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Amid West Asia war, why central banks are between a rock and hard place

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UPSC Spotlight - focus page for prelims 2026

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## WEST ASIA ON EDGE: ESCALATION, ENERGY SHOCK, AND EXPANDING GLOBAL STAKES



The ongoing conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States has entered a dangerous new phase marked by military escalation and geopolitical signalling. The U.S. is deploying additional naval and marine forces, including an amphibious assault ship, to the region amid concerns over the closure of the strategically critical Strait of Hormuz. This disruption has triggered a sharp spike in global oil prices. Israel claims to have significantly degraded Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities through strikes on key infrastructure such as the South Pars gas field, while also targeting high-ranking Iranian military and intelligence officials. Meanwhile, Iran's leadership has projected resilience and unity, even as internal stability remains uncertain.

The war is increasingly drawing in global actors, highlighting its international ramifications. Several Western nations, including France, Germany, and United Kingdom, have expressed willingness to ensure maritime security in the region, though conditional on de-escalation. At the same time, tensions within alliances have surfaced, with the U.S. criticising partners for limited involvement. The conflict shows no immediate signs of resolution, with experts warning that restoration of disrupted energy supplies could take months. Expanding dimensions—such as cyber, maritime, and proxy engagements—combined with high-profile assassinations and infrastructure attacks, indicate that the war is evolving beyond a bilateral confrontation into a wider geopolitical crisis with long-term implications for global security and energy stability.

## Assam inks pact with Hmar, Kuki extremist groups

The Government of Assam has signed a memorandum of settlement with four insurgent groups, including three Kuki outfits and one Hmar group, marking a significant step toward peace in the poll-bound State. The groups involved include the Hmar People's Convention-Democratic and three Kuki organisations, whose members had laid down arms earlier in 2012 under a Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement.

### From Insurgency to Negotiation

These groups had laid down arms in 2012 as part of a Suspension of Operations agreement, which is a ceasefire arrangement between the government and insurgent outfits. This was followed by multiple rounds of tripartite negotiations involving the State government, the Centre, and the insurgent groups. The recently signed settlement represents the culmination of these prolonged discussions aimed at ensuring peace, stability, and integration of former militants into mainstream society.



### Key Provisions of the Memorandum of Settlement

A major feature of the agreement is the creation of two dedicated institutional bodies: a Hmar Welfare Development Council and a Kuki Welfare Development Council. These councils will cater specifically to the developmental needs of Hmar- and Kuki-dominated areas in the State. Each council will include key positions such as a chairman, deputy chairman, chief executive member, and other nominated members, with headquarters in Guwahati.

### Governance and Development Framework

The councils will function as developmental bodies, preparing budgets based on local needs and submitting them to the State's Transformation and Development Department. This institutional mechanism aims to ensure targeted development, improved governance, and better representation of the communities. Such decentralised arrangements reflect an effort to address long-standing socio-economic grievances.

### Rehabilitation and Reintegration Measures

The agreement also includes provisions for the rehabilitation of former insurgents. The State government has committed to facilitating their reintegration through established procedures, which may include livelihood support and social rehabilitation. This is a critical component in sustaining peace and preventing relapse into insurgency.

### Who are the Hmar Community?

The Hmars are an ethnic group primarily residing in parts of Assam, particularly in the Cachar and North Cachar Hills regions. Historical records indicate that they were present in these areas even before British annexation in 1832, when they were referred to as "Old Kuki." Traditionally, the Hmars had their own local self-governing institutions, such as the Hill Panchayat, which continued under British policy of non-interference in tribal customs. The Hmar community has played a significant role in regional history, including during the time of India's partition in 1947, when they contributed to retaining the Cachar region within the Indian Union. They have a distinct cultural identity, rooted in customary practices, local governance systems, and strong community structures, which continue to shape their socio-political aspirations.

The memorandum of settlement is significant as it strengthens peace-building efforts in Northeast India by addressing both security and developmental concerns. It reflects a shift from conflict management to inclusive governance and regional development.

## How Pakistan's strategic assets became its greatest threat

A serious escalation has emerged between Afghanistan and Pakistan, marked by cross-border airstrikes and retaliatory attacks. The crisis intensified after Pakistan allegedly bombed a facility in Kabul, leading to heavy civilian casualties, while both sides have reported significant military losses.

This escalation has effectively broken the fragile ceasefire mediated in 2025 and reflects deeper structural tensions in bilateral relations.

### Immediate Causes: Military Escalation and Ceasefire Breakdown

The present conflict began with Pakistan's military operation involving airstrikes on Afghan territory, followed by retaliatory attacks by Afghan forces. The cycle of action and reaction has resulted in rising casualties on both sides, including civilians. The breakdown of the ceasefire indicates the absence of trust and highlights the volatility of relations, especially in border regions.

### The TTP Factor: Core Security Challenge

A major driver of the conflict is the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), formed in 2007. The group emerged in response to Pakistan's alignment with the U.S. "War on Terror" and intensified military operations in tribal regions. Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing safe havens to the TTP, while the Afghan Taliban deny direct support, calling it Pakistan's internal issue. However, ideological and ethnic linkages between the Afghan Taliban and TTP complicate the situation.

