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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE : 4

India leads 16-nation maritime initiative

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

With the West Asia conflict entering its fifth week and disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz triggering economic and energy instability, the Indian Navy on Thursday flagged off *INS Sunayna* as the Indian Ocean Ship (IOS) SAGAR, reinforcing its commitment to regional maritime security and cooperation.

The offshore patrol vessel, carrying Indian Navy personnel along with representatives from 16 foreign countries, was flagged off by Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth in the presence of Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi at Naval Dockyard in Mumbai.

Admiral Tripathi said maritime competition was no longer limited to oil and energy but was expanding to critical domains such as rare earth elements, minerals, fishing grounds and data. He noted that the global order was witnessing increasing friction, with the maritime domain emerging as a primary arena of contestation.

Rising challenges

He flagged rising challenges including illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, deep-sea research activities encroaching on sovereign rights, and growing threats from piracy, armed robbery and narco-trafficking.

Citing data, the Naval Chief said the Indian Ocean Region recorded around 3,700 maritime incidents last year, while narcotics seizures crossed \$1 billion in 2025, underscoring the scale of maritime threats.

During the deployment, the IOS SAGAR will undertake port calls at Colombo, Phuket, Jakarta, Singapore, Chittagong, Yangon and Male before concluding at Kochi.

The mission will focus on training in seamanship, navigation, communication, maritime safety, fire-fighting, damage control and VBSS operations.

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THE HINDU PAGE : 8

A betrayal foretold

After Trump's taunts, threats, Europe has to reimagine its security paradigm

The U.S. appears poised to break with 77 years of partnership with Western European nations under the security umbrella of NATO, especially after its President Donald Trump has said that he is "absolutely" considering withdrawing from the alliance, which in his view is a "paper tiger". This and similar remarks by Mr. Trump have followed White House's apparent frustration that European and other allies did not expediently send military assets into West Asia to assist the U.S. and Israel in their war campaign against Iran, particularly to secure safe passage for oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, currently under Tehran's control. Mr. Trump has frequently complained about getting less from NATO than Washington was putting into it, saying recently to the media, "... it's a one-way street". He has further hinted that NATO may have become an ineffectual global force when he recently observed that Russian President Vladimir Putin also "knows" that NATO lacks teeth to defend its members – a comment that gains additional salience in the context of Moscow's military aggression against Ukraine and its likely further military adventurism in the Baltic states region.

At the heart of the heightened tension in the U.S.-NATO relationship is Washington's constant refrain that defence spending by its European partners has fallen short of expectations – even if the immediate trigger for talk of withdrawing from NATO is the Iran war context. A prior question of legality remains unanswered too: under section 1250A of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, signed into force by former President Joe Biden, no U.S. President may unilaterally withdraw from NATO; rather they would require either a two-thirds Senate supermajority or an act of Congress towards this end. In the longer arc of history spanning the two Trump terms, a split with NATO, a security alliance, might not be of the same order as the eviscerating institutions of global governance and cooperation, which include the WTO and UN system organisations. But it is part of Mr. Trump's simultaneous pursuit of American global dominance and splendid isolation. On the one hand it may come as a relief to some that Mr. Trump's inward turn, pulling the U.S. back from global collaborative engagements could leave a security vacuum that could be opportunistically exploited by middle powers. However, for the world at large, and from a growth and economic stability perspective, the shock of a partner-nation abandoning its commitments worldwide will likely lead to a recalibration of trust and strategic calculus, ultimately remaking the rules-based international order and the global balance of cooperation across emerging powers. In this new post-Pax Americana world, Europe, more than most, will have to reimagine its security paradigm from first principles.

GS 2: POLITY

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ECI transfer controversy, top court's clarifications

Recently, the Election Commission of India (ECI) transferred a number of senior officers in some of the election-bound States as soon as their election schedules were announced. In the election schedule for 2026, polls are to be held in four States, namely, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and the Union Territory of Puducherry.

