

Topics - MINDS MAPS included (Daily current affairs 6th December 2024



- Pulicat lake and flamingos
- Gelephu
- INDIAN PM VISIT TO THREE COUNTRIES
- Syrian Conflict Overview
- Nepal's Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation with China
- MAINS



By saurabh Pandey



THE HINDU

Target Mains -2025/26 -

Q “Culture linkage between countries will be the basis for sustaining and maintaining good relations between countries.” Discuss

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Winged visitors



Flamingos are back at the Pulicat Lake near Sriharikota in Andhra Pradesh. With the onset of northeast monsoon, the lake is brimming, attracting flocks of migratory birds. PTI

Topic → Pulicat Lake


 Pulicat Lake is a brackish water lagoon located on the Coromandel Coast of India.


 It is the second largest lagoon in India, spanning approximately 460 square kilometers.

Pulicat lake is the second-largest brackish water lake in India located in the state of **Andhra Pradesh** after Chilika lake. It extends from the extreme southeastern portion of Andhra Pradesh to the adjacent portion of Tamil Nadu state.

 The lake is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including migratory birds, making it a significant ecological site.

 Pulicat Lake is a popular destination for birdwatching and eco-tourism activities.

 The region surrounding the lake supports various fishing and agricultural communities.

 Pulicat Lake is part of the Pulicat Lake Bird Sanctuary, which aims to protect its unique biodiversity

About Flamingos



There are five species of flamingos divided into three genera:

- ***Phoenicopterus ruber*** is divided into two distinct and geographically separated subspecies: *P.r. ruber* and *P.r. roseus*. Some scientists classify these as two separate species.
 - ***P.r. ruber***, the Caribbean flamingo, is slightly smaller than *P.r. roseus*.
 - ***P.r. roseus***, the greater flamingo, is the largest of the flamingos and has deep pink wings.
- ***Phoenicopterus chilensis***, the Chilean flamingo. Chilean flamingos are slightly smaller than Caribbean flamingos and have gray legs with pink bands at the joints.
- ***Phoenicopterus minor***, the lesser flamingo. (Still sometimes listed in the genus *Phoeniconaias*). This species is the smallest of all flamingos. The color of the lesser flamingo is brighter than the greater flamingo.
- ***Phoenicoparrus jamesi***, the James' flamingo. This species is characterized by having all black flight feathers, including the secondary flight feathers, which are red in other species.
- ***Phoenicoparrus andinus***, the Andean flamingo. This is the only species of flamingo that has yellow legs and feet. It also has a red spot between the nostrils.

Distribution



- All flamingos are found in tropical and subtropical areas.
- Populations of Chilean flamingos are found in central Peru, both coasts of southern South America (mainly in the winter), Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Bolivia, and southern Brazil. Stragglers have been reported on the Falkland Islands and Ecuador.
- The lesser flamingo is primarily an African species. Populations are found in eastern, southwestern, and western Africa. In addition, a sizable population nests in India. Stragglers can be found as far north as southern Spain.
- The James' flamingo has the most restricted range of all flamingo species. They are found in southern Peru, northeastern Chile, western Bolivia, and northwestern Argentina.
- Andean flamingos are found in southern Peru, north-central Chile, western Bolivia, and northwestern Argentina.
- The Caribbean flamingo is found throughout the Caribbean (Cuba, the Bahamas, the Yucatan, Turks and Caicos), the Galapagos Islands, and the northern part of coastal South America.
- The greater flamingo has the most widespread distribution of all flamingo species. Populations are found in northwest India, the Middle East, the western Mediterranean, and Africa. Limited numbers of this species can be found over much of northern Europe and eastward to Siberia.

Habitat

The flamingo's most characteristic habitats are large alkaline or saline lakes or estuarine lagoons that usually lack vegetation. Lakes may be far inland or near the sea.

A variety of habitats are used by flamingos: mangrove swamps, tidal flats, and sandy islands in the intertidal zone.

The presence or absence of fish may have a great influence on the use of lakes by some flamingos.

- The Chilean flamingo is scarce or absent in lakes with fish. It is present, usually in large numbers, where there are no fish with which to compete for food.
- The introduction of fish to some lakes may seriously affect the distribution of the Chilean flamingo as well as the greater and Caribbean flamingos, since they all feed primarily on invertebrates. Other flamingo species are not affected because of different food sources.
-

Vocalization

Flamingo vocalizations range from nasal honking to grunting or growling. Flamingos are generally very noisy birds. Variations exist in the voices of different species of flamingos.

Vocalizations play an important role in keeping flocks together as well as in ritualized displays. Specific calls are used in conjunction with certain behaviors.

Vocalizations are used in parent-chick recognition.

Visual Displays

Flamingos communicate with a broad range of visual displays

Social Structure



Flamingos are very social birds. Breeding colonies of a few individual flamingos are rare, while colonies of tens of thousands of birds are common.

Flock size ranges from 2 to 340 birds with an average of 71 birds.

saurabh pandey upsc

Bhutan and India discuss Gelephu, hydel power plans

The leaders agreed on the need for early conclusion of the Punatsangchhu-I hydro power project; both sides discussed cross-border connectivity projects, including a rail line and digital networks

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India and Bhutan on Thursday discussed bilateral projects in the fields of electricity and urban planning during the visit of the King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk and Queen Jetsun Pema. Mr. Wangchuk met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and both sides reiterated continued collaboration on multiple fronts including in the Gelephu Mindfulness City project and hydropower.

