The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE

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Page 01: GS III : Environment / Preliminary Examination

The UNEP's Limiting Overshoot report highlights a critical shift in global climate strategy. With the breach of the 1.5°C threshold declared unavoidable, international climate policy is pivoting from pure prevention to managing an "Overshoot, Peak, and Decline" strategy. Current commitments under National Climate Plans (NDCs) point toward a peak warming of 1.8°C, while actual implemented policies threaten up to 2.6°C warming by 2100.

This reality introduces compounding costs: severe biodiversity collapse, up to a 14% drop in global food production by 2050, and irreversible ecological tipping points like Greenland ice sheet degradation. The report emphasizes two critical technical shifts: prioritizing short-lived climate pollutants like methane (which accounts for ~0.5°C warming) and vastly scaling up Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) and nature-based solutions to reverse the temporary peak.

UN sets pathway to tackle 'inevitable breach' of the 1.5°C global warming limit

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

Warning that a possible breach of the 1.5 degrees Celsius global warming limit will bring irreversible ecological losses that no adaptation initiatives could undo, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on Wednesday, for the first time, set out a detailed "overshoot, peak, and decline" pathway.

The pathway projects a trajectory where the world overshoots the 2015 Paris Agreement's central goal of limiting the rise in average global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels – which a UNEP report said was now unavoidable. The pathway seeks to hold peak temperatures after the overshoot as low as possible and then bring it back down below the limit by 2100.

The report, *Limiting Overshoot*, said global warming would cross 1.5 degrees Celsius "in the next few years". Even a scenario in which every country delivers on its national climate plan and net-zero target puts peak warming at 1.8 degrees Celsius, it said. According to the report, current policies point to a rise of about 2.6 degrees Celsius by 2100 with a range of 1.9-3.6 degrees Celsius.

"Overshoot, peak, and decline", the report said, "is by no means an acceptable or preferred pathway; it is simply the best remaining option". "This summer's scorching heat, raging wildfires, and deadly floods are a warning of what lies ahead. We must make the overshoot as small and short as possible," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement.

The diplomatic grounds for that framing were laid at the 30th UN Climate Change Conference, COP30, held in 2025 in Brazil's Belém, where the consensus "Global *Mutirão* (collective effort)" decision became the first COP text to concede that a temporary overshoot of the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit was likely, given how fast the remaining carbon budget was being spent.

Compounding costs

Given that cuts alone will no longer suffice, a steep scaling up of nature-based removals such as large reforestation programmes was needed, COP30 CEO Ana Toni said.

The UNEP report suggested that time spent above 1.5 degrees Celsius carries compounding costs such as faster sea-level rise, coral reef collapse, glacier loss exceeding a quarter of global mass by 2100, declines of up to 14% in global food production by 2050 without effective adaptation, and rising odds of irreversible tipping points in the West Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets, the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation and the Amazon.

Moreover, it gets harder to roll back the effects of a tonne of emitted carbon. The report said every five years of continued high emissions adds roughly 0.1°C to peak warming. Reversing that same 0.1°C afterwards means pulling about 220 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide back out of the atmosphere over and above whatever is still being emitted.

The report, in a first for the UN, placed significant stress on methane, which contributes about 0.5°C of warming. Cutting it is described as the most effective way to slow warming in the near term.

Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Paradigm Shift in Climate Governance:** Transitioning from "Limiting to 1.5°C" to an "Overshoot Management Strategy" acknowledges current mitigation failures while attempting to cap peak global temperatures.
- **Compounding Costs of Delay:** Every 5 years of delayed emission cuts adds ~0.1°C to peak warming. Reversing this requires removing roughly 220 billion tonnes of CO_2 from the atmosphere.
- **Methane as Immediate Leverage:** Methane abatement is framed as the most effective near-term measure to slow warming due to its high Global Warming Potential (GWP) and short atmospheric lifetime (~12 years).
- **Carbon Removal Imperative:** Nature-based solutions (reforestation) and technical CDR must supplement—not replace—direct emission cuts to bring temperatures back down by 2100.
- **Equity and Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR):** Developing nations face higher exposure to climate tipping points, demanding greater technology transfer and climate finance from historical emitters.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper III (Environment & Ecology):**

- **UNFCCC & Paris Agreement:** Article 2 goals (1.5°C vs 2°C limits), NDCs, and the Global Stocktake mechanism.
- **Greenhouse Gases:** Radiative forcing profiles of CO_2 vs Methane (CH_4). Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCPs).
- **Carbon Sequestration:** Nature-Based Solutions (NbS), Afforestation, Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS).
- **Ecological Tipping Points:** AMOC (Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation) disruption, cryosphere melt, coral bleaching.

- **GS Paper II (International Relations & Governance):**
  - **Climate Diplomacy:** Evolution of COP decisions (from Paris 2015 to Belém COP30 "Global Mutirão").
  - **Climate Finance:** Loss and Damage Fund, Green Climate Fund (GCF), and transfer of carbon-removal technologies.

