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CURRENT AFFAIRS

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 **Offline Centre Location:**
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1. 'Talks underway, India-U.S. statement on deal in days'

Why in the News?

India and the United States are on the verge of finalising the first tranche of a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA), with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal announcing that a joint statement is expected within days. The statement will trigger tariff adjustments - the U.S. is expected to reduce tariffs on Indian exports via executive order, while India will follow after a formal legal agreement, likely by mid-March. The deal is linked to India's projected imports of \$500 billion worth of goods from the U.S. over five years, reflecting deepening strategic and economic ties.



Background

India–U.S. trade relations have evolved from cautious engagement to a strategic economic partnership:

- Bilateral goods and services trade crossed \$190+ billion in recent years, making the U.S. India's largest trading partner.

Trade tensions earlier arose over:

- Withdrawal of India from the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) in 2019
- Tariff disputes at the WTO
- Market access issues in agriculture, medical devices, and digital trade

Since 2022, both countries launched:

- India–U.S. Trade Policy Forum revival
- Supply chain resilience initiatives
- Technology and defence partnerships (iCET framework)
- The proposed BTA represents a shift from piecemeal negotiations to a structured trade architecture.

- The deal also comes amid global supply chain realignments and India's strategy to diversify import sources while supporting domestic growth.

Features

Tariff Rationalisation

- U.S. tariffs on Indian exports to drop from 50% to 18% via executive action
- India will reduce MFN tariffs after signing the legal agreement
- Reflects asymmetry in tariff mechanisms:
 - U.S.: executive flexibility
 - India: WTO-bound legal commitments

\$500 Billion Import Projection

- **India expects major imports in:**
- Energy (LNG, crude oil)
- Aircraft and aerospace components
- Data centre and semiconductor equipment
- ICT and digital infrastructure
- Defence and advanced manufacturing inputs

Phased Agreement Structure

- Joint political statement first
- Conversion into a legal treaty later
- Mirrors India's FTA negotiation pattern with other partners

Strategic Economic Alignment

- Reduces dependence on single-source imports
- Supports India's infrastructure and industrial growth
- Strengthens Indo-Pacific economic architecture

Challenges

Domestic Industry Concerns

- Fear of an import surge hurting MSMEs
- Pressure on the agriculture and manufacturing sectors
- Risk of widening trade deficit

Regulatory and Legal Complexity

- India's MFN tariff commitments limit flexibility
- Need for parliamentary/legal scrutiny
- Harmonisation of standards and rules of origin

Political Sensitivity

- Trade agreements often face domestic backlash
- Labour and farmer groups may resist tariff cuts
- Perception of unequal concessions

Strategic Dependence Risks

- Over-reliance on U.S. energy and tech imports
- Technology transfer remains uncertain
- Supply chain vulnerabilities

Way Forward

Safeguard Mechanisms

- Include emergency tariff clauses
- Sectoral protection windows
- Anti-dumping safeguards

Balanced Market Access

- Ensure reciprocal benefits
- Expand Indian services exports
- Promote pharma and IT market entry

Domestic Capacity Building

- Strengthen MSME competitiveness
- Invest in manufacturing under PLI schemes
- Improve logistics and infrastructure

Strategic Trade Diplomacy

- Align with Indo-Pacific economic frameworks
- Diversify partnerships beyond the U.S.
- Use trade deals to advance technology cooperation.

Conclusion

The emerging India–U.S. trade agreement signals a major recalibration of economic relations between two strategic partners. If designed carefully, it can accelerate India’s growth ambitions, deepen technology integration, and strengthen global supply chain resilience. However, the success of the deal depends on balancing openness with domestic safeguards, ensuring reciprocity, and embedding long-term industrial strategy within trade diplomacy.

2. Mobile phone ban in Himachal Pradesh schools from March 1

Why in the News?

The Himachal Pradesh government has announced a statewide ban on mobile phones in schools, effective March 1, 2026. Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu stated that the move applies to both government and private institutions, with fines and confiscation for violations. The decision is framed as a step toward improving academic focus and protecting students’ mental and physical well-being.

Background

- Rising smartphone penetration among school-age children has triggered concerns about:
 - Screen addiction
 - Cyberbullying
 - Reduced attention span
 - Mental health stress
- Several Indian schools already impose informal or partial phone restrictions.
- Globally, countries such as France, China, and parts of Australia have implemented school phone bans.
- India lacks a uniform national policy; regulation is mostly left to states and school boards.
- The Himachal decision is among the most formal state-wide legal bans with penalties.

