Daily News Analysis

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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India declined to endorse the joint statement at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meeting held in Qingdao, China. The primary reason was the document's failure to mention the Pahalgam terror attack of April 22, 2025, despite including references to militant activities in Pakistan's Balochistan region.

India declines to endorse joint statement at the SCO over exclusion of Pahalgam

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

India declined to endorse the joint statement at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Defence Ministers' meeting in China, and pushed for including tougher language on terrorism that would reflect the Indian position, particularly in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22.

Sources said Defence Minister Rajnath Singh refused to sign the document on Thursday as it did not mention the Pahalgam attack but included militant activities in Balochistan. Pakistan and China were trying to divert attention from terrorism, and the document would have diluted India's position on critical issues, particularly terrorism and regional security, sources added.

In his address at the SCO meet in Qingdao, Mr. Singh said a terror group, The Resistance Front, had carried out a "dastardly and heinous attack" on innocent tourists at Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir, killing 26 innocent civilians, including a Nepali national. The TRF, a proxy of the UN-designated Lashkar-e-Taiba, had claimed responsibility for the attack, he said.

"Peace and prosperity cannot co-exist with terrorism and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the hands of non-state actors and terror groups. Dealing with these challenges requires decisive action. It is imperative that those who sponsor, nurture and utilise terrorism for their narrow and selfish ends must bear the consequences. Some countries use cross-border terrorism as an instrument of policy and provide shelter to terrorists. There should be no place for such double standards. SCO should not hesitate to criticise such nations," Mr. Singh said.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun in Qingdao. ANI VIDEO GRAB

Key Highlights:

1. **India's Objection:**

- o Defence Minister Rajnath Singh refused to sign the joint statement.
  - o India sought stronger language on terrorism that reflected its position, particularly after the Pahalgam attack which killed 26 civilians, including a Nepali national.
  - o India was concerned that the joint statement would dilute the gravity of cross-border terrorism if it selectively addressed terrorism in certain regions while ignoring others.

2. **Pahalgam Terror Attack:**
   - o Carried out by The Resistance Front (TRF), a proxy of Lashkar-e-Taiba.
   - o TRF is a UN-designated terrorist organization.
   - o The attack targeted innocent civilians and tourists, showcasing the continued threat of terror networks operating from across the border.

3. **India's Stand at SCO:**
   - o Rajnath Singh emphasized that terrorism and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction by non-state actors are serious global threats.
   - o He called out countries that sponsor terrorism, indirectly referring to Pakistan.
   - o India advocated for a consistent and strong SCO stance against terrorism without political compromise or double standards.

4. **Geo-political Undercurrents:**
   - o The inclusion of Balochistan but exclusion of Pahalgam in the statement indicated a possible attempt by China and Pakistan to shift the narrative.
   - o India's decision to not endorse the statement highlighted its unwillingness to accept selective condemnation of terrorism.

Implications for India's Foreign Policy:

- **Assertive Diplomacy:** Reflects India's growing assertiveness in multilateral forums when it comes to core national interests, particularly on the issue of terrorism.
- **China-Pakistan Nexus:** Reinforces concerns about the strategic alignment between China and Pakistan on regional security narratives.
- **Credibility at Global Stage:** India's decision upholds its consistent position on terrorism and enhances its credibility as a nation that does not compromise on national security.
- **Strained Multilateralism:** Raises questions about the efficacy of SCO as a platform to address terrorism neutrally, given internal contradictions and political alignments.

Conclusion:

India's refusal to endorse the SCO joint statement is a clear signal of its zero-tolerance approach to terrorism and its demand for equitable and impartial global counter-terror frameworks. The move also reflects broader challenges in multilateral cooperation where geopolitical interests often overshadow collective security objectives.

UPSCMainsPractice Question

Ques : "India's refusal to endorse the SCO joint statement highlights the complexities of multilateral diplomacy in the face of terrorism." Discuss in the context of India's regional security concerns.**(250 Words)**

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Geetha Hospital, Street No:5, Chaitanyapuri Main Rd, above Dmart Pick-up Point, opp. to Genius Grammar School, Chaitanyapuri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500060
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Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla of the Indian Air Force made history by becoming the first Indian to enter the International Space Station (ISS) as part of the private Axiom Mission 4 (Ax-4), a significant milestone in India's growing human spaceflight ambitions, particularly the Gaganyaan mission.

Shukla becomes first Indian to enter the ISS

IAF Group Captain is the pilot of the much-delayed mission and will spend two weeks on the space station; he is one of the four astronauts designated to take part in Gaganyaan mission

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla of the Indian Air Force created history on Thursday afternoon by becoming the first Indian to enter the International Space Station.

As the Dragon crew capsule carrying Mr. Shukla and three other astronauts as part of Axiom Mission 4 (Ax-4) circled earth, he greeted people back home with a "*Namaskar* from space". The spacecraft then docked with the ISS at 4.01 p.m. IST as it passed over the north Atlantic Ocean.

