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**STUDY CENTRE**

# DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

FOR UPSC CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION

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## 1. Global Geopolitical Tensions: European Resistance and West Asian Peace Proposals

- **European Strategic Autonomy and NATO Friction:** Major European powers, including France, Italy, and Spain, have actively restricted US-Israeli military operations within their territories and airspace. This includes France's refusal to permit the transport of American weapons to Israel and Italy's denial of landing rights at the Sigonella air base in Sicily for aircraft bound for the Middle East. These actions highlight a growing rift within NATO, with US President Donald Trump publicly criticizing European allies for a perceived lack of support in the ongoing conflict with Iran.
- **Spain's Legalist Stance:** Spain has emerged as a vocal critic, closing its airspace to US planes involved in Iranian strikes. Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares cited the necessity of upholding international law, the UN Charter, and global peace as the primary drivers for this decision. This underscores a shift where middle powers are prioritizing multilateral legal frameworks over traditional bilateral military alliances.
- **China-Pakistan Five-Point Peace Proposal:** In a diplomatic counter-move, Beijing and Islamabad have proposed a joint peace plan for West Asia. The framework emphasizes an immediate cessation of hostilities, initiation of peace talks, restoration of regional stability, ensuring safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz, and safeguarding the primacy of the UN Charter.
- **Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity:** The joint statement by Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Ishaq Dar stresses that the sovereignty and national independence of Iran and Gulf states must be protected. It advocates for the principle of non-intervention and the protection of civilians in conflict zones as non-negotiable pillars of regional security.
- **Escalation in Lebanon:** Recent Israeli strikes hitting civilian infrastructure near the Beirut airport road indicate an expansion of the kinetic theater beyond Iran, raising significant humanitarian concerns and complicating the diplomatic efforts for a ceasefire.
- **International Law and Multilateralism:** The crisis emphasizes the tension between "might is right" unilateralism and the legalist approach adopted by European nations. It brings to the forefront the role of the UN Charter in regulating the use of force and the rights of transit for military supplies under international treaties.

### Key Definitions and Legal Provisions

**International Law & UN Charter:** The body of rules that governs the relations between states. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.

**Strategic Autonomy:** The ability of a state or a bloc (like the EU) to pursue its own national interests and adopt its own foreign policy without being overly dependent on other states.

**Strait of Hormuz:** A vital chokepoint between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman; it is the world's most important oil transit checkpoint, governed largely by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). **Sigonella Air Base:** A major NATO base in Italy; the denial of its use illustrates the exercise of "Host Nation Support" rights, where a sovereign state restricts foreign military use of its facilities during specific conflicts.

### Conclusion

The current geopolitical climate reflects a significant realignment of power dynamics. While the US continues to exert military pressure in West Asia, its traditional European allies are increasingly using international law as a shield to distance themselves from unilateral military engagements. Simultaneously,





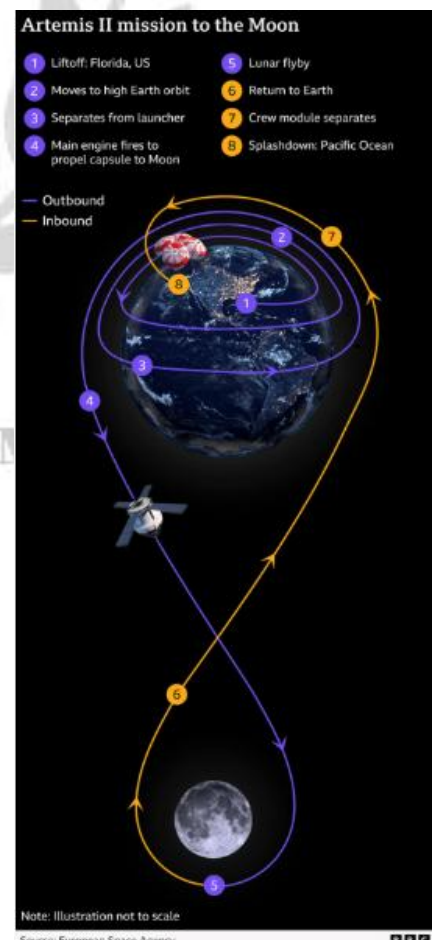
the China-Pakistan axis is positioning itself as a diplomatic mediator, leveraging the principles of sovereignty and the UN Charter to fill the vacuum left by fractured Western alliances. The situation remains volatile, with the potential for either a regional conflagration or a new multilateral security architecture.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (International Relations):** This topic is critical for understanding "Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests." It touches upon India's "Link West" policy, the stability of energy corridors (Strait of Hormuz), and India's stance on sovereignty versus intervention.

## 2. Artemis II: Re-envisioning Lunar Exploration and Space Diplomacy

- **Resumption of Crewed Lunar Missions:** NASA has officially commenced the countdown for Artemis II, marking the first human mission toward the Moon in over five decades since the conclusion of the Apollo program in 1972. This mission serves as a critical flight test to validate the Space Launch System (SLS) rocket and the Orion spacecraft's life-support systems for deep-space habitation.
- **Mission Profile and Objectives:** The 10-day mission involves a complex trajectory where the crew will spend 24 hours in Earth orbit before performing a "free-return" maneuver. This "U-turn" around the Moon utilizes lunar gravity to propel the capsule back to Earth for a Pacific Ocean splashdown, testing high-speed atmospheric re-entry protocols.
- **Technological Challenges and Iterative Learning:** The mission faced significant technical hurdles, including hydrogen fuel leaks and helium pressurization line clogs, which led to delays from the initial February schedule. These issues highlight the extreme precision required in cryogenic fueling and the "fail-safe" engineering approach necessary for crewed deep-space exploration.
- **Diversity and Inclusion in Space Exploration:** Unlike the Apollo missions, Artemis II features a diverse crew including the first woman, the first person of color (Pilot Victor Glover), and a non-US citizen. This shift reflects a modern geopolitical approach to space, emphasizing that lunar exploration is a global endeavor rather than a localized nationalist achievement.
- **Orion Spacecraft Capabilities:** The mission will test the Orion's heat shield, which must withstand temperatures near 2,800°C during re-entry—about half as hot as the surface of the sun—ensuring the structural integrity of the capsule and the safety of the four-member crew.



