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GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT

SYLLABUS:

GS 3 > Science and Technology >> Awareness on emerging technologies >>> SDGs

REFERENCE NEWS:

In the recently concluded 'Summit of the Future' organised by the United Nations, member countries adopted the 'Global Digital Compact' (GDC).

GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT:

- The Global Digital Compact (GDC) is a key initiative spearheaded by the United Nations to establish a shared understanding and set of principles for governing digital technologies in a manner that **is inclusive, open, and sustainable**.
- The UN offers an **inclusive platform** to articulate challenges, reconcile diverse national interests and promote international cooperation mechanisms.
- Building on the norms of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN 2030 Agenda among others, GDC proposes global cooperation in the governance of data and digital technologies.
- To meet the Compact's goals, UN members have committed to establish two panels: an Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and a panel for Global Dialogue on AI Governance.

AIM OF GDC:

- **Bridging the Digital Divide:** The GDC prioritizes the reduction of inequalities in access to digital technologies, ensuring that marginalized communities and developing nations benefit from digital advancements. It aims to create equitable access to digital infrastructure and proposes **Digital Public Goods** that will include open-source software, open data and open AI models plus adherence to privacy and best practices. Digital Public goods have the ability to drive social change as elements of a digital public infrastructure that deliver services.
- **Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** By promoting digital inclusion and cooperation, the GDC intends to leverage digital technologies to further progress on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in the fields of education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation.
- **Strengthening International Governance of Emerging Technologies:** The GDC seeks to establish governance frameworks for emerging technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), to ensure that their development aligns with human rights, ethical standards, and sustainable development goals as digital technologies continue to shape our societal and geopolitical landscape.

- **Promoting Digital Trust and Safety:** A significant focus is on enhancing digital trust and safety by establishing common standards to combat misinformation, harmful content, and protect users' rights such as privacy and freedom of expression.
- **Fostering Collaboration:** The GDC will promote **multistakeholder collaboration**, bringing together governments, civil society, private sector, and international organizations to address digital governance challenges and formulate global standards for an inclusive and secure environment. GDC is not a binding law but a **diplomatic instrument** with a set of shared goals for governments, institutions, firms and other stake holders. Once there is a greater adherence, the GDC terms may become **soft laws** in each country.

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE GDC

- **Geopolitical Contestations:** Global digital governance is marked by a geopolitical divide, particularly between the **United States** and **China**, each advocating different AI governance frameworks. The U.S. promotes a **harmonized AI governance** model focused on transparency and data protection, while China emphasizes **equitable benefits** and **non-discriminatory trade**. This divergence could complicate the formation of a cohesive global framework.
- **Digital Sovereignty Concerns:** Many countries, including India, have expressed concerns over **digital sovereignty**, fearing that global digital governance frameworks may limit their control over their own digital ecosystems. Balancing global standards with national interests will be a significant challenge.
 - The extensive European experience with public private partnerships vis-à-vis digital projects suggests openness within such partnerships is restricted by contractual requirements such as non-disclosure, confidentiality and intellectual property protection.
 - GDC recognises interoperable data governance to foster innovation and economic growth, which experts note may amplify risks in absence of effective personal data protection and privacy laws.
- **Digital Divide:** A stark contrast exists between developed and developing nations in terms of digital infrastructure, AI innovation, and access to the internet. The GDC must address this **digital divide** to ensure that developing countries can participate equitably in the global digital economy.
- **Implementation and Accountability:** While the GDC sets ambitious goals, ensuring **accountability** and **compliance** with the agreed-upon principles might be difficult, particularly when dealing with large multinational tech companies. Establishing robust mechanisms for implementation and monitoring progress will be crucial.
 - **GDC** adds little to international governance and moots for self-regulation by digital tech companies to keep users safe. This is not an optimum solution as self-regulation has already proved ineffective.

INDIA'S ROLE IN THE GDC:

India's Role in the Global Digital Compact

India's strategic engagement with the GDC is vital, given its increasing global prominence in digital technologies and its long-standing advocacy for the Global South.

