

News Juice – 16th June, 2022

1. Why is NordVPN removing its India servers?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

NordVPN has become the third virtual private network (VPN) provider to remove its servers from India in response to the country's cybersecurity directive. It follows the likes of ExpressVPN and Surfshark who have already pulled their servers from the country in the aftermath of the rules. The norms, released by the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) in April, require VPNs to record and keep users' logs for 180 days as well as store a range of information for five years.

"In the past, similar regulations were typically introduced by authoritarian governments in order to gain more control over their citizens," NordVPN said in a statement. "If democracies follow the same path, it has the potential to affect people's privacy as well as their freedom of speech. One way or another, this law will likely have a negative impact on people's privacy and digital security."

Why has NordVPN removed its India servers?

The Panama-based company said that due to the logging and storage requirement of the rules, "a VPN company with servers in India may no longer be able to guarantee privacy for its users".

The firm is "concerned" about the possible effect this regulation may have on people's data. "From what it seems, the amount of stored private information will be drastically increased throughout hundreds or maybe thousands of different companies. It is hard to imagine that all, especially small and medium enterprises, will have the proper means to ensure the security of such data," it said.

NordVPN will remove its servers on June 26, a day before the cybersecurity norms come into effect. NordVPN is among the largest VPN providers globally, with more than 14 million users globally and more than 5,500 servers in 60 countries.

How have other VPN providers reacted?

Last week, Surfshark pulled its India servers, saying that the cybersecurity rules "go against the core ethos" of the company's "no logs" policy. Before that, ExpressVPN had removed its servers from the country, saying it "refuses to participate in the Indian government's attempts to limit internet freedom".

What are India's rules related to VPNs?

The guidelines, released by CERT-In on April 28, asked VPN service providers along with data centres and cloud service providers to store information such as names, e-mail IDs, contact numbers, and IP addresses, among other things, of their customers for a period of five years.

While the government has said it wants these details to fight cybercrime, the industry argues that privacy is the main selling point of VPN services, and such a move would be in breach of the privacy cover provided by VPN platforms.

However, despite these concerns, Minister of State for Electronics and IT Rajeev Chandrashekhar had earlier said that VPNs who would not adhere to the rules are free to exit the country. The rules will come into effect on June 27.

What happens to Indian users of NordVPN?

The firm said that its Indian servers will remain until June 26, and in order to ensure that its users are aware of this decision, NordVPN will send notifications with the full information via its app starting 20 June.

While the firm is yet to announce how the move will impact its India users, other VPNs who have removed their servers said that they will service users in the country via virtual servers located in other countries.

Source: The Indian Express

2. The fall in unemployment rate in the 2020-21 labour survey, what it means

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Reduction in Unemployment

Labour indicators recorded a sharp, all-round improvement in 2020-21 (July-June) compared with the previous three years, data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Tuesday showed.

The annual report of the Periodic Labour Force Survey for July 2020 to June 2021 showed that the unemployment rate, as per usual status (reference period of last 365 days preceding the survey), eased to 4.2 per cent from 4.8 per cent in 2019-20.

As per the current weekly status (reference period of one week) — contrary to perceived expectations of a likely hit on jobs — unemployment rate eased to 7.5 per cent in 2020-21 from 8.8 per cent. But there is a catch: while the overall employment situation showed improvement, the rise was seen mostly in low-quality, unpaid work.

The headline numbers

The headline employment numbers show an improvement in the employment situation. The unemployment rate of 4.2 per cent in 2020-21, the lowest since the first PLFS showed an unemployment rate of 6.1 per cent in 2017-18. According to the report, the labour force participation rate (LFPR), or those working or seeking or available for work in the labour force, was the highest in four years at 39.3 per cent in 2020-21, as was the worker population ratio (WPR) at 36.3 per cent. WPR is defined as the percentage of employed persons in the population.

The unemployment rate was higher for males in rural areas than females. In rural areas, the unemployment rate was 3.9 per cent in 2020-21, while that for females was 2.1 per cent. In urban areas, the unemployment rate for females was 8.6 per cent, while that for males was 6.1 per cent.

Rise of agricultural share, unpaid work

While the overall employment situation showed improvement, the rise was seen in low-quality, unpaid work. Employment in the unpaid self-employed category continued to show an increase in 2020-21 by rising to 17.3 per cent from 15.9 per cent in 2019-20 and 13.3 per cent in 2018-19. Rural unpaid employment also showed increase to 21.3 per cent in 2020-21 from 20.0 per cent in the previous year, while that for urban areas increased to 6.3 per cent from 5.7 per cent.

Unpaid self-employment for females increased to 42.8 per cent in rural areas in 2020-21 from 42.3 per cent a year ago, while that for rural males increased to 11.0 per cent from 10.4 per cent.

In urban areas, unpaid self-employment for females showed a significant increase to 12.4 per cent in 2020-21 from 11.1 per cent in 2019-20, while that for males increased to 4.5 per cent from 4.1 per cent.

The PLFS data shows that the share of the labour force engaged in agriculture continued to show a rise in 2020-21, increasing to 46.5 per cent from 45.6 per cent in 2019-20 and 42.5 per cent in 2018-19 — a reversal of the decades-long decline in the labour force participation in agriculture.

This suggests that the movement of labour out of agriculture, which had gathered pace post 2004-05, seems to have been stymied by the economic slowdown and the pandemic. The reverse migration of labour from cities to villages would have only increased the pressure on agriculture to absorb the workers.