Mobile phone ban in Himachal Pradesh schools from March 1

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Thursday announced that students will be prohibited from using mobile phones in all government and private schools across the State, beginning March 1, 2026.

The Chief Minister said the decision has been taken as a step towards improving the academic environment and protecting students' well-being. He made the announcement during the closing ceremony of the 69th National School Games Under-19 Girls Handball Tournament held at Ghumarwin in Bilaspur district.

"Under the new regulations, students will no longer be permitted to bring

Those found in possession of a phone would face a fine of ₹500 and the confiscation of the device, the CM said

mobile devices in the school premises," he said, adding that any student found in possession of a phone would face a fine of ₹500 and the confiscation of the device.

SOP for compliance
"Additionally, parents will be required to attend mandatory counselling sessions at the school. To ensure long-term compliance, the Education Department has been tasked with drafting a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to address repeated violations," he said.

Features

Complete Ban on Possession

- Students cannot bring mobile phones to the school premises.
- Applies to both private and government schools.

Financial Penalty

- ₹500 fine for violations.
- Immediate confiscation of the device.

Parental Accountability

- Mandatory counselling sessions for parents of violators.
- Encourages shared responsibility between schools and families.

Institutional Enforcement

- The Education Department is to draft an SOP.
- Focus on handling repeat offences.
- Standardised compliance across the state.

Challenges

Enforcement Practicality

- Monitoring thousands of schools consistently is difficult.
- Risk of uneven implementation.

Digital Learning Trade-off

- Smartphones are tools for:
 - Online research
 - EdTech platforms
 - Emergency communication
- Blanket bans may limit constructive usage.

Equity Concerns

- Rural students may rely on phones for digital access.
- Schools lack alternative infrastructure in some areas.

Parent Resistance

- Safety concerns (communication during emergencies).
- Perception of overregulation.

Behavioural Adaptation

- Students may hide devices.
- Policing approach may strain teacher-student relations.

Way Forward

Regulated Use Instead of Absolute Ban

- Allow phones for supervised academic purposes.
- Create “phone lockers” during class hours.

Digital Literacy Curriculum

- Teach responsible screen use.
- Cyber safety education.

Strengthening School Infrastructure

- Provide tablets/computers for academic work.
- Improve digital classrooms.

Parent–School Partnership

- Awareness campaigns on screen addiction.
- Joint monitoring at home and school.

Mental Health Support

- Counselling cells in schools.
- Promote sports and extracurricular engagement.

Conclusion

Himachal Pradesh's mobile phone ban reflects growing anxiety over technology's impact on children. While the objective of improving academic focus is valid, sustainable success depends on balanced regulation rather than pure prohibition. Combining discipline with digital education, infrastructure support, and parental involvement can transform the ban from a punitive rule into a broader child well-being strategy.

3. TDB aims at tackling pollution in Pampa River ahead of the next Sabarimala season

Why in the News?

The Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) has announced a large-scale campaign to curb pollution in the Pampa River ahead of the next Sabarimala pilgrimage season. The move follows criticism over pilgrims discarding clothes and plastic waste in the river, which has severely degraded water quality. Authorities warn that chemical residues and microfibres from dumped garments threaten ecosystems and public health.



Background

Sabarimala Temple is one of India's largest annual pilgrimage centres, attracting millions of devotees. The Pampa River is a sacred bathing site where pilgrims traditionally cleanse before trekking uphill to the shrine.

- The river is a lifeline for the central Kerala districts.
- Seasonal pilgrimage surges cause:
 - Plastic waste accumulation
 - Textile dumping
 - Open defecation and sewage stress
- Earlier clean-up drives have struggled due to scale and ritual behaviour.
- Environmental concerns are heightened because the river lies near the Periyar Tiger Reserve is a biodiversity hotspot.

Scientific monitoring has shown rising contamination from synthetic fabrics releasing dyes, microplastics, and toxic residues.

Features

Multi-State Awareness Campaign

- Rollout across South Indian States from April
- Press conferences and media outreach
- Social media and FM alerts

Behavioural Intervention

- Message: dumping clothes is not a required ritual
- Focus on persuasion over punishment

On-Ground Enforcement

- Volunteers stationed along riverbanks
- Sanitation staff support
- No legal penalties yet

Pilgrimage Guide Reform

- Official Sabarimala guide in five languages
- The environmental code of conduct is included

Challenges

Ritual vs Environmental Protection

- Practices seen as spiritually symbolic
- Resistance to change in religious behaviour

Scale of Pilgrim Footfall

- Millions arrive in a short window
- Infrastructure overwhelmed

Waste Management Gaps

- Insufficient bins and recycling systems
- Limited sewage treatment capacity

Microplastic Pollution

- Hard to reverse ecological damage
- Long-term contamination of the food chain

Inter-agency Coordination

- TDB, Pollution Control Board, Forest Department, and local bodies must align

Way Forward

Green Pilgrimage Framework

- Eco-certification for pilgrimage sites
- Carry-in carry-out waste rules

Infrastructure Upgrade

- Textile collection centres
- Riverbank waste sorting units
- Biodegradable alternatives

Legal and Policy Support



- Gradual move toward enforceable fines
- Environmental guidelines under pilgrimage regulations

Faith-based Messaging

- Involve spiritual leaders
- Promote “cleanliness as devotion”

Continuous Monitoring

- Real-time water quality checks
- Annual environmental audits

Conclusion

Protecting the Pampa River is not merely an environmental necessity but a cultural responsibility. The success of the TDB campaign depends on transforming pilgrim behaviour through awareness, infrastructure, and faith-sensitive messaging. A sustainable pilgrimage model can ensure that devotion does not come at the cost of ecology, preserving both sacred tradition and natural heritage for future generations.

4. DAC to weigh acquisition of Rafale ahead of Macron visit

Why in the News?

India’s Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) is set to consider a proposal to procure 114 additional Rafale fighter aircraft from France ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit. The move is aimed at addressing urgent capability gaps in the Indian Air Force (IAF). If approved, it would become one of India’s largest defence acquisitions and significantly expand the country’s Rafale fleet.



Background

The Indian Air Force has been facing a steady decline in squadron strength:

- Sanctioned strength: 42 squadrons
- Current strength: ~30–32 squadrons
- Aging fleets: MiG-21, MiG-27 retirement
- Delays in indigenous fighter production

India signed its first Rafale deal with France in 2016:

- 36 Rafales inducted between 2020 and 2022
- 26 naval variants ordered for aircraft carriers
- Rafale seen as a stopgap and long-term capability solution

The new proposal fits into India's broader defence modernisation and the Make in India push for local manufacturing.

Features

Scale of Procurement

- 114 additional aircraft proposed
- The total Rafale fleet could reach 176 aircraft

Flyaway + Domestic Manufacturing Model

- 18 jets in flyaway condition for urgent needs
- Remaining aircraft to be manufactured in India
- 30–40% indigenous content expected

Technology Structure

- Source code retained by France
- Limits deep software-level autonomy
- Still offers industrial ecosystem benefits

Strategic Timing

- Linked to Macron's visit and India–France defence ties
- Strengthens Indo-French strategic partnership
- Supports regional deterrence posture

Challenges

High Financial Cost

- Rafale is among the world's most expensive fighters
- Budgetary strain amid competing defence priorities

Technology Dependence

- Source code not transferred
- Continued reliance on foreign OEM support

Indigenous Programme Impact

- Risk of overshadowing Tejas and AMCA programmes

- HAL production bottlenecks are already visible

Delivery Timelines

- Global supply chain constraints
- Past delays in engine supply highlight vulnerabilities

Strategic Signalling

- Regional arms race concerns
- Diplomatic balancing with neighbours

Way Forward

Balanced Fighter Mix

- Combine Rafale with accelerated Tejas production
- Fast-track AMCA development

Stronger Technology Negotiation

- Push for deeper technology transfer
- Build domestic avionics and software capabilities

Industrial Ecosystem Development

- Strengthen private defence manufacturing
- Reduce HAL monopoly bottlenecks

Long-term Procurement Planning

- Predictable production pipeline
- Multi-year budgeting strategy

Strategic Autonomy Framework

- Diversify suppliers
- Invest in indigenous R&D

Conclusion

The proposed Rafale acquisition reflects India's urgent need to restore fighter squadron strength in a volatile security environment. While the deal enhances short-term operational readiness and deepens India–France defence ties, long-term air power sustainability depends on strengthening indigenous aerospace capability. A calibrated approach that combines imports with domestic innovation is essential for strategic autonomy.

