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UPSC Spotlight - focus page for prelims 2026



U.S. sinks Iranian vessel near Sri Lanka

A major escalation occurred in the ongoing West Asian conflict when a U.S. submarine torpedoed and sank an Iranian warship, IRIS Dena, in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka's southern coast. The strike reportedly took place about 40 nautical miles off Galle, bringing the conflict geographically closer to the Indian subcontinent. U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth confirmed the attack, describing it as the first sinking of an enemy ship by torpedo since World War II and framing it as part of the broader U.S. military campaign. The incident caused significant casualties, with 83 sailors reported dead, while 32 were rescued by the Sri Lankan Navy after a distress call from the vessel. The event signals a serious intensification of hostilities with potential regional security implications.



Macron orders France's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to Mediterranean

Emmanuel Macron announced that France is deploying the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the Mediterranean Sea to help secure maritime trade routes threatened by the widening West Asia conflict. With the Strait of Hormuz closed and shipping through the Suez Canal and Red Sea under threat, France is also working to form an international coalition to safeguard global trade and energy flows. Paris has deployed additional naval assets, intercepted drones near Gulf allies, and reinforced security at home while assisting evacuation of its citizens from the region.



Why politicians in Bihar are not saying 'cheers' to the decade-old prohibition



In April 2016, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar imposed a total ban on alcohol in the State, citing overwhelming support from women and children. The ban prohibited the sale of both country-made and commercially produced liquor, and no new licenses were issued for hotels, bars, or clubs. The policy aimed to curb alcohol consumption and protect public health, and it was widely popular among certain sections of the population.

However, over the years, questions about the effectiveness of the ban have emerged. Opposition parties and some allies have highlighted that illegal liquor trade continues to thrive, with creative smuggling methods involving ambulances, LPG cylinders, and train pantry cars. Enforcement efforts have led to seizures, arrests of millions of people, and impounding of vehicles, but illicit trade persists. Critics argue that prohibition disproportionately affects the poor, while the wealthy often evade consequences.

The economic impact of the ban has been significant. State excise revenue dropped drastically from ₹3,142 crore before the ban to just ₹30 crore in 2016-17, while a parallel illegal liquor market worth ₹20,000–40,000 crore operates in Bihar. Lawmakers and economists have called for a review, arguing that legal alcohol sales could strengthen the State's finances, reduce illegal trade, and improve policy implementation. Despite these concerns, the government has maintained its stance, emphasizing the health and social benefits of prohibition.



Karnataka CM backs Stalin on Centre-State relations debate

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has expressed strong support for initiating a national dialogue on Union–State relations, emphasizing that federalism is part of the basic structure of the Constitution. Responding to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin's communication and the report of the Justice Kurian Joseph High-Level Committee, he highlighted the need for cooperative and collective federal renewal involving all States, regardless of political differences.

He clarified that the objective is not to weaken the Union but to ensure a proper constitutional balance, where the Centre focuses on national priorities while States exercise powers entrusted to them. He raised concerns about increasing centralisation through expansive use of the Concurrent List, conditional fiscal transfers, reduced State flexibility in centrally sponsored schemes, and delays in Governors' assent. He also suggested strengthening institutional mechanisms like the Inter-State Council to restore federal balance.

Nepal to vote in first post-protest parliamentary election

Nepal is holding its first election since the protests that forced the resignation of K. P. Sharma Oli and the dissolution of the House of Representatives. The protests, largely led by young people, turned violent when police opened fire, leaving 77 people dead, including 19 youths. The incident shocked the country and drew global attention. An interim government was later formed, though some critics argued that the process stretched constitutional limits.

The March 5 election is therefore seen as an important step toward restoring constitutional order and returning Nepal to a stable democratic process. However, political analysts believe that no single party is likely to win a clear majority. As a result, Nepal may once again witness a hung parliament and coalition negotiations, which have become common features of its recent politics.

Nepal's close economic and political ties with India remain significant, especially given their long porous border and strong trade relations. While India has publicly stated that it will work with whichever government comes to power, analysts believe it may quietly prefer a non-Left government, possibly led by the Nepali Congress or the emerging Rastriya Swatantra Party. Meanwhile, both China and the United States have also expressed support for a peaceful election process, highlighting the broader international interest in Nepal's political stability. The outcome of the vote will therefore not only shape Nepal's domestic politics but also influence its relations with major regional and global powers. The election is thus a crucial test of Nepal's democratic resilience after a period of unrest. Its results will determine not only the stability of the next government but also the strategic balance among external powers with interests in the Himalayan region.



IRGC claims it has 'complete control' of Strait of Hormuz

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps claimed it had taken control of the Strait of Hormuz during the ongoing conflict with Israel, while Israeli strikes targeted Tehran. Iran has expanded missile and drone attacks across the region, escalating the war and disrupting shipping through the strait. Major shipping companies have halted transit after vessels were attacked, and the United States Navy signalled readiness to escort oil tankers. Because the Strait of Hormuz carries a large share of global oil shipments, any disruption threatens energy supply, raises global oil prices, and creates instability in international markets and geopolitical relations.