- **Advocacy for the Global South:** India has consistently advocated for equitable access to digital technologies and AI resources for developing nations. India aims to ensure that the interests of the Global South are adequately represented in the discussions on AI governance and other emerging technologies.

- Drawing on its experiences in global climate negotiations, India seeks to push for principles such as equity, accessibility, and differentiated responsibilities in the governance of digital technologies.
- **Building Digital Infrastructure and Capacity:** India has been a leader in building Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) and has committed to sharing its expertise with other developing nations. Through initiatives like the **Global DPI Repository** launched during India's G20 presidency, India aims to accelerate the development of digital infrastructures in the Global South.
- **Influence in Global Governance:** India's active participation in international fora such as the G20 and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) positions it as a crucial player in shaping digital governance norms. India is expected to continue championing inclusive and human-centric approaches to AI governance at the UN and GDC.
- **Fair and inclusive AI governance framework:** India's role in such a framework is crucial in the context of bipolar dynamics between US and China.

WAY FORWARD:

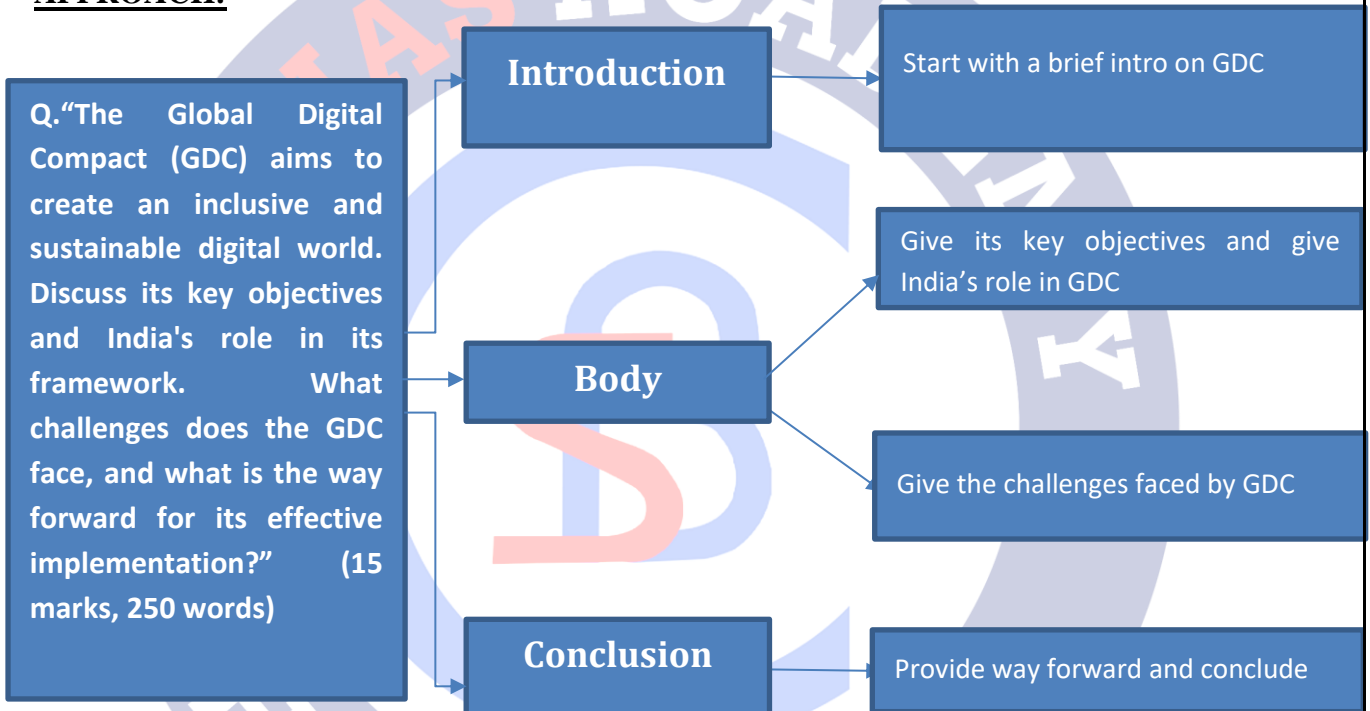
- **Promote a Multistakeholder Approach:** Digital governance cannot be led by governments alone, as the private sector (particularly tech companies) plays a critical role in developing and managing digital infrastructure. Moreover, civil society is crucial in safeguarding human rights and ensuring inclusivity. Establish formal consultation mechanisms for stakeholders, enabling meaningful dialogue on digital governance, ensuring that all views are represented during decision-making, and giving the process more legitimacy.
- **Address Geopolitical Contestation:** It should emphasize neutrality and collaborative efforts rather than favouring one geopolitical bloc over another. Geopolitical competition, particularly between the U.S. and China on digital governance and AI, poses a major challenge to forming global agreements. A neutral and balanced approach will help gain the acceptance of a wider range of countries.
- **Incorporate Flexibility for Digital Sovereignty:** Many countries are concerned about losing control over their digital policies. To gain their buy-in, the GDC must offer flexibility in implementation, allowing countries to adapt global norms to local contexts while maintaining international collaboration. Create a **tiered framework** where countries can opt into different levels of commitment based on their national priorities, while still aligning with the overall principles of the compact, similar to the Paris Agreement model for climate action.
- **Focus on Bridging the Digital Divide:** Establish a **Global Digital Development Fund**, supported by public and private sectors, to invest in infrastructure development, connectivity, and capacity-building initiatives in the Global South.
- **Strengthen Accountability and Monitoring Mechanisms:** Set up an independent body under the UN to oversee and report on the progress of member states and companies in meeting GDC commitments. This body should issue periodic reports, highlighting successes and areas needing improvement.
- **Develop Tailored Strategies for Emerging Technologies:** Establish global standards for the ethical use of emerging technologies, including AI accountability frameworks, transparency in algorithms, and international cooperation on data sharing and security.
- **Promote Digital Trust and Safety:** Create global guidelines for digital safety, backed by legal frameworks and industry commitments. Encourage collaboration between governments, tech companies, and civil society to address these issues comprehensively

- **Focus on Inclusivity and Representation:** Establish advisory councils or working groups within the GDC that are composed of representatives from the Global South, marginalized communities, and SMEs. Encourage regular consultations to ensure their perspectives are integrated into the compact.
- **Ensure Alignment with Global Development Agendas:** Incorporate specific SDG-related metrics into the GDC’s objectives, particularly focusing on education, healthcare, and poverty reduction through digital transformation efforts.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. “The Global Digital Compact (GDC) aims to create an inclusive and sustainable digital world. Discuss its key objectives and India's role in its framework. What challenges does the GDC face, and what is the way forward for its effective implementation?” (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

The **Global Digital Compact (GDC)** is a key initiative launched by the **United Nations** to establish shared principles for governing digital technologies, aiming for an inclusive, sustainable, and secure digital environment. The GDC, discussed at the **Summit of the Future (2024)**, proposes global cooperation in areas such as **digital trust, bridging the digital divide, and AI governance.**

KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT (GDC):

1. **Bridging the Digital Divide:** The GDC prioritizes reducing global disparities in **digital infrastructure** and **internet access**, particularly focusing on **marginalized communities** and **developing nations**. It advocates for **Digital Public Goods**, including **open-source software, open data, and open AI models** to drive social change and enhance digital inclusion
2. **Advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Digital inclusion is seen as a means to **accelerate progress** on the SDGs, especially in **education, healthcare, and**

- poverty reduction.** The GDC aims to harness digital technologies to tackle global development challenges
3. **Strengthening Governance of Emerging Technologies:** The GDC seeks to develop global governance frameworks for emerging technologies like **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**, ensuring that their development is aligned with **ethical standards, human rights, and sustainability goals**
 4. **Promoting Digital Trust and Safety:** A core focus of the GDC is to establish common standards for **digital trust**, countering **misinformation** and protecting user rights like **privacy and freedom of expression**
 5. **Fostering Multistakeholder Collaboration:** The GDC encourages cooperation between **governments, private companies, civil society**, and international organizations to address challenges in digital governance. It emphasizes the need for inclusive global standards that all stakeholders can agree upon

