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Australia to Join Malabar Exercise

Why in News

Recently, **Australia has agreed to join the Malabar Exercise** on India's request. The exercise is scheduled to be held in November 2020.

Malabar Exercise

- It is an **annual trilateral naval exercise** between the navies of **India, Japan, and the USA** which is held **alternately in the Indian and Pacific Oceans**.
- It began as a **bilateral naval exercise** between **India and the USA in 1992** and was expanded into a trilateral format with the **inclusion of Japan in 2015**.
- The Exercise is **aimed to support free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific** and remain committed to a **rules based international order**.
- It is **also aimed at interoperability** with an emphasis on humanitarian assistance, surface war manoeuvres, anti-submarines warfare, counter-terror operations, gunnery training and aerial surveillance.

Key Points

- **2020 Malabar Exercise:**
 - The 2020 Exercise is expected to be held in the **Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea**. In 2019, the exercise was conducted off the coast of Japan.
 - Due to **Covid-19 pandemic** the exercise had been planned in a **'non-contact - at sea' format**.
 - **Its objective** is to enhance safety and security in the maritime domain.

- **Australia's Inclusion:**

- The issue of Australia's inclusion in Malabar had again come up for discussion at the **Quad** foreign ministers meet in Tokyo held in October 2020. Thereafter, India invited Australia to join the Exercise.

Quad is the informal strategic dialogue between India, the USA, Japan and Australia with a shared objective to ensure and support a **free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region.**

- The move will bolster the ability of India, Australia, Japan and the United States to work together to **uphold peace and stability across the Indo-Pacific region.**
- It is also expected to further lay the foundations for the eventual **formalisation of the Quad grouping.**

- **Background:**

- Despite regular requests from Australia, India resisted issuing the invitation due to its concerns that the move would give the appearance of a **'quadrilateral military alliance'** aimed at China.
 - In 2017, Australia had requested for observer status in the Malabar Exercise.
 - China has repeatedly expressed strong opposition to any expansion of the Malabar Exercise, which it sees as a multilateral naval construct designed to "counter and contain" it.
- However, the recent **India-China tensions** over the situation at the **Line of Actual Control** (LAC) may have brought more flexibility to India's decision making process.
- **Japan and the U.S.A also have been pressing India** for Australia's inclusion in Malabar Exercise.

- **Other Cooperation Between Quad Members:**

- India and Japan had signed a **military logistics agreement** in September, 2020.
- India has signed maritime information sharing agreements for **Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)** with Australia and Japan and a similar agreement is under discussion with the U.S.A.

MDA is defined by the **International Maritime Organization** as the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment of a country.

- India and U.S.A. are also stepping up efforts to conclude the **Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA)** ahead of the **Indo-US 2+2 ministerial meeting** on 26-27 October, 2020.
 - BECA, a key military pact, will allow India to use U.S.A.'s geospatial intelligence and enhance accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones.
 - BECA is one of the **four foundational military communication agreements** between the two countries. The other three being **GSOMIA, LEMOA, CISMOA**.
 - **GSOMIA:** General Security Of Military Information Agreement
 - **LEMOA:** Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement
 - **CISMOA:** Communications and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement
 - Defence and Foreign ministers of the two countries will Participate at the 2+2 ministerial meeting.

Way Forward

- As India seeks to increase cooperation with other countries in the maritime security domain, high-end military exercises like Malabar are key to enhancing maritime capabilities, building interoperability with its close partners, and demonstrating its collective resolve to support an open and prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- The fast-tracking of work on BECA and the decision of the four Quad countries to participate in the Malabar Exercise are perceived to be a strategic signal to an aggressive China.

Source: TH

Fertiliser Subsidy

Why in News

The Centre is **working on a plan to restrict the number of fertiliser bags** that individual farmers can buy during any cropping season.

Key Points

- **Fertiliser Subsidy:**

- Farmers **buy fertilisers at Maximum Retail Prices (MRP) below their normal supply-and-demand-based market rates** or what it costs to produce/import them.