### Key Definitions and Technical Concepts

**Space Launch System (SLS):** A super heavy-lift expendable launch vehicle, currently the most powerful rocket ever built by NASA, designed to send the Orion spacecraft to the Moon.

**Orion Multi-Purpose Crew Vehicle (MPCV):** The spacecraft designed to carry astronauts to deep-space destinations, consisting of a crew module and a service module provided by the European Space Agency (ESA).

**Free-Return Trajectory:** A spacecraft path that uses the gravity of a secondary body (the Moon) to return the craft to its



point of origin (Earth) without the need for additional propulsion. **Cryogenic Propulsion:** Rocket engines that use fuel and oxidizers kept at extremely low temperatures (e.g., Liquid Hydrogen and Liquid Oxygen), providing higher efficiency but presenting significant leakage and handling risks.

### Conclusion

Artemis II represents the transition from "lunar visitation" to "lunar presence." By successfully executing this crewed flyby, NASA and its international partners establish the foundation for Artemis III, which aims to land humans on the lunar South Pole. The mission underscores the importance of resilient engineering and the evolving social dimensions of international space cooperation.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper III (Science and Technology):** Highly relevant for "Awareness in the fields of Space" and "Achievements of Indians in Science & Technology." Understanding the Artemis program is crucial as ISRO has signed the Artemis Accords, signifying India's participation in the US-led lunar exploration framework.

## 3. Anaesthetised Democracy and the Ethics of Global Conflict

- **Crisis of Democratic Consciousness:** Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues that modern democracies, specifically the US, are suffering from a profound moral "anaesthesia." Despite high levels of public disapproval for the war in Iran, there is a lack of active resistance or meaningful discourse. This indifference suggests that democratic societies are becoming structurally disposed toward cruelty and the avoidance of moral responsibility in the face of humanitarian catastrophes.
- **Mechanisms of Disinformation and Abstraction:** The "fog of war" is no longer just a tactical reality but a linguistic one. The use of technocratic abstractions—terms like "targeted operations," "tactical advantage," and "escalation logic"—sanitizes the violence and removes the human element from public consciousness. This fragmentation of information, fueled by social media clips and partisan reporting, prevents the public from forming a cohesive or experiential understanding of the war's true character.
- **Erosion of Global Moral Hierarchies:** The text highlights a growing regression in empathy, where "racial and national hierarchies of concern" dictate international response. The claim that "there is no hierarchy of trauma" is critiqued as a hollow statement when viewed against the reality of selective concern. This degradation of public discourse signifies a collapse of the liberal international order's supposed ethical foundations.
- **The Paradox of Middle Powers:** Countries like India, Japan, and Canada are described as being in a state of self-delusion. While they seek to shield themselves from the immediate fallout, their reluctance to build coalitions for naming and shaming perpetrators renders them "neither middling nor powerful." The refusal to take a principled stand is often dismissed as moralism, whereas it actually reflects a lack of long-term strategic prudence.
- **Nature of the "Interconnected War":** The current conflict is defined as a "global interconnected war" rather than a traditional world war. Theatres from Ukraine to Iran and Sudan to Yemen are entwined; actions in one region reverberate globally. This new warfare legitimizes targeted assassinations, asymmetric attacks on civilian infrastructure (water,





education), and the proliferation of failed states, leading to a global condition of paranoia and suspicion.

### Key Definitions and Conceptual Frameworks

**Anaesthetised Democracy:** A state where the citizenry remains indifferent or numbed to systemic violence and moral crises, often due to information overload, propaganda, or a sense of powerlessness. **Strategic Catastrophism:** A foreign policy approach characterized by a willingness to destroy regional stability or "burn the house down" if strategic objectives cannot be met through traditional means. **Asymmetric Warfare:** Conflict between parties of significantly different military power or strategy, often involving non-traditional tactics like drone strikes on infrastructure or guerrilla movements. **Prudence in IR:** The exercise of sound judgment and caution in international relations, which Mehta argues is missing when nations fail to confront global instability for fear of short-term economic or diplomatic costs.

### Conclusion

The ultimate devastation of the current global conflict is as much institutional and psychological as it is physical. When democracies lose the ability to feel moral revulsion and instead seek absolution from responsibility, they lose their inherent strength. A democracy that remains silent or "anaesthetised" in the face of global cruelty has, in effect, already lost its core battle for legitimacy and survival.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (International Relations):** Critical for analyzing the "Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests" and the changing nature of the global order. It challenges the concept of India's role as a "Leading Power" versus a "Middle Power."

## 4. India's Neighborhood Policy: Transitioning from Patronage to Pragmatic Trade

- **Generational Political Shift in the Subcontinent:** Recent electoral outcomes in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have ushered in new leaderships—such as Tarique Rahman's "Bangladesh First" approach and the rise of the Rastriya Swatantra Party in Nepal. These new regimes signal a move away from old cycles of political distrust and "special relationships" toward mature, unsentimental, and interest-based engagement with New Delhi.
- **Economic Interdependence as a Strategic Anchor:** Despite political volatility, deep economic ties have survived. The current global fragmentation and the return of tariffs make the Indian market a vital scale-provider for smaller neighbors like Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. This creates a "new regional logic" where India can act as a solid anchor against politically driven instability through deeper cooperation in energy and essential commodities.
- **Addressing the Trade Surplus Paradox:** A major friction point is India's substantial trade surplus with Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. While New Delhi frequently criticizes its own trade deficit with China, it has historically found it difficult to offer its neighbors the same market access it demands from Beijing. Resolving this requires India to move beyond protectionism toward importing more via stronger investment ties and modernized border infrastructure.
- **Modernizing Connectivity and Infrastructure:** Transforming regional connectivity is no longer just about geography; it involves neutralising "non-tariff barriers" and poor infrastructure that currently hinder the 4,000-km border with Bangladesh and the Palk Strait connectivity





with Sri Lanka. Genuine transformation requires negotiated give-and-take and institutional agility rather than just a revival of stalled forums like SAARC.

- **End of Clientelism and Patronage:** The new electorates in Dhaka, Kathmandu, and Colombo have rejected traditional forms of dependency and "clientelism." They seek partners, not patrons. Future agreements must produce visible, measurable benefits—such as jobs and growth—on both sides, grounded in mutual respect for sovereignty and political ownership.

### Key Definitions and Strategic Concepts

**Neighborhood First Policy:** A core component of India's foreign policy that prioritizes building cordial and synergistic relations with its immediate neighbors. **Trade Deficit/Surplus:** The difference between the value of a country's imports and exports. A surplus occurs when exports exceed imports. **Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs):** Trade restrictions that are not in the form of a tariff, such as quotas, embargoes, or complex sanitary/technical regulations that impede the flow of goods. **Strategic Autonomy:** The ability of a state to pursue its national interests and adopt its own foreign policy without being constrained by other states or international blocs. **Clientelism:** A social or political order governed by the exchange of goods and services for political support, often leading to asymmetrical power dynamics between a larger power and its smaller neighbors.

### Conclusion

India stands at a rare crossroads where political shifts in the neighborhood align with a global economic fragmentation that favors regional integration. By shedding outdated protectionist instincts and viewing its neighbors as equal economic partners rather than dependents, India can create a stable, prosperous Subcontinent. This transition from "political favor" to "shared economic benefit" is essential for India to counter external influences and establish itself as a true regional leader.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (International Relations):** Directly relevant to "India and its neighborhood relations." The article provides a nuanced critique of the "Neighborhood First" policy and offers specific solutions regarding trade and connectivity. **GS Paper III (Economy):** Touches upon "External Sector" dynamics, including trade deficits, regional trade agreements, and the impact of global supply chain shifts on the Indian economy.

## 5. West Asia Crisis: Operation Epic Fury and the Resilience of Political Shiism

- **Escalation into Large-Scale Conflict:** What began as a localized confrontation has devolved into "Operation Epic Fury," a joint U.S.-Israeli military campaign against Iran launched on February 28, 2026. Despite the assassination of top Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the conflict has moved beyond a "limited strike" into a war of attrition aimed at regime change, with the potential for ground troop commitment.
- **Iranian Strategic Endurance:** Contrary to expectations of a state collapse, Iran has maintained its command structure and secured its uranium stockpiles. Under the new leadership of Mojtaba Khamenei, the regime is leveraging "strategic endurance," utilizing its vast geography and acclimatized forces to sustain a prolonged conflict that air power alone cannot resolve.
- **Weaponization of Global Infrastructure:** The conflict has shifted from purely military targets to the "weaponization of infrastructure." By blockading the Strait of Hormuz—a chokepoint for 30% of global oil shipments—Iran has triggered a global energy crisis. This tactic exploits the economic vulnerabilities of the U.S. and its allies, who face surging prices and supply disruptions.



- **Fracturing of Western Alliances:** A significant "collateral damage" of the war is the visible rift within NATO and among U.S. allies. Many European nations have refused to assist in reopening the Strait of Hormuz, opting instead for a cautious distance from the U.S.-Israeli objectives, which they perceive as lacking legal merit or a clear "underwriting of order."
- **The Symbolic Dimension of Resistance:** The conflict has transcended geopolitics to become a civilizational struggle. Drawing on the "Battle of Karbala" narrative, Iranian resistance is framed as a religious and messianic mission. This revival of Shiite militancy ensures that the revolutionary fervor is likely to intensify rather than diminish with the loss of individual leaders.
- **Military Sustainability and Risks:** The U.S. is facing "war weariness" and the rapid depletion of high-end munitions like Patriot and THAAD interceptors. Israel's provocation, including strikes near the Russian-built Bushehr nuclear plant, risks dragging major powers like Russia and China into the fray, potentially escalating the regional cauldron into a global conflagration.



### Key Definitions and Strategic Concepts

**Operation Epic Fury:** The code name for the 2026 joint U.S.-Israeli military offensive targeting Iranian leadership and nuclear infrastructure. **Strait of Hormuz:** The world's most sensitive oil transit chokepoint; a blockade here effectively weaponizes global energy logistics. **Thucydides Aphorism:** The realist notion that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must"; in this conflict, Iran's fierce retaliation has upended this traditional power dynamic. **Political Shiism:** A form of Islamism that emphasizes social justice, resistance against perceived oppression, and the martyrdom of leaders as a catalyst for further mobilization. **War of Attrition:** A military strategy consisting of belligerent attempts to win a war by wearing down the enemy to the point of collapse through continuous losses in personnel and materiel.

### Conclusion

The current West Asian conflict represents a grave miscalculation of Iranian resilience and the global appetite for prolonged economic chaos. While Israel pursues a "Biblical Promise" of territorial security and the U.S. seeks to extract strategic advantage, they have ignored the ideological depth of Shiite resistance and the fragility of the global oil economy. Without an immediate shift toward an armistice, the world risks a "Third World War" scenario triggered by the collapse of diplomatic order in the region.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (International Relations):** Crucial for "Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests." India's energy security is directly tied to the Strait of Hormuz, and any prolonged conflict impacts the 8 million-strong Indian diaspora in the Gulf. **GS Paper I (World Geography):** Focuses on "Critical geographical features" and the strategic importance of maritime chokepoints like Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.

