

● POLITY

● ECONOMICS

● TECHNOLOGY

● ECOLOGY

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## UNSC calls for ceasefire in Gaza during Ramzan

**CONTEXT:** The United Nations Security Council issued its first demand to halt the fighting in Gaza, calling for a ceasefire during the Muslim holy month of Ramzan in a vote that drew an immediate protest from the Israeli Prime Minister.



The resolution, calling for a ceasefire during the Muslim holy month of Ramzan, which also included an unlinked demand for the release of all hostages taken captive during Hamas' October 7 surprise attack in southern Israel passed 14-0 after the U.S. decided not to use its veto power and instead abstained on the resolution. The resolution was put forward by the 10 elected council members, was backed by Russia and China.

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a planned visit to Washington by a high-level delegation and accused the U.S. of "retreating" from a "principled position" by allowing the vote to pass without conditioning the ceasefire on the release of hostages held by Hamas. The Israeli delegation was to present White House officials with plans for an expected ground invasion of the strategic Gaza town of Rafah, where over 1 million Palestinian civilians have sought shelter.

The elected members changed the final draft resolution to drop the word "permanent" from its demand that a Ramzan ceasefire will lead to "a permanent sustainable ceasefire", apparently at the request of the U.S.

### U.S. reasoning

The U.S., "consistent" in its support for a ceasefire as part of a hostage deal abstained as this resolution text did not condemn Hamas. The vote comes after Russia and China vetoed a U.S.-sponsored resolution on Friday that would have supported "an immediate and sustained ceasefire" in the Israeli-Hamas conflict. The U.S. warned the resolution could hurt negotiations to halt hostilities by the U.S., Egypt and Qatar, raising the possibility of another veto, this time by the Americans. More than 32,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed during the fighting, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## EU launches probe against tech giants under new law

**CONTEXT:** The European Union has initiated investigations into whether Apple, Alphabet (Google), and Meta (Facebook) breached the Digital Markets Act (DMA), a new law aimed at regulating the operations of large tech firms, reflecting a broader trend of governments seeking to increase oversight of big tech companies.

### Under lens

What do the EU probes mean for Alphabet, Apple and Meta



Apple



Facebook



Google

- The probes will examine whether the companies violated the Digital Markets Act
- If found so, they could be fined up to 10% of their global revenue

- The investigations, which are likely to conclude in a year, will also look at issues around user choice, stifling competition, use of targeted advertising etc

The European Union has announced that companies found to violate the Digital Markets Act (DMA) could face fines of up to 10% of their global revenues, with 20% penalties for repeat offenses. This announcement follows a recent fine of over €1.84 million imposed on Apple for anti-competitive practices in the streaming music app market. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Justice has filed a case against Apple, accusing the company of stifling competition and maintaining high prices in the smartphone market.

The DMA fully came into effect on March 7 and seeks to regulate large online companies called 'gatekeepers', whose products and services are used by some 450 million EU users. The DMA had designated six 'gatekeepers' in September last year: Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance (owners of TikTok), Meta and Microsoft.

The European Commission has launched investigations into Alphabet (Google) and Apple over alleged "anti-steering" practices. This refers to whether the companies are restricting app developers from directly communicating with users, which could limit user choice. The investigations were announced by EU competition

commissioner Margrethe Vestager and internal market commissioner Thierry Breton at a press conference in Brussels.

The European Commission has launched a third probe into Apple, focusing on whether the company provides users with enough choice, such as the ability to easily uninstall apps and change default settings. The investigation is concerned with the web browser choice screen, which may not allow users to make fully informed decisions. Additionally, Apple's practices, such as making certain apps un-installable and preventing users from changing default settings like iCloud, are being scrutinized for compliance with the Digital Markets Act.

The European Commission has launched a fourth investigation into Meta (formerly Facebook) regarding its "pay or consent" policy. This policy requires users to pay if they wish to use Facebook and Instagram without targeted advertising. However, the Digital Markets Act (DMA) stipulates that gatekeepers must obtain users' consent to use their personal data across different services, and this consent must be freely given.

