

The Indian Express

Front Page

US House votes for sanctions waiver to India over S-400s (Page no. 5)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

The US House of Representatives has passed by voice vote a legislative amendment that approves waiver to India against the punitive CAATSA sanctions for its purchase of the S-400 missile defence system from Russia to help deter aggressors like China.

The legislative amendment was passed Thursday as part of an en bloc (all together as a single unit) amendment during floor consideration of the National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA).

Authored and introduced by Indian-American Congressman Ro Khanna, the amendment urges the Biden administration to use its authority to provide India with a Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) waiver to help deter aggressors like China.

CAATSA is a tough US law that authorises the US administration to impose sanctions on countries that purchase major defence hardware from Russia in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its alleged meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections.

This amendment is of the utmost importance, and I am proud to see it pass the House on a bipartisan basis. The law was brought in 2017 and provides for punitive actions by the US government against any country engaged in transactions with the Russian defence and intelligence sectors.

In October 2018, India signed a USD 5-billion deal with Russia to buy five units of the S-400 air defence missile systems, despite a warning from the then-Trump administration that going ahead with the contract may invite US sanctions.

The S-400 is known as Russia's most advanced long-range surface-to-air missile defence system. The US has already imposed sanctions on Turkey under the CAATSA for the purchase of a batch of S-400 missile defence systems from Russia.

NIRF: IITs sweep rankings, IISc tops universities, Delhi colleges shine (Page no. 5)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

LED BY IIT-Madras, the Indian Institutes of Technology continue to dominate the country's higher education landscape, according to the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) 2022.

Be it engineering education, management or research, the premier institutes figured prominently across categories in the rankings released by Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in the presence of University Grants Commission (UGC) chairperson Prof M Jagadesh Kumar and AICTE chairman Prof Anil Sahasrabudhe, among others.

IIT-Madras topped the overall category for the fourth consecutive year, and in engineering for the seventh straight year. Director Prof V Kamakoti told The Indian Express that gaining the Institute of Eminence (IoE) status has boosted research work in IIT-Madras, helping it retain pole position.

But we need to improve our student faculty ratio. We are aggressively trying to get good faculty. This is important because more faculty implies more students, more research, more outreach, more ideas, more projects. We will try to push it faster.

The second part is perception, which is a very subjective matter. And we should make outreach and get globally recognised like world reputed institutes. In a way, NIRF is also helping us improve the perception factor.

The Indian Institute of Science (IISc), which topped the latest round of QS rankings among Indian institutes, was placed second in the NIRF rankings like last year.

The slots from third to seventh have been secured by IIT-Bombay, IIT-Delhi, IIT-Kanpur, IIT-Kharagpur, IIT-Roorkee and IIT-Guwahati, in a repeat of 2021, followed by AIIMS and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

Basic pay, wages: Govt open to relook labour code proposals (Page no. 5)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

With the Government setting the stage to implement four new labour codes, the Ministry of Labour and Employment is open to reviewing some provisions in two of them — The Code on Wages and The Code on Social Security — that have led to concerns among employers and industry representatives, The Indian Express has learnt.

A proposed provision in The Code on Wages to cap basic salary at 50 per cent of total pay, which effectively reduces take-home salaries but raises contributions towards social security components such as Employees' Provident Fund, is likely to be among the proposals being considered for a review based on feedback from stakeholders.

Representations have been made to the Union Labour Ministry for tweaking the definition of wages as proposed in the code, and those inputs are being taken into consideration.

"We are willing and open to reconsider if there are issues, such as the wage provision, whether allowances can be more than 50 per cent. Some are saying that incentives and bonuses are given.

So, those are being looked at. Concerns should be sorted out and we are trying to build consensus on all issues," a senior Government official told The Indian Express.

The Code on Wages proposes to fix a National Floor Level Minimum Wage, and redefine the break-up of wage to increase the share of the basic pay component — a provision to enable higher provision for social security for establishments, especially in the service sector.

The code proposes to peg basic pay at 50 per cent of gross salary. The Labour Ministry is also learnt to have held meetings with representatives of gig and platform aggregators, who have pitched for redefining the definition of turnover.

