



DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS - The Hindu

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India revokes Pakistan's MFN status:

Why in news?

India has announced that it had decided to withdraw the **Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status** granted to Pakistan and would also take all possible steps to isolate the country at the international level after February 14 **car bomb attack** in which at least 37 CRPF men were killed in the Kashmir Valley.

Government Decision:

- Briefing the press after a meeting of the **Cabinet Committee on Security** (CCS), Minister Arun Jaitley said that the Ministry of External Affairs would announce the diplomatic steps to be taken against Pakistan.
- A notification would be issued by the Commerce Ministry withdrawing the MFN status.
- The government would call for an all-party meeting after Home Minister returned from a visit to the Kashmir Valley.
- Prime Minister said it was important that the country spoke in one voice after the terror strike. India would give a befitting response to the terror attack. He called on the international community to stand together to defeat terrorism.

What is MFN status:

- While the term suggests special preference for the country given MFN status, it actually means it would be **treated equally as all others**.
- According to the **World Trade Organisation rules**, countries cannot normally discriminate between their trading partners.

- If one country is granted a trade concession such as, for example, lower import duties, then all WTO members must be extended the same concessions.
- This principle is known as the Most Favoured Nation treatment. Despite repeated promises, **Pakistan has never granted MFN status to India.**
- Revoking it means **India can levy whatever import tariffs it wants.** India can now make it very expensive for Pakistan to export its goods to India. Pakistan has always retained this right.

Impacts on Pakistan:

- So far, India has only revoked the MFN status. It has not altered the import duties on Pakistan. However, if it does hike them, then this will likely have an impact on that country.
- That said, the scale of that impact is questionable. **India's total trade with Pakistan stood at \$2.4 billion in 2017-18**, with just \$488.56 million of this being imports from Pakistan, according to Commerce Ministry data. Pakistan's exports to India made up only 2.1% of its total exports in 2017-18, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.
- Revoking Pakistan's MFN status seems to be more of a symbolic move, aimed at signalling to the world the change in India's stance regarding Pakistan, rather than one aimed at doing economic damage.

Gaganyaan's Review Panel to meet in March:

Why in news?

A national review committee on Gaganyaan is slated to meet for the first time here on March 5 and 6 and comprehensively scan the contours of the first Indian human mission to space.

About the meet:



- The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) wants to unveil the human mission's details to stakeholders from multiple agencies, and also keep the nation in the loop about the prestigious mission.
- It should also give ISRO confidence that it is on the right track with such a humongous project.

- The broad-based review committee may have around 100 experts and scientists related to all aspects of the **₹10,000-crore human mission**.
- The committee will also be briefed on March 6 on the lunar lander and rover mission, **Chandrayaan-2**, which may take place around April.
- Back in November **2004**, **ISRO had first brainstormed** a crewed mission at a similar gathering of nearly 100 experts in Bengaluru.

Work in progress:

- Agreements and programmes planned with the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) will start taking shape from now.
- Gaganyaan-related activities are in full swing, under the newly formed **Human Space Flight Centre (HSFC)** and a dedicated project team.

Humans in space:

- Gaganyaan was announced on August 15, 2018 as a marquee mission for the 75th year of Independence. It is slated to take place at a '**near-Earth' distance of 400 km**.
- Before that, two **unmanned trial flights with human-friendly capsules are to be flown in 2020**, carrying a few micro-gravity experiments.
- ISRO recently submitted to the IAF a set of requirements on selecting and training prospective Indian space travellers.
- The IAF would come back with details of its facilities. In order to have three flight-ready finalists as crew, it need to give astronaut training to at least ten [eligible] persons.
- The astronauts will be mainly trained at the **IAF's Institute of Aerospace Medicine in Bengaluru**.
- The area of **Environment Control and Life Support Systems (ELCSS)** is said to be the most important for making the capsule habitable for astronauts. The life sciences labs of the DRDO work in this area.

SC sends plea challenging Ayodhya act:

Why in news?

The Supreme Court referred to the **Ayodhya** Bench a plea challenging the validity of the Ayodhya Act of 1993 under which the Central government acquired 67.703 acres, including the disputed Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid (RJBm) premises and adjacent areas.

About the Plea:

- Senior advocate Rajeev Dhawan, for the Muslim side in the Ayodhya title suit appeals, said the issue raised in the petition had been decided by a Constitution Bench in the **1994 Ismail Faruqui verdict**.
- The present petition has been filed despite the fact that the Constitution Bench, in its judgment, had **upheld the validity of the Ayodhya Act** except sub-section (3) of Section 4, which mandates the abatement of all pending suits and legal proceedings without providing for an alternative dispute resolution mechanism for resolution of the dispute between the parties.
- The petition, filed by several persons, including two Lucknow-based advocates who claim to be devotees of Ram Lalla, has challenged the legislative competence of Parliament to acquire religious land.