In the State of West Bengal, the Chief Secretary and Director General of Police – the head of State administration and the head of the police force – were among several officials transferred overnight without the consent or prior knowledge of the State government. The ECI claimed that such a step had been taken to ensure free and fair elections in those States. The States concerned, particularly West Bengal, were virtually stunned by the ferocity of these transfer orders, which have almost paralysed the administration. The crucial question here is whether it is within the powers of the ECI to transfer, in this manner, the heads of State administration in the name of ensuring free and fair elections. Are we then to conclude that, without transferring a handful of top officers, the ECI cannot conduct free and fair elections? There are many such disturbing questions that arise from these transfers.

It is difficult to find any statute under which such transfers can be made by the ECI. Of course, it always points to Article 324 of the Constitution (Superintendence, direction and control of elections to be vested in an Election Commission) to justify such actions. It is true that the Article confers unspecified powers on the ECI to conduct free and fair elections.

Article 324 and scope of powers

The Supreme Court of India had, in *Mohinder Singh Gill and Anr. vs The Chief Election Commissioner, New Delhi and Ors.* (1978), and in a host of other cases, held that Article 324 is a plenary provision which is in fact a reservoir of powers that can be used by the ECI whenever the need arises to ensure free and fair elections. But in all such cases the Court has added a rider that such powers can be used only where the field is unoccupied by a statute. In other words, the ECI cannot draw any such power from Article 324 where a law made by Parliament or a State legislature holds the field in which case it has to obey that law.

In *Mohinder Singh Gill*, the Court made the following significant observations which have clearly laid out the scope of the powers under this Article as well as its limitations. It said, "The



P.D.T. Achary

Former Secretary
General, Lok Sabha

Constitution, contemplates a free and fair election and vests comprehensive responsibilities of superintendence, direction and control of the conduct of elections in the Election Commission. This responsibility may cover powers, duties and functions of many sorts, administrative or other, depending on the circumstances".

However, there is a caveat. The Court added, "Two limitations at least are laid on its plenary character in the exercise thereof. Firstly, when Parliament or any State Legislature has made valid law, relating to or in connection with elections, the Commission shall act in conformity with, not in violation of such provisions but where such law is silent Art. 324 is a reservoir of power to, act for the avowed purpose of, not divorced from pushing forward a free and fair election with expedition. Secondly, the Commission shall be responsible to the rule of law, act bona fide and be amenable to the norms of natural justice in so far as conformance to such canons can reasonably and realistically be required of it as fairplay-in-action in a most important area of the constitutional order, viz., elections."

The issue of statutory backing

The officers belonging to the all India services are governed by the All India Services Act and the rules made thereunder. The transfer of an officer is the exclusive prerogative of the government. The all India service officers who are serving a State government are under the administrative control of the State government which has exclusive authority to transfer them at any time.

Under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the State Public Services are under the exclusive control of the State governments. It is the exclusive function of the governments – the State and the Union – to deal with all aspects of the services of the officers serving under these governments.

The crucial question that has arisen in the context of the transfer of senior officials of the State governments under the orders of the ECI is whether this action has any statutory backing. The duty of the ECI is to conduct elections in a free and fair manner. Of course, it has all the powers to perform this task in accordance with the mandate of the Constitution and statute.

Article 324(G) requires the State government or the Union government to make available to the ECI on demand the staff required by it to conduct elections. The Representation of the People Act of 1950 as well as the Representation of the People Act, 1951 contain elaborate provisions that deal with the duties and powers of the ECI. Nowhere

do any of these Acts contain any provision that empowers the ECI to transfer the head of a state administration or the head of the state police force, while keeping the State government in the dark, on the ground that their continuance in their posts will hamper the conduct of free and fair elections.

It is true that the Court has held that Article 324 has plenary powers to ensure free and fair election. But the Court has never dealt with the transfer of the seniormost officers in States by the ECI, taking the State governments by surprise and resulting in a paralysis of the administration, in the exercise of its plenary powers under Article 324. Apart from that, the Court has itself clarified that if the field is occupied by the law, the ECI needs to obey that law. It may be argued that the law mentioned by the Court must be related to, or in connection with, the election. It may also be argued that the All India Services Act or its rules are not laws relating to elections, but that is a very narrow, technical view.

The crucial point is that the ECI is not empowered to bypass a law made by Parliament dealing with the transfers and postings of all India Service officers, and cannot transfer such officers at will over the heads of the State government. The underlying assumption in such transfers is that those officers will not allow the ECI to conduct elections in a free and fair manner.

On 'unchecked power'

The ECI has a proud history of conducting elections in the country since 1951-52. It has always depended on State government officials to accomplish this task as the ECI does not have any machinery of its own to undertake such a gigantic exercise. The ECI, by branding them as men lacking integrity and removing them from their posts on the eve of an election is a new trend that will most certainly demoralise civil servants in the country. It is also not clear under what procedure the ECI has reached the conclusion that these officers are biased and unsuitable for conducting free and fair elections. Article 324 does not give unfettered powers to the ECI. The Court, which granted plenary powers to the ECI, had also said this in *Mohinder Singh Gill* – "No one is an imperium in imperio in our constitutional order. It is reasonable to hold that the Commissioner cannot defy the law armed by Article 324. Likewise, his functions are subject to the norms of fairness and he cannot act arbitrarily. Unchecked power is alien to our system."

These words from the highest court of the land are loud and clear enough.

Article 324 does not give unfettered powers to the Election Commission of India

GS 3: SPACE

THE HINDU PAGE : 10

Artemis II: what is at stake for U.S.?

The Artemis II mission sent a crew of four astronauts beyond low-earth orbit for the first time since 1972; it aims to prove the whole system works as designed and accelerate plans to land U.S. astronauts on the moon amid increasing competition from China

EXPLAINER

Yasudevan Makuth

The NASA Artemis II mission launched in the early hours of April 21, 2025. The giant rocket ascended on route to sending a crew of four astronauts to near the moon for the first time in more than half a century. In so doing, it marked a milestone for the U.S. space programme. Its crew—commander Reid Wiseman, pilot Victor Glover, mission specialist Christina Koch, and Canadian Space Agency astronaut Jeremy Hansen—are also the first humans to travel beyond low-earth orbit since Apollo 17 in 1972. Glover also became the first person of colour, Koch the first woman, and Hansen the first non-U.S. citizen to embark on a lunar trajectory.

The Artemis II mission uses the Space Launch System (SLS) rocket and the crew capsule is called Orion. The SLS will propel Orion into a free-return trajectory around the far side of the moon, reaching around 7,500 km from the moon's surface before the earth's gravity pulls them back to splash down in the Pacific Ocean in a little over a week.

The mission does not plan to land on the moon. Instead, NASA is flying it to prove that the whole system—from the ground teams to the rocket and its crew—works as designed and the processes to land humans on the moon are ready.

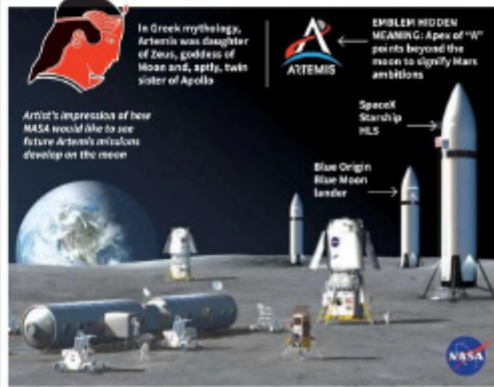
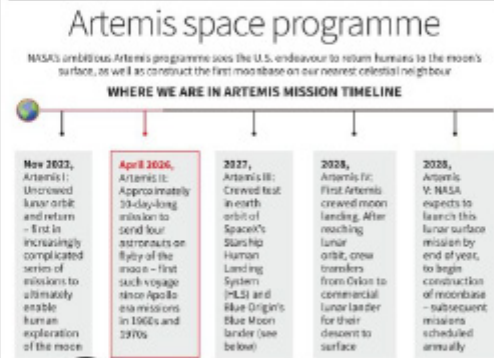
Mission profile
After the SLS core stage is separated, the crew will spend 24 hours in a high orbit around the earth as it checks the capsule's life support and environment systems. If they're all in order, they will fire Orion's trans-lunar injection burn. The crew will also test manual piloting and proximity operations, communications and navigation systems, and a high-speed data relay and collect data about physiological and biological responses of the human body to deep-space travel.

Once Orion has finished going around the moon, it will be pulled towards the earth by gravity. NASA engineers expect the capsule will enter the earth's atmosphere at a speed of around 40,000 km/hr. Its 5-metre-wide heat shield will endure temperatures as high as 5,000°C.

NASA will be collecting important data at this time because during the Artemis I mission in 2022, engineers found that Orion's heat shield was eroded during re-entry as gases trapped in the shield's material cracked it. In response, NASA used the same material but this time modified the re-entry trajectory so that Orion spends less time in the atmosphere as it descends.

Artemis overhaul
Artemis II will be the first test flight in the programme since NASA Administrator James Hansen overhauled the programme's milestones earlier this year. In the older plan, the Artemis II mission was to land humans on the moon for the first time in the 21st century. In the new plan, however, Artemis III will launch a crewed Orion capsule to earth orbit to dock with prototype lunar landers designed by SpaceX and Blue Origin to ensure the technology works. Mr. Isaacman has said this mission is currently planned for 2027. NASA will actually land American astronauts on the moon in the Artemis IV mission, currently planned for 2028.

This is why SpaceX and Blue Origin



Sources: Reuters, NASA, Royal Museums Greenwich. Illustration: NASA. © GREGORY BEPES

recently announced that they would focus on their plans to help U.S. astronauts reach the moon in the near future.

The restructuring also addressed a deeper operational problem. NASA flew the Artemis I test flight in late 2022 and Artemis II has now flown in 2026. This three-year gap included workforce attrition that could have resulted in loss of institutional memory, forcing parts of the mission to start afresh. So instead, NASA abandoned a plan to upgrade SLS for the Artemis II mission. Instead, it flew with the same configuration that flew on Artemis I. NASA also said it will increase the launch frequency, with the additional mission in 2027, followed by at least one mission landing on the moon's surface from 2028 onwards.

NASA also cancelled the Lunar Gateway project to build a space station orbiting the moon, and reallocated its components to infrastructure that will eventually be installed on the moon's south pole.

The Chinese pressure
Mr. Isaacman wasn't only responding to technical challenges. A big reason for NASA to change its plans to return to the moon so drastically is China. As he put it: "...with credible competition from our greatest geopolitical adversary increasing by the day, we need to move faster, eliminate delays, and achieve our objectives."

China is set to conduct a test flight of its



new Mengzhou crewed spacecraft this year. Its new and powerful Long March 10 rocket made its first low-altitude flight on February 21. The Laneyue lunar lander, which will carry astronauts from orbit to the surface, is expected to make its maiden flight between 2028 and 2029. As for robotic missions: the Chang'e 7 moon mission is also expected this year. It will explore the moon's south pole region for resources like water. The Chang'e 8 mission is expected around 2029; it will have technologies to use resources on the moon itself, like a 3D printer that will try to build structures using lunar soil.

Importantly, China also plans to land humans on the moon by 2030 and subsequently unfurl its 'International Lunar Research Station' in the 2030s.

As the U.S.-China rivalry continues to dig in on the earth, with the entrenched hegemon reluctant to cede dominance and the rising power determined to reshape the international order, the space

race they're leading wouldn't be what it is if it weren't for a particular limited resource: water on the moon.

There are craters in the moon's south pole region that have been permanently shadowed. These areas have escaped the drastic temperature swings on the parts of the moon that are exposed to the sun (from 127°C during the day to -173°C at night). As a result, they are expected to contain water ice. The thinking goes: whichever country establishes infrastructure first in this area could corner these water ice deposits and shape the scientific and geopolitical rules for everything that follows.