From Discord to Dialogue: The Changing Trajectory of India–Canada Relations

India–Canada relations faced an unprecedented strain in 2023 when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alleged that India could be linked to the killing of pro-Khalistani separatist Hardeep Nijjar in British Columbia. This led to a severe diplomatic escalation, including the expulsion of diplomats, closure of consulates, and withdrawal of high commissioners—a scale of action usually reserved for war or terrorism. India strongly rejected the allegations and described Canada as a "safe haven" for extremists, a rare characterization for a Western democracy. The relationship began to improve in 2025 after Trudeau stepped down and Mark Carney became Canada's Prime Minister. Carney, a former central banker, prioritized separating political tensions from economic and strategic ties. By inviting Prime Minister Modi to the G7 outreach summit in June 2025 and establishing dialogue mechanisms under the National Security Advisors of both countries, Carney set the stage for gradual restoration of trust and cooperation.

Trade and Economic Ties

Trade and investment remain central to India–Canada relations. The countries are negotiating a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement to double two-way trade to \$70 billion by 2030. In 2024, two-way trade was \$30.8 billion, with India exporting pharmaceuticals, machinery, iron and steel, electronic goods, chemicals, and textiles, while importing pulses, fertilizers, and minerals from Canada. Canadian investment in India has been significant, amounting to \$4.18 billion from April 2000 to June 2025, making Canada the 17th largest foreign investor in India. These economic links create strong incentives for stability in bilateral relations.

Advancing trade negotiations, expanding cooperation in technology, clean energy, and critical mineral supply chains, and leveraging the large Indian diaspora in Canada can further deepen economic and societal linkages.



Security and Defence Cooperation

Security dialogue between India and Canada is well-established, covering counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, and regional stability. Frameworks such as the 1997 Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and the 2018 Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism agreement provide structured platforms for cooperation. Recent meetings between India's NSA Ajit Doval and Canada's national security and intelligence officials have strengthened this collaboration, particularly to address concerns over pro-Khalistani activities in Canada.

Energy Collaboration

Energy forms another important pillar of the bilateral relationship. Canada's vast resources of oil, gas, LNG, LPG, and critical minerals complement India's growing energy needs. Cooperation spans both conventional and renewable energy sectors, positioning Canada as a reliable long-term supplier for India's expanding energy demands.

Education and People-to-People Links

Educational ties have reinforced people-to-people connections. *Indian students form the largest group of international students in Canada, numbering over 3.92 lakh as of December 2024.* Institutional partnerships, joint research programs, and academic mobility initiatives have further deepened these bonds, making education an enduring channel for mutual engagement.



India–Brazil Rare Earths MoU: Strategic and Economic Benefits

The MoU ensures stable mineral supplies for India, boosting investor confidence and supporting domestic high-tech and strategic industries. By aligning on environmental and quality standards, India can better access global markets for finished products. Economically, it diversifies imports and strengthens supply chain security.

Global Connections

The agreement complements India's participation in the U.S.-led Pax Silica initiative, which secures silicon for computing and AI hardware, by adding another reliable source of critical minerals. Brazil gains investment for mining and processing, moves up the value chain, and secures a long-term market for its rare earths, lithium, bauxite, and manganese, reducing dependence on speculative exports. The MoU enhances strategic, economic, and technological cooperation, strengthening India's supply chains while supporting Brazil's mineral development and industrial growth.

How will rare earth MoU with Brazil help India

On February 21, during President Lula da Silva's state visit, India and Brazil signed a strategic MoU on rare earths and critical minerals. Covering the full value chain—exploration, mining, processing, recycling, and refining—the agreement aims to strengthen supply chains, enhance competitiveness, and foster long-term cooperation. Though non-binding, it is significant for industrial and strategic collaboration, especially as both countries look to reduce reliance on global suppliers and secure critical materials for emerging technologies such as electronics, renewable energy, and defense applications.

The India–Brazil MoU on rare earths and critical minerals strengthens both countries' ability to secure and diversify supply chains for strategically important resources. For India, it reduces dependence on limited suppliers while supporting domestic manufacturing in sectors such as electric vehicles, electronics, and defence. For Brazil, the partnership can attract investment, expand mineral processing capacity, and create stable export markets. Overall, the agreement enhances economic resilience and strategic cooperation across the global critical minerals value chain.



Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

Pahalgam and Tackling cross-border infiltration

Location: Pahalgam is situated in the north-east of Anantnag district in Jammu and Kashmir, surrounded by lofty hills covered with evergreen forests.

- **River System:** It lies at the confluence of the Lidder River (a tributary of the Jhelum) and streams originating from Sheshnag Lake. The melodious flow of the Lidder Nallah enhances its ecological and tourist appeal.
- **Geological Features:** Pahalgam forms part of the Lidder Valley and is characterized by limestone and volcanic rock formations, giving it distinct physical features.
- **Climate and Tourism:** The region has a cool, invigorating, and pleasant climate, making it a well-known health resort attracting domestic and international tourists.
- **Strategic and Religious Importance:** Pahalgam serves as the traditional starting point and major transit camp for the Amarnath Yatra. The Amarnath Cave shrine is located about 72 km away, making Pahalgam a crucial base for pilgrims.

