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POLITY

UGC-NET cancelled after 'irregularity' claims; CBI to probe

CONTEXT: The Education Ministry late on Wednesday announced the cancellation of the UGC-NET held on Tuesday, after inputs from the Ministry of Home Affairs suggested that the "integrity of the exam had been compromised".

The CBI would probe the issue, it said. The University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test is conducted by the National Testing Agency (NTA).

The development comes at a time when the NTA is embroiled in a controversy over irregularities in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for medical and allied courses.

The UGC-NET is conducted twice a year to determine the eligibility of candidates for the positions of Assistant Professor, Junior Research Fellowship Assistant Professor and for Ph.D. admissions. The Ministry of Education said on social media platform X, "Government is committed to ensure the sanctity of examinations and protect the interest of students.



ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

What is University Grants Commission (UGC)?

Genesis:

The Sargeant Report was the first attempt to formulate a national system of education in India in 1944.

It recommended the formation of a University Grants Commission, which was established in 1945 and was tasked with dealing with all of the then existing Universities in 1947.

Soon after independence, the University Education Commission was established (in 1948) under the chairmanship of Dr. S Radhakrishnan to report on Indian university education and suggest improvements and extensions.

It proposed reorganizing the University Grants Committee along the lines of the University Grants Commission of the United Kingdom.

As a result, the UGC was formally inaugurated in 1953 by Maulana Abul Kalam, the then Minister of Education.

However, the UGC was established [by the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education] as a statutory body in November 1956 by the UGC Act 1956.

A proposal to replace UGC with another new regulatory body called the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) is under consideration by the Government of India.

Mandate:

The UGC has the unique distinction of being the only grant-giving agency in the country which has been vested with two responsibilities of:

- Providing funds
- Coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S. lawmakers call on Beijing to hold dialogue with Dalai Lama

CONTEXT: Days after the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Resolve Tibet Act that called upon the Chinese government to engage with the Dalai Lama, an influential group of U.S. lawmakers met the Tibetan spiritual leader at Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh on Wednesday.

Addressing a rare public meeting, they stated that the United States will not allow Beijing to interfere in the "succession" of the Dalai Lama.

The delegation, led by the Republican chair of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul, expressed a firm U.S. position on Tibet and described China's claim of having ancient links with Tibet as 'ridiculous'.



What is the China-Tibet Issue?

Tibet's Independence: Tibet is a region on the Tibetan Plateau in Asia, spanning about 2.4 million km² nearly a quarter of China's territory.

- It is the traditional homeland of the Tibetan people as well as some other ethnic groups.
- Tibet is the highest region on Earth, with an average elevation of 4,900 meters. The highest elevation in Tibet is Mount Everest, Earth's highest mountain, rising 8,848 m above sea level.
- The 13th Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso, announced de facto Tibetan independence in early 1913.
- China did not recognize Tibet's independence and continued to claim sovereignty over the region.

What are the Recent Developments in Tibet?

- China has been building and developing next generation infrastructure in Tibet, such as border defense villages, dams, an all weather oil pipeline, and internet connectivity projects.
- China is trying to control the selection of the next Dalai Lama, by promoting that Tibetan Buddhism has always been part of Chinese culture.
- The Indian government doesn't give citizenship to Tibetans born in India after the cut off year of 1987.
- This has created a sense of dissatisfaction amongst the youth of the Tibetan community.

Dalai Lama

About:

- The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the largest and most influential tradition in Tibet.
- There have been only 14 Dalai Lamas in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, and the first and second Dalai Lamas were given the title posthumously.
- The 14th and current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso.
- The Dalai Lamas are believed to be manifestations of Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the patron saint of Tibet.
- Bodhisattvas are realized beings inspired by a wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings, who have vowed to be reborn in the world to help humanity.

Process to Choose Dalai Lama:

- The process to choose the Dalai Lama traditionally involves identifying the reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lama, who is considered the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism.
- The search for the Dalai Lama's reincarnation typically begins after the previous Dalai Lama's passing.
- According to Buddhist scholars it is the responsibility of the High Lamas of the Gelugpa tradition and the Tibetan government to seek out and find the next Dalai Lama following the death of the incumbent.
- If more than one candidate is identified, the true successor is found by officials and monks drawing lots in a public ceremony.

