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Daily Current Affairs
🎯 To The Point
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1 | Will the End of the SDS Visa Impact Indian Students' Canadian Dreams?

Context: The Canadian government's decision to **discontinue the Study Direct Stream (SDS) visa program** has sent shockwaves through the Indian student community, one of the largest contingents of international students in Canada. Introduced in **2018**, the SDS visa aimed to simplify and expedite visa applications for students from specific countries, including India. However, its **abolishment in November 2024** has made the path to Canadian education more challenging, with longer wait times, **higher fees**, and **complex application requirements**.

What Was the SDS Visa?
The SDS visa program offered numerous advantages to eligible students, including:
1. **Faster Application Processing**: A streamlined process ensured quicker study permit approvals.
2. **Lower Application Fees**: Students enjoyed reduced costs compared to the standard visa process.
3. **Simplified Documentation**: Minimal paperwork made the process more accessible.

In **2022**, more than **189,000 Indian students** applied through the SDS program, with an **approval rate of 63%**, far surpassing the **19% approval rate** for non-SDS applicants.

Why Was the SDS Visa Discontinued?
The Canadian government outlined several reasons for ending the program:
1. **System Abuse**: Concerns grew over students using the SDS route to enroll in **low-value diploma courses** primarily as a gateway to **permanent residency**.
2. **Housing Challenges**: A sharp increase in international students exacerbated **Canada's housing crisis**, especially in urban hubs.
3. **Strained Resources**: Public services, such as healthcare and transportation, faced mounting pressure.
4. **Policy Shifts**: Canada is **reassessing its immigration policies** to ensure fair and sustainable practices.

Canadian Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau** remarked, "We're issuing **35% fewer international student permits** this year, and next year, that number will decline by **another 10%.**"

Impact on Indian Students:
The removal of the SDS visa introduces several hurdles:
- **Longer Processing Times**: Delays in approvals may disrupt students' academic plans.
- **Increased Costs**: Standard visa applications are more expensive, adding financial stress.
- **Complex Documentation Requirements**: Applicants now need comprehensive proof of funds, language proficiency scores, and detailed study plans.

These changes may result in **admission delays**, **higher financial burdens**, and uncertainty about **future immigration pathways**, particularly for students aiming for **permanent residency**.

What Are the Options for Indian Students?
Despite the SDS visa discontinuation, students can still apply for a **regular Student Visa**. Here's how aspirants can enhance their chances of success:
1. **Early Planning**: Start the application process well in advance to account for longer processing times.
2. **Accurate Documentation**: Ensure thorough preparation of required documents, including **proof of funds** and **admission letters**.
3. **Seek Expert Guidance**: Consult with experienced **immigration consultants** to navigate the complex application process.

Conclusion:
While the end of the **SDS visa program** poses challenges, it doesn't close the door on Indian students' Canadian education dreams. By planning ahead, staying informed, and seeking professional advice, aspirants can still make their way to Canada and achieve their academic and career goals. **Resilience and preparation are key to overcoming these new obstacles.**

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GS Paper 3 – Internal Security

2 — Centre Reimposes AFSPA in Six Volatile Areas of Manipur Amid Rising Insurgent Violence

Context: The Indian government has **reimposed the "Disturbed Areas" status under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)** in six police jurisdictions of Manipur. This decision comes amid escalating violence and insurgent activities in the state.

Key Areas Under AFSPA:
The regions where AFSPA has been reinstated include **Sekmai, Lamsang, Lamlai, Moirang, Leimakhong, and Jiribam**. Notably:
- **Jiribam**, a critical region bordering Assam, is now back under AFSPA.
- These areas were previously exempted from AFSPA between **April 2022 and April 2023**, prior to the onset of the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur.

The **reimplementation** is aimed at curbing insurgent violence and enhancing security in these volatile areas.

What is the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)?

Background:
- The origins of AFSPA trace back to **British-era laws** designed to suppress the **Quit India Movement**.
- It was first introduced as four ordinances in **1947**, later replaced by an act in **1948**.
- The current version, enacted in **1958** under **Home Minister G.B. Pant**, was initially called the **Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) Special Powers Act**.
- Over time, it extended to cover states like **Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya**.

