DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYSIS

19 JULY 2024

1 - Strengthening India-Austria Relations: Diplomatic Milestones and Future Prospects:

GS II

International Relations

- **Context:**

- The Prime Minister of India recently undertook an official visit to Austria, marking the first such visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 41 years. This visit commemorated the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between India and Austria, aiming to strengthen cooperation across various sectors, including technology, economy, and global security.

- **Key Highlights of the Prime Minister's Visit to Austria:**

- **Indo-Pacific Stability:**

- Both nations underscored their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region, focusing on maritime security and adherence to international laws, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

- **Political and Security Cooperation:**

- Discussions included evaluations of European and West Asian developments, with a shared goal of peace restoration and adherence to international law, particularly concerning the Ukraine conflict.
- The launch of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) was welcomed, with Austria expressing interest in this initiative.

- **Economic Collaboration:**

- The leaders agreed on a forward-looking economic partnership emphasizing green and digital technologies, infrastructure, renewable energy, and smart cities.
- The first high-level bilateral Business Forum was convened to promote sectoral partnerships and encourage CEO-level interactions for exploring new opportunities.

- **Climate Commitments:**

- Both countries pledged to collaborate on renewable energy, particularly Austria's Hydrogen Strategy and India's Green Hydrogen Mission, recognizing their commitments under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).
- Acknowledgment of climate neutrality targets: EU by 2050, Austria by 2040, and India by 2070.

- **Technology and Innovation:**

- Initiatives such as the Start-Up Bridge and exchanges under Austria's Global Incubator Network and India's Start-Up India were highlighted for fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.
- Emphasis on the importance of digital technologies in industrial processes (Industry 4.0), including in the sustainable economy.

- **Cultural Exchanges:**

- Promotion of yoga, Ayurveda, and other cultural exchanges was emphasized as part of cultural diplomacy.

- **Multilateral Cooperation:**

- Reiteration of commitment to multilateralism and support for comprehensive United Nations reforms.
- India supported Austria's UNSC candidature for the term 2027-28, and Austria reciprocated for India's candidature for 2028-29.
- India invited Austria to join the International Solar Alliance (ISA), highlighting collaboration in renewable energy and sustainable development.
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- **Overview of India-Austria Relations:**

- **Political Relations:**

- Diplomatic relations were established in 1949, with the 75th anniversary being observed from November 2023 to November 2024.
- India played a significant role in Austria's independence negotiations with the Soviet Union in 1955.

- **Economic Cooperation:**

- Austria, one of the wealthiest EU nations, is crucial for India's relations with Europe, especially central and Eastern Europe.

- The Indo-Austrian Joint Economic Commission (JEC) established in 1983 facilitates bilateral interactions between governmental ministries and chambers of commerce.
- In 2021, bilateral trade totaled USD 2.47 billion, increasing to USD 2.84 billion in 2022.
- Key Indian exports: Electronic goods, apparel, textiles, footwear, rubber articles, vehicles, and railway parts.
- Key Austrian exports: Machinery, mechanical appliances, railway parts, iron, and steel.

- **Space Collaboration:**

- Austria's first two satellites, TUGSAT-1/BRITE and UniBRITE, were launched from India's Satish Dhawan Space Centre, Sriharikota, in 2013.
- **Cultural Relations:**

- The cultural relationship dates back to the 16th century. Sanskrit teaching began at Vienna University in 1845, culminating in an independent chair for Indology in 1880.
- Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited Vienna in 1921 and 1926, fostering cultural and intellectual exchanges.
- Ayurveda and Yoga have gained popularity in Austria, with numerous yoga schools in Vienna.

- **Austria: A Brief Overview:**

- **Geography:**

- Located in southern Central Europe, Austria borders eight countries: Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein.
- The Austrian Alps, part of the Central Alps, form the country's backbone.
- Capital: Vienna

- **International Memberships**

- Austria is a member of the European Union (EU) since 1995 and also part of OECD, WTO, IMF, and WHO.

- **Conclusion: Way Forward**

- The historic visit by the Indian Prime Minister to Austria has set the stage for a new era of bilateral cooperation. With a focus on economic collaboration, climate commitments, technological innovation, and cultural exchanges, both nations are poised to strengthen their ties further. Continued engagement in multilateral platforms and joint initiatives in renewable energy and sustainable development will be crucial in addressing global challenges and enhancing mutual interests.

