



NAMAN SHARMA
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Daily **CURRENT AFFAIRS**

 January 23rd, 2026



 **Offline Centre Location:**
SCO 173-174, Sector 17C, Chandigarh

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1. 'Secondary particulate matter is the top cause of Delhi winter's pollution'

Why in the News?

A synthesis report commissioned by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has identified secondary particulate matter (SPM) as the largest contributor (27%) to Delhi's winter air pollution, ahead of transport (23%), biomass burning (20%), dust (15%) and industry (9%). The report was prepared in response to a January 6 direction from the Supreme Court of India to place on record the major causes behind the worsening AQI in the National Capital Region.



Background

Primary vs Secondary PM:

- Primary particulate matter is directly emitted (e.g., dust, soot).
- Secondary particulate matter forms in the atmosphere when gases like SO_2 , NO_x and VOCs chemically react, often facilitated by ammonia (NH_3).
- Winter vulnerability: Low temperatures, weak winds, temperature inversions, and high humidity in Delhi winters trap pollutants and accelerate the formation of secondary aerosols.
- Policy context: The CAQM has relied on multiple source apportionment studies over the years, though methodologies varied. In late 2024, it paused the Decision Support System for policy use due to forecasting limitations.

Features

- Dominance of secondary PM: At 27%, SPM overtakes direct sources, signalling that chemistry in the air matters as much as tailpipes or fires.

Chemical pathway:

- SO₂ (from coal combustion, brick kilns) → oxidises to sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄)
- NO_x (from vehicles, generators) → forms nitric acid (HNO₃)
- Both acids react with NH₃ → ammonium sulfate & ammonium nitrate aerosols
- Scale of impact: 25–60% of PM_{2.5} can comprise these sulfates and nitrates during winter episodes.
- What's next: A new emissions inventory and source apportionment with 2026 as the base year is planned by the Automotive Research Association of India, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, The Energy and Resources Institute, and Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology.

Challenges

- **Fragmented methods:** Past studies used differing approaches, complicating consensus and policy prioritisation.
- **Forecasting gaps:** Limits in predicting sharp AQI drops reduce the agility of emergency responses.
- **Inter-sectoral nature:** SPM control requires coordinated action across power, transport, waste, agriculture and industry, often siloed.

Way Forward

- **Target precursors, not just sources:**
 - Tighten controls on SO₂ and NO_x (power plants, diesel fleets, generators).
 - Explicit NH₃ management: regulate fertiliser use, promote urease inhibitors, cover manure/waste, and strengthen MSW segregation.
- **Clean energy & fuels:** Accelerate coal-to-clean transitions, brick kiln upgrades, and cleaner cooking/heating.
- **Transport reforms:** Rapid fleet electrification, inspection & maintenance, congestion pricing, last-mile public transport.
- **Urban dust & waste:** Pave/green shoulders, mechanised sweeping, strict bans on open waste burning.
- **Better science for policy:** Standardised methods, real-time chemical speciation, improved winter forecasting.
- **Regional coordination:** NCR-wide actions with shared accountability and transparent data.

Conclusion

The CAQM synthesis shifts the policy lens from what we emit to what forms in the air. Tackling Delhi's winter smog demands a precursor-first strategy, especially curbing ammonia alongside SO₂ and NO_x. Without addressing secondary particulate formation, piecemeal source controls will fall short of delivering breathable winters.

2. Officials ‘coercing’ us to surrender land: tribals

Why in the News?

Members of the Tribal Council in Little and Great Nicobar have alleged that local officials are pressuring them to surrender ancestral tribal lands for the ₹92,000-crore Great Nicobar Island mega infrastructure project, parts of which are reportedly nearing approval. The allegations surfaced during an online briefing by Council members to journalists.



Background

- The Great Nicobar project envisages a trans-shipment port, airport, power plant and township, primarily around Galathea Bay, Pemmaya Bay, and Nanjappa Bay.
- These areas include forest lands traditionally inhabited by the Nicobarese, a Scheduled Tribe, before the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which displaced several coastal villages.
- The Nicobarese community has since sought rehabilitation and return to ancestral village sites, many of which now fall within the proposed project footprint.