Centre's recent application

- Recently, the Centre moved an application to return the acquired superfluous excess land adjacent to the disputed area to its rightful owners after mapping out the exact extent of acreage required to provide easy access and enjoyment of the RJBm area to the ultimate winner of the title dispute appeals pending in the apex court.
- The petitioners had claimed that the 1993 Act infringed on the right to religion of Hindus guaranteed and protected under Article 25 (freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion) of the Constitution.
- The plea sought the court's direction restraining the Centre and the Uttar Pradesh government from interfering in "puja, darshan and performance of rituals at the places of worship situated within the land admeasuring 67.703 acres acquired under the Act, particularly at the land belonging to Shri Ram Janm Bhoomi Nyasand other temples.

Why in news?

The inaugural trip of **India's first semi-high-speed train**, Vande Bharat Express, was flagged off by Prime Minister at the New Delhi railway station.

About the Train:

- The train, named '**Train 18**' at the concept stage, is a plush 16-coach, air-conditioned, self-propelled train set and **doesn't have a locomotive**.
- The express will ply **between Delhi and Varanasi**, with halts at Kanpur and Allahabad. It will complete the 780-km journey in eight hours, slicing off 180 minutes from the current travel time of 11-and-a-half hours.
- This is India's fastest train to date, capable of commercial speeds up to **160 km per hour**. On the Delhi-Varanasi route, however, its top speed would be restricted to 130 km per hour. The train will start commercial operations on this route on February 17.
- The express will have two travel classes: executive and chair car, similar to the Shatabdi. From Delhi to Varanasi, an air-conditioned chair car ticket will cost ₹1,760, while the executive class fare will be ₹3,310. In the return direction, the chair car and executive class tickets will cost ₹1,700 and ₹3,260 respectively. The fares are inclusive of catering charges.
- Keeping with the Railways' stated aim of offering a "totally new travel experience" to passengers, the train's interiors have the look and feel of a commercial airplane.

Game changer:



- Railway Minister told reporters that the tendering process for the manufacture of **30 more semi-high speed trains** like Vande Bharat Express, has already begun. Additionally, the Prime Minister's approval has been sought for 100 more such train sets.
- The **major systems of this train have been designed and built in India**. It meets global standards of performance, safety and passenger comfort at half the global costs. It therefore has the potential to be a game-changer in the global rail business.
- Built at the **Integral Coach Factory (ICF), Chennai**, the Vande Bharat Express has a total seating capacity of 1,128 passengers. All the coaches are equipped with **automatic doors, a GPS-based passenger**

information system, and free WiFi. But the Wi-Fi can only be used to access select entertainment content provided by the Railways.

- The **toilets are bio-vacuum type**, similar to those on airplanes. On the downside, the chair car seats are not very comfortable, though the leg space is adequate.
- In contrast, the executive class seats are plush and can rotate 180 degrees. Every coach has a pantry with facilities to serve hot meals, and hot or cold beverages. The coaches are also well insulated from outside noise.

Supreme Court on only Bureaucrats in CIC:

Why in news?

The Supreme court has found that “official bias” in favour of bureaucrats and government employees was evident from the very beginning of the process for their appointment.

Eminent Persons:

- The Central Information Commission (CIC) and State Information Commissions, the country’s apex bodies entrusted to uphold the citizen’s right to information, have been bastions of government employees and their retired counterparts.
- The court raised concerns over how government employees or retired ones had consistently been found “more competent and more suitable” than eminent persons from other walks of life.
- The Right to Information Act of 2005 law was enacted to ensure accountability in governance.
- The act itself requires people from varied domains to man the Commission.
- The apex court directed the government to look beyond bureaucrats and appoint professionals from “all walks of life,” including eminent persons with wide knowledge and experience in law, science and technology, social service, management, journalism as Information Commissioners.

Bureaucratic dominance:

- Parliament intended that persons of eminence in public life should be taken as Chief Information Commissioner as well Information Commissioners.
- Many persons who fit the criteria have been applying for these posts.
- However, a strange phenomenon which we observe is that all those persons who have been selected belong to only one category, namely, public service, i.e., they are the government employees.
- In fact, the selection committee, which shortlists candidates for appointment, is itself composed of government employees.
- Official bias in favour of its own class is writ large in the selection process.

Other issues:

- The Supreme Court concluded that the entire RTI mechanism has been choked by rising pendency and growing number of vacancies of Information Commissioners.
- Now, the Supreme Court has, for the first time, put the government on a deadline as far as filling vacancies in the Commissions.
- The court directed that the process of appointment should commence at least one or two months before the retirement is due.

EC urged to prevent misuse of government machinery:

Why in news?

The Opposition parties in Odisha have urged the Election Commission of India to prevent the misuse of government machinery and schemes during electioneering.

EC observations:

- Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa said there were allegations of huge sums of money being parked with preferred government functionaries before the EC observers move in.
- Some parties also complained about the use of police vans and ambulances for transporting money for political use.
- It was also alleged that inducements were being passed to self-help

groups through newly started schemes.

- Instances of party publicity in the garb of government schemes were also cited. **KALIA scheme** was also mentioned.
- The EC team led by Mr. Lavasa has met political parties and held discussions with the stakeholders to conduct free and fair elections.

