

SAARC VISA EXEMPTION SCHEME (SVES)



- The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme (SVES) was launched in 1992.
- Under the scheme, **certain categories of dignitaries from SAARC countries are issued a special travel document.**
- This special instrument **exempts them from the need for visas and other travelling documents** to travel among these countries.
- **Currently, the list includes 24 categories of entitled persons**, which include **dignitaries, judges of higher courts, parliamentarians, senior officials, businessmen, journalists, sportspersons, etc.**
- Visa stickers are **issued by the respective member states to the entitled categories of that particular country.**
- The **validity** of the visa sticker is generally **for one year.**
- The implementation is **reviewed regularly by the immigration authorities** of SAAR member states.

What is SAARC?

- The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** was established on December 8, 1985.
- SAARC is an **economic and political regional organisation** of countries in **South Asia.**
- The **Secretariat** of the Association was set up in **Kathmandu, Nepal**, in January 1987.
- SAARC has eight member countries — **Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.**
- SAARC aims to accelerate the process of economic and social development in its member states through increased intra-regional cooperation.

COUNTERING INFILTRATION IN JAMMU & KASHMIR - CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

The Terrain and Tactical Challenges:



- **Difficult terrain in Pir Panjal range:**
 - **Dense forests** with poor visibility (less than 100 meters).
 - **Rugged topography** spanning hundreds of kilometres.
- **Ideal hideouts for terrorists**, making search and counter-operations difficult.
- **For example**, Baisaran, 6 km from Pahalgam, is accessible only on foot or by pony.
 - **The meadow** is ringed by the **densely forested Pir Panjal mountains** that stretch far, toward Kokernag and Kishtwar to the south and Balatal and Sonamarg to the north.
- **Security forces at risk:**
 - Over 50 army personnel have been martyred in **counter-terror operations** in areas like Poonch, Rajouri, Kathua, and Doda.
 - Terrorists, often trained in Pakistan, **operate in stealth**, avoid local contact, and use encrypted communication tools.
- **Pakistan-backed infiltration:**
 - Around **60%** of terrorists killed in J&K in 2024 were Pakistani nationals.
 - Source-based reports indicate **three attackers in the Pahalgam** incident were from **Pakistan**.

Counter-Infiltration Measures:

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- **Role of border fencing:**
 - Nearly the **entire** India-Pakistan **border** (including the LoC) is **fenced**.
 - Fencing reduces infiltration but **needs continuous repair and technological upgrades**.
- **Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS):** Introduced post-Pathankot attack (2016), CIBMS uses advanced tech like -
 - Thermal imagers, IR and laser sensors, aerostats,
 - Radars, fibre-optic sensors, sonar for riverine borders.

Border Security During Winters:

- **Weather-induced damage:**
 - One-third of the fence is damaged each winter due to snow up to 15 feet.
 - Repairs take 3–4 months, leading to temporary security gaps.
- **Operational difficulties:**
 - **Inhospitable conditions:** Sub-zero temperatures, fog, and rain affect alertness.
 - **Limited rest for soldiers:** 1 night's sleep in 3 days is common.
 - **Night vision and surveillance devices:** Have limited operating hours and often lack power sources.

The Way Forward:

- **Technological upgradation:**
 - **Develop smart fences** with real-time breach alerts.
 - **Enhance aerial surveillance** and **tunnel detection technology**.
 - Invest in **all-weather surveillance**
- **Infrastructure investment:**
 - Build **weather-resilient fences**.
 - **Ensure power availability** for surveillance equipment.
 - **Bolster manpower training** and **rest-rotation policies** to maintain alertness.

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PAKISTAN SUSPENDS 1972 SIMLA AGREEMENT: STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR INDO-PAK RELATIONS

Understanding the Simla Agreement

- Signed on July 2, 1972, by Indian Prime Minister **Indira Gandhi** and Pakistani President **Zulfikar Ali Bhutto**, the Simla Agreement was a diplomatic response to the 1971 Indo-Pak war, which **led to the creation of Bangladesh**.
- The treaty aimed to restore peace and normalise bilateral relations, establishing key principles for future engagement:
 - **Peaceful Coexistence:** Both nations committed to resolving conflicts bilaterally and refraining from third-party mediation.
 - **Respect for Sovereignty:** Each side was to respect the territorial integrity and political independence of the other.
 - **Non-Interference:** The agreement explicitly prohibited any interference in each other's internal affairs.
 - **Bilateral Negotiation Framework:** Issues such as Kashmir were to be resolved without international intervention.

Key Provisions and Outcomes

- **Line of Control (LoC):**
 - The ceasefire line from the 1971 war was converted into the LoC, a de facto boundary in Jammu and Kashmir. Both nations agreed not to alter this line unilaterally.
- **Return of Captured Territory:**
 - India returned over 13,000 sq. km of Pakistani territory captured during the war, reinforcing its commitment to peace, though strategic areas like Turtuk and Chalunka were retained.
- **Recognition of Bangladesh:**

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- While not part of the agreement directly, it paved the way for Pakistan's eventual diplomatic recognition of Bangladesh.
- **UN Charter Alignment:**
 - The agreement reaffirmed both countries' adherence to the principles of the UN Charter, including peaceful coexistence and abstaining from use of force.

Why Pakistan Suspended the Agreement

- Pakistan's decision appears to be a reaction to India's domestic measures, particularly those concerning Jammu and Kashmir, such as the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019.
- With bilateral engagement stalled and tensions escalating, Islamabad has opted for a symbolic but potentially destabilising move.
- This suspension allows Pakistan to:
 - **Distance itself from the bilateral framework**, possibly to seek third-party intervention.
 - **Reclaim diplomatic leverage by internationalising the Kashmir issue** through forums like the UN or OIC.
 - **Signal strategic recalibration**, especially amidst domestic political and security pressures.

Potential Impact on the Line of Control

- The LoC has historically been volatile, marked by frequent ceasefire violations and infiltration attempts.
- The Simla Agreement, by codifying mutual respect for the LoC, provided a framework to de-escalate tensions. With that framework now in question:
 - **Ceasefire Stability May Erode:** Without a binding commitment, the risk of increased skirmishes and military escalation grows.
 - **Loss of Diplomatic Buffer:** The absence of a shared agreement removes a key diplomatic restraint, potentially inviting brinkmanship.
 - **Greater Global Involvement:** Pakistan may use the suspension to justify third-party mediation, a stance India opposes.

NEW GLOBAL PANDEMIC TREATY

After over three years of negotiations, WHO member states (excluding the United States) have agreed on a draft of a legally binding treaty aimed at improving global preparedness and response to future pandemics.

This treaty, set to be ratified at the World Health Assembly in May, marks only the second legally binding accord in WHO's history—the first being the 2003 tobacco control treaty.

Key Provisions of the Pandemic Treaty

- **Pathogen Access and Benefit Sharing**
 - The treaty introduces a system where pharmaceutical companies gain access to scientific data—like pathogen samples and genomic sequences—in exchange for a commitment to equitably share the resulting vaccines, drugs, and diagnostics during a pandemic.
- **Production Allocation to WHO**
 - Manufacturers participating in the agreement must allocate:
 - 10% of their pandemic-related products (vaccines, therapeutics, diagnostics) to WHO **free of charge**, and
 - An additional 10% at affordable prices.
- **Technology and Knowledge Sharing**
 - Member states are expected to encourage or incentivize the transfer of technology and know-how, enabling developing countries to manufacture their own medical tools during pandemics.
- **Conditions on Publicly Funded Research**
 - Countries must create policies that require any publicly funded research—whether at universities or private companies—to ensure equitable and timely access to resulting treatments or diagnostics during health emergencies.
- **Government Intervention for Public Benefit**

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- The treaty empowers governments to intervene when life-saving medicines, developed using public funds, are unaffordable or inaccessible, ensuring availability for citizens and vulnerable populations worldwide.

Criticism of the Global Pandemic Treaty

- **Limited Authority of the WHO**
 - While the treaty is considered a major step forward, it does not grant the WHO any legal power over individual countries.
 - Clause 24 explicitly states that the WHO cannot direct or change any national laws or policies.
- **No Enforcement Mechanism**
 - The WHO has no power to ensure compliance. In a future crisis, countries could again prioritize national interests—such as hoarding vaccines—without facing consequences.
 - This weakens the treaty's enforceability.
- **Concerns from the Pharmaceutical Industry**
 - Pharma leaders argue that unclear rules around intellectual property and benefit-sharing may discourage investment in high-risk pandemic research.
 - They emphasized the need for legal certainty to maintain innovation and public-private partnerships in future health emergencies.
- **Lack of Clarity in Key Provisions**
 - The “pathogen access and benefit sharing” system—central to the treaty—lacks detailed implementation guidelines, raising concerns about its practicality and effectiveness.
- **Absence of the United States**
 - The U.S., a major player in vaccine and drug production, withdrew from negotiations after Donald Trump's return to power.
 - Its absence significantly weakens the treaty's impact.

INS SURAT



Indian Navy's guided missile destroyer INS Surat successfully test-fired a medium-range surface-to-air missile in the Arabian Sea recently.

- It is the fourth and **final ship of the Project 15B stealth guided missile destroyer class**, popularly known as the **Visakhapatnam class**.
- It ranks among the largest and most sophisticated destroyers in the world.
- It has **75 percent indigenous content** and is equipped with state-of-the-art weapon-sensor packages and advanced network-centric capabilities.
- It was **designed by the Navy's Warship Design Bureau and built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders, Mumbai**.
 - It was **commissioned** into the Indian Navy in **January 2025**.

Features:

- It is the **Indian Navy's first AI (artificial intelligence)-enabled warship**, which will utilise **indigenously developed AI solutions** to enhance its operational efficiency manifold.
- With a displacement of 7,400 tonnes and an overall length of 164 metres, INS Surat is a potent and versatile platform equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and sensors, including **surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship missiles, and torpedoes**.
- It is powered by a **Combined Gas and Gas (COGAG) propulsion set** comprising four gas turbines.
- It has speeds in excess of 30 knots (56 km/h).

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NILGIRI TAHR



- The Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*, former name is *Hemitragus hylocrius*) is an **endangered mountain ungulate endemic** to the **southern part of the Western Ghats**.

- It is also known by the name **Nilgiri Ibex** or simply

Ibex. Locally the animal is called **‘Varayaadu’**.

- It is the **only mountain ungulate in southern India**.
- It is also the **state animal of Tamil Nadu**.

Habitat and Distribution:

- The species is found in a roughly 400 km stretch in the **Western Ghats**, which falls in the states of **Kerala and Tamil Nadu**.
- These tahrs inhabit the **open montane grassland habitat** of the southwestern **ghats montane rain forests**
- At elevations ranging from 1200 to 2600 m, the **jungle opens into grasslands** interspersed with pockets of stunted forests, known as **‘sholas.’**
- The **Eravikulam National Park (Kerala)** has the **highest density and largest surviving population** of Nilgiri tahr.

Features:

- The Nilgiri Tahrs are **stocky goats** with **short, coarse fur** and a **bristly mane**.
- The **males** are found to be **larger than the females**, and have a **darker color** when mature.
- **Both sexes have curved horns**, which are larger in the males.
- **Adult males** develop a **light grey area** or **‘saddle’ on their backs** and are hence called **‘saddlebacks’**.

Conservation Status:

- **IUCN Red List: Endangered**
- **Wildlife (Protection) Act of India, 1972: Schedule I**