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Page 01:GS 2 : International Relations

India has strongly reacted to a U.S. legislative proposal — Russian Sanctions Act, 2025 — which seeks to impose 500% duties on countries (including India) that continue importing Russian oil and energy products. This has sparked concerns over energy security, strategic autonomy, and geopolitical double standards, especially when voiced by leaders such as NATO Secretary-General and U.S. lawmakers.

Russian oil: India calls out 'double standards'

Centre responds to U.S. Bill seeking to impose duties on India and others buying Russian oil

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

India has cautioned against “double standards”, even as U.S. lawmakers consider a Bill that would impose 500% duties on India and other countries buying Russian oil.

The Ministry of External Affairs’s (MEA) comments comes after indications that U.S. President Donald Trump is backing the Russian Sanctions Act, 2025, introduced by Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, and threat of secondary tariffs of 100% on countries that continue trade on sanctioned Russian products.

On Wednesday, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who met with Mr. Trump and members of the U.S. Congress, also is-

sued a threat, in particular to China, India, and Brazil, who are among the top buyers of Russian crude oil, oil products, and coal. “Beijing and Delhi” should push Russian President Vladimir Putin towards ending the war in Ukraine, or face tariffs, the chief of the military alliance said.

Responding to questions on the issue on Thursday, the MEA said it was following the developments closely.

‘Diverse sources’

“Securing the energy needs of our people is understandably an overriding priority for us. In this endeavour, we are guided by what is there on offer in the markets, as also by the prevailing global circumstances,” MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

“We would particularly

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte also issued a threat, in particular to China, India, and Brazil

Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri says India would ‘deal’ with sanctions when they are passed

Strong stand

The ‘Sanctioning Russia Act of 2025’, expected to be introduced in U.S. Congress in August, mandates 500% duties on goods and services from countries buying Russian oil

What the NATO chief said

■ India, China, and Brazil should tell Vladimir Putin to be serious about peace talks with Ukraine

■ Continuing to do business with Russia will ‘slam back’ on these countries

■ The secondary sanctions by U.S. will hit these countries ‘very hard’



Centre's response

■ Securing energy needs is an ‘overriding priority’ for the government

■ India is guided by what markets offer and global circumstances

■ Maintain caution against double standards on the matter

caution against any double standards on the matter,” he added.

At an industry event in Delhi on Thursday, Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri said that India would “deal” with sanctions when they are passed, pointing out that

India has diversified its supply sources, buying oil from about 40 countries now, as opposed to 27 in the past.

However, despite requests from Tehran, India has not so far reversed a decision taken under pressure from the first Trump

administration in 2017, to stop all oil imports from Iran.

However, while Russia sells about half its oil exports to China, and about 38% to India (as of February 2025), it exports only about 6% to the EU countries.

The latest comments from the government come as lawmakers in the U.S. prepare to go forward with the Russian Sanctions Act, 2025 that has been introduced in the House and Senate, with 87 and 84 co-sponsors respectively, cutting across party lines.

Section 17 of the Act proposes to impose 500% *ad valorem* duties on countries that buy, sell or transfer “oil, uranium, natural gas, petroleum products, or petrochemical products that originated in the Russian Federation”.

In Washington on July 2, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had confirmed that India’s “concerns” about the Bill and “interests in energy security” had been conveyed to Mr. Graham who, along with Democrat Senator Richard Blumenthal, is sponsoring the Bill.

Mr. Graham has said that he believes Mr. Trump supports the law which would give him the power to waive the duties for a period of six months. However, the Republican lawmaker has urged the U.S. President to impose the sanctions earlier than the 50-day deadline proposed at present.

Talks on trade, tariffs

Amidst intense negotiations over tariffs, as well as market access to India, particularly in the areas of

agriculture, dairy and genetically modified produce, New Delhi has also been coordinating with the U.S. government about the deportation of Indians illegally resident in the U.S.

On Thursday, Mr. Jaiswal said that 1,563 Indian nationals have been deported in the first six months of Mr. Trump’s second tenure, from January 20 to July 15 this year.

According to ICE statistics, 1,529 immigration violators were deported in all of 2024, and far less than in the three preceding years. After protests in India over the first few batches of deportees being handcuffed and shackled on board military flights in February this year, the U.S. agreed to send Indians back by commercially chartered flights, including as recently as last week.

Key Issues and Developments:

1. Sanctions Proposal and Targeted Nations:

- The Russian Sanctions Act, 2025 is a bipartisan Bill introduced in both chambers of U.S. Congress.
- It proposes 500% *ad valorem* duties on countries engaging in oil or energy trade with Russia.
- NATO Secretary-General also warned India, China, and Brazil to pressure Russia or face economic penalties.

2. India’s Response – Energy Security and Sovereignty:

- MEA highlighted that India's energy procurement is guided by availability, affordability, and global circumstances.
- Minister Hardeep Puri underlined India's strategy to diversify crude oil imports, now sourcing from over 40 countries.

- India also reminded global powers not to exhibit “double standards”, noting similar imports by Western nations in the past.

3. Strategic Autonomy in Foreign Policy:

- India continues to pursue a balanced approach – maintaining relations with Russia while deepening ties with the U.S.
- Despite Western pressure, India has not joined sanctions against Russia, arguing for a multipolar and interest-driven global order.

4. Deportation and Immigration Diplomacy:

- Alongside trade tensions, deportation of 1,563 Indians from the U.S. has added to diplomatic negotiations.
- The mode of deportation (military flights with shackles) led to domestic backlash, pushing U.S. to switch to chartered commercial flights.