Key Provisions of AFSPA:
- **Control Over Disturbed Areas**: Enacted to regulate regions declared as **disturbed** due to internal conflicts or insurgency.
- **Special Powers to Armed Forces**:
  - **Open Fire**: Security forces can fire upon individuals if deemed necessary.
  - **Arrest Without Warrant**: Officers are empowered to arrest without judicial permission.
  - **Search Without Warrant**: Premises and individuals can be searched without prior authorization.
- **Protection for Security Forces**: Legal prosecution of officers requires prior approval from the **Central Government**.

States Affected by AFSPA:
AFSPA is currently enforced in parts of:
- **Nagaland**
- **Assam**
- **Manipur**
- **Arunachal Pradesh**

However, it has been **lifted from Meghalaya (2018)** and repealed in **Tripura (2015)**.

Disturbed Area Status:
- A **disturbed area** is declared under **Section 3 of AFSPA** based on threats from internal conflicts.
- The **Governor** or the **Central Government** can issue the notification, allowing the deployment of armed forces.
- Once declared, the area retains its status for at least **three months** under **The Disturbed Areas (Special Courts) Act, 1976**.

Controversial Provisions of AFSPA:
Section 3: Empowers the **Centre** to declare any region as a **Disturbed Area**, even without the **state's consent**.
Section 4: Grants extensive authority to armed forces, including:
- **Use of Lethal Force**: Officers can fire upon individuals, even if it results in death.
- **Arrests Without Warrants**: Enables detention without judicial oversight.
- **Unrestricted Searches**: Permits property searches without prior authorization.

Section 7: Mandates prior approval from the **state or central authorities** for prosecuting security personnel, often leading to **allegations of misuse and lack of accountability**.

Conclusion:
The **reimposition of AFSPA in Manipur** highlights the government's ongoing struggle to address rising violence in the region. While the act strengthens the security apparatus, it also invites concerns over **civil liberties** and **human rights violations**. Balancing **security needs** with **community rights** remains a pressing challenge for policymakers.

GS Paper 3 – Environment, Biodiversity, and Disaster Management

3 MATES Migration Scheme: A New Pathway for Indian Professionals

Context: Australia has introduced an innovative initiative called the **Mobility Arrangement for Talented Early-professionals Scheme (MATES)**, designed to attract **young Indian talent** and provide them with opportunities to **work in Australia** for a limited period.

What is the MATES Scheme?

The **MATES Scheme** is a part of the **Migration and Mobility Partnership Arrangement (MMPA)** between India and Australia. It allows **Indian university graduates** and **early-career professionals** to gain valuable international work experience in Australia for up to **two years**.

Key Highlights of the MATES Scheme

Background:

- The scheme is part of the **Migration and Mobility Partnership Arrangement (MMPA)**, aimed at promoting **two-way migration** and addressing issues related to **illegal and irregular migration**.
- MATES will officially commence in **December 2024**.

Eligibility Criteria:

To qualify for the MATES Scheme, applicants must:

1. Be **30 years old or younger** at the time of application.
2. Have **proficient English skills**, demonstrated by an **IELTS score of 6 or equivalent** (minimum 5 in each module).
3. Hold a **Bachelor's degree or higher** in one of the following fields:
   o **Renewable Energy**
   o **Mining**
   o **Engineering**
   o **Information and Communications Technology (ICT)**
   o **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**
   o **Financial Technology (FinTech)**
   o **Agricultural Technology (AgriTech)**
4. Be a recent graduate (within two years) from an **eligible educational institution**.
5. Be an alumnus of one of India's **top 100 universities** as per the **NIRF 2024 rankings**.
6. Not have participated in the **MATES Scheme** previously.

