

The Indian Express

Front Page

Armed forces chief's will brief PM today on Agnipath Scheme (Page no. 1)

(GS Paper 3, Defence)

So dreadful is the prospect of a military defeat, and so horrifying its consequences, that nations are willing to go to any length to avoid such an outcome.

It is for this reason that national security has been historically deemed, worldwide — by economists and not soldiers — as “the first charge on the treasury.”

Independent India, unfortunately, saw defence expenditure being relegated to the “non-plan” category, within the ambit of a Soviet-inspired, central economy. In another anomaly, the pension bill of veteran soldiers — a separate charge on the exchequer — was linked to the defence budget and its (inevitable) growth trotted out as an excuse for the dwindling funds available for force-enhancement and hardware replacement/modernisation.

Thus, for years, governments dragged their feet, for “want of resources”, over the army’s demand for a mountain strike corps. But, ironically, the 2020 Chinese incursions in Ladakh resulted in the deployment of 50,000-60,000 troops — over a corps strength — and the outflow of a huge unplanned expenditure to support this indefinite deployment.

The most disheartening aspect of this situation has been the fact that the finance ministry, instead of finding ways and means of raising essential, additional funds for national defence, has passed the buck to the armed forces, and demanded that they evolve measures for reducing the pension bill. One presumes that the Agnipath scheme, launched with much fanfare, is an outcome of this demand.

Express Network

Cybersecurity linked to national security, India upgrading to take on threat: Amit Shah (Page no. 6)

(GS Paper 3, Science and Tech)

Cybersecurity is linked to national security, and with many countries having created their own “cyber armies”, India is upgrading itself to deal with this threat, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Monday.

Shah also said many new dimensions of cyber fraud will be seen in the coming days and India will have to make many preparations to gear up to fully secure cyberspace.

Cybersecurity is also linked with national security in a way. Those who do not want to see our country safe attempt various types of cyber-attacks — some nations have even created cyber armies. But the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is fully alert to deal with this and is upgrading itself to prevent such threats.

We have to be more careful in the context of critical information security. Both data and information are going to become a huge economic force in the coming days, so we have to prepare ourselves for security of data and information.

Explained Page

Banning single use plastic (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

The Centre has banned the use of ‘single-use plastic’ from July 1. The Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change had issued a gazette notification last year announcing the ban, and has now defined a list of items that will be banned from next month.

“The manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of following single-use plastic, including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene, commodities shall be prohibited with effect from the 1st July, 2022,” says the Ministry notification.

As the name suggests, it refers to plastic items that are used once and discarded. Single-use plastic has among the highest shares of plastic manufactured and used — from packaging of items, to bottles (shampoo, detergents, cosmetics), polythene bags, face masks, coffee cups, cling film, trash bags, food packaging etc.

Black swan event (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 1, Society)

A study by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has spoken about the possibility of capital outflows to the tune of \$100 billion (around Rs 7,80,000 crore) from India in case of a major global risk scenario or a “black swan” event.

A black swan is a rare, unpredictable event that comes as a surprise and has a significant impact on society or the world. These events are said to have three distinguishing characteristics – they are extremely rare and outside the realm of regular expectations; they have a severe impact after they hit; and they seem probable in hindsight when plausible explanations appear.

The black swan theory was put forward by author and investor Nassim Nicholas Taleb in 2001, and later popularised in his 2007 book – The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable.

How lightning kills, and which areas are the most prone to strikes? (Page no. 9)

(GS Paper 1, Geography)

Seventeen people have been killed by lightning over the last two days in various parts of Bihar, Six deaths have been reported from Bhagalpur district, while three people were killed in Vaishali, and two each in Banka and Khagaria. Other deaths happened in Madhepura, Saharsa, Munger and Katihar.

Of all the atmospheric phenomena, lightning perhaps is the most dangerous and mysterious. In India, lightning kills about 2,000-2,500 people every year.

Bihar is just one of the several hotspots for lightning in India, as a new atlas of lightning shows.

Scientifically, lightning is a rapid and massive discharge of electricity in the atmosphere some of which is directed towards earth. The discharges are generated in giant moisture-bearing clouds that are 10-12 km tall.

The base of these clouds typically lie within 1-2 km of the Earth’s surface, while the top is 12-13 km away. Temperatures in the top of these clouds are in the range of -35° to -45°C .

As water vapour moves upward in the cloud, the falling temperature causes it to condense. As they move to temperatures below 0°C , the water droplets change into small ice crystals.

They continue to move up, gathering mass until they are so heavy that they start to fall to Earth. This leads to a system in which, simultaneously, smaller ice crystals are moving up and bigger crystals are coming down.

