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Daily News Juice

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Italy to walk out of China's Belt and Road Initiative

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Why in news?

- Amid Italian media's speculations that Italy was planning to leave China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the country's prime minister Giorgia Meloni has said that "there was more to Italy's relationship with China than the BRI".
- Meloni who met Chinese Premier Li Qiang on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi clarified that a final decision on whether to leave the BRI was still to be taken.
- Italy is the only G7 country (the grouping of advanced economies of US, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan, with the European Union as a "non-enumerated" member) to sign up for the BRI, which it did in 2019.
- China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative is a massive trade and infrastructure network that seeks to connect the country with the West in a model based on the ancient Silk Route.
- Under the initiative, pushed by the Xi Jinping regime, China has built or financed bridges, roads, ports, and even laid down digital connectivity networks in partner countries.



Giorgia Meloni at the G20 summit

Why does Italy want to leave the BRI?

- Italy had joined the BRI at a time it was desperate for investment and infrastructure building, having survived three recessions in 10 years.
- Its govt at the time did not share warm relations with the EU, and was happy to turn to China for the funds it could pump in.
- Four years later, the agreement hasn't done much for Italy. According to figures, Chinese FDI in Italy dropped from \$650 million in 2019 to just \$33 million in 2021.
- In fact, Italy invested far more in non-BRI countries in Europe. In terms of trade, since joining BRI, Italy's exports to China increased from 14.5 billion euros to a mere 18.5 billion euros, while Chinese exports to Italy expanded from 33.5 billion euros to 50.9 billion euros.
- However, despite these obvious problems, if Italy walks out of the deal, the reason won't be just economics.

BRI amid changing geopolitics

- For China, a G7 country joining the BRI had been a big diplomatic win, and Italy walking out just ahead of the initiative's 10th anniversary will be a loss of face.
- This will be in line with Europe's increasingly cautious stand towards China.
- While the US-China ties have been rocky for years now, many countries in Europe continued to maintain close economic and trade links with China. The Russia-Ukraine war, China's perceived staunch support of Vladimir Putin, and geopolitical rivalries taking the form of trade sanctions have forced a rethink.
- In April, EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) collapsed. Last year, Estonia and Latvia quit the 17+1, China's diplomatic push in Central and Eastern European countries. Lithuania had walked out in 2021.
- Italy too has been gradually hardening its stance against China, especially after Meloni came to power. Her govt has restricted a Chinese firm's influence on Italian tiremaker Pirelli.

(more ahead)

Cont'd

- Italy has the G7 presidency next year, and walking out of the BRI will sit well with its Western allies.
- The BRI, too, has attracted negative press over the years. Many countries that joined it enthusiastically now find themselves staring at a massive debt burden to China.
- As per an analysis, a dozen countries most indebted to China — including Pakistan, Kenya, Zambia, Laos and Mongolia found that paying back the debt is consuming an ever-greater amount of the tax revenue and draining foreign currency reserves.
- Notably, China is reluctant to forgive debt and maintains extreme secrecy about how much money it has loaned and on what terms. This has kept other major lenders from stepping in to help these countries.
- Recently, the West has come out with its own initiative for funding infrastructure projects across the world, seen as a counter to the BRI —the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII).

BRI and India

- India does not support the BRI, and has declined to join the project. The major reason for this is that the BRI passes through Indian territory illegally held by Pakistan.
- The arm of the BRI project that links mainland China to the Arabian Sea runs from Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region to Gwadar port in southwestern Baluchistan in Pakistan.
- The project enters Indian territory occupied by Pakistan in Gilgit Baltistan, and traverses the entire length of Pakistan from north to south before reaching the Arabian Sea.
- This arm of the BRI is called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, and consists of multiple modern highway and railway projects.
- India has repeatedly voiced its concern and opposition to the CPEC, and flagged the violation of international law in its building by China and Pakistan.

EU forces Apple to switch to USB-C in iPhone15

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Why in news?

- Apple recently launched iPhone 15. The new iPhone range features Apple's first new charging technology in more than a decade — a USB-C charging port instead of the company's proprietary 'lightning' connector.
- This design change has been forced on Apple by European Union (EU) rules that require smartphones and other electronic devices to have a USB-C port by the end of 2024.
- Apple had initially fought back, claiming the rule would "stifle innovation" and "increase" wastage, but ended up complying well before the deadline kicked in, not just in the EU, but across geographies.



Need behind this change

- The lack of a single charger solution in the last decade has piled up to 11,000 tonnes of e-waste every year from disposed and unused chargers, and more than 2 billion euros spent annually on standalone chargers.
- In addition to that, there was also a lack of interoperability between different brands or models, poor safety requirements, costs for adaptors and proprietary chargers, unpredictable charging times, and failed or lost chargers.

