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1. 22 India-bound ships on Hormuz evacuation list

Why in the News?

The Indian government has proactively identified and initiated the evacuation of 22 India-bound vessels from the conflict-prone Persian Gulf region. The operation is in the news because it highlights India's immediate response to the escalating Israel-Iran tensions and the spillover effect on the Strait of Hormuz—a vital global chokepoint. Specifically, 20 of these ships are critical to India's energy security, carrying massive quantities of crude oil, LNG, and LPG, making their safe passage a matter of national economic importance. The successful escort of the first three vessels by the Indian Navy underscores the operational readiness of India's maritime forces.



Background

- **Geopolitical Context:** The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint. Recent escalations in West Asia (including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran-Israel hostilities) have led to attacks on merchant vessels near the strait (e.g., the Fujairah terminal attack).
- **India's Dependency:** India is heavily dependent on imports to meet its energy needs. The Persian Gulf region accounts for a significant portion of India's crude oil and LNG imports. Any disruption here directly impacts India's economy and inflation.
- **Maritime Security Concerns:** The threat to commercial shipping poses a risk not only to cargo but also to the lives of Indian seafarers, with approximately 23,000 stranded in the region.

Feature

- **Scale of Assets:** The evacuation list includes 3 LNG carriers, 10 LPG carriers, and 7 crude oil tankers, transporting over 22 lakh tonnes of essential fuel.
- **Flag Diversity:** While 10 of the energy-critical vessels are Indian-flagged, others are foreign-flagged (Marshall Islands, Liberia, Greece, etc.), yet their cargo is India-bound. This

shows India's commitment to protecting its economic interests regardless of the flag on the ship.

- **Multi-Agency Coordination:** The operation involves a whole-of-government approach:
 - Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways: Logistics and port clearance.
 - Directorate of Naval Operations (DNO): Tactical naval support.
 - Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG): Securing the fuel supply chain.
 - Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFCIOR): Intelligence and surveillance.
- **Humanitarian Aspect:** Beyond cargo, the government is tracking stranded seafarers. While no Indian ship has been attacked, casualties have been reported on foreign vessels, prompting the need for evacuation.

Challenges

- **Geopolitical Volatility:** The region is a powder keg. Ensuring safe passage through a live conflict zone is a high-risk military operation. The narrow width of the Strait of Hormuz leaves little room for error or evasion.
- **Scale of Evacuation:** Coordinating the safe movement of 22 commercial vessels with different speeds, origins, and owners is a complex logistical puzzle.
- **Protecting Economic Interests:** A disruption in these supplies could spike global crude prices, impacting India's import bill and fiscal deficit. The "shadow fleet" or rerouting options are often more expensive.
- **Welfare of Seafarers:** Evacuating or ensuring the safety of 23,000 stranded seafarers requires immense diplomatic and logistical effort, involving shipping companies and port authorities in multiple countries.
- **Deterrence vs. Escalation:** While the Navy provides a credible deterrence, there is always a risk of a "miscalculation" in a crowded waterway that could draw India directly into a conflict.

Way Forward

- **Continued Naval Presence:** The Indian Navy must maintain a persistent presence in the region (Operation Sankalp) to act as a first responder and ensure the safe passage of Indian-flagged vessels and Indian interests.
- **Strengthening IFCIOR:** The Information Fusion Centre in Gurugram should be further strengthened to provide real-time threat intelligence to commercial shipping in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** India must continue its "multi-alignment" policy—engaging with Iran, Israel, the US, and Gulf nations simultaneously to de-escalate tensions and protect its interests.
- **Diversification of Energy Sources:** In the long term, India needs to reduce its over-dependence on the Gulf region. This involves diversifying import sources (e.g., the US, Russia, and Africa) and accelerating the transition to renewable energy and the National Hydrogen Mission.
- **Enhancing Coastal and Port Security:** Ensure that ports like Mundra and Vadinar are prepared to handle any emergency and that the supply chain remains uninterrupted upon the ships' arrival.

