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 **Offline Centre Location:**
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1. Iran grants India, 4 others Hormuz passage

Why in the News

- Iran has allowed ships from “friendly nations” including India, China, Russia, Iraq, and Pakistan to pass through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz.
- This comes amid escalating tensions between Iran and the United States following a military conflict involving the U.S. and Israel.
- Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi emphasised Iran’s “sovereignty” over the strait and hinted at future regulatory arrangements.
- U.S. President Donald Trump warned Iran to resume negotiations or face consequences.



Background

The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow maritime chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Around 20–25% of global oil trade passes through this route, making it one of the most critical energy corridors. It lies between Iran (north) and Oman (south), both claiming territorial jurisdiction.

Historically, the strait has been a flashpoint due to:

- Iran–U.S. tensions
- Sanctions on Iranian oil exports
- Attacks on oil tankers and naval confrontations

Feature

Strategic Chokepoint:

The Strait of Hormuz is the world’s most critical oil chokepoint. Approximately 20% of global petroleum consumption passes through it. Iran’s assertion of “sovereignty” over the strait highlights its ability to leverage geography as a tool of statecraft. By selectively granting passage

to "friendly nations," Iran is weaponising access, rewarding allies (India, China, Russia) while potentially restricting adversaries or neutral parties.

India's Delicate Balancing Act:

India finds itself in a precarious position:

- **Strategic Autonomy:** Despite being a strategic partner of the U.S. (through initiatives like I2U2 and QUAD), India has maintained communication channels with Iran.
- **Energy Security:** India is a major importer of crude oil. Although imports from Iran have historically ceased due to U.S. sanctions, the safety of Indian-flagged vessels (like Jag Vasant and Shivalik) and Indian seafarers in the region remains a paramount concern.
- **Diplomatic Trust:** Iran's Foreign Minister specifically thanked India for helping transfer Iranian ships to a safe location (Kochi) after the U.S. attack. This creates a diplomatic "credit" that New Delhi can utilise, but it also risks being perceived by the U.S. as aiding an adversary.

The U.S.-Iran Standoff:

The article highlights a stark contradiction in narratives. While U.S. President Trump threatens that Iran must "get serious before it's too late" and the Pentagon prepares for a potential ground offensive, Iran denies direct talks, admitting only to "exchange of messages" through intermediaries like Pakistan. This indicates a breakdown in formal diplomatic channels, increasing the risk of miscalculation.

Challenges

For India:

- **Maritime Security:** The sharp decline in traffic through Hormuz (from hundreds of ships to single digits) threatens global supply chains. India must ensure the safety of its vessels and crew in a war zone without a formal naval escort structure that could be perceived as siding with either party.
- **Diplomatic Dilemma:** India faces immense pressure to choose sides. Assisting Iran (as seen with the IRIS Dena incident) while maintaining strategic ties with the U.S., which is actively bombing Iran, creates a foreign policy contradiction that is difficult to sustain.
- **Economic Impact:** A closure or severe restriction of the Strait of Hormuz would cause a massive spike in oil prices and insurance premiums, directly impacting India's fiscal deficit and current account deficit.

For the Region:

- **Escalation:** President Trump's warning of "no way back" suggests the U.S. is moving beyond airstrikes toward a potential ground offensive, which would destabilise the entire Gulf region, affecting the large Indian diaspora (approximately 9 million in the Gulf).
- **Proxy Warfare:** The conflict risks spilling over into the Indian Ocean, threatening vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) beyond the Persian Gulf.

Way Forward

- **Active Engagement via "Track II" Diplomacy:** India must leverage its "intermediary" status. Having been thanked by Iran and being a recipient of U.S. strategic trust, India can act as a responsible stakeholder to de-escalate tensions, ensuring the safety of navigation without taking sides.
- **Strengthening Maritime Presence:** The Indian Navy must enhance its "Operation Sankalp" (the mission to ensure the safety of Indian-flagged vessels in the Gulf region).

Deploying assets in the Northern Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman to act as a "net security provider" is crucial.

- **Energy Diversification:** This crisis reiterates the urgency of diversifying India's energy basket. Accelerating the shift towards renewable energy, sourcing crude from non-Gulf sources (like the U.S. or Guyana), and maintaining strategic petroleum reserves (SPRs) are essential to insulating the economy from Hormuz-related shocks.
- **Clarity on "Strategic Autonomy":** India must clearly communicate to both Washington and Tehran that its actions (such as assisting Iranian ships) are based on humanitarian grounds (saving lives at sea) and the protection of its own economic interests, rather than a geopolitical alignment shift.