Implications for India:

Energy Security:

- India imports ~38% of its oil from Russia — making it vital for price stability and inflation control.
- Any disruption or duty burden could adversely affect current account balance and fuel prices.

Geopolitical Tightrope:

- Imposing sanctions on India might affect India-U.S. strategic ties, especially within the QUAD and Indo-Pacific frameworks.
- It could also push India to pivot further towards alternative alliances (e.g., BRICS+).

Global Governance and Equity:

- India's call against “double standards” reflects its demand for equal treatment in global affairs, particularly when Western nations also pursue pragmatic ties (e.g., EU's gas imports from Russia).

Domestic Political and Economic Narrative:

- The government can use this stance to showcase assertive diplomacy and independent foreign policy, reinforcing its nationalist image ahead of elections.

Way Forward:

1. **Diplomatic Dialogue:** India must intensify bilateral talks with the U.S. to convey energy dependence and seek exemptions or phased compliance.
2. **Diversification:** Continued push for alternate sources (Middle East, Africa, U.S. shale) and renewable energy investments.
3. **Multilateral Engagement:** Use platforms like G20, BRICS, and SCO to build consensus against unilateral economic coercion.
4. **Public Narrative Management:** Maintain transparency with domestic stakeholders about how such sanctions may impact prices, economy, and foreign policy.

Conclusion:

India's firm yet measured response to the proposed U.S. sanctions underscores its commitment to strategic autonomy, energy security, and sovereign decision-making. As global power equations shift, India's ability to balance geopolitical pressure with national interest will define its rise as a responsible global actor.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Analyze India's response to the proposed U.S. sanctions on Russian oil trade. What are the implications for India's foreign policy and energy security? **(250 words)**

Page 01:Prelims Pointer

Ahmedabad has emerged as the cleanest big city (population over 10 lakh) in the SwachhSurvekshan 2024-25, the Government of India's annual urban cleanliness survey. This reflects not only urban governance improvements but also India's evolving approach toward inclusive, data-driven sanitation efforts.

Ahmedabad sparkles as the cleanest big city in India

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Ahmedabad was named the cleanest big city in India, followed by Bhopal and Lucknow, in the Centre's annual "Swachh Survekshan" cleanliness survey.

Indore, Surat, Navi Mumbai, and Vijayawada were among 23 cities that entered the newly introduced "Super Swachh League", which recognises sustained excellence in cleanliness among cities, in the "million-plus population" category.

President Droupadi Murmu gave away the "Swachh Survekshan 2024-25" awards to the winners on Thursday.

Noida, Chandigarh, and Mysore, among others, entered the league in the "3 to 10 lakh population" category while New Delhi made the cut in the "50,000 to 3 lakh population" category of the league.

Pristine places The "Swachh Shahar", or Clean City category, was introduced this year to promote new cities in the cleanliness rankings	
Million-plus cities (More than 10 lakh population) ■ Ahmedabad (Gujarat) ■ Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh) ■ Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh)	Small cities (20,000-50,000 population) ■ Panaji (Goa) ■ Aska (Odisha) ■ Kumhari (Chhattisgarh)
Big cities (3 lakh-10 lakh population) ■ Mira-Bhayandar (Maharashtra) ■ Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh) ■ Jamshedpur (Jharkhand)	Medium cities (50,000-3 lakh population) ■ Dewas (Madhya Pradesh) ■ Karhad (Maharashtra) ■ Karnal (Haryana)
Very small cities (Less than 20,000 population) ■ Bilha (Chhattisgarh) ■ Chikiti (Odisha) ■ Shahganj (Uttar Pradesh)	

category while New Delhi made the cut in the "50,000 to 3 lakh population" category of the league.

In order to promote new cities in the cleanliness rankings, this year's awards introduced the "Swachh Shahar", or Clean City category, in which Ah-

medabad, Bhopal, and Lucknow secured top three positions in the list of cities with a population of more than 10 lakh. In the "3-10 lakh population" group, Mira-Bhayandar of Maharashtra topped the list, followed by Bilaspur (Madhya Pradesh) and Jamshedpur (Jharkhand).

The award for the "Best Ganga Town" was given to Prayagraj, while Secunderabad Cantonment was honoured as the Best Cantonment Board for its exemplary sanitation efforts. Visakhapatnam, Jabalpur, and Gorakhpur were declared "Best Saifai-Mitra Surakshit Shehar"

for their outstanding commitment to the safety and dignity of sanitation workers.

The Uttar Pradesh government, Prayagraj Mela Authority and Prayagraj Municipal Corporation were recognised for their exceptional urban waste management during the *Maha Kumbh*, the world's largest religious congregation, which witnessed an estimated footfall of 66 crore earlier this year.

ing Clean Cities). A total of 34 cities across various States and Union Territories earned this distinction, showcasing their notable progress in urban cleanliness and sanitation excellence.

President Murmu complimented the Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry for promoting the "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" (3R) approach and commended the waste-to-wealth memento presented to her.

"Waste is best" is the mantra and it gives strength to "circularity in economy", she added.

According to the government, 14 crore people participated in the survey through face-to-face interactions, the Swachhata App, MyGov and social media platforms in over 4,500 cities.

The 3R approach

Under this year's format, smaller cities found a level playing ground with big cities in the survey, the government said.

Also, following the "One City, One Award" principle, the top-performing cities from each State were recognised as "Promising Swachh Shehars" (Promis-

Key Highlights:

1. Top Performers by Category:

- **Big Cities (10+ lakh population):** Ahmedabad, Bhopal, Lucknow.
- **Mid-Sized Cities (3-10 lakh):** Mira-Bhayandar (Maharashtra), Bilaspur (MP), Jamshedpur (Jharkhand).
- **Best Ganga Town:** Prayagraj.
- **Best Cantonment Board:** Secunderabad.
- **Best Saifai Mitra Surakshit Shehar:** Visakhapatnam, Jabalpur, Gorakhpur.