5. UPSC adds more norms for Civil Services aspirants

Why in the News?

The Union Public Services Commission (UPSC) has introduced new eligibility restrictions for candidates allotted to the Indian Police Service (IPS) or other Group "A" Central Services starting from the Civil Services Examination (CSE) 2026. The move changes how already-selected officers

can reappear for future attempts, tightening norms to discourage repeated attempts without joining the service.

Background

Union Public Services Commission conducts the Civil Services Examination to recruit officers for elite services such as:

- IAS
- IPS
- IFS
- Central Group A services (IRS, IAAS, IRTS, etc.)

Traditionally:

- Candidates allotted services could reappear in later exams
- Many officers attempted again to upgrade to IAS/IFS
- This created:
 - Training disruptions
 - Seat blocking
 - Administrative inefficiency

The government has periodically modified service rules to balance aspirant mobility with institutional stability.

Features of the New Norms (From CSE 2026)

One-time Exemption Rule

- Candidates allotted IPS or Group A services in CSE 2026
- Can appear in CSE 2027 only
- Must receive an exemption from the training authority
- Required to attend the foundation course

Ban from CSE 2028 Onward

- Cannot attempt future exams
- Unless they resign from the allocated service

Transition Window for Existing Officers

- Candidates allotted services up to CSE 2025
- Get a one-time opportunity to appear in:
 - CSE 2026 or CSE 2027
- No resignation required for this one attempt

Vacancy Details

- Approx. 933 vacancies in CSE 2026
- 33 reserved for Persons with Benchmark Disabilities

Challenges

Aspirant Autonomy vs Administrative Stability

- Limits career mobility

- Seen by some as restrictive

Psychological Pressure

- “One-shot upgrade” increases stress
- Risk of rushed decisions

Legal Scrutiny

- May face challenges on grounds of fairness
- Service jurisprudence debates the possible

Talent Allocation Concerns

- Candidates may avoid joining the service
- Strategic attempt planning could distort choices

Way Forward

Transparent Communication

- Clear guidance to aspirants
- Early awareness campaigns

Structured Career Mobility

- Internal promotion pathways
- Inter-service deputation flexibility

Training Reform

- Modular entry points
- Reduced disruption from reattempts

Psychological Support

- Counselling systems for candidates
- Decision-making guidance

Periodic Policy Review

- Data-driven assessment of outcomes
- Feedback from services and aspirants

Conclusion

The UPSC's revised norms aim to reduce systemic inefficiencies caused by repeated attempts after service allocation. While the policy strengthens administrative discipline, its success will depend on balancing institutional needs with aspirants' career aspirations. A fair, transparent, and adaptable framework is essential to maintain trust in India's premier recruitment system.

6. More money for defence, now fix the process

Why in the News?

India's latest Union Budget has announced a double-digit increase in defence spending, pushing defence expenditure close to 2% of GDP. While the headline number signals strategic intent in a turbulent global environment, defence experts argue that money alone cannot fix capability gaps unless India reforms its defence acquisition, budgeting, and research ecosystem. The debate has shifted from how much we spend to how effectively we spend.

Background

India's defence budget trajectory has fluctuated over the past decade:

- Defence spending steadily declined as a % of GDP after 2017
- Capital modernisation suffered due to revenue pressures (salaries, pensions)
- Legacy procurement delays weakened force readiness
- Regional threats increased:
 - China's military expansion
 - Pakistan's tactical unpredictability
 - Indo-Pacific maritime competition

At the same time, India has pursued:

- Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence manufacturing
- Export-oriented defence industrial growth
- Modernisation of air, land, and naval capabilities

The new allocation represents an attempt to reverse years of underinvestment - but structural bottlenecks remain.

Features

Double-Digit Budget Increase

- Defence spending touches ~2% of GDP
- Signals strategic prioritisation

Capital Expenditure Push

- Capital outlay rises over 22%
- Modernisation prioritised over routine expenses

Service-Specific Allocation

- Indian Air Force: +32% boost
- Army heavy equipment: +30%
- Navy: modest 3% increase

Domestic Procurement Emphasis

- 75% of capital procurement is earmarked for the Indian industry
- Supports private sector participation

Rising Defence Exports

- Jump from ₹1,000 crore (2014) to ₹23,000 crore+

- Expanding domestic ecosystem

Challenges

Structural Budget Inefficiency

- Capital funds often remain unspent
- ₹12,500 crore returned in FY25 due to delays

