

INSTC Sees First Russian Coal Trains Bound for India

Russia has sent two trains laden with coal to India via the eastern branch of **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** for the first time, as per reports.

- Trains will bring coal to **Bandar Abbas** Port of Iran.

About INSTC

- A 7,200-km **multimodal transportation network**, links **Indian Ocean** to **North Europe** via Iran and Russia's Saint Petersburg.
- **Objective:** To enhance trade and transport connectivity among countries along its route.
- Envisaged in 2000 by **Iran, Russia and India**.
 - ⊕ Currently, **13 countries** are its members such as Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc.
 - ⊕ **Bulgaria** has joined as an Observer State.
- Consists of the 3 corridors, namely, Central, Western and Eastern.

Why INSTC is important for India?

- **Enhance Connectivity to Central Asia:** Provides greater ease and more cost-effective transport facilities.
- Provide an **alternative route** to the **Suez Canal** trade route.
 - ⊕ Reduces transit times to around **25 days** from the usual **45 days** via the Suez Canal route and reduced **freight costs by 30%**.
- **Energy Security:** INSTC bypass vulnerable choke points like the **Red Sea** and **Strait of Hormuz**.
 - ⊕ Also, enhances access to energy-rich Central Asia, Arctic, Nordic and Baltic region.
- **Other:** Counters **China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, etc.



Russian Satellite breaks up in Space, adds space debris into orbit

The defunct **RESURS-P1 Russian Earth observation satellite** has broken up into pieces, adding to the mass of space debris in orbit.

About Space Debris (Space Junk)

- Defined as all non-functional, artificial objects, including fragments and elements thereof, in Earth orbit or re-entering into Earth's atmosphere.
 - ⊕ **Maximum debris concentrations** can be noted at altitudes of 800-1000 km, and near 1400 km (mainly in **Lower Earth Orbits (LEO)**).
- **Key Sources:** Majority of debris objects originate from on-orbit break-ups as well as on-orbit collisions.
 - ⊕ Space debris also originates from spent rocket stages, and use of space-based weapons (such as **Anti-satellite missile**).

Risks associated with Space Debris

- **Operational risks:** Space debris objects can cause harm to operational spacecrafts and satellites.
 - ⊕ Risk will be further aggravated by the **Kessler syndrome**.
 - ◆ **Kessler syndrome** is a phenomenon in which the **density of objects in the LEO grows leads to collision**, triggering a chain reaction that generates more space debris and further collisions.
- **Threat to astronauts' lives:** Due to rate of speed and volume of debris in LEO, poses threat to astronauts living in **International Space Station (ISS)**.
- **Rising cost of maintaining satellites in Space:** Space agencies have to undertake **Collision Avoidance Manoeuvres (CAMs)**.

Initiatives Taken

Global

- **Inter-Agency Debris Coordination Committee (IADC)**, established in 1993
- **UN Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines**, Prepared by UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UN-COPUOS)
- **Zero Debris Charter:** Signed by 12 countries - Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, etc.

India

- Debris Free Space Missions (DFSM) 2030
- ISRO System for Safe and Sustainable Operations Management (IS4OM)
- Established Space Situational Awareness Control Centre (SSACC)
- Project Network for Space Object Tracking and Analysis (NETRA)

FATF adopts Mutual Evaluation Report (MER) of India

It assessed the **effectiveness of India's measures** to Combat Money Laundering (ML), Terrorist Financing (TF) and proliferation financing.