For example, the MRP of neem-coated urea is fixed by the government at Rs. 5,922.22 per tonne, whereas its average cost-plus price payable to domestic manufacturers and importers comes to around Rs. 17,000 and Rs. 23,000 per tonne, respectively.

- The **difference**, which varies according to plant-wise production cost and import price, is **footed by the Centre as subsidy**, which goes to the companies.

- The **MRPs of non-urea fertilisers are decontrolled or fixed by the companies**. However, the **Centre pays a flat per-tonne subsidy on these nutrients** to ensure reasonable prices.

The per-tonne subsidy ranges from Rs. 10,231 to Rs. 24,000 for different types of fertilisers.

- **Decontrolled fertilisers retail way above urea**, as they **attract lower subsidy**.

In **April 2020**, the **Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA)** **cut the subsidy for non-urea fertilisers**, which was about 3% lower than the previous year.

- **Subsidy Mechanism:**

- From **March 2018**, a new **direct benefit transfer (DBT) system was introduced**, wherein subsidy payment to the companies would **happen only after actual sales to farmers by retailers**.
- Each retailer has a **point-of-sale (PoS) machine** linked to the Department of Fertilisers' **e-Urvarak DBT portal**. Anybody buying subsidised fertilisers is required to furnish their **Aadhaar** or **Kisan Credit Card (KCC)** number.
- **Only upon the sale getting registered on the e-Urvarak platform can a company claim subsidy**, with these being processed on a weekly basis and payments remitted electronically to its bank account.

- **Loophole:**
 - Currently, the Centre follows a **“no denial” policy where anybody, non-farmers included, can purchase any quantity of fertilisers** through the PoS machines.
 - It **allows for bulk buying by unintended beneficiaries**, who are not genuine or deserving farmers.
 - There is a **limit of 100 bags that an individual can purchase at one time but it does not stop anyone from buying any number of times.**
- **Reason Behind the Restriction Plan:**
 - The main motive is **to curb diversion**, which is natural **with any under-priced product.**
 - For example, urea whose basic MRP (excluding taxes and neem-coating cost) has been raised by hardly 11% since April 2010.
 - Being super-subsidised, urea is always **prone to diversion for non-agricultural use.**
 - For example, it is used as a binder by plywood/particle board makers, cheap protein source by animal feed manufacturers or adulterant by milk vendors, apart from being smuggled to Nepal and Bangladesh.
- **Proposed Measures:**
 - Discussions are going on to **cap the total number of subsidised fertiliser bags that any person can buy during an entire Kharif or Rabi cropping season.**
 - It is expected that it would **end even retail-level diversion** and purchases by large buyers masquerading as farmers.
 - A **reasonable cap** for a total of 100 bags only once **would easily cover the seasonal requirement** of a 20-acre farmer. Those **wanting more can well afford to pay the unsubsidised rates** for the extra bags.
- **Other Associated Costs to the Farmers:**
 - Apart from fertilisers, there are **other things for which farmers need to pay** like **Goods and Service Tax (GST)** and other taxes on inputs.
 - It ranges from **12%** on tractors, agricultural implements, pumps and drip/sprinkler irrigation systems to **18%** on crop protection chemicals.
 - Fertiliser itself is taxed at **5%**.
 - **Excise and value-added tax** on diesel.
 - And since there’s **no GST on farm produce, farmers cannot claim any input tax credit on their sales**, unlike other businessmen.

Way Forward

- The time has come to seriously consider paying farmers a flat per-acre cash subsidy that they can use to purchase any fertiliser. The amount could vary, depending on the number of crops grown and whether the land is irrigated or not.

- This is, perhaps, the only sustainable solution to prevent diversion and also encourage the judicious application of fertilisers, with the right nutrient (macro and micro) combination based on proper soil testing and crop-specific requirements.