2. Super Swachh League: A new category for sustained excellence.

- Indore, Surat, Navi Mumbai, and Vijayawada among the 23 million-plus cities included.

3. "Swachh Shahar" and "Promising Swachh Shehar": New categories introduced to ensure inclusivity and level playing field across population sizes.

4. MahaKumbh Recognition:

- Uttar Pradesh govt, Prayagraj Mela Authority, and Municipal Corporation lauded for managing waste during an event that hosted 66 crore people.

Significance and Implications:

1. Urban Governance and Decentralisation:

- Recognition across city sizes shows success of the “One City, One Award” policy.
- Encourages competitive federalism, inter-city competition, and community participation in municipal reforms.

2. Inclusive Sanitation Models:

- Categories like SaifaiMitraSurakshitShehar highlight focus on safety and dignity of sanitation workers.
- Emphasis on cantonment boards and Ganga towns broadens the scope beyond just municipal corporations.

3. People’s Participation:

- With over 14 crore people participating, this survey demonstrates rising civic consciousness.
- Use of digital platforms like Swachhata App and MyGov enhances transparency and feedback loops.

4. Circular Economy Push:

- Promotion of the “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (3R)” principle and “waste-to-wealth” initiatives supports sustainable urbanisation.
- This aligns with SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production).

Challenges Remain:

- Maintaining long-term cleanliness across all urban wards.
- Reducing reliance on informal waste pickers without social security coverage.
- Need for real-time waste monitoring and scientific landfill management in smaller cities.
- Ensuring independent third-party auditing to verify survey claims.

Way Forward:

1. Strengthen Urban Local Bodies (ULBs):

- Capacity building and financial autonomy for ULBs is key for sustainable cleanliness.

2. Integrate Urban Sanitation with Livelihoods:

- Link sanitation work with skill training, health benefits, and insurance for sanitation workers.

3. Expand 3R and Waste-to-Wealth Models:

- Promote local startups and community groups for decentralized composting, biogas, and plastic reuse.

4. Institutionalise Citizen Feedback:

- Make citizen inputs more formally linked to policy revisions and budget allocations.

Conclusion:

The SwachhSurvekshan 2024-25 reflects a matured phase of India's urban cleanliness movement—from performance ranking to inclusive recognition. It offers a replicable model of combining technology, citizen engagement, and government accountability for transformative sanitation governance.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: What is the objective of introducing the "Super Swachh League" in SwachhSurvekshan 2024-25?

- A. To promote Ganga towns only
- B. To honour rural sanitation panchayats
- C. To recognise cities with sustained excellence in cleanliness
- D. To monitor real-time waste generation

Ans: C)

In the age of social media, nutrition information has become highly accessible — but also increasingly unreliable. This article explores the consequences of misinformation, oversimplification, and “black-and-white” thinking around food, often driven by influencers and unverified sources.

Navigating nutrition information in the era of social media

Social media thrives on black-and-white thinking, and much of the information is not always accurate; nutrition science is all about context, dose, and individuality; genetics, gut microbiome, lifestyle, stress levels, and cultural background all determine what works for you, say experts

Nabeela Khan

Do you start your mornings with detox water, flaxseeds, chia seeds, eat collagen for skin during the day and add a dose of magnesium for good sleep? If your answer is yes, you are not alone.

The global health and wellness market stood at \$1.4 trillion in 2024 according to a report by McKinsey, the multinational consulting firm. The report highlighted that people are prioritising wellness more than ever and are looking for science-backed products.

How is wellness and nutrition a central narrative of our conversations these days? Clinical nutritionist Amita Gadre explained: “Today, the ultimate status symbol is health and vitality. A glowing skin, a high-energy lifestyle, and a fit physique are the new aspirations. And social media is the perfect stage for this display.”

However, in an information-filled world, people are struggling to understand nutrition science, an area of study that is already a complex subject.

A recent peer-reviewed study conducted of Indian students highlighted how “social media impacts an individual’s eating patterns by acting as a stimulus for immediate consumption of food, cravings and trying trends.” Another study from South Africa also found that social media is used to “access and implement nutrition information while showing the inability of participants to assess whether nutrition information on social media is evidence-based and correct.”

A simple Google search tells us what to eat or drink and how much, for our weight concerns, skin concerns or even conditions such as diabetes. However, this information is not always accurate, as it is sometimes not backed by strong scientific evidence, may promote conflicting views and could even distort scientific findings to promote one particular food item or product. “While social media has raised awareness, it has simultaneously created a ‘Wild West’ of information that has deeply complicated the public’s understanding of nutrition,” said Ms. Gadre.

So what is the science behind nutrition and food? Vikrant Ghawalekar, scientific officer, Biology Cell at Homi Bhabha Centre for Science Education explained that the small intestine has an extensive supply of blood vessels to facilitate the uptake of nutrients. He added that “excess vitamins, minerals may not give immediate benefits because water-soluble vitamins (Vitamin B and Vitamin C) are lost through body fluids [urine] and excessive oil-soluble vitamins can be harmful for metabolism. Regular supply through fruits and leafy vegetables is enough to maintain a balance,” he said.