For Mr. Shukla, this is the first step to a more ambitious mission as he is one of the four astronauts designated to take part in Gaganyaan, India's first human spaceflight mission. The Indian Space Research Organisation, which ex-

Mission update: Shubhanshu Shukla and his fellow astronauts being welcomed aboard by the ISS crew. PTI

pects to conduct the first crewed flight under this mission no earlier than 2026, paid more than ₹500 crore for the Ax-4 mission to include Mr. Shukla and Prasanth Nair, another Gaganyaan designate who was part of the back-up crew for the Ax-4 mission.

On Thursday's flight, Mr. Shukla was the mission pilot. A live videolink from NASA showed the spacecraft approaching the sta-

tion, with the docking sequence being completed at 4.15 p.m.

At the lift-off on Wednesday evening from Florida, Axiom Space – which is orchestrating the mission – had said the capsule would attempt docking in about 28 hours.

"Shubhanshu stands at the threshold entrance of International Space Station... as the world watches with excitement and ex-

pectation," Union Minister of State for Space Jitendra Singh wrote in a post on X.

The four astronauts aboard will spend the next two weeks at the ISS conducting scientific experiments, including eight from ISRO, and helping with the station's upkeep.

The first delay was due to adverse weather, followed by technical issues in the Falcon 9 rocket and then on the ISS.

In the lead-up to the Ax-4 mission, both Mr. Shukla and Mr. Nair had received advanced training at NASA's Johnson Space Centre in Texas.

Along with the other Gaganyaan designates Ajit Krishnan and Angad Pratap, they had previously received training in Russia. Training inputs from the U.S. and Russia are deemed valuable because of their considerable human spaceflight experience.

Key Highlights:

1. **Historic Entry into ISS:**

- o Shukla flew aboard the Dragon crew capsule launched by Axiom Space, which docked with the ISS over the North Atlantic Ocean.
- o He greeted the nation with "Namaskar from space", marking a symbolic moment of national pride.
- o He will spend two weeks aboard the ISS, conducting experiments and maintenance activities.

2. **Significance for Gaganyaan:**
   - o Shukla is one of the four astronauts designated for India's first crewed spaceflight mission, Gaganyaan, expected around 2026.
   - o His participation in Ax-4 is part of India's strategic preparation and exposure to international spaceflight operations.

3. **International Collaboration:**
   - o India paid over ₹500 crore for this participation, showcasing ISRO's commitment to international partnerships for advanced space training.
   - o Training was received from NASA's Johnson Space Center (USA) and Russia, leveraging their rich human spaceflight experience.
   - o A backup crew member, Prasanth Nair, also underwent this training, ensuring mission preparedness.

4. **Scientific and Technological Relevance:**
   - o Eight Indian scientific experiments from ISRO are part of the ISS mission, enhancing India's research capabilities in microgravity and human physiology.
   - o The mission provides hands-on exposure to international space protocols, boosting India's own human spaceflight ecosystem.

5. **Mission Challenges and Resilience:**
   - o The launch faced multiple delays — first due to weather, then technical issues with the Falcon 9 rocket, and later at the ISS.
   - o Despite this, successful docking and mission commencement highlight India's resilience and maturity in space engagement.

Implications for India:

1. **Strategic and Technological Leap:**
   - o Marks a significant milestone in India's journey toward becoming a major player in human space exploration.
   - o Strengthens India's capacity for independent crewed missions.

2. **Boost to Gaganyaan Preparedness:**
   - o Real-time exposure to ISS operations strengthens training quality and mission simulation for Gaganyaan astronauts.
   - o Highlights ISRO's strategy of combining domestic capability with global best practices.

3. **Soft Power and Diplomacy:**

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- o Projects India's technological advancements on the global stage.
- o Enhances India's space diplomacy by collaborating with private and government space agencies in the US and Russia.
4. **Inspiration and Capacity Building:**
    - o Acts as a motivational milestone for young Indians aspiring for careers in space sciences and defence services.
    - o Encourages STEM education, research, and private investment in the Indian space sector.

Conclusion:

Shubhanshu Shukla's entry into the ISS is not just a personal achievement but a strategic success for India's space programme. It marks a pivotal moment for the country's human spaceflight ambitions and cements India's position in the global space ecosystem. The collaboration with international agencies and the hands-on experience gained through this mission will serve as a launchpad for the Gaganyaan mission and future indigenous human space missions.

UPSC Mains Practice Question
Ques:"Shubhanshu Shukla's space mission signifies a new chapter in India's human spaceflight programme." Discuss the strategic, technological, and diplomatic implications of India's participation in Axiom Mission 4. **(250 words)**

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In his written submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the proposed Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024, former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud has opined that staggered elections are not an immutable feature of the Constitution. His remarks come amid ongoing debate over the feasibility and desirability of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

Staggered polls cannot be considered an immutable feature of Constitution: ex-CJI

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

Conducting free and fair elections is a basic feature of the Constitution, but the Constitution does not say that polls can be free and fair only if they are held non-simultaneously, former Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud has opined, according to sources, in his written submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee reviewing the proposed legislation aiming to introduce simultaneous elections.

Justice Chandrachud, who served as the CJI from November 2022 to November 2024, will present his views to the panel on July 11. Justice J.S. Kehar, who served as CJI between January and August 2017, has

Former CJI D.Y. Chandrachud will present his views on simultaneous elections to a Parliamentary Joint Committee on July 11. PTI

also been invited by the panel, which is reviewing the Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024.