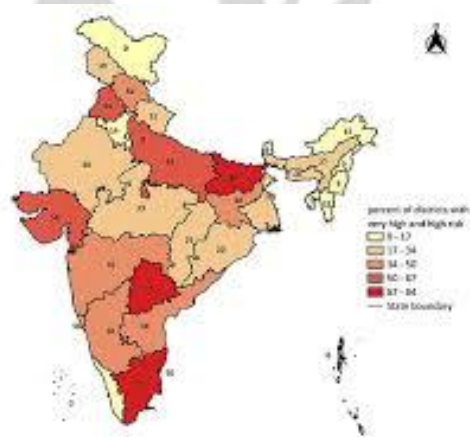
## 6. 16th Finance Commission: Structural Flaws in Disaster Risk Allocation

- **Redefining Disaster Risk Metrics:** The 16th Finance Commission (FC-16) has introduced a transformative multiplicative Disaster Risk Index (DRI) defined as  $\$DRI = Hazard \times Exposure \times Vulnerability$ . This marks a shift from the 15th Finance Commission's additive model,



correctly theorizing that risk only exists when a natural hazard intersects with an exposed and fragile population.

- **Paradox of Odisha's Funding Decline:** Despite being India's most disaster-prone state with the highest hazard score (12), Odisha has faced the steepest reduction in its funding share—a decline of 1.57 percentage points. This paradox stems from the DRI's operational design, where low population scores negate high hazard risks, effectively penalizing states that have successfully managed mortality but remain geographically vulnerable.
- **The "Exposure" Measurement Crisis:** The primary structural flaw lies in using a state's total population as a surrogate for "Exposure." Scientifically, exposure refers to the population specifically located within hazard zones (e.g., coastal belts or floodplains). By using total headcount, the formula disproportionately favors demographically large, inland states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar over smaller, high-risk coastal states like Odisha and Kerala.
- **Vulnerability vs. Fiscal Capacity:** The current formula equates "Vulnerability" with the inverse of per capita Net State Domestic Product (NSDP). This metric measures fiscal capacity (the ability to pay) rather than physical or social vulnerability (the quality of housing or health infrastructure). Consequently, wealthier states with high disaster histories, such as Kerala, receive lower vulnerability scores, ignoring the multidimensional nature of climate risk.
- **Impact on Cooperative Federalism:** The revised allocation has caused 20 states to lose their relative share of disaster funding. This creates a "funding-gap" for states most vulnerable to climate change, such as the Himalayan and coastal regions, potentially undermining the long-term sustainability of their highly successful "zero-casualty" disaster management models.
- **Proposed Institutional Reforms:** Experts suggest transitioning to a "State Disaster Vulnerability Index" curated by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). This should incorporate granular data such as the share of *kutcha* housing, crop insurance penetration, and the density of health facilities in high-hazard districts to move beyond simple headcounts to true risk assessment.



## Key Definitions and Technical Frameworks

**Disaster Risk Index (DRI):** A mathematical representation of risk calculated as  $\text{Risk} = \text{Hazard} \times \text{Exposure} \times \text{Vulnerability}$ . **Exposure (IPCC Definition):** The presence of people, livelihoods, species or ecosystems, environmental functions, services, and resources, infrastructure, or economic, social, or cultural assets in places and settings that could be adversely affected. **Net State Domestic Product (NSDP):** The total value of all finished goods and services produced within a state; used by the FC as a proxy for a state's economic resilience. **SDRF & SDMF:** The State Disaster Response Fund (80%) and State Disaster Mitigation Fund (20%). The FC-16 recommends a total corpus of ₹2,04,401 crore for these funds for 2026-31. **Multiplicative vs. Additive Model:** In an additive model ( $\text{H} + \text{E} + \text{V}$ ), each factor contributes independently; in a multiplicative model, if any factor is zero, the total risk is zero, emphasizing the interdependence of the variables.

## Conclusion

While the 16th Finance Commission's move toward a risk-based scientific formula is theoretically sound, its reliance on total population as a proxy for exposure has turned a disaster index into a demographic



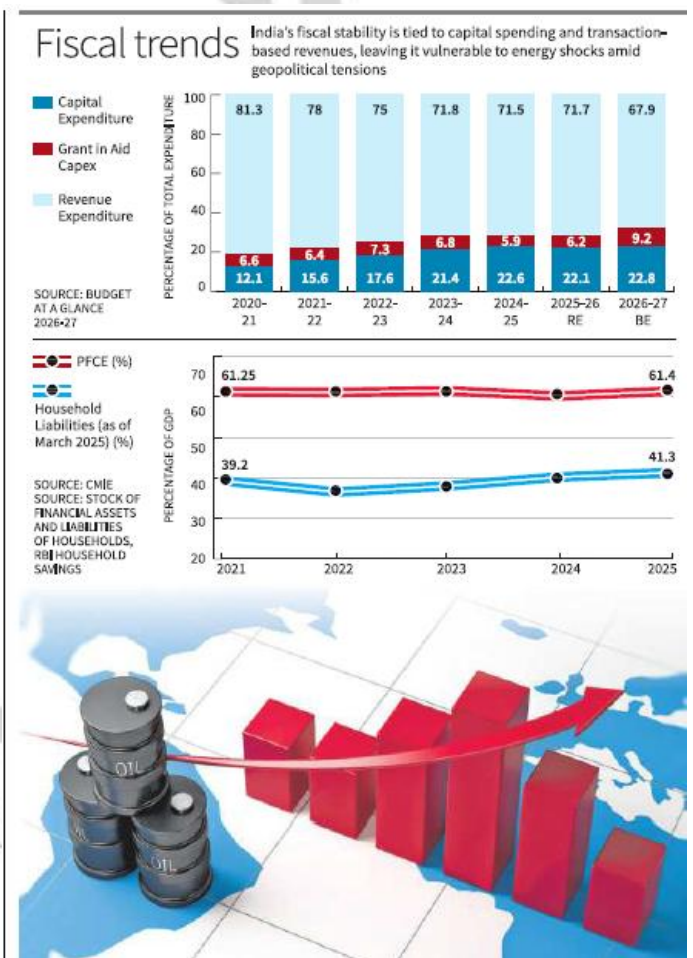
headcount. This structural bias risks de-incentivizing states that have invested heavily in disaster resilience. To safeguard India's climate future, the allocation logic must evolve to recognize "population-at-risk" rather than "population-at-large," ensuring that the most vulnerable geographies are not left fiscally stranded.

