuts twice since the Ukraine war began, aimed at keeping the prices high which would help both Moscow and Riyadh. (Saudi Arabia is currently undertaking massive infrastructure projects aimed at transforming its economy and to sustain those projects and meet its economic goals, the Kingdom needs high oil prices).

- It has also built stronger trade and defence ties with China, and the Iran reconciliation deal, under China's mediation, announced China's arrival as a power broker in West Asia.

- At the same time, Saudi Arabia has placed orders for Boeing aircraft worth \$35 billion and entered into conditional talks with the U.S. on normalising ties with Israel.
- De-Americanisation of West Asia is not a Saudi goal. Rather it is trying to exploit America's weakness in the region to establish its own autonomy by building better ties with Russia and China and mending relations with regional powers without completely losing the U.S.
- **What are the implications for the region?**
- Saudi Arabia's normalisation talks with Syria or its talks with the Houthis cannot be seen separately from the bigger picture of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement.
- If Syria rejoins the Arab League, it would be an official declaration of victory by Mr. Assad in the civil war and would help improve the overall relationship between Syria and other Arab countries.
- If the Saudis end the Yemen war through a settlement with the Houthis (which would probably split Yemen), Saudi Arabia would get a calmer border while Iran could retain its existing influence in the Saudi backyard. Such agreements may not radically alter the security dynamics of the region but could infuse some stability across the Gulf.
- But the path ahead may not be smooth. While the Saudis are trying to build cross-Gulf stability, another part of West Asia remains tumultuous — which was evident in the Israeli raid at Jerusalem's Al Aqsa, Islam's third holiest place of worship recently.
  - ✓ This triggered rocket attacks from Lebanon and Gaza and in return Israeli bombing of both territories. Israel also keeps bombing Syria with immunity. The impact of escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran on cross-Gulf stability remains to be seen.
- Another challenge before Saudi Arabia is to retain the course of autonomy without irking the U.S. beyond a point. Though the U.S. publicly welcomed the Saudi-Iran rapprochement.
- The U.S. would also not be happy with Syria, where it once sought regime change, being re-accommodated into the West Asian mainstream.
- In post-War West Asia, the U.S. had been part of almost all major realignments — either through force or talks, from **the Suez war** to **the Abraham Accords**.
- But now, when China and Russia are mediating talks between rivals successfully and Saudi Arabia, a trusted ally, is busy building its own autonomy, the U.S., despite its huge military presence in the region, is reduced to being a spectator.

### **COOPRATIVE FEDERALISM (POLITY)/GOVERNANCE**

- ❖ **How Tamil Nadu and the Centre have locked horns over the issue of online gaming**
- **CONTEXT: From privatisation efforts to disagreements over a centralised market for electricity, there have been many instances of ever-growing tussles between the Centre and various state governments in the last few years. Most recently perhaps a new frontier was added to that – the Tamil Nadu government received its Governor's approval for a Bill banning online gambling, just one business day after the Centre notified fresh rules for online gaming.**
- The state's assembly had passed the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Online Gambling and Regulation of Online Games Ordinance, 2022 in Oct 2022. However, in early March 2023, the Governor returned the ordinance for reconsideration. A few weeks later, the assembly readopted the Bill and sent it to Governor once again.
- State laws on online gaming are a pain-point that many in the industry are foreseeing. They have also raised these concerns with the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY), which is now the nodal agency for the sector. They are also likely to challenge Tamil Nadu's measure in court once it is notified by the state government.
- **What is Tamil Nadu's law on online gambling?**
- The Bill prohibits online gambling and online games of chance played for money or other stakes.
- While it specifically names Rummy and Poker as **games of chance**, it defines **online games of chance** as those where both an element of chance and skill are involved, and the element of chance dominates over the element of skill; games are presented as games of chance; the element of chance can only be eliminated by superlative skill; or games involve cards, dice, or wheel which work on random event generators.
- It also establishes the Tamil Nadu Online Gaming Authority and empowers it to regulate online gaming companies. Companies that are based outside the state are required to follow specified due diligence or restrict access to prohibited games for people in Tamil Nadu.
- The state's proposed gaming authority will identify games of chance and recommend them to be included in the Schedule of prohibited games.
- It is worth noting that the state's Governor gave his assent to the Bill hours after the legislative assembly passed a resolution against him for indefinitely withholding assent to several bills.
- **Online gaming: Centre vs Tamil Nadu**
- Aside from the state assembly's resolution against the Governor, the timing of the development is also particularly significant given that his assent to the Bill comes just days after the Centre notified amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, which brought in rules for regulating online real money games.
- According to Minister of State for Electronics "State governments' regulating online gambling is not required any more after the IT rules for online gaming have been notified.