Conclusion

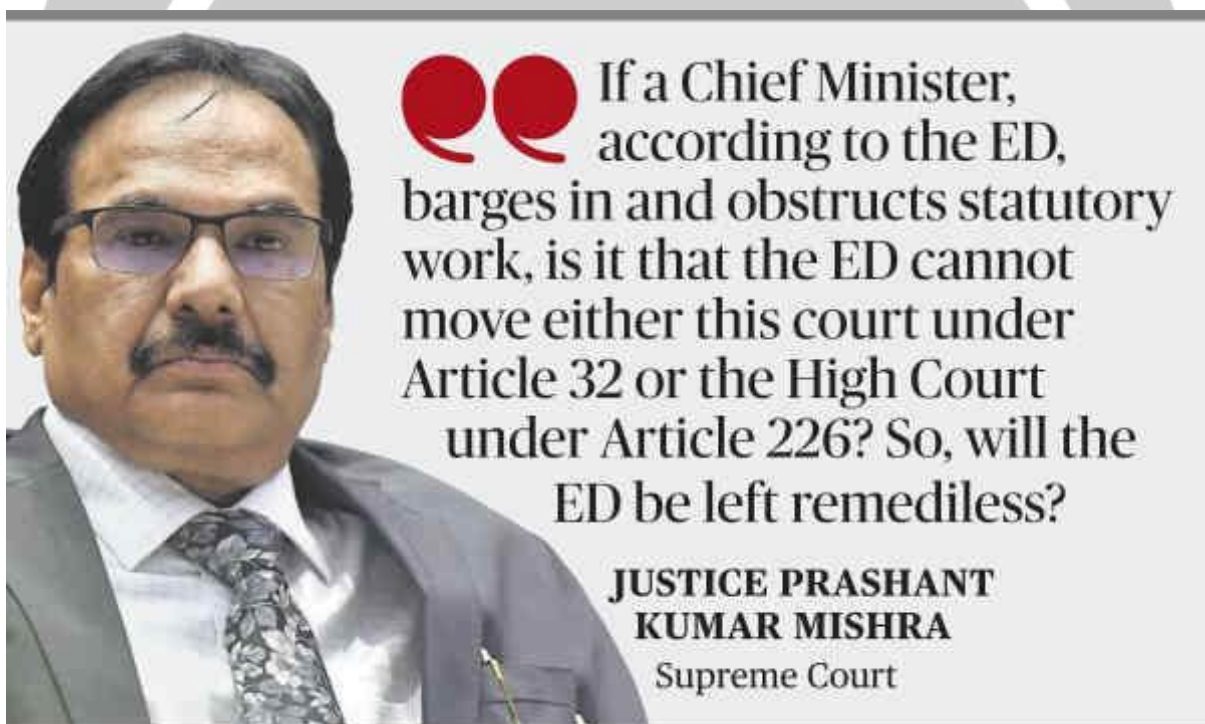
The evacuation of India-bound ships from the Strait of Hormuz is a textbook example of "Blue Water" diplomacy and national power. It demonstrates India's emergence as a "First Responder" and a "Net Security Provider" in the Indian Ocean Region. However, the incident serves as a stark reminder of India's vulnerability to energy shocks stemming from extra-regional conflicts. Moving forward, India

must balance its immediate tactical responses (naval escorts) with long-term strategic goals (energy diversification and multilateral maritime security frameworks) to safeguard its economic and strategic interests in an increasingly turbulent West Asia.

2. SC asks Bengal if ED should 'merely watch' as CM disrupts I-PAC search

Why in the News?

The Supreme Court's observation-whether the ED should "merely watch" while its investigation is obstructed- raises fundamental questions about the maintainability of a petition by a government agency under Article 32 and the limits of federalism when law and order overlaps with central laws.



Background

- **The Incident:** In January 2024, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) was searching for the offices of I-PAC (Indian Political Action Committee) in Kolkata as part of a money laundering investigation linked to an alleged coal smuggling case (involving ₹2,742 crore).
- **The Allegation:** The ED alleges that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, along with senior police officers, "barged in" and obstructed the search operation.
- **The Legal Remedy:** The ED moved the Supreme Court under Article 32 seeking a direction for a CBI probe against the CM and the officers.

- **The Objection:** The West Bengal government has raised a preliminary objection to the maintainability of this petition, arguing that the ED is not a "person" (legal or natural) entitled to file a writ petition under Article 32 for violation of its "fundamental rights."

Feature

- **The "Remedy Vacuum" Argument (SC):** The Supreme Court questioned the State's logic. If a Chief Minister obstructs a lawful investigation, and the agency cannot go to the High Court (Article 226) or the Supreme Court (Article 32), does the law leave a "vacuum" where no remedy exists? The Court noted this is an "unusual" and "unhappy" situation that has "not happened before," and the law must evolve to fill such a vacuum.

