

1. Short News

Scarborough Shoal Tensions in the South China Sea

Context: China has reportedly deployed fishing boats, coast guard vessels, and a floating barrier at the entrance of Scarborough Shoal, intensifying tensions with the Philippines in the South China Sea. Satellite imagery indicates attempts by China to restrict access to the shoal's lagoon, a historically rich fishing ground.

About Scarborough Shoal

1. Scarborough Shoal is a disputed atoll in the South China Sea, claimed by both China and the Philippines as part of their territory.
2. Geographical Position: It lies roughly 220 km west of Luzon, the Philippines' main island, and more than 800 km southeast of Hong Kong.
3. Local Names:
 1. Bajo de Masinloc (Philippines)
 2. Huang yan Island (China)

Strategic Importance of the Scarborough Shoal

1. Rich Fishing Grounds: The shoal has long served as a productive fishing area, traditionally used by fishermen from the Philippines, China, and Vietnam.
2. Maritime Position: It lies about 120 nautical miles from the Philippine coast, placing it entirely within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).
3. Control of Sea Lanes: The shoal lies in the South China Sea, a major global shipping route carrying around one-third of global maritime trade.
4. Potential Military Value: Control of the shoal would enable surveillance of maritime activities and enhance the ability to project naval power in the region.

Legal and Diplomatic Background

1. 2012 Standoff: China seized effective control of the shoal following a 2012 standoff with the Philippines.
2. 2016 International Arbitration Ruling: The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the South China Sea Arbitration Case (Philippines v. China) held that China's blockade violated international law and recognised the shoal as a traditional fishing ground.
3. Unresolved Sovereignty Issue: The ruling clarified maritime rights but did not determine sovereignty over the shoal.
4. China's Rejection of the Verdict: China rejected the ruling and continues to assert claims based on the Nine-Dash Line.
5. Nine-Dash Line: A demarcation line used by China to claim historic rights over most of the South China Sea, overlapping with the maritime claims of several Southeast Asian countries.

Growing Geopolitical Dimensions

1. Philippines-US Defence Cooperation: Under Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the Philippines has strengthened military ties with the United States.
2. Joint Military Exercises: Large-scale drills involving thousands of troops are planned across the Philippine archipelago, including Zambales, about 120 nautical miles from Scarborough Shoal.

BRICS Health Working Group (HWG) Meeting 2026

Context: The first Health Working Group (HWG) meeting under the BRICS framework for 2026 was held under the chair ship of India.

Key Points

1. Participation: The virtual meeting was chaired by India's Health Secretary and attended by delegates from several BRICS member countries.
2. Theme: India's BRICS presidency theme is "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability."

New Priorities Proposed by India:

1. BRICS Mission for Healthy Lifestyles to address risk factors such as unhealthy diet, inactivity, tobacco and alcohol use.
2. Mental Health and Wellness Promotion to strengthen services and reduce stigma.

Key Areas Discussed:

3. BRICS TB Research Network collaboration.
4. Integrated Early Warning System for infectious diseases.
5. Digital health architecture for continuum of care.
6. Cooperation in traditional and integrative medicine.
7. Addressing social determinants of health and strengthening public health institutions.

About BRICS

1. BRICS is a grouping of eleven major emerging economies—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia.
2. Formation (2006): BRIC was formalised at a meeting of BRIC Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in 2006.
3. First Summit (2009): The inaugural BRIC Summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia.
4. Partner Countries (2025): Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam joined as BRICS Partner Countries.

Key Declarations under BRICS

1. Fortaleza Declaration (2014): The Fortaleza Declaration was adopted at the 6th BRICS Summit, and it marked the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB).
2. Ufa Declaration (2015): Adopted at the 7th BRICS Summit in Ufa, Russia.
 1. It emphasised reforms in global governance, international security cooperation, and strengthening economic collaboration among BRICS countries.
3. Beijing Declaration (2022): Adopted at the 14th BRICS Summit in Beijing, China.
 1. It supported dialogue between Russia and Ukraine, and emphasised cooperation on COVID-19 response, digital transformation, resilient supply chains, and low-carbon development.

Cyclone Maila (2026)

Context: Recently, Severe Tropical Cyclone Maila, a Category 5 system, has claimed 23 lives in Papua New Guinea, triggering a state of emergency in the Bougainville region.