Features of the Issue

- **Alleged coercion:** Tribal Council members claim they were orally asked in a January 7 meeting to sign a “surrender certificate” relinquishing claims over ancestral land.
- **Lack of clarity:** Officials reportedly did not specify which exact parcels of land were to be surrendered, nor the legal implications of such a document.

- **Relocation offer:** After the public briefing, Council members were again summoned and asked whether they would give up land claims in exchange for relocation to another coastal area.
- **Cultural stakes:** The land in question includes former village sites, central to Nicobarese identity, customary rights and future livelihood security.

Challenges

- **Tribal rights vs development:** Large infrastructure projects often collide with customary land rights of indigenous communities, especially where titles are community-based rather than individual.
- **Consent and due process:** Allegations raise concerns over whether free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)-a global norm for indigenous people-is being respected.
- **Post-disaster rehabilitation gaps:** Two decades after the tsunami, unresolved rehabilitation claims have deepened mistrust between the community and the administration.
- **Ecological sensitivity:** Great Nicobar is among India's most fragile ecosystems, amplifying resistance when projects overlap with tribal habitats.

Way Forward

- **Transparent consultation:** Any land-related decision must involve formal, documented consultations with the Tribal Council, not ad-hoc meetings.
- **Legal safeguards:** Strict adherence to the Forest Rights Act, 2006, especially provisions on community forest rights and consent, is essential.
- **Independent social impact assessment:** Beyond environmental clearances, credible assessments of cultural and livelihood impacts should guide project design.
- **Participatory rehabilitation:** If relocation is unavoidable, it must be tribal-led, culturally appropriate, and backed by long-term livelihood guarantees.
- **Trust-building measures:** Addressing long-pending tsunami rehabilitation demands can restore confidence before pursuing fresh land diversion.

Conclusion

The Great Nicobar Island project has become a test case for balancing strategic development with tribal rights. Allegations of coercion, if left unaddressed, risk undermining constitutional protections for Scheduled Tribes and eroding trust in governance. Sustainable development in ecologically and culturally sensitive regions can succeed only when consent, clarity and justice are placed at the centre of policy decisions.

3. BRICS India summit needs a green and resilient agenda

Why in the News?

India is set to host the next BRICS Summit this year. With expanding membership and growing geopolitical weight, there is a renewed call-articulated by climate negotiators and policy experts-for the Summit to prioritise a green, resilient, and inclusive agenda that reflects the needs of the Global South amid intensifying climate risks and strained multilateralism.

Background

- BRICS has evolved from an economic grouping into a platform of strategic coordination among major developing economies.
- India's successful hosting of the G20 (2023) demonstrated its ability to balance geopolitics with Global South concerns, including climate finance and development equity.
- Climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are under pressure due to geopolitical polarisation, weakening consensus, and reduced ambition by some developed countries.



Features of the Issue

- **Climate vulnerability of BRICS:** Members face diverse but severe impacts, permafrost thaw (Russia), Amazon stress (Brazil), Himalayan risks (India, China), and coastal vulnerabilities (South Africa, UAE).
- **Global leadership vacuum:** Retreat by the U.S. under Donald Trump from climate multilateralism and climate finance has created space for BRICS to act as a stabilising force.
- **Expanded BRICS:** With new members like Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia and the UAE, BRICS now represents ~50% of the global population, ~40% of the global GDP, and ~26% of the global trade, amplifying its voice.

- **Climate finance focus:** The 2025 Rio Summit adopted a BRICS Leaders' Framework Declaration on Climate Finance, aligning with India's long-standing advocacy for equity and finance for adaptation.

Challenges

- **Geopolitical sensitivities:** BRICS is often perceived as anti-West, triggering concerns in Washington and complicating India–U.S. relations.
- **Weak climate finance flows:** Retreat of private capital from ESG and green finance, coupled with U.S. scepticism, constrains global action.
- **Fragmented climate governance:** Unilateral measures like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) risk undermining UNFCCC principles of equity.
- **Institutional gaps:** Over-reliance on the New Development Bank limits the scale of climate finance mobilisation.