The European Commission has launched a fifth investigation, this time into Alphabet (Google's parent company), to determine if it is giving preferential treatment to its own services in Google Search. Services like Google Shopping, Google Flights, and Google Hotels are under scrutiny for potentially benefiting from this prioritization. The investigation is expected to be completed within 12 months.

and strikes on the public. The back-to-back attacks pose a serious security challenge to the Eurasian region, especially for Russia, which hosts thousands of Central Asian migrant labourers. Mr. Putin, who rose to power in the late 1990s promising security to Russians battered by terror attacks, will have to plug the security loopholes. But that will not be enough. To tackle the IS, countries need to address the geopolitical conditions that help the IS regroup. As long as the Taliban continues its Pashtun-only rule over a diverse, radicalised Afghanistan, and instability, wars and lawlessness prevail in parts of West Asia, groups such as the IS would continue to find avenues to grow and strike.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### China, a 'want-to-be' superpower

**CONTEXT:** China's state-controlled media highlighted Xi Jinping's success in bringing together Riyadh and Tehran as an institutional Chinese position to promote peace, though the first anniversary of the China-brokered détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 passed without much fanfare.

The war in Gaza has enveloped almost all regional political and diplomatic capacities across the Persian Gulf, while also highlighting international actors and their core interests amidst this fallout. Beijing has taken a position that is clearly pro-Palestine, in line with its historical standing on the issue, alienating its relations with Israel.

#### Beijing's aims

China pushes an aspirational 'mediation diplomacy' to position itself as an antithesis to western interventionist policies, specifically in a region such as West Asia and to increase its own geopolitical weight as a responsible international actor and power. China has taken a clear stance towards the Arab side and has not condemned Hamas by name. Much of the reasoning behind this is to counter long-standing American influence and to take advantage of crevasses in regional diplomacy, specifically by the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are looking to chart their own paths of strategic autonomy and willing to partner with Beijing despite having close security ties with Washington DC.

In early 2023, Wang Yi (Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee) gave his endorsement to a plan to set up a new China-backed international mediation organisation headquartered in Hong Kong. The Chinese establishment hopes to link the mediation initiative to its expansive economic corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has extensive membership in West Asia as well, with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE among others being part of China's economic highways.

#### China's absence in the Red Sea crisis

The probability of China being pulled into the process by Riyadh and Tehran, rather than actively brokering a deal, remains high. China has also been absent through the crisis in the Red Sea, where predominantly western naval forces have attempted to maintain the free flow of trade in this critical waterway. Yemen-based Houthis were not targeting Chinese and Russian ships, suggesting a bypass potentially using leverages that Beijing has with its close partner Iran despite Tehran's calls for the Yemeni militia to cease attacks. China's crafty diplomacy was to predominantly protect its own interests and not wade into the crisis as an influential power looking to use its position to broker peace or even a ceasefire.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### Terror in Moscow

**CONTEXT:** The terror attack at the Crocus City Hall on the outskirts of Moscow on March 22, that killed at least 137 people, underscores the concerns that the Islamic State (IS), whose physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq was destroyed six years ago, is on a path to revival.

The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the Afghanistan-based branch of the Sunni jihadist group, carried out twin bombings in Kerman, Iran, in January, targeting a memorial event for General Qassem Soleimani. This attack killed at least 80 people. Since then, IS has continued its attacks in Turkey, Syria, and Afghanistan. The recent Moscow shooting is seen as an indication of IS's growing terror capabilities. Russian authorities have charged four Tajik nationals in connection with the shooting. IS-K, largely composed of Central Asian militants, was founded in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in 2015 and has gained prominence since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. The group has targeted Afghanistan's Shia minority and is building networks with radicalized youths from Central Asia and Afghanistan's Tajik and Uzbek minorities, who are dissatisfied with the Taliban's rule. These networks are now becoming stronger.

In recent months, the IS-K has run propaganda videos against Russia and President Vladimir Putin. The IS claims that the Russians spilled "the blood of Muslims" in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria. In Syria, Russia's intervention in 2015 turned the civil war around in favour of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who the IS wanted to topple. If in 2013-14, al Qaeda in Iraq and the IS used anti-western propaganda to build networks across West Asia, today, the IS-K is using anti-Russian and anti-Iranian propaganda to find recruits among Central Asians, Afghans and Pakistanis. The group, which once controlled territories across Syria and Iraq, has now transformed itself into a traditional terrorist outfit that hides in chaos

Beijing's support for the Palestinian cause without criticising Hamas practically aligns with the larger Arab posture. This stands against U.S. support for Israel, which is increasingly being criticised for its absolutist nature as the body count in Gaza continues to grow. China's intent for 'mediation' is non-existent in high-stake conflicts and is un-aspirational beyond the strategic aim of showcasing western, and, more specifically, American power and influence, as detrimental to both international stability and security.

### In perspective

China seems content with predominantly displacing American hegemony without replacing it. Even a perception of being a 'soft hegemon' in the region will stand starkly against Chinese grandstanding against western policies. Beijing utilised the 'war on terror'-era to build closer ties with the U.S. and benefit its own security concerns regarding radicalisation and terrorism narratives around its restive Xinjiang region. But once again, these were all narrow geostrategic aims.

The war in Gaza colours Beijing as still being a 'want-to-be' superpower. Being risk averse and having a lack of alternatives to the historical West-centric policies (which it chides as being detrimental to global security and prosperity) makes Beijing stand out as hollow. Other than offering a sizeable cheque book, China still has few answers as substitutes to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints. For now, despite its size, it remains a utilitarian superpower for others to hedge against rather than being an upcoming traditional superpower.

## POLITY & GOVERNANCE

# Understanding what the right to equality promises

**CONTEXT:** The rules of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, recently notified has been challenged before the Supreme Court on the grounds that it violates Article 14 of the Constitution.

### The classification test

The classical test to judge these violations is the 'reasonable classification' test, where the Court asks whether there is a clear way to differentiate members of one class from another, and then whether there is a clear relation between making this distinction and achieving the goal that the government wishes to achieve. When the Bill was being debated in Parliament, the Home Minister had declared that it was consistent with the test given above — it applied to persecuted minorities who had fled to India from geographically connected nations, and the purpose was to provide these minorities with full citizenship rights in India. The Court has generally allowed a great deal of latitude to the state while dealing with a potential equality law violation. The Supreme Court in *Charanjit Lal Chowdhury v. Union of India* (1950) declared that "the Legislature is free to recognise degrees of harm and it may confine its restrictions to those cases where the harm is deemed to be the clearest." If we go by this standard, the CAA might be constitutional.

The classification test is a tool that the Court employs to decide what state action would violate equality. The real protection afforded by the Constitution, however, is not the test; it is what the test is used for. Equality is a moving target, and the reasonable classification test was developed to hit it most accurately. But this

does not always happen. The CAA may pass this test, and yet not satisfy our constitutional conscience. The source of our pain is the fact that there are some persecuted minorities who are excluded for no apparent reason. This is unsettling also because the discrimination here is on the basis of religion, which is against any understanding of secularism.

The classification test, in its most repeated form, does not necessarily account for any of this. While reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, as he was then, stated that Article 14 contains "a powerful statement of values", and that to "reduce it to a formal exercise of classification may miss the true value of equality". Other judges have also attempted to augment the classification test with more teeth. But these responses are stopgap. The test is either bent to suit more just outcomes, or a new test is developed. The 'manifest arbitrariness' test developed by the Court in recent cases is a response of the latter kind, and is unfortunately too broad to provide any concrete guidance. Unlike the reasonable classification test, it has no shape or form. The most that the Court has said about the content of this test is that what is "without adequate determining policy or principle" is manifestly arbitrary. These concepts are, on the face of it, susceptible to multiple interpretations — hardly a suitable fit for a judicial test which is supposed to crystallise an ethereal concept like equality.

What is required instead is a comprehensive re-understanding of what the right to equality promises. This does not necessarily mean that the old test needs erasure, but it needs a radical redevelopment. The Court needs to go beyond asking the questions it already does. It will have to develop the constitutional idea of equality more thoroughly. The old idea of 'treating equals equally and unequals unequally' has shown its deficiencies. This will be a deeply theoretical exercise, but it is necessary for a more robust constitutionalism.

The Court will also have to ask more probing questions of the state, such as why Ahmadiyya Muslims have been excluded and the exact number of immigrants who have come from each of these countries (from each religion). Each of these will test the state's purported justifications against the new idea of equality. These questions may be asked in the classification test as well, but are not its core components. Their application depends upon active judicial engagement with the values flowing from Article 14. Leaving crucial questions of constitutional law open to such discretion is incorrect. This is the core of the problem.

### Opportunity for a clear break

The legal and constitutional challenge to CAA is a timely opportunity for this task because the Act goes against many of our beliefs of what equality entails, and what the Constitution requires from the government. Questions of this magnitude are better answered with a clear distinction between the right and the test. Only the former is inviolable.