Their predecessors who had met the panel earlier had pointed out several infirmities in the legislation,

according to sources.

Justice Chandrachud, as per sources, has dismissed the contention that holding simultaneous elections would blur the distinction between different tiers of government, since voters may prioritise national issues over regional concerns if the election cycles are synchronised. This ar-

gument, he said, is based on the assumption that the Indian electorate is "naive" and can be easily "manipulated". This contention, he has argued, flies in the face of the universal adult franchise which has been part of the Constitution since its inception.

He further said in his submission, as per sources, that "staggered elections cannot be considered as a feature of the original Constitution, let alone an immutable feature."

According to sources, he has also referred to the concern that simultaneous elections could marginalise smaller parties or regional parties. But this problem, he said, exists independent and irrespective of the simultaneous election legislation.

Key Highlights of the Submission:

1. **Free and Fair Elections – A Basic Feature, Not Staggered Polls:**

- o Justice Chandrachud reaffirmed that free and fair elections are a basic feature of the Constitution, but clarified that non-simultaneity (holding polls at different times) is not a constitutional requirement.
- o He argued that there is no textual or structural basis in the Constitution that mandates elections must be staggered to ensure fairness.

2. **Electoral Maturity of the Voters:**
   - o He dismissed the concern that simultaneous polls would blur the distinction between national and regional issues.
   - o To assume voters cannot differentiate between different levels of government is to undermine the maturity of the Indian electorate, which has consistently exercised universal adult franchise since independence.

3. **Not an Original or Immutable Constitutional Feature:**
   - o Justice Chandrachud stated that staggered elections were not envisaged as a core or unchangeable part of the Constitution.
   - o The current staggered cycle is largely a consequence of political developments (e.g., premature dissolutions of assemblies) rather than deliberate constitutional design.

4. **Impact on Smaller or Regional Parties:**
   - o Concerns have been raised that simultaneous polls might marginalise regional or smaller parties.
   - o He countered that this challenge exists irrespective of the electoral timing, and therefore cannot be an argument against the proposal per se.

Significance of the Viewpoint:

- **Balanced Constitutional Interpretation:**
  - o The former CJI's opinion provides a nuanced and constitutionalist perspective, balancing electoral integrity with practical governance considerations.
- Strengthens Legal Basis for Simultaneous Elections:
  - o His views offer intellectual and legal weight in favour of the idea that simultaneous elections do not violate the Constitution's basic structure, clearing a key hurdle for legislative reform.
- **Democratic Confidence in the Electorate:**
  - o Upholds the dignity and rational judgment of voters, reinforcing that democracy functions through an informed and capable electorate, not a manipulated one.

Challenges Still Ahead:

- **Logistical and Administrative Complexity:**
  - o Conducting simultaneous elections across a vast and diverse nation will require major institutional restructuring, synchronization of terms, and constitutional amendments.

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opp. to Genius Grammar School, Chaitanyapuri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500060
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- **Political Consensus:**
  - o The success of such a reform hinges on broad political agreement, which remains elusive given opposition from regional parties fearing loss of distinct identity.

Conclusion:

Justice D.Y. Chandrachud's articulation reopens the debate on One Nation, One Election with constitutional clarity. While logistical and political challenges remain, his assertion that staggered elections are not sacrosanct paves the way for serious legal and parliamentary engagement with the idea. For UPSC aspirants, this reinforces the need to critically evaluate constitutional flexibility, electoral reforms, and the evolving relationship between law and democratic practice.

UPSCMainsPractice Question

Ques: "Simultaneous elections can bring administrative efficiency but raise concerns about democratic representation." In light of recent expert opinions, critically examine the constitutional and political implications of holding simultaneous elections in India.(250 Words)

At the third Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) held in Bangkok, governments from across Asia and the Pacific committed to achieving universal registration of births and deaths by 2030. This follows a decade-long initiative under the "CRVS Decade" (2014–2024) led by UNESCAP, which saw significant progress but left gaps in universal coverage.

At Bangkok event, a commitment to count every birth and death

Governments across Asia and the Pacific decide to ensure registration of all vital events of the population by 2030; an estimated 14 million children in the region still do not have their births registered by their first birthday and every year, an approximate 6.9 million deaths go unrecorded

Ramya Kannan

Governments across Asia and the Pacific, on Thursday, signed off on a landmark decision to ensure that all births are registered and all deaths are recorded by 2030, at the third Ministerial conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics for Asia and the Pacific, in Bangkok, Thailand. This is expected to bring the vision of universal, inclusive and resilient CRVS systems a step closer to reality.

The United Nations defines civil registration and vital statistics as the "continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events of the population in accordance with the law".

What are the vital events?
These vital events include births, deaths and marriages, divorces, besides causes of death. The focus of the nations is on registering births and deaths as a fundamental aspect of a person's legal identity, and besides, grant access to a whole range of life-cycle benefits/functions for any one living in a society. Birth registration grants individuals formal legal recognition, enabling access to essential rights and services, including health services. Death certificates serve as legal proof of death, supporting families with matters such as inheritance, insurance and other administrative processes.

