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News: At SCO meet, Jaishankar targets BRI

- Connectivity projects must respect sovereignty issues, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said, in a reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), at a virtual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Heads of Government hosted by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Tuesday.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a **permanent Eurasian political, economic and military intergovernmental organization** aiming to **maintain peace, security and stability in the region.**
- SCO was established on 15th June 2001 with its headquarters in **Beijing, China.**
- Previously it was known as Shanghai-Five. With the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 15th June 2001, the grouping became Shanghai Cooperation Organization.
- India and Pakistan joined as full members in the SCO on 9th June 2017 at Astana summit, Kazakhstan.
- Iran was granted full membership at the 21st summit held virtually on 2021.
- Members of the organisation are **Iran, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China.**

- Observers of the group are **Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia**. Belarus recently applied for the membership also.
- Dialogue Partners are **Azerbaijan, Armenia, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka**.
- **Culture** has become an important element of SCO.
- SCO is the **largest regional organization in the world in terms of geographical coverage and population, covering three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and nearly half of the human population**.
- Officially accepted languages in the group are Russian and Chinese.
- Recent meet of Prosecutors General hosted by India, adopted a protocol to **strengthen cooperation in preventing and combating growing menace of human trafficking, especially women and children**.
- Recently, **Varanasi** has been selected as the SCO regions first “**Tourism and Cultural Capital**”.
- Varanasi’ “**Cultural and Tourism Capital**” has been **decided under a new rotating initiative to promote people-to-people contacts and tourism among the member states**.
- Each year a city of the cultural heritage of a member country that will take over the **rotating Presidency of the organisation** will get the title to highlight its prominence.

- The new initiative will come into force after the Samarkand summit (2022) following which India will take over the Presidency and host the next Heads of the State summit.

Objectives

- Strengthening mutual trust and neighborliness among the member states.
- Promoting effective cooperation in -politics, trade & economy, research & technology and culture.
- Enhancing ties in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, etc.
- Maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the region.
- Establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political & economic order.
- Guiding Principle – Based on Shanghai Spirit.
- Internal policy based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development.
- External policy in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness.

Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

- **Heads of State Council** – The supreme SCO body which decides its internal functioning and its interaction with other States & international organisations, and considers international issues.
- **Heads of Government Council** – Approves the budget, considers and decides upon issues related economic spheres of interaction within SCO.
- **Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs** – Considers issues related to day-to-day activities.
- **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)** – Established to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism.
- **SCO Secretariat** – Based in Beijing to provide informational, analytical & organisational support.

Importance for India

- India's membership of SCO can help in achieving regional integration; promote connectivity and stability across borders.

Security

- India through RATS can **improve its counterterrorism** abilities by working toward intelligence sharing, law enforcement and developing best practices and technologies.
- Through the SCO, India can also work on **anti-drug trafficking** and small arms proliferation.
- Cooperation on common challenges of **terrorism and radicalization**.

Energy

- **India being an energy deficient country** with increasing demands for energy, **SCO provides it with an opportunity to meet its energy** requirements through regional diplomacy.
- Talks on the construction of stalled pipelines like the **TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline; IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline** can get a much needed push through the SCO.

Trade

- SCO provides **direct access to Central Asia** – overcoming the main hindrance in flourishing of trade between India and Central Asia.
- SCO acts as an **alternative route to Central Asia**.

- Economic Ties - Central Asian countries provides India with a market for its IT, telecommunications, banking, finance and pharmaceutical industries.

Geopolitical

- Central Asia is a part of India's Extended Neighborhood – SCO provides India an opportunity to pursue the “Connect Central Asian Policy”.
- Helps India fulfill its aspiration of playing an active role in its extended neighborhood as well as checking the ever growing influence of China in Eurasia.
- Platform for India to simultaneously engage with its traditional friend Russia as well as its rivals, China and Pakistan.

Challenges of SCO Membership for India

- Pakistan’s inclusion in SCO poses potential difficulties for India.
- India’s ability to assert itself would be limited and it may have to play second fiddle since China and Russia are co-founders of SCO and its dominant powers.
- India may also have to either dilute its growing partnership with the West or engage in a delicate balancing act - as SCO has traditionally adopted an anti-Western posture.

Wonders of SCO

- India- Statue of Unity
- Kazakhstan- Archaeological Landscape of Tamgaly
- China- Daming imperial palace complex
- Kyrgyzstan- Lake Issyk-Kul
- Pakistan- The Great Mughal's heritage, Lahore
- Russia- The Golden Ring cities
- Tajikistan- Palace of Nowruz
- Uzbekistan- the Poi Kalon complex.

Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)

- Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious project that focuses on connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries spread across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. BRI spans about 150 countries (China's Claim).
- Initially announced in the year 2013, the project involves building networks of roadways, railways, maritime ports, power grids, oil and gas pipelines, and associated infrastructure projects.

The project covers two parts.

- **Silk Road Economic Belt:** It is land-based and is expected to connect China with Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe.
- **21st Century Maritime Silk Road:** It is sea-based and is expected to connect China's southern coast to the Mediterranean, Africa, South-East Asia, and Central Asia.