But in 2025, former NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine told a Senate Commerce Committee hearing that without significant changes, it is highly unlikely the U.S. will beat China's projected timeline to land people on the moon.

If Artemis II and III go as planned and Artemis IV is able to lift off on time, U.S. astronauts could reach the moon's surface at least two years before China's mission. However, that depends on many things happening right on schedule—perhaps too many. Artemis I was delayed four times before it launched; Artemis II was delayed at least three. More broadly, whereas China has followed an incremental approach driven by the state, the U.S. has been following a commercial model with a large coalition: more than 50 countries through the Artemis Accords plus private companies like SpaceX and Blue Origin.

Success versus failure
The Artemis II mission will last 10 days. Assuming it succeeds on all counts (since it is a test flight), it will prove the SLS rocket and the Orion crew capsule work, encourage NASA's partners to focus on Artemis III, potentially galvanise political commitment to land U.S. astronauts on the moon before China does.

Delaying launches, especially those including a human crew, is par for the course in spaceflight because safety comes first. But that doesn't mean these decisions resist in a vacuum. If Artemis II had been delayed again, for example, public as well as institutional confidence in SLS and Orion could have eroded further. There could have been cascading complications for NASA's partners, including the European and Japanese space agencies.

A delay could also have prompted the U.S. government to revisit the question of whether the programme is too expensive. It has so far cost at least \$95 billion and each new launch costs at least \$2 billion. SpaceX also still has to demonstrate the in-orbit refuelling technology that lunar missions require.

If, however, Artemis II had failed (or fails in the later part of the mission), the time-wise consequences range from a small but important delay if the failure is non-catastrophic to a delay of several years as the programme is halted altogether if the failure is catastrophic. It will also give reason for NASA's partners to consider whether they should suspend or possibly exit their involvement and for the U.S. government to consider a more panicked programme just to beat China to the moon.

So as Artemis II launched, it did more than just send four people farther from the earth than any mission has in 54 years. It signalled that the U.S. is still in the race, against a China that has kept the U.S. anxious by almost always sticking to its schedule even as it thunders towards a crewed landing on the moon by 2030.

THE GIST

▼ The mission will spend 24 hours in high earth orbit to check the capsule's life support and environment systems, followed by a trans-lunar injection burn and tests of manual piloting, communications and navigation systems.

▼ The capsule is expected to enter earth's atmosphere at around 40,000 km/hr, with its heat shield enduring temperatures as high as 5,000°C, as NASA collects important data after mission issues in Artemis I.

▼ The Artemis programme was overhauled recently to reduce complexity, revise timelines, and increase the launch frequency to respond to competition from China.

GS 3: DEFENCE

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 10

India's defence exports rose by 62.66% in '25-26 to reach all-time high of Rs 38,424 cr

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, April 2

DEFENCE EXPORTS have reached an all-time high of Rs 38,424 crore in the financial year 2025-26, marking an increase of Rs 14,802 crore (62.66%) over the previous fiscal year's figure of Rs 23,622 crore, in which the Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) and the private sector have contributed 54.84% and 45.16% respectively, the Defence Ministry said on Thursday.

In a statement, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said that the DPSUs' exports surged by 151% compared to the previous year while private firms recorded an increase of 14%.

"In terms of value of con-

tribution, the private sector accounted for Rs 17,353 crore worth of defence exports, while DPSUs contributed Rs 21,071 crore. Their respective figures in the previous financial year stood at Rs 15,233 crore and Rs 8,389 crore (respectively)," it said, adding that this figure indicates an increase by around three times in the last five years.

The ministry said the sharp rise highlights the increasing global acceptance of Indian-made defence products and the sector's growing integration with the international supply chains.

It stated that aside from being a successful global partner for systems/sub-systems, India is exporting defence equipment to more than 80 countries as of FY 2025-26,

adding that the number of exporters went up to 145 from 128 — a 13.3% rise from the previous fiscal.

It also highlighted the Department of Defence Production has streamlined defence export regulatory processes with a revamped online portal and simplified Standard Operation Procedure for authorisations.