About Cyclone Maila

1. Type: Categorized as a Severe Tropical Cyclone (Category 5) over Solomon Sea
2. Origin: Northeastern Coral Sea/Solomon Sea.
3. Course: Followed an erratic, sluggish path between Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Solomon Islands before moving west-southwest toward the Cape York Peninsula.
4. Named by : Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre Port Moresby, PNG.
5. Impact: Widespread landslides and flooding caused 23 deaths in PNG, displaced thousands, and destroyed critical infrastructure across the Bougainville, East New Britain, and Milne Bay provinces.

About Tropical Cyclones

1. A tropical cyclone is a powerful circular storm originating over warm tropical oceans, defined by extremely low atmospheric pressure, torrential rain, and violent winds.
2. These systems intensify by drawing energy from warm sea surfaces, often maturing from minor depressions into massive storms like hurricanes or typhoons when sustained winds exceed 119 km/h.

Regional Names:

1. Hurricanes: North Atlantic Ocean, Northeast Pacific (off the coast of North America), and the Caribbean Sea.

2. Typhoons: Northwest Pacific Ocean (impacting East Asian countries like China, Japan, and the Philippines).
3. Cyclones: North Indian Ocean (Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea) and South Pacific Ocean.
4. Willy-Willies: Occurring in the waters off Western Australia.

Formation Conditions (Cyclogenesis)

5. Sea Surface Temperature (SST): Warm Ocean waters exceeding 27°C provide the necessary moisture and energy.
6. Coriolis Force: Must be strong enough to initiate a cyclonic vortex; hence, they do not form exactly at the Equator.
7. Vertical Wind Shear: Low variations in vertical wind speed are required to maintain the storm's structure.
8. Energy Source: Driven by the latent heat of condensation released during the formation of cumulonimbus clouds.

Structural Characteristics

9. The Eye: A central region of calm, sinking air with lowest pressure and abnormally high temperatures (warm core).
10. The Eyewall: The zone surrounding the eye with the most violent winds and heaviest rainfall.
3. Direction of Rotation: Clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere and Counter-clockwise in the Northern Hemisphere due to the Coriolis Effect.
4. Path: Generally, move westward due to trade winds (Easterlies) before "re-curving" poleward.
5. Landfall: The storm weakens rapidly over land as the supply of moisture (energy) is cut off and surface friction increases.

Age Tokens

Context: Andhra Pradesh government has proposed "age tokens" integrated with DigiLocker to enable privacy-preserving age authentication for social media access.

1. Legislative Initiative: A Group of Ministers (GoM) is working on legislation inspired by global models to regulate social media usage for minors under 16.
2. Age-Based social media Policy: The policy proposes a complete ban on social media for children below 13 and restricted, age-appropriate access for those aged 13–16.

About Age Tokens

1. Age tokens are a digital proof of age that confirms how old a person is without revealing his full identity.
2. Integration with Digital Infrastructure: Proposed to be issued via DigiLocker, leveraging existing government-backed digital identity infrastructure.
3. Privacy Mechanism: Platforms will only see age eligibility instead of sensitive personal data like name or Aadhaar number.
4. Regulatory Tool: They will facilitate enforcement of age-based restrictions (e.g., banning under-13 users, limiting 13–16 usage on social media).
5. Implementation Concerns: Includes privacy risks, digital divide issues, and technological complexity in large-scale adoption.

Urban Challenge Fund (UCF)

Context: Recently the operational guidelines for the Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) to boost market-driven financing for sustainable urban infrastructure in emerging cities was launched.

Urban Challenge Fund (UCF)

1. Urban Challenge Fund is an initiative aimed at catalysing large-scale urban infrastructure investments through market-based financing mechanisms.
2. Objective: To promote reform-driven, financially sustainable urban development by enabling cities to access diverse funding sources like municipal bonds, loans, and PPPs.

3. Nodal Ministry: Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.
4. Implementation: Supported by the Credit Repayment Guarantee Sub-Scheme to enhance creditworthiness of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and attract private investment.
5. Budget Outlay: Total central assistance of ₹1 lakh crore, aiming to leverage nearly ₹4 lakh crore in overall investments; includes allocations for projects, capacity building, and credit guarantees.
6. Focus Areas: Targets Tier-II and Tier-III cities, including hilly and North-Eastern regions; prioritises urban mobility, redevelopment, water and sanitation, last-mile connectivity, and climate-resilient infrastructure.
7. Significance: Strengthens financial autonomy of ULBs, promotes investment-ready urban hubs, and aligns with long-term goals like Viksit Bharat @2047 and sustainable urban transformation.