In 2014, the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), launched the "CRVS Decade" to 'Get every one in the picture.' The decadal progress was measured in a review that was then launched as a publication last week.

In her preface to the publication, Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP, wrote: "Importantly, civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems help protect populations in vulnerable situations, as birth and marriage registration can serve as safeguards against child marriage, trafficking and modern slavery by verifying age and identity."

Acknowledging legal identity in good governance and justice, is also target 16.9 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Birth registration has an intergenerational impact, empowering registered mothers to secure legal identity and rights for their children, breaking cycles of invisibility and exclusion.

Earlier, speaking to presspersons, Ms. Alisjahbana said the ID card is the most important part of every one's wallet, and as such it goes beyond a mere document. There have been accelerated actions by many countries that have led to better registration rates in these nations, and the successes have come as a result of collaborative work in the region and learning from each other's work.

As a result, over the past decade, in the countries in the Asia Pacific region, the number of children under five who are unregistered had dropped from 135 million in 2012 to 51 million, a reduction of more than 60%. 29 countries currently have reported over 90% registration of births in a year, and 30 countries have achieved this for death registration. The quality of cause of death reporting has also significantly improved, the ESCAP acknowledged.

However, despite this progress, an estimated 14 million children across the region still do not have their births registered by their first birthday. Every year, an approximate 6.9 million deaths also go unrecorded.

Extension of deadline
Responding to a question on the future of the programme, Ms. Alisjahbana said: "We have been very fortunate in seeing significant progress, and political will and investments in this decade. They have paid off. But there is a lot of work to be done yet, and there is in place a very good momentum to accelerate operations and digitalisation to ensure registration. So the consensus among member nations is to extend it to 2030."

With the chosen decade complete, but 100% registration still not achieved, the Declaration has decided to extend the roadmap to 2030, the end of the decade, with people at the centre. It calls for inclusive and accessible service delivery, harnessing the power of digital transformation, strengthening legal foundations and building inter-operable data systems. The governments also provided commitments to ensuring gender equity in registration, safeguarding personal data and privacy.

Indian scenario
In India, the Registrar-General and Census Commissioner is responsible for civil registration as well as the production of vital statistics. The Ministry of Health supports the civil registration system providing incentives for registration, manpower and logistics support under the National Health Mission. There is no fee for birth registration within the prescribed period of 21 days, although fees for birth certificates may vary according to State/local body.

The Indian national CRVS coordination mechanism was established in August 2015, while a national CRVS strategy and a comprehensive assessment are still in progress. In 2011, the Office of the Registrar-General identified challenges such as lack of awareness regarding the

> Civil registration and vital statistics systems help protect populations in vulnerable situations, as birth and marriage registration can serve as safeguards against child marriage, trafficking and modern slavery by verifying age and identity
>
> **ARMIDA SALSIAH ALISJAHBANA**
> Under-Secretary-General, UN

need and importance of registration, low priority accorded to the system of civil registration by the States, lack of coordination among the concerned departments and low level of reporting by registration units.

To tackle these issues, several initiatives were launched. Among these measures were developing a software application for online and offline registration of birth and death covering the entire gamut of the civil registration system: registration of events, generation of certificates, and generation of statistical tables and reports. In addition, a new project on data digitisation is being implemented, with the support of UNICEF, to keep old records in easy to retrieve digital form has started. This will help in storage of registers in electronic format and allow easy access to the records.

Digital transformation
Ms. Alisjahbana earlier acknowledged this, in response to a question from *The Hindu*, that India with its strength and leadership in digital transformation has helped a lot with rolling out a CRVS system that can be implemented digitally. Tanja Sejersen, Statistician, ESCAP, who spoke to presspersons, along with Ms. Alishjahbana, said, the use of technology has been super helpful in certain countries in advancing the principle of registration, but in other countries, could be a stumbling block. There has been, since the launch of the decade of CRVS, a broader push for linking digital transformation. India's representative at the Ministerial conference, Nityanand Rai,

Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs, said the country has embarked on a citizen-centric activities that will make universal registration possible across the country. The registration of births and deaths is mandatory under the Registration of Births and Deaths (RBD) Act, 1969, and amendments to it, have made possible digital registration of births and deaths and the recognition of electronic documents that can be stored safely and securely in the Digilocker by all, obviating the need for presenting hard copies of documents.

In India, legal provisions now cover the registration of adopted, orphaned, abandoned, surrendered, and surrogate children, along with children of single parents or unmarried mothers. It has been made mandatory for medical institutions to provide cause of death certificates to the Registrar. He added that a new central CRVS portal had been launched too. As a result of these proactive policies, the registration of births had increased from just over 86% at the beginning of the CRVS decade to over 96% in India, he said.

Children participants at the Ministerial conference made a strong pitch for ensuring registration for all children irrespective of the many variables that may make it difficult for their parents to register their births. "Bureaucracy shouldn't be the reason we remain invisible," they said.

As the conference wound to a conclusion, the nations' commitments seemed solid. If commitments count, then strident steps had already been made towards achieving universal registration in the Asia and Pacific region. The words of Siromi Turaga, Minister for Justice and Acting Attorney General, Fiji, during his address at the Ministerial event, must go home though, to every nation: "The progress of the decade was only possible because of shared commitment in the region. As we look ahead to 2030...together we can ensure that every person in our region is seen heard and counted."