The increase in share of agricultural employment was seen more for urban areas than rural areas. In urban areas, male employment in agriculture increased to 5.3 per cent in 2020-21 from 5.0 per cent in 2019-20, while that for females increased to 10.4 per cent in 2020-21 from 8.2 per cent.

Source: The Indian Express

3. The fragile state of nuclear disarmament

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) released its yearbook a few days back highlighting some worrying trends of the past year in international security. The expected rise of the global nuclear arsenal was the chief cause of concern among SIPRI experts. The comprehensive report claims that while absolute numbers of nuclear arsenal have reduced, they are expected to grow over the next decade.

What have been the trends in military spending?

During 2012-2021, military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product has largely been stable. If anything, the average worldwide trend has been slightly downward. Russia leads the charge in absolute numbers of nuclear inventory (5977 against the U.S.'s 5428), however it is the U.S. that has the largest number of deployed warheads (1744 against Russia's 1588). The U.K. has 225 nuclear weapons in its inventory, while France has 290, China has 350, India has 160, Pakistan has 165. Israel is estimated to have 90 and North Korea 20.

It is concerning, to say the least, to see how global discourse has created a sense of fear around China's military modernisation and their upward trend in nuclear weapons development while the thousands of nuclear weapons held by the U.S. don't seem to attract a similar level of attention.

What about global arms imports?

Military modernisation is seen to be a global trend. All nuclear weapon owning states have, over the years, stated and worked upon their intention to modernise multiple facets of their armed forces—ranging from the development of newer and more efficient nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, fighter jets, manned and unmanned aerial vehicles to the growing spread of the use of missile defence systems which may result in aggravating security concerns for other countries.

The yearbook has highlighted India as being the top weapons importer during the 2017-2021 period. Other countries to feature in the top five arms importers list include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, and Australia. According to SIPRI, these five nation states account for 38% of total global arms import.

What are the key developments/concerns flagged by the yearbook?

The yearbook mentions low level border clashes between India and Pakistan, the civil war in Afghanistan, and the armed conflict in Myanmar as some of the worrying indicators of an unstable system. It also highlighted three cause of concern trends: Chinese-American rivalry, involvement of state and non-state actors in multiple conflicts, and the challenge that climatic and weather hazards pose. It is important to note here that the threat posed by climate change seems to feature in the report only nominally.

The marginal downsizing observed in the nuclear arsenal has come mostly from the U.S. and Russia dismantling retired warheads. But the Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised some serious eyebrows because of the continuous rhetoric from the Kremlin over them not shying away from the use of nuclear weapons. China's recent activities surrounding construction of 300 new nuclear missile silos have also been turning

heads. Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Chinese Defence Minister, Wei Fenghe, claimed that while they have made “impressive progress” vis-à-vis their nuclear arsenal, the primary purpose of said arsenal continues to be self-defence. Over in the subcontinent, India and Pakistan seem to be making gains over their nuclear arsenal (in absolute numbers) while also looking at the development and procurement of newer and more efficient forms of delivery systems.

Has Iran inflated its military expenditure?

The SIPRI yearbook claims that while there were some advances over the rollout of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iran increased its enrichment of Uranium-235 to 60% in 2021. It also reported that Iran’s military budget grew to \$24.6 billion, growing for the first time in four years. However, some analysts believe that SIPRI has, over the years, overstated Iran’s military expenditure. This is based on there not being a single Iranian exchange rate, resulting in a hyperinflated estimation of expenditure by SIPRI analysts.

It is claimed that SIPRI is aware of this ‘accusation’ and will investigate the ‘exchange rate issue’.

What is the general attitude among countries about existing nuclear and arms related treaties?

Earlier this year, the leaders of the P5 countries (China, France, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S.) issued a joint statement affirming the belief that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”. The joint statement also highlighted their seemingly collective belief that bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements and commitments were indeed important. The dichotomy of this sentiment against the upward trend in absolute numbers of arms and nuclear arsenals is rather unsettling. One could however claim that even with these upward trends, the nation states are making sure to remain well within the ambit of what the treaties and agreements ask for. The tactic here seems to be to milk the treaties and agreements to the hilt. The states are aware of the value of the rhetoric and the security dilemma that their actions present. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent NATO bids by Finland and Sweden seem to be telling events. While the Ukrainian invasion saw Russian military and political establishments hype-up its nuclear attack rhetoric against Ukraine, its primary leadership (both civil and military) had been rather diplomatic and ‘relatively’ cordial in its treatment of the Finnish and Swedish NATO bids.

Clear and constant communication between the countries involved was instrumental in making sure no unintended meanings were construed by the parties involved. The Russians seem to protract this invasion and hope to win it by exhausting Ukraine’s defence capabilities.

The year 2021 also saw the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 2017 coming into effect. The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the Missile Technology Control Regimes (MTCR) held their annual meetings despite decision making being limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What lies ahead?

The recent geopolitical events transpiring around the world in practically all regions have made the global security climate more unstable. A sense of precariousness lulls the air. It is further aided by actions of authoritarian leaders of not just non-democratic systems but also of strongmen leaders of democratic systems. The muscular military policies of these nations coupled with the continuous use of rhetoric that fuel public sentiment over the state’s use of military assets make ripe conditions for the situation to further deteriorate. A strong political opposition would be needed to help keep the ruling dispensation in check. Furthermore, the two largest nuclear weapons holding states need to take on a more engaging role in the international arena. SIPRI’s yearbook, while not being devoid of some challenges, forces us to look critically at how the global disarmament project seems to be going.

Source: The Hindu