Ms. Gadre explained how eating one food may not immediately impact our



Consumption patterns: A recent peer-reviewed study of Indian students found that social media significantly influences eating behaviours by triggering immediate food consumption, intensifying cravings, and encouraging participation in food trends. [GRTS saasr](#)

health. “Take Vitamin C as an example (from oranges). It is water-soluble, so it is absorbed in the small intestine and carried in the blood. Your body takes only what it needs. The rest is excreted in urine. No amount of oranges can force your skin to glow instantly. Glows come from a combination of hydration, healthy fats, protein and antioxidants, not just one vitamin. Also, absorption depends on gut health, the presence of other nutrients, and overall balance.” “So yes, eat your oranges. But also eat your dal, rice, ghee, sabzi, nuts – glow comes from nourishment, not gimmicks.”

‘Food as a cure’

What many struggle to understand or often misunderstand, is whether food can cure diseases or medical conditions. Krish Ashok, author of the book *Masala Lab* explained “good food provides ingredients for the body’s immune system to function at its best genetically determined capacity. But beyond that, food cannot act like medicine.”

It is the same with seeds, spices and water. According to Ms. Gadre, kitchen ingredients such as carom seeds or fennel seeds (*ajwain*, *dalcini*, *jera*, *saunf*) are great in culinary doses and have traditional digestive benefits. When asked if they could help lose weight, she said, “To expect them to cure obesity or diabetes is taking it too far. Superfoods don’t undo overeating or inactivity. Weight loss and metabolic health require exercise, stress and sleep management and calorie balance.”

Commenting on daily water

requirements, she said, “Hydration is vital, but that 8-glass rule is generic. Overhydration can lead to electrolyte imbalance. A good rule of thumb: drink when you’re thirsty, sip more in hot weather or after workouts, and observe your urine colour – pale yellow is ideal. Water doesn’t flush toxins.”

A simple keyword search – “how to lose weight” unravels a whole lot. Search results lead to multiple videos explaining how to lose weight with the help of “natural oesmpic”. These videos say that a concoction of vegetables such as cucumber, celery, and bitter melon constitute “Nature’s Oesmpic” and claim that this can lower blood sugar and melt fat. Oesmpic is an antidiabetic and anti-obesity medicine which is prescribed under medical supervision for weight management.

There are multiple videos promoting juices of certain vegetables and drinking these on empty stomach for weight loss. Ms. Gadre, commenting on this trend, explained: “There is no clinical evidence supporting these drinks for sustainable weight loss. Moreover, Oesmpic is a prescription GLP-1 drug used for type 2 diabetes under strict medical supervision. You can’t DIY that with karela [bitter melon].” She further warned that “Overconsumption of raw vegetable juices can cause bloating, nutrient imbalances, risk of kidney stones and even blood sugar dips if not combined with meals.”

While social media promotes certain foods, it also creates fear around a few food products. This makes understanding what to eat and what not more complex.

Both sugar and carbohydrates have earned a bad reputation on social media. And while too much of either can be detrimental, many take extreme measures to curb it from their diets. The Mayo Clinic prescribes: “people need at least 130 grams of carbohydrates every day to meet the body’s energy needs.” A Johns Hopkins blog post on sugar explains, “Our bodies run on sugar. Removing natural sources of sugar and other carbohydrates from your diet – fruits, dairy products and grains – is not a healthy choice”. Diets that cut out all carbohydrates and sugars, such as the ketogenic diet, can be harmful to your health, it says.

Ms. Gadre added: “Social media thrives on black-and-white thinking. Nutrition science is all about context, dose, and individuality: Is sugar ‘bad’? It depends. A spoonful in your chai is vastly different from drinking a litre of soda. The diet that worked for a 22-year-old actor in Bollywood is unlikely to be the right fit for a 45-year-old working mother in Delhi. Genetics, gut microbiome, lifestyle, stress levels, and cultural background all determine what works for you.” When it comes to a nuanced understanding of nutrition science, randomised controlled trials are the gold standard to understand how and why certain foods get easily absorbed by the body. But a lot of claims are based on observations and observational studies, and therefore can or cannot be applied to everyone. (Nabeela Khan is a Delhi-based health and science journalist. nabeelainyati@gmail.com)

THE GIST

The global health and wellness market stood at \$1.4 trillion in 2024 according to a report by McKinsey, the multinational consulting firm. The report highlighted that people are prioritising wellness more than ever and are looking for science-backed products

A Google search tells us what to eat or drink and how much, for our weight concerns, skin concerns or even conditions such as diabetes. However, this information is not always accurate, as it is sometimes not backed by strong scientific evidence, may promote conflicting views and could even distort scientific findings to promote one item or product

While social media promotes certain foods, it also creates fear around a few food products. This makes understanding what to eat and what not more complex. The diet that worked for a 22-year-old actor in Bollywood is unlikely to be the right fit for a 45-year-old working mother in Delhi

Key Issues Highlighted:

1. Impact of Social Media on Eating Patterns:

- A peer-reviewed Indian study confirms that social media triggers cravings, trends, and immediate food consumption.
- South African study: Users often lack the ability to assess the credibility of nutrition-related content.

2. Misinformation and ‘Wellness Fads’:

- Diet fads (detox water, chia seeds, collagen, “natural Ozempic” drinks) often have little to no scientific backing.
- Pseudoscientific claims can lead to health risks like bloating, kidney stones, nutrient imbalances, or dangerous calorie restrictions.

3. Complexity of Nutrition Science:

- Nutrition is not one-size-fits-all; it depends on genetics, gut microbiome, lifestyle, age, and culture.
- The body regulates vitamin absorption (e.g., excess water-soluble vitamins are excreted), so mega-dosing often adds no value.
- Carbs and sugars are not inherently bad — they are essential in proper doses.