Way Forward

- **Make resilience central:** Shift focus from mitigation-only debates to adaptation, resilience, and loss and damage, which matter most to the Global South.
- **Engage Bretton Woods Institutions:** Bring World Bank and International Monetary Fund leadership into BRICS deliberations to unlock scale in climate finance.
- **Strengthen South–South cooperation:** Build technology-sharing platforms for renewables, climate-resilient infrastructure, and early-warning systems.
- **Defend multilateral principles:** Use the BRICS consensus to resist unilateral climate-trade measures and reaffirm equity under the UNFCCC.
- **Indian leadership:** Leverage India's credibility, shaped by initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inclusive climate vision, to anchor the agenda.

Conclusion

The upcoming BRICS Summit offers India a strategic opportunity to shape a green and resilient global agenda at a time of fractured multilateralism. By foregrounding resilience, climate finance, and equity, India can reinforce BRICS as a constructive force for the Global South while safeguarding its own strategic autonomy and leadership in global climate governance.

4. A dangerous march towards a Himalayan ecocide

Why in the News?

Concerns have intensified over large-scale infrastructure expansion in the fragile Himalayas, particularly the Char Dham road-widening project in Uttarakhand. Environmental groups and citizen forums warn that continued deforestation, slope cutting and road widening in disaster-prone zones could push the region towards a Himalayan ecocide, especially after repeated climate-induced disasters in 2025.

Background

- In 2025, climate-related disasters caused over 4,000 deaths across India, with Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand worst affected.
- Towns such as Dharali, Harsil, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Kullu and Mandi witnessed cloudbursts, landslides, avalanches and flash floods.
- Despite this, approvals were granted for forest diversion and tree felling under the Char Dham road project, including in areas recently devastated by disasters.

Features of the Issue

Forest diversion:

- On November 12, the Uttarakhand Forest Department approved the diversion of 43 hectares of forest land, including the felling of nearly 7,000 deodar (Devdar) trees, with 10 hectares earmarked for muck dumping.



Ecological sensitivity:

- The region lies north of the Main Central Thrust (MCT), a geologically fragile zone where major infrastructure is discouraged.
- It is influenced by the rapidly retreating Gangotri glacier, with unstable hanging glaciers and moraine-laden valleys.

Role of deodar forests:

- Stabilise slopes, reduce landslide and avalanche risks.
- Regulate microclimate and snowmelt-fed streams.
- Maintain water quality and ecological integrity of the Ganga, especially within the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone.

Scientific concern:

- Deodar trees contribute antimicrobial and ecological functions that support river health; “translocation” of such ancient trees is ecologically unviable.

Challenges

- Unsafe engineering choices: Adoption of the DL-PS (12-metre paved width) standard in a fragile mountain ecology, requiring excessive hill cutting.

Environmental governance failures:

- Fragmentation of projects to bypass comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA).
- Indiscriminate muck dumping into water sources.

Rising disaster risk:

- Over 800 active landslide zones have emerged along nearly 700 km of widened roads.

Policy contradiction:

- Current practices contradict the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), which mandates glacier monitoring, hazard mitigation and sustainable livelihoods.

Climate risk multiplier:

- The Himalayas have warmed ~50% faster than the global average since 1950, intensifying extreme weather events.

Way Forward

- **Prioritise disaster resilience:** Infrastructure design must respect slope stability, natural angles of repose and carrying capacity limits.
- **Regulate road width:** Focus on slope safety over excessive widening, as repeatedly advised by experts and courts.
- **Strengthen EIAs:** Enforce cumulative, region-wide environmental and geological assessments.
- **Protect critical forests:** Recognise old-growth deodar forests as natural disaster buffers, not expendable resources.
- **Align with policy:** Fully operationalise the NMSHE to guide Himalayan development using science-based planning.
- **Manage tourism and waste:** Introduce strict visitor caps, traffic regulation and solid waste systems in fragile zones.