A joint statement issued after the meeting said Mr. Modi “reassured His Majesty of India’s continued support for the Gelephu Mindfulness City Project, which will bring prosperity and well-being in Bhutan and also the border areas, and further strengthen economy and investment linkages between the two countries”.

The two sides on Thursday also discussed the hydel power projects including the 1020-MW Punatsangchhu-II hydro power project and expressed satisfaction as it



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk during the meeting on Thursday. PTI

was “nearing completion”.

“The leaders agreed on the need for early conclusion of the Punatsangchhu-I hydro power project. The two sides reiterated the importance of cooperation in the hydropower sector, and their commitment to advancing it, including through finalizing modalities urgently for new projects, including reservoir hydro projects,” the joint statement said.

Both sides also discussed cross-border connectivity projects includ-

ing a rail line as well as digital networks.

The visit of the Bhutan royals comes days after the visit of Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay who inaugurated the Global Cooperatives Alliance in New Delhi on November 25. India’s commitment for the Gelephu project while hosting the Bhutanese King is significant as it comes against the backdrop of diplomatic setbacks that South Block has faced in the neighbourhood, especially in Dhaka

where India’s ties with the interim government of Bangladesh has failed to stabilise since the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government in August.

In Nepal too, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has prioritised Kathmandu’s ties with Beijing and sealed a new Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation on Wednesday during his first foreign trip since taking power in July this year.

The Hindu had earlier reported that the Adani Group was in talks with Thimphu for investing in the project in Gelephu. In July, Mr. Wangchuk and Prime Minister Tobgay had travelled to Gujarat where they sought cooperation with the Adani Group on airport, infrastructure and renewable energy projects.

While India’s neighbours, including Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have announced reviews of Adani projects in the past few weeks, and the U.S. Department of Justice indictment of the Adani Group has cast a shadow, the Bhutanese government has so far not commented on the issue.

Topic → Gelephu



Overview of Gelephu

Location: Southern Bhutan 🌅

Significance: Proposed 'Mindfulness City' 🧘

Development Plans: Infrastructure, Cooperation with India 🇮🇳

Key Themes

Mindfulness City Project 🏙️

Purpose: Attract investment, create jobs 🧳

Design: Unique urban planning focused on well-being 🌿

Community Impact: Concerns from displaced ethnic Nepalis ⚠️



Government Cooperation

Involvement of Leaders 🌐

PM Modi of India 🇮🇳

Bhutan King 👑

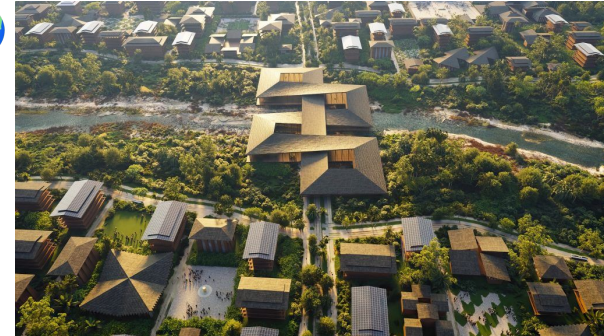
Discussions: Economic connectivity, hydro power plans 💧

Economic Potential

Investment Opportunities 💰

Gautam Adani's interest in projects 🏗️

Potential for tourism and sustainable development 🌍



A three-nation visit as a foray into summit diplomacy



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Nigeria, Brazil, and Guyana (November 16-21, 2024) was exceptionally well designed to achieve multiple objectives. It was India's latest foray into summit diplomacy covering three different geographic regions – Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean – and encompassed an extensive interaction on bilateral, regional and global issues. While the Prime Minister's primary purpose was to represent India at the nineteenth summit of the Group of 20 (G-20), in Brazil, his spending ample time in the two other countries enhanced the impact of this trans-continental journey. A close look at how the visit unfolded, and its outcome, is an index to understanding India's current foreign policy priorities.

Nigeria, the first leg

The halt at Abuja, Nigeria, was not a pit stop. It was a full-scale state visit to Africa's most populous nation and the fourth-largest economy. This West African nation's international heft has been increasing, as evidenced by its presence at the G-20 summit last year at India's invitation and the BRICS' invitation to join it as a partner state. Nigeria's recent chairship of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is relevant too. As two large democracies and multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic societies devoted to 'unity in diversity', India and Nigeria are natural partners.

The Nigerian leadership gave ample signals to convey its appreciation of India's expanding economic and political influence and its robust Africa policy. The formal gifting of the keys of the city of Abuja to Mr. Modi, the ceremonial welcome at the State House complete with a 21-gun salute, and the conferment of a top national award were clear giveaways. The award citation referred to his leadership and stellar contribution to fostering India-Nigeria ties and noted that India has been positioned as a global powerhouse under his transformative governance.