ECONOMY

Official data: more frequent surveys, quicker results on the cards

CONTEXT: The Centre is eyeing an increase in the frequency of some critical official surveys, including the periodic survey to measure employment, and releasing their results faster to facilitate timely and informed policy decisions, a top Statistics Ministry official said on Wednesday.

Speaking at a data user conference on the recently released findings of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation Secretary Saurabh Garg said data would be the basis of making "much more informed" decisions needed to make India a developed nation by 2047.



Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES)

- The CES is traditionally a quinquennial (recurring every five years) survey conducted by the government's National Statistical Office (NSO).
- It is designed to collect information on the consumption spending patterns of households across the country, both urban and rural.
- The data gathered in this exercise reveals the average expenditure on goods (food and non-food) and services.
- It helps generate estimates of household Monthly Per Capita Consumer Expenditure (MPCE) as well as the distribution of households and persons over the MPCE classes.

Significance of Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES)

Vital in gauging the demand dynamics: The estimates of monthly per capita consumption spending are important in measuring the demand dynamics of the economy. It is also useful for understanding the shifting priorities in terms of baskets of goods and services.

Assessment of growth trends across different strata

It is helpful in assessing living standards and growth trends across multiple strata.

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The CES is an invaluable analytical as well as forecasting tool. It helps policymakers spot and address possible structural anomalies that may cause demand to shift in a particular manner. It provides pointers to producers of goods and providers of services. It is used by the government in rebasing the GDP and other macro-economic indicators.

ECONOMY

India and U.S. work out strategies to scale up collaboration on critical minerals under iCET

CONTEXT: India and the U.S. are looking to “quickly” conclude a bilateral agreement on furthering cooperation on critical minerals between the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry and the Ministry of Mines, and to drive a partnership in supply chains for graphite, gallium, and germanium.

One of the aims will be to promote “India’s vital role in the mineral security partnership, including through coinvesting in a lithium resource project in South America and a rare earths deposit in Africa, to responsibly and sustainably diversify critical mineral supply chains,” said a fact sheet issued on June 17 on the India U.S. Initiative for Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) dialogue, chaired by the National Security Advisers of the countries.

India has incorporated a joint venture company Khanij Bidesh India Ltd. (KABIL) with equity contribution from three Central Public Sector Enterprises National Aluminium Company Ltd, Hindustan Copper Ltd and Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Ltd with the objective of acquiring critical mineral assets abroad to ensure consistent supply of critical minerals to the Indian domestic market.



About the U.S.-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET):

- It was launched by the US President and Indian Prime Minister on the sidelines of the Quad summit on May 2022.
- Goal: To elevate and expand Indo-U.S. strategic technology partnership and defense industrial cooperation between the governments, businesses, and academic institutions of the two countries.

- The initiative will be spearheaded by the National Security Council Secretariat in India and the US National Security Council.
- The initiative would help forge links between the government, academia, and industry in areas such as AI, quantum computing, 5G/6G, biotech, space, and semiconductors.
- Under iCET, the two sides have identified six focus areas of co-development and co-production:
 - strengthening innovation ecosystems;
 - defense innovation and technology cooperation;
 - resilient semiconductor supply chains;
 - space;
 - STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) talent, next-generation telecom.

About Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL):

It is a Joint Venture Company formed with the participation of National Aluminium Company Ltd.(NALCO), Hindustan Copper Ltd.(HCL) and Mineral Exploration Company Ltd. (MECL) in August, 2019.

Mandate: Target of this company is to identify, acquire, develop, process and make commercial use of strategic minerals in overseas locations for supply in India.

It is focusing on identifying and sourcing battery minerals like Lithium and Cobalt.

The equity participation between NALCO, HCL and MECL is in the ratio of 40:30:30.

Functions

It helps in building partnerships with other mineral rich countries like Australia and those in Africa and South America, where Indian expertise in exploration and mineral processing will be mutually beneficial bringing about new economic opportunities.

The KABIL would carry out identification, acquisition, exploration, development, mining and processing of strategic minerals overseas for commercial use and meeting country’s requirement of these minerals.