4. Science vs. Social Media:

- Nutrition science relies on randomized controlled trials, not anecdotal claims or observational patterns.
- “Superfoods” or “miracle cures” promoted online oversimplify complex physiological processes.

Significance for India:

Public Health:

- Misleading content on diet can exacerbate non-communicable diseases like diabetes and obesity.
- Social media trends bypass the clinical oversight needed for dietary interventions.

Behavioral Shifts:

- Health has become a status symbol, driving aspirational but often misguided practices.
- Vulnerable groups, especially youth and women, are at risk of following restrictive, unhealthy diets.

Need for Regulation:

- The unregulated spread of pseudo-nutrition advice calls for fact-checking mechanisms and media literacy.
- Influencers promoting health claims must be held accountable for spreading unverified or dangerous content.

Challenges:

- Lack of scientific literacy among users.

- Easy access to content without vetting or credentials of content creators.
- Influence of celebrity culture and unregulated advertising.
- Difficulty in differentiating clinical advice from sponsored content.

Way Forward:**1. Strengthen Nutrition Education:**

- Integrate evidence-based dietary education in schools and public platforms.
- Promote understanding of basic nutrient functions, daily requirements, and safe practices.

2. Promote Scientific Content Creators:

- Encourage credentialed nutritionists and science communicators to use social media for outreach.

3. Regulate Health Misinformation:

- Develop policy frameworks to counter unverified health claims online.
- Platforms should require disclosures of sponsorships and scientific citations for health-related posts.

4. Community Awareness Campaigns:

- Use tools like MyGov, TV/radio, and mobile apps to counter myths and promote balanced diets rooted in local traditions.

Conclusion:

While social media has democratized access to health information, it has also created a “Wild West” of conflicting, inaccurate, and often dangerous dietary claims. Navigating this space requires scientific literacy, regulatory oversight, and a return to context-driven, culturally relevant nutrition practices. The goal should be informed wellness, not performative health.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Social media has democratized nutrition awareness but also deepened misinformation." Examine the role of digital platforms in shaping public health behaviour in India.

Page 08 :GS 3: Science and Technology

On July 15, 2025, Indian astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla returned from a two-week training mission to the International Space Station (ISS), facilitated by a collaboration between NASA, Axiom Space, and ISRO. This event is seen as a prelude to India's first human space mission, Gaganyaan, expected in 2027.

Key Highlights:

1. ISRO-Axiom-NASA Partnership:

- ISRO paid ₹500+ crore to Axiom Space for Shukla's participation in the mission.
- Despite initial concerns about restricted technology sharing under the U.S. International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), the mission enabled comprehensive astronaut training.

2. Training Outcomes:

- Shukla, and backup astronaut Prasanth Nair, trained in microgravity adaptation, space medicine, survival techniques, and spacecraft operations.
- Mr. Shukla acted as mission pilot, learning manual operations, docking/undocking, and re-entry protocols.
- They trained with European and Japanese space agencies as well, highlighting multilateral space cooperation.

3. Strategic and Economic Efficiency:

- ISRO Chairman V. Narayanan stated the mission was more cost-effective than developing indigenous training modules from scratch.
- The collaboration enabled access to international standards and real-world experience at lower strategic risk.

Significance for India:

Technological Advancement:

- India's presence in the ISS, even via a paid partnership, marks a strategic leap in space exploration capacity.
- Exposure to advanced space systems will strengthen Gaganyaan and future deep space missions.

Stepping stone

The NASA-Axiom-ISRO tie-up is an admirable outcome

A crew of four astronauts including India's Shubhanshu Shukla completed their roughly two-week mission to the International Space Station on July 15. Mr. Shukla's trip was presumed to have been an intensive rehearsal ahead of his flight as part of India's first batch of astronauts for ISRO's 'Gaganyaan' mission, currently expected in 2027. The presumption is because the goals of Mr. Shukla's trip, which ISRO arranged for by paying north of ₹500 crore to Axiom Space, have not been officially communicated by Indian authorities. Fortunately, clarifications from Axiom and NASA have since cast more light on its purpose. While ISRO and the Department of Space are still expected to proactively disseminate what they know about their activities under Gaganyaan, not least because of the mission's ₹20,000 crore price tag, Mr. Shukla's trip ought to strengthen ISRO's preparations. Human spaceflight is a highly involved endeavour: once in space, the crew is on its own and the resources to respond to a variety of situations are limited. According to a statement ISRO published after the mission launched on June 25, Mr. Shukla and Prasanth Nair – who is also part of Gaganyaan's first cohort of astronauts and was part of the Axiom mission's backup crew – were familiarised with “advanced spacecraft systems, emergency protocols, scientific payload operations, microgravity adaptation, space medicine, and survival traits”. As the mission pilot, per Axiom, Mr. Shukla was also coached on docking and undocking, manual operations, atmospheric reentry, and anomaly management. Onboard the space station, Mr. Shukla was exposed to operations in the Japanese and European modules, for which he and Mr. Nair were trained in Japan and Germany. ISRO Chairman V. Narayanan has also said that the Axiom mission cost less than what ISRO might have had to invest if it had to train Mr. Shukla on its own. In all, the NASA-Axiom-ISRO tie-up emerges as an admirable outcome, even as space agencies continue to closely guard space technologies for their strategic value.

Concerns that the limitations imposed by the U.S.'s International Traffic in Arms Regulations would prevent the duo from learning much may also be laid to rest. Instead, they may be replaced by concerns about ISRO's piecemeal communication. Astronauts cut inspirational figures and appeal to all ages. As India prepares for its first human spaceflight mission, there can be no better way to build excitement than by facilitating access to India's astronauts. The lack of initiative is hard to rationalise, although it is still not too late. ISRO as well as India's soft power platform will make copious gains by expanding outreach and easing public access to the spacefarers.

Soft Power and Inspiration:

- Human spaceflight boosts national morale and youth engagement in STEM.
- However, ISRO's limited communication strategy is a missed opportunity for public engagement and soft power projection.

Geopolitical Symbolism:

- Despite strategic sensitivities around space technologies, this collaboration signals growing trust between India and the U.S..
- It reflects India's rising profile in global space diplomacy, especially ahead of BRICS and QUAD-led space initiatives.

Concerns:

- Poor communication strategy by ISRO and Department of Space regarding mission goals and outcomes.
- Lack of real-time public engagement with India's astronaut corps, limiting national enthusiasm.
- Over-reliance on foreign agencies for training may delay development of indigenous infrastructure for future missions.

Way Forward:**1. Enhance Public Outreach:**

- ISRO should showcase astronauts in media, schools, and national events to create visibility and build public pride.

2. Accelerate Indigenous Capacity Building:

- Parallel to foreign partnerships, India must invest in training infrastructure, simulation labs, and microgravity testing facilities.

3. Institutional Transparency:

- Regular, official communication about mission milestones will boost public trust, media awareness, and global confidence.

4. Leverage Diplomacy:

- Use such collaborations to strengthen India's bilateral space diplomacy and multilateral initiatives like the Artemis Accords or ISpA (Indian Space Association).

Conclusion:

The ISRO-Axiom-NASA partnership is more than a training exercise—it's a strategic stepping stone towards India's future in human spaceflight. While the technical and diplomatic gains are substantial, India must complement these achievements with narrative-building, public outreach, and institutional transparency to fully realise the benefits of this momentous milestone.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements about the Gaganyaan Mission:

1. Gaganyaan is India's first manned space mission expected to be launched by 2027.
2. The astronauts for Gaganyaan were trained only in Russia and the U.S.
3. Shubhanshu Shukla and Prasanth Nair are part of India's first astronaut cohort.

Which of the statements above are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 1 and 3 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: B)

Page 15:GS 2 : International Relations

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli completed one year in office during his fourth term, having returned to power in 2023 through a coalition between his Communist Party of Nepal (UML) and the Nepali Congress (NC). The coalition promised constitutional reforms, better governance, and accelerated development. However, political analysts deem the year largely unsuccessful, citing failures across governance, legislation, and foreign policy.

A year of rhetoric, broken promises, and weak governance for Nepal's Oli

The Prime Minister's first year in office in his latest stint is seen as unsuccessful across sectors like governance, legislation, development, and foreign relations, say political analysts; public dissatisfaction has grown under an increasingly intolerant regime, with laws misused to target critics, they add

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sanjeev Satgajanya
KATHMANDU

Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli has completed a year in office with the two largest parties – the Nepali Congress and his own CPN-UML – continuing the coalition that they forged with several promises, including amendments to the constitution, good governance, and a boost to development.

While promises have remained largely unfulfilled, public dissatisfaction has grown.

Analysts describe Mr. Oli's one year in office as unsuccessful across key sectors – governance, legislation, development, and foreign relations.

"It's a disaster on all fronts," says Hari Sharma, a political commentator. "If we were to talk about achievements, there is nothing visible."

When Mr. Oli signed a seven-point deal with Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba on July 1 last year – which set the stage for Mr. Oli's fourth stint in power starting two weeks later on July 15 – the message the duo tried to convey was that a strong and stable government was what Nepal needed to usher in stability and ensure good governance.

With the Congress, the single largest party with 88 seats, backing Mr. Oli – whose Communist Party of



The lost empire: Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli in China in 2018. Last November, after assuming office, he went to China, in a departure from the general tradition of visiting India first. FILE PHOTO

Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) holds 79 seats – they controlled a comfortable majority in Parliament. But even on the legislative front, the government's weakness was starkly exposed, triggering public outcry.

Amending the constitution was a core agenda of the two parties. They peddled the idea that the electoral system envisioned by the constitution, promulgated 10 years ago, made it nearly impossible for any single party to secure a majority, inevitably leading to hung parliaments and a cycle of unstable coalition governments.

They proclaimed that Nepal's development was stymied by the lack of a stable and strong government.

But the constitutional amendment was a ruse from the outset, a smoke-screen to justify their re-

turn to power, say commentators.

Just as Mr. Oli neared the first anniversary of his government, reports surfaced that one of his Cabinet ministers was involved in corruption. For several weeks, lawmakers have been raising issues of bad governance and irregularities.

Corruption concerns

Mr. Oli, a loquacious leader by nature, is never tired of asserting that he won't tolerate corruption, but chooses to maintain silence on the issues of irregularities, including those involving Ministers from his own party.

"Forget achievements and progress; under Oli, corruption has been socialised. And this is even more dangerous," says Tula Shah, a political analyst.

A couple of months ago, Home Minister Ramesh

Lekhak's name appeared in connection with a scheme under which millions were allegedly being collected from unsuspecting Nepalis going abroad on visit visas. After a hue and cry in the media and Parliament, the government formed a committee to investigate the matter. By the Oli government's own admission, the "visit visa scam" had been going on for many years under various governments.

Analysts say pointing to previous governments is a deflection tactic by the Oli government, when it should have taken stern measures and asked the Home Minister to resign.

"No government, or its leader for that matter, can avoid responsibility by claiming it has not committed corruption; checking corruption is the primary duty of any government," says Mr. Shah.

Nepal's foreign policy is mainly shaped by its relations with two countries – India and China, its two neighbours.

Foreign relations fiasco

Ever since Mr. Oli became Prime Minister for the first time in 2018 – after the promulgation of the constitution in 2015 – he has made a habit of taking India head-on. He used Delhi's lukewarm response to the constitution and the subsequent border blockade to whip up ultra-nationalist fervor among his political base.

His relations with New Delhi have not been the best. Yet, ever since assuming office last year, Mr. Oli has been keenly waiting for a visit to India.

In November, he went to China, in a departure from the general tradition of visiting India first. During the Beijing visit, he secured a deal under the Belt and Road Initiative to carry forward a dozen projects in Nepal with Chinese funding.

"We have not seen any progress under that deal," says Mr. Sharma.

According to him, Mr. Oli, who never misses a chance to take a jibe at India, has spent the entire year waiting for an invite from Delhi.

"There is clearly a lack of trust from both neighbours," he said. "So, on the foreign policy front as well, Oli has not been successful."

From the very outset, the government has

earned notoriety for being intolerant of criticism and for its vindictive attitude. Those criticising the government or people in power on social media have been prosecuted through misuse of laws.

In March, pro-monarchy protests attracted many people – though not all were calling for the monarchy's return. Many had joined simply to express dissatisfaction with misgovernance. The way the Oli government handled the protests – two people were killed and several others injured – led to more discontent among the general public.

In recent months, even some members of the ruling parties have voiced criticism of the Oli government over its failures in basic areas like service delivery.

A Bill related to civil service was mired in controversy after it was discovered that some interest groups from outside Parliament had influenced the insertion of a provision without lawmakers' knowledge.

The episode exposed the weakness of the legislature.

Ignoring such incidents that have eroded public faith in the government, Prime Minister Oli's outrageous daily claims of development and governance come as an affront to the people, commentators say.

"All in all, it's a rhetoric-filled one year for Mr. Oli," says Mr. Sharma. "More in talk, nothing in substance."

Key Takeaways:

1. Governance Deficit and Public Discontent:

- The promise of constitutional amendment, aimed at ensuring political stability, remained unfulfilled.
- The government has struggled to pass key legislation, with even routine service delivery being questioned.
- A civil service Bill was found to have been tampered with by interest groups, eroding faith in the legislature.

2. Corruption Allegations:

- The “visit visa scam”, implicating Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak, is a major scandal under Mr. Oli’s tenure.
- Although Mr. Oli claims to oppose corruption, his silence on party-linked allegations has drawn strong criticism.
- Analysts argue that corruption has been “normalised” and socialised, making governance more fragile.

3. Authoritarian Tendencies and Intolerance:

- Increasing misuse of laws to target dissenters and critics on social media.
- Crackdown on pro-monarchy protests resulted in deaths and injuries, reflecting rising state repression.
- Even members within the ruling coalition have started expressing concerns about declining democratic standards.

Foreign Policy Failures:

India-Nepal Relations:

- Traditionally, Nepali PMs visit India first. Mr. Oli broke this norm by visiting China first, signaling strategic defiance.
- However, no concrete progress emerged from his engagements with Beijing.
- Oli continues to take public jibes at India, yet awaits a formal invitation from New Delhi, signaling a lack of bilateral trust.

China-Nepal Ties:

- Mr. Oli signed a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) deal for 12 projects.
- However, implementation has been negligible, raising questions about feasibility, overdependence, and lack of execution capability.

Implications for India and the Region:

1. Regional Stability:

- Nepal’s internal political instability directly impacts India’s strategic interests, particularly in border regions like Kalapani and Susta.
- A weakened democracy with rising public unrest can become a flashpoint for regional friction.

2. Strategic Space Competition:

- Mr. Oli's balancing act between India and China shows signs of failure.
- For India, this offers an opportunity to rebuild trust through low-key diplomacy and soft power tools.

Challenges:

- Erosion of institutional credibility (legislature, media, executive).
- Failure to deliver development outcomes, especially amid rising youth dissatisfaction.
- Weak coalition dynamics despite a parliamentary majority.

Way Forward:

1. For Nepal:

- Pursue genuine constitutional reforms with transparency and public consultation.
- Tackle corruption through independent investigations and Cabinet accountability.
- Allow freedom of expression, protect dissent, and promote civil liberties.

2. For India:

- Re-engage Nepal through quiet diplomacy, educational exchanges, and infrastructure projects.
- Respect Nepal's sovereign political space, but remain watchful of Chinese encroachments in Nepal's governance and economy.

Conclusion:

PM K.P. Sharma Oli's fourth term in office has, so far, failed to deliver on governance, development, and diplomacy. Growing public dissatisfaction, rising authoritarianism, and diplomatic stagnation threaten Nepal's democratic gains and regional stability. For India and the region, a stable and democratic Nepal remains vital — and its current trajectory must prompt regional introspection and recalibrated engagement.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The internal political instability in Nepal has implications beyond its borders. Examine the impact of Nepal's political developments on India-Nepal bilateral relations. **(250 words)**

Page : 10 Editorial Analysis

A better terror fight with J&K police under state reins

On June 16, 2025, the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Manoj Sinha, emphasised that the eradication of terrorism from J&K was the government's top priority. In his address on the occasion of the passing out parade at the Sher-e-Kashmir Police Academy, Udhampur, he called upon the J&K Police (JAKP) to utilise the modern technology to counter security threats, prevent radicalisation and triumph over adverse situations. He exhorted the JAKP to adopt a multi-pronged approach and harness the power of intelligence, community engagement, technology and inter-agency collaboration, based on good old beat policing.

