

## General Knowledge - II

### Current Affairs

Q. no 2

The HTS Islamic rebels have toppled down Bashar al Assad regime in Syria.....

#### \*Introduction:

The toppling of Bashar al-Assad's regime by Hayat Tahrir al-Shams (HTS) represents a significant shift in Syrian politics and military trajectory. This development while signalling the end of decades of authoritarian rule, raises pressing questions about the stability, governance and implications of Islamist dominance in Syria.

#### \*Background: History of the Conflict

Bashar al-Assad came into power in Syria in 2000 after his father Hafez al-Assad's death, who became the president of Syria in 1971 and ruled until 2000. Assad followed his father's footsteps and developed an authoritarian rule in Syria for more than two decades. This resulted in the Syrian civil war in 2011 after pro-democracy protests swept through Syria during the Arab Spring, threatening the rule of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. His violent suppression of protestors escalated into war between Assad's forces and opposition militia.

#### ⇒ How did the Syrian Civil War begin?

From 2006 to 2010, Syria suffered its worst drought in modern history. The

combined effects of the drought and pre-existing economic disparities under the Assad's regime contributed to the first non-violent pro-reform protest in 2011, riding the wave of Arab Spring uprisings. Divisions between the country's Sunni majority and the ruling Alawite elite were also a factor. Bashar's harsh military crackdown escalated tensions, and by September 2011 the peaceful protest turned into an armed emergency.

Opposition militias began to form in 2011, and by 2012 the conflict had expanded into a full-fledged civil war. In late November 2024, as the government's support from military allies collapsed, it was unable to stave off a rapid offensive by opposition forces and on December 8 Assad fled the country and the HTS took control of Damascus, the Syrian capital. Opposition forces announced their victory on state television and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed Assad's resignation and his departure from Syria.

### Reasons for Assad's Regime fall:

1. Prolonged civil war and institutional weakening:

→ A decade of conflict:

The Syrian civil war (2011-2023) depleted the Assad's regime resources, devastated

infrastructure and fostered widespread public dissatisfaction.

- **Economic collapse:**

Sanctions, war-driven destruction and corruption left Syrian economy in shambles eroding the regime's legitimacy.

## 2. HTS's Strategic and Military Tactics:

HTS and other opposition forces backed by western powers such as US and Germany and local support from Turkey, Jordan, Israel and Saudi-Arabia has utilized their

- **Guerrilla Warfare Tactics**
- **Territorial dominance**

## 3. Public discontent and Regime Brutality

- **Human Rights Violation**

Assad in his more than two decades rule killed, tortured, dispossessed and exiled million of its people. Widespread reports of use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombing and arbitrary detentions alienated the population.

- **Failed Governance**

Assad ruled as an absolute dictator whose dis-interest in public grievances, coupled with nepotism and corruption, fueled resentment among the people.

#### 4. Declining International Support:

Iran and Russia have suffered a dramatic loss of influence in Syria and the region as a result of wars in Middle East and Ukraine, making it impossible to save Assad in 2024 as they did in 2014-15.

#### • Shifting Geopolitics

Turkey seems to have a winning strategy in Syria, opposing Assad while negotiating with its backers, hosting refugees, supporting the opposition politically and militarily has leverage in the region.

#### 5. Rise of Islamist Factions:

HTS emerged as a disciplined, organized entity compared to fragmented opposition groups (YPG and PKK), gaining local and international recognition as a key player.

#### Implications of HTS's victory:

##### • Regional Implications

The fall of Assad's Regime has completely disrupted the influence of Iran and Hezbollah, which has heavily supported and depended on Assad's Regime. It will also decrease sectarian tensions, reducing the risk of regional spillover conflicts.

• **Power vacuum in Syria**: could create regional instability and risk of Syria becoming a field for regional competition over hegemony, potentially creating more chaos and empowering extremist groups.

## • Geopolitical Shift:

Russia's loss of a key ally in the region reduces its Middle Eastern influence while the US and Europe must recalibrate their counter-terrorism strategies in the region.

Fall of Assad's brutal regime is a watershed moment in Syria's history, signifying the end of decade of authoritarian rule but also a critical period of uncertainty and potential ~~uncertainty~~ instability.

HFS's ascendancy poses significant challenges for governance, stability and regional security with implications that extend far beyond Syria's borders.

Comprehensive international engagement and conflict resolution strategies are the need of the hour to prevent Syria following into depths of destruction and destabilization in the region. The

key international players like US should now work with regional players like

Turkey to engage diplomatically towards a stable and inclusive governance model that contributes towards region's stability.

Q.No.3 State owned enterprises have been a huge and persistent burden ----- why and how they should be privatized?

### State Owned Enterprises (SOEs)

SOEs in Pakistan have historically contributed towards economic activity but over time many of these entities have become inefficient and loss-making ventures, posing a persistent strain on national budget. With massive losses mismanagement and fiscal deficit the privatization of these SOEs is an imperative step towards economic stabilisation and efficiency.