Conclusion

The Himalayas are not merely a frontier for connectivity or strategic infrastructure; they are the ecological foundation of the Indian subcontinent. Repeated disasters underline a hard scientific truth: unsafe land use, not nature alone, is the primary trigger of Himalayan catastrophes, with climate change acting as a force multiplier.

5. Does Trump's Greenland plan signal the end of NATO?

Why in the News?

U.S. President Donald Trump has renewed his push to acquire Greenland, calling it an “absolute necessity” for U.S. national security. The proposal—directed at an autonomous territory of Denmark, a NATO member—has reignited debate over whether such unilateralism undermines North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), particularly its core Article 5 collective defence pledge.



Background

- Greenland is a self-governing territory under Danish sovereignty and hosts strategic U.S. military facilities, including the Thule Air Base.
- NATO, formed in 1949, rests on Article 5: an attack on one member is considered an attack on all.
- Trump has long questioned NATO's relevance, accusing European allies of free-riding on U.S. security guarantees during both his first and second terms.

Features of the Issue

- **Imperial overtones:** Mr Trump's demand for sovereign control rather than access or partnership marks a sharp break from alliance-based diplomacy.
- **Strategic Arctic value:** Greenland offers proximity to emerging Arctic sea routes (Northern Sea Route, Northwest Passage), missile defence advantages, and access to critical minerals and rare earths.
- **Arctic geopolitics:** Melting ice has intensified competition among the U.S., Russia, and China, raising the region's global salience.
- **Alliance contradiction:** A NATO leader coercing another NATO member challenges the credibility of collective security assurances, especially for smaller European states wary of

Russia.

Challenges

- **Erosion of trust within NATO:** If the U.S. itself threatens allied sovereignty, Article 5 risks becoming politically hollow.
- **European dependence:** Decades of underinvestment in defence leave Europe reliant on U.S. military power.
- **Internal European divisions:** Without American leadership, historical and strategic cleavages within Europe could widen.
- **Uncertain U.S. strategy:** While Russia dominates Arctic infrastructure, the U.S. has shown limited willingness for long-term Arctic investments, making Trump's Greenland focus appear selective.

Way Forward

- **European strategic autonomy:** Accelerate defence spending, joint procurement and operational integration within Europe.
- **Alliance recalibration:** NATO must clarify red lines on sovereignty and reinforce political not just military commitment to Article 5.
- **Arctic governance:** Strengthen multilateral Arctic frameworks to prevent unilateral territorial assertions.
- **Diplomatic accommodation:** Short-term face-saving arrangements (greater U.S. access without sovereignty transfer) may help avoid an open alliance rupture.

Conclusion

Trump's Greenland gambit does not immediately end NATO, but it fundamentally weakens its political foundations. By signalling that U.S. commitments are transactional rather than principled, it forces Europe to confront an uncomfortable reality: NATO's survival increasingly depends on Europe's ability to defend itself and manage internal unity. The Greenland episode is thus less about territory and more about the future credibility of collective security in a post-unilateralist world.

6. India absent as Trump rolls out Board of Peace with 19 nations attending

Why in the News?

India was absent as U.S. President Donald Trump formally launched the Board of Peace at the World Economic Forum in Davos, a new U.S.-led initiative aimed at overseeing a ceasefire in the Israel– Hamas conflict and potentially expanding into broader global conflict management. While India was invited, it has not yet taken a call on joining the body.

Background

- The Board of Peace was unveiled at World Economic Forum, with Mr Trump presenting it as a platform that could one day rival or replace parts of the United Nations.
- Although the U.S. claims 59 countries have signed on, only 19 countries were represented at the launch.
- India, despite being invited and despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi's presence in global peace and mediation initiatives, chose not to participate at this stage.

Features of the Board of Peace

- **Initial mandate:** Monitor and support the ceasefire in Gaza, with U.S. supervision over a transitional Palestinian governance mechanism.
- **Ambitious scope:** Mr Trump suggested the board could eventually handle conflicts beyond Gaza and take over some UN functions.
- **Participating countries:** Include Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Turkiye, Qatar, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia and many from West Asia and Central Asia.
- **Symbolic moment:** The announcement coincided with renewed controversy over Mr Trump's Greenland ambitions, diverting attention and raising doubts among allies.