Nigeria, an important beneficiary of India's development assistance and human-resource



Rajiv Bhatia

Distinguished Fellow at Gateway House, a former High Commissioner to South Africa, and the author of three books on foreign policy

The Prime Minister's recent visit to Nigeria, Brazil, and Guyana offers an understanding of India's current foreign policy priorities

development-related programmes, has been keen to advance the 'strategic partnership'. India seemed ready and willing. The dialogue at Abuja confirmed the two leaders' assessment that much potential existed for expanding bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, education, energy, health, culture, and people-to-people ties. New areas such as agriculture, urban transportation, renewable energy, and digital transformation were identified. Besides, they renewed their commitment to joint combat against terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation. Despite closeness at the political level, only three memoranda of understanding (MoU) were signed due probably to bureaucratic delays on the host side. Overall, the visit was a clear plus for the India-Nigeria friendship.

G-20, the centrepiece in Brazil

The nineteenth summit of G-20, comprising 19 powerful economies and two regional organisations, was hosted in Rio de Janeiro (November 18-19). It took forward the people-centric decisions adopted at the New Delhi summit by mainstreaming key perspectives of the Global South into the G-20 decision-making. The Rio Declaration highlighted the three priorities defined by the Brazilian presidency: social inclusion, sustainable development and reform of global governance institutions.

On the first issue, the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty was launched. It will serve as a platform for "mobilizing finance and knowledge sharing" on a wide scale. Regarding sustainable development, the G-20 reiterated its previous positions but failed to make headway on climate finance. On the third issue, the new achievement was the adoption of the road map for "Better, Bigger and more Effective Multilateral Development Banks", with the group calling for its early implementation. On the United Nations and World Trade Organization (WTO) reform, there was nothing new in the G-20's pronouncements.

As conflicts rage in Europe and West Asia, leaders sought peaceful resolution and focused

attention on the significant issues of economic development and climate change. While experts debated what the G-20 summit achieved, many expressed the view that it was time for the group to concentrate on implementing its decisions.

The Rio summit provided many opportunities for leaders to interact in the plenary hall and on the sidelines. Mr. Modi met several leaders, notably from the United States, Europe, and the Global South countries. The Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi to devise the next stage of the India-China rapprochement.

Guyana, as the wrap up

On the third leg, Mr. Modi travelled to Guyana, a nation of fewer than one million people in the Caribbean region. Its importance came into focus: 40% of the population is of Indian origin, a robust bilateral cooperation programme exists, Guyana has energy resources and is an important player in regional affairs. Decisions were announced to expand cooperation in diverse sectors such as energy, defence, urban development, digital collaboration, education, and food security as 10 MOUs were signed.

India and the Caribbean Community held their second summit in Georgetown, Guyana. This enabled Mr. Modi to interact with about a dozen leaders of this successful regional body. He proposed seven pillars to deepen cooperation, covering capacity building, agriculture and food security, renewable energy and climate change, innovation, technology and trade, cricket and culture, ocean economy, and medicine and health. The commonality in these pillars, he told them, was that they were all based on "your priorities and needs".

In sum, the Prime Minister's visit packed a lot within six days. It contributed to enhancing India's global standing and Mr. Modi's image and popularity abroad. Guyana's President Irfan Ali hailed him as "a champion among leaders" who has "led incredibly". Through the expeditious implementation of the decisions announced, New Delhi could optimise the outcomes of this bold essay in diplomacy.

Topic -- INDIAN PM VISIT TO THREE COUNTRIES



Nigeria-India Strategic Partnership

Overview of the Visit

Significant State Visit: Abuja as a key location

Nigeria's Importance: Most populous nation & fourth-largest economy in Africa

Global Presence: Participation in G-20 and BRICS invitations

Nigeria is emerging as a critical player on the global stage, enhancing its strategic partnerships with countries like India.

New Areas of Cooperation

Trade & Investment: Expanding economic ties

Education: Enhancing educational exchanges

Energy: Renewable energy initiatives

Health: Joint health programs

Culture: Promoting cultural ties

People-to-People: Strengthening social connections



2,249 x 2,299

Bilateral Cooperation

Areas of Focus

Agriculture: Collaboration for food security
Urban Transportation: Infrastructure development
Digital Transformation: Technology and innovation

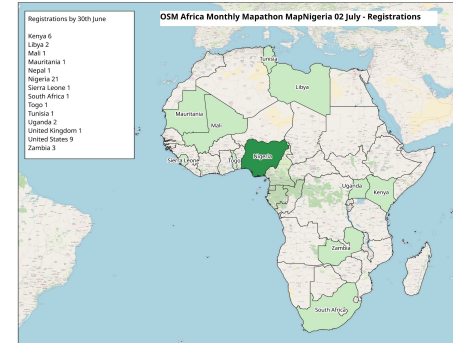
India and Nigeria are committed to mutual growth in diverse sectors, ensuring a robust partnership.

Joint Commitments

Combatting Terrorism: Cooperative security efforts
Extremism & Radicalization: Joint strategies for peace

Challenges and Outcomes

Bureaucratic Delays: Issues affecting MoUs
Three MoUs Signed: Despite challenges, progress made



G-20 Summit 2023: The Centrepiece in Brazil 🇧🇷



Key Highlights and Themes

Date & Location:

November 18-19, 2023, Rio de Janeiro

Participants:

19 powerful economies + 2 regional organizations

Objectives:

Mainstream perspectives of the Global South

People-centric decision-making



Priorities Outlined in the Rio Declaration:

Social Inclusion:

Launch of the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty
Platform for mobilizing finance and knowledge sharing

Sustainable Development:

Reiterated previous positions on sustainability
No significant progress on climate finance

Global Governance Reform:

Roadmap for effective Multilateral Development Banks
Calls for early implementation

Geopolitical Context:

Focus on peaceful resolutions amidst conflicts in Europe and West Asia
Economic development and climate change as significant issues
High-level interactions between leaders (e.g., Modi & international counterparts).