Significance

- Apple made the last major change in its charging ports back in 2012, when it introduced the lightning proprietary tech. And this tech was widely expected to remain this way— had it not been for the spirited EU pushback.
- With the USB-C now featuring across its four new iPhone 15 models, these ports will be the same as those found on Android phones, most Windows laptops, Macbooks and iPads, and pretty much every other consumer gadget or device.
- The EU's common charger rules have the potential to set a global standard, on the lines of the EU's data protection rules rolled out in 2018 that have been customised and adapted by more than 100 countries.

The Indian scenario

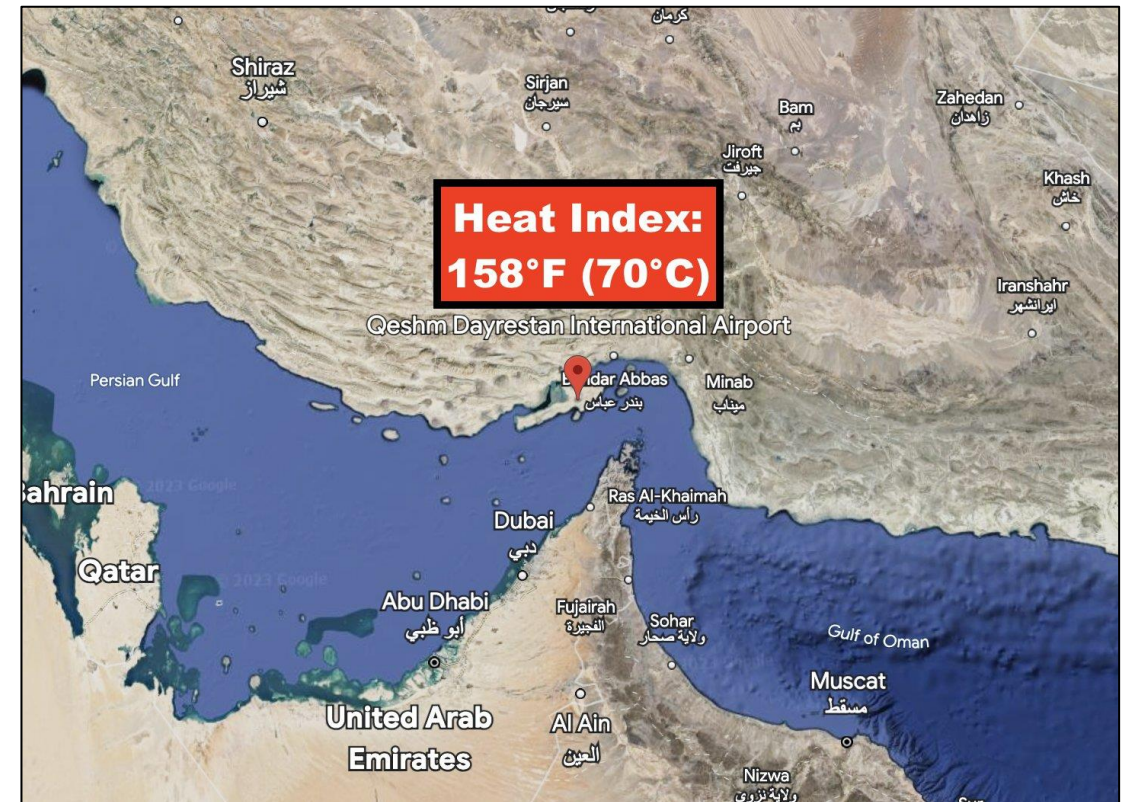
- The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) has notified standards for Type-C chargers and the govt is in the process of prescribing two common types of charging ports for mobiles and wearable electronic devices.
- The Ministry of Consumer Affairs wants original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to make USB-C a standard charging port for all electronic devices by March 2025, which is six months after the passage of the EU deadline.

Iran records life threatening heat index of 70 degrees Celsius

Relevance: Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Why in news?

- In August, Iran recorded a scorching heat index of 70 degrees Celsius ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) in the coastal part of the country, a metric at which survival of life is unfathomable, if not impossible.
- The country had also declared public holidays on two consecutive days on account of “unprecedented heat”. This is not the first time this year that Iran is dealing with extreme heat.
- In July, the Persian Gulf Airport recorded a heat index of 66.7°C .



What is heat index?

- Heat index, also known as apparent temperature, is a measure of how the temperature feels to humans. Relative humidity is an important factor that determines heat index, along with air temperature.

How is it calculated?

