U.S.’s UNESCO re-entry

Why in news?

The United States said that it was re-joining the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

What is UNESCO?

- UNESCO is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- It contributes to peace and security by promoting international cooperation in education, sciences, culture, communication and information.
- UNESCO promotes knowledge sharing and the free flow of ideas to accelerate mutual understanding and a more perfect knowledge of each other's lives.
- UNESCO's programmes contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in the 2030 Agenda, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

Why did the US leave the UNESCO?

- **Palestine -** UNESCO, which designates world heritage spots, accorded recognition in 2011 to Palestine as its 195th member.
- UNESCO is the first U.N. agency to do so.
- This triggered controversies over the historical status of the region’s religious symbols.
- And this is also a continuing issue of contention between the already divided Palestinian Authority and Israel.
- The 2012 elevation to a non-member observer status at the UN came as a boost for Palestinians demanding separate statehood.
- **US -** The US had long had stronger ties with Israel and supported its settlements in Palestine.
- Also, U.S. laws bar funding to any UN agency that recognises the Palestinian state.
- Accordingly, the US had stopped funding the UNESCO since its 2011 decision, but the partnership with UNESCO continued.
- It also opposed to the admission of Palestine to world bodies until the question of its UN membership was resolved.
- **Holy sites -** Meanwhile, Arab nations at the UNESCO have sought to fast-track the designation of holy sites as endangered heritage sites.
- They alleged Israel of making attacks on religious sites, affecting their authenticity and integrity.
- **Hebron -** Notably, UNESCO declared a contested shrine in Hebron city as an endangered Palestinian heritage site.
- While most of Hebron is under Palestine administration, the core of the shrine is surrounded by Israeli military guards.

- Also, a resolution last year condemned Israel for hampering access for the Palestinians to Jerusalem's holy places.

Did the US leave other forums too?

- **WHO –** During the pandemic, in 2020, President Trump announced the U.S.'s withdrawal from funding the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement.
- This followed from the Trumpist world view that the U.S. was being short-changed by major polluters such as China and India.
- In the case of WHO, the case was over its inadequate response time to the gravity of the pandemic originating in China.
- Following political change, President Joseph Biden has now brought the U.S. back into the fold of funding WHO as well as re-joining the climate treaty.

Why did the US return to the UNESCO?

- **China factor –** The reason for the U.S'.s return is ostensibly China.
- The U.S.'s absence had helped China gain more influence in setting the rules around artificial intelligence and the ensuing technological shifts.
- This is the first time that China has been proffered as a reason for the U.S.'s re-entry into, rather than its exit of, a multi-lateral treaty.
- **Israel –** Unlike the America First policies that propelled the Trump administration's exits, the U.S.'s UNESCO re-entry has little to do with why it exited it in the first place.
- It is not unreasonable to infer that the re-entry is a sign of America's growing paranoia about China.
- It is also appropriate to recall that the Reagan administration withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 for, among other things, advancing Soviet interests.

What is the role of AI in the U.S.'s move?

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI) –** Developments in AI are slightly different from historical technological developments.
- Here, product patents and their enforcement have helped countries such as the U.S. maintain their edge.
- However, with AI, China, along with a rising repertoire of patents and research publications, has the advantages of a much larger population and a more powerful surveillance state.
- This feeds into a cycle of generating greater troves of data that in turn feed and improve machine learning systems that make its AI far more formidable.
- Unlike other technologies, no country can have a sustained, natural edge in AI indefinitely.

What is the way forward?

- America might bring in at least $600 million in outstanding dues to the UNESCO.
- However, it is high time and countries such as India would do well to point this out.
- Organisations should get stricter on countries exiting and entering on frivolous grounds, alongside framing policies and research that accommodate the tussles of a

hyper-connected world.

References

1. The Hindu │On the U.S.'s UNESCO re-entry
2. CBS │U.S. to re-join UNESCO