2 - The Landmark High Seas Treaty: A Global Agreement for Ocean Conservation:

GS II

International Issues

- **Context:**

- Recently, India has taken a significant step by endorsing and approving the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, commonly known as the High Seas Treaty. This international accord aims to protect marine biodiversity on the high seas through global cooperation, operating within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

- **Understanding the High Seas:**

- **Definition:**

- According to the 1958 Geneva Convention: The high seas refer to parts of the ocean that are not within the territorial waters or internal waters of any country.
- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): The high seas begin beyond a country's EEZ, which extends up to 200 nautical miles from the coastline.

- **Importance:**

- Coverage: The high seas encompass over 64% of the world's oceans and cover 50% of the Earth's surface.
- Biodiversity: Home to around 270,000 known species, with many more yet to be discovered.
- Climate Regulation: They play a crucial role in regulating the climate, absorbing carbon, storing solar radiation, and distributing heat.
- Human Survival: The high seas provide essential resources such as seafood, raw materials, genetic resources, and medicinal compounds.

- **Threats:**

- Environmental Impact: Phenomena like El Niño and ocean acidification are damaging marine ecosystems.

- Extinction Risks: Thousands of marine species face extinction by 2100 if current warming and acidification trends continue.
- Human Activities: Seabed mining, noise pollution, chemical and oil spills, disposal of untreated waste, overfishing, and invasive species pose significant threats.
- Protection: Currently, only about 1% of the high seas are protected.

- **The High Seas Treaty:**

- **Overview:**

- Formal Name: Agreement on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ).
- Framework: A new legal framework under UNCLOS designed to maintain the ecological health of the oceans.
- Negotiation: Finalized in 2023, aiming to reduce pollution and promote the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources.

- **Key Objectives:**

- Marine Protected Areas (MPAs): Establishment of MPAs to regulate activities and conserve marine ecosystems.
- Equitable Sharing: Ensure fair distribution of benefits derived from marine organisms, whether through scientific research or commercial exploitation.
- Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA): Mandatory EIAs for activities that could harm the marine ecosystem, even if the activity is within a country's jurisdiction but impacts the high seas.
- Capacity Building: Transfer of marine technologies to help developing countries utilize ocean benefits while contributing to conservation.

- **Signing and Ratification:**

- Current Status: As of June 2024, 91 countries have signed the treaty, with 8 having ratified it.
- Ratification Process: The treaty will become legally binding 120 days after 60 countries ratify it. Ratification involves a country agreeing to be legally bound by the treaty's provisions.

- **Significance of the High Seas Treaty:**

- **Global Commons Challenge:**

- Resource Overexploitation: The high seas, as global commons, face issues of overuse, biodiversity loss, and environmental challenges.
- Pollution: In 2021, approximately 17 million tonnes of plastics were dumped into the oceans, with this amount expected to rise.

- Comparison to Paris Agreement: The treaty has been likened to the 2015 Paris Agreement, potentially leading to the protection of vast ocean areas and sustainable use of marine resources.

- **Complementing UNCLOS:**

- Framework Alignment: The BBNJ aligns with UNCLOS principles but provides specific implementation guidelines.
- Legal Mechanism: It introduces a legal mechanism for creating and managing marine protected areas on the high seas.
- Equitable Use: Ensures equitable and sustainable use of marine resources, balancing the interests of both developed and developing countries.

- **Combating Emerging Threats:**

- Challenges Addressed: Deep-sea mining, ocean acidification, and plastic pollution are significant threats addressed by the treaty.

- **International Cooperation:**

- Framework: Establishes a robust institutional framework for greater international cooperation and coordination in ocean governance.

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):**

- SDG 14 (Life Below Water): Successful implementation will significantly contribute to achieving SDG 14.

- **Significance for India:**

- Global Leadership: India's endorsement underscores its commitment to ocean governance and marine resource sustainability.
- Policy Alignment: The EIA mandate will align India's maritime policies with international standards.
- Economic Benefits: Provisions on benefit-sharing from marine genetic resources align with India's Blue Economy goals.
- Strategic Position: Ratifying the treaty strengthens India's position in the Indo-Pacific region, supporting a sustainable maritime environment through the SAGAR initiative.

- **Related Conventions:**

- **UNCLOS:**

- Adoption: An international treaty signed in 1982, replacing the 1958 Geneva Conventions related to various maritime zones and resource conservation.