According to The Code on Social Security, aggregators employing gig workers have to contribute 1-2 per cent of annual turnover for social security, with the total contribution not exceeding 5 per cent of the amount payable by the aggregator.

They are saying their turnover doesn't just include gig workers. They have workers for warehousing, for delivery, those who run the online platforms, so they said turnover cannot be seen in totality. So we have asked them to provide detailed inputs and we are willing to sort the issues.

Experts, however, said any proposed amendment needs to be discussed with all stakeholders, including employers and employees.

Govt. and Politics

'India maintains strong ties with neighbours' (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 3, Defence)

If India is increasing its power, it is doing so not only for itself but also for its friends, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Singh was speaking at the launch of Dunagiri, a Project 17A frigate at Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Limited in Kolkata.

Singh said that the Indian Navy, Indian Coast Guard and other organisations need to ramp up infrastructure to stay ahead of the curve in dealing with emerging challenges.

Singh also said the Centre was extending "all possible help" to Sri Lanka amid the crisis that country is now facing. "India wants friendly relations with all its neighboring countries.

For this, India keeps making constant efforts. Be it Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Maldives or Bangladesh, we have maintained our warm and strong relations with everyone.

You are all aware of the difficult situation Sri Lanka is going through today. Although India has also been affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine situation, we are extending all possible help to our friend Sri Lanka.

Singh called the launching of Dunagiri a "great achievement" and said such a capable warship "reflects the growing indigenous design strength of our Navy and the high technical prowess of Indian shipyards, ancillary industries and MSMEs i.e. our "self-reliance."

The Editorial Page

Bridge the gulf (Page no. 10)

(GS Paper 2, International Relations)

The virtual summit-level I2U2 meeting between the leaders of Israel, India, UAE and US on Thursday took place just nine months after the grouping was launched by the foreign ministers of all four countries in Israel.

The UAE has promised a \$2-billion plan for "integrated food parks" in India with the assistance of American and Israeli private sectors and the summit also delivered an investment commitment towards a 300-MW hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat.

But beyond these concrete results, the I2U2 is a validation of New Delhi's nimble foreign policy in West Asia as well as a pointer to the as yet untapped potential in the region.

A grouping like the I2U2 has been made possible by several developments. In recent years, particularly since Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to office, Delhi has responded to the new diplomatic and strategic dynamic in the region — by giving a political imprimatur to the relationship with Israel and engaging more deeply with the Gulf monarchies, for example — while continuing its relationship with Palestine.

The foreign office also seems to have shed its earlier wariness about the US's role in West Asia. Washington, in turn, seems both comfortable with and keen for India playing a more proactive role.

The Abraham Accords of 2020, under which the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco now have formal ties with Israel too altered the diplomatic calculus in West Asia.

That Delhi is already a player in this ongoing realignment is a prospect for cautious optimism about India's place at the diplomatic table in the region.

For all the gains India has accrued, a lot more remains to be done. Delhi has traditionally viewed West Asia either through the lens of the Pakistan problem or from the perspective of the region as a leading destination for Indian labour.

The former — engaging with countries on their own terms, rather than their perceived closeness to Islamabad — has already been addressed to some degree.

In terms of the latter, it is important to take into account the immense capital accumulation in the region, and how it has been deployed in infrastructure projects and corridors as far as Africa.

Express Network

UN: 30 Lakh Indian kids not receive first DTP dose in 2020 (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

The COVID pandemic left India's immunisation programme in tatters, with an estimated three million children not having received the first dose of the DPT vaccine in 2020, according to UNICEF.

The percentage of children who globally received three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3), fell five percentage points between 2019 and 2021 owing to conflict and the pandemic, the United Nations agency.

However, Unicef said India was “quick to prevent further backslide with catchup programmes” such as the Intensified Mission Indradhanush 3, which reduced the number of children who had not received the first dose from 3 million to 2.7 million in 2021. In 2019, 1.4 million children in the country did not receive the first dose.

“India successfully managed to prevent a decline in coverage, while ensuring a continued focus on Covid-19 vaccination. A rapid resumption of routine immunisation services coupled with evidence-based catch-up campaigns enabled India to prevent a backslide on routine immunisation coverage,” said Mainak Chatterjee, a health specialist with UNICEF India.