(This reporter was at Bangkok at the invitation of UN-ESCAP)
(ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)

Planning ahead: The third Ministerial conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics for Asia and the Pacific was held in Bangkok, Thailand. X/@UNESCAP

Key Highlights of the Conference:

1. **Renewed Commitment:**
   - The declaration extends the CRVS initiative to 2030, aiming for 100% birth and death registration.
   - Focus on building inclusive, digital, and interoperable CRVS systems.
   - Prioritises gender equity, data privacy, and legal empowerment through registration.

2. **Current Gaps:**
   - Despite progress, 14 million children remain unregistered by age one.
   - 6.9 million deaths go unrecorded annually across the region.
   - Only 29 countries have achieved over 90% birth registration, and 30 countries for deaths.

3. **Broader Importance of CRVS:**
   - Birth registration is a gateway to legal identity, essential for accessing rights, healthcare, education, and social benefits.
   - Death registration ensures legal closure, access to inheritance, insurance, and vital public health statistics.
   - CRVS also acts as a safeguard against child marriage, trafficking, and slavery by verifying identity and age.

4. **Link to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):**
   - Directly relates to SDG Target 16.9: Legal identity for all, including birth registration.
   - Also linked to other goals related to public health, education, and social protection.

India's Progress and Role:

1. **Achievements:**
   - India has increased birth registration from 86% to over 96% during the CRVS decade.
   - Death registration and cause-of-death documentation also improved due to legal mandates and digitisation.

2. **Policy and Legal Framework:**
   - Governed by the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969, recently amended to allow electronic documentation and Digilocker storage.
   - Online and offline software applications have been developed for seamless registration and data integration.
   - Legal provisions now cover complex cases—adoption, surrogacy, orphaned and abandoned children, and single parents.

3. **Challenges Identified:**
   - Lack of public awareness, inadequate state-level prioritisation, poor inter-departmental coordination, and infrastructure deficits.
   - Need for real-time data systems, privacy protections, and local-level capacity building.

4. **Digital Leadership:**
   o India's digital ecosystem (Aadhaar, Digilocker, CRVS portal) is being recognised as a model for scalable, citizen-centric digital CRVS systems in the region.

Regional and Global Significance:

- This initiative represents a major intergovernmental consensus on human rights, identity, and data justice.
- Strong emphasis on technology-enabled governance and interoperability across departments and borders.
- Reinforces the human-centric approach to development, especially for marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Conclusion:

The Bangkok conference marks a critical reaffirmation of political will toward building inclusive, resilient, and people-centred CRVS systems by 2030. For India, it is both a moment of recognition and a call for deeper action — particularly in data accuracy, last-mile delivery, and privacy safeguards. As the region moves forward, shared learning and digital innovation will be key to ensuring that every individual is seen, heard, and counted.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) is central to inclusive development and legal empowerment." Discuss in the context of India's progress and the Asia-Pacific regional efforts.**(250 Words)**

Tirumal Classes
Quality education

THE HINDU
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Daily News Analysis

Page : 10: GS 1 : Art & Culture

The transfer of archaeologist K. Amarnath Ramakrishna and the Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) directive to revise his report on the Keeladi excavations has reignited a political and cultural debate. Keeladi, a Sangam-era urban settlement in Tamil Nadu, has become a symbol of Tamil pride and ancient civilisational identity. The controversy revolves around the scientific credibility, heritage recognition, and perceived political motives behind the ASI's actions.

What sparked the Keeladi controversy?

What was the dispute between the archaeologist and the ASI? Why did the ASI ask for a rewrite of the Keeladi report? Why did political parties react strongly to the decision? How did the public and historians respond to the findings?

EXPLAINER

D. Suresh Kumar

The story so far:

On June 17, archaeologist K. Amarnath Ramakrishna, whose excavation at Keeladi in Tamil Nadu drew the nation's attention, was transferred yet again, this time from New Delhi to Greater Noida. Mr. Ramakrishna, who was serving as the Director (Antiquity) and as Director of the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA), will now be the Director of the NMMA only. The NMMA unit, set up in 2007, according to sources, remains almost defunct. Over two years after Mr. Ramakrishna submitted his 982-page report on the first two phases of excavations carried out at Keeladi between 2014 and 2016, a fresh controversy erupted last month. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) mandated that he revise his report, but he refused to do it. This disagreement sparked a political clash between the Centre and Tamil Nadu.

How did Keeladi excavation begin?
Keeladi has become a symbol of pride for many in Tamil Nadu. Over a decade ago, Amarnath Ramakrishna, then the ASI's Superintending Archaeologist, had initiated excavations at a site known as the Pallichanthai Tidal in Keeladi, originally a coconut grove spanning 100 acres. He had identified over 100 sites for excavation along the Vaigai River, but Keeladi stood out.

It was in Keeladi that they unearthed over 7,500 ancient artifacts, including wall structures, drainage systems, and wells – all evidence of a sophisticated urban society that thrived. What was even more compelling was the carbon dating, which revealed that these elements are over 2,160 years old, dating back to the 2nd century BCE, which is the time of the Sangam period in Tamil history.

