● POLITY   ● ECONOMICS   ● TECHNOLOGY   ● ECOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PAKISTAN CONDEMNS AIR STRIKES BY IRAN, RECALLS AMBASSADOR

CONTEXT: Pakistan recalls ambassador to Tehran after Iran airstrikes on alleged militant bases, condemning the attack as a violation of airspace that killed two children.

BACKGROUND: Pakistan is recalling its Ambassador to Iran in protest of an alleged unprovoked breach of sovereignty by Iran in Balochistan. Pakistan claims the attack violated international law and UN principles, expressing disappointment over Iran's lack of prior information. A senior official states Pakistan may respond appropriately, emphasizing a measured and publically acceptable approach.

IRAN – PAKISTHAN RELATIONS

- Historical Ties: Rich historical connections between Iran and Pakistan influence diplomatic relations, fostering a deep understanding.
- Socio-Cultural Bonds: Shared cultural heritage and historical links contribute to strong people-to-people connections, enhancing diplomatic understanding.
- Economic Collaboration: Bilateral economic ventures, including energy projects, promote economic growth, trade, and investment, benefiting both nations.
- Issues and Challenges: Border management and security concerns pose challenges, demanding diplomatic efforts for resolution and sustained cooperation.
- Regional Dynamics: Both nations navigate complex regional dynamics, requiring strategic alignment to address common geopolitical challenges and promote stability.

News Highlights

- Iranian Revolutionary Guard targeted Jaish al-Adl bases; state media later withdrew report without explanation.
- Jaish al-Adl, seeking Balochistan independence, admitted assault; claimed civilian casualties, including two children.
- Baloch activist videos show burning buildings; Pakistani intel reports two children killed, three women injured.
- The attack raises concerns about destabilization; official warns of dangerous precedent with reciprocal implications.
- Six bomb-carrying drones and rockets hit homes; Jaish al-Adl accuses Iran, sharing online statement.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

REGIONAL TURMOIL

CONTEXT: Escalation in the Israel-Gaza conflict extends to Lebanon and Syria, involving Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iranian commanders, with broader regional implications.

BACKGROUND: Hezbollah engages in fire exchanges with Israeli troops in southern Lebanon. Iran-backed militias in Syria and Iraq target U.S. forces, while Houthi rebels in Yemen escalate hostilities in the Red Sea. U.S. conducts airstrikes in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as retaliation against Shia militias, contributing to a broader regional conflict.

News Highlights: Hezbollah engages in fire exchanges with Israeli troops in southern Lebanon. Iran-backed militias in Syria and Iraq target U.S. forces, while Houthi rebels in Yemen escalate hostilities in the Red Sea. U.S. conducts airstrikes in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as retaliation against Shia militias, contributing to a broader regional conflict.

- Pre-Attack Stability: Jake Sullivan noted a relative calm in the Middle East, citing progress in relations, including the Abraham Accords.
- Overlooked Crisis: Despite regional improvements, the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict persisted, overshadowing positive developments.
- Security Crisis Unleashed: The October 7 Hamas attack and Israel's fierce response triggered the most significant security crisis since 1967.
- Complex Dynamics: Involvement of non-state actors and the absence of diplomatic exits complicate the situation, with limited achievements for Israel in Gaza.
- Need for New Equilibrium: The old order, reliant on the U.S. presence, is crumbling; a new security balance requires immediate Gaza ceasefire and broader regional talks.

"Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence." - Robert Frost

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DAILY NEWS ANALYSIS

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A SEARCH FOR DETERRENCE IN THE RED SEA

CONTEXT: Houthi rebels, in retaliation to Israeli actions, target merchant ships in the Red Sea, employing drones and anti-ship ballistic missiles since mid-November.

BACKGROUND: Rebels, showcasing diverse tactics, hijacked the Galaxy Leader using a helicopter, revealing their capabilities and training. Despite the U.S. delisting the Houthis, recent developments signal a reversal, with plans to designate them a global terrorist group from mid-February. This move could restrict their access to the global financial system and lead to other measures.