- There is a complex formula to calculate heat index. It considers a “typical adult human of either sex, with a height of 1.7 metres and a weight of 67 kg.”
- Dew point, which is the temperature at which gas is transformed into a liquid state, is an important factor in the calculation of heat index.
- In terms of atmospheric moisture, it's the temperature at which air cannot hold any more water vapour, and droplets of water begin to form. The inventor of the heat index used 14 °C as the dew point in his calculations.
- Some countries have developed their own corresponding indices to measure heat index instead of using the original one.

Importance of measuring the heat index

- Hot air can hold more moisture than cold air. Therefore, when temperature rises, the air's capacity to hold moisture also increases, thus affecting the apparent temperature or heat index.
- Humidity is typically higher during heat waves — which is why the heat index at the time is usually higher than just the temperature because humid air can feel hotter to humans.

Impact of high humidity on the human body



- High humidity can lead to heat stress, meaning the body is unable to get rid of excess heat. Humans usually maintain a core temperature in the range of 36.1 to 37.2 °C.
- When the body is unable to get rid of excess heat, the heart rate increases due to a rise in core temperature, leading to heat-related exhaustion and rashes, among other symptoms. It can also be fatal if not addressed promptly.
- At high temperatures, the human body can lose excess heat through perspiration and cool itself. But when humidity is high as well, it is difficult to sweat and then for that sweat to evaporate because the air around is already saturated with moisture. This makes it difficult for the body to lose heat.
- On the other hand, if the humidity is low, evaporation of sweat is easier, thus making the apparent temperature feel close to the actual air temperature.
- This is why a measure of heat index is more useful than just the temperature to gauge the impact of heat on humans.

Adaptive measures

- A heat index value of 67°C or above can be extremely dangerous for people and animals who have direct and prolonged exposure.
- As per an expert, “With climate change, it is likely that we will continue to witness record-breaking heat index values across the world. We will need to prepare and adapt to such extreme conditions by investing in early warning, making changes to work timings, and finding sustainable cooling solutions.”

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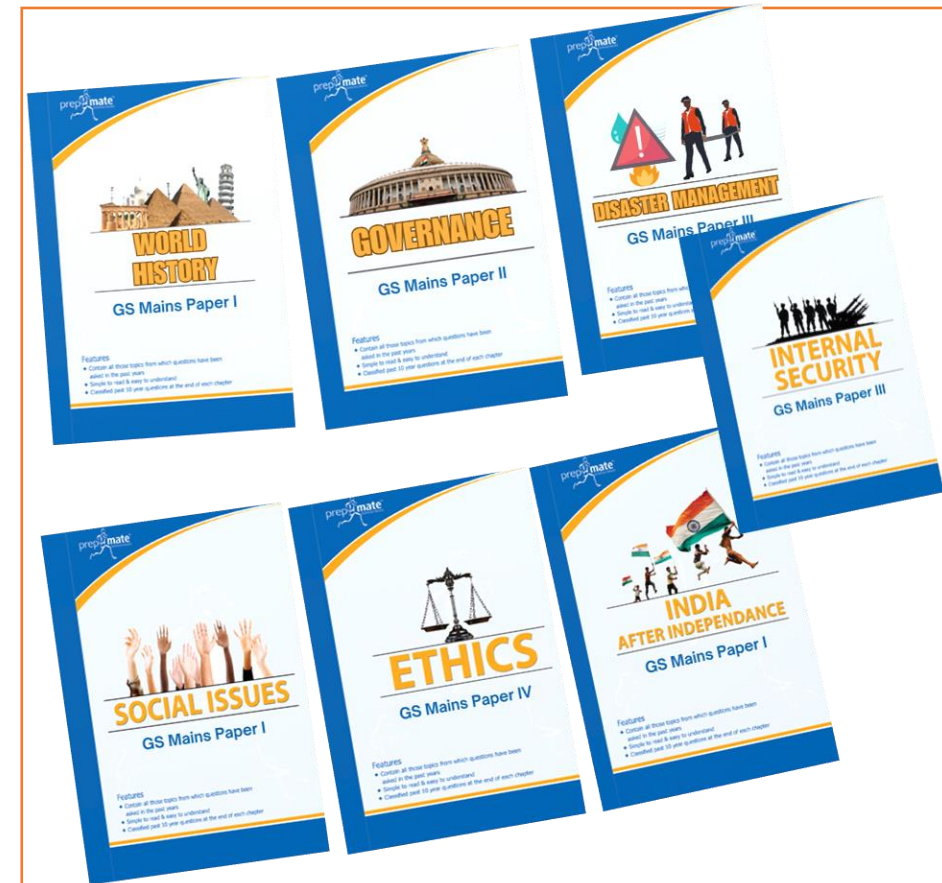
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