How bird hits happen, why they are a concern (Page no. 9)

(Miscellaneous)

Bird strikes are among the most common threats to aircraft safety, and they typically occur during the take-off or landing phases of a flight.

Dozens of bird strike incidents happen each day but some can be more dangerous than others. Typically, when birds will collide with an aircraft’s airframe, it is unlikely to cause significant problems for the pilots flying.

But there are cases — like the ones that happened on Sunday — where the aircraft engine ingested the birds causing damage to the power plants.

This can lead to a loss of thrust for the engine and cause manoeuvrability problems for the crew. In these cases, where a jet engine ingests a bird, procedures would generally call for pilots to get the plane on the ground at the closest airport. However, while most airframe bird strikes are not considered critical to air safety, if the collision has happened with a window or a windscreen resulting in cracking of the structure, pilots will look to land the plane as early as possible.

Editorial Page

The reckless borrower (Page no. 10)

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Pakistan’s latest Economic Survey (2021-22) gives a glimpse of just how deeply it is indebted to China. It has a current debt of \$87.7 billion. Its ongoing economic crisis can be traced to reckless borrowing, enabled by China.

Meanwhile, even as the country risks a financial crisis, the military has awarded itself an 11 per cent increase in budgetary allocation, while other heads such as education, housing and health have seen their budgets slashed. This has created an unprecedented backlash against the military.

Given the role Chinese lending has played in the crisis in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, other lenders are coming around to the view that China must also take some of the haircuts and burden of debt relief to these countries directly.

Funds from the IMF – which Pakistan is in negotiations with for its 22nd loan — and other aid providers, shouldn’t be used to repay opaque financing made on unfair terms.

China is Pakistan’s largest bilateral creditor, with outstanding loans of \$14.5 billion – only the Asian Development Bank (ADB) at \$14 billion and the World Bank (WB) at \$18.1 billion have comparable amounts owed to them.

However, this number undercounts the true extent of Chinese lending to Pakistan under other categories. For instance, China's SAFE (State Administration of Foreign Exchange) has lent to Pakistan.

The Economic Survey lists \$7 billion owed to "SAFE/TIME" (not clarified in the budget documents), which likely includes loans extended by SAFE.

Pakistan also owes \$8.77 billion to "commercial banks", which includes banks from West Asia and three Chinese lenders — the Bank of China, ICBC and China Development Bank, all state-owned banks.

Between 2016-17 to 2020-21, the three Chinese lenders extended short-term loans worth \$11.48 billion. It is not clear how much of this amount is still outstanding.

The Idea Page

On jobs, the big picture (Page no. 11)

(GS Paper 3, Indian Economy)

Let us look at three reports that have appeared recently on the issue of jobs. The first pertains to start-ups that have begun issuing pink slips to their employees.

The number given for this year so far is above 10,000 and more could be in the offing. The second pertains to the NSO survey which says that the unemployment rate in 2020-21 (July to June) was at 4.2 per cent, down from 4.8 per cent in 2019-20.

This sounds good because it seems that even though start-ups are retrenching staff, somewhere in the country, opportunities are being created.

And the third is the determination shown by the government in creating opportunities — it has assured the creation of one million jobs over the next one-and-a-half years.

This may be optimistic, but if it does materialise, the employment landscape will change dramatically.

So what is the employment situation today in India? Ex-post, one can say that if jobs are being created on a progressive basis, there will be an increase in income generation, which in turn, should spur consumption.

Therefore, if consumption picks up – this can be indicated by the growth in the consumer goods segments — then one can be confident of jobs being created.

Here the picture may not be too assuring. Consumer durable goods have been registering negative or slightly positive growth for the last five years or so — this is a reflection of the purchasing power of the people that ultimately can be linked to job creation.

Economy

Five states need to take steps to stabilise debt levels: RBI (Page no. 13)

(GS Paper 3, Indian Economy)

Bihar, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal are the five highly stressed states after taking into account the warning signs flashing from all the indicators, a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) study has said.

We can identify a core subset of highly stressed states from among the 10 states identified by the necessary condition i.e., the debt/ GSDP ratio. The highly stressed states are Bihar, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

It said Punjab is expected to remain in the worst position as its debt-GSDP ratio is projected to exceed 45 per cent in 2026-27, with further deterioration in its fiscal position. Rajasthan, Kerala and West Bengal are projected to exceed the debt-GSDP ratio of 35 per cent by 2026-27. These states will need to undertake significant corrective steps to stabilise their debt levels.

Based on the debt-GSDP ratio in 2020-21, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana turn out to be the states with the highest debt burden. These 10 states account for around half of the total expenditure by all state governments in India.