Conclusion

The current crisis in the Strait of Hormuz represents a classic "red line" dilemma for Indian foreign policy. While Iran has granted India a "special privilege" by allowing passage—a move that underscores India's historical ties with Tehran—the broader context of U.S. military aggression and threats of a ground invasion puts India in a high-risk position.

2. Toothless ban: single-use plastic rules 84% of surveyed sites in 4 cities

Why in the News?

A recent field study by Toxics Link has revealed that the nationwide ban on single-use plastics (SUP), implemented three years ago, is largely ineffective. The survey found that 84% of 560



locations across four major cities (Bhubaneswar, Delhi, Mumbai, and Guwahati) are still using the banned items, highlighting a massive failure in enforcement.

Background

In 2022, the Indian government imposed a ban on identified single-use plastic items—such as thin carry bags, cutlery, cups, plates, and straws—to combat environmental pollution. However, the recent study conducted between April and August 2025 surveyed a wide range of establishments, including street vendors, markets, railway platforms, and religious sites, to assess ground-level compliance. The findings show that Bhubaneswar had the highest usage (89%), followed by Delhi (86%), Mumbai (85%), and Guwahati (76%).

Challenge

The study identified several key challenges undermining the ban:

- **Inconsistent Enforcement:** There is a significant gap between policy and implementation, with regulatory monitoring being irregular.
- **Customer Demand:** Vendors reported high customer demand for plastic bags (91%) and a perception that disposable plastic is more hygienic than reusable alternatives.
- **Economic Factors:** Small vendors and informal markets struggle with the higher cost of alternatives (paper, cloth, or thicker reusable plastics) compared to cheap, banned single-use items.
- **Supply Chain:** The continued availability of these items suggests that the supply side has not been effectively controlled.

Way Forward

- **Stronger Enforcement:** Implementing robust monitoring mechanisms, regular inspections, and consistent penalties for violations.
- **Coordinated Action:** Ensuring collaboration between regulatory agencies to control the supply chain of banned plastics.
- **Addressing Perception:** Educating consumers to change the perception that plastic is more hygienic than reusable or alternative materials.
- **Economic Support:** Finding ways to make alternatives more affordable for small vendors to reduce reliance on banned plastics.

Conclusion

The Toxics Link report concludes that the ban on single-use plastics is currently a "toothless" measure due to poor enforcement and persistent customer demand. Without immediate nationwide action to strengthen implementation and control the supply of these items, the ban will fail to achieve its primary goal of reducing plastic littering and environmental pollution.

3. The key to India's multi-domain deterrence, capabilities

Why in the News?

Amidst escalating military challenges posed by China, a former Lieutenant General argues that India faces a critical window to overhaul its defence strategy. The article discusses the urgent need for India to move beyond incremental military upgrades and adopt a coherent multi-domain deterrence posture, underpinned by a robust defence-industrial base, to prevent the PLA from widening the capability gap.

Background

India's military modernisation has historically been constrained by slow procurement, a reliance on legacy platforms, and an underdeveloped industrial base. While China possesses the capacity to produce advanced weaponry—including missiles, drones, and ISR systems—at scale and speed, India struggles to translate military requirements into industrial outputs. The author notes that technology is evolving faster than military doctrine, leaving India with difficult choices. Currently, India lacks a single "exquisite" capability that could alter the military balance, making its margin of deterrence against China uncertain.

Challenge

The article identifies several systemic vulnerabilities:

- **Industrial Base Constraints:** India's defence-industrial sector is not structured to deliver at speed and scale. While technological competence exists, the base lacks the capacity to surge production during conflict—a critical risk given China's massive inventory and wartime production capabilities.
- **Procurement System Flaws:** The procurement system is slow, risk-averse, and often constrains rather than enables the fighting force. It fails to adapt quickly to evolving technological needs.
- **Doctrinal Ambiguity:** Concepts like Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) are difficult to define and operationalise. There is a lack of deep doctrinal convergence across services, and theatre-ization alone will not solve this without conceptual clarity.



- Political and Strategic Hesitancy: Urgent, hard policy choices regarding what to buy, what to build, and at what cost are delayed due to a lack of broad political consensus and debate on deterrence priorities.

Way Forward

Fixing the Enabling Layers:

- C4ISR: Developing a layered C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) architecture with cheap, attritable ISR platforms to ensure survivability and battlefield awareness.
- Deep-Strike & Close-Battle: Integrating missiles, aircraft, drones, and land-based platforms to dislocate the enemy in depth and fight effectively at the front.
- Logistics: Building robust supply chains and infrastructure to sustain protracted conflict.
- Nuclear Deterrence: Clarifying the role of nuclear capabilities to compensate for conventional deficits against a nuclear-armed adversary like China.