Conclusion:

The UNEP report serves as a pragmatic wake-up call that "overshoot" is no longer a hypothetical risk but a planned operational phase. For developing economies like India, this reality demands a dual approach: accelerating domestic mitigation (such as methane reduction in agriculture and waste management) while aggressively strengthening climate adaptation and disaster risk resilience. Overshoot management must not become an excuse for delayed decarbonization; rather, it makes immediate emissions cuts even more urgent to prevent crossing irreversible ecological thresholds.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: Which one of the following best describes climate overshoot?

A. Temporary decline in global temperature below the pre-industrial level

B. Temporary exceedance of a specified warming threshold, followed potentially by a decline in global temperature

C. Permanent cessation of global greenhouse-gas emissions

D. Short-term increase in atmospheric oxygen concentration

Ans: B)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Explain the concept of climate overshoot. What are its ecological and socio-economic implications for developing countries such as India?**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

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Page 08 : GS I & II : Indian Society & Social Justice / Preliminary Examination

The news "Orthodoxy redux" addresses a recent directive by a prominent Islamic cleric in Kerala restricting Muslim women from participating in public religious celebrations, specifically during Prophet Muhammad's birth anniversary events. The piece examines the friction between traditional religious authority and constitutional guarantees of individual liberty, gender equality, and public participation.

While orthodox leaders frame such directives as an enforcement of religious norms and tradition, the editorial highlights how religious orthodoxy is frequently leveraged as a mechanism of social control over women. It criticizes the reluctance of political parties—such as the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)—to unequivocally condemn the decree, attributing their silence to political expediency. Ultimately, the editorial argues that Kerala's identity as a progressive state is undermined when exceptions are made for religious orthodoxy at the expense of women's fundamental rights.

Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Conflict Between Custom and Constitutionalism:** The directive directly challenges the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 14 (Equality), 15 (Non-discrimination), and 21 (Right to life and personal liberty) of the Indian Constitution, demonstrating how customary or patriarchal directives conflict with constitutional morality.
- **Selective Political Ambiguity:** The silent or cautious response from political entities like the IUML demonstrates how electoral compulsions and political alliances can subvert political commitment to progressive social reform.
- **Internal Pluralism within Communities:** The Muslim community is not homogenous; progressive movements, social media dissent by young Muslim women, and increasing female participation in public spheres actively contest orthodox decrees.
- **Limits of Religious Freedom:** Under Article 25 of the Constitution, the right to freedom of religion is subject to public order, morality, health, and fundamental rights—meaning religious authority cannot infringe upon individual mobility or gender equity.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper II (Polity & Governance):**
    - **Fundamental Rights vs. Freedom of Religion:** The delicate balance between Article 25 (Freedom of conscience/religion) and Articles 14, 15, and 21.

Orthodoxy redux

Religion is oft used as a tool to suppress women in the public sphere

Veteran Islamic cleric Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker Musliar's directive to restrict Muslim women's participation in public celebrations has unsettled Keralam because it strikes at a fundamental question: women's right to participate in public life. This is not merely a quarrel over how Muslims should mark Prophet Muhammad's 1,501st birth anniversary. It is a test of how far religious authority can intrude into the lives of women in a State that takes pride in its progressive social history. Kanthapuram says he is merely reminding followers of established religious norms. His supporters argue Milad celebrations have moved beyond mosques and madrasas into large public events, and that scholars have a duty to caution against such departures. That argument holds no weight. Communities have the right to preserve traditions and regulate religious practices, but they have to conform to the values enshrined in the Constitution. When women are told to remain at home because their presence could cause "chaos", the issue is no longer about religious observance; it is at variance with constitutional equality and Keralam's long struggle to expand the space in public life for women disadvantaged by social customs and religious traditions.

The Muslim community is not a monolith. It contains both orthodox and progressive currents. More Muslim women are breaking barriers in education, employment, politics and public life, but that progress is encountering a countercurrent of renewed orthodoxy and social control. The CPI(M), Keralam's main Opposition party and a decades-old ally of the Kanthapuram-led faction of Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, a body of Sunni scholars, has responded sharply. The Congress, which leads the ruling coalition, was largely guarded until Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan rubbished the decree as antediluvian. The Indian Union Muslim League's silence is harder to defend. A party with an active women's forum and a woman legislator for the first time in the State Assembly cannot equivocate when women's right to public participation is open to challenge. Its caution may reflect political pressure over Waqf, *Vande Mataram* and PM-SHRI, or an attempt to improve ties with the Kanthapuram faction amid strained relations with the rival Samastha faction. Whatever the political calculation, silence carries a cost. Religious freedom does not confer on religious authorities the right to regulate women's freedom of movement, association and degree of participation in society. During Onam, social media were awash with videos of young Muslim girls celebrating the harvest festival. Kanthapuram's remarks drew criticism from a section of Muslim women on social media. Keralam cannot claim to be progressive while making exceptions for orthodoxy.

- **Constitutional Morality:** The principle that values of justice, equality, and liberty in the Constitution override prevailing social or religious dogmas (as affirmed in cases like Sabarimala and Shayara Bano).
- **Secularism in India:** Indian secularism as principled distance, where the state retains the mandate to intervene in socio-religious practices to reform inequalities and protect individual rights.

- **GS Paper I (Indian Society):**
  - **Gender Stratification & Patriarchy:** Patriarchal tools used to curtail women's public presence, mobility, and agency under the guise of tradition.
  - **Social Reform Movements in Kerala:** The historical legacy of Kerala's socio-religious reform movements (e.g., Sree Narayana Guru, ChattampiSwamikal) and modern challenges to these progressive gains.

Conclusion:

The directive restricting women's public participation highlights an ongoing struggle in Indian democracy: ensuring that individual fundamental rights are not compromised by religious authorities. While communities possess the right to manage their religious affairs, this right remains strictly subordinate to constitutional equality and human dignity. For a state like Kerala, sustaining a genuinely progressive society requires political courage, active dissent against patriarchal controls, and the uncompromising enforcement of constitutional values over religious orthodoxy.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Which of the following best describes constitutional morality?

A. Following the customs historically prevalent in a particular community

B. Adherence to constitutional values such as liberty, equality, dignity and justice even when they challenge prevailing social practices

C. Giving absolute priority to the majority's social preferences

D. Restricting all religious practices by the State

Ans: B)

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: "Freedom of religion under Article 25 is subject to the broader constitutional commitment to equality, dignity and individual liberty." Discuss. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

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The article discusses the economic risks India faces due to proposed US legislative measures—specifically the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026. This legislation proposes tariffs of up to 100% on major importers of Russian oil and gas, which, combined with existing duties, could increase India's tariff burden in the US market to 110%.

Using GTAP model simulations, the author contrasts two outcomes: a severe economic contraction under a pure sanction scenario versus a strong recovery under an export diversification strategy (modeled via an India-EU Free Trade Agreement). The article emphasizes that while energy diversification towards Russia has protected domestic price stability, India must hedge its export risks through alternative multilateral agreements and structural domestic trade reforms.

Reducing India's exposure to U.S. tariff risks

The U.S. Senate recently passed the Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026, imposing sanctions and authorising additional tariffs and other restrictions related to Russia. Most concerning is a provision authorising tariffs of up to 100% on countries among the five largest importers of Russian crude oil or natural gas if they knowingly make new purchases after enactment. Though it still awaits House approval, enactment could have serious implications for India's economic interests.

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The Lindsey O. Graham Act puts India under pressure, but export diversification and domestic reforms can cushion shocks

The Russian oil dilemma

India has diversified its energy supplies in recent years to reduce its crude import bill and gain strategic advantage amid global uncertainty, driving a sharp rise in Russian crude imports. Before the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russian crude accounted for just 2% of India's imports; it is now roughly half.

In 2026 alone, imports nearly doubled from 4.54 MMT in January to 8.96 MMT in May. While the strategy has helped secure supplies, it carries diplomatic costs, particularly in managing ties with the United States, which seeks to strongly discourage these imports. The U.S. Russia Sanctions Act reflects this pressure.

On July 24, before the bill's introduction, the U.S. imposed forced-labour tariffs on 60 countries, including India, under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, imposing an additional 10% tariff, a replacement of the expired 10% duty under Section 122, on India. If the Russia Sanctions Act becomes law, India's cumulative tariff could reach 110%, making it one of the most heavily tariffed countries. Such high tariffs could affect India's price competitiveness in the U.S., a major export market, leading to economic losses. China's cumulative tariff could reach 112.5%, as both countries are major importers of Russian crude.

Trade simulations and results

To analyse the trade dynamics and possible way forward for India, two global trade simulations were conducted using the GTAP dataset and model, a global general equilibrium model that captures global linkages and country-level shocks. The first (sanction scenario) models a 110% U.S. tariff on India, with other countries facing forced-labour tariffs and China facing 112.5%. The second (diversification scenario) applies the same tariffs while India pursues export diversification, proxied by a full India-European Union free trade agreement (FTA).

The simulation results suggest that the proposed U.S. sanctions could have adverse consequences for the Indian economy. Under the sanction scenario, India's welfare declines by nearly $47 billion, while GDP, output, domestic demand, exports, and imports all contract. Aggregate exports fall by 5.1% and imports by 5.2%, reflecting disrupted trade flows and weaker economic activity. The results indicate that a prolonged tariff-based confrontation with the U.S. could impose substantial costs on India's growth and trade performance.

The picture changes considerably when India responds through export diversification. With a functional India-EU FTA, the economy turns around despite the same tariff environment. Welfare improves by $26.3 billion, GDP turns positive, and sectoral output and domestic demand recover by around 1%. Aggregate exports increase by 3.1%, while imports rise by a moderate 2.6%, indicating stronger production and trade integration with alternative markets.

The findings suggest that even if India continues procuring crude from Russia to strengthen its energy security, the adverse economic effects of U.S. tariffs can be mitigated to a large extent through export diversification. The India-EU FTA, used here as a proxy for diversification, demonstrates that India must increasingly look beyond the U.S. and expand its presence in alternative markets, even as the U.S. remains one of its largest export destinations.

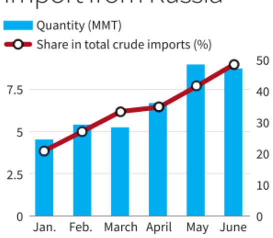
The strategy to pursue

However, diversification is not a panacea. It depends on the ability of other markets to absorb additional Indian exports. Without adequate external demand, diversification may remain limited.

Therefore, export diversification must be complemented by sustained domestic reforms, including trade facilitation, removal of non-tariff barriers, improved logistics and standards, and movement up the goods quality ladder. Such a strategy would not only enhance India's resilience to future geopolitical shocks but also strengthen its long-term export competitiveness.

The views expressed are personal

India's crude import from Russia



Source: Department of Commerce, Govt. of India

Impact of tariffs and export diversification

	Sanction scenario	Diversification scenario
Welfare ($ billion)	-46.6	26.3
Change in GDP (%)	-0.02	0.01
Sectoral output (%)	-1.9	1.2
Domestic demand (%)	-1.8	1
Aggregate export (%)	-5.1	3.1
Aggregate import (%)	-5.2	2.6

Source: Writer's analysis using GTAP

Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Impending US Protectionist Escalation:** The proposed US legislation targets third-party nations buying Russian energy, putting India—which imports nearly 50% of its crude oil from Russia—at risk of punitive cumulative tariffs up to 110%.

- **Quantified Economic Impact:** Modeling shows an unmitigated 110% tariff scenario could reduce India's welfare by ~$47 billion, while contracting GDP, exports (-5.1%), and imports (-5.2%).
- **The Diversification Buffer:** Implementing an alternative trade path (such as an India-EU FTA) neutralizes the shock—turning GDP growth positive, improving welfare by $26.3 billion, and expanding total exports by 3.1%.
- **Limitations of Diversification:** External diversification relies on foreign absorption capacity; hence, it must be supported by internal supply-side competitiveness and non-tariff barrier reductions.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper III (Economy & Trade):**
  - **Global Trade Models & CGE:** Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) models like GTAP (Global Trade Analysis Project) used to estimate macroeconomic trade shocks.
  - **External Sector Resilience:** Trade balance, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Tariff vs Non-Tariff Barriers, and Export Promotion Policies.
  - **Energy Security vs Economic Risk:** Managing the crude import basket, strategic petroleum reserves, and international oil pricing mechanisms.
- **GS Paper II (International Relations):**
  - **India-US Bilateral Relations:** Impact of US unilateral sanctions (e.g., Section 301 tariffs, secondary sanctions) on India's strategic autonomy.
  - **India-Russia Strategic Partnership:** Energy ties versus Western diplomatic/economic friction.
  - **India-EU FTA Negotiations:** Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreements (BTIA) and market access dynamics in Europe.

Conclusion:

India’s energy strategy of procuring discounted Russian crude has shielded its domestic economy from inflation, but it risks triggering severe trade repercussions from key Western markets like the US. To protect its long-term growth trajectory, India must pursue proactive trade diplomacy—expediting FTAs with regions like the European Union—while driving internal structural reforms in logistics and product quality. This balanced strategy ensures India preserves its strategic energy autonomy without exposing its export engine to foreign tariff shocks.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: Which one of the following best explains trade diversification?

A. Increasing dependence on a single export destination

B. Expanding the number of export markets and/or products to reduce concentration risk

C. Restricting imports from all countries

D. Replacing international trade with domestic trade

Ans: B)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Energy diversification and export diversification should be pursued simultaneously as complementary components of India's economic security strategy. Examine.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

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The editorial "Many layers" addresses the recurring vulnerability in India's agricultural price management, specifically through the lens of the onion economy. It exposes the structural flaws in the government's traditional "balancing act"—trying to keep food prices low for urban consumers while assuring remunerative returns for farmers.

The piece criticizes reactive, short-term trade interventions—such as sudden export bans, shifting Minimum Export Prices (MEP), and fluctuating export duties—which disrupt farmers' decision-making cycles. Despite post-facto procurement price hikes by the Centre during supply gluts, small and marginal farmers fail to capture value due to acute storage deficits, quality degradation, and distress sales. Compounded by extreme weather shocks and post-harvest buffer losses reaching up to 30%, the editorial warns that state-level relief schemes (like Tamil Nadu's subsidized PDS distribution) could strain central buffers and founder under high logistical losses without modern post-harvest infrastructure.

Many layers

Farmers need more storage facilities and better distribution networks

Since the 1960s, India has developed a balancing-act habit: between keeping food prices affordably low for consumers and assuring farmers of remunerative prices, with the state's interventions focused on managing this volatility in the short term. This is also why the government banned onion exports from December 2023 to May 2024, then imposed a $550/tonne minimum export price and a 40% export duty, reduced the duty to 20% in September 2024, and finally abolished it in April 2025. But erratic weather together with the lack of long-term relief has rendered the act increasingly awkward. From farmers' point of view, the government often changes its mind after they have made important production-related decisions based on the expected price. On the other hand, during the bounteous *rabi* harvest, onion farmers in Maharashtra, the country's principal supplier, had argued that the Centre's procurement price of ₹12.35/kg would not cover the costs of cultivation. The Centre subsequently raised the price to up to ₹26.45/kg, but many farmers – including some who had had to sell at ₹1/kg earlier because of low quality and lack of storage, among other factors – were unable to capture the higher value, exposing the limits of intervening after prices have already collapsed and not reaching all farmers or grades of produce.