- In a meeting with MeitY a day after the amended IT Rules were notified, online gaming companies had raised concerns around state governments passing competing legislations which could potentially go against norms prescribed under Centre's rules.
- MeitY believes that while **gambling is a state subject**, activities that occur on the Internet – including online gambling and gaming – fall exclusively in its domain to regulate.
- **What are the Centre's norms for online gaming?**
- Recently MeitY notified amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021 clearing regulations for the online gaming sector. The fresh changes require the setting up of multiple self-regulatory bodies (SRBs) whose approval will be required for online games with a monetary element. Games that involve wagering on outcomes of events will not be allowed.
- Online gaming companies will also have to complete a KYC procedure for users when they first make a deposit in their accounts to play a game.
- KYC norms laid down by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for its regulated entities will have to be followed by them.
- **How have gaming companies reacted to Tamil Nadu's Bill?**
- Industry associations representing online gaming companies expressed regret over Tamil Nadu Governor's assent to the Bill.
- They are expected to challenge it in court when the state government notifies provisions of the ordinance.
- All India Gaming federation (AIGF) said the Bill was "unconstitutional" and that the association will file a case against it.
- The AIGF had challenged the constitutional validity of Tamil Nadu's Bill at the Madras High Court. However, at the time, the state government had said that it was yet to notify the Bill as a law, following which the court had allowed AIGF to withdraw its petition with liberty to file it once the law is in effect.
- In 2022, the Karnataka High Court had declared as unconstitutional certain provisions of the Karnataka Police (Amendment) Act, 2021, which prohibited and criminalised the activities of offering and playing online games, by risking money or otherwise.

### PRELIMS

#### 1. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

➤ **CONTEXT:** The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi has paid tribute to the great social reformer, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule on his birth anniversary.

#### ➤ **About**

- Jotirao Govindrao Phule was an Indian social activist, thinker, anti-caste social reformer and writer from Maharashtra.
- His work extended to many fields, including the eradication of untouchability and the caste system and for his efforts in educating women and exploited caste people.
- He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were pioneers of women's education in India. Phule started his first school for girls in 1848 in Pune at Tatyasaheb Bhide's residence or Bhidewada.

#### ➤ **Contributions**

- His work included the abolition of untouchability and the caste system, as well as efforts to educate women and exploited caste people.
- Later, the Phules established schools for children from the untouchable castes of Mahar and Mang.
- In 1863, he established a home for pregnant Brahmin widows to give birth in a secure environment.
- To avoid infanticide, he established an orphanage home. In this regard, he is thought to be the first Hindu to establish an orphanage for needy children.
- Jyotirao decided to build a common bathing tank outside his house in 1868 to demonstrate his embracing attitude toward all humans and his desire to dine with everyone, regardless of caste.
- He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) with his followers in order to achieve equal rights for people from exploited castes.
- People of all religions and castes were welcome to join this organization dedicated to the upliftment of the oppressed classes.
- Phule is regarded as a pivotal figure in Maharashtra's social reform movement. In 1888, Maharashtrian social activist Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar bestowed the honorific 'Mahatma' title on him. Satyashodhak Samaj

#### ➤ **Published works**

- Tritiya Ratna, 1855
- Manav Mahamand (Muhammad) (Abhang)
- Gulamgiri, 1873
- Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Poostak, April 1889
- Sarvajanic Satya Dharmapustak, 1891

#### 2. UN Democracy Fund

➤ **CONTEXT:** India, a founding member of UNDEF, has no objections to the Fund giving grants to NGOs funded by George Soros, while he is put on the watchlist in India.

3

➤ **About the fund**

- UNDEF was created by UN Secretary-General Kofi A. Annan in 2005 as a United Nations General Trust Fund to support democratization efforts around the world.
- It was welcomed by the General Assembly in the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit.
- UNDEF subsists entirely on voluntary contributions from Governments.
- Functions: UNDEF funds projects that empower civil society, promote human rights, and encourage the participation of all groups in democratic processes.
- ✓ The large majority of UNDEF funds go to local civil society organizations.
- Composition: The Advisory Board, constituted by the Secretary General, includes eight largest Member State contributors and six other states to reflect diverse geographical representation.
- ✓ India has been a member of the Board since the beginning.
- Providing Grants: Ranging from US\$100,000 to US\$300,000 support initiatives in the areas of:
  - ✓ Support for Electoral Processes
  - ✓ Women's Empowerment
  - ✓ Media and Freedom of Information
  - ✓ Rule of Law and Human Rights
  - ✓ Strengthening Civil Society Interaction with Government
  - ✓ Youth Engagement

➤ **India's Contribution to the Fund**

- India and the US were instrumental in the establishment of the UN Democracy Fund in 2005, with India contributing \$5 million to the fund in its early years. However, India's funding for the UNDEF has dwindled since 2012.

**3. Cyber Surakshit Bharat initiative**

➤ **CONTEXT: National e-Governance Division (NeGD) has organised 35th Chief Information Security Officers (CISO) Deep-Dive training programme Under the Cyber Surakshit Bharat initiative.**

➤ **About the initiative**

- The Cyber Surakshit Bharat initiative was conceptualised with the mission to spread awareness about cyber-crime and build capacities of Chief Information Security Officers (CISOs) and frontline IT officials, across all government departments.
- It was launched by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in 2018 in cooperation with National e-Governance Division (NeGD) and various industry partners in India.
- The CISO training is the first-of-its-kind partnership between the Government and industry consortium under Public Private Partnership (PPP) model.

➤ **Objectives**

- To educate and enable the chief information security officers (CISO) and broader IT community to address the challenge of cyber security.
- Create awareness on the emerging landscape of cyber threats.
- Provide in-depth understanding on key activities, new initiatives, challenges and related solutions.
- Applicable frameworks, guidelines and policies related to the subject.
- Share best practices to learn from successes and failures.
- Provide key inputs to take informed decisions on cyber security related issues in their respective functional areas.

**ANSWER WRITING**

**Q. What is the relationship between ethics and aptitude? How does a person's moral character affect their ability to make rational decisions and act in the best interest of society? (150 words)**

- The relationship between ethics and aptitude has long been debated in philosophy and social sciences. Ethics is concerned with moral principles and values, while aptitude refers to the natural ability or talent to do something well. Both ethics and aptitude play a significant role in shaping an individual's personality and behavior.

Body

- Ethics and Aptitude: Ethics and aptitude are interrelated, and both have a significant impact on a person's behavior.
- ✓ Ethics is concerned with the principles and values that guide our behavior and decision-making, while aptitude is the natural ability or talent to perform certain tasks well.
- ✓ An individual's aptitude can influence their ethical behavior, as they may be more likely to act in accordance with their abilities and strengths. Similarly, an individual's ethics can affect their aptitude, as they may prioritize their moral values over their natural abilities in certain situations.
- ✓ The relationship between ethics and aptitude is further complicated by the fact that individuals may have different ethical values and aptitudes.
- ✓ For example, an individual may have a strong aptitude for science, but their ethical values may prioritize environmental protection over scientific progress. In such cases, the individual may struggle to reconcile their natural abilities with their moral values, leading to conflicts and difficult decision-making.

- Moral Character and Rational Decision-Making:
- Moral Character and Rational Decision-making A person's moral character can affect their ability to make rational decisions.
- Rational decision-making involves weighing the costs and benefits of different options and choosing the option that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the costs.
- A person's moral character can influence how they weigh these costs and benefits.
- ✓ For example, a person who values honesty highly may choose to tell the truth even when it is not in their best interest.
- ✓ In contrast, a person who lacks such moral values may be more likely to lie to avoid the consequences of telling the truth.
- ✓ In this way, a person's moral character can influence their ability to make rational decisions.
- Moral Character and the Best Interest of Society:
- A person's moral character can also affect their ability to act in the best interest of society.
- Acting in the best interest of society involves making decisions and taking actions that benefit society as a whole. A person's moral character can influence how they define what is in the best interest of society.
- ✓ For example, a person who values social justice highly may prioritize policies that benefit marginalized groups, even if it means sacrificing their own personal gain.
- ✓ In contrast, a person who lacks such moral values may prioritize policies that benefit themselves or their own group, even if it comes at the expense of marginalized groups.