Defence-Industrial Reforms:

- Private Sector Integration: Shifting the mindset to recognise private industry as a more efficient builder of military systems.
- Budgetary Stability: Providing long-term contracts and one-off budgetary allocations for select critical capabilities (such as missiles, munitions, and drones) to close the inventory gap with China.
- Reducing Red Tape: Removing bureaucratic obstacles to speed up production and procurement.

Conclusion

India cannot afford to merely admire service-specific acquisitions or rely on a conservative strategy suited only for shorter conflicts. To deter China, India must pursue a robust industrial strategy focused on building critical enabling layers—C4ISR, strike, logistics, and nuclear—while reforming its procurement and industrial base to deliver at speed and scale. The window for these reforms is shrinking, and without urgent, politically expedient hard choices, the capability gap with China will continue to widen.

4. A mislabelling of a Supreme Court handbook

Why in the News?

In February 2026, Chief Justice of India Justice Surya Kant remarked that the Supreme Court's Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes (released in 2023) was "technical" and "too Harvard-oriented," calling for a panel to review it. This critique has sparked debate, with the author—a lawyer and legal scholar—arguing that such characterisations misrepresent the handbook's true nature and risk undermining a significant institutional achievement.

Background

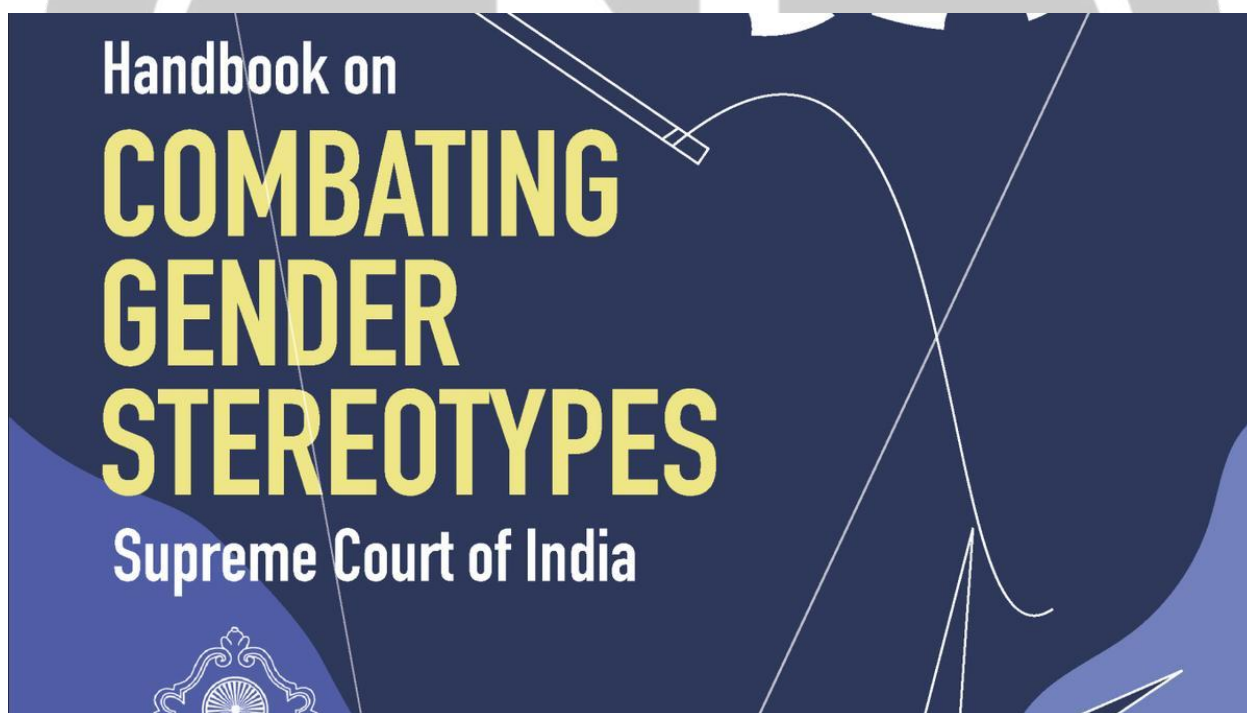
The Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes was released in 2023 under the CJI D.Y. Chandrachud. Its objectives were threefold:

- To identify language in judicial reasoning that perpetuates gender stereotypes and suggest alternatives.
- To highlight common reasoning patterns based on stereotypes and explain why they are legally incorrect.