Topic → Guyana: A Strategic Partnership with India

Overview of Prime Minister Modi's Visit

Historical Significance: First Indian PM in 56 years to visit Guyana 🇮🇳✈️

Population Insight: 40% of Guyana's population of Indian origin 🇬🇵🕌

Bilateral Cooperation: Robust programs in place for collaboration 🤝



Key Areas of Cooperation



Energy Resources:

Guyana's role in India's energy security 💡

Defence:

Strengthening military ties and training ⚔️

Urban Development:

Infrastructure improvements and city planning 🏙️

Digital Collaboration:

Technology sharing and IT advancements 💻

Education:

Academic partnerships and scholarships 🎓

Food Security:

Agricultural cooperation and supply chain management 🌾



Pillars of Cooperation Proposed by Modi



Capacity Building:

Enhancing skills and workforce development 

Agriculture & Food Security:

Sustainable practices and innovation in farming 

Renewable Energy & Climate Change:

Joint initiatives for sustainable energy sources 

Innovation, Technology & Trade:

Promoting startups and trade agreements 

Cricket & Culture:

Cultural exchange programs and sporting events 

Ocean Economy:

Marine resource management and conservation 

Medicine & Health:

Healthcare partnerships and research collaboration 



Impact of the Visit

Global Standing: Enhanced India's image and Modi's popularity abroad 🌟

Mutual Benefits: Optimized outcomes for both nations through signed agreements 📝

Community Engagement: Strengthening ties with Caribbean nations and leadership interactions 🌐



Is Syria's Assad regime in danger?

What was the role of Russia in the Syrian civil war back in 2016? How was the Bashar al-Assad regime able to recapture Aleppo then? Who are the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and what is their connection to the al-Qaeda? How were the militants able to make such extensive territorial gains?

EXPLAINER

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

Islamist militants in Syria's northwest launched a surprise attack last week against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad and made dramatic territorial gains. The Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011 amidst Arab Spring-inspired anti-government protests, had entered into a frozen stage in late 2016 after the regime recaptured most of its territories. There was relative calm, but no real peace in the Arab republic. With the latest clashes, peace has been broken and hot war has resumed.

How has Syria's control map changed in the span of a week?

In 2015, before Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to send troops to Syria, the Assad regime was on the brink of collapse. He had lost most of the population centres, except Damascus and the Alawite-dominated coastal cities. There were multiple rebel and jihadist factions such as the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's Syria branch) and the Islamic State (IS). The IS was controlling eastern Syrian cities of Raqa and Deir Ezzor as well as the ancient city of Palmyra. Al-Nusra and Free Syrian Army were controlling parts of Idlib in the northwest. Other militant groups were controlling Hama, Homs, and even some neighbourhoods of Damascus. In the south, Daraa and Quneitra were under siege.

The Russian intervention played a pivotal role in turning around the civil war. While Kurdish militias, backed by the U.S., fought the IS in the east and in the Kurdish border towns, the Syrian army, backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, fought other rebel groups, recapturing lost territories. For example, by December 2016, more than a year after the Russian arrival, the regime retook Aleppo, Syria's second largest city and its commercial capital. The militants continued to hold on to Idlib when the war got frozen.

Last week, the rebels launched their offensive from Idlib. Their initial objective was to capture the western neighbourhoods of Aleppo. But the ease with which they pushed the regime forces out of Aleppo's suburbs prompted them to expand the scope of the offensive and march towards the city. Within days, they captured Aleppo. They have now entered Hama, a regime stronghold. In the northeast of Aleppo, militants have captured territories from Kurdish rebels. In less than a week, the Idlib militants have more than doubled the territories they hold.

Who are the main actors?

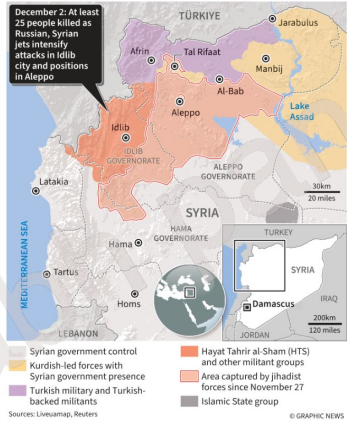
There are three main actors in Syria today. The most important actor is the regime, which is backed by Iran and Shia militias from Iraq and Russia. The second player is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is basically an umbrella militia group involving both People's Protection Forces (YPG), the main Syrian Kurdish militia that controls Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava). From the early stages of the civil war, the regime and the YPG had entered into a detente. The Kurds, who got their relative autonomy, and the regime forces stayed away from targeting each other. The third actor is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the main anti-government force that is in control of Idlib. The Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army, which is today called the Syrian National Army,



Dramatic offensive: Militants of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham drive along a street in al-Rashideen, Aleppo province, Syria on November 29. REUTERS

The extent of the militants' advance

It took four years for Bashar al-Assad to recapture Aleppo in 2016. It took just four days for him to lose it to the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The regime faces a full-blown civil war, with Syria getting ready for another prolonged spell of bloodshed



(SNA). Is practically a sidekick of the jihadist HTS. The ongoing offensive is led by the HTS, along with the SNA.