Mobile App:

- For the first time, a mobile application **cVigil app** will be activated in the State once the poll dates are notified.
- If a **citizen comes across any violation of the code of conduct, he or she can take pictures or make a video and upload it.**
- The information will reach the control room along with the latitude and longitude which will enable it to ascertain where the picture or video was taken.
- The enforcement machinery has to respond and upload the action taken report within 100 minutes. This application was tried five State elections. App received about 20,000 complaints and 70% of them were found to be true. And prompt action was taken.
- The **EC will be using 100% VVPAT machines in all the booths for the first time in Odisha.** As many as 16 districts of Odisha have been identified to be affected by Left-Wing Extremism.

New Delhi superbug gene reaches the Arctic:

Why in news?

In a significant find in the global spread of multi-drug resistant (MDR) bacteria, scientists have found a “superbug” gene first detected in New Delhi over a decade back in one of the last “pristine” places on Earth that is some 12,870 km away.

Findings of the Study:

- Soil samples taken in **Svalbard a Norwegian archipelago** between mainland Norway and the North Pole have now confirmed the spread of blaNDM-1 (called **New Delhi Metallo-beta-lactamase-1**) into the High Arctic.

- This Antibiotic-Resistant Gene (ARG), **originally found in Indian clinical settings**, conditionally provides multi-drug resistance (MDR) in microorganisms, revealed the research team from U.K.'s Newcastle University.
- British scientists later found the “superbug” in New Delhi’s public water supply. Since then, the resistant gene has been found in over 100 countries, including new variants.
- **Carried in the gut of animals and people**, the new research said that blaNDM-1 and other ARGs were found in Arctic soils that were likely spread through the **faecal matter of birds, other wildlife and human visitors to the area**.

About NDM-1:

- **Antibiotic-Resistant Genes** (ARGs) provide multidrug resistance (MDR) in microorganisms. An example is NDM-1, which is a protein that can confer resistance in a range of bacteria.
- NDM-1 was first identified in New Delhi and coded by the resistant gene blaNDM-1. Strains that carry blaNDM-1 were first found in clinical settings in 2008, but by 2010 blaNDM-1 was found in surface waters in Delhi.
- Since then, the resistant gene has been found in over 100 countries, including new variants.

Last resort of anti-biotics:

- There are currently few antibiotics to combat bacteria that are resistant to Carbapenems- still, a last-resort antibiotic class -- and worldwide spread of blaNDM-1 and related ARGs is a concern.
- What humans have done through excess use of antibiotics on global scales is accelerate the rate of evolution, creating a new world of resistant strains that never existed before.
- Encroachment into areas like the Arctic reinforces how rapid and far-reaching the spread of antibiotic resistance has become, confirming solutions to AR must be viewed in global rather than just local terms
- Polar regions are among the last presumed pristine ecosystems on Earth, providing a platform for characterising pre-antibiotic era background resistance against which we could understand rates of progression of AR 'pollution'.

Hong Kong getting record haul of rhino horns from South Africa:

Why in news?

Hong Kong customs seized a record 40 kg (88 pounds) of rhino horns worth around HK\$8 million (\$1 million) from Johannesburg en route to **Vietnam**, the latest bust for authorities trying to tackle the rising volume of endangered species trafficked through the Chinese territory.

About the seizure:

- The seizure came less than one month after customs busted a massive smuggling operation from Africa, seizing a record **quantity of pangolin scales**, along with more than **1,000 ivory tusks**.
- Customs said the rhino horns were found in two check-in carton boxes, destined for Ho Chi Minh City. Two men were arrested, adding it was a record haul for airline passengers.
- The **former British colony on China's southern coast is one of the world's primary wildlife trafficking transit points**, supplying an array of wildlife products including shark's fin and rhino horn across Asia and particularly mainland China.
- Much of the trade supplies the **traditional Chinese medicine sector**. Highly valued rhino horn for instance, is believed to **treat issues from cancer to clearing toxins and curing hangovers**.
- The city remains a global blackspot with organised criminal gangs taking advantage of the special administrative region's geographic location, logistics network and relatively lax enforcement.
- **All species of rhino are listed under CITES Appendix 1** which means it is illegal to trade them internationally.
- **There are under 29,000 rhinos alive in the wild and in captivity.**

Chinese Efforts:

- China has made significant strides in wildlife protection in recent years but it also has formidable profit driven wildlife business interests.
- After pressure from some breeders, China's State Council said in October that it would replace a **1993 ban on the trade of tiger bones and rhino horn**, opening up exceptions under special circumstances, including medical research.

- But in November, Beijing postponed the move following widespread protest from conservation groups.
 - Hong Kong authorities last year raised penalties for smuggling endangered species to a maximum fine of HK\$10 million and a 10-year prison sentence. However, conservation groups say wildlife crime is treated less seriously with prosecutions still paltry.
 - ADM Capital Foundation, which focuses on environmental challenges across Asia, wrote in a January report that wildlife trafficking should be incorporated under **Hong Kongs Organised and Serious Crime Ordinance (OSCO)**.
 - Doing so would provide a powerful disincentive to wildlife criminals, and importantly, would prevent reinvestment of profits into further criminal activities, the report said.
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