Commending the efforts of all stakeholders in this achievement, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, in a post on X, said that with DPSUs contributing 54.84% and private industry 45.16%, this milestone showcases the power of a collaborative and self-reliant defence ecosystem.

He also noted that this significant jump of Rs 14,802 crore

in defence exports reflects the growing global trust in India's indigenous capabilities and advanced manufacturing strength.

On Wednesday, the Defence Ministry said that it has fully utilised its capital outlay of Rs 1.86 lakh crore for defence services provided for the FY 2025-26 at the Revised Estimates stage.

In the FY 2025-26, AoN (Acceptance of Necessity) for 109 proposals amounting Rs 6.81 lakh crore has been accorded by MoD, compared to 56 proposals worth Rs 1.76 lakh crore approved in FY 2024-25. Also, capital procurement contracts for a total 503 proposals amounting Rs 2.28 lakh crore were signed by MoD in FY 2025-26, it said.

GS 3: ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 15

● RBI DIRECTIVE TO BAR NON-DELIVERABLE DERIVATIVE CONTRACTS SIGNALS CRACKDOWN ON EXCESSIVE RUPEE SPECULATION

NDD ban: Is it the end of speculative games in rupee?

George Mathew
Mumbai, April 2

THE RESERVE Bank of India's (RBI) latest directive to bar banks from non-deliverable derivative (NDD) contracts in the rupee — often misused and manipulated by big currency players — marks a decisive shift toward tighter control and transparency in the foreign exchange market.

The move boosted the battered rupee, which had fallen below the 95 level against the dollar, to 93.10, a sharp rally of Rs 1.73 on Thursday.

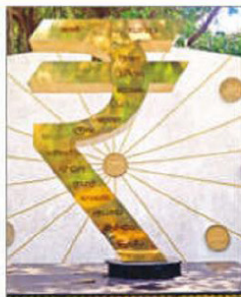
By eliminating a key avenue for speculative exercise, the central bank is attempting to stabilise currency movements, hit hard by the rising oil prices and capital outflows in the wake of the West Asia conflict, and reinforce the primacy of the onshore market in

the country.

What's the NDD market?

NDDs, which are typically traded outside India in financial hubs like Singapore, Hong Kong, London or Dubai, allow participants to bet on the rupee's direction without actual delivery of the currency.

An NDD is a derivative contract where two parties agree on a future exchange rate for the rupee, but settle the difference in cash, usually in US dollars. As India has capital controls, offshore investors can't freely trade in the rupee in physical form. This led to the creation of the NDD markets in the rupee. These instruments have long been criticised for distorting price discovery and manipulation as such an offshore sentiment can diverge sharply from domestic funda-



The ban aims to curb offshore speculation that often leads to rupee volatility. EXPRESSPHOTO

mentals and movements.

The NDD market is widely used by foreign investors, hedge funds and global banks who cannot freely access and play in the Indian rupee market, as well as by firms looking to hedge currency risk. These

trades take place offshore, outside the control of the RBI. This often acts as a price discovery mechanism for the rupee, even influencing expectations before Indian markets open. The ban on NDD is aimed at curbing offshore speculation that often leads to rupee volatility.

Misuse of NDD market

The NDD market was also misused by some market participants. Previously, some participants would cancel and re-enter contracts to take advantage of favourable movements, effectively turning hedging tools into speculative instruments.

Taking advantage of the geopolitical and trade tensions, big offshore traders sometimes take huge positions betting that the rupee will fall, impacting it in India's onshore market.

"This was happening when the West Asia conflict started in late February. By disallowing this practice, the RBI is closing a loophole that enabled regulatory arbitrage," said an analyst.

Another significant aspect is the RBI's restriction on transactions with related parties. This move addresses concerns on intra-group dealings that

could obscure true risk exposure or be used to shift profits and risks across jurisdictions. By aligning definitions with global accounting standards, the RBI is signalling its intent to bring Indian forex practices in line with international best practices, thereby boosting investor confidence.

In the near term, the rupee is likely to see reduced volatility as speculative trades diminish.

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