**UPSC Relevance**

**GS Paper II (Governance & Polity):** Directly relates to "Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States" and the "Role of the Finance Commission" as a balancing wheel of fiscal federalism under Article 280.

**7. Geopolitical Volatility and the Indian Macroeconomic Stress Test**

- Macroeconomic Contradiction and External Vulnerability:** India currently faces a striking divergence between robust internal indicators and weakening external buffers. While Q3 FY26 GDP growth is projected at 8.1% and public capex remains high (4% of GDP), the Rupee has touched a record low of ₹95 per dollar. Foreign exchange reserves have retreated to \$709.76 billion due to FPI outflows of over \$8 billion, highlighting that domestic growth prints often mask systemic exposure to global geopolitical shocks.
- Energy Import Dependency and Fiscal Squeeze:** With India importing 85–87% of its crude oil, the economy remains structurally exposed to price spikes. A \$10 per barrel rise in crude typically increases CPI inflation by 0.2 percentage points and reduces GDP growth by 0.5 percentage points. In 2026, with oil hitting \$156.29 per barrel, the fiscal space is further compressed as the government must balance excise duty cuts to contain inflation against rising fertilizer and LPG subsidy burdens.
- Shift in Revenue Architecture:** India's fiscal model has pivoted toward "transaction-linked taxation" (GST) rather than "income-deepening" direct taxes. While GST collections reached ₹22.8 lakh crore in FY25, this model is highly sensitive to external shocks. Any disruption in energy markets that slows transport or compresses household spending directly reduces transaction volumes, thereby weakening the primary revenue stream for both the Union and States.
- Household Fragility and Leverage:** Private consumption, the backbone of the economy (61.4% of GDP), is increasingly sustained by credit rather than real wage growth. Household liabilities have surged to 41% of GDP, making consumers highly vulnerable to "imported inflation." When energy costs rise, real incomes are compressed while fixed debt-servicing obligations remain, creating a "consumption-debt trap" that threatens long-term demand stability.





- **Industrial Divergence and Labor Stress:** The industrial recovery is skewed toward capital-intensive, high-tech sectors aligned with public investment, while labor-intensive and informal sectors remain weak. Micro-shocks, such as the 2026 LPG crisis, have caused significant disruptions for small businesses and gig workers, reporting up to a 60% decline in orders. This reflects a lack of institutional protection for the informal economy during geopolitical commodity cycles.

### Key Definitions and Economic Indicators

**Indian Basket of Crude Oil:** A weighted average of Oman/Dubai (sour) and Brent (sweet) crude price, representing the actual cost of crude for Indian refineries. **Fiscal Buoyancy:** An indicator of the efficiency of the tax system; it measures the responsiveness of tax revenue growth to changes in GDP. **Current Account Deficit (CAD):** The shortfall between a nation's total export earnings and its total import payments. **Capital Expenditure (Capex):** Government spending on creating physical assets like roads and power plants, which has a higher "multiplier effect" on growth compared to revenue expenditure. **Real Wages:** Wages adjusted for inflation; they represent the actual purchasing power of a worker's income.

### Conclusion

India's current macroeconomic resilience is being tested by an unprecedented "energy-geopolitical" pincer. While the state-led infrastructure push (Capex) builds long-term capacity, the immediate stability of the economy depends on managing the dual pressures of a depreciating currency and imported inflation. Transitioning from a transaction-dependent revenue model to an income-led demand model, alongside aggressive energy diversification, is essential to prevent external shocks from turning into permanent fiscal stress.

### UPSC Relevance

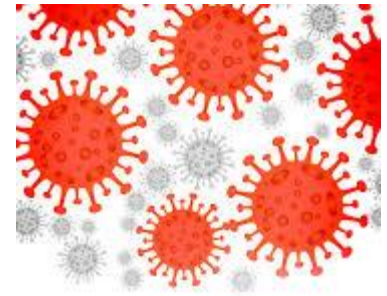
**GS Paper III (Indian Economy):** Crucial for "Issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment." The shift toward GST-linked revenue and rising household debt are vital points for Mains.

## 8. India's COVID-19 Pandemic Response: A Six-Year Retrospective and Policy Reckoning

- **Absence of Formal Inquiry and Unofficial Reckoning:** Unlike many developed nations such as the UK, New Zealand, and Sweden, India has not conducted a formal government inquiry into its pandemic management. In the absence of state-led accountability, a body of literature from medical experts, policy analysts, and journalists has emerged as an "unofficial reckoning," highlighting the systemic gaps in the clinical, logistical, and human dimensions of the 2020-2022 period.
- **Logistical Disruption and Migrant Crisis:** The sudden imposition of a nationwide lockdown with only four hours' notice is identified as the defining feature of the crisis. The suspension of the Indian Railways without a contingency plan for millions in transit led to a massive humanitarian migration on foot. While "Shramik Specials" were eventually introduced, the initial lack of logistical foresight created a deep disconnect between state policy and the reality of the informal workforce.
- **Healthcare Infrastructure and Oxygen Supply Chain:** Critical failures were documented in the scaling of ICU capacity and ventilators, which reportedly fell by 30% to 46% between the first and second waves as the government prematurely declared victory. Furthermore, the slow installation of Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA) oxygen plants—with only 38 installed against a target of 500 by the peak of the second wave—exposed the lethality of "logistical bottlenecks" in life-saving infrastructure.