### The Burden of SOEs on Pakistan's Economy

Almost 100 state owned enterprises were granted a bailout package of 1 Trillion PKR. Most prominent of these SOEs are NHA, Railways, PIA, Pakistan Post, DISCOS, National Steels Mill etc.

In the end of June 2024, PIA was facing about 400 Billion PKR loan. Subsidies of about 60 Billion PKR were granted to it in 2023-24. whereas subsidies of about 80 Billion PKR to NHA, 35 Billion PKR to Railways, 100 Billion to NSM and 200 Billion PKR to DISCOS in fiscal year 2024-25.

largest amount was paid to QESCO and PESCO.

During the Socialist government of 1970s in Pakistan, majority of the enterprises were nationalized, but in 1990s majority of the industries were privatized once again including textile, automobile, sports, leather and electrical under the SME development Authority.

Today almost all SOEs are indebted, PKR 1 TRILLION is annually injected to bail them out.

### Reasons

#### 1) Inefficiency & Mismanagement:-

Overstaffing due to political appointments and a lack of accountability results in operational inefficiency. Poor governance and outdated technology hinder productivity, making these entities unable to compete in the market.

#### 2) Fiscal Pressure on Budget:

Government's subsidies to support SOEs contribute significantly to budget deficit increasing public debt.

#### 3) Lack of Innovation and Competitiveness

State control discourages innovation and fails to foster competition, leading to stagnation and underdevelopment of services.

## \* Why Privatization is necessary?

### → Reduction of Fiscal Deficit:

1 Trillion PKR would be saved every year, reducing the burden on national exchequer, allowing fiscal space for development priorities.

→ state expenses would be reduced by 1 Trillion PKR every year.

→ state would acquire lesser loans at least by 1 Trillion per year.

→ It would help improvement in state's performance.

### ⇒ Attracting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment):

This would encourage investment from foreign investors not only bringing capital but expertise, technology and innovations, improving the service delivery.

### ⇒ Growth & Job creation:

a competitive private sector encourages economic growth, creating employment opportunities and contributing to GDP.

## \* How to Privatize SOEs?

SOEs like NHA, Railways and PIA should be privatized at top priority. At number two all DISCOs and then



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NSM. But this should be done in a comprehensive way. First the financial health, liabilities and operational efficiency of SOEs ~~to set~~ should be evaluated to set benchmark for privatization. A phased approach should be adopted by starting with non-strategic SOEs and then gradually moving towards larger entities to ensure smooth transition. Involving reputable international firms and investors to ensure technology transfer and adherence to global best practices. Employees welfare should be protected with 'Golden hand Shake' by offering compensation, retraining or redeployment programs.

Pakistan's SOEs have become a burden on economy due to their inefficiency and mismanagement. Privatization is not <sup>mere</sup> only an option but a necessity to enhance productivity and service delivery. However successful privatization requires strategic transparent and phased approach backed by regulatory reforms and public awareness. Through this Pakistan can transform its loss-making SOEs into drivers of economic growth & stability.

Q.No.5 Dollar and SWIFT being used as a weapon by US against the countries of the Global South. Critically evaluate how BRICS+ could .....

The United States has used the dollar's dominance in global trade and the SWIFT financial messaging system as instrument of geopolitical leverage, often imposing sanctions or financial restrictions on countries in the Global South. This has created economic vulnerabilities for these nations, prompting the rise of alternatives like BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and their expanded members). BRICS+ seek to counter-balance Western financial exploitation and establish a more equitable international financial system.

### Dollar and SWIFT as Tool of Western Leverage :

#### 1. Dollar Dominance

The US dollar is the world's primary reserve currency, accounting for over 60% of global reserve and trade settlement. Dollar reliance exposes nations to US sanctions, as transactions denominated in dollars often pass through US financial institutions.

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## 2. SWIFT's Role

The US and its allies leverage SWIFT to exclude targeted countries (e.g. Iran, Russia) from the global financial system, crippling their economies.

## 3. Global South's vulnerabilities:

Economies in the Global South depend on dollar-denominated trade and foreign exchange reserves. Sudden sanctions or financial isolation destabilize these economies, hindering growth and development.

## How BRICS+ can counter Dollar and SWIFT Hegemony

The western dominated Bretton Woods System had systematic shortcomings due to its inability to avoid <sup>major</sup> financial (Asian financial crisis of 1997 and Global financial crisis 2008) as well as its inability to adjust to changing dynamics like unremitting climate change, extreme inequality between global North and global South and economic and geo-political changes.

BRICS is an ~~initiated~~ initiative to counter western economic system. BRICS want

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want to make a democratic transition to counter US Dollar hegemony by introducing an alternate currency initiative also known as BRICS pay. BRICS pay is a planned decentralised and independent payment messaging mechanism system for BRICS nations to trade with each other through their own currencies. BRICS pay was first introduced in 2018, as a way for the developing nation to better trade with each other, not in use yet.

#### • Developing Alternative Payment System

Russia's SPFS (system for transfer of financial messages) and China's (cross-border interbank payment system), BRICS can integrate these systems into a unified network for secure, SWIFT independent transactions.

