

1. US position on Ukraine-NATO shifts

NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration- Apr 3, 2008

NATO's Bucharest Summit Declaration said "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

Feb 12, 2025 Statement

Feb 12, 2025: United States Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth told the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels that "...The United States does not believe that NATO membership for Ukraine is a realistic outcome of a negotiated settlement [of the war]..."



Clear Cut shift in Policy

During his February 12 phone call with Russia's President Vladimir Putin, US President Donald Trump rejected as "impractical" the possibility of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the 32-member transatlantic military alliance in which an attack on any member is considered an attack on all.

The possibility of Ukraine becoming part of NATO has been Moscow's declared *casus belli*. Though the US and its European allies have never committed to when Ukraine might join the alliance, the statements by Trump and Hegseth mark a fundamental shift in America's Ukraine policy.

West's broken 'promises'

In 1990, James Baker, President George H W Bush's Secretary of State, assured Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader who oversaw the dissolution of the USSR, that "not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction". But in fact, NATO continued to expand steadily eastward, adding former Soviet allies and satellites as members.

NATO's eastward march

In 1999, less than a decade after the collapse of the USSR, NATO onboarded former Warsaw Pact countries Czechia (formerly part of Czechoslovakia), Hungary, and Poland.

President Bill Clinton presented this as a project for democracy: "We want all of Europe to have what America helped build in Western Europe — a community...where nations cooperate to make war unthinkable. That is why I have pushed hard for NATO's enlargement and why we must keep NATO's doors open to new democratic members." (Speech delivered in San Francisco, 1999; Clinton White House Archives)

In 2004, more Warsaw Pact countries — Bulgaria, Slovakia (formerly part of Czechoslovakia) and Romania — joined NATO, as did erstwhile Soviet republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and Slovenia, which was formerly a part of neutral Yugoslavia. NATO was now literally at Russia's doorstep.

Albania and Croatia joined in 2009, and Montenegro and North Macedonia in 2017 and 2020 respectively, expanding NATO's Eastern European footprint further.

Moscow's concerns

The expansion of NATO presents Russia with a classic "security dilemma", a situation in which the actions of one state to make itself more secure tends to make another state less secure, and prompts them to respond in ways that result in a spiral of hostility.

Article 5 in the NATO Charter of 1949 establishes the principle of collective defence, such that "an armed attack" against any NATO member is to be considered as "an attack against them all", and all NATO members would be obligated to defend the one who has been attacked.

Putin's Russia sees NATO as a tool of Western hegemony, and its expansion eastward as a threat to its national security.

The Trump disruption

President George W Bush was the first major leader to suggest that Ukraine should be brought into NATO. But France and Germany were opposed, and the Bucharest Summit produced a “worst of all worlds” compromise — a promise without a timeline for delivery. While nothing changed for Ukraine, Russian insecurity spiked sharply. Putin annexed strategically vital Crimea in 2014, and ultimately invaded the Donbas in 2022.

Meanwhile, NATO continued to repeat its resolve to let Ukraine in. In July 2024, at the NATO summit in Washington, its leaders pledged to support Ukraine on an “irreversible path to full Euro-Atlantic integration, including NATO membership”.

All this has changed now. Trump is halting the expansion of NATO.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Organisations

Source: Indian Express

2. PM Modi, Amit Shah & Rahul Gandhi meet to appoint new Chief Election Commissioner

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi met to appoint the successor of Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar.

This marks the first time a selection panel has been set up to appoint the head of the country’s election watchdog.

How were Chief Election Commissioners appointed earlier?



The Election Commission (EC) is a three-member body made up of one Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners. Although all three election commissioners are equal, the CEC, like the Chief Justice of India, is the first among equals.

Earlier, there was no law passed by Parliament for the appointment of the CEC and ECs. The appointments were done by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. Traditionally, the successor to the incumbent CEC has been the next senior-most Election Commissioner. Seniority was usually defined by who was appointed earlier to the Commission.

Decision on seniority

The current Commission is made up of Rajiv Kumar as CEC and Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu as the two Election Commissioners. Both Kumar and Sandhu were appointed to the Commission on the same day, March 14, and are of the same batch of IAS officers (year 1988). So who is senior? Sources within the government and Commission state that it is Gyanesh Kumar, since in the appointment notification issued by Rashtrapati Bhavan, his name comes first.

Hence, under the old system, upon Rajiv Kumar's retirement, the President would have notified Gyanesh Kumar's appointment as CEC. But it's not so simple this time.

How will the new CEC be appointed this time?

The new CEC is being appointed under a new law — Chief Election Commissioner And Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service And Term of Office) Act, 2023. This law lays down procedures for appointment of both CEC and ECs.

Under the Act, a search committee headed by the Law Minister and comprising two senior bureaucrats serving as secretaries to the Government of India must first draw up a shortlist of five candidates. This shortlist is then sent to a Selection Committee made up of the Prime Minister, Leader of Opposition, and a Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM.

The current Selection Committee comprises Prime Minister Narendra Modi, LoP Rahul Gandhi and Home Minister Amit Shah. This committee met Monday evening at the Prime Minister's Office in South Block to select Rajiv Kumar's successor. Section 8 of the Act gives this Committee the power to also consider names beyond the shortlisted five. This is the same process used to appoint Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu to the Commission in March 2024.

Apart from laying down the exact appointment process, does the new Act also specify eligibility conditions?