- **The "Counting Problem" and Excess Mortality:** A central theme is the significant discrepancy between official state data and ground realities. While local registers in cities like Lucknow documented 101 cremations in a single day, the official state count stood at 14. By 2025, data from the Office of the Registrar General indicated a 25.9% spike in registered deaths for 2021 (1.02 crore), suggesting that the "state's capacity to not count" became a tool for managing public perception.
- **Vulnerability of Frontline and Ground Workers:** The pandemic highlighted the lack of institutional protection for ground-level actors. This included schoolteachers forced into election duty despite pregnancy, ASHA workers operating with minimal support, and over 500 journalists who died in the line of duty without being officially recognized or compensated as "frontline workers."
- **Depoliticization of State Failure:** Despite the colossal human cost, the pandemic failed to emerge as a significant electoral or "poll issue." In many rural areas, the catastrophe was internalized as "divine intervention" rather than "state failure." This sociological shift reflects a broader challenge in democratic accountability, where those who bore the highest costs of policy failure remain unheard in the national political discourse.



COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDIA  
PRE & POST CHALLENGES

DR. CHINHOI DR. SHWETA JAGDAL, DR. CHINTA T. MORGAL  
DR. KARANDETHI NIL, DR. GURJAN, DR. BH. PRABHU

### Key Definitions and Legal Provisions

**Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897:** The colonial-era legislation invoked by the Union and State governments to exercise emergency powers during COVID-19; it has been criticized for being outdated and focused on "policing" rather than "public health." **Disaster Management Act, 2005:** The primary legal framework used to implement the lockdown and coordinate the National Executive Committee (NEC) and State Executive Committees (SEC). **Universal Health Coverage (UHC):** A healthcare system where all individuals have access to the health services they need without suffering financial hardship. **Pressure Swing Adsorption (PSA):** A technology used to separate oxygen from a gas mixture under pressure; PSA plants became the primary solution for on-site hospital oxygen generation. **Excess Mortality:** The difference between the observed number of deaths in a specific period and the expected number of deaths based on historical trends.

### Conclusion

Six years after the onset of COVID-19, the core issue is no longer debating the success or failure of specific maneuvers, but acknowledging the structural invisibility of those who suffered most. The Indian state's response demonstrated high-level mobilization but low-level empathy for the marginalized. Until the "counting problem" is addressed and the human costs of policy failures are integrated into future disaster frameworks, India remains vulnerable to the same systemic blind spots in subsequent public health emergencies.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (Governance & Social Justice):** Relevant for "Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health." The pandemic serves as a case study for the limitations of the Epidemic Diseases Act and the need for a comprehensive Public Health Act.



## 9. Judicial Intervention on Human Trafficking: Supreme Court's Mandate for Practical SOPs

- **Shift from Academic to Practical Strategy:** The Supreme Court (SC), in a significant move, has rejected "hypothetical or academic" formulas in favor of a "practical, time-sensitive, and uniform" Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to combat human trafficking. The Bench, headed by Justice Ahsanuddin Amanullah, emphasized that the strategy must be implementable at the local police station level immediately upon the receipt of a complaint.
- **The Criticality of Time ("Golden Hour" Response):** The Court identified time as being of the "greatest importance" the moment a person is reported missing. The proposed guidelines aim to eliminate procedural delays, ensuring that the police act within a strict framework to prevent the victim from being moved across borders or into untraceable networks.
- **Persistence of Investigation:** The SC reiterated that missing person cases must remain "alive on the ground" and not just on paper until the individual is located. This addresses the systemic issue where cases of missing persons, especially from marginalized backgrounds, often go cold due to administrative neglect or lack of follow-up.
- **Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement:** The Union Home Secretary, State Home Secretaries, and Directors-General of Police (DGPs) have been directed to hold discussions with stakeholders specifically dealing with trafficking. This bottom-up approach ensures that the resulting SOP incorporates the ground realities and challenges faced by anti-trafficking units.
- **Constitution of Expert Committee:** To draft these proposals, the Court has appointed a high-level committee including P.M. Nair (former DG, NDRF and trafficking expert), Veerendra Kumar Mishra (Director, MHA), and Additional Solicitor General S.D. Sanjay. The committee will also draw on the expertise of Senior Advocate H.S. Phoolka, who was instrumental in crafting Delhi's anti-trafficking SOPs.

### Key Definitions and Legal Provisions

**Human Trafficking:** Per Article 23 of the Constitution and Section 370 of the IPC, it involves the recruitment, transportation, or receipt of persons by means of threat, force, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation (including forced labor or sexual exploitation).

**Standard Operating Procedure (SOP):** A set of step-by-step instructions compiled by an organization to help workers carry out complex routine operations, aiming for efficiency, quality output, and uniformity of performance. **Article 23 of the Indian Constitution:** Prohibits traffic in human beings and *begar* (forced labor), making it a fundamental right enforceable against both the State and private individuals. **Immortal Case Doctrine (Judicial Intent):** The principle that a missing person case cannot be closed based on a mere passage of time; it remains an active investigation until a logical conclusion is reached. **Section 370 & 370A of IPC:** Comprehensive provisions that define trafficking and provide stringent punishment for the traffickers as well as those who exploit the victims.

### Conclusion

The Supreme Court's directive marks a transition toward "Accountable Policing" in human trafficking cases. By demanding an SOP that works at the "thana" (police station) level, the judiciary is addressing the weakest link in the Indian criminal justice system—the initial response. Success will depend on whether the Union and State governments can synchronize their efforts to move beyond paper guidelines toward a tech-enabled, time-bound recovery mechanism that prioritizes the dignity of the missing individual.





## UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (Polity & Governance):** Crucial for "Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation." It also relates to the "Role of Judiciary" in protecting the Fundamental Rights of vulnerable sections under Article 23.

## 10. India's Semiconductor Leap: Sanand's Strategic "Bridge" to Silicon Valley

- **Sanand as a Global Semiconductor Hub:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Kaynes Semicon assembly and test facility in Sanand, Gujarat, positioning the industrial town as a vital "bridge" to California's Silicon Valley. This ₹3,300 crore facility marks a critical milestone in India's journey from a technology consumer to a global supplier of semiconductor chips, which are essential for everything from smartphones to advanced defense systems.
- **Ambitious Market Projections and "India's Techade":** The government projects that India's semiconductor market will exceed \$100 billion (approx. ₹9 lakh crore) by 2030, doubling from its current valuation of ₹4.5 lakh crore. This growth is central to the "Techade" (Technology Decade) vision, leveraging India's success in Digital India and Fintech to build public trust and industrial scale in high-tech manufacturing.
- **The India Semiconductor Mission (ISM) 2021:** The Prime Minister framed the ISM not merely as an industrial policy but as a "declaration of India's confidence" on the global stage. By providing fiscal support and a structured ecosystem for fabless design, display fabs, and ATMP (Assembly, Testing, Marking, and Packaging) units, the mission aims to reduce India's heavy reliance on chip imports and secure its electronics supply chain.
- **Geopolitics of "Pax Silica" and Supply Chain Resilience:** India's participation in the "Pax Silica" initiative—a U.S.-led coalition—underscores a strategic alignment to secure supply chains for semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Rare Earth Elements. This collaboration is designed to build resilience against global disruptions and position India as a "trusted partner" in the democratic technology bloc.
- **Transition to Leading Global Change:** The shift from being a "witness to change" to "leading it" is evidenced by the rapid expansion of the electronics sector. The chips manufactured in Sanand are intended for global export, including to the United States, signaling India's emerging role as a reliable alternative to traditional manufacturing hubs in East Asia.



## Key Definitions and Strategic Frameworks

**Semiconductor:** A material (usually silicon) that has electrical conductivity between that of a conductor and an insulator; it is the fundamental building block of all modern electronic circuits. **ATMP (Assembly, Testing, Marking, and Packaging):** A crucial "back-end" stage in semiconductor manufacturing where silicon wafers are converted into individual chips and tested for functionality before being integrated into devices. **India Semiconductor Mission (ISM):** A specialized business division within the Digital India Corporation that aims to build a vibrant semiconductor and display ecosystem to enable India's emergence as a global electronics manufacturing hub. **Pax Silica:** A metaphorical term referring to a period of relative peace and stability driven by the dominance and shared security of silicon-based technologies



(semiconductors) among allied nations. **Techade:** A portmanteau of "Technology" and "Decade," used to describe the 2021-2030 period where technology is expected to be the primary driver of India's socio-economic transformation.

## Conclusion

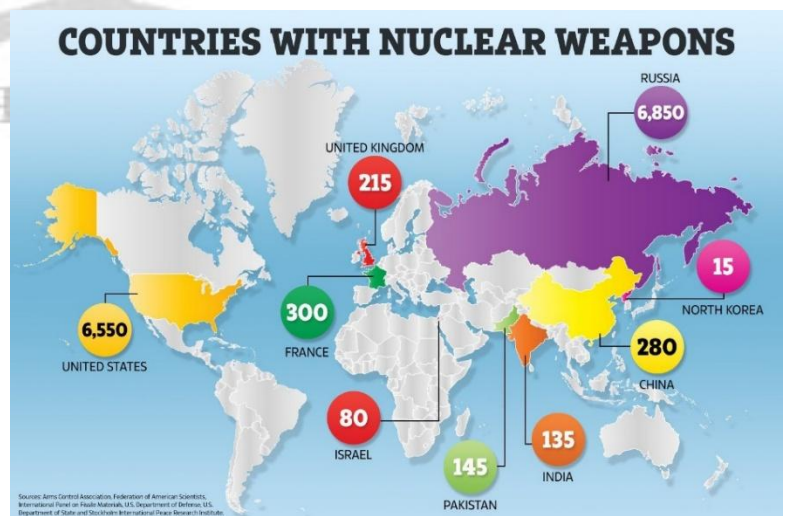
The establishment of the Sanand facility transcends local industrial growth; it represents India's integration into the highest tier of the global value chain. By aligning domestic missions like ISM with international coalitions like Pax Silica, India is effectively insulating itself from "chip-shortage" vulnerabilities. The successful realization of a \$100 billion market will depend on sustained infrastructure support, a skilled workforce, and the continued attraction of global "mega-fabs" to Indian shores.

## UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper III (Science & Technology):** Highly relevant for "Awareness in the fields of IT, Space, Computers, Robotics, Nanotechnology, Biotechnology." The technical nuances of semiconductor manufacturing and ATMP are potential areas for Prelims and Mains.

## 11. West Asia Conflict: Pezeshkian's Counterproposal and the Nuclear-Energy Flashpoint

- **Iran's Strategic Shift toward De-escalation:** Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has expressed the "necessary will" to terminate the ongoing war with Israel and the United States, provided specific "guarantees" are established. This signals a shift from purely retaliatory rhetoric to a diplomatic opening, conditioned on a mechanism that prevents a repeat of the current "aggression."
- **The 15-Point vs. 5-Point Diplomatic Gridlock:** Tehran has officially countered a 15-point U.S. peace plan with its own 5-point proposal. Central to Iran's demand is the cessation of all "aggressive attacks" and a binding international guarantee that neither the U.S. nor Israel will resume hostilities once an armistice is reached.
- **Strikes on Critical Nuclear and Religious Infrastructure:** Recent U.S.-Israeli strikes have targeted Isfahan, a city housing one of Iran's primary nuclear enrichment sites, resulting in significant physical disruption. Furthermore, an attack in the city of Zanzan damaged the Grand Husseiniya mosque, highlighting the expansion of the conflict theater toward both strategic nuclear assets and sensitive socio-religious landmarks.
- **Weaponization of Maritime Energy Corridors:** In a retaliatory move, an Iranian drone struck a Kuwaiti-flagged oil tanker, the *Al-Salmi*, off the coast of Dubai. While no oil spill was reported, the incident underscores the vulnerability of the Persian Gulf shipping lanes and the potential for a "maritime energy war" that could paralyze global supply chains.
- **Human and Cultural Toll:** The conflict continues to extract a heavy human price, with recent strikes in Zanzan causing multiple casualties. The damage to the dome and minarets of historical mosques adds a layer of "civilizational friction" to the war, potentially fueling broader regional Shia mobilization against the coalition forces.