NEWS HIGHLIGHTS - TRADE DISRUPTIONS A WORRY

- Red Sea Complexity: Escalating situation in the Red Sea impacts stability and raises trade concerns due to modern weaponry usage.
- Interoperability Challenges: Despite substantial maritime forces, nations struggle to coordinate effectively, questioning claimed high interoperability post joint defense exercises.
- Piracy Parallel: Similar to piracy challenges, delayed response allows adaptation, with hijacked ships potentially used by Houthis for attacks.
- Houthi Threat: Houthi rebels using drones and ASBMS raise significant concerns; state support, particularly from Iran and possibly China, adds complexity.
- Missile Proliferation: Supply of ASBMS, potentially linked to China, raises worries about missile technology proliferation, adding complexity to the situation.

TEPID RESPONSE FROM ALLIES: Operation Prosperity Guardian, launched by the U.S. under CMF's Combined Task Force 153, faces limited support, with NATO allies (France, Italy, Spain) opting out. Only Bahrain from West Asia participates. Saudi Arabia abstains, likely to avoid affecting Yemen peace talks and improve Iran ties. India operates independently, potentially due to U.S.-India relations and Iran ties. Even U.S. allies Japan and Australia are yet to join, revealing divisions among nations supporting maritime security, raising doubts about U.S. leadership in cooperative efforts.

NEED FOR CALIBRATED ACTIONS

- Houthi Exploitation: Houthis exploit global division, challenging U.S. dominance; ground-based responses, like U.S. and U.K. attacks, are crucial.
- Strategic Challenge: Unlike past conflicts, Yemen's situation demands a nuanced approach to halt weapons supply; global stakes heighten complexity.
- Lack of Control: The situation lacks control, raising concerns about potential deterioration; urgency for an achievable, accepted end state is crucial.
- Avoiding Confrontation: Priority is preventing state-on-state conflict, preserving legitimacy, and preventing Yemen from becoming a battleground akin to Lebanon.
- Global Impact: Recognizing Yemen's unique challenges, the emphasis is on swift, effective actions to address the crisis without escalating global tensions.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

CERT-IN TAKES OVER 11 MONTHS TO PLUG VULNERABILITIES EXPOSING PERSONAL DATA

CONTEXT: Corporate Affairs Ministry resolves a critical cybersecurity vulnerability exposing personal details of prominent figures, addressed months after expert flagged the issue.

BACKGROUND: Sai Krishna Kothapalli, CEO of Hackrew Infosec, discovered and reported a vulnerability to CERT-IN on January 16, 2023. The issue was seemingly resolved 11 months later on December 20. Concerned about potential data theft or misuse, Kothapalli urges an investigation into the incident, emphasizing the sensitivity of the compromised data.

INDIAN COMPUTER EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM

- CERT-IN Definition: CERT-IN stands for the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, a government agency dealing with cybersecurity incidents.
- Ministry Affiliation: CERT-IN operates under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in India.
- Role and Function: It is the national agency responsible for responding to and mitigating cybersecurity threats and incidents.
- Functions Include: CERT-IN provides alerts, advisories, and conducts training programs to enhance the nation's cybersecurity preparedness.
- Coordination: It collaborates with various organizations, government agencies, and the private sector to strengthen the overall cybersecurity posture of India.

News Highlights

- Security Tool Discovery: Sai Krishna, working on "Eagle Eye," found a vulnerability exposing personal details of 98 lakh Indian company directors.
- Prominent Personalities Affected: Ratan Tata, Mukesh Ambani, and others' personal data, including Aadhaar and PAN details, were freely accessible.
- Web Portal Vulnerability: While prototyping "Eagle Eye," Krishna discovered a generic vulnerability on the Ministry's website, exposing sensitive personal information.