Features of the MATES Scheme:

- **Duration**: Participants can **live and work in Australia for up to 2 years**.
- **Dependents**: Visa holders can bring their **spouses and dependent children**, who will have full **work rights**. Dependents do not count towards the **3,000 annual participant cap**.
- **Pilot Programme**: The scheme begins as a **pilot**, with **3,000 slots annually** for primary applicants.
- **Flexible Entry**: Visa holders have **12 months** to make their first entry into Australia and can stay for **24 months** from the first entry date.

Significance of the MATES Scheme:

- **Boosts Talent Mobility**: Offers a platform for **Indian graduates** to explore global opportunities and enhance their professional expertise.
- **Strengthens Bilateral Ties**: Deepens the **India-Australia relationship** through strategic cooperation in education, technology, and workforce development.
- **Encourages High-Demand Skills**: Focuses on industries critical to future growth, such as **AI, FinTech, and Renewable Energy**.
- **Empowers Dependents**: Allows families to relocate and enjoy employment opportunities in Australia, making it a more attractive option for young professionals.

The **MATES Scheme** is a game-changer for talented **Indian professionals**, offering them a gateway to explore international work environments, contribute to key industries, and foster stronger ties between India and Australia.

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4 — Operation Dronagiri: Transforming Lives with Geospatial Technology

Context: The Department of Science and Technology (DST) has recently launched **Operation Dronagiri**, a pioneering initiative aimed at showcasing the transformative potential of **geospatial technologies**. The launch took place at the **Foundation for Innovation and Technology Transfer (FITT)**, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi.

What is Operation Dronagiri?

Operation Dronagiri is a **pilot project** under the **National Geospatial Policy 2022**, designed to demonstrate how geospatial technologies can **enhance citizens' quality of life** and **streamline business processes**.

Key Objectives and Features

1. Core Goals

- **Integration of Geospatial Technologies**: Showcase innovative applications in fields like **agriculture, livelihoods, logistics, and transport**.
- **Ease of Access to Spatial Data**: Utilize the **Integrated Geospatial Data Sharing Interface (GDI)** to make spatial data easily accessible.
- **Nationwide Impact**: Build a foundation for **nationwide implementation** by proving its value in a **pilot phase**.

2. Pilot Phase Implementation

The project will first be rolled out in five states:

- **Uttar Pradesh**
- **Haryana**
- **Assam**
- **Andhra Pradesh**
- **Maharashtra**

Here, **use cases** will be developed to demonstrate the real-world applications of geospatial technology across key sectors.

3. Collaborative Framework

- **Partnerships**: Collaboration with **government departments, industries, corporates, and startups** to leverage resources and expertise.
- **Implementing Agency**: The project is spearheaded by the **Geospatial Innovation Cell, Department of Science and Technology**.
- **Operational Support**: Activities are supervised by the **IIT Tirupati Navavishkar I-Hub Foundation (IITTNiF)**.
- **Geospatial Innovation Accelerators (GIAs)**: Institutes such as **IIT Kanpur, IIT Bombay, IIM Calcutta, and IIT Ropar** will serve as operational arms to drive the initiative forward.

The Backbone: Geospatial Data Infrastructure

The project is powered by an **Integrated Geospatial Data Sharing Interface (GDI)**, a robust platform that ensures easy access to spatial data and promotes innovation in geospatial technologies.

Significance of Operation Dronagiri:

- **Empowering Sectors**: It focuses on solving challenges in **agriculture**, improving **livelihoods**, and optimizing **logistics and transport** systems.
- **Skill Development**: Enhances **geospatial skills and knowledge**, aligning with the **National Geospatial Policy**.
- **Fostering Innovation**: Encourages collaboration between startups, corporates, and academia to drive technological advancements.
- **Nationwide Transformation**: Creates a blueprint for the **nationwide rollout** of geospatial applications, improving governance and economic growth.

Way Forward:

Operation Dronagiri represents a **milestone in geospatial innovation** in India. By aligning with the **National Geospatial Policy 2022**, it is set to create a **modernized, data-driven ecosystem** that will benefit citizens, industries, and governments alike.