- The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) places India in the **'regular follow-up' category**, a distinction shared by **only four other G20 countries**.
- FATF is an **intergovernmental organisation** established in 1989 by G7 to examine and develop measures to combat ML.
 - ⊖ India became a member of FATF in 2010

About Money laundering

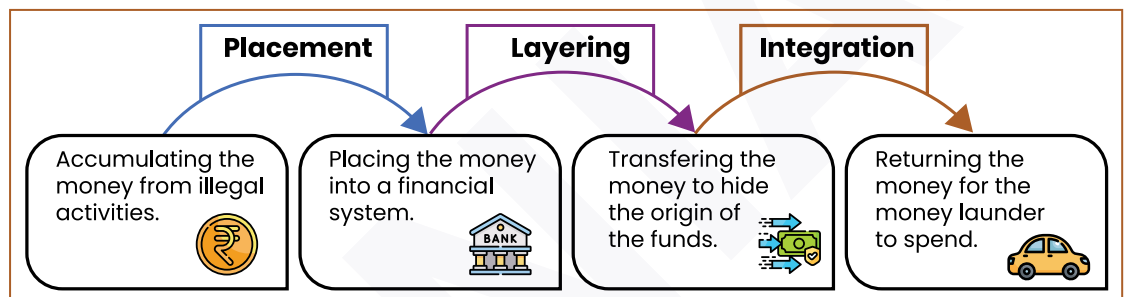
It is the processing of criminal proceeds to **disguise their illegal origin**. It involves three stages-**Placement, Layering, and Integration** (refer to infographic).

Key Achievements of India's MER

- **Mitigation of Risks** arising from ML/TF, and from the proceeds of laundering such as corruption, fraud, and organized crime.
- Transition from a **cash-based to a digital economy**.
- **JAM Trinity (Jan Dhan, Aadhaar, Mobile)** leading to significant increase in financial inclusion and digital transactions thereby making transactions more traceable.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the supervision and implementation of **preventive measures in non-financial sectors**.
- Address delays relating to **concluding ML and TF prosecutions**.
- Measures aimed at **preventing the non-profit sector from being abused for TF** should be based on risk based approach.



Process to re-constitute parliamentary committees started

Motions in the Lok Sabha were moved to constitute the **Public Accounts Committee (PAC)** and **Estimate Committee (EC)**.

- These committees are part of the **financial committees of the Parliament**.

About Parliamentary committees

- **These are of two kinds:** Ad hoc Committees and the Standing Committees.
- **Ad hoc Committees:** These are appointed for a specific purpose and cease to exist when they finish the task assigned to them.
- **Standing Committees:** These are permanent and regular committees which are constituted from time to time.
 - ⊖ The **Financial Committees, Departmentally Related Standing Committees (DRSC)**, and some other **Committees like Committees on Subordinate legislation** come under it.

Significance of Parliamentary committees

- Acts as **Parliament's watchdog over the executive**.
- Provide a forum for **building consensus across political parties**.
- **Help in scrutinization of the bill** properly before it is passed.
- Provide **technical expertise to parliament** to understand complex matters.

Public Accounts Committee

- First set up in 1921 in the wake of the **Montague-Chelmsford Reforms**.
- Consists of not more than **22 members (15 members from Lok Sabha and 7 from Rajya Sabha)**.
- Function: auditing the revenue and the expenditure of the Government of India.

About Estimate committee

- Constituted for the **first time in 1950** and consists of **30 members from Lok Sabha**.
- **Functions:** to suggest **alternative policies to bring about efficiency** in administration.
 - ⊖ To examine whether the **money is well laid out within the limits** of the policy implied in the estimates, etc.

Challenges: few bills are referred, lack of attendance of MPs in Committee meetings, do not have full-time technical expert support, poor number of sittings, etc.

RBI reviews Ways and Means Advances Scheme of State Governments/ UTs

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has increased the **Ways and Means Advance (WMA) limit** of States/UT to Rs 60,118 crore from existing Rs 47,010 crore.

- This will enable States/UTs to better manage their **fiscal situation**.
- Apart from WMA, **Special Drawing Facility (SDF)**, and **Overdraft (OD) facility** are important financial accommodation instruments availed by States/UTs.
 - ⊕ These instruments are governed under the **RBI Act, 1934**.