Nodal Ministry: Ministry of Mines

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INTERNAL SECURITY

CISF yet to get orders for Parliament security

CONTEXT: The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) is yet to receive formal orders to take over the security at Parliament, officials told The Hindu.

In the past few months, over 2,500 CISF personnel have been deployed on the premises replacing the Delhi Police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The CISF has assumed some key duties earlier assigned to the Parliament Security Service (PSS) such as issuance of pass and facilitating the entry of MPs.

The fate of officials of the PSS, which has been deployed since 1950 with special training to recognise and interact with MPs, hangs in the balance with the entry of the CISF. Several members have complained of being stopped by CISF officials while entering the premises.



About the Central Industrial Security Force:

- It was established after the recommendation of the Justice Mukherjee Commission.
- It was set up by an Act of Parliament on March 10, 1969.
- It is one of seven Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) under the Ministry of Home Affairs the other six being the Border Security Force, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, the Sashastra Seema Bal, the Assam Rifles, the National Security Guard, and the Central Reserve Police Force.
- It is headed by an Indian Police Service officer with the rank of Director General.

Mandate:

- Initially, its remit was restricted to protecting government owned industries, but this was expanded to include joint ventures and private undertakings in 2009.
- It also provides consultancy services to the private sector.
- The force is deployed in over 350 locations across the country, in diversified areas such as atomic energy and space installations, sea ports, steel plants, coal fields, hydro-electric

- and thermal power plants, defence production units, fertiliser and chemical industries, RBI's note printing mints, heritage monuments such as the Taj Mahal.
- It has the largest percentage of women in its force, in comparison to all other CAPFs.
- Presently, CISF is also providing security to the protected persons classified as Z Plus, Z, X, Y.

ECONOMY

Australia hopes to conclude CECA negotiations with India early next year

CONTEXT: Australia is keen to conclude negotiations for the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with India in the next six-seven months since it may not be in a position to take hard decisions from early next year as the country prepares for its federal elections, according to sources.

Australia's federal elections are likely in mid 2025 and the ruling government is expected to steer away from controversial decisions, the source said. The India-Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA) came into force on December 29, 2022.

It served as a stepping stone for the CECA which is to be a deeper and comprehensive agreement covering five tracks agreed in the ECTA, including goods, services, digital trade, government procurement and Rules of Origin (ROO) Product Specific Rules Schedule. New areas in which either party has shown interest for coverage include competition policy, MSME, gender, innovation, agritech, critical minerals and sports.



What is the Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement?

It is the first Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that India has signed with a major developed country in over a decade.

In February, India signed an FTA with the UAE and is currently working on FTAs with Israel, Canada, UK and the European Union.

The Agreement encompasses cooperation across the entire gamut of bilateral economic and commercial relations between the two friendly countries, and covers areas like:

- Trade in Goods, Rules of Origin.
- Trade in Services.

- Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).
- Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures.
- Dispute Settlement, Movement of Natural Persons.
- Telecom, Customs Procedures.
- Pharmaceutical products, and Cooperation in other Areas.

ECTA provides for an institutional mechanism to encourage and improve trade between the two countries.

The ECTA between India and Australia covers almost all the tariff lines dealt in by India and Australia respectively.

India will benefit from preferential market access provided by Australia on 100% of its tariff lines.

This includes all the labour intensive sectors of export interest to India such as Gems and Jewellery, Textiles, leather, footwear, furniture etc.

On the other hand, India will be offering preferential access to Australia on over 70% of its tariff lines, including lines of export interest to Australia which are primarily raw materials and intermediaries such as coal, mineral ores and wines etc.

India- Australia trade relations

India and Australia have been each other's important trading partners.

Australia is the 17th largest trading partner of India and India is Australia's 9th largest trading partner.

India-Australia bilateral trade for both merchandise and services is valued at USD 27.5 billion in 2021.

India's merchandise exports to Australia grew 135% between 2019 and 2021. India's exports consist primarily of a broad-based basket largely of finished products and were USD 6.9 billion in 2021.

India's merchandise imports from Australia were USD 15.1 billion in 2021, consisting largely of raw materials, minerals and intermediate goods.