5 **SVASTIK Initiative: Bridging Tradition and Science**

Context: At the **International Conference on Communication and Dissemination of Traditional Knowledge (CDTK-2024),** the Director of CSIR-National Institute of Science Communication and Policy Research (NIScPR) presented an overview of the innovative **SVASTIK Initiative**. This national effort combines traditional wisdom with scientific validation to ensure its preservation and relevance in modern society.

What is the SVASTIK Initiative?

The **Scientifically Validated Traditional Knowledge (SVASTIK)** initiative, coordinated by **CSIR-NIScPR**, is a national program aimed at:

- **Preserving Traditional Practices**: Ensuring the longevity of culturally significant traditions.
- **Encouraging Scientific Validation**: Fostering a **scientific approach** to verify the authenticity and benefits of traditional knowledge.
- **Building Public Trust**: Boosting public confidence in the **scientific validity** of traditional practices.

Collaborative Efforts:

The initiative involves **research organizations**, **higher education institutions**, **experts**, and **NGOs** working together to:

- Document Indian traditional knowledge.
- Share scientifically validated information with society.

Achievements of the SVASTIK Initiative:

- **Dissemination of Knowledge**: SVASTIK has successfully shared engaging stories of scientifically validated traditions in **17 Indian languages** through **social media platforms**.
- **Inspirational Publications**: Two dedicated **SVASTIK publications** provide authenticated narratives on traditional knowledge, inspiring young minds to explore science through a cultural lens.
- **Community Engagement**: By linking traditional knowledge with scientific temper, the initiative fosters a deeper connection between India's heritage and its scientific future.

About CSIR:

India's Premier R&D Organization:

The **Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)** is India's foremost publicly funded research organization. It promotes cutting-edge advancements in **natural sciences** and **engineering**, translating them for the benefit of the nation.

Key Facts about CSIR:

- **Legal Status**: Registered under the **Societies Registration Act, 1860**.
- **Network**: Operates **37 national laboratories**, **39 outreach centers**, **one innovation complex**, and **three specialized units** across India.
- **Headquarters**: Based in **New Delhi**.

Organizational Structure:

- **President**: The **Prime Minister of India** (Ex-officio).
- **Vice President**: The **Union Minister of Science and Technology** (Ex-officio).

Governing Body: Headed by the **Director-General**, with the **Finance Secretary (Expenditure)** as an ex-officio member. Other members serve **three-year terms**.

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GS Paper 2 – Governance, Constitution, Polity, Social Justice and International Relations

6 25th Session of the IRIGC-TEC

Context: The **25th session** of the **India-Russia Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological, and Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC)** was recently co-chaired by **India's External Affairs Minister** and **Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister** in **New Delhi**. The session highlighted significant strides in the **trade relations** and **strategic cooperation** between the two nations across various sectors.

Key Highlights from the 25th Session of IRIGC-TEC

1. **Ambitious Trade Targets: USD 100 Billion by 2030:** India and Russia set a target to achieve a **USD 100 billion** trade goal by **2030**. Both nations are optimistic about reaching this target, with notable progress already made in several sectors.

2. **Advancing Trade and Overcoming Challenges:** Both countries have made substantial progress in overcoming **payment and logistics barriers**. Nearly **90% of bilateral trade** is now being conducted using **local or alternative currencies**, with only a small portion remaining in freely convertible currencies. This shift is helping both nations mitigate the impact of international financial fluctuations.

3. **Focus on Diversification:** Efforts are underway to move beyond traditional trade areas like **crude oil** and explore opportunities in **agriculture**, **pharmaceuticals**, **industrial equipment**, and **technology**. This will help both countries reduce the existing trade imbalance, which is heavily skewed by oil imports from Russia.

4. **Strengthening Connectivity and Talent Mobility:** Both countries emphasized the importance of enhancing connectivity, notably through initiatives such as the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** and the **Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor**. These projects are designed to improve **trade logistics**. Additionally, there is a strong focus on promoting **talent mobility** and **skills development**, particularly in sectors aligned with Russia's needs.

5. **Economic Cooperation Beyond 2030:** The session also set the stage for long-term economic cooperation. Working groups were tasked with advancing discussions on **market access**, **services**, **investments**, and **technology exchange**, aiming for a comprehensive economic cooperation program through 2030.

Trade and Economic Landscape Between India and Russia

Bilateral Trade Milestones:
- India and Russia originally aimed to increase bilateral trade to **USD 30 billion** by **2025**.
- In **FY 2023-24**, bilateral trade reached a record **USD 65.7 billion**, with India's exports valued at **USD 4.26 billion** and imports from Russia at **USD 61.44 billion**.

Key Imports and Exports:
- **Imports from Russia** include **oil, petroleum products, fertilizers, minerals, precious stones**, and **vegetable oils**.
- **Exports to Russia** include **pharmaceuticals, organic chemicals**, **electrical machinery**, **mechanical appliances**, and **iron & steel**.

Challenges in India-Russia Trade:
1. **Trade Imbalance:** India faces a **trade deficit** of nearly **USD 57 billion** with Russia, primarily due to the **crude oil imports**. India's exports to Russia are relatively low in comparison, contributing to the imbalance.
2. **Geopolitical Challenges:** India's growing ties with the **US** and the **Quad** are complicated by the ongoing **Ukraine war**, which may limit the depth of strategic cooperation with Russia. Furthermore, Russia's alignment with **China** impacts its ability to balance relations with both nations, reducing India's leverage in **multilateral forums**.

3. **Sanctions and Compliance Issues: Western sanctions** on Russia present a significant hurdle in trade relations, as some Indian companies now face targeted sanctions. India must balance its **defence** and **energy ties** with Russia while adhering to international norms.

4. **Slow Trade Diversification:** While the energy sector has boomed, efforts to diversify into areas like **automotive parts**, **electronics**, and **renewables** have been slow. Additionally, **Russia's declining international influence** makes it challenging to engage India in new economic areas like **technology** and **manufacturing**.

5. **Connectivity Projects Hindered:** Projects like the **INSTC** and the **Chennai-Vladivostok Corridor** are central to the India-Russia trade strategy, but India's interest in other routes like the **India-Middle East-Europe Corridor** may reduce the INSTC's significance, affecting its performance.

Addressing Trade Challenges: India-Russia Initiatives

1. **Special Rupee-Vostro Account:** To bypass international sanctions and facilitate **local currency payments**, India introduced the **Special Rupee-Vostro Account**, allowing Indian and Russian businesses to transact without relying on global financial systems.

2. **Free Trade Agreement (FTA):** India and Russia are working toward an **FTA** with the **Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)** to reduce trade barriers and streamline cooperation. A **Bilateral Investment Treaty** is also under negotiation, aimed at boosting economic engagement between the two countries.

3. **Facilitating Business Ventures:** Russia has expressed interest in India's **Make in India** program, which could lead to new **joint ventures** and enhance **economic collaboration** in manufacturing and other sectors.

4. **Bilateral Agreements:** The **Authorised Economic Operators (AEO)** agreement was signed between India and Russia, simplifying trade processes and providing mutual benefits for trusted exporters in both nations.

5. **Energy Sector Cooperation:** Energy remains a focal point, with efforts to expand cooperation in the **nuclear**, **solar**, and **wind energy sectors**.

6. **Russian Business Centre in New Delhi:** The establishment of the **Russian Business Centre** in New Delhi aims to strengthen ties through **business forums**, **regional missions**, and analytical support to enhance economic cooperation.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC):

The **INSTC** is a **7,200 km multimodal transit** route connecting the **Indian Ocean** and **Persian Gulf** to the **Caspian Sea** and **northern Europe** via **St. Petersburg**, Russia. Launched in **2000** through a trilateral agreement by **India**, **Iran**, and **Russia**, it aims to strengthen **trade and logistics** between the countries involved.

Significance of INSTC:

- **Boosts connectivity** between India, Central Asia, and **Eurasian regions**.
- **Membership**: India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman, Syria, and **Bulgaria** (Observer State).

By enhancing connectivity and leveraging strategic partnerships, India and Russia are poised to strengthen their bilateral ties, ensuring greater **trade cooperation** and **economic growth** in the years to come.