Pension Burden

- Defence pensions consume ~22% of the MoD allocation
- Limits modernisation flexibility

Procurement Delays

- Submarine Project 75 delayed for decades
- Fighter acquisition cycles are painfully slow
- Bureaucratic approvals hinder urgency

L-1 Procurement Rule

- Lowest-cost bidding discourages innovation
- Hurts startups and high-tech entrants

Fragmented R&D Ecosystem

- Research is scattered across institutions
- Weak private sector investment
- India's total R&D: ~0.66% of GDP

Currency Depreciation Impact

- Imports become costlier
- Reduces effective budget gain

Way Forward

Non-Lapsable Defence Modernisation Fund

- Carry forward unspent capital funds
- Ensure continuity in procurement cycles

Procurement Reform

- Move beyond L-1 to value-based selection
- Fast-track strategic acquisitions
- Reduce bureaucratic layers

Pension Restructuring Debate

- Separate defence pensions from the MoD capital budget
- Improve fiscal transparency

Integrated R&D Strategy

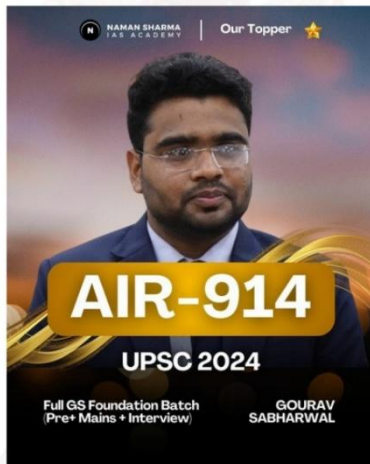
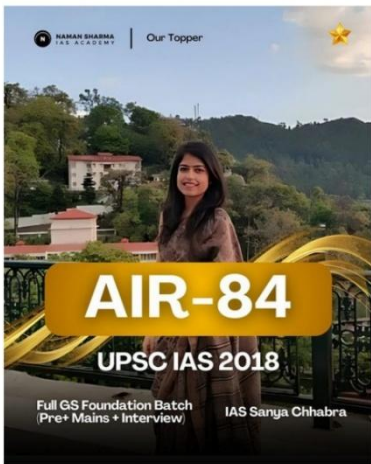
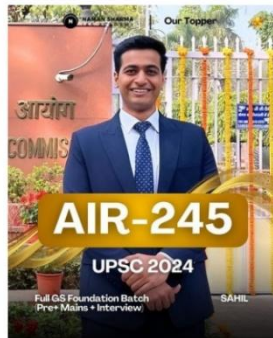
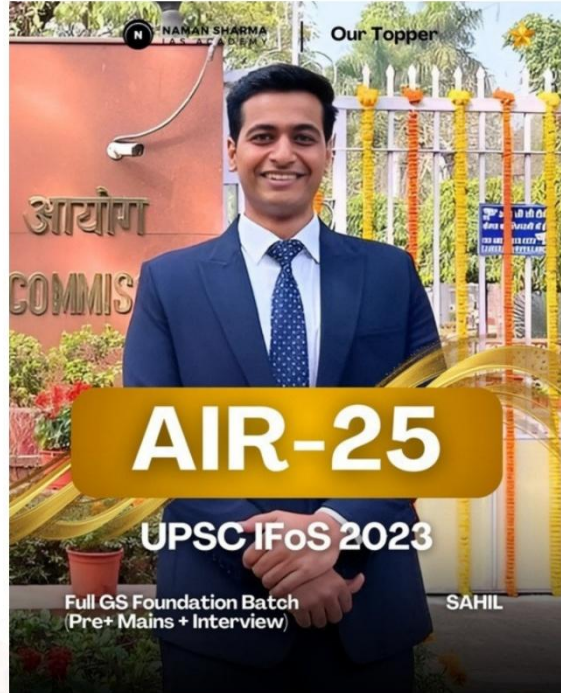
- Public–private research partnerships
- Incentivise corporate R&D investment
- Align civilian and military innovation

Conclusion

India's defence budget expansion is a strategic statement, but without systemic reform, it risks becoming an accounting exercise rather than a capability revolution. Modern warfare rewards speed, innovation, and industrial depth - not just allocation size. Treating defence expenditure as an engine of economic growth, technological advancement, and national resilience will transform the budget from a cost centre into a catalyst for a stronger, self-reliant India.



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