India and Australia are partners in the trilateral Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) arrangement along with Japan which seeks to enhance the resilience of supply chains in the Indo-Pacific Region.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In South China Sea dispute, a bolder Philippines tests Beijing's resolve

CONTEXT: Experts say the Philippines's policy switch to publicise China's actions in the contested South China Sea, combined with Manila's military alliance with the U.S., had constrained Beijing's ability to escalate matters at sea but also raised the risks of Chinese economic retaliation and U.S. involvement.



About South China sea

- The South China Sea is an arm of western Pacific Ocean in Southeast Asia.
- It is south of China, east & south of Vietnam, west of the Philippines and north of the island of Borneo.
- Bordering states & territories (clockwise from north): the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan),

the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam.

- It is connected by Taiwan Strait with the East China Sea and by Luzon Strait with the Philippine Sea.
- It contains numerous shoals, reefs, atolls and islands. The Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands and the Scarborough Shoal are the most important.

The dispute

- It is over territory and sovereignty over ocean areas in south China sea. This also includes the two islands namely The Parcel and the Spratly.
- China often invokes the so called nine-dash line to justify its apparent historic rights over most of the South China Sea.
- Parts of this sea is also claimed by Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei and Vietnam.
- China has ignored a 2016 international tribunal decision that declared its assertion as without basis.
- In 2016, Permanent Court of Arbitration awarded a verdict refuting Chinese claim over South China Sea.

Geopolitical significance of South China Sea:

For China

- China declared its right to the islands of this region in an official address to the UN Secretary General back in May 2009.
- With its growing economy and increasing energy and raw material exports shipped through the Malacca Strait, Beijing needs to create strongholds in the sea to insure against possible risks.

For ASEAN

- Many ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Philippines, Brunei etc. claim their sovereign rights over this region and hence are

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parties to the dispute.

- After the verdict, government of these countries would get more leverage in their own disputes with Beijing over South China Sea.

For USA

- USA is aggressively pursuing its rebalancing strategy and hence it is wary of Chinese domination in this region.
- After the verdict, there are chances of more confrontation between USA and China in this region.

For India

- India's presence in Pacific is increasing making it an important player in the Indo-Pacific region.
- For this freedom of navigation through South China Sea is very important.
- India is also pursuing its economic interest in this region. It has collaborated with Vietnam to explore the petroleum resources in South China Sea.

This has been opposed by China

- Also, large volume of Indian trade happens through the Strait of Malacca.

Resource availability

- The region has huge amount of oil and natural gas reserve.
- It holds one third of the entire world's marine biodiversity

For Multilateralism

- South China Sea region has become a litmus test for multilateralism especially after the verdict of PCA which China is not willing to accept.
- It has potential to affect the credibility of PCA.

The sinking of the Tutor in the Red Sea marks what appears to be a new escalation by the Iranian backed Houthis in their campaign targeting shipping through the vital maritime corridor over the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

The attack comes despite a months long U.S. led campaign in the region that has seen the Navy face its most intense maritime fighting since World War II, with near daily attacks targeting commercial vessels and warship.

About Red Sea:

It is a semi enclosed inlet (or extension) of the Indian Ocean between the continents of Africa and Asia. It is one of the world's warmest seas.

It is connected to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the south through the Gulf of Aden and the narrow strait of Bab El-Mandeb.

The northern portion of the Red Sea is bifurcated by the Sinai Peninsula into the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gulf of Suez, where it is connected to the Mediterranean Sea via the famous Suez Canal.

Bordering Countries:

Yemen and Saudi Arabia border the Red Sea to the east.

It is bordered by Egypt to the north and west and by Sudan, Eritrea, and Djibouti to the west.

This sea has a surface area of roughly 438,000 km² and is about 2,250 km in length.

The maximum width of the sea is 355 km, and the sea's deepest point is 3,040 m at the central Suakin Trough, with the sea's estimated average depth being 490 m.

Islands: Some well known islands include Tiran Island, which is located near the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, and Shadwan Island, which is located at the entrance of the Gulf of Suez.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Ship attacked by Yemen's Houthis sinks in Red Sea

CONTEXT: A bulk carrier sank days after an attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels believed to have killed one mariner on board, authorities said early on Wednesday, the second ship sunk in the rebels' campaign.



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