Tackling cross-border infiltration

Once infiltrators enter, counter-terror operations become manpower-intensive and casualty-prone.

- Majority of neutralised terrorists in recent years were reportedly foreign infiltrators, highlighting cross-border dimensions.
- Preventive border management is more effective than post-infiltration search operations. Dense forests and mountainous terrain provide natural cover for stealth movement.
- Visibility in jungle areas is extremely low, limiting surveillance effectiveness.
- Heavy snowfall damages fencing annually, creating temporary vulnerabilities.
- Riverine gaps and rugged topography complicate fencing and monitoring.
- Existing Measures include Border fencing along the Line of Control (LoC), Deployment of the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), and use of thermal imagers, infrared sensors, radars, ground sensors, and aerial surveillance systems.
- Development of snow-resistant & smart fencing systems with breach sensors and enhanced satellite surveillance is the need of the hour.

Prelims model questions

1. With reference to border management in Jammu & Kashmir, consider the following statements:

1. The Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS) uses thermal imagers and ground sensors.
2. Heavy snowfall along the Line of Control does not affect border fencing.
3. Riverine gaps pose challenges to border security.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3 only
 (b) 1 only
 (c) 2 and 3 only
 (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a) 1 and 3 only

2. Which of the following are challenges in counter-infiltration operations in the Pir Panjal region?

1. Dense forest cover
2. High-altitude snowfall damaging fences
3. Extensive desert terrain

Select the correct answer using the code below:

- (a) 1 only
 (b) 1 and 2 only
 (c) 2 and 3 only
 (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : 1 and 2 only

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Which of the following are detritivores? (2021)

1. Earthworms
2. Jellyfish
3. Millipedes
4. Seahorses
5. Woodlice

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- a) 1, 2 and 4 only
- b) 2, 3, 4 and 5 only
- c) 1, 3 and 5 only
- d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

2) Consider the following plants: (2024)

1. Groundnut
2. Horse-gram
3. Soybean

How many of the above belong to the pea family?

- a) Only one
- b) Only two
- c) All three
- d) None

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HERITAGE

Attukal Pongala: The World's Largest Gathering of Women Devotees



Attukal Pongala is a renowned annual festival held at the Attukal Bhagavathi Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. Recognised in the Guinness World Records as the largest gathering of women for a religious festival, it draws millions of devotees who assemble to offer Pongala to Goddess Bhagavathy, lovingly known as Attukalamma. During the ritual, women prepare a sweet dish of rice, jaggery, coconut, and plantains in earthen pots, symbolising prosperity and divine blessings.

The ten-day festival begins in the Malayalam months of Makaram–Kumbham (February–March) on the Karthika star. It commences with the Kappukettu ceremony and the recitation of Kannaki Charitam, invoking Kodungallur Bhagavathy. The main Pongala ritual takes place on the ninth day under the Pooram star, coinciding with the full moon, when vast stretches of the city transform into sacred hearths. At an auspicious moment signalled by the chief priest, thousands of hearths are lit simultaneously.

The ceremony concludes with the sprinkling of holy water and a showering of flowers, signifying divine grace. Beyond its scale, Attukal Pongala represents unity, devotion, and women's spiritual agency, standing as a vibrant expression of Kerala's cultural and religious heritage.

Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option c

Detritivores are organisms that feed on dead organic matter, breaking it into smaller particles. They play a crucial role in ecosystems by recycling nutrients and contributing to the decomposition process. Let's evaluate the organisms mentioned:

- 1. Earthworms:** It belongs to the detritivores category. Earthworms consume decaying organic matter in soil, breaking it down and enriching the soil with nutrients. They are classic examples of detritivores.
- 2. Jellyfish:** It is not a detritivore. Jellyfish are carnivorous, feeding on small fish, plankton, and other marine organisms. They do not consume dead organic material.
- 3. Millipedes:** It is a detritivore. Millipedes feed on decomposing plant material, dead leaves, and other organic debris. They contribute significantly to the decomposition process in forest ecosystems.
- 4. Seahorses:** It is not a detritivore. Seahorses are carnivorous, feeding on small crustaceans like shrimp. They are not involved in breaking down organic matter.
- 5. Woodlice:** It is a detritivore. Woodlice feed on decaying plant matter and are important in breaking down organic material in terrestrial ecosystems.



2) Answer is option c



The pea family refers to the Leguminosae or Fabaceae family, which includes plants that typically have the ability to fix nitrogen in the soil through symbiotic relationships with nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

- 1. Groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*):** It belongs to the pea family: Groundnut, commonly known as peanut, is a legume in the Fabaceae family. It is a nitrogen-fixing plant and is a part of the pea family.
- 2. Horse-gram (*Macrotyloma uniflorum*):** Belongs to the pea family: Horse-gram is another legume in the Fabaceae family. It is a drought resistant pulse that is widely cultivated in parts of India and other countries.
- 3. Soybean (*Glycine max*):** It belongs to the pea family: Soybean is also a legume in the Fabaceae family. It is widely grown for its edible beans, which are rich in protein and oil. Soybean also plays a role in nitrogen fixation.

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