What is HTS?

The HTS is led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, a 42-year-old Syrian militant. Julani had moved to Iraq in his early 20s to fight the American occupation of the country (2003) and joined the al-Qaeda. When the al-Qaeda in Iraq was commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Julani emerged as one of his close lieutenants. When Baghdadi decided to send a contingent of al-Qaeda jihadists across the border to Syria to fight President Assad after the civil war broke out, he chose Julani to lead the pack. He set up Jabhat al-Nusra. Later, Julani fell out with Baghdadi as the former wanted al-Nusra to join the Islamic State. Julani wanted to retain his group as an autonomous al-Qaeda branch in Syria.

When the world's focus shifted towards the Islamic State, Julani steadily built his

out such an attack against an enclave of 3 million people without Russia's active support. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan staunchly opposed any offensive at Idlib, saying it would trigger another refugee influx into Turkey. This was also the time Russia's Mr. Putin and Mr. Erdogan entered into an entente. Russia forced Syria to accept a ceasefire, leaving Idlib in the hands of the HTS and the SNA. This led to the tense calm in Syria.

However, geopolitical dynamics have since shifted. Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Moscow is today preoccupied with the ongoing war, and his also withdrawn thousands of soldiers from Syria. During the height of the civil war, Qasem Soleimani, the Charismatic Iranian Quds Force General, was in charge of building and deploying Shia militias in Syria that fought the anti-regime militants. Gen. Soleimani was assassinated by the Americans in January 2020. Over the past year, several senior Iranian Generals were killed in Syria by Israeli air strikes. Hezbollah, which fought on the frontlines against the rebels during the early phase of the civil war, is today busy reorganising itself after months of fighting in the Gaza Strip. Israel's repeated air strikes in Syria over the past several years have substantially weakened Iran's regime and Hezbollah positions in the country. These geopolitical developments provided an opportunity for the anti-regime forces to launch their offensive. Without direct support from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, Syria's troops were vulnerable. The militants, reportedly backed by Turkey, made use of that vulnerability and made swift advances to capture the whole of Aleppo.

What happens next?

It took four years for Mr. Assad to recapture Aleppo in 2016. It took just four days for him to lose it to the HTS. This is an embarrassing setback for the regime. On December 5, the militants entered Hama, the central city. They are now likely to march towards Homs. The collapse of the regime forces in the north has reinvigorated other smaller rebel groups elsewhere in the country who started attacking government positions, especially in the south. The regime faces a full-blown civil war. It's too early to rule out Mr. Assad, who survived a years-long civil war and has regained some of his coastal regions and among the country's major cities. After the initial but, the regime forces are not coordinating with Iran for reinforcements. Thousands of fighters from Iran (including some as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Badr Organisation) have already joined the battle. But the regime's inability to arrest the militant advances should set alarm bells ringing in Damascus. The militants on the other side sense a great opportunity in expanding their territorial control. Syria appears to be getting ready for another prolonged spell of bloodshed.

Why did the militants attack now? Julani had always said that bringing down the Assad regime was one of his objectives. The Syrian regime wanted to attack Idlib and recapture the governorate. But it could not have carried

THE GIST


Islamist militants in Syria's northwest launched a surprise attack last week against the forces of President Bashar al-Assad and made dramatic territorial gains.


The HTS is led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, a 42-year-old Syrian militant. Julani had moved to Iraq in his early 20s to fight the American occupation of the country (2003) and joined the al-Qaeda. When the al-Qaeda in Iraq was commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Julani emerged as one of his close lieutenants.


Without direct support from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, Syria's troops were vulnerable. The militants, reportedly backed by Turkey, made use of that vulnerability and made swift advances to capture the whole of Aleppo.

Topic → Syrian Conflict Overview

Main Actors and Alliances


 **Main Actors:** The three primary actors in Syria are the regime, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).


 **Regime Support:** The Syrian regime is supported by Iran, Shia militias from Iraq, and Russia.


 **SDF Composition:** The SDF is an umbrella group that includes the People's Protection Forces (YPG), the main Kurdish militia controlling Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan).