- **Other Key Conventions:**

- Convention on Continental Shelf (1964): Defines state rights over the continental shelf's resources.
- Convention on Fishing and Conservation of Living Resources of the High Seas (1966): Addresses the conservation of high seas living resources.
- London Convention (1972): Aims to control marine pollution and prevent sea pollution from waste dumping.
- MARPOL Convention (1973): Addresses marine pollution from ships, covering oil, hazardous substances, sewage, and garbage.

- **Way Forward:**

- **Adoption and Ratification:**

- National Commitment: Countries must adopt and ratify the agreement for it to take effect.
- Global Cooperation: Cooperation across all sectors is essential for the treaty's successful implementation and monitoring.

- **India's Role:**

- Showcasing Commitment: By adopting the High Seas Treaty, India can highlight its dedication to ocean conservation.
- Leadership Role: This move positions India as a leader in global high seas protection, enhancing its maritime reputation.

- **Conclusion:**

- The High Seas Treaty marks a monumental step in global ocean governance. India's decision to ratify this treaty is a crucial move that could have widespread implications for the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources worldwide.

- *Source → The Hindu*

3 - UNESCO Sounds Alarm on Potential 90% Soil Degradation by 2050:

GS III

Environmental Conservation

- **Context:**

- Recently, during an international conference in Agadir, Morocco, the Director-General of UNESCO emphasized the urgent need for its 194 Member States to enhance soil protection and rehabilitation efforts. This call to action comes in light of UNESCO's stark warning that by 2050, up to 90% of the planet's soil could be degraded, posing a significant threat to global biodiversity and human life.

- **UNESCO's Insights on Global Soil Degradation:**

- **Current State of Soil Degradation:**

- Current Degradation: According to UNESCO and the World Atlas of Desertification, 75% of soils are already degraded, impacting 3.2 billion people directly. If current trends continue, this could increase to 90% by 2050.
- World Soil Health Index: UNESCO plans to establish a 'world soil health index' with international partners to standardize the measurement and comparison of soil quality. This initiative aims to identify trends in soil degradation or improvement and pinpoint vulnerable areas.
- Pilot Programme for Sustainable Soil Management: A pilot programme will be launched in ten natural sites under UNESCO's Biosphere Reserves Programme to assess and enhance soil and landscape management methods, promoting best practices globally.
- Training Programs: UNESCO will offer training to member government agencies, indigenous communities, and conservation organizations to improve access to soil protection tools.

- **Understanding Soil Degradation:**

- **Definition:**

- Soil Degradation: Defined as a decline in soil health resulting in reduced capacity of the ecosystem to provide goods and services. This encompasses biological, chemical, and physical declines in soil quality.

- **Detailed Processes:**

- Processes of Degradation: Includes loss of organic matter, reduced soil fertility, structural damage, erosion, and changes in salinity, acidity, or alkalinity. It also involves contamination by toxic chemicals and pollutants.

- **Global Impact:**

- Global Statistics: Approximately 33% of the world's soils are moderately to highly degraded, disproportionately affecting regions with high poverty and food insecurity. Annually, 12 million hectares of agricultural soils are lost due to degradation.
- Impact in India: In India, 146.8 million hectares, or about 30% of the soil, is degraded. Of this, 29% is lost to the sea, 61% is relocated, and 10% is deposited in reservoirs.

- **Causes of Soil Degradation:**

- Physical Factors: Rainfall, surface runoff, floods, wind erosion, and tillage.
- Biological Factors: Human and plant activities reducing soil quality.
- Chemical Factors: Nutrient reduction due to alkalinity, acidity, or waterlogging.
- Deforestation and Urbanization: Leading to exposure of soil minerals and conversion of land for non-agricultural use.
- Industrial and Mining Activities: Untreated sewage, industrial waste, and mining activities, including opencast mining, contribute significantly to soil degradation.

- **Impact of Soil Degradation:**

- Food Production and Security: Degraded soils lead to reduced food production and heightened food insecurity.
- Environmental Issues: Soil degradation affects climate change mitigation and resilience due to its impact on carbon stocks.

- **Global and National Initiatives for Soil Management:**

- **Global Initiatives:**

- Global Soil Partnership (GSP): Established in 2012 to prioritize soils on the global agenda and promote sustainable soil management.
- World Soil Day: Celebrated annually on December 5th to raise awareness about healthy soil and promote sustainable soil management.
- Bonn Challenge: Aims to restore 150 million hectares of degraded landscapes by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030.
- Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN): A UNCCD goal to halt and reverse land degradation by 2030.
- Sustainable Development Goal 15: Aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems.
- RECSOIL: Led by the FAO, focuses on increasing soil organic carbon through sustainable soil management practices.