- Scammers' Jackpot: Such data is a goldmine for scammers; earlier incidents saw scammers defraud banks using VIPs' PAN numbers.
- Delayed Resolution: Despite reporting to CERT-IN, the vulnerability persisted for 11 months, highlighting a delay in addressing the critical issue.
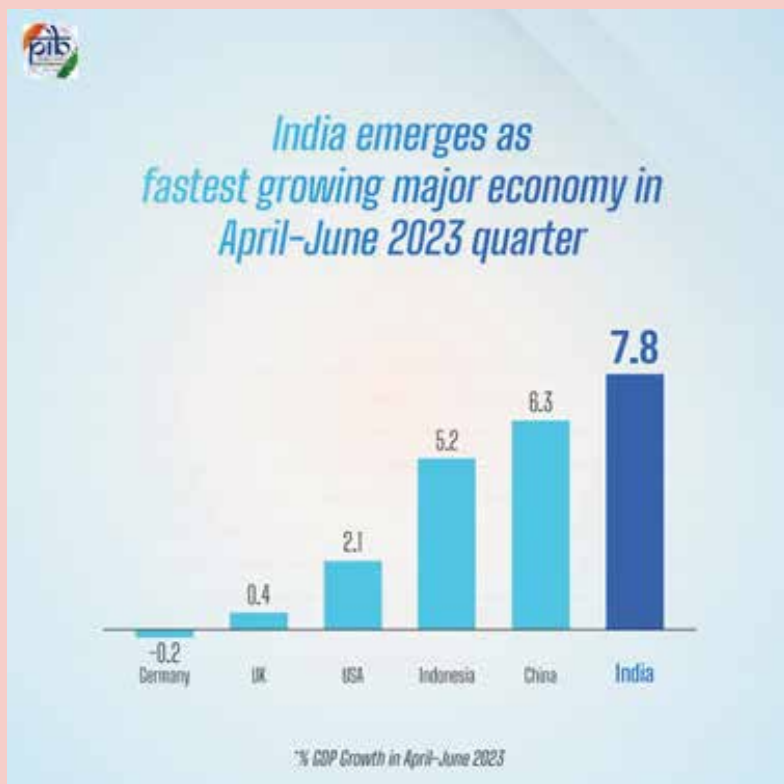
CERT-IN REPLY: After flagging a security vulnerability to CERT-IN on January 16, 2023, the researcher received assurances of appropriate action. Despite subsequent emails and assurances from CERT-IN, the vulnerability persisted. The researcher, concerned about potential exploitation, calls for a thorough investigation into the issue, which involves the sale of directors' contact information online.

ECONOMICS

Q3 GROWTH MAY SLIP BELOW 6%: ICRA

CONTEXT: ICRA reports a potential drop in India's real GDP growth to under 6% in Oct-Dec 2023, citing softening high-frequency indicators.

BACKGROUND: The firm's economists attribute the Q3 growth slowdown to an 8.8% YoY dip in the Centre's capital expenditure, coupled with anticipated minimal growth in Gross Value Added (GVA) by the Agriculture sector. Factors include a significant decline in kharif crop output and sluggish progress in rabi sowing, impacting the farm sector GVA.

India emerges as fastest growing major economy in April-June 2023 quarter

'% GDP Growth in April-June 2023

News Highlights

- ICRA's Growth Concerns: ICRA expresses concern over sustaining growth momentum, projecting a drop in GDP growth to below 6% in Q3 FY2024.
- Divergence from MPC Forecast: ICRA's forecast is substantially lower than the Monetary Policy Committee's

Q3 projection of 6.5%.
- RBI MPC's Previous Projections: RBI's MPC had earlier revised the annual GDP growth forecast to 7%, with Q3 expected at 6.5%.
- December Economic Activity: ICRA notes a six-month low pace of 8.1% growth in December, attributing it to post-festive easing and seasonal factors.
- Selective Growth: While ICRA's Business Activity Monitor shows a high of 10.3% growth in Q3, it highlights non-broad-based growth, driven by specific indicators.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

HATE SPEECH IN INDIA: CONSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Supreme Court emphasized the importance for authorities to be aware that incitement to violence and hate speech is not permissible. This statement was made in the context of the court instructing the Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh police and local authorities to monitor public events closely.

In India, hate speech is a complex issue that involves a delicate balance between freedom of expression and the need to prevent discrimination, hostility, and violence against particular groups. The constitutional aspect of hate speech in India is primarily governed by Article 19(1)(a) and Article 19(2) of the Constitution of India.

Freedom of Speech and Expression (Article 19(1)(a)): The Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression to all citizens. However, this right is not absolute, and it is subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2). Hate speech that incites violence, public disorder, or poses a threat to the sovereignty and integrity of the country may be curtailed in the interest of public order and security.

Reasonable Restrictions (Article 19(2)): Article 19(2) allows the state to impose reasonable restrictions on the freedom of speech and expression in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign countries, public order, decency, or morality. Hate speech that falls within these categories can be restricted by law.

Preventive Detention Laws: Apart from constitutional provisions, there are preventive detention laws in place that empower the state to take preventive action against individuals who are likely to promote hatred or engage in activities that may threaten the maintenance of public order.