While in the past the government had usually appointed retired senior bureaucrats to the Commission, the Act makes the qualification for the job clear: "The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall be appointed from amongst persons who are holding or have held a post equivalent to the rank of Secretary to the Government of India and shall be persons of integrity, who have knowledge of and experience in management and conduct of elections," Section 5 of the Act states.

The Act also sets clear terms of service. "The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall not be eligible for re-appointment. Where an Election Commissioner is appointed as Chief Election Commissioner, his term of office shall not be more than six years in aggregate as the Election Commissioner and the Chief Election Commissioner," it states.

Why was the appointment process changed?

This Act was brought after an intervention from the Supreme Court, following a clutch of petitions filed between 2015 and 2022 challenging the Centre's exclusive powers in picking the Election Commissioners.

The court had noted that the Constitution's founders never intended to give the Executive exclusive appointment powers. Concerned about the "devastating effect" of leaving appointments solely to the Executive, the court established a new process. In its judgment on March 2, 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that a selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India would select the CEC and ECs, until Parliament enacted a law.

Before any vacancy in the Commission could arise, the government brought the Bill in Parliament, which passed it in December 2023. The Act changed the composition of the selection committee — replacing the CJI with a “Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister”, effectively giving the government the final say on who is selected.

Will today’s Selection Committee decision settle the matter of the new CEC appointment?

No, not until the Supreme Court hears petitions challenging the new appointment process. Association for Democratic Reforms has challenged the removal of the Chief Justice of India as member of the Selection Committee under the new law.

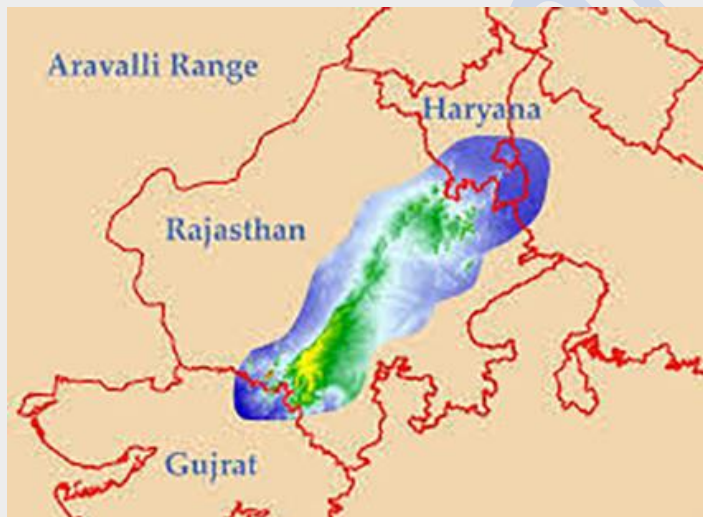
The key constitutional question raised by these petitions is whether Parliament has the legal authority to override or modify a Constitution Bench judgment through legislation or ordinance. Although the petitioners sought an early hearing before Rajiv Kumar’s retirement, the Court scheduled it for February 19, a day after his exit. However, SC judge Surya Kant assured the petitioners that “consequences” of the court’s decision on the validity of the new Act would apply even if appointments were made in the interim period.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. What is the Aravali safari park project?

Introduction



The Haryana government’s ambitious 3,858 hectare Aravali safari park project spread across Gurugram and Nuh is envisaged to be the world’s largest safari park.

What is the project?

As per the tender invited by the Haryana Tourism Department, the proposed Aravali safari park will have animal cages, guest houses, hotels, restaurants, auditoriums, an animal hospital, childrens’ parks, botanical gardens, aquariums, cable cars, a

tunnel walk with exhibits, an open-air theatre and eateries. The project has now been transferred to the forest department and an expert committee has been set up to oversee it. Of the total 3,858 hectares proposed in the tender, 2,574 will be in Gurugram and the remaining 1,284 in Nuh.

Why is there opposition?

The hills in the southern districts of Gurugram and Nuh are a part of Aravali, the oldest fold mountain range in the world. It runs diagonally across Rajasthan extending from Champaner in Gujarat in the southwest to near Delhi in the northeast for about 690 km. It is ecologically

significant as it combats desertification by checking the spread of the Thar Desert towards eastern Rajasthan, and performs the role of an aquifer with its highly fractured and weathered quality rocks allowing water to percolate and recharge the groundwater. It is also a rich habitat to a wide spectrum of wildlife and plant species.

A group of 37 retired Indian Forest Service officers have written a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking to scrap the project arguing that the project's aim is to simply increase tourist footfall and not conserve the mountain range. The "primary purpose of any intervention in an eco-sensitive area should be 'conservation and restoration' and not destruction", the letter said.

The increased footfall, vehicular traffic and construction will disturb aquifers under the Aravali hills which are critical reserves for the water-starved districts of Gurugram and Nuh (the groundwater level in the two districts has been categorised as "over-exploited" by the Central Ground Water Board). Additionally, the location of the project falls under the category of "forest", which is protected under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Besides, Haryana has very low forest cover of 3.6%, and therefore, the State needs rewilding of natural forests and not destructive safari projects, the letter said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

'Sharing is Caring'

If you have friends preparing for Civil Services, tell them that they can also receive Updates through WhatsApp from Shubham's IAS by sending 'Name' and 'State' on 75979-00000