Challenges and Concerns

- **Legitimacy deficit:** Absence of major global players like India, several European allies, and key UN stakeholders weakens credibility.
- **Overlap with UN:** The board risks duplicating or undermining established UN mechanisms for peacekeeping and mediation.
- **Perception of unilateralism:** Seen by many as part of Mr. Trump's broader scepticism of multilateral institutions.

- **Unclear governance:** Membership criteria, decision-making authority, and legal standing remain vague.
- **Allied scepticism:** Even close U.S. partners have opted out or delayed participation, citing parliamentary and constitutional constraints.

Why India May Be Hesitant

- **Commitment to multilateralism:** India has consistently backed UN-centric global governance, while pushing for reforms rather than replacement.
- **Strategic autonomy:** Joining a U.S.-driven peace body with undefined powers may constrain India's independent foreign policy posture.
- **West Asia balancing:** India maintains delicate ties with Israel, Palestine, Iran, and Arab states, requiring cautious diplomacy.
- **Precedent concerns:** Endorsing parallel institutions could weaken norms that India itself relies upon in global forums.

Way Forward

- **Wait-and-watch approach:** India may assess the board's evolution, mandate clarity, and international acceptance before deciding.
- **UN coordination:** Any engagement could be conditional on the Board operating in conjunction with the UN, not in competition with it.
- **Issue-based participation:** India could support humanitarian or ceasefire efforts without formal membership.
- **Reaffirm multilateral reform:** Use the moment to reiterate the need for UN reform, not bypassing it.

Conclusion

India's absence from the Board of Peace reflects strategic caution rather than disengagement. As Mr. Trump experiments with alternative global governance structures, New Delhi appears unwilling to endorse initiatives that dilute multilateral legitimacy or create parallel power centres.

7. Net FDI negative for fourth month in a row in Nov. 2025

Why in the News?

India's net foreign direct investment (FDI) remained negative for the fourth consecutive month in November 2025, with outflows exceeding inflows by \$446 million, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Net foreign portfolio investments (FPI) have also stayed negative so far in FY 2025–26, reflecting persistent investor caution.

Background

- **FDI vs FPI:**

- FDI involves long-term investments in productive assets and is considered growth-enhancing.
- FPI is typically short-term, flowing into equity and debt markets for returns.
- Since mid-2025, global financial conditions have tightened amid geopolitical uncertainty, currency volatility, and trade policy risks.
- India's external investment flows are being closely watched as indicators of growth confidence, balance of payments stability, and currency strength.

Key Features

- **Net FDI (Nov 2025):** -\$446 million (outflows exceeded inflows).
- Gross FDI inflows: \$6.4 billion, 22.5% higher than November 2024, though slightly lower than October (\$6.5 bn) and September (\$7 bn).
- Major source countries: Japan, Singapore, and the U.S. together accounted for over 75% of inflows.
- Sectoral distribution:
 - Financial services (~75% combined top share)
 - Manufacturing
 - Retail & wholesale trade
- Repatriation & disinvestment: \$5.3 billion (five-month high).
- Outward FDI: \$1.5 billion (down sharply from \$3.2 billion in October), mainly to Singapore, Mauritius, the U.S., and the U.K.
- Net FPI: Negative so far in FY 2025–26 (till January 16, 2026), driven by trade uncertainty and a weakening rupee.

In the red

Net FDI into India was negative for the fourth consecutive month in November 2025 due to higher repatriations by foreign companies in India (In \$ million)



Source: RBI

Challenges

- **High repatriations:** Elevated profit-taking and exits by foreign firms are outweighing fresh inflows.
- **Trade policy uncertainty:** Unresolved India–U.S. trade negotiations are dampening medium-term investor sentiment.
- **Currency pressures:** A weakening rupee reduces dollar returns and raises hedging costs for foreign investors.
- **Global risk aversion:** Tight global liquidity and geopolitical risks are pulling capital back to safer markets.
- **FPI volatility:** Persistent negative portfolio flows increase pressure on equity markets and the exchange rate.