While the government has alluded to some price manipulation, the dominant issue remains that it keeps reacting instead of taking proactive measures, including improving storage options, maintaining a less erratic trade policy, moving stock more efficiently between regions, and protecting farmers against price shocks. The abnormal rainfall at the time of harvest and a 5%-7% drop in the *kharif* crop in Maharashtra, together with the well-known challenges associated with storing onions and maintaining large buffers, are simply among the pressures that highlighted the flaw this year. Further, Tamil Nadu's targeted subsidy, to buy 1,000 tonnes of onions to distribute 1 kg per ration card at ₹35, will impose pressures on the Centre to maintain a steady supply. The move is commendably designed to discourage hoarding while allowing private retail prices to cool down. However, the State must also guard against the pitfalls of distributing onions through a dry-grain PDS network – its economic case could collapse if post-harvest losses, to which onion is more susceptible than, say, wheat or rice, exceed 10%-15% – and if the need arises to persist with the subsidy. Finally, if other States also adopt similar measures, the Central buffer could be quickly exhausted, more so given this year's high storage losses of around 30%.

Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Structural Failure of Reactive Policy:** Intervening after market price crashes fails to protect primary producers, leading to distress sales as low as ₹1/kg before delayed procurement relief reaches the ground.
- **Policy Uncertainty and Market Distortion:** Frequent shifts in trade controls (bans, duties, MEPs) destroy export predictability, harming long-term trade relationships and farmer income security.
- **High Post-Harvest Losses (PHL):** Onions are semi-perishable; storage losses of nearly 30% exhaust government buffers faster and severely undermine market-intervention schemes.
- **Logistical Pitfalls of PDS Extension:** Using traditional dry-grain Public Distribution System (PDS) logistics for perishable horticulture crops like onions runs a high risk of operational failure due to storage decay exceeding 10–15%.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper III (Agriculture & Economy):**
    - **Agricultural Marketing Reforms:** Limitations of APMC markets, necessity of e-NAM integration, and decentralization of procurement.
    - **Supply Chain & Post-Harvest Infrastructure:** Role of the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF), Operation Greens ("TOP" to "TOTAL"), cold chain logistics, and scientific irradiation storage.
    - **Buffer Stocking Mechanisms:** Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) price recommendations, NAFED/NCCF market interventions, and Minimum Support Price (MSP) shortfalls in horticulture.
    - **Issues of Buffer Losses & Food Inflation:** Price Stabilization Fund (PSF) management and its impact on CPI-based food inflation.

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- **GS Paper II (Governance & Public Policy):**
  - **Targeted PDS vs Perishable Commodities:** Policy mechanics and fiscal implications of state-level subsidization schemes using existing fair-price infrastructure.

Conclusion:

India's onion trade crisis demonstrates that agricultural price stability cannot be achieved through ad-hoc export curbs, duties, or late-stage procurement. A durable solution demands a transition from reactive policy to proactive structural reforms: constructing cold-storage and processing infrastructure, establishing predictable trade regimes, and digitizing real-time market intelligence. Protecting both consumer purchasing power and farmer livelihoods requires treating post-harvest supply chain resilience as an imperative national infrastructure goal.

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: Frequent export restrictions may control short-term food inflation but can undermine long-term agricultural investment and export competitiveness. Discuss.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

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The article by T. Ramakrishnan critiques supply-side mega-hydrological interventions, specifically the National Interlinking of Rivers (NILR) project advocated by the Central government. The piece highlights the operational, legal, and ecological limitations of massive water-transfer initiatives by contrasting political optimism with ground realities.

Through examples such as the delayed constitution of the Pennaiyar River Dispute Tribunal, resistance to the Pamba-Achankovil-Vaippar link, and grassroots/tribal protests over the Ken-Betwa link in Chhatarpur, the author demonstrates how federal frictions, environmental costs, and displacement issues derail large-scale engineering projects. The analysis concludes that sustainable water security requires shifting away from capital-intensive river diversions toward demand-side management, local conservation, groundwater regulation, and efficient agricultural water use.

River-linking is not the solution

T. Ramakrishnan

The Union Minister for Home Affairs Amit Shah's speech at the Southern Zonal Council's meeting last month in Mamallapuram has provided a few takeaways on the contentious issue of water sharing. His emphasis on the need for an early resolution of water-related issues in the southern region appears well meaning but it is easier said than done. He had also talked about linking major rivers from the Brahmaputra to the Godavari and the Cauvery, an option that, according to Mr. Shah, can ensure that India faces no water shortage for 100 years.

However, water issues are not that easy to solve. This is evident from the Centre's response to Tamil Nadu's demand for the constitution of a tribunal to adjudicate the Pennaiyar river water dispute. Aggrieved over the "violation" of the 1892 inter-State agreement by Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, in November 2019, requested the Centre to establish a tribunal. It had also moved the Supreme Court with the same demand. Since then, two negotiation committees have been formed and 11 meetings held. Eventually, the top court, this February, directed the Centre to form the tribunal within a month and, later, extended the deadline by six months.

Still, the adjudicatory body is yet to be put in place. Meanwhile, the Centre asked the court whether the Pennaiyar dispute could be referred to the Mahadayi Water Dispute Tribunal instead of constituting a new tribunal. This suggestion defies logic as there is nothing in common between the two disputes. Moreover, the Interstate River Water Disputes Act, 1956 does not permit it. This suggestion in the Pennaiyar case gives the impression that the Centre is not keen on expeditiously implementing a judicial verdict in an inter-State river dispute. To cite one more example, the Central government has not yet replied to Tamil Nadu's demand, in March this year, to constitute a tribunal on the Mekedatu dam project proposed by Karnataka.

In the last 130-odd years, the country has seen only a handful of inter-basin transfer projects, most of which are in south India

A complex problem

Given this background, one need not delve much into the complications that would entail by the inter-linking of rivers. Proponents of river linking, including Tamil Nadu, have been saying that the idea is not to disturb the natural flow of any river but to divert a portion of the surplus water. Many experts are not convinced about this argument as they are worried that once the linking is allowed, regions that benefit may become vociferous in demanding water even in times of distress, eventually depriving original beneficiaries of their quota. This is apart from the concerns over the possible adverse consequences on ecology. In fact, Keralam has been stoutly opposing the Pamba-Achankovil-Vaippar link proposal, which, if implemented, the State says, will affect the Vembanad wetland system, where the Pamba and Achankovil rivers drain. However, the National Water Development Agency says that it has accounted for improving the flow of rivers in lean periods.

In the last 130-odd years, the country has seen only a handful of inter-basin transfer projects, most of which are in south India. The Mullaperiyar dam, the Parambikulam-Aliyar project, the Krishna Water Supply Project, and the Indira Gandhi Canal Project are regarded as successful examples of inter-basin transfer of river waters.

After the Bharatiya Janata Party's return to power in 2014, the Union government formed a Special Committee for Interlinking of Rivers, which has held over two dozen meetings since then. Needless to say, there has not been much headway.

However, in 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone for the ₹44,000 crore Ken-Betwa Link Project. This has now led to agitations by the tribal populations in Chhatarpur.

What the governments, both at the Centre and in States, and civil society should focus on is demand side management, instead of perpetually looking for supply side interventions. With land becoming scarcely available and resistance growing among people when it comes to land acquisition, the days of implementing mega irrigation projects are almost over. The priority has to be towards conserving what is available and using it judiciously. A massive programme of sensitising and incentivising farmers on the optimal use of water has to be launched. Indiscriminate extraction of groundwater, facilitated by schemes of free electricity for agriculture in many States, is paving the way for ecological disaster and has to be curbed immediately. Unless water conservation becomes the mantra of all the stakeholders and is practised genuinely, disputes will be the norm.

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Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Institutional Delays in Adjudication:** Structural delays in setting up tribunals (e.g., the Pennaiyar dispute) highlight the limitations of existing mechanisms under the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956.
- **Ecological & Federal Resistance:** Inter-basin water transfer plans encounter resistance from lower-riparian or basin-origin states (e.g., Kerala's objections regarding Vembanad wetland degradation) due to concerns over environmental disruption and loss of basin autonomy.
- **Socio-Environmental Costs of Mega-Projects:** Key projects like the Ken-Betwa link face displacement issues, forest submergence (e.g., Panna Tiger Reserve), and tribal protests, demonstrating the limits of top-down infrastructure planning.

- **Shift to Demand-Side Management:** Sustainable water governance requires moving away from supply-side engineering toward micro-irrigation, rainwater harvesting, crop diversification, and rationalizing agricultural power subsidies to prevent groundwater depletion.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper II (Polity, Governance & Federalism):**
  - **Inter-State River Water Disputes:** Article 262 of the Constitution, statutory powers under the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, and Entry 56 (Union List) vs. Entry 17 (State List).
  - **Federal Dynamics:** Cooperative vs. Competitive Federalism in shared natural resource governance.
- **GS Paper III (Environment, Geography & Agriculture):**
  - **National River Interlinking Project:** Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), forest clearances, and ecological consequences on riverine ecosystems and deltas.
  - **Water Resource Management:** Demand-side management mechanisms (e.g., PM-KSY 'Per Drop More Crop'), micro-irrigation adoption, and groundwater management (e.g., Atal Bhujal Yojana).
  - **Agricultural Distortions:** The relationship between unmetered/subsidized power, paddy-wheat crop cycles, and rapid aquifer depletion.

Conclusion:

The debate over interlinking rivers exposes a fundamental divide in Indian water policy: engineering-driven supply expansion versus ecologically conscious resource management. Given mounting climate variability, growing federal disputes, and high social and environmental costs, mega-diversion projects offer limited solutions to long-term water stress. True water security depends on strengthening decentralized conservation, enforcing disciplined groundwater extraction, adopting water-efficient agricultural practices, and building robust institutional mechanisms for cooperative inter-state water sharing.

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: Inter-State river-water disputes represent a major test of cooperative federalism in India. Examine the institutional and constitutional challenges involved in their resolution.**(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

'Early Harvest' — larger but not necessarily safer

Ashok K. Kantha

Former Ambassador of India to China; Subhas Chandra Bose Chair Professor of International Relations at Chanakya University, Bengaluru, and the lead Indian negotiator for the Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Boundary Settlement (2005)

India-China boundary talks suggest movement, but hard questions remain over strategic costs and concessions

On August 25, 2026, in Beijing, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi held the 25th round of talks between the Special Representatives (SRs) on the India-China boundary question. That evening's readouts from both sides were anodyne and notably avoided a phrase that has dominated this discussion for a year: early harvest. A day later, the two sides released an "Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus". Point 3 restored and enhanced the phrase: the Expert Group on Boundary Delimitation and the Working Group on Border Management, set up under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) a year ago, would "respectively advance discussions on an Early and Substantial Harvest of boundary delimitation and Border Management". Their first task, it adds, is to agree on their own terms of reference, one year after they were constituted, suggesting that whatever is being contemplated remains at an early stage

An uncertain Early Harvest

The phrase "Early and Substantial Harvest" is significant because it is India's own coinage. When Beijing first proposed settling the Sikkim Sector alone, India's considered response, around 2019, was a counter-proposal on an "Early and Substantial Harvest" covering the Sikkim Sector together with the entire Middle Sector, with the boundary delineated along the watershed. China rejected the proposal. In subsequent discussions on an "Early Harvest," China reportedly agreed only to include the Sikkim Sector and some undisputed areas of the Middle Sector – a proposal that was unacceptable to India.

The exact Indian formulation has now resurfaced in a joint document. This could mean that Beijing has accepted India's terms – which this writer doubts – as that would involve China giving up its claim to approximately 2,450 square kilometres of territory in the Middle Sector, all south of the watershed boundary (Barahoti, Giu-Kaurik, Nilang-Jadhang, Sangcha Malla, and Lapthal). It could equally mean something the Indian side had rejected earlier: an "agreement with holes", a settlement nominally covering both sectors but confined to stretches where the claims already coincide, leaving the trijunctions and contested pockets of the Middle Sector undefined.

If that is the case, we will have the same asymmetric outcome as with a Sikkim-only settlement – India conceding ground where its position is strong, without any progress in the Eastern and Western Sectors, where China maintains its hardline position, "dong tiao xi rang", meaning "meaningful adjustments by India in the East and corresponding concessions by China in the West". It would also jettison a key provision (Article III) of the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary, which calls for a "package settlement ...covering all sectors of the India-China boundary", opting instead to bank the easy gains immediately while leaving the hard issues open on China's terms. The package clause exists precisely because the boundary's four sectors are strategically interlinked, requiring cross-sector give and take.

No open-and-shut case

The Sikkim Sector is also not the open-and-shut case that some suggest. The two sides agree that the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 is the "basis of the alignment" of the boundary in this sector. However, Article I of the Convention contains two stipulations that are mutually contradictory. Its first sentence makes the watershed crest the boundary, while its second names Mount Gipmochi as the starting point on the Bhutan frontier. Yet, British Indian maps of 1907 and 1913 placed the trijunction not at Gipmochi but roughly 6.5 kilometres to its north, on the true watershed crest. India and Bhutan read the watershed principle as controlling and place the trijunction at Batang La; China seizes on the literal reference to Gipmochi to push the trijunction southwards, onto the Jampheri Ridge. A Sikkim delimitation built on the 1890 text, unless it repudiates Gipmochi, would be read by Beijing as conceding the southern trijunction.

Even a trijunction-reserved settlement would strip India of the standing to counsel Bhutan against a bilateral deal, having itself settled out of turn nearby. China's "package proposal" to Bhutan – relinquishing roughly 495 sq km of claims in the north in exchange for Bhutan ceding about 269 sq km in the northwest, including the Doklam Plateau – would gain fresh momentum, deepening China's presence in the Chumbi Valley and opening a path to the Jampheri Ridge, from which the entire Siliguri Corridor, India's sole overland link to its northeastern States, would come under direct observation. This is not hypothetical: since the 2017 Doklam standoff, China has spent years building roads, villages, and military facilities across western Bhutan, gaining de facto control over Doklam.

A genuine "Early and Substantial Harvest" requires three things. First, delineation must proceed on the highest-watershed principle across the entire stretch in both sectors, rather than selectively along segments where the two positions already converge, which would serve no purpose for India. Second, trijunction points, at Batang La and any comparable third-country-adjacent points in the Middle Sector, must be explicitly excluded from the Expert Group's mandate and settled only in consultation with the country concerned, as stipulated in the 2012 Common Understanding between the two SRs. However, unless the highest-watershed principle is accepted, silence on the trijunction will, on the ground, be filled in Beijing's favour in Bhutan. Third, the terms of reference for the Expert Group must extend India's 2019 proposal in good faith, rather than dilute it beyond recognition.

Several questions about these negotiations remain unanswered. The Chinese readout of August 25 reiterates a commitment to a "package" settlement, but how will that commitment be reconciled with a piecemeal approach to settlement? How is the setting up of an Expert Group on Delimitation consistent with the instructions given to the SRs in Article X of the 2005 Agreement, which require them to "continue consultations in an earnest manner with the objective of arriving at an agreed framework for a boundary settlement, which will provide the basis for the delineation and demarcation of the India-China boundary to be subsequently undertaken by civil and military officials and surveyors of the two sides"? There is no agreed framework yet, but it is proposed to commence the process of "delimitation", a term that the Chinese use interchangeably with "demarcation". Indeed, the 2005 Agreement does not use the term "delimitation" at all. Will the SRs earnestly pursue negotiations on the "agreed framework", or will they, in effect, leave it in abeyance while officials grapple with a partial delimitation exercise without such a framework? The other elements of the Eight Points – additional meeting points and hotlines for the General Level Mechanisms in the Eastern and Middle Sectors, continued pilgrimage and border trade, and a September meeting on trans-border rivers – are useful, incremental confidence-building measures. But they belong to a different track from boundary settlement and should not be conflated in public discussion.

The Eight Points are silent on the Medog County project on the Yarlung Tsangpo River, while referring to both sides agreeing to "maintain communication on (trans-border river) issues, including hydrological data sharing and renewal of the relevant MoUs", without reporting any progress. The September meeting should convey India's concerns about the project – the world's largest hydropower plant – being built close to the border in the Eastern Sector, in a highly earthquake-prone zone, a risk underscored by the flash floods in Nepal on August 26.

Avoid optics

Two points bear reiteration. First, the 2005 agreement – the only substantive outcome of 23 years of SR talks – must not be diluted; China has sought to reinterpret and undermine it since its conclusion. Second, Indian negotiators must guard against the temptation to project contrived progress. Diplomacy that trades long-term strategic interests for short-term optics is self-defeating.

GS Paper II: **International Relations**

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Questions: "In India–China relations, management of the boundary dispute and resolution of the boundary dispute are distinct diplomatic objectives." Discuss.(**10Marks, 150 Words)**

Context :

The article by former diplomat Ashok K. Kantha analyzes the outcomes of the 25th round of Special Representatives (SR) talks between India and China in Beijing. It critically assesses the "Eight Points of Outcomes and Consensus", specifically examining the re-emergence of an "Early and Substantial Harvest" in boundary delimitation.

The author warns that a piecemeal, sector-by-sector settlement—focusing on easier areas like the Sikkim Sector or undisputed parts of the Middle Sector—could undermine India's strategic leverage. Such an approach dilutes the mandatory "package settlement" mandate established in the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles. Kantha argues that selectively settling aligned sectors allows China to consolidate gains without making concessions in the contested Western (Ladakh) and Eastern (Arunachal Pradesh) sectors, while simultaneously complicating Bhutan's position and threatening the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor.

Key Takeaways & Analytical Points

- **Shift from Package Settlement to Partial Delimitation:** Pursuing an "Early Harvest" risks abandoning Article III of the 2005 Agreement, which demands a holistic, cross-sectoral "package deal" covering all boundary sectors simultaneously.
- **Strategic Asymmetry:** A partial deal in the Sikkim or Middle Sector forces India to concede ground where its claim is strong, while leaving China's maximalist stance in the Eastern and Western sectors unchanged.
- **Trijunction Vulnerability & Bhutan Connection:** Settling the Sikkim sector without strictly applying the highest-watershed principle (e.g., Mount Gipmochi vs. Batang La) could indirectly cede the Doklam Plateau to China, threatening the strategic Siliguri Corridor ("Chicken's Neck").

- **Procedural and Conceptual Anomalies:** Initiating "delimitation" via an Expert Group before the SRs have agreed on an overarching "Framework for Settlement" violates the sequence mapped out in Article X of the 2005 Agreement.
- **Conflation of CBMs with Resolution:** Incremental Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)—such as additional border meeting points, river data sharing, and pilgrimage routes—must not be mistaken for structural progress on border demarcation.

Related UPSC Static Dimensions

- **GS Paper II (International Relations & Security):**
  - **India-China Border Dispute:** Historical origins of the Western (Aksai Chin), Middle (Himachal/Uttarakhand), and Eastern (McMahon Line/Arunachal) sectors.
  - **Border Governance Frameworks:** Agreements of 1993, 1996, 2005 (Guiding Principles), 2012 (WMCC), and 2013 (BDCA).
  - **Neighborhood First & Trilateral Dynamics:** India-Bhutan-China trijunction issues (Doklam, Jampheri Ridge) and their impact on India's net security role.
- **GS Paper III (Internal Security & Strategic Geography):**
  - **Border Infrastructure & Vulnerabilities:** Defense of the Siliguri Corridor and civil-military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
  - **Trans-Border River Issues:** Hydro-hegemony, upper-riparian dynamics on the YarlungTsangpo/Brahmaputra, and the Medog Dam mega-project.

Conclusion:

The analysis serves as a strategic warning against prioritizing short-term diplomatic optics over long-term territorial integrity. For India, a genuine "Early Harvest" must strictly adhere to the highest-watershed principle, exclude sensitive international trijunctions from partial deals, and remain tethered to an overarching, cross-sectoral framework as mandated by the 2005 Agreement. Adhering to these core principles is essential to prevent China from converting temporary operational CBMs into permanent, asymmetric strategic advantages.

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