Crucial asset

Mr. Sinha could not have been more accurate in underlining the role of the local police in fighting terrorism. The primacy of the local or State police as the fulcrum of counter-terror operations is a well established fact. The central forces – to include the armed forces and central police forces – always supplement and can never supplant the State forces. The strength, and hence the advantage of the local police in the given context, comes from the fact that its personnel belong to the region and know the terrain and demography like no outside force would know.

This intangible asset, as part of the repertoire of the local police, is mainly due to their connect with the local population, facilitating high-grade intelligence of terrorists who operate amidst the population. Can we deny the fact that the terrorists who were behind the Pahalgam strike on April 22, 2025, are still at large mainly due to an existing gap in human intelligence (HUMINT)? Or, for that matter, there indeed was a lack of HUMINT prior to the strike and that had it been present it could have averted Pahalgam? Unless we acknowledge the gap, learn lessons and proceed accordingly, it will be challenging to ward-off potential terror strikes.

It is upon the government to constantly



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Placing the J&K police under the command of the elected government will ensure policing strategies that align with the local population's concerns

improve the functional aspects of JAKP, which could contribute to the overall consolidation of the security situation. A beginning needs to be made by placing the JAKP under the command of the government that has been elected by the people.

The local population has the most intimate connect with the elected representative, who cannot be kept out of the loop as far as the security situation is concerned. Developments such as terrorist movements and overground workers' activities in an area can never escape the notice of peoples' representatives, who are one of the most crucial stakeholders in the security matrix. It is reiterated that locals always feel more comfortable to share information with their *sarpanch* or their Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) than with someone from a central agency.

Restore the democratic structure

J&K has a rich and vibrant democratic culture wherein the population has always participated in local body elections with much enthusiasm. In fact, the participation percentage in elections decreases as one goes up the structure to Assembly and parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, due to the fragile security situation, the local elected representatives – though elected from time to time – have never been empowered as in the constitutional provisions.

The democratic order in J&K needs to be restored, with all tiers in the structure of governance from panchayats/municipal bodies to MLAs and Members of Parliament activated and made responsible for security. In the laid-down tiered structure, the JAKP has a vital role towards participatory execution. If not, there will be an attitude of indifference on the part of peoples' representatives, with a likely trickle-down effect – of an indifferent local population – which will be detrimental to counter-terrorism.

Polymakers will have to encourage a

structured dialogue between police forces and local leaders to collaborate and address community concerns, gather information on terror-related activities and enhance public safety initiatives.

This partnership can lead to more informed decision-making and improved community engagement in policing efforts. In a diverse situation that exists in the various sub-regions of J&K, terrorism has a local flavour, contextualised by participation of local terrorist cadres operating with foreign terrorists. These diverse challenges will have to be tackled by respective local governance, against the one size fits all approach. The JAKP, with its basic unit at the *thana* level, has always been enmeshed with local governance to produce amazing results.

Bridging the gap

In the present situation of elected representatives having been kept out of the security matrix, the desired end will always be found wanting. The policy measure of restoring the control of the JAKP under the elected government will facilitate better accountability and responsiveness to community needs, ensuring that policing strategies align with the local population's concerns and aspirations. Elected officials can play a vital role in bridging the gap between the police and the community, fostering trust and cooperation essential for effective law enforcement and counter terrorism.

By holding Assembly and parliamentary elections in J&K, we have acknowledged the agency of the people; the measures undertaken will remain an unfinished agenda if not addressed in an inclusive manner. More than terrorism, it is about granting a participatory governance model as against an elitist model, to the people. Mr. Sinha's overall aim of community engagement will remain a pipe dream if elected representatives are not incorporated with vigour, to respect the decision of the people in electing them. An improved security situation will follow.

Paper 03 Internal Security

UPSC Mains Practice Question: The local police must be placed at the core of counter-terrorism efforts in Jammu and Kashmir, supported by a participatory governance model." In this context, critically examine the role of Jammu and Kashmir Police in combating terrorism and the need for democratic control over policing. (250 words)

Context :

The author emphasizes that **local police (Jammu & Kashmir Police - JAKP)** must be at the forefront of counter-terrorism efforts. While central forces such as the army and paramilitary can support operations, they cannot replace the critical role played by local police who have deep familiarity with the region's **terrain, demography, and society**.

Key Points:

1. Strength of Local Intelligence:

- JAKP personnel, being natives, have better community links, enabling high-quality **Human Intelligence (HUMINT)**.
- The **April 2025 Pahalgam attack** might have been averted if better HUMINT was available, indicating a critical intelligence gap.

2. Need for Democratic Oversight:

- Placing JAKP under an elected government ensures **greater accountability, local responsiveness**, and strategic alignment with people's concerns.
- Citizens are more likely to share sensitive information with local elected leaders (sarpanch, MLA) than with central officials.

3. Reviving Participatory Governance:

- J&K has a strong tradition of grassroots democratic participation, especially in local body elections.
- Elected representatives should be empowered and involved in the **security matrix** to ensure community cooperation and avoid detachment from security concerns.

4. Contextual Strategy over Centralised Approach:

- Each sub-region in J&K faces different security dynamics. A **"one-size-fits-all"** policy will not work; instead, **localized strategies** should be adopted.

5. Bridging the Trust Gap:

- Involving elected representatives will **build trust between police and community**, essential for successful counter-terrorism operations.
- A **structured dialogue** between local leaders and law enforcement can enhance information sharing and community safety.

Conclusion:

Restoring JAKP under the command of the elected state government is vital for meaningful, community-driven counter-terrorism. More than a tactical decision, it represents a shift toward **inclusive, participatory governance**. The restoration of democratic processes and people's trust is key to achieving sustained peace and security in Jammu and Kashmir.