#### • Expanding local currency trade:

Encouraging bilateral and multilateral trade settlements in local currency (e.g. yuan). This would support growth and development. For example Russia is facing sanctions due to its war against Ukraine. Using a variety of currencies in its foreign transaction may make it easier to get around these sanctions.

## • Strengthening BRICS Bank:

In response to the contemporary financial architecture (CFA), Brics introduced and alternative financial architecture. It created a New Development Bank (NDB) parallel to the World bank. Increasing funds for BRICS + projects in local currencies can foster development without western financial constraint.

## • Promoting De-Dollarization Globally:

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• Collaborating with other Global South nations can diversify reserve into gold, yuan or other regional currencies. The five additional members KSA, Iran, UAE, Egypt and Ethiopia broaden the sphere of BRICS making it even more powerful as it now holds 28% of the Global GDP with an economy of \$28.5 Trillion generating additional \$2.6 Trillion in GDP. With the addition of Arab countries, the bloc accounts for more than 43% of global oil production.

### Conclusion:

Dollar and SWIFT being used as a weapon by US against the countries of the Global South. BRICS+ is a powerful counterweight that has challenged the Western Hegemony and exploitations on a permanent basis, by offering an alternative financial system, fostering local currency and economic cooperation. While challenges remain, a coordinated and sustained effort by BRICS+ can pave the way for a more equitable global financial order.

Q4

## Russia-China Relations

The relationship between China and Russia has undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by their mutual ambition to counter US-led international order and re-shape the global balance of power. As two nations complete 75 years of diplomatic relations in 2024, their cooperation has expanded across economic, strategic and geo-political collaboration.

## US-Led Liberal World Order:

The liberal international world order was established after World War II, with US assuming a crucial leadership role. As per liberal school of thought, this system was multi-faceted and focused on economic openness (establishment of world trade organisation), multilateral institutes (United Nations, IMF and WB), security cooperation (NATO) and democratic solidarity. The US dollar was established as the world's reserve currency and this provided the foundation for America's leadership role in international system. The US-led world order has undergone

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many shifts after world war II. America has been constrained to a certain extent by the bipolarity of the Cold War Era. The balance of power provided a degree of order and stability in bipolar world.

But the disintegration of USSR, the cold war came to an end and America's position as global hegemon was cemented internationally. From end of cold war until 2016, the liberal international order is dominated by America and its western allies interfering in internal affairs of other countries the guise of 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine.

## Russia-China Collaboration:

### 1 Economic Collaboration:

#### a. Bilateral Trade and Energy Cooperation:

- Russia and China have deepened bilateral ties, trade exceeding 1200 Billion annually, driven by energy exports from Russia and manufactured goods from China. Key projects, such as Power of Siberia gas pipeline, enhance interdependence and secure China's energy needs while diversifying Russia's exports.

- When US imposed Sanctions on Russia after Ukraine war, China was the biggest import of Russia oil and gas



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Russia supplied 19.8% in the first 10 months of 2024.

### • Economic Institutions:

Collaboration within frameworks like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serve to challenge western-dominated financial institutions like IMF and the World Bank.

• Initiatives such as the BRICS, New Development Bank (NDB) aim to provide alternative to US-centric economic system.

### 2. Strategic and Military Cooperation:

#### a. Military Exercises and Arms Trade

• Joint military exercises, such as 'Vostok' and 'Peace Mission', reflect growing military interoperability and signal to the west their ability to coordinate defense efforts.

• Russia remains a major supplier of advanced weapons to China, bolstering Beijing's military modernization efforts.

#### b. Opposition to US Military Alliances

Russia and China has often opposed US-led alliances like NATO and AUKUS. Russia Ukraine war one of the reason

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because NATO was expanded its wing around its eastern corner, Ukraine wanted to become member of NATO, ultimately Russia attacking Ukraine.

- Similarly US military alliances in South East Asia and its bases in Taiwan has imposed threat to Russia China, Both has frequently coordinated in the United Nations to block resolutions undermining their sovereignty.

### 3. Geopolitical Collaboration:

Russia and China has both joined hand to counter US hegemony and advocated for a multipolar world order, challenging the unipolar dominance of US.

- One major alliance is the formation of BRICS+ and its expansion, aimed not only for economic collaboration but geopolitical alliance.

- China launched its BRI expanding its global foot print.

### Potential challenges and Limitation:

The US and its allies are strengthening relations through alliances such as Quad, G-7, D-8, AUKUS, <sup>G-20</sup> to counter

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balance Russia-China influence.

• In response to China's BRI, US has started IMEC and B3W economic projects to provide counterweight.

The growing Russia-China partnership poses a serious challenge to the US-led world order. Their shared world of multipolar world, underpinned by deepening economic, strategic and geopolitical collaboration, seeks to counterbalance Western hegemony. However, the success of this challenge will depend on their ability to manage internal divergence, resist external pressures and sustain long-term coordination.