- To compile binding Supreme Court precedents that have already rejected such stereotypes. The handbook uses a tabulated format presenting stereotype-promoting language alongside recommended alternatives, supported by case law. It emerged from decades of feminist legal scholarship documenting problematic language in Indian judgments, such as using the term "keep" to describe women in live-in relationships or "ravished" to describe rape, and aligns judicial language with constitutional commitments to dignity and equality.

Challenge

- **Misunderstanding the Audience:** Critics, including the CJI's remarks, suggest the handbook is too technical for survivors and laypersons. However, the author argues the handbook is explicitly addressed to judges and lawyers- professionals trained to interpret statutes and craft reasoned judgments. Technical precision is therefore appropriate, not a flaw.
- **Risk of Dismissal:** Labelling the handbook "Harvard-oriented" implies it is detached from Indian realities. The author contends this overlooks its firm grounding in Indian precedent and courtroom realities, as it compiles binding Indian Supreme Court decisions and addresses language patterns found in Indian judgments.
- **Undermining Institutional Progress:** The handbook represented a significant institutional acknowledgement that language can entrench or dismantle inequality. Dismissing it as overly academic risks diminishing this step toward internal judicial accountability.



Way Forward

- **Evolve Through Feedback:** The handbook should be improved based on input from the Bench, the bar, and civil society.
- **Complement with Training:** The emphasis on greater practical training for judges is welcome, but training should supplement, not replace, the handbook's guidance.

- **Retain Core Purpose:** Any review should preserve the handbook's essential function: providing judges and lawyers with a practical, precedent-based tool to eliminate stereotypical reasoning from judicial language.

Conclusion

The Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes is not a detached academic exercise but a practical, context-driven guide rooted in Indian law. To label it "Harvard-oriented" or overly technical misreads its audience and purpose. While the handbook can and should evolve, such evolution must proceed from an accurate understanding of its role: an institutional tool for judicial accountability that aligns language with constitutional values. Dismissing its significance risks setting back efforts to combat gender stereotypes within the judiciary.

5. What is driving the fall in gold prices?

Why in the News?

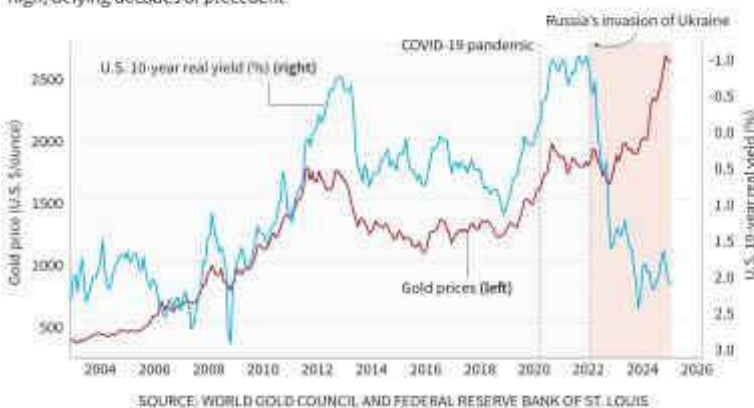
Gold prices have experienced a sharp and unexpected decline since the onset of the West Asian conflict in February 2026, contradicting its historical role as a safe-haven asset. In India, 24-carat gold fell from approximately ₹1.9 lakh per 10 grams in late January to around ₹1.3 lakh per 10 grams, prompting questions about what has changed in the global economic landscape to reverse gold's typical crisis-time performance.

Shifts in safe havens

Physical demand for gold jewellery has softened as consumers adjust to higher prices. But investment demand, particularly through gold exchange-traded funds (ETFs), has remained resilient.

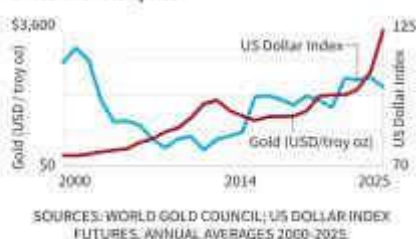
Gold stopped following the rules in 2022

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, gold has kept climbing even as real yields have stayed high, defying decades of precedent.



For 25 years, gold rose when the dollar fell. Not anymore

A 25-year relationship that has held through wars, crises and rate cycles.



■ The dollar is still the world's go-to currency in a crisis. When oil prices spike, inflation fears prompt investors to pull money away from gold to ensure liquidity. That demand for liquidity has kept the dollar strong even as its long-term dominance slowly erodes.

Background

Historically, gold has thrived during crises, surging during the 2008 financial meltdown, the COVID-19 pandemic, and after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Gold's appeal traditionally stems from two factors:

- **Low Interest Rates:** As a non-interest-bearing asset, gold becomes more attractive when bond yields fall.
- **Weak Dollar:** Gold is priced in U.S. dollars globally; a weaker dollar makes it cheaper for foreign buyers, boosting demand.

Before the current conflict, gold had been on a strong run, with international prices exceeding \$5,000 per troy ounce and Indian prices more than doubling over two years.

Challenge

- **Interest Rate Expectations:** The West Asian conflict triggered an oil price surge past \$120 per barrel, reigniting inflation fears. Central banks are now expected to keep rates "higher for longer," making interest-bearing government bonds more attractive than gold.
- **Stronger Dollar:** Higher expected interest rates have strengthened the dollar as investors flock to dollar-denominated assets. A stronger dollar makes gold more expensive for foreign buyers, dampening demand.
- **Liquidity Crunch and Profit Booking:** Stock markets have fallen sharply. Investors facing losses in equities have sold profitable gold holdings to cover shortfalls, triggering a cascade of sell orders. Automatic stop-loss mechanisms have exacerbated the downward spiral.
- **Dollar's Haven Status:** In the short term, the dollar has reasserted itself as the go-to currency during crises, particularly because oil, now more expensive, must be purchased in dollars, driving up demand for the currency.

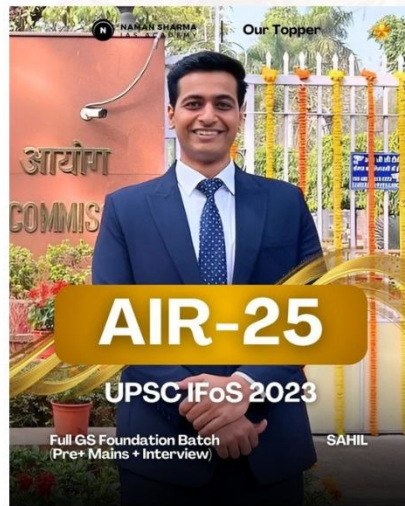
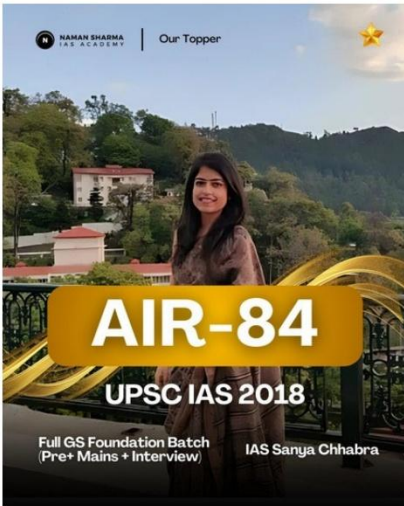
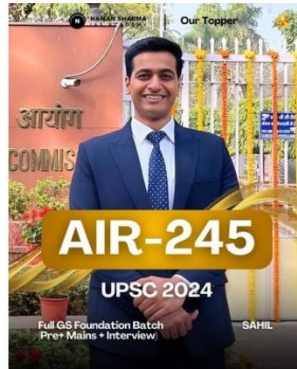
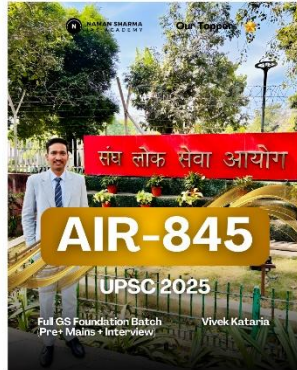
Way Forward

- **Underlying Demand Remains Strong:** Central bank buying, though modestly slower in 2025, rebounded in February 2026. Gold ETF inflows in India remained positive for the tenth consecutive month, and February imports were 80% higher year-on-year despite the price drop.
- **Long-Term Fundamentals Intact:** The conflict's trajectory will be key. If oil prices stabilise, rate hike expectations will recede, restoring gold's appeal. Even in a stagflation scenario (slow growth with high inflation), gold has historically performed well.
- **Structural Shift:** Following the freezing of Russian assets by Western allies, central banks have pivoted toward gold as a physical asset that cannot be sanctioned—a trend that continues to support long-term demand.

Conclusion

The current gold price correction represents a temporary deviation from historical patterns, driven by shifting interest rate expectations, a strengthening dollar, and short-term liquidity pressures rather than a fundamental loss of gold's safe-haven status. While short-term volatility is likely to persist as the West Asian conflict evolves, analysts view the correction as a normal market pullback.

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