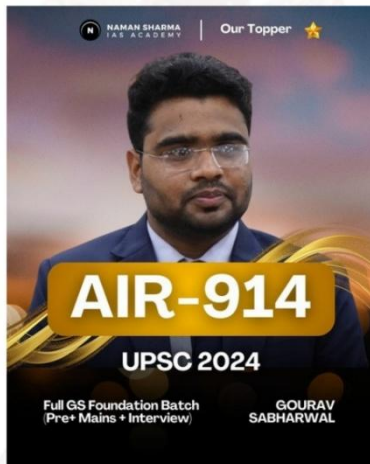
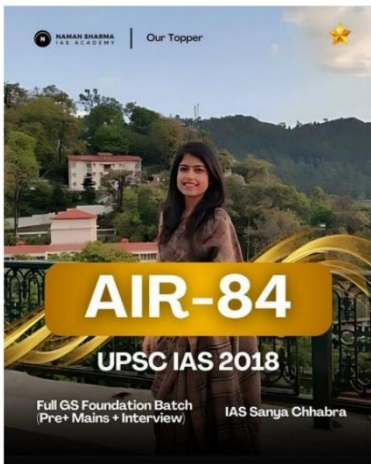
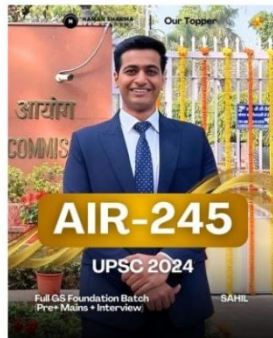
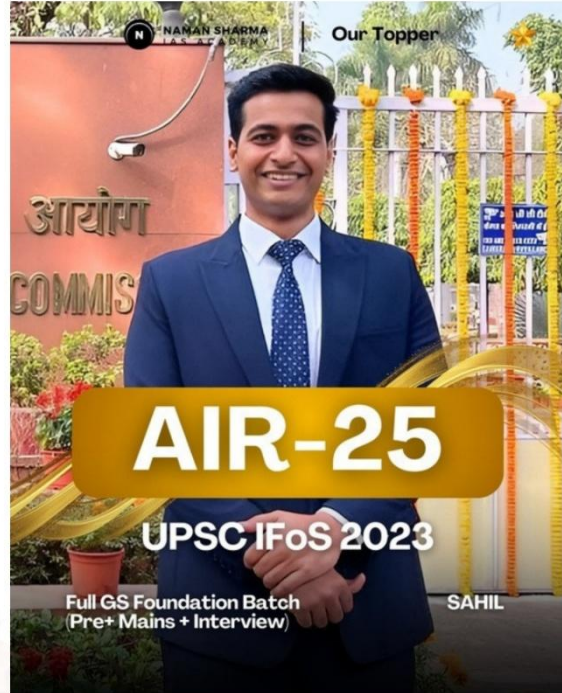
Way Forward

- **Policy certainty:** Fast-track clarity on trade agreements, especially with the U.S., to restore confidence.
- **Ease of doing business:** Reduce regulatory friction and ensure stability in taxation and sectoral FDI rules.
- **Deepen manufacturing push:** Strengthen production-linked incentives and supply-chain integration to attract long-term FDI.
- **Currency management:** Maintain macro stability through prudent fiscal and monetary coordination to limit excessive volatility.
- **Quality over quantity:** Focus on attracting stable, technology- and employment-intensive FDI, rather than short-term flows.

Conclusion

While gross FDI inflows remain resilient, persistently negative net FDI and FPI flows signal rising investor unease. The trend underscores that capital is entering India but leaving faster through repatriation and disinvestment. Restoring confidence will depend on trade clarity, macroeconomic stability, and a renewed push for long-term, productivity-enhancing investments rather than volatile portfolio flows.

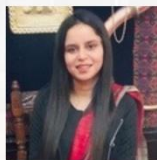
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