K. Amarnath Ramakrishna at the Keeladi excavation site. FILE PHOTO

What made the findings significant?
Archaeologists were stunned by a few findings. Most importantly, there was no evidence of religious symbols at the excavation site, which hinted at the secular nature of the civilisation.

So, naturally, the excitement around Keeladi's discoveries was palpable. Tamil historians and enthusiasts saw it as proof of an advanced ancient Tamil civilisation, but soon after, things took a sharp turn.

What did political critics accuse the Centre of doing?
It all began in 2017, when the ASI transferred Mr. Ramakrishna to Assam just as the excavations were ramping up after the first two phases. Back then, political critics accused the Centre of deliberately derailing the excavations. It is because the Centre that had promised funding and support for further digs delayed both after the second phase.

The local political climate grew tense with some alleging that the Centre was trying to suppress Tamil heritage. By 2017, the excavations had entered its third phase, this time, under archaeologist P.S. Sriraman. After excavating just around 400 square meters, he reported a lack of continuity in the brick structures previously discovered.

Did State's findings resolve the issue?
The Madras High Court stepped in, with judges visiting the excavation site. The court then directed the ASI to continue the excavations and allowed the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology to get involved. The department, in 2019, published a report asserting that Keeladi was an urban settlement dating back to the Sangam era between the 6th century BCE and the 1st century CE.

Since the third phase, the State Archaeology Department has continued the project, but these findings have not helped resolve the issue; instead, the drama has escalated. In January 2023, Mr. Ramakrishna, who was transferred back to Tamil Nadu, submitted his report on the first two phases of excavation.

What did the ASI ask Ramakrishna to do with the report?
For about two-and-a-half years, this report remained with the ASI, and just last month, the ASI sent Mr. Ramakrishna a letter to revise the report. The ASI questioned the dating and depth of certain findings, suggesting the evidence for the earliest period, as it "appeared to be very early," and said it needed further analysis. Mr. Ramakrishna, however, stood firm and refused to rewrite his conclusions, defending his work as scientifically sound, based on rigorous archaeological standards. He argued that the report's chronology was backed by stratigraphic sequences, material culture and even Accelerator Mass Spectrometry.

Why did the ASI's decision spark political outrage?
Against this backdrop, many political parties in Tamil Nadu have slammed the ASI's decision. They have termed it a blatant attempt to suppress Tamil heritage. They argued that the Centre's refusal to acknowledge Keeladi's significance was not just about science but also about politics. Amid the backlash, the Union Minister for Culture, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, said Mr. Ramakrishna's findings were not technically well-supported and further scientific studies were required to validate the findings. He sought more results, data, and evidence because he said a single finding cannot change the entire discourse.

Why did AIADMK stay silent initially?
Interestingly, the AIADMK, which was in power when the Keeladi report was published, remained silent for a long time on the current controversy. However, on June 18, senior leader R.B. Udhayakumar contended that the Centre had sought more information by way of ensuring "additional corroboration." He also said, "if the Keeladi report is rejected, the AIADMK will be the first party to express its voice of protest."

The controversy is not just about one report or one excavation; it is a clash of narratives. The Centre insists on scientific validation while Tamil Nadu views it as a matter of historical recognition. The State government is pressing on with its excavations, which are under way, and it has already set up a new museum at Keeladi, drawing thousands of visitors.

THE GIST

▼ Archaeologist Amarnath Ramakrishna's transfer from New Delhi to Greater Noida and the ASI's demand to revise his 982-page Keeladi excavation report sparked renewed controversy.

▼ The ASI questioned the dating and depth of the findings, but Ramakrishna defended his conclusions as scientifically sound, citing stratigraphy and Accelerator Mass Spectrometry.

▼ The move drew political outrage in Tamil Nadu, with parties accusing the Centre of suppressing Tamil heritage, turning Keeladi into a flashpoint between science, politics, and identity.

What Sparked the Controversy:

Tirumal Classes
Geetha Hospital, Street No:5, Chaitanyapuri Main Rd, above Dmart Pick-up Point, opp. to Genius Grammar School, Chaitanyapuri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500060
Contact:- 082477 38641   Website:- www.tirumalclassesiasinstitute.com

1. **Excavation and Significance:**
   - Keeladi, near the Vaigai River, revealed over 7,500 artifacts, including urban infrastructure (drainage systems, brick structures) dating back to the 2nd century BCE.
   - Carbon dating placed the findings within the Sangam period, challenging the long-held belief that advanced urban life in India was mostly northern and Indo-Aryan in origin.

2. **Lack of Religious Symbols:**
   - Absence of temples or iconography suggested a secular society, raising new interpretations about early Tamil culture and polity.

Points of Conflict:

1. **ASI's Opposition:**
   - ASI questioned the chronology and interpretation of findings in Mr. Ramakrishna's 982-page report, asking for revisions.
   - The delay and eventual demand for a rewrite were seen as attempts to undermine the site's significance, leading to public and political outcry.

2. **Ramakrishna's Resistance:**
   - He defended his report as scientifically valid, based on stratigraphy, cultural layers, and AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometry) dating techniques.
   - Refused to revise under pressure, viewing it as a matter of academic and professional integrity.