The "ED as a Non-Person" Argument (State):

- Shyam Divan (for State): Argued that the ED is not a "body corporate" or a "natural person." Therefore, it cannot claim that its own fundamental rights (under Part III) are being violated.
- He argued that the proper remedy for a dispute between two government entities (Centre and State) lies under Article 131 (Original Jurisdiction of SC in Centre-State disputes), not Article 32.

The "Federalism" Argument (State):

- Kapil Sibal (for CM): Contended that an ED officer has no "fundamental right to investigate"; it is merely a statutory power under the PMLA. Allowing the Centre to use Article 32 would lead to agencies filing petitions against private citizens and each other.
- He warned that permitting this would undermine federalism—a basic feature of the Constitution—by treating States as "appendages" of the Centre.

The "Public Interest" Argument (Centre):

- SG Tushar Mehta (for ED): Countered that the Chief Minister (the head of the State government) hindered an investigation being conducted in the "larger public interest." The obstruction was not just an insult to an agency but an attack on the rule of law.

Challenges

- **Constitutional Interpretation:** The core challenge is defining who is a "person" for the purpose of Article 32. Can a government department, wielding statutory power, claim that its right to investigate has been infringed?
- **Federal Balance:** How does the court balance the Centre's power to investigate Union-list crimes (like money laundering) with the State's control over its police and law and order machinery?
- **Rule of Law vs. Executive Immunity:** The incident raises the challenge of ensuring that high constitutional functionaries (like a Chief Minister) are not above the law and cannot physically obstruct lawful processes without consequence.
- **Precedent Setting:** If the ED's plea is allowed on the current grounds, it could open the floodgates for central agencies to directly approach the SC against state officials, potentially leading to judicial overreach or 中心-state gridlock.

Way Forward

- **Judicial Clarity on Article 32:** The Supreme Court may need to clarify the locus standi of government agencies. Can a statutory authority invoke the Court's writ jurisdiction against another organ of the state? If not, is Article 131 the only remedy?
- **Doctrine of Constitutional Trust:** All institutions (Centre, State, Judiciary) must function on mutual trust. The court may need to lay down guidelines to prevent political vendetta while ensuring that investigations are not physically obstructed.

- **Strengthening Inter-Governmental Dialogue:** Disputes regarding investigations should ideally be resolved through the Inter-State Council or high-level political dialogue before they reach the point of constitutional litigation.
- **Referring to the Constitution Bench:** Given the complexity of the federal question involved, the State's request to refer the matter to a 5-Judge Constitution Bench might be considered to settle the law permanently.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's observation serves as a crucial reminder that in a constitutional democracy, no individual, however highly placed, is above the law. However, the procedural question raised by West Bengal is equally vital: whether the Centre can use the Supreme Court's fundamental rights jurisdiction as a battlefield for political disputes with States. The case is a litmus test for Indian federalism. It will determine whether the relationship between the Centre and States is one of "cooperative federalism" or "confrontational federalism" when it comes to the enforcement of central laws within state boundaries. The answer will shape the future of investigative autonomy and federal balance in India.

3. China-bound Russian oil tanker diverted to India

Why in the News?

A Cameroon-flagged tanker (Aqua Titan) carrying 1.1 lakh tonnes of Russian Urals crude, originally destined for China, made a mid-sea U-turn in Southeast Asia and is now heading to Mangalore, India. This diversion occurs against the backdrop of tightening US sanctions on Russian oil and ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia. For UPSC, this is a live example of how India is navigating complex international pressure to secure its energy needs.



Background

- **The Tanker:** Aqua Titan, a Cameroon-registered vessel, set sail from Primorsk (Russia) on January 18, initially bound for Rizhao port in China.

- **The Diversion:** Ship-tracking data shows the vessel circumvented India initially, travelled through Southeast Asia and the Singapore Strait, and then made a U-turn in mid-March to head to the New Mangalore Port.
- **The Context:** The diversion coincides with a reported US signal allowing India a 30-day window to import Russian crude amidst fresh sanctions. It also comes as India faces supply disruptions from the Persian Gulf due to the Israel-Iran conflict.
- **The "Dark Fleet":** Analysts classify this vessel as part of the "dark fleet"—ageing, often opaque-owned tankers used by Russia to evade Western sanctions and price caps.

Feature

- **Energy Security Imperative:** The oil is destined for the Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd. (MRPL). MRPL requires about 1.5 million tonnes of crude per month. This consignment adds to the two Russian and two Saudi tankers expected by month-end, ensuring the refinery has enough stock to operate.
- **Geopolitical Manoeuvring:** The diversion suggests that while India officially adheres to a "No Sanctions" policy (recognising only UN sanctions), it is actively securing supplies where possible. The ship's path-avoiding India initially and then turning back indicates the complex calculations involved in shipping sanctioned commodities.
- **Port-Level Incentives:** To encourage imports amidst global volatility, the New Mangalore Port Authority (NMPA) has waived cargo handling charges for crude and LPG tankers. For a one-lakh-tonne crude shipment, this waiver amounts to approximately ₹34 lakh.
- **Alternate Routes for Saudi Oil:** Simultaneously, to avoid the volatile Strait of Hormuz, Saudi crude is being diverted through the Yanbu Port on the Red Sea, utilising the East-West Petroline Terminal. This offers a safer, albeit longer, passage to India.

Challenges

- **Sanctions and Payment Mechanisms:** The Aqua Titan is a sanctioned vessel. While India is importing it, the payment mechanism (rupee-rouble or dirham route) and insurance coverage for such "dark fleet" tankers remain complex and risky.
- **Western Pressure:** India faces constant diplomatic pressure from the G7 nations to adhere to the price cap (\$60 per barrel) and not support mechanisms that allow Russia to fund its war effort.
- **Maritime and Environmental Risks:** The "dark fleet" consists of older vessels with questionable maintenance and ownership. An oil spill or accident off the Indian coast could lead to an ecological disaster and a diplomatic nightmare.
- **Logistical Strain:** The sudden diversion of multiple tankers to a single port (Mangalore) requires efficient planning to avoid congestion at the Single Point Mooring (SPM) facilities.

Way Forward

- **Diplomatic Balancing:** India must continue its "multi-alignment" policy, maintaining strategic autonomy by engaging with the West (US, EU) while securing economic interests from the East (Russia).
- **Robust Monitoring of "Dark Fleet":** Agencies like the Indian Coast Guard and the Directorate General of Shipping must enhance inspection of ageing or sanctioned vessels entering Indian waters to prevent maritime accidents.
- **Diversification of Supply:** While Russian oil is cheaper, India must continue to diversify its energy basket (e.g., Guyana, the US, and Africa) to avoid over-dependence on any single geopolitical bloc.

- **Strengthening Port Infrastructure:** Ports like Mangalore, Mundra, and Vadinar need to be equipped to handle the increased throughput and potential emergency response requirements stemming from volatile shipping routes.

Conclusion

The diversion of the Aqua Titan is a classic example of "Realpolitik" in India's foreign policy. It demonstrates India's willingness to prioritise its core national interest, energy security, over external pressure, as long as it operates within the grey areas of international sanctions. However, it also underscores the risks of relying on an opaque "dark fleet." As West Asia remains volatile and sanctions on Russia persist, India's ability to navigate these troubled waters will be a true test of its status as a "Vishwa Bandhu" (friend to the world) while securing its own economic fortress.

4. The opportunity in Cameroon to rebalance the WTO

Why in the News?

The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14) is scheduled to be held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from March 26-29, 2026. This conference is in the news because it presents a critical juncture for the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which is facing its "biggest crisis" since its inception. The article argues that MC14 is an opportunity to "rebalance" the WTO to address the challenges of the 21st century, where trade is increasingly used as a geopolitical tool, moving away from a rules-based order to a power-based one.

Background

- **Origin of WTO:** Established in 1995 as the successor to GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) to provide a rules-based, transparent, and predictable framework for global trade.



Current Crises:

- **Paralysed Dispute Settlement Mechanism:** The Appellate Body, the WTO's highest court, has been non-functional since 2019, primarily due to the US blocking the appointment of new judges.

- **Outdated Rules:** Existing WTO rules have not kept pace with modern trade realities like digital commerce and global value chains.
- **Decision-Making Deadlock:** With 166 members, achieving consensus on any issue has become nearly impossible, leading to stalled negotiations (e.g., the Doha Development Round).
- **Geopoliticization of Trade:** The rise of unilateral tariffs, economic coercion, and "wrecking-ball politics" (as per the Munich Security Report 2026) undermines multilateralism.

Feature

- **The Need for Rebalancing:** The article argues that the original balance of rights and obligations in the WTO reflects a late 20th-century reality. Today's challenges include climate-related trade measures, digital networks, and technology-intensive exports from emerging economies, requiring updated rules.
- **Restoring Credibility (Enforcement):** The top priority is fixing the Appellate Body. Without a binding and trusted dispute resolution mechanism, commitments are meaningless, and conflicts become political rather than legal.
- **Fairness vs. Predictability:** The author makes a crucial distinction: WTO rules ensure the "rule of law" (predictability) but not necessarily the "rule of justice" (fairness). Developing countries feel that outcomes can be legally correct but developmentally unfair.
- **Institutional Adaptability:** While smaller "plurilateral" agreements (like on e-commerce) are emerging, the article warns that they must remain inclusive and transparent to avoid fragmenting the multilateral system. They should eventually be folded into the broader WTO framework.