**Conclusion**

- The relationship between ethics and aptitude is complex and multifaceted. While ethics and aptitude are interrelated, they may also conflict with each other in certain situations.
- ✓ An individual's moral character plays a crucial role in their ability to make rational decisions and act in the best interest of society. Therefore, it is essential to develop strong ethical values and moral character, which can enhance an individual's aptitude and promote ethical behavior.
- ✓ Ultimately, a society that prioritizes ethics and moral character is more likely to flourish and achieve sustainable progress.

**MCQs**

1. With reference to the Cyber Surakshit Bharat, Consider the following Statements:
  1. It aims to spread awareness about cybercrime and building capacity for safety measures across all government departments.
  2. It is the first public-private partnership of its kind and will leverage the expertise of the IT industry in cybersecurity.
  3. Initiative has been launched by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

Which of the above given statements is/are correct?

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

2. With reference to UN Democracy Fund consider the following
  1. India has been a member of the UNDEF advisory board since the fund's inception.
  2. It is funded entirely by voluntary contributions from member states
  3. India's contributions to this fund have decreased in recent years.

Which of the above statement/s is/are correct?

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

3. According to Jyotiba Phule, which of the following statements is correct?
  1. Jyotiba Phule is one of the earliest leaders of the non-Brahmin movement.
  2. He founded Satyashodhak samaj which supported the upliftment of women, the depressed class, and the caste system.
  3. The word "Dalit" for depressed classes was first used by him.
  4. Shetkaryacha Asud was written by him.

Which of the above statement/s is/are correct?

- a) 1, 2 and 3 only
- b) **1, 3 and 4 only**
- c) 2, 3 and 4 only
- d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

4. With reference to Arab League consider the following statements
  1. It is a regional organization consists of west Asian Islamic countries only.

2. Syria is one of the founding members of the league which participation has been suspended since November 2011.

Which of the above statement/s is/are correct?

- a) 1 only  
**b) 2 only**  
 c) Both 1 and 2  
 d) Neither 1 nor 2
5. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has notified rules regarding online gaming under the Information Technology Rules, 2021. With reference to these rules consider the following statements:
1. The new rules define an online game as a game that is offered on the internet and is accessible by a user through a computer resource or an intermediary.
  2. The new rules for online gaming prohibit any game that involves betting and wagering.
  3. The new rules provide for the establishment of Inter-Gaming Organization (IGO) for regulating the unethical practices involved in the gaming.

Which of the above statement/s is/are correct?

- a) **1 and 2 only**  
 b) 2 and 3 only  
 c) 1 and 3 only  
 d) 1,2 and 3
6. Suhelwa Wildlife Sanctuary recently seen in news situated in which of the following state?
- a) Jharkhand  
 b) Maharashtra  
**c) Uttar Pradesh**  
 d) Rajasthan
7. With reference to Biomethanation often seen in news consider the following statements
1. Biomethanation is a process by which organic material is microbiologically converted under anaerobic conditionsto biogas.
  2. It is more capital intensive compared to composting and landfill and not suitable for wastes containing less biodegradable matter

Choose the incorrect statement/s using the codes given below

- a) 1 only  
 b) 2 only  
 c) Both 1 and 2  
**d) Neither 1 nor 2**
8. Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding National Innovation Foundation-India (NIF)?
1. NIF is an autonomous body of the Department of Science and Technology under the Central Government.
  2. NIF is an initiative to strengthen the highly advanced scientific research in India's premier scientific institutions in collaboration with highly advanced foreign scientific institutions.

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- a) **1 only**  
 b) 2 only  
 c) Both 1 and 2  
 d) Neither 1 nor 2
9. Which of the following statement/s is/are correct regarding National Center of Excellence in Technology for Internal Security?
1. It aimed at developing and advanced technology solutions across the world for Internal Security forces in broad areas of Electronics System Design & Manufacturing (ESDM).
  2. It is an initiative by IIT Bombay & Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY) Govt. of India under its flagship Digital India Program.

Select the correct answer using the codes given below

- a) 1 only  
**b) 2 only**  
 c) Both 1 and 2  
 d) Neither 1 nor 2
10. Miyawaki Method often mentioned in news is related to which of the following?
- a) **Afforestation**  
 b) Water conservation  
 c) Wind energy  
 d) Plastic recycle