Political Dimensions:

1. **Centre-State Clash:**
   - Tamil Nadu political parties (especially DMK and others) accused the Centre of cultural suppression, alleging bias against Dravidian heritage.
   - The AIADMK, though initially silent, later hinted at defending the findings if the Centre rejected them outright.

2. **Union Government's Position:**
   - Claimed more evidence and corroboration were needed to revise historical narratives.
   - Culture Minister argued that scientific validation, not regional sentiment, should guide acceptance of such findings.

Public and Scholarly Response:

- Historians and civil society groups expressed concern over bureaucratic interference in archaeological science.

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- Keeladi became a symbol of Tamil identity, leading to mass support for the excavations and the creation of a museum.
- The issue became a touchpoint of cultural federalism, where the State asserts its heritage against perceived central neglect.

Governance and Ethical Issues:

- Raises questions about the autonomy of academic institutions, freedom of inquiry, and the role of evidence vs ideology in historical reconstruction.
- Reflects the challenge in balancing regional identity with national historical narratives.

Conclusion:

The Keeladi controversy is not just about archaeological findings — it represents a deeper contest over history, identity, and authority. While scientific rigour is essential, undermining legitimate research without transparent review processes damages institutional credibility. For the UPSC aspirant, it offers insight into Centre-State relations, cultural policy, and the politicisation of history — all of which are key themes in Indian governance and society.

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UPSC MainsPractice Question

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Ques:"The Keeladi excavations highlight the challenges of reconciling scientific inquiry with political and cultural narratives." Discuss in the context of heritage management and Centre-State dynamics in India. **(250 words)**

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis

Fathoming America's plan to manage AI proliferation

The announcement by the United States of the rescission of its Framework for AI Diffusion, a set of export controls for Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology announced earlier this year, has been viewed as a good thing. The Framework was considered counterproductive to AI technology development and diplomatic relations. However, recent developments suggest that controls on AI are likely to persist, albeit in different forms.

A flawed blueprint

Earlier this year, during the final week of its tenure, the Joe Biden administration announced the AI Diffusion Framework. Combining export controls and export licences for AI chips and model weights, it effectively viewed AI like nuclear weapons. Under the proposed framework, countries such as China and Russia were embargoed, trusted allies were favoured, and others restricted in their access to advanced AI technology. The rationale for these rules was that computational power dictates AI capabilities: the greater the compute, the better the AI. In the last decade, the compute used in advanced AI models has nearly doubled every 10 months. Following this logic, for the U.S. to preserve its lead, it needed to prevent adversaries from acquiring powerful compute while ensuring that AI development stays within the U.S. and its close allies.

While export controls on AI hardware predated the framework, they were not sweeping. The Framework aimed to tighten these controls and establish a predictable system to streamline regulatory processes and standardise conditions. However, imposing such sweeping restrictions, affecting adversaries and partners alike, brought many unintended effects, proving counterproductive.

The framework set a concerning precedent for technology cooperation with the U.S., especially for its allies. It signalled U.S. willingness to dictate how other nations conducted their affairs,

Rijesh Panicker

is a Fellow at the Takshashila Institution

Bharath Reddy

is an Associate Fellow at the Takshashila Institution

Ashwin Prasad

is a Research Analyst at the Takshashila Institution

The rescission of the AI Diffusion Framework appears to be more a change in tactics than a fundamental shift in strategy

incentivising them to hedge against U.S. actions. Consequently, U.S. allies had reasons to invest in alternatives to the U.S. ecosystem, pursuing their own strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty.

Additionally, the framework would treat AI, a civilian technology with military applications, as if it were a military technology with civilian uses. Unlike nuclear technology, AI innovation is inherently civilian in its origins and international in scope. Confining the development geographically within the U.S. could prove counterproductive.

Finally, the system created an enduring incentive for the global scientific ecosystem to develop pathways to circumvent the need for powerful compute to make powerful AI, thereby undermining the very lever that the U.S. sought to employ. China's DeepSeek R1 exemplifies this. Years of export controls spurred algorithmic and architectural breakthroughs, enabling DeepSeek to rival the best AI models from the U.S. with a fraction of the compute. Such trends can make export controls on AI chips an ineffective policy instrument.

It is for these reasons that the Trump administration revoked the AI Diffusion Framework. This is welcome news for India, which was not favourably placed under the framework. However, the underlying U.S. thinking and approach towards AI diffusion will likely persist, manifesting in other forms. The AI technology race is still on, and the U.S. intent to restrict Chinese access to AI chips still endures.

The possible replacement

Notwithstanding the rescinded Framework, the current U.S. administration has taken firm steps toward further preventing Chinese access to AI chips. For instance, in March 2025, the administration expanded the scope of the existing export controls and added several companies to its entity list (blacklist). It has also released several new guidelines to strengthen the

enforcement of these controls.

New provisions are reportedly under consideration, such as on-chip features to monitor and restrict the usage of AI chips. These could include rules at the hardware level limiting chip functionality or restricting certain use cases. Recently, U.S. lawmakers introduced new legislation mandating built-in location tracking for AI chips to prevent their illicit diversion into China, Russia and other countries of concern. In effect, these measures seek to enforce the goals of the AI diffusion framework technologically rather than through trade restrictions.

The related concerns

Such measures are problematic in their own way. New concerns related to ownership, privacy and surveillance will proliferate. While malicious actors might be sufficiently motivated to circumvent these controls, legitimate and beneficial use by others could be inadvertently discouraged. Such developments undermine user autonomy and lead to trust deficits. Just like the old framework, this will lead to concerns about losing strategic autonomy for any nation buying AI chips. Yet again, both adversaries and allies will feel compelled to hedge against their reliance on the U.S. AI ecosystem and invest in alternatives.

The rescission of the AI Diffusion Framework represents a notable policy reversal. Yet, it appears to be more a change in tactics than a fundamental shift in the U.S. strategy to manage AI proliferation. Should these technologically-driven control measures gain traction in U.S. policy discourse and be implemented, they risk replicating the negative consequences of the original AI Diffusion Framework. Ultimately, should this path be pursued, it would indicate that the crucial lessons from the Framework and its eventual withdrawal have not been fully assimilated, potentially jeopardising the very U.S. leadership in AI it ostensibly seeks to protect.

Paper 03: Science & Technology

UPSC Mains Practice Question: The U.S. rollback of the AI Diffusion Framework is a tactical shift, not a strategic change. Examine this statement in light of global technological governance and India's AI diplomacy. (250 words)

Context :

The United States has officially rescinded its AI Diffusion Framework, a policy that sought to control the global spread of advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, especially toward adversarial nations like China and Russia. Although this withdrawal appears to be a softening of U.S. policy, deeper analysis reveals that restrictive measures will likely persist, albeit in more technologically embedded forms rather than overt trade controls.

Background of the Framework:

- The AI Diffusion Framework was introduced by the Biden administration to create an export control regime for AI chips and model weights, treating them similarly to military-grade or nuclear technologies.
- It aimed to restrict AI compute power from reaching adversaries and to consolidate technological leadership within the U.S. and allied nations.
- However, the framework faced backlash for being overly broad, counterproductive, and diplomatically damaging — even among allies.

Key Issues and Criticisms:

1. **Strategic Overreach:**
   o The framework signalled that the U.S. was willing to dictate the terms of technology use globally, causing discomfort among both partners and adversaries.
   o This undermined trust and encouraged strategic autonomy efforts by other nations.
2. **Mischaracterisation of AI:**
   o Treating AI as a military-first technology ignored its largely civilian roots and global innovation networks.
   o The comparison with nuclear technology failed to consider AI's democratised and rapidly evolving nature.
3. **Counterproductive Innovation:**
   o Export controls incentivised actors like China to innovate beyond compute-heavy models.
   o Example: DeepSeek R1, a powerful Chinese model that uses far less computational power, undermining the logic of compute-based restrictions.
4. **Impact on India and the Global South:**
   o India was not favourably placed under the framework, risking restricted access to AI tools and chips despite being a democratic ally.
   o Rescinding the framework provides India a greater opportunity to collaborate, but the fundamental strategic barriers remain.

Geetha Hospital, Street No:5, Chaitanyapuri Main Rd, above Dmart Pick-up Point,
opp. to Genius Grammar School, Chaitanyapuri, Hyderabad, Telangana 500060
Contact:- 082477 38641   Website:- www.tirumalclassesiasinstitute.com

The Tactical Shift – Not a Policy Change:

- The Trump administration rescinded the framework, but restrictive measures continue:
    - Expansion of export controls and blacklisting of Chinese firms.
    - Proposed on-chip surveillance features, location tracking, and hardware-based usage restrictions.
    - These moves represent technological enforcement over regulatory or trade-based mechanisms.

Emerging Concerns:

1. **Surveillance and Privacy:**
    - Built-in tracking mechanisms raise concerns over data privacy, sovereignty, and user autonomy.
    - Legitimate users and friendly nations may feel coerced into U.S.-centric standards, triggering a trust deficit.
2. **Geopolitical Hedging:**
    - Countries may seek to reduce dependency on U.S. AI infrastructure, investing in indigenous or alternative ecosystems (e.g., EU AI strategy, India's BharatGPT, China's AI regulations).
3. **Scientific Fragmentation:**
    - International collaboration in AI research may suffer as scientific openness gives way to techno-nationalism.

Implications for India:

- **Opportunities:**
    - With the framework revoked, India has room to strengthen bilateral AI partnerships and advocate for balanced global AI governance.
    - It can push for frameworks that preserve access, ethics, and innovation simultaneously.
- **Challenges:**
    - India must invest in indigenous AI hardware and infrastructure to avoid future dependence.
    - Strategic diplomacy will be required to balance relations with the U.S. while maintaining technological sovereignty.

Conclusion:

The rollback of the AI Diffusion Framework appears promising, but it is more of a tactical recalibration than a change in strategic thinking. The U.S. is likely to continue pursuing AI leadership by embedding control mechanisms into technology itself. For global players like India, this underscores the need for strategic

autonomy, proactive diplomacy, and investments in homegrown AI innovation. Managing AI proliferation requires a balanced, cooperative global framework, not one driven by unilateral restrictions and surveillance.