**VEDHIK**  
IAS ACADEMY  
The New Learning Mantra  
www.vedhikiasacademy.org

**Comprehensive Coaching For  
568 Government Jobs**  
www.vedhikiasacademy.org

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Arunachal Pradesh has always been part of China: Lin Jian

**CONTEXT:** China continued to claim that Arunachal Pradesh is part of its territory, notwithstanding India dismissing Beijing's claim as "absurd" and "ludicrous".

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian reiterated the claim while reacting to External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's assertions on Saturday, dismissing China's repeated claims on Arunachal Pradesh as "ludicrous" and that the frontier State was a "natural part of India".

Zangnan, China's official name for Arunachal Pradesh, was always part of China before it was "illegally occupied" by India, he claimed. China has all along had an effective administration over the region. Claiming that it is an "indisputable fact", he said India has established the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh" in 1987 on the illegally occupied territory.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## Jaishankar discusses bilateral ties with Singapore PM, senior Ministers

**CONTEXT:** External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar called on Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, and other senior Ministers and discussed ways to further the strategic bilateral ties, and the situation in the Indo-Pacific and West Asia regions.



Mr. Jaishankar is on a three-day visit to Singapore from Saturday. He met investors on Saturday and addressed the Indian diaspora on Sunday. Apart from Foreign Minister Balakrishnan, Mr. Jaishankar held separate meetings with Minister of Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong, and Senior Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security Teo Chee Hean.

### 'Discussed Indo-Pacific'

Mr. Jaishankar will also visit the Philippines and Malaysia. The March 23-27 visits will focus on enhancing bilateral relations with the three countries, and would provide an opportunity for engagement on regional issues of mutual concern, the External Affairs Ministry had said.

## POLITY &amp; GOVERNANCE

## Google billing: Start-ups said to challenge CCI order

**CONTEXT:** The Commission rejected interim relief application of start-ups' for complete restraint on Google from collection of fees under tech giant's updated payments policy.

Start-ups are set to challenge the Competition Commission of India's (CCI's) recent order denying them interim relief during the pendency of the plea challenging Google's Play Store payment policies. The appeals are likely to be filed before the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal in the next few days, sources said. Despite [the] CCI finding prima facie contravention against tech giant Google, the competition watchdog had not given any interim protection to start-ups," they reasoned.

### Probe against Google

This ruling came close on the heels of the competition watchdog ordering an investigation against Google on March 15 for excessive pricing on Play Store. CCI had then held the tech giant's users choice billing (UCB) payments policy was 'prima facie' violative of the Competition Act 2002.

Shaadi.com, KukuFM and Indian Broadcasting and Digital Foundation and Indian Digital Media Industry Foundation, had urged the Commission to restrain Google from collecting any fee for transactions involving paid downloads or in-app purchases on apps offering services.

**VEDHIK**  
IAS ACADEMY  
*The New Learning Mantra*

## MASTER THE NEW LEARNING MANTRA

[www.vedhikiasacademy.org](http://www.vedhikiasacademy.org)

**The  
More  
You Learn,  
The  
More  
You Earn**

**VEDHIK**  
IAS ACADEMY  
*The New Learning Mantra*

[www.vedhikiasacademy.org](http://www.vedhikiasacademy.org)



# VEDHIK

## IAS ACADEMY

*The New Learning Mantra*

# START YOUR JOURNEY WITH THE BEST

**INDIA'S  
TOP MOST  
CIVIL SERVANTS  
FOR COACHING**

[www.vedhikiasacademy.org](http://www.vedhikiasacademy.org)

*Head Office:*

**Vedhik IAS Academy**  
Mercy Estate,  
MG Road, Ravipuram,  
Ernakulam-682 015,

*Corporate office:*

**Vedhik IAS Academy**  
Samkalp Bhawan, Plot No.15,  
Sector 4, Rama Krishna Puram,  
New Delhi, Delhi-110022

*Regional office*

**Vedhik IAS Academy**  
202, Raheja Chambers, 12,  
Museum Road. Bangalore -  
560001. Karnataka, India.

*GCC Office:*

**Bobscoedu,**

Bobsco Trading & Contracting Co. W. L . L  
Office 22, Dream Tower 1,  
Road: 2701, Adliya, Kingdom of Bahrain  
[www.bobscoedu.com](http://www.bobscoedu.com)