## Key Definitions and Legal Provisions

**Uranium Enrichment Site (Isfahan):** A facility where the concentration of the isotope U-235 is increased through isotope separation; Isfahan is a central node in Iran's nuclear fuel cycle, making it a "high-value" strategic target. **Grand Husseiniya:** A congregation hall for Shia commemoration ceremonies; damage to such sites is often governed by the "Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954)." **Persian Gulf Maritime Security:** Governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which guarantees "freedom of navigation" and "innocent passage" through international straits, both of which are currently compromised. **Armistice:** A formal agreement of warring parties to stop fighting. It is not necessarily the end of a war, but a temporary cessation of hostilities while a permanent peace treaty is negotiated. **Nuclear Proliferation:** The spread of nuclear weapons, fissionable material, and weapon-applicable nuclear technology to nations not recognized as "Nuclear Weapon States."

## Conclusion

The current phase of the West Asia war reflects a dangerous "tit-for-tat" escalation involving nuclear sites and energy tankers. While President Pezeshkian's call for guarantees offers a diplomatic window, the simultaneous targeting of Iranian heartlands and religious sites complicates the path to a ceasefire. The global economy remains at the mercy of this "escalation-ladder," where a single miscalculation near a nuclear site or a major oil spill in the Persian Gulf could trigger an irreversible global catastrophe.

## UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper II (International Relations):** Directly relevant to "Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests." India's "Link West" policy and its investments in the Chabahar port are directly threatened by instability in the Persian Gulf.

## 12. RBI New Digital Payment Norms: Strengthening the Two-Factor Authentication (2FA) Framework

- **Mandatory Multi-Layered Security:** Effective 1 April 2026, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has mandated that all digital transactions—including UPI, cards, and e-wallets—must be authenticated using at least two independent factors. This transition moves the financial ecosystem away from reliance on a single layer of verification, such as just an OTP or a PIN, to a more robust "2FA" model where at least one factor must be dynamic in nature.
- **Closing the "Phishing" Gap:** The primary objective of this tightening is to mitigate risks associated with compromised credentials. Under the new rules, even if a fraudster gains access to a user's OTP through phishing or social engineering, the transaction cannot be completed without a second, independent factor such as a biometric scan (fingerprint/face ID) or a hardware-linked secure PIN.
- **Rising Financial Fraud as a Catalyst:** The move follows alarming data from the RBI showing that bank frauds surged to ₹36,014 crore in FY25, representing a 194% increase in value compared to the previous year. This regulatory intervention is designed to reinforce public trust in the digital payment architecture as adoption continues to scale across both urban and rural demographics.





- **Technological Upgrades and Bank Liability:** Financial institutions are now required to upgrade their systems to support these independent factors. Banks will be held strictly liable if they fail to implement these 2FA protocols. Additional safeguards being introduced include SIM-binding (linking the app to a specific registered mobile number), detection of screen-sharing apps, and real-time flagging of unusual transaction patterns.
- **Balancing Security with User Experience:** To ensure that increased security does not compromise the "ease of payment," the RBI is encouraging banks to adopt low-friction methods like biometric approvals and device-based "push notifications." This approach seeks to maintain the speed of digital transactions while ensuring they are fundamentally more secure against unauthorized access.
- **Implementation Across All Platforms:** The rule is platform-agnostic, meaning it applies uniformly across all Point of Sale (PoS) terminals, online gateways, and mobile banking applications. This creates a standardized security baseline for the entire Indian payments landscape, which is currently one of the most advanced and high-volume systems globally.

### Key Definitions and Legal Provisions

**Two-Factor Authentication (2FA):** A security process in which a user provides two different authentication factors to verify themselves. These are typically categorized as: something you know (PIN/Password), something you have (Mobile/Token), or something you are (Biometric). **Dynamic Factor:** A security element that changes with every transaction, such as an OTP or a time-based token, making it difficult for hackers to reuse intercepted data. **Phishing:** A type of social engineering attack where criminals trick individuals into revealing sensitive information, such as passwords or credit card numbers, often via fraudulent emails or messages. **Banking Regulation Act, 1949:** The primary legislation that empowers the RBI to supervise and direct the functioning of banks in India, including the issuance of mandates related to security and consumer protection. **Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007:** The legal framework that provides for the regulation and supervision of payment systems in India, designating the RBI as the authority to ensure the safety and efficiency of these systems.

### Conclusion

The RBI's transition to a mandatory, independent 2FA model marks a decisive shift from "convenience-first" to "security-first" digital banking. By addressing the structural vulnerabilities exploited by modern cyber-criminals, the central bank is attempting to decouple digital growth from the rising curve of financial fraud. While the transition may involve a brief learning curve for users, the long-term stability of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) infrastructure depends on such rigorous, multi-layered defense mechanisms.

### UPSC Relevance

**GS Paper III (Economy):** Highly relevant for topics concerning "Changes in industrial policy and their effects on industrial growth" and "Inclusive growth and issues arising from it." The stability of digital payments is a cornerstone of India's formalization of the economy.