About Ways and Means Advance (WMA)

- **Advances to States/UTs provided by RBI to meet temporary mismatches in the cash flows** of receipts and payments.
 - ⊕ Facility is also available for the Union Government.
- **Types: Normal WMA and Special WMA** {now known as **Special Drawing Facility (SDF)**}
 - ⊕ First, a state/UT is provided with a **special WMA** and after its exhaustion, it gets a normal WMA.
 - ⊕ Special WMA has lower interest rate than Normal WMA
- Interest rates are linked to **Repo rate**.

About Special Drawing Facility (SDF)

- Availed by State against the collateral of **Consolidated Sinking Fund (CSF), Guarantee Redemption Fund (GRF), Auction Treasury Bills (ATBs)**, etc.
 - ⊕ CSF and GRF are reserve funds maintained by some State with the RBI.

About Overdraft Facility

- Facility is provided **whenever financial accommodation to a State exceeds its SDF and WMA limits**.
- Generally, State Governments/UTs can avail overdraft on 14 consecutive days (relaxation can be provided by RBI).

Decline in the Share of Imported Coal over the Last Decade

As per Ministry of Coal, Compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of **imported coal share fell from 13.94% (2004-05 to 2013-14) to -2.29% (2014-15 to 2023-24)**.

- Under **Open General Licence**: Coal can be freely imported by the consumers themselves considering their needs based on their commercial consideration.

Measures taken to reduce coal import

- **Amendment of Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957**: to allow captive mines to sell up to 50% of their annual production.
- **Foreign Direct Investment(FDI)**: 100% FDI allowed for commercial mining.
- **Coal Area Expansion**: Taking up new projects and expansion of existing projects, auction of coal blocks to private companies/PSUs, etc.
- **Single Window Clearance portal**: for the coal sector to speed up the operationalization of coal mines.

Challenges of Coal Mining

- **Non availability of domestic production** of high grade coals like coking coal, anthracite and low ash thermal coal, etc in India.
- **Non-Payment of commensurate Coal value** along with huge outstanding dues by Power Sector consumers.
- **Un-seasonal and extended Rainfall** in the coal bearing areas.

About Coal Sector in India

- **Fifth-largest** coal reserves in the world and stands as the **second-largest consumer of coal**.
- All India Production of coal during **2023-24** was **997.25 MT**.
- Occurs in rock sequences mainly of two geological ages, namely **Gondwana and tertiary deposits**.
 - ⊕ **About 80 percent** of the coal deposits in India is of bituminous type and is of non-coking grade.
 - ⊕ **Over 97 percent** of coal reserves occur in the valleys of Damodar, Sone, Mahanadi and Godavari.
- **Gevra coal mine of Chhattisgarh became the largest coal mine in 2023.** (Earlier Jharia was the largest coal field)

Also in News



South China Sea

India Shows concern on **unilateral actions to change status quo in South China Sea**.

About South China Sea

- A semi-enclosed sea in the **western Pacific Ocean**.
- The South China Sea and the East China Sea together form the **China Sea**.
- China claims by far the largest portion of territory in an area demarcated by its so-called "**nine-dash line**".

Disputed Islands

- **Paracel Islands**: China has occupied all the Paracel Islands but also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan.
- **Spratly Islands**: Consist of more than 100 small islands or reefs.
 - ⊕ **Claimed by** China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia.
- **Scarborough Shoal**: Claimed by China, Taiwan, and Philippines.



Senna Spectabilis

Kerala Forest dept. joins hands with Kerala Paper Products Limited (KPPL) to eradicate invasive plant **Senna Spectabilis (calceolaria shower)**.

- **Senna Spectabilis** is threat to wildlife habitat in the **Nilgiri biosphere**, including the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS) and other sanctuaries.

About Senna Spectabilis

- Native Species (Fabaceae family) of **Tropical America**.
- Grown as ornamental plant.
- **Key Characteristics**:
 - ⊕ Grows in deep, moist, sandy or loamy soils but flourishes even in poor soils.
 - ⊕ **Tree Type**: Evergreen in climates with rain all year round, but can become deciduous in areas with dry seasons
 - ⊕ Used in **traditional medicine**.



North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

The Dutch Prime Minister will take over as new **secretary general** of NATO.

About NATO

- **Founded:** 1949
- **Headquarters:** Brussels, Belgium
- **Treaty:** North Atlantic Treaty (Washington Treaty)
 - ⊖ **Collective defence** is at the heart of the Treaty.
- It derives its authority from **Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.**
 - ⊖ It reaffirms the inherent **right of independent states to individual or collective defense.**
- **Members:** 32 (Sweden joined in 2024)



Aid-for-Trade Initiative

The World Trade Organization (WTO) released a report titled **Aid for Trade in Action: Supporting the transition to clean energy**, which highlights the Aid-for-Trade Initiative.

About Aid-for-Trade Initiative

- **Led by the WTO**, grew out of the **2005 WTO Hong Kong Ministerial Conference.**
- **Aim:** To help **developing economies integrate** into world trade by mobilizing additional development support to address supply-side capacity and trade-related infrastructure constraints in these economies.
- Seeks to **mobilize financial resources** to address the trade-related constraints identified by developing economies and least-developed countries.



RIMPAC Exercise

The opening ceremony for the 29th edition of the biennial **Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise** was held in Hawaii (USA).

About RIMPAC Exercise

- World's largest international multilateral maritime exercise (India also takes part in it).
- **Aim:** To build relationships, enhance interoperability, contribute to the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."



National Quality Assurance Standards (NQAS) Assessment

Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has launched Virtual NQAS Assessment and **Spot food license initiative** to promote "Healthcare for All".

About Initiatives

- **NQAS Assessment:** It has been launched for Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (AAM) and **Integrated Public Health Laboratories (IPHL).**
 - ⊖ It is launched in compliance with Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS)
 - ◆ **IPHS** is digital platform for **real-time monitoring of public health facilities** that provides a comprehensive overview of the **assessment and compliance status of public health facilities**
- **Spot Food License Initiative:** It is for the **instant issuance of licenses and registrations** through **pan-India IT platform the Food Safety and Compliance System (FoSCoS).**
 - ⊖ It aims to simplify the licensing and registration processes.



AI washing

Recently, Many companies are using **Artificial Intelligence (AI) Washing.**

About AI washing

- AI washing is a term derived from **greenwashing**, where companies exaggerate their environmental friendliness.
- Tech companies and startups **marketing themselves as using AI**, but not doing so is known as 'AI washing'.
- It can misguide investments in **superficial enhancements**, slowing real progress in AI technologies.



Artificial Intelligence Preparedness Index (AIPI)

International Monetary Fund (IMF) Dashboard released the AIPI Dashboard.

- **Singapore** has been placed at 1st position and **India's** at 72nd position.

About AIPI Dashboard

- Tracks 174 economies for AI readiness.
- **Assessment of readiness of countries is based on four key areas:** Digital infrastructure, Human capital and Labour market policies, Innovation and economic integration and Regulation and Ethics
- **Categorization of Countries:** Advanced Economy (AE), Emerging Market Economy (EM), and Low-Income Country (LIC).

Places in News



Togo (Capital: Lomé)

India & Togo have recently reviewed their bilateral relations.

Togo (Capital: Lomé)

- **Political Features:**
 - ⊖ **Location:** Western Africa
 - ⊖ **Land Boundaries:** Ghana (west), Benin (east), and Burkina Faso (north).
 - ⊖ **Water Bodies:** Gulf of Guinea (south)
- **Geographical Features:**
 - ⊖ It is a **narrow strip of land** on Africa's west coast.
 - ⊖ **Highest point:** Mount Agou (Baumann Peak)
 - ⊖ **Major rivers:** Oti river, Mono river
 - ⊖ **Climate:** Tropical climate

