

The Hindu

Front Page

BRICS supports dialogue between Russia, Ukraine (Page no. 1) (GS Paper 2, International Relations)

Blaming “selfish actions” by western countries for the economic crisis arising due to sanctions, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for the strengthening of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping.

With other countries pursuing an “independent policy” at a virtual summit of BRICS leaders hosted by China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other leaders discussed the situation in Ukraine and Afghanistan.

While PM Modi focussed on the importance of BRICS in the post-pandemic global economic recovery, Chinese President Xi Jinping too called on members to reject “Cold war mentality” and oppose what he called the US and EU’s “unilateral sanctions”.

The Beijing summit declaration said that BRICS countries recalled their national positions as expressed at the United Nations over the past few months.

We support talks between Russia and Ukraine. We have also discussed our concerns over the humanitarian situation in and around Ukraine and expressed our support to efforts of the UN Secretary-General, UN Agencies and ICRC to provide humanitarian assistance in accordance with the basic principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality,” the BRICS declaration said.

Editorial

A turning point for Ukraine and its women’s rights (Page no. 8) (GS Paper 2, International Relations)

The Ukrainian Parliament —the Verkhovna Rada — passed a Bill on June 20 ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

Better known as the Istanbul Convention,

it is the most far reaching international treaty designed to set legally binding standards for governments in Europe for the prevention, protection, and prosecution of gender based violence.

According to official numbers, 259 deputies voted in favour of the bill, eight voted against it, 28 voted blank and 47 abstained.

While the convention was first signed by Ukraine in 2011 — despite repeated calls from activists to ratify it — the government, for years, remained stubbornly mute on the subject and continued to delay its ratification because of opposition by religious and conservative groups over the term “gender” used in the document.

Ukraine in fact, came close to ratifying the convention in 2016 but failed after a majority in Parliament voted against it. As a result, until today, Ukraine was one of the 11 countries that had signed but never ratified the Istanbul Convention.

OPED

Will Agnipath energise or demoralise the military? (Page no. 9) (GS Paper 3, Defence)

On June 14, the government announced the Agnipath scheme, which fundamentally transforms the process of recruitment of soldiers, sailors and airmen into the three services.

Agniveers, the recruits, will be employed for four years, after which 25% of them will be selected for enrolment in the regular cadre, while the rest will be given a certain amount of money and be shown avenues to get back to civilian life.

The scheme has generated a lot of debate, and protests against it have been violent in several parts of the country.

Lt Gen D.S. Hooda (DSH): Let me try and take a very dispassionate view and look at both sides. Just like any scheme, there are advantages and concerns. Let me briefly cover both.

The advantages, as have been brought out by the government and the military leadership... they've been talking about a younger military, the average age going down from 32 to 26.

The rapid turnover of Agniveers in the system, they are hoping, will attract people who are more technologically savvy and are therefore more capable of handling new kinds of modern equipment.

That is why they're also hoping to exploit some people from the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIS) and other technical institutes.

What has not been stated by the military and the government, but which is obviously a big factor for the adoption of this scheme, is the fact that at some stage, maybe not immediately, Agnipath is going to help reduce the salary and pension budgets.

That could go into capital expenditure and for the modernisation of the three forces. Also, by picking 25% of the whole lot of Agniveers, you will possibly get people who can then be trained as non-commissioned officers (NCOs), etc. And with our shortage of officers, it is essential that we have better NCOs in the military.

The problems plaguing thermal power generators (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

On June 10, India's power demand touched a record high of 211 MW even as the coal shortage continued with coal stocks available only for eight days.

In the last two months, as temperatures soared and the economy recovered, the power demand breached the 200 MW level on several occasions.

But the coal stock position at power plants remained worrisome. Consequently, the Ministry of Power sprang into action.

To bridge the gap between shortage in domestic supply and increasing demand, power-generating companies or 'gencos' were directed to use imported coal for 10% of their requirement, failing which their domestic supplies would be cut.

India is the second largest producer of coal, with reserves that could last up to 100 years. Despite that, year after year, the shortage of coal supplies continues to be an issue.

The domestic production of coal stagnated between FY18 and FY21, but revived in FY22. The power demand too surged owing to economic recovery and hotter weather conditions.

In a press release published on May 27, the Ministry of Power noted that "despite efforts to increase the supply of domestic coal, there is still a gap between the requirement of coal and the supply of coal."

Explainer

Open network for digital commerce (Page no. 10)

(GS Paper 3, Science and Technology)

The story so far: The government of India announced the launch of the pilot phase of open network for digital commerce (ONDC) in five cities in late April with an aim to "democratise" the country's fast growing digital e-commerce space that is currently dominated by the two U.S.-headquartered firms - Amazon and Walmart.

The announcement was made by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal. "After UPI, another game changing idea to democratise commerce - ONDC soft launch today to select consumers, sellers and logistics providers. Get ready for a world of choice, convenience and transparency," Mr Goyal had tweeted.

As per the strategy paper on ONDC, it is a not-for-profit organisation that will offer a network to enable local digital commerce stores across industries to be discovered and engaged by any network-enabled applications.

It is neither an aggregator application nor a hosting platform, and all existing digital commerce applications and platforms can voluntarily choose to adopt and be a part of the ONDC network.

The ONDC aims to enable buying of products from all participating e-commerce platforms by consumers through a single platform. Currently, a buyer needs to go to Amazon, for example, to buy a product from a seller on Amazon.

Under ONDC, it is envisaged that a buyer registered on one participating e-commerce site (for example, Amazon) may purchase goods from a seller on another participating e-commerce site (for example, Flipkart).

The ONDC model is trying to replicate the success of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in the field of digital payments.

UPI allows people to send or receive money irrespective of the payment platforms they are registered on. The open network concept also extends beyond the retail sector, to any digital commerce domains including wholesale, mobility, food delivery, logistics, travel, urban services, etc.

News

Group wants new order on MGNREGA workers revoked (Page no. 14)

(GS Paper 2, Welfare schemes)

The Union Rural Development Ministry must withdraw its order to discontinue manual attendance for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work sites with more than 20 workers and use a mobile phone-based application, National Mobile Monitoring Software (NMMS), for recording attendance, the Peoples Action For Employment Guarantee (PAEG), a group of academics and activists working in the field, says.

The PAEG, in a recent letter to Secretary, Rural Development, N.N. Sinha, said that the Ministry's May 13 order is in violation of the NREGA law and also flagged a series of technical and sociological issues with the app.

Section 15 Schedule 1 that lays down rules about the muster rolls clearly - says that the muster roll must be accessible to the workers on demand all days during all working hours. If the muster roll is available only digitally, access will be limited.

The app specifies that it is mandatory for workers to upload two time-stamped photos within a pre determined time window designed by the app.

Business

Govt. said to aim to keep deficit at 6.7% (Page no. 16)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

India's government will not be able to cut its budget deficit this fiscal year as previously projected, officials said, but will seek to cap the shortfall at last year's level to prevent a major deterioration in public finances.

Efforts to maintain fiscal discipline reflect New Delhi's concern around risks to its sovereign credit rating but will likely limit the government's firepower to check inflation and provide relief to households and businesses.

In February, the government set a fiscal deficit target of 6.4% of GDP for the year to March 2023, compared with a deficit of 6.7% in the last financial year.

The sources said that while increased spending to provide relief from inflation meant the government would miss this year's target, policymakers would seek to limit the deviation to 30 basis points.

RBI moots IT outsourcing norms for banks, NBFCs (Page no. 16)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

The Reserve Bank proposed norms for the outsourcing of IT services to ring-fence banks and other regulated entities from financial, operational and reputational risks.

"The underlying principle... is that the RE should ensure that outsourcing arrangements neither diminish its ability to fulfil its obligations to customers nor impede effective supervision by the supervising authority," the RBI said in its draft Master Direction on Outsourcing of Information Technology Services, on which it has invited comments by July 22.

Regulated entities including cooperative banks, credit information companies and NBFCs would be required to put in place a comprehensive board approved IT outsourcing policy.

"Outsourcing of any activity of the RE shall not diminish its obligations as also of its Board and senior management, who shall be ultimately responsible for the outsourced activity.