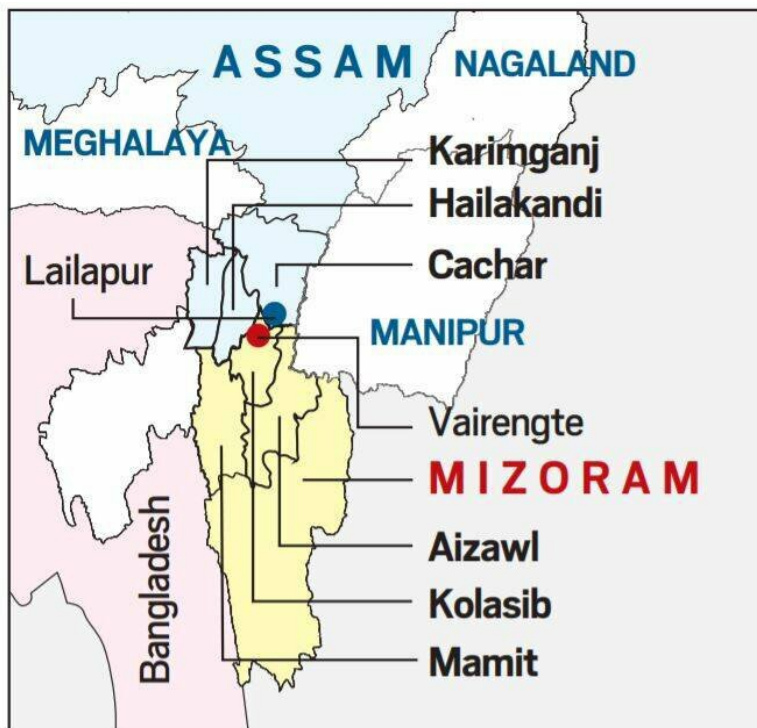
Source: IE

Assam-Mizoram Border Dispute

Why in News

Recently, **Assam-Mizoram border** witnessed firing over a territory dispute, which spotlights the **long-standing inter-state boundary issues in the Northeast**, particularly between Assam and the states which were carved out of it.

Mizoram borders Assam's Barak Valley and the boundary between present-day Assam and Mizoram is **165 km** long. **Both states border Bangladesh.**



Key Points

- **Ongoing Tussle:**

- Residents of Lailapur village in **Assam's Cachar district** clashed with residents of localities near Vairengte in **Mizoram's Kolasib district**.
- Earlier in October 2020, a similar clash took place on the border of **Karimganj (Assam)** and **Mamit (Mizoram)** districts.
- Mizoram civil society groups blame **"illegal Bangladeshis"** (alleged migrants from Bangladesh) on the Assam side.

- **Background:**

- The boundary issue between present-day Assam and Mizoram dates back to the **colonial era when inner lines were demarcated according to the administrative needs of British Raj**.
- The issue could not be settled once and for all when the **state was created in independent India**. The result is **both states continue to have a differing perception** of the border.
 - Mizoram was granted statehood in **1987** by the **State of Mizoram Act, 1986**.
 - Assam became a **constituent state of India in 1950** and **lost much of its territory to new states that emerged** from within its borders between the early 1960s and the early 1970s.
- The Assam-Mizoram dispute **stems from a notification of 1875** that **differentiated Lushai Hills from the plains of Cachar**, and another of **1933 that demarcates a boundary between Lushai Hills and Manipur**.
 - During colonial times, **Mizoram was known as Lushai Hills**, a district of Assam.
- **Mizoram** believes the **boundary should be demarcated on the basis of the 1875** notification, which is derived from the **Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) Act, 1873**.
 - Mizo leaders have argued in the past against **the demarcation notified in 1933** because Mizo society **was not consulted**.
- **The Assam government follows the 1933 demarcation**, and that is the point of conflict.
- According to an agreement between the governments of Assam and Mizoram, the **status quo should be maintained in no man's land** in the border area.
- In the Northeast's complex boundary equations, **clashes between Assam and Mizoram residents are less frequent than they are between other neighbouring states of Assam**, like with Nagaland.

- **Other Boundary Issues in Northeast:**

- During British rule, **Assam included present-day Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya besides Mizoram**, which became separate states one by one.
- Currently, Assam has **boundary problems with each of them.**
- **Assam-Nagaland:**
 - **Nagaland** shares a **500-km boundary** with Assam.
 - It achieved **statehood in December 1963** and was **formed out of the Naga Hills district of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh** (then North-East Frontier Agency).
 - **Violent clashes and armed conflicts**, marked by killings, have occurred on the Assam-Nagaland border since 1965.
 - The boundary dispute is in the **Supreme Court**.
- **Assam-Arunachal Pradesh:**
 - Both states have a **boundary of over 800 km.**
 - **Arunachal Pradesh** was granted statehood by the **State of Arunachal Pradesh Act, 1986** in **1987**.
 - **Clashes were first reported in 1992** and since then, there have been several accusations of illegal encroachment from both sides, and intermittent clashes.
 - This boundary issue is also **being heard by the Supreme Court**.
- **Assam-Meghalaya:**
 - The **884-km boundary** between the two states also witnesses flare-ups.
 - **Meghalaya** came into existence as an autonomous state within the state of Assam in April 1970 comprising the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills districts. In **1972, it got statehood**.
 - As per Meghalaya government statements, today there are **12 areas of dispute between the two states**.

Source: IE

Rationalisation of Autonomous Institutions

Why in News

The **Ministry of Finance** has recommended that the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** “**disengage**” from **five autonomous institutions** working under it and **merge two** others, thus **reducing the 16 autonomous organisations** under the ministry **to 9**.

Key Points

- **Background:**

The recommendations are a part of the report that has been **prepared in accordance with the guidelines prescribed under rule 229 of General Finance rules 2017.**

- Rule 229 pertains to ‘General Principles for setting up of Autonomous Organisations’.
- The purpose of the report is to make specific and actionable recommendations for rationalisation of **autonomous bodies** with a view to furthering the aim of ‘**minimum government, maximum governance,**’ ensuring **efficient use of public funds.**

- **Recommendations for MoEFCC:**

- **Disengagement** from the **Wildlife Institute of India** (WII-Dehradun), **Indian Institute of Forest Management** (IIFM-Bhopal), **Indian Plywood Industries Research & Training Institute** (Bengaluru), **CPR Environmental Education Centre** (Chennai) and **Centre for Environment Education** (Ahmedabad).
 - ‘Disengagement’ will involve **two aspects - phasing out government support** to the institution in a time-bound manner, **disassociating from the management** of the institutions and allowing the relevant industry/stakeholders to run them.
 - **Disengagement** by the government **with a three-year timeline** and a **gradual budget reduction of 25% each year** is recommended.
 - Both **WII** and **IIFM** can be **converted to deemed universities.**
- The **Society of Integrated Coastal Management** (New Delhi) should be merged with the **National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management** (Tamil Nadu), as both perform similar roles of promoting coastal management. This will **avoid duplication** of activities and **attain economies of scale.**
- **Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History**(Tamil Nadu), which receives Rs. 14 crore annually from MoEFCC, should be merged with the ministry.
- **Statutory bodies** such as **Central Pollution Control Board, Central Zoo Authority (CZA), National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), National Biodiversity Authority** should continue to function under and with the financial support of MoEFCC.

These bodies should be encouraged to become ‘self-financed’.

- **Appreciation:**

- This is the **first time ever that such an audit has been done** of institutions which took around four years to get completed.
- Making WII and other institutions into deemed universities will **give more freedom to the institutions** to initiate more courses and have enhanced faculties.

- **Criticism:**

- The disengagement will make these institutions **worry for financial issues rather than research**, which should be their prime focus.

The environment is a public issue and there must be good public institutions to safeguard it.

- The government's disengagement from these institutions is seen as **'the first step towards sending them into private hands'**.

If the government feels that funds are not being utilised properly or the institutions are not performing well, their officials should be held accountable rather than taking the route of disengagement as this will have an impact on those students who dream of studying these specialised subjects but cannot afford the high fees charged by private universities.

- **Other Related Steps:**

- Recently, the **Ministry of Textiles** has **abolished the All India Handloom Board and the All India Handicrafts Board**.
- In **2018**, the Union Cabinet had approved the proposal for **closure of Autonomous Bodies**, namely, **Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi (RAN)** and **Jansankhya Sthirata Kosh (JSK)** and the functions were proposed to be vested in Department of Health & Family Welfare (DoHFW).

Autonomous Bodies

- These are **set up** whenever it is felt that certain functions need to be discharged outside the governmental set up with some amount of independence and flexibility without day-to-day interference of the Governmental machinery.
- These are set up **by the Ministries/Departments concerned with the subject matter** and are funded through grants-in-aid, either fully or partially, depending on the extent which such institutes generate internal resources of their own.
 - These **grants are regulated by the Ministry of Finance** through their instructions as well as the instructions relating to powers for creation of posts and etc.
 - The amount disbursed to autonomous/grantee bodies was Rs. 799.55 billion, which, **in 2019-20, was increased** to Rs. 943.84 billion.
- They are mostly registered as societies under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 and in certain cases they have been set up as statutory institutions under the provisions contained in various Acts.
- These are a **major stakeholder in the government's functioning** as they are engaged in diverse activities, ranging from formulating frameworks for policies, conducting research, and preserving the cultural heritage, etc.

Institutes imparting technical, medical and higher education fall in this category.

Way Forward

There is a need to review the governance of ABs, and devise uniform procedures. Many of ABs act as interfaces between the government and the public. Thus, each ministry should undertake a comprehensive review of ABs under their jurisdiction. ABs that have outlived the cause for which they were established may need to be closed or merged with a similar organisation or their memorandum altered as per the new charter.

Source: IE

Ayushman Sahakar Scheme

Why in News

The **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare** has launched **Ayushman Sahakar**, a scheme to **assist cooperatives in creation of healthcare infrastructure** in the country.

Key Points

- **Formulated By: National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC).**
 - NCDC was **set up under an Act of Parliament in 1963** for promotion and development of cooperatives.
 - It functions under the **Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.**
 - Recent initiatives include **Sahakar Cooptube NCDC Channel** (Youth-focussed), **Sahakar Mitra** (Internship Programme), etc.
- **Features:**
 - **NCDC would extend term loans to prospective cooperatives to the tune of Rs.10,000 crore** in the coming years.
 - Any Cooperative Society with suitable provision in its byelaws to undertake healthcare related activities would be able to access the NCDC fund.
 - The **scheme covers** establishment, modernization, expansion, repairs, renovation of **hospital and healthcare and education infrastructure.**
 - NCDC **assistance will flow either through the State Governments/ UT Administrations or directly** to the eligible cooperatives.
 - The scheme also provides **working capital and margin money** to meet operational requirements.
 - Further, the scheme provides **interest subvention of 1% to women majority cooperatives.**

- **Significance:**

- It has a **comprehensive approach**-hospitals, healthcare, medical education, nursing education, paramedical education, health insurance and holistic health systems such as **AYUSH**.
 - The **Covid-19 pandemic** has brought into focus the **requirement of creation of more facilities**.
 - There are about 52 hospitals across the country run by cooperatives. They have cumulative bed strength of more than 5,000. The scheme would give **a boost to provision of healthcare services by cooperatives**.
- The scheme **aligns itself with the focus of the National Health Policy, 2017**, covering the health systems in all their dimensions- investments in health, organization of healthcare services, access to technologies, development of human resources, encouragement of medical pluralism, affordable health care to farmers etc.
- It is **in line with the National Digital Health Mission** and would bring transformation in rural areas.

Cooperatives have a strong presence in rural areas, thus, cooperatives utilizing the scheme would revolutionize the way healthcare delivery takes place in rural areas.

Cooperatives

- **Definition:**

According to the **International Labour Organisation (ILO)**, a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

- **Related Provisions of Indian Constitution:**

- The **Constitution (97th Amendment) Act, 2011** added a new **Part IXB** right after Part IXA (Municipals) regarding the cooperatives working in India.
- The word “cooperatives” was added after “unions and associations” in **Article 19(1)(c) under Part III of the Constitution**. This enables all the citizens to form cooperatives by giving it the status of fundamental right of citizens.
- A new **Article 43B** was added in the **Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV)** regarding the “promotion of cooperative societies”.

Source: PIB

Heeng Cultivation Project in India

Why in News

Scientists at **CSIR-Institute of Himalayan Bioresource Technology (IHBT), Palampur** are on a **mission to grow heeng** (asafoetida) in the **Indian Himalayas**.

IHBT is the only laboratory of the **Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)** in Himachal Pradesh.

Key Points

- **Heeng:**
 - It is a **herbaceous plant** of the umbelliferae family. It is a **perennial plant** whose **oleo gum resin** is extracted from its **thick roots and rhizome**. The plant stores most of its nutrients inside its deep fleshy roots.
 - It is **endemic to Iran and Afghanistan**, which are also the **main global suppliers of it**. It is very popular in India and is used in cooking.
 - **Climatic Condition:** It thrives in dry and **cold desert conditions**. The plant can withstand a maximum temperature between 35 and 40 degree, whereas during winters, it can survive in temperatures up to minus 4 degree.
 - Regions with sandy **soil, very little moisture** and **annual rainfall of not more than 200mm** are considered conducive for heeng cultivation.
 - During extreme weather, the plant can get dormant.
 - **Properties:** It has **medicinal properties**, including relief for digestive, spasmodic and stomach disorders, asthma and bronchitis.

The herb is used to help with painful or excessive bleeding during menstruation and premature labour.
- **India's Heeng Cultivation Project:**
 - Heeng is **not cultivated in India**. **India imports** about 1,200 tonnes of raw heeng worth Rs. 600 crore **from Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan**.
 - In 2017, IHBT approached the **National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources (NBPGR)** with an **experimental project idea** to cultivate heeng in the Indian Himalayas.
 - In June 2020, the **IHBT inked a Memorandum of Understanding with the agriculture ministry of Himachal Pradesh** to jointly cultivate the heeng.

The agriculture ministry has identified **four locations in the Lahul-Spiti valley** and has distributed heeng seeds to seven farmers in the region.
 - However, the **challenge** for the scientists is that heeng **seeds remain under a prolonged dormant phase** and the rate of **seed germination is just 1%**.

Source: IE

Frontier Technologies Cloud Innovation Center

Why in News

Recently, the **NITI Aayog** and **Amazon Web Services (AWS)** have announced the establishment of a **Frontier Technologies Cloud Innovation Center (CIC)**, the first of its kind in India.

- **AWS is a subsidiary of Amazon**, multinational tech and online-shopping giant.
- It provides on-demand **cloud computing platforms** and **Application Programming Interfaces (API)** to individuals, companies, and governments, on a metered pay-as-you-go basis.

Key Points

- CIC is part of the **AWS CIC Global Program**, which provides an **opportunity for government agencies, nonprofits and educational institutions, to come together** on pressing challenges, apply design thinking, test new ideas, and access the technical expertise of AWS.
- **Frontier Technologies CIC** will **identify and prioritise projects** as well as **collaborate with local leaders**, including subject matter experts at the state and district levels, to solve critical challenges.
Local enterprises, start-ups, researchers, and universities in India can experiment and build prototypes on AWS Cloud.
- It is aligned to the visions of **Aatmanirbhar Bharat Mission** and the **Atal Innovation Mission**.
- **Aims of Frontier Technologies CIC:**
 - To **address societal challenges** through digital innovation.
 - To **enable budding innovators and start-ups** and help in piloting state-of-the-art, cloud-centric digital innovations by leveraging emerging technologies such as **artificial intelligence (AI)**, **Internet of Things (IoT)**, **robotics**, etc.
 - To **identify and deploy leading-edge technologies to drive continuous innovation** in delivering citizen services.

Source: PIB