- **National Initiatives in India:**

- Soil Health Management under National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA)
- Soil Health Card Scheme
- Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY)
- Sub-Mission on Agroforestry (SMAF) Scheme

- **Way Forward:**

- Regenerative Agriculture: Focus on restoring soil health through practices like crop rotation, cover cropping, and reduced tillage to enhance soil organic matter, improve water retention, and increase biodiversity.
- Organic Amendments: Use of biochar, compost, and other organic amendments to improve soil structure and fertility.
- Promote Agroforestry: Integrate trees and shrubs into agricultural landscapes to prevent soil erosion and enhance soil fertility.
- Assessment and Mapping: Develop a global database to standardize soil health monitoring for better tracking of progress and targeted interventions.
- Green Infrastructure: Incorporate green roofs, bioswales, and urban parks into city planning to promote rainwater infiltration and reduce runoff.
- Reclamation of Industrial Sites: Transform abandoned industrial sites into urban agriculture or green spaces to promote soil regeneration.

- Bioremediation and Phytomining: Utilize microbes and plants to break down or neutralize soil contaminants and explore the use of specific plants to absorb and accumulate metals from contaminated soils.

- **Conclusion:**

- The potential for 90% of the planet's soil to be degraded by 2050 is a pressing concern that requires immediate and concerted global efforts. By implementing sustainable soil management practices, promoting awareness, and engaging in innovative solutions, we can mitigate soil degradation and ensure the health and productivity of our ecosystems for future generations.

- *Source → The Hindu*

4 - NTCA's Strategy for Relocating Villages within Core Tiger Habitats:

GS III

Environmental Conservation

- **Context:**

- The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has recently called upon state wildlife departments to formulate a detailed timeline and action plan for relocating villages situated in core tiger habitats. This move aims to ensure the protection and viability of tiger populations in India.

- **Understanding NTCA's Village Relocation Strategy:**

- **Core Areas Definition:**

- According to the Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Act of 2006, core areas within tiger reserves are designated as undisturbed zones crucial for maintaining viable tiger breeding populations.
- Core or critical tiger habitats are zones within these reserves that must remain untouched to support the survival and reproduction of tiger populations.

- **Current Situation:**

- In India, there are 55 tiger reserves, where around 600 villages (encompassing 64,801 families) are situated within these core habitats.
- The NTCA's focus is to manage these areas to ensure both wildlife protection and local community welfare.

- **Voluntary Village Relocation Program (VVRP):**

- **Objectives:**

- The VVRP is designed to both empower local communities by offering development opportunities and to create inviolate spaces for tigers, fostering harmonious co-existence.

- **Voluntary Participation:**

- Relocations are to be conducted on a voluntary basis with the informed consent of the affected gram sabhas and families.
- The rights of Scheduled Tribes (STs) and other forest dwellers must be recognized and settled as per existing legal frameworks.

- **Compensation:**

- Families have the option to select either a financial compensation package of Rs 15 lakh or a resettlement package, which includes land, housing, and basic amenities.

- **Challenges with the Relocation Plan:**

- The NTCA's relocation package has been critiqued for not meeting the legal standards outlined in the Land Acquisition Act of 2013.
- The Land Acquisition Act mandates specific provisions for the resettlement and rehabilitation of ST communities and forest dwellers, which the NTCA's plan does not fully address.

- **Project Tiger: A Historical Perspective:**

- **Introduction:**

- Launched in 1973, Project Tiger is a pivotal wildlife conservation initiative aimed at safeguarding the tiger population in their natural habitats.
- Initially comprising nine reserves, the project has expanded to 55 reserves, covering 2.38% of India's land area by 2024.

- **Evolution of Monitoring Techniques:**

- Early tiger censuses relied on the unreliable pug-mark method.
- This method was later replaced by more accurate techniques such as the camera-trap method.

- **Conclusion and Way Forward:**

- The NTCA's relocation plan is a crucial step in balancing the conservation of tiger habitats with the needs of local communities. While the VVRP seeks to offer development opportunities and create safe spaces for tigers, it must address the gaps in legal compliance to ensure fair and effective resettlement. Moving forward, it is essential for the NTCA to align its plan with the Land Acquisition Act and enhance transparency and support for affected families to achieve sustainable conservation outcomes.

- *Source → The Hindu*