Dynamics and Leadership



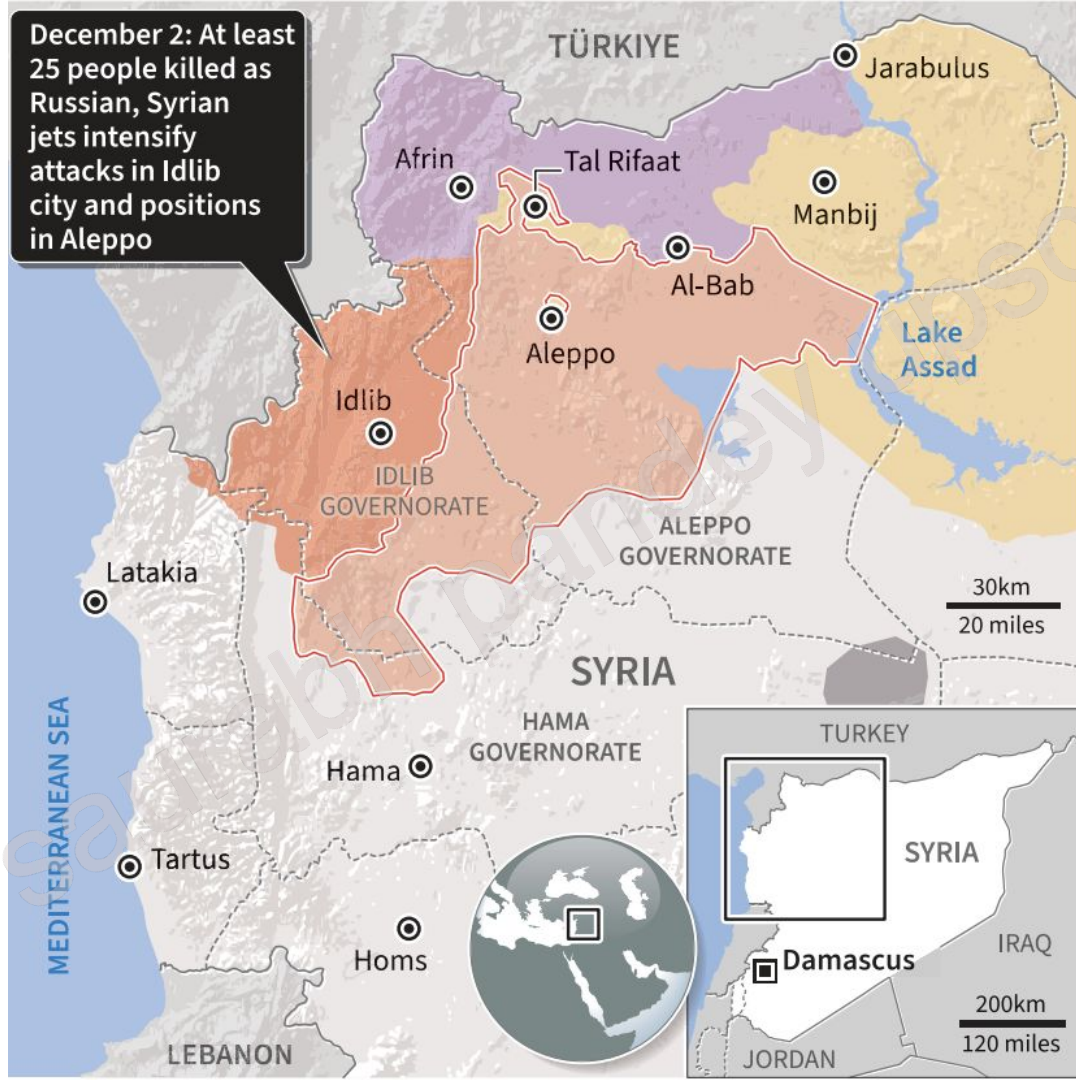
 **Detente:** There has been a detente between the regime and the YPG, allowing for relative autonomy for the Kurds without direct conflict.

 **HTS Overview:** Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is the main anti-government force in control of Idlib, leading ongoing offensives alongside the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA).

 **HTS Leadership:** HTS is led by Abu Mohammad al-Julani, a former al-Qaeda lieutenant who fought against the American occupation in Iraq.

 **SNA Connection:** The Syrian National Army (SNA), previously known as the Free Syrian Army, acts as a sidekick to HTS in their military operations.

December 2: At least 25 people killed as Russian, Syrian jets intensify attacks in Idlib city and positions in Aleppo



Oli secures BRI deal in Beijing with support from key ally Nepali Congress

The signing of the deal paves the way for advancing Chinese investment and cooperation in Nepal under the BRI; officials say the Chinese initially sought to replace 'grant financing' with 'assistance financing', but after further negotiations, the two sides agreed on 'aid assistance financing'

Sanjeev Satgainya
KATHMANDU

From "no loans but grants only," Nepal finally settled for "aid assistance financing" as Nepali and Chinese officials on Wednesday inked a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation framework deal in Beijing during Prime Minister K.P Sharma Oli's four-day visit to China.

The signing paves the way for advancing Chinese investment and cooperation in Nepal under the BRI, to which Kathmandu signed up for in 2017.

In the days leading up to Mr. Oli's visit to the north, there was a debate about whether Mr. Oli should sign the BRI implementation plan, a proposal Beijing had sent in 2020. A rigid stance by his coalition partner, the Nepali Congress (NC), against loans, had led to formation of a task force to revise the Chinese proposal.

Nepal subsequently revised the "BRI implementation plan" to "Framework for BRI Cooperation" emphasising "grant financing cooperation" and sent the proposal to the Chinese side for a review.

Officials said the Chinese initially sought to replace "grant financing" with "assistance financing", but after further negotiations, the two sides agreed on "aid assistance financing", leading to the inking of the deal.

As many as 10 projects have been listed under "aid assistance financing", which are related to trade,



Close ties: Nepal's Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli waves with his wife Radhika Shakya (left) before his departure at the Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu on December 2. AFP

infrastructure, connectivity, technology and cultural exchange.

"This deal is significant in two ways. First, it provides fresh momentum to Nepal-China cooperation under the BRI, seven years after Nepal signed up for the initiative," said Pradeep Gyawali, a former Foreign Minister and Deputy General Secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or the CPN-UML. "Second, for the first time, two major parties have made a common position on Nepal's foreign policy conduct."

Mr. Oli and his CPN-UML and the NC held differing views on how to approach the BRI. The NC feared embracing the BRI without addressing Nepal's concerns could increase debt burden and amplify Chinese influence. The CPN-UML, however, argued that there was nothing

wrong in pursuing loans.

"The fear was unwarranted. Nonetheless, signing BRI now with some revisions by incorporating the concerns of all the stakeholders is undoubtedly a step forward," said Mr. Gyawali.

Devil is in details

Analysts say the signing indicates that ground has been set to get the BRI ball rolling in Nepal, but since specifics are unclear, one has to wait to see how things unfold.

"The devil lies in the details," said Chandra Dev Bhatta, a political scientist. "We don't know yet what 'aid financing' entails. The common understanding is it could encompass both grants and loans and as described by Nepali officials, it could mean concessional loans."

Nepal has traditionally received concessional

loans from multilateral agencies like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank and other bilateral development partners, with interest rates under 2% and payback periods up to 40 years.

"What we can infer from the deal also is that the Chinese cooperation can be sought on a project-by-project basis, and depending on the project, financing could involve grants or concessional loans," said Mr. Bhatta. "In that sense, the deal can be dubbed a positive development in terms of investment, cooperation and Nepal-China ties."

Even though China has promoted the BRI as an investment tool to enhance connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa, it does not typically involve grants.

According to Mr. Bhatta, revising the Nepal-proposed document to in-

clude "aid" can be seen as more of a success for China. Beijing had increasingly upped pressure on Nepal to move the BRI forward, especially after the Millennium Challenge Corporation, a \$500 million American grant, in 2022.

"It's now up to Nepal to follow up on the deal," he said.

Relief for Oli

Mr. Oli's decision to visit China on his first bilateral trip—breaking the tradition of Nepali Prime Ministers visiting New Delhi first—with the BRI high on the agenda had raised the stakes. He risked upsetting his coalition partner, the NC and India, historically Nepal's closest ally. In a bid to assuage the NC's concerns, Mr. Oli last week said that he would not sign any loan agreements in Beijing.

Observers say by securing the BRI cooperation with the NC on board, Mr. Oli managed to save the coalition, and by extension, keep his position secured. Upon his return from China on Thursday, Mr. Oli stated that he would lead the government for 18 more months before handing over power to NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba, as per the agreement reached in July.

He also said, "We have discussed different projects under the BRI and separate agreements will be signed for each project." "This has nothing to do with loans."

In response to media

queries about his visit to India, Mr. Oli said, "Now, arrangements will be made soon."

Mr. Bhatta said, geopolitically, the BRI signing is unlikely to attract significant criticism from India or the United States. "The agreement signed on Wednesday, by and large, is continuation of the 2017 framework," he said.

During his visit, Mr. Oli met with his Chinese counterpart Li Qiang and held talks with President Xi Jinping on Tuesday.

According to Chinese state media, Mr. Xi reiterated that "China is ready to help Nepal accelerate its transformation from a 'land-locked country' to a 'land-linked country'...continue to support Nepal's economic and social development within its capacity."

Nepal, however, has not been able to translate the northern goodwill into practical cooperation. A transit deal signed with China in 2016 during Mr. Oli's previous tenure, aimed at reducing Nepal's over-reliance on India, has failed to yield tangible results.

Analysts say growing signs of thawing relations between India and China could reduce regional tensions, from which Nepal stands to benefit significantly. There, however, are concerns that BRI signing may not sit well with India, as it is widely perceived that Mr. Oli decided to make Beijing his first port of call after failing to secure an invitation from New Delhi.



**Land route
"One Belt"**

China-Pakistan

**Sea route
"One Road"**

Economic corridors

- Land
- Sea
- China-Pakistan
- Rail routes
- - - Selected pipelines

Sources: Digital Silk Road Project;
Project Cargo Network; *The Economist*

INDIAN OCEAN

2,000 km

Topic → Nepal's Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation with China



Overview


🇳🇵 Nepal has signed a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation framework with China during Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's visit to Beijing.


🤝 The agreement marks a shift from "no loans but grants only" to a more flexible "aid assistance financing," paving the way for Chinese investment in Nepal.

📅 July 17 Initially signed in 2017, this new deal represents a significant advancement in cooperation after years of debate.

Key Developments




 Ten projects have been identified under the new financing framework, focusing on trade, infrastructure, connectivity, technology, and cultural exchange.

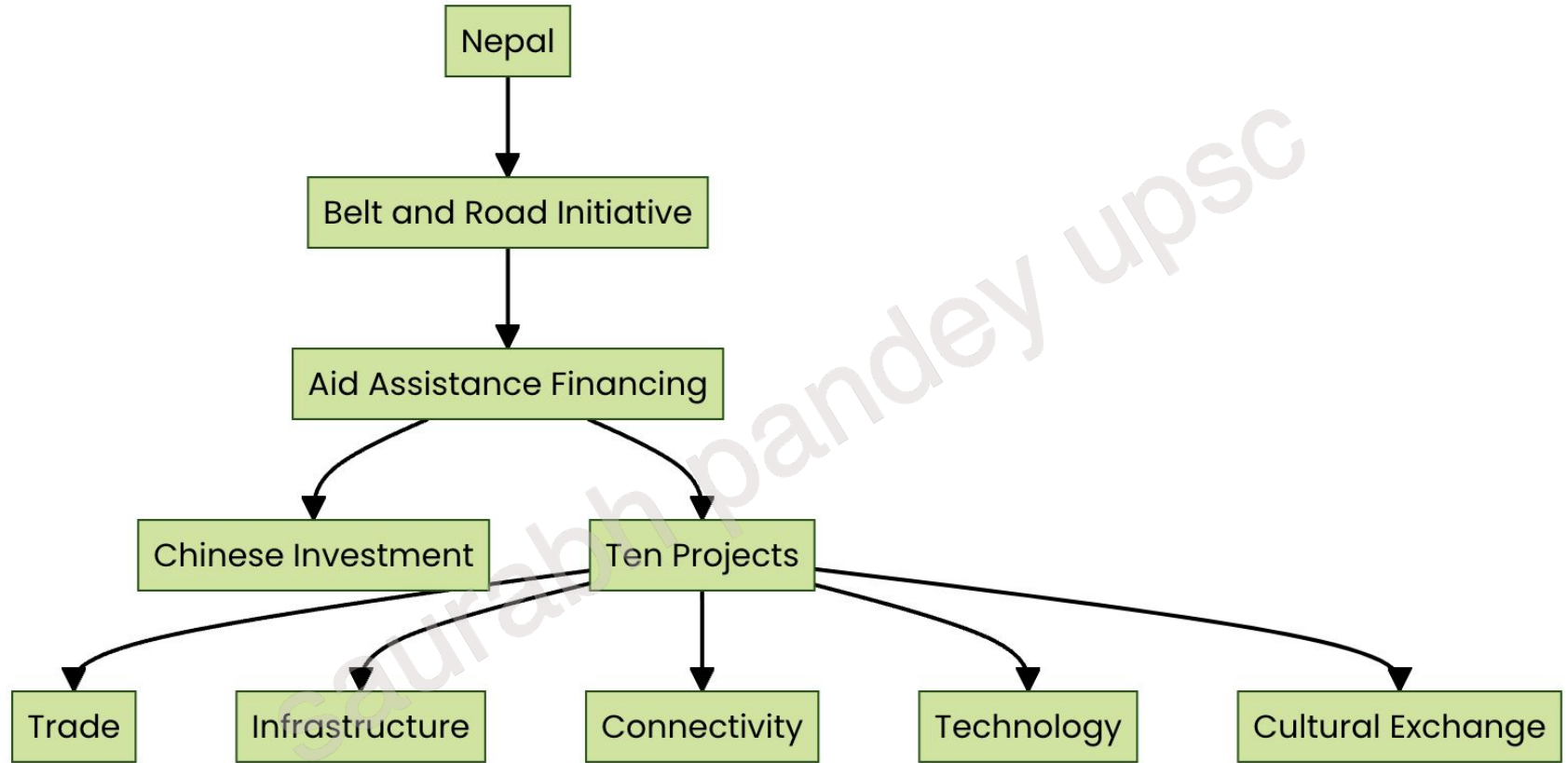
 The deal reflects a consensus among major political parties in Nepal, addressing concerns about debt and Chinese influence.

 Analysts highlight that the specifics of "aid financing" remain unclear, with potential implications for both grants and concessional loans.

Implications

 The agreement is viewed as a continuation of Nepal's foreign policy and is unlikely to provoke significant criticism from India or the U.S.

BRI Cooperation Framework:



Summary: Nepal and China have formalized a cooperation framework under the BRI, transitioning from a grant-only approach to a more flexible "aid assistance financing" model, which includes various projects and reflects a political consensus in Nepal.

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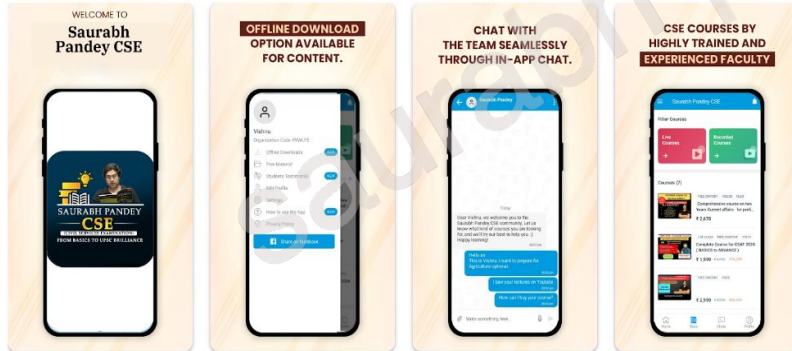
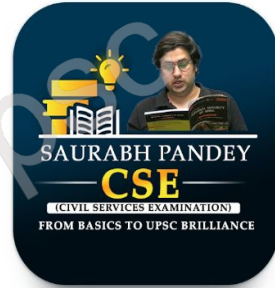
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