Indian Penal Code (IPC): The IPC contains provisions that deal with hate speech and related offenses. Section 153A prohibits promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, etc., and Section 295A criminalizes deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings.

Judicial Interpretation: The judiciary plays a crucial role in interpreting and applying laws related to hate speech. Courts have, at times, upheld the right to criticize and express unpopular views while also emphasizing the need to prevent speech that leads to violence or discrimination.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE EROSION OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN INDIAN UNIVERSITIES: A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Academic freedom, considered the cornerstone of intellectual growth and progress, is facing increasing challenges in Indian universities. The recent directive from the University Grants Commission (UGC) to display government logos raises concerns about the curtailment of academic freedom, a trend that has been observed in various instances across the country.

Current Landscape of Academic Freedom:

The UGC's persistent imposition of government directives on academic institutions reflects a broader trend where academic institutes are being increasingly used as platforms for political propaganda. This shift contradicts the very essence of universities as spaces for free thought and intellectual diversity.

Historical Irony:

Ironically, the current ruling establishment, led by those who fought against the Emergency in the 1970s, now appears to be adopting similar tactics to suppress dissent and homogenize thought. The divergence from the principles that once safeguarded independent thinking is evident in recent government interventions.

Challenges to Academic Freedom:

Several incidents over the past year, such as the cancellation of discussions at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) and fines imposed on Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) protestors, underscore the challenges faced by academia. The resignation of scholars at Ashoka University following their research findings further exemplifies the growing intolerance towards dissenting voices.

The Vital Role of Universities in Democracy:

Universities play a pivotal role as cradles of ideas essential for the development of India. They provide a platform for critical discussions, crucial in any functioning democracy. Restricting the articulation of opinions and ideas can hamper academic work, impeding the progress of research environments.

International Ranking and Constitutional Framework:

India's academic freedom index, ranking in the bottom 30% among 179 countries, reflects the deteriorating state of academic freedom. While the Indian constitution guarantees freedom of speech, it is subject to reasonable restrictions, often leading to challenges such as the misuse of sedition and defamation laws.

Erosion of Institutional Autonomy:

The gradual erosion of institutional autonomy, including the politicization of appointments, further exacerbates the issue. The UGC, originally intended to monitor standards in consultation with universities, has evolved into an instrument of the ministry, impacting the selection of key academic figures.

Call for Protection and Change:

In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need for universities to formulate system-wide protections against the restriction of academic autonomy and freedom of expression. Drawing inspiration from international models, such as New Zealand's Education Act, could provide a framework for safeguarding academic freedom.

As India commemorates its 75th year as a Republic, it is imperative to reflect on the state of academic freedom and autonomy. Embracing Tagore's vision of a nation where the "mind is without fear" requires a collective effort from political parties, faculty bodies, and student associations to restore and uphold the essence of academic freedom in the country.

INDIAN SOCIETY

EXAMINING THE DELISTING OF KUKI AND ZOMI TRIBES

The recent directive from the Centre urging the Manipur Government to consider delisting certain Kuki and Zomi tribes from the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list has sparked discussions and concerns. The representation, submitted by Maheshwar Thounaojam, National Secretary of the Republican Party of India (Athawale) in Manipur, calls for the inclusion of Meiteis in the ST list by proposing the exclusion of specific Kuki and Zomi tribes.

The call for delisting comes amid the eighth month of ethnic conflict between the Meitei people in the valley and the Kuki-Zo (ST) people in the hills. The conflict, initiated by a Manipur High Court order directing the State government to recommend Meiteis' inclusion in the ST list, has created tensions and divisions between communities.

Representation Contents:

Maheshwar Thounaojam's representation objects to the inclusion of three specific entries in the ST list of Manipur — "Any Mizo (Lushai) Tribes," "Zou," and "Any Kuki Tribes." The primary argument posited for their exclusion is the claim that these tribes are not indigenous to Manipur, raising concerns about potential illegal immigration benefiting from ST benefits.

Validity of Claims:

The representation's assertion that these communities were not present in Manipur during the publication of the first Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) list in 1950 is disputed. Historical records reveal the inclusion of these tribes in earlier lists, challenging the argument of non-indigenous status. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the claim that these entries facilitate illegal immigration.