The DPT vaccine is considered a marker for immunisation coverage across countries. At 81 per cent now, it represents the “largest sustained decline in childhood vaccinations” in 30 years, according to the UN agency.

Aiming to immunise every pregnant woman and child, India launched Intensified Mission Indradhanush 4.0 in February 2022. It is globally the largest vaccination drive reaching out to missed children and pregnant women.

Annually, India vaccinates more than 30 million pregnant women and 27 million children through its universal immunisation programme.

Globally, 25 million children missed out on one or more doses of the DTP vaccine through routine immunisation services in 2021 alone. This is two million more than those who missed out on them in 2020 and six million more than in 2019.

The decline was due to many factors including an increased number of children living in conflict and fragile settings where immunization access is often challenging, increased misinformation and Covid-19-related issues such as service and supply chain disruptions, resource diversion to response efforts, and containment measures that limited immunization service access and availability.

Explained Page

Benefits of new HPV vaccine (Page no. 15)

(GS Paper 3, Science and Technology)

Dr Kishore Singh tells Anonna Dutt that with a cheaper, indigenously developed vaccine against HPV soon to become available, routine immunisation of all girl children would be extremely cost-effective —and may in the coming years drastically bring down the rates of the resulting cervical cancer.

Dr Singh, a radiation oncologist by training, currently heads Delhi government's only standalone cancer treatment centre Delhi State Cancer Institute. The institute, currently, runs the country's only public HPV vaccination programme for school children.

Cervical cancer continues to be one of the only vaccine-preventable cancers. If you see, almost all cervical cancers are found in women who have a history of HPV infection.

This is not to say all HPV infections can lead to cancer; not at all. In fact, over 80% of women have an HPV infection in their lifetime and almost all of them can clear it.

But in some people some high-risk types of HPV persist and lead to cervical cancer. In addition, having multiple sexual partners, poor hygiene, smoking are other factors that increase the risk of developing cervical cancer.

So, the best way to prevent the cancer is to prevent an infection in the first place.

And, that is what the HPV vaccines do. There are two to four types of HPV that lead to almost 70% to 80% of all the cervical cancers and the vaccines prevent these infections.

Since the virus is sexually transmitted, it has to be given to teenage girls before they are sexually active. Once an infection happens, the vaccine cannot clear it out. Hence, the effectiveness of the vaccine keeps dropping with age.

At present, there are two HPV vaccines available – GSKs Cervarix and Merck's Gardasil. The first one protects against the two most common types HPV 16 and 18, whereas the second one protects against two additional types 6 and 11.

Now, these vaccines cost between Rs 2,500 and Rs 3,300 per dose, with teenagers requiring at least two doses and those getting it later in life needing three.

Economy

Quite willing to trade: FM asks WTO to allow wheat exports from official stocks (Page no. 19)

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman asked World Trade Organisation (WTO) to allow India to export foodgrains from its public stockholding to nations that are facing a food crisis.

She was speaking at a seminar on 'Strengthening global collaboration for tackling food insecurity on the sidelines of the third G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors (FMCBG) meeting in Bali, Indonesia.

As per WTO norms, countries are not allowed to export foodgrains from their public stock holdings as they are procured at subsidised rates.

WTO restriction that grains so procured cannot be brought to the market to export. It is a condition, which exists since the Uruguay Round days. We have repeatedly said that (surplus) than what we have for our small farmers...we are quite willing to trade.

She said that India can help in reducing hunger or food insecurity but there is a hesitation on the part of WTO. Many countries in the world are currently facing food shortages due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

A group of about 70-80 countries, led by Singapore, is pushing member countries of the WTO to accept binding commitments of not extending export restrictions on the foodgrains procured under the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

Some members, however, have voiced concerns regarding a blanket exemption for WFP food purchases due to domestic food security considerations.

The finance minister highlighted that food, fuel, and fertilisers are global public goods, and ensuring access to these for developing and emerging economies is critical.

She said there is an urgency to strengthen food production and the global food system. Sitharaman also shared India's experience, including robust gains in agriculture production, citizen-centric food security programmes, and innovative delivery mechanisms such as the landmark plan of the 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme