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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

WARNING SIGNALS FOR INDIA FROM NATO'S ANKARA SUMMIT

- The **2026 Ankara Summit** marked a major turning point in the evolution of the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**.
- Amid the **Russia-Ukraine War**, growing **China-Russia strategic cooperation**, and rising global security challenges, NATO shifted its focus from political commitments to strengthening military capabilities, industrial resilience, and technological superiority.

Major Outcomes of the Ankara Summit

- **Reaffirmation of Collective Defence**
 - NATO members reaffirmed their **Article 5** commitment, reinforcing alliance unity and strengthening deterrence against emerging threats.
- **Historic Defence Spending Commitment**
 - Members reiterated The Hague **Defence Commitment**, pledging to spend **5% of GDP** on defence by **2035**, replacing the earlier 2% benchmark.
 - The increased investment aims to modernise armed forces, improve readiness, and enhance technological capabilities.
- **Building a Strong European Defence Industrial Base**
 - A key priority is creating a technologically advanced **Defence Industrial Base (DIB)** through increased investment, innovation, joint production, and resilient supply chains to sustain long-term military preparedness.

Why Europe Needs Defence Industrial Self-Reliance?

- The Ukraine conflict exposed serious weaknesses in Europe's defence manufacturing.
- Major firms such as **MBDA** and **Rheinmetall** have reported shortages in ammunition and missile production.
- Although European defence spending has increased, nearly **50%** of defence procurement during 2022–24 came from the United States, reflecting continued dependence on American military industries.

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Lessons from Recent Conflicts

- The **extensive use of advanced munitions** in recent conflicts, including the U.S.-Israel campaign against Iran, highlights how quickly missile inventories can be depleted and how difficult they are to replenish.
- The Ukraine war has similarly shown that sustained conflicts require continuous production of missiles, artillery, air defence systems, and precision-guided weapons.

Global Implications

- Higher NATO defence spending is transforming the international arms market from a buyer's market into a **seller's market**.
- Defence manufacturers are likely to prioritise domestic and allied requirements, leading to longer delivery schedules, higher procurement costs, and shortages of critical technologies such as jet engines, missiles, semiconductors, and advanced electronics.

Implications for India

- India, one of the world's largest defence importers, faces increasing supply-chain vulnerabilities.
- Delays in the delivery of **GE F-404 engines** for the **Tejas Light Combat Aircraft** illustrate the risks of dependence on external suppliers.
- To strengthen national security, India must accelerate **Atmanirbhar Bharat** in defence by expanding indigenous manufacturing of **AI, drones, cyber and electronic warfare systems**, missiles, semiconductors, and defence electronics.
- Greater collaboration among **DRDO**, private industry, startups, and academia will be essential for building a resilient defence ecosystem.

Way Forward

- India should diversify defence procurement while strengthening domestic production through **Make in India** and **Atmanirbhar Bharat**.
- Investments in emerging technologies, defence research, ammunition production, resilient supply chains, and defence exports should be prioritised to reduce import dependence and enhance strategic autonomy.

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INDIA'S SHIFT TOWARDS POLYMER CURRENCY - OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND THE ROAD AHEAD

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), through its currency-printing arm Bharatiya Reserve Bank Note Mudran Pvt. Ltd. (BRBNMPL), has invited global Expressions of Interest (EOI) for supplying Biaxially Oriented Polypropylene (BOPP) polymer substrates with advanced security features.

Why is RBI Considering Polymer Currency?

- **Greater durability:**
 - Polymer notes last 2.5–4 times longer than conventional cotton-paper notes.
 - Lower denominations such as ₹10 and ₹20, which experience the highest circulation and physical wear, are likely to be introduced first.
 - Longer lifespan reduces the frequency of replacement under the RBI's **Clean Note Policy**.
- **Better security against counterfeiting:**
 - Polymer banknotes can incorporate advanced security features such as -
 - Transparent windows
 - Metallic numerals
 - Magnetic pseudo-threads
 - Holograms
 - Shadow images
 - Iridescent patterns
 - Durable tactile markings for visually impaired persons
 - These features are significantly harder to replicate than those on paper currency.
- **Improved currency management:** Although manufacturing costs are higher initially, fewer replacement cycles can reduce printing expenditure, transportation costs, storage and logistics costs, and destruction of **soiled** notes.

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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

Unanswered Questions:

- **Dependence on petrochemical imports:**
 - Polymer substrate is made from BOPP (Biaxially Oriented Polypropylene).
 - India **imports** around one-fifth of its polypropylene requirement.
 - Volatility in crude oil prices, aggravated by geopolitical tensions (especially West Asia), could increase manufacturing costs.
 - This is despite planned domestic capacity expansion by companies such as Reliance Industries and Indian Oil Corporation.
- **Relevance in an increasingly digital economy:**
 - India's payment ecosystem presents a paradox - **UPI** processes over 24,000 crore transactions annually, accounting for nearly **85%** of retail digital payments.
 - Yet, currency in circulation has exceeded ₹41 lakh crore (2025–26), compared to around ₹16–17 lakh crore a decade earlier.
 - The **Currency-to-GDP ratio** remains above 11%, indicating sustained demand for cash despite rapid digitalisation.
 - **Reasons for continued cash demand:** Large informal economy, limited digital infrastructure in rural areas, and cash remains essential for financial inclusion and small-value transactions.

Way Forward:

- Begin with **limited** pilot projects in lower denominations before nationwide adoption.
- Encourage **domestic production** of polymer substrates to reduce import dependence.
- Conduct comprehensive cost-benefit and environmental impact assessments (**EIAs**).
- Upgrade ATM and cash-handling infrastructure in a phased manner.
- Ensure **coexistence** of paper and polymer notes during transition without demonetisation.
- **Align** currency reforms with India's broader objectives of Digital India, financial inclusion, and efficient cash management.

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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

FAST-TRACK COURTS IN INDIA: MECHANISM, LEGAL BASIS AND PERFORMANCE GAPS

PM Modi has proposed setting up fast-track courts (FTCs) to try paper leak cases amid ongoing protests. This has renewed focus on whether such courts can genuinely deliver on their promise of speedy justice, given India's persistent judicial backlog.

What Are Fast-Track Courts?

- FTCs are not governed by a single central legislation. Their origin lies in the recommendations of the Fourteenth Finance Commission (2015–2020), which proposed setting up 1,800 FTCs to expedite trials of:
 - Heinous crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and extortion
 - Property disputes pending for over five years
 - Cases involving vulnerable groups — women, children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and those with terminal illnesses

Fast-Track Special Courts (FTSCs)

- In 2019, following a criminal law amendment and a Supreme Court directive, the Union government launched a **centrally sponsored scheme for FTSCs**.
- Partly funded through the Nirbhaya Fund, these courts are dedicated exclusively to time-bound trials of rape cases and offences under the POCSO Act.

Can a Special Court Be Set Up for a Single Case?

- Setting up special courts must satisfy **Article 14** (equality before law).
- In *State of West Bengal vs Anwar Ali Sarkar* (1952), the Supreme Court struck down a law allowing arbitrary selection of cases for special courts merely for "speedier trial," holding that speed alone is too vague a justification.
- Any classification for fast-tracking must rest on a **rational, objective basis** — such as the nature of the offence or victim vulnerability.

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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

Speed and Targets

- Litigants have no automatic statutory right to a fixed trial deadline.
- The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) recommends trials be completed within two years generally, and within two months for sexual offences.
- Each FTSC is expected to dispose of 41–42 cases per quarter, translating to at least 165 cases annually.

Performance So Far

- As of January 2026: 862 regular FTCs functioning across 21 states/UTs, alongside 774 FTSCs (including 398 exclusive POCSO courts) across 29 states/UTs.
- FTSC disposal rate stands at around 96%.
- In 2024, 88,902 new cases were filed in FTSCs while 85,595 were resolved.
- An FTSC disposes of about 9.5 cases per month — nearly three times the 3.3 cases cleared monthly by a regular trial court of similar jurisdiction.
- Despite high clearance rates, pendency remains significant: over 2.4 lakh cases were pending in FTSCs by end-2023.

Why Delays Persist

- The Ministry of Law and Justice, in a March 2026 Lok Sabha response, attributed delays to **multiple factors**: infrastructure availability, case complexity, investigation quality, evidence nature, and cooperation among the bar, investigating agencies, forensic support, witnesses, and litigants.
- Legal experts note mixed efficacy across subject areas — FTCs handling POCSO and IPC cases face heavy case volumes and judge shortages, while those under the Prevention of Corruption Act show comparatively better outcomes.

Conclusion

Fast-track courts offer measurably faster case disposal than regular courts, but their success is constrained by infrastructure gaps, judge shortages, and rising case inflow. Without addressing these root causes, fast-tracking risks becoming a symbolic response to public pressure rather than a durable fix for India's justice delivery system.

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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

WHAT IS THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT (EAS)?



- It is the **Indo-Pacific's premier forum** for strategic dialogue.
- It is the **only leader-led forum** at which **all key Indo-Pacific partners meet** to discuss political, security, and economic challenges facing the region.
- It was **established** in **2005** with the convening of the **1st Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**.
- **Members:**
 - The EAS has **19 members**: the **11 ASEAN countries** (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam) along with **Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States**.
 - **Timor-Leste** became the **latest member** of the EAS following its ASEAN accession on 26 October 2025.
 - India is a founding member of EAS.
- **Six priority areas** of regional cooperation within the framework of the EAS:
 - **Environment and Energy,**
 - **Education,**
 - **Finance,**
 - **Global Health Issues and Pandemic Diseases,**
 - **Natural Disaster Management, and**
 - **ASEAN Connectivity.**
- The EAS is an **annual Leaders' Summit** usually held in October or November.
- Along with the Leaders' Summit, each year there is an **EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting** and an **EAS Economic Ministers' Meeting**.

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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

KUSHA MISSILE



- It is a long-range **Surface-to-Air missile**.
- **Developed By:** All weapon system elements, including the missiles, radars, command and control centre, have been developed by various **DRDO laboratories and Industry partners**.
- **Range:** A long-range SAM typically has a **range of over 200 km**.
- **Capability:** It is capable of neutralising a wide variety of aerial threats **including fighter jets, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles** and large enemy aircraft within a wide range & altitude envelope.
- The successful test marks a **key step in the development of Project Kusha**, India's indigenous long-range air defence programme.

Key Facts about Project Kusha:

- It is also referred to as the **Extended Range Air Defence System (ERADS)**.
- It is being developed by DRDO as the backbone of India's future **long-range air defence network**.
- The system is planned as a three-tier architecture **comprising M1, M2 and M3 interceptor missiles** with engagement ranges of approximately **150 km, 250 km and up to 350-400 km, respectively**.
- It is designed to integrate with India's **Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS)** for network-centric air defence.

CRIME AND CRIMINAL TRACKING NETWORK & SYSTEMS

- It was conceptualized by the **Ministry of Home Affairs in 2009**.
 - It aims at creating a **comprehensive and integrated system** for enhancing the efficiency and effective policing at all levels and especially **at the Police Station level**.



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Current Affairs - 24 July 2026

- **Objectives**
 - **Provide Citizen Centric Police Services** via a web portal
 - **Pan India search** on National database of Crime & Criminal records
 - Crime and Criminal reports at State and Center
 - Computerization of Police Processes
- The scope of CCTNS **spans all States and Union Territories** and covers all Police Stations (15,000+ in number) and all Higher Police Offices in the country.
- The CCTNS project includes **vertical connectivity of police units** (linking police units at various levels within the States - police stations, district police offices, state headquarters, SCRB and other police formations) as **well as horizontal connectivity**, linking police functions at State and Central level to external entities.

RATLE HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT



- It is an 850 MW hydroelectric power project being built on the **Chenab River** in the Kishtwar District of **Jammu & Kashmir**.
- It is a **run-of-river project**.
- It is located **downstream of the Dulhasti project** and **upstream of the Baghlihar project**.
- The project is implemented by the **Ratle Hydroelectric Power Corporation (RHPCL)**.
 - RHPCL was formed as a **joint venture (JV)** between **Jammu & Kashmir State Power Development Corporation (JKSPDC)** and India's state-owned **National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC)**.
 - NHPC and JKSPDC hold **51% and 49% equity ownership** in RHPCL, respectively.
- The **construction work** is being undertaken by **Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Limited (MEIL)**.