INDIA'S ROLE IN THE GLOBAL DIGITAL COMPACT:

1. **Advocating for the Global South:** India has consistently championed equitable access to digital technologies for the **Global South**. Drawing on its experience in **global climate negotiations**, India pushes for principles such as **equity, accessibility, and differentiated responsibilities** in digital governance
2. **Leadership in Digital Public Infrastructure:** India is a leader in building **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** and has committed to sharing its expertise with other developing nations. Through initiatives like the **Global DPI Repository**, India promotes the development of **digital infrastructures** across the Global South
3. **Influence in Global Digital Governance:** India actively participates in international fora such as the **G20** and **Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI)**. It advocates for **inclusive, human-centric AI governance**, ensuring that the interests of developing nations are well-represented in the global dialogue on digital technologies

CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE GDC:

1. **Geopolitical Contestations: Geopolitical divides**—particularly between the United States and China—present a major challenge to forming a cohesive global framework. Both countries promote differing approaches to AI governance, with the U.S. focusing on **transparency and data protection**, while China emphasizes **equitable benefits and non-discriminatory trade**
2. **Digital Sovereignty Concerns:** Several countries, including India, have raised concerns about **digital sovereignty**, fearing that global digital governance frameworks may infringe upon their ability to control their own digital ecosystems. Balancing **global standards with national interests** is a critical challenge
3. **Digital Divide:** The vast differences in **digital infrastructure** and **AI innovation** between developed and developing nations further complicate the GDC's efforts to ensure equitable access. Developing countries must be empowered to participate fully in the global digital economy
4. **Implementation and Accountability:** The GDC's ambitious goals require robust mechanisms for **monitoring compliance** and **ensuring accountability**. Large multinational tech companies may resist oversight, and self-regulation has already proven ineffective in addressing challenges like **misinformation** and **data privacy**

WAY FORWARD FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GDC:

1. **Promote a Multistakeholder Approach:** Digital governance should involve all stakeholders—**governments, private sector, civil society, and academia**. Establishing **formal consultation mechanisms** for stakeholders will enable more **meaningful dialogue** on digital governance and ensure that all views are considered in decision-making
2. **Address Geopolitical Divides:** The GDC should adopt a **neutral stance**, promoting **collaborative efforts** rather than favoring one geopolitical bloc over another. By acting as a platform for **bilateral and multilateral discussions**, the GDC can help find common ground on contentious issues like **data governance** and **AI regulation**
3. **Incorporate Flexibility for Digital Sovereignty:** The GDC must allow countries to maintain **autonomy** over their digital ecosystems while aligning with global norms. A **tiered framework**, similar to the **Paris Agreement**, could allow countries to opt into different levels of commitment based on their national priorities
4. **Focus on Bridging the Digital Divide:** A **Global Digital Development Fund** should be established to invest in digital infrastructure, connectivity, and capacity-building initiatives in developing countries, ensuring equitable access to digital technologies
5. **Strengthen Accountability and Monitoring:** An **independent body under the UN** should be created to oversee and report on the progress of member states and companies in meeting GDC commitments. **Periodic reports** would highlight successes and areas needing improvement
6. **Promote Digital Trust and Safety:** The GDC should establish **global guidelines** for digital safety, backed by **legal frameworks** and **industry commitments**. Collaboration between **governments, tech companies, and civil society** is essential to address issues such as **cybersecurity, misinformation, and privacy protection**.

The **Global Digital Compact** represents a critical initiative for shaping the future of global digital governance. By promoting inclusive, equitable, and secure digital spaces, the GDC seeks to address the complex challenges posed by emerging technologies. For India, the GDC presents an opportunity to continue its leadership in digital infrastructure while advocating for the **Global South**. To ensure success, the GDC must address **geopolitical tensions**, respect **digital sovereignty**, and prioritize the **digital inclusion** of developing nations.