Challenges

- **Geopolitical Rivalry:** The US-China strategic competition often plays out in WTO forums, blocking consensus. The "transactional" approach of major powers undermines the institution's normative value.
- **The Consensus Rule:** The requirement for unanimous decision-making among 166 diverse members makes substantive reform extremely difficult.
- **Development Divide:** Reconciling the interests of developed nations (pushing for services and IPR protection) with those of developing nations (seeking special and differential treatment and fair agricultural subsidies) remains a hurdle.
- **New Issues:** Integrating new topics like e-commerce, digital trade, and investment facilitation into the WTO framework is contentious, with many developing countries lacking the capacity to implement such agreements.

Way Forward

- **Revive Dispute Settlement:** Members must find a political solution to unblock the Appellate Body appointments, potentially with compromises on the scope of its powers.
- **Plurilateralism within Multilateralism:** Encourage issue-based agreements among smaller groups of members (e.g., the Joint Statement Initiatives on e-commerce) while keeping them open to all, ensuring they complement rather than replace the multilateral framework.
- **Meaningful Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT):** Reform S&DT provisions to make them more targeted and effective for developing countries and LDCs, rather than a blanket exemption.
- **Addressing 21st-Century Trade:** Update rules to cover digital trade, services, and global value chains, while ensuring that climate measures (like carbon border taxes) are not used as disguised protectionism.

Conclusion

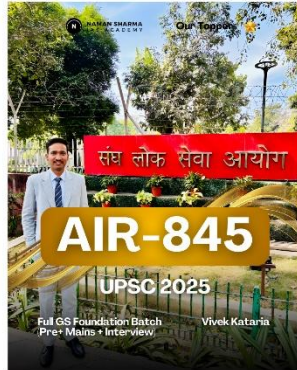
The MC14 in Cameroon is more than just a ministerial meeting; it is a litmus test for multilateralism. As the article rightly points out, a world governed by transactional deals favours the powerful, leaving weaker nations vulnerable. The WTO's core value lies in preventing economic domination through rules. For India, as a leading voice of the Global South, this conference is an opportunity to champion a reform agenda that ensures the WTO remains relevant, fair, and development-centric. The choice is clear: meaningful reform or further fragmentation. India must play a proactive role to ensure that the outcome is the former.



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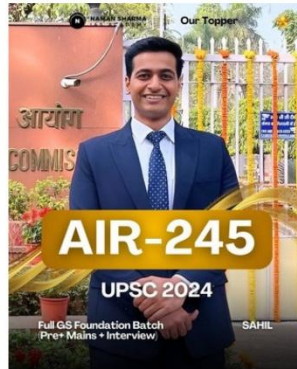
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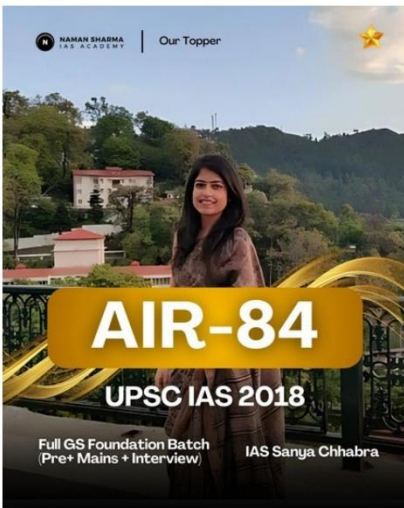
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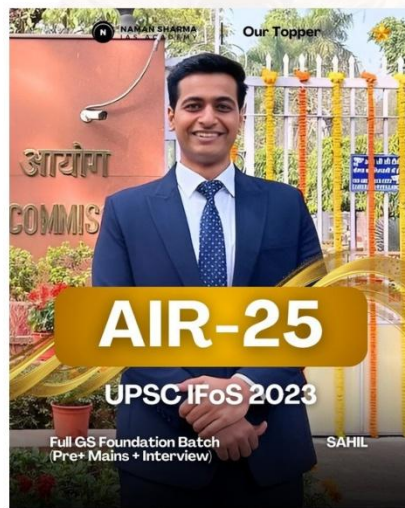
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