Commission Recommendations:

Historical reports, including those from the First Backward Classes Commission in 1955 and the Lokur Commission in 1965, suggest a need to revisit and revise the classification of tribes. The Bhuria Commission Report in 2002-2004 highlighted confusion arising from the generic entry "Any Kuki Tribes" and recommended specifying tribe names in the ST list to address inter-tribe differences.

The ongoing debate regarding the delisting of Kuki and Zomi tribes in Manipur raises questions about the criteria for defining Scheduled Tribes and the need for historical accuracy in such classifications. As the State government contemplates the formation of a special committee to examine this representation, it is crucial to ensure a fair and inclusive process that respects the diverse identities within Manipur.

GEOGRAPHY

CHANGING RAINFALL PATTERNS IN INDIA: A GRANULAR ANALYSIS

A recent granular analysis of changes in the Indian monsoon at the tehsil level reveals that more than half (55%) of India's 4,400 tehsils have experienced an increase in rainfall. This analysis, conducted for the first time, brings attention to the regional variations in rainfall trends across the country.

Concerns Over Decreased Rainfall:

While a significant portion of tehsils has seen a rise in rainfall, approximately 11% have witnessed a fall. The decline is particularly worrisome during the critical southwest monsoon, with 68% of tehsils experiencing reduced rainfall throughout the monsoon months from June to September.

Geographical Impact:

The tehsils reporting lower rainfall are predominantly located in the Indo-Gangetic plains, northeastern India, and the Indian Himalayan region. These areas, crucial for India's agricultural production, are facing challenges due to shifting rainfall patterns.

District-Level Extremes:

The study, conducted by the Council on Energy, Environment, and Water (CEEW), analyzes high-resolution meteorological data spanning four decades, indicating that India has experienced normal, above-normal, and below-normal monsoon years. District-level analysis further reveals that 30% of India's districts have faced deficient rainfall, while 38% have encountered excessive rainfall.

Localized Wet Rainfall Extremes:

In the past decade, nearly 64% of Indian tehsils have witnessed an increase in the frequency of heavy rainfall days during the southwest monsoon. This pattern is prominent in states with higher GDPs, such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, and Karnataka, with excess rainfall coming from short-duration, heavy rainfall events.

Northeast Monsoon Changes:

Rainfall from the northeast monsoon, occurring from October to December, has increased by more than 10% in several tehsils in Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh. The study highlights the importance of considering both southwest and northeast monsoons in understanding India's changing rainfall patterns.

Impact on Agriculture and Economy:

As erratic rainfall patterns pose challenges, the study emphasizes the need to future-proof the economy. The monsoons, influencing food production, water resources, and energy transition, call for strategic planning and consideration in the upcoming Union Budget.

INDIAN SOCIETY

ANNUAL STATUS OF EDUCATION REPORT (ASER): ASSESSING EDUCATION BEYOND BASICS

Overview of ASER Report:

The "Beyond Basics" edition of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) was released, focusing on rural students aged 14 to 18. Conducted by Pratham across 28 districts in 26 states, the survey aimed to assess foundational reading and arithmetic abilities, digital awareness, and skills of 34,745 students.

Enrollment Patterns:

The report highlights that 86.8% of 14 to 18-year-olds are enrolled in educational institutions, with small gender gaps. However, significant differences emerge with age, revealing a 3.9% non-enrollment rate for 14-year-olds and a notable 32.6% for 18-year-olds.

Academic Stream Preferences:

Examining academic streams, the majority of students in this age group are enrolled in the Arts/Humanities stream. In Class 11 or higher, more than half (55.7%) opt for Arts/Humanities, while girls are less likely than boys to choose Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (28.1% vs. 36.3%).

Basic Abilities Assessment:

The ASER report evaluates basic abilities such as reading, math, English proficiency, and real-life applications. Approximately 25% of students cannot fluently read a Class 2 level text in their regional language. More than half struggle with 3-digit by 1-digit division problems, a skill expected in Standard III/IV.

Language and Mathematical Skills:

Regarding English proficiency, only a little over half (57.3%) can read sentences in English. Of those who can, almost three-quarters (73.5%) can understand the meanings. The report also notes that around 25% of students face challenges in financial calculations needed in real life.

Digital Literacy:

Close to 90% of youth in the surveyed age group have access to a smartphone in their households and possess the necessary skills to use it. This emphasizes the widespread digital literacy among these students, pointing to the ubiquity of smartphones in their lives.

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