

Trade deficit

- India's merchandise trade deficit widened to a record \$23.33 billion in May, as exports grew 15.5% to \$37.3 billion while imports jumped 56.1% to \$60.62 billion, preliminary data from the Commerce and Industry Ministry show
- This is the third month in a row that merchandise imports have crossed \$60 billion, thanks to elevated commodity and oil prices amid the festering Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- Gold imports shot up almost nine fold year-on year to cross \$5.8 billion
- Petroleum imports almost doubled to \$18.1 billion while coal imports more than doubled from May 2021 levels to \$5.33 billion.

THE HINDU

Liquid mirror telescope

- The four-metre International Liquid Mirror Telescope (ILMT) saw the first light recently, gazing out from its vantage on Devasthal, a hill in Uttarakhand, into the deep sky.
- The telescope, staring at the sky overhead, will make sky surveys possible and obtain images that can help observe transient phenomena such as supernovae and record the presence of space debris or meteorites basically, watch the skies.
- The telescope has been built by a collaboration of scientists from Canada, Belgium and India.
- It is located at an altitude of 2,450 metres on the Devasthal Observatory campus of the Aryabhata Research Institute of Observational Sciences (ARIES) in Nainital district, an autonomous institute under the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India.
- A large pool of mercury placed in a vessel is spun around so fast that it curves into a parabolic shape.
- Since mercury is reflective, this shape helps in focusing the reflected light.
- A thin sheet of Mylar protects the mercury from the wind.
- The telescope, having a primary mirror that is liquid, cannot be turned and pointed in any direction.
- It "stares" at the zenith and watches the sky as the earth rotates, thereby giving a view of different objects.
- This property can be used to scan and survey the sky, observe transients and moving objects such as meteorites.
- It will work in tandem with the existing 3.6-metre Devasthal Optical Telescope.

- Once it starts making observations, the telescope will collect gigabytes of data, which will need to be analysed using artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI and ML) tools.

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India Israel

- Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his visiting Israeli counterpart Benny Gantz discussed partnerships within the government-to-government framework, military training, and technological cooperation with a focus on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) and defensive capabilities.
- A Letter of Intent on enhancing cooperation in the field of futuristic defence technologies was also exchanged between the two Ministers, a Defence Ministry statement said.
- The Ministers also discussed a cooperation agreement signed between the Indian Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel's Directorate for Defence R&D.
- The Ministers declared their intention to further develop defence cooperation in a manner that harnesses Israel's "technological advance and operational

experience", together with India's "extraordinary development and production capabilities",

- "Cooperation between the countries would be in line 'Make in India' vision.

THE HINDU

Caste census

Why do all political parties support it in Bihar?

- Almost all political parties in Bihar identify themselves with a particular caste, sub-caste or community for representation, and leaders cannot afford to take their political identity out of that caste or group.
- The objective behind this demand is to bring out the recent changes in caste groups and how resources may be best shared.
- The data will help the State government understand the exact population of various caste groups and assess the socio-economic development in every group, and the welfare schemes needed for their benefit.

What are the benefits of a caste count?

- Social equality programmes and welfare measures cannot be successfully implemented without

comprehensive data and for this a caste count is necessary in a State known to be fragmented into several castes, sub-castes, groups and communities.

- In a modern state, a count of every category of citizens is necessary so that they can get the benefit of all welfare measures, says political analyst Ajay Kumar.
- In the absence of such data, there is no proper estimate for the population of other backward classes (OBC)s, extremely backward classes (EBCs) and several other groups within them, he added.
- A caste-based count goes a long way in bringing a measure of objectivity to the debate on reservations.

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China and pacific islands

The story so far:

- Wang Yi, the Foreign Minister of China, is currently on an eight-day visit to ten Pacific Island Countries (PICs), and has co-hosted with Fiji the Second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting on May 30, 2022.
- During the meeting, China's effort to push through a comprehensive framework deal, the draft of which

was leaked earlier, failed to gain consensus among the PICs.

- What is the strategic significance of the PICs?
- The Pacific Island Countries are a cluster of 14 states which are located largely in the tropical zone of the Pacific Ocean between Asia, Australia and the Americas.
- They include Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Republic of Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The islands are divided on the basis of physical and human geography into three distinct parts Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.
- The islands are very small in land area, and are spread wide across the vast equatorial swathe of the Pacific Ocean.
- As a result, though they are some of the smallest and least populated states, they have some of the largest Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the world.
- Large EEZs translate into huge economic potential due to the possibility of utilising the wealth of fisheries, energy, minerals and other marine resources present in such zones.

- Hence, they prefer to be identified as Big Ocean States, rather than Small Island States.
- In fact, Kiribati and FSM, both PICs, having EEZs larger than that of India.
- The Pacific islands also acted as one of the major theatres of conflict during the Second World War between imperial Japan and the U.S. Due to the remoteness of these islands from the Soviet Union and major population centres of the world, some of the major nuclear weapon test sites of the U.S., the U.K. and France were located here.
- In addition, the 14 PICs, bound together by shared economic and security concerns, account for as many number of votes in the United Nations, and act as a potential vote bank for major powers to mobilise international opinion.
- They are located beyond China's 'First Island Chain', which represents the country's first threshold of maritime expansion.
- The PICs are located geostrategically in what is referred to by China as its 'Far Seas', the control of which will make China an effective Blue Water capable Navy an essential prerequisite for becoming a superpower.
- At a time when the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has emerged as a major force in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China, the need to influence the PICs have become an even more pressing matter for China.
- Apart from the vast marine richness of the PICs, the Taiwan factor plays a major role in China's Pacific calculus.
- China, which considers Taiwan to be a breakaway territory, is preparing for what seems like an inevitable military invasion. In this context, it becomes important to break Western domination of island chains of the Pacific which could impede reunification.

What does China seek to achieve from the PICs and how?

- China does not have any particular historical linkages to the PICs unlike the Western powers.
- Therefore, its interest in the PICs is of relatively recent origin, and is linked to China's rise in the past few decades.
- The PICs lie in the natural line of expansion of China's maritime interest and naval power.
- Wooing the PICs away from the West and Taiwan will therefore make the goal of Taiwan's reunification easier for China.

What are the implications of China's latest move?

- China has increasingly started talking about security cooperation in addition to its economic diplomacy towards the PICs.
- In April 2022, China signed a controversial security deal with the Solomon Islands, which raised regional concerns.
- Prior to the current visit of Wang Yi, two draft documents prepared by the Chinese side were leaked, and gained the attention of regional leaders in the Pacific as well as the larger international community.
- One of the documents is the “China-Pacific Island Countries (PICs) Common Development Vision”, and the other is “China-Pacific Islands Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022-2026)”.
- The vision gives a broad proposal about co-operation in the political, security, economic and strategic areas, whereas the action plan outlines the more specific details of co-operation in the identified areas.
- The secrecy surrounding the draft, and the haste with which it was discussed with the governments of the PICs during the meeting sent worrying signals across the Pacific
- The intensification of China's diplomacy towards the Pacific

Islands have made the powers who have traditionally controlled the regional dynamics like the U.S. and Australia more cautious.

- The U.S. has started revisiting its diplomatic priority for the region ever since the China-Solomon Islands deal.

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