Significance of BRI for China

- The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most emblematic of China's economic and industrial might, as of its ambitions for global, political and strategic influence.
- As infrastructure spending at home became less sustainable, China has shifted the emphasis to boost the global competitiveness of domestic businesses.
- The large infrastructure investments in the least developed and developing countries have enabled China to leverage its influence around the world, potentially altering the established rules of the global order and challenging western powers.
- BRI will strengthen China's presence in the Eurasian region and puts it in a commanding position over Asia's heartland.

Criticism of BRI

- Western critics have attacked the initiative as new colonialism, or Marshal Plan for the 21st century.
- BRI is also being seen as a part of China's debt trap policy, wherein China intentionally extends excessive credit to another country with the intention of extracting economic or political concessions from the debtor country.

Counter to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Blue Dot Network (BDN)

- Blue Dot Network (BDN) is a US led multi-stakeholder initiative along with Japan and Australia.
- It was launched in Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Bangkok, Thailand on 4th November 2019 in the sidelines of ASEAN Summit.
- BDN will bring together governments, the private sector and civil society to promote high-quality, trusted standards for global infrastructure development.
- BDN is based on G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment and is based on the guidelines of OECD.
- It is said to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- However unlike BRI, the BDN would not offer public funds or loans for the project.

- BDN will serve as a globally recognized seal of approval for major infrastructure projects, letting people know that projects are sustainable and not exploitative.
- India has been invited to join Blue Dot Network.

Global Gateway Plan

- Recently, the European Commission has announced a plan, called Global Gateway, to mobilize EURO 300 billion by 2027 in public and private infrastructure investment around the world.
- Although the plan doesn't mention China, it is seen as a response to China's Belt and Road strategy.

With Global Gateway, the EU, in a Team Europe approach, will offer its partners a response to the urgent needs:

- To develop sustainable and high quality digital, climate and energy and transport infrastructures.
- Strengthen health, education and research systems across the world.
- To finance the project, the EU will use its European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus.

- Under this, 40 billion euros are made available in guarantee capacity, and will offer grants of up to 18 billion euros from external assistance programs.
- The plan will need funding from international institutions and from the private sector if it is to get anywhere near its target.
- The financing will be done under fair and favorable terms in order to limit the risk of debt distress.
- The EU strategy is an offshoot of the Build Back Better World (B3W) Initiative announced by Group of Seven (G– 7 countries).

Quadrilateral Diplomatic Platform

- The U.S., Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan have agreed in principle to establish a new quadrilateral diplomatic platform focused on enhancing regional connectivity.

Background

- Afghanistan's strategic location has for a long time been touted as a competitive advantage for the country.
- Afghanistan is bordered by Pakistan to the east and south, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the northeast.

- Located at the **heart of the historic Silk Road**, Afghanistan was long the crossroads of commerce between **Asian countries connecting them to Europe**, and **enhancing religious, cultural, and commercial contacts**.
- The formation of the new quad group is important amid China's desire to extend its **Belt Road Initiative to Afghanistan**,
- By virtue of its location, **Afghanistan can provide China with a base to spread its influence across the world**.

News: Invasive tree spreading in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve

- An invasive species, **Senna spectabilis**, an exotic tree, has taken over between **800 hectares and 1,200 hectares of the buffer zones of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) in the picturesque Nilgiris hill district**.
- The Forest Department is coming up with a comprehensive strategy to tackle the invasive species, which continues to spread rapidly in the buffer zone.

Senna Spectabilis

- The **Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) is facing the threat of invasive species of Senna spectabilis** which is making incursions into the reserve from neighbouring Kerala and Bandipur.

- The trees are seen in both the core and buffer areas of MTR, with parts of Nilakottai, Kargudi, Singara and Masinagudi ranges being affected.
- Introduced as an ornamental species and for use as firewood from South and Central America, the species has become highly invasive in the Sigur plateau.
- The tree bears a bright yellow flower.
- According to the Forest Department estimates that the species has spread over 800 - 1,200 hectares of the buffer zone over the last five years.
- According to officials, policy level discussions are under way on Tamil Nadu Newsprint and Papers Limited (TNPL) plan to use wood from Senna spectabilis from the MTR for papermaking.
- They said the funds so raised would be used in eco restoration to bring back native species.
- Senna spectabilis, along with Lantana camara, is among five major invasive weeds that had taken over vast swathes of the Nilgiris, with wattle being the other major invasive species.
- Eucalyptus and pine, though exotic, do not spread as quickly as the other species and are considered easier to manage.

Mudumalai Tiger Reserve

- Mudumalai Tiger Reserve is located in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu state at the tri-junction of states; Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- It is a part of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.
- Tiger and Asian Elephant are the important flagship species conserved in the reserve.
- Recently, rejuvenation camp for captive elephants was inaugurated in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve.
- Recently, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve was accredited with Conservation Assured | Tiger Standards (CA|TS) for its excellence in Tiger conservation.