### Pakistan's Strategic Contradiction

Pakistan's long-standing policy of supporting Afghan militant groups has created a strategic dilemma. Historically, Pakistan maintained ties with the Taliban to secure influence in Afghanistan, but the same networks now pose a threat through groups like the TTP. Thus, what was once considered a "strategic asset" has transformed into a "strategic liability," undermining Pakistan's internal security.

The Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict today is shaped by a combination of historical disputes, militant networks, and strategic miscalculations. The Durand Line issue, the rise of the TTP, and Pakistan's past policies toward the Taliban all intersect to create a highly volatile situation. The current crisis underscores the limits of proxy-based strategies and highlights the need for sustained diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and a rethinking of security doctrines to achieve long-term stability.



### Strategic Depth Doctrine

Pakistan's policy of "Strategic Depth," developed during the Cold War, aimed at ensuring a friendly regime in Afghanistan to gain geopolitical leverage. This policy was implemented through support to Mujahideen groups during Operation Cyclone, with Pakistan acting as a key facilitator. However, this approach has had unintended consequences, including the rise of militant networks that now operate beyond state control.

### The Durand Line Dispute: Historical Root of Conflict

The Durand Line, drawn in 1893 by British authorities, remains a major source of contention. Originally intended as a buffer, it became an international border after 1947, dividing Pashtun populations across both countries. Afghanistan has historically rejected the legitimacy of this boundary, leading to repeated diplomatic and military tensions over decades.

### Historical Trajectory of Tensions

Relations between the two countries have been marked by recurring conflicts, including disputes over Pashtunistan, cross-border incursions, and political mistrust. Afghanistan even opposed Pakistan's entry into the United Nations in 1947. Throughout the Cold War and beyond, Pakistan supported various Afghan factions to counter regional threats, but this strategy has contributed to long-term instability.

## Amid West Asia war, why central banks are between a rock and hard place

The ongoing West Asia conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has led to a sharp increase in global energy prices and heightened economic uncertainty. Policymakers across the world are now confronted with a difficult choice between controlling inflation and sustaining economic growth, making this a classic macroeconomic dilemma.

### Transmission Mechanism: Energy to Inflation

The rise in energy prices directly increases the cost of fuels such as petrol, diesel, LPG, and LNG, thereby raising household expenditure. At the same time, higher energy costs increase transportation and production expenses for firms, which are eventually passed on to consumers. This results in **cost-push inflation**, where the overall price level in the economy rises significantly.

### Central Bank's Conventional Approach

Central banks such as the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank usually respond to rising inflation by increasing interest rates. Higher interest rates make borrowing more expensive, which reduces consumption and investment demand in the economy. This decline in demand helps in controlling inflation, as was observed after the Russia-Ukraine War.

### Why Interest Rates Are Not Being Raised Now

Despite the clear risk of rising inflation, central banks have chosen not to increase interest rates due to a high degree of uncertainty surrounding the conflict. The duration of the war, its impact on energy supply, and the future trajectory of prices remain unclear. In such a situation, premature monetary tightening could aggravate economic instability instead of stabilizing it.



### Growth and Employment Risks

Rising energy prices reduce the purchasing power of households and increase the overall cost of living, thereby weakening consumer demand. At the same time, declining stock markets reduce household wealth, further dampening consumption. As demand for goods and services falls, firms may cut back production and hiring, leading to slower economic growth and higher unemployment. If this slowdown persists and GDP contracts for two consecutive quarters, the economy may enter a recession.

### The Stagflation Trap

The most concerning outcome of the current situation is the simultaneous occurrence of high inflation and low economic growth. In this scenario, rising prices coexist with declining output and increasing unemployment, creating a condition known as stagflation. This is particularly dangerous because the usual policy tools become ineffective or counterproductive.

### Policy Trade-off

If central banks choose to raise interest rates, they may succeed in controlling inflation but at the cost of reducing economic growth and increasing unemployment. On the other hand, if they lower interest rates to stimulate growth, they risk further increasing inflation. This creates a policy dilemma where any action taken can worsen another aspect of the economy.

### Current Outlook: Mixed Signals

Recent projections by the Federal Open Market Committee show an unusual situation where both growth and inflation expectations have been revised upwards. At the same time, the risks associated with these projections remain uncertain, with possibilities of both higher inflation and lower growth.

The central issue facing policymakers today is not simply inflation or economic slowdown in isolation, but the simultaneous risk of both occurring together. The global economy appears to be moving toward a stagflationary phase, where rising prices are accompanied by stagnant growth and increasing unemployment. In such a complex situation, central banks are choosing caution, as conventional policy tools may not be sufficient to address this dual challenge.

## From Avestan and Persian to Rumi and Sufism: The many links between India and Iran

India and Iran share one of the deepest and oldest cultural relationships in the world. These ties go beyond modern geopolitics and are rooted in prehistoric migrations, shared linguistic origins, and long-standing civilisational exchanges. Among regions west of India, Iran stands out as having the most sustained and intimate interaction with South Asia.

### Prehistoric and Early Cultural Interactions

The connection dates back over 60,000 years, when early human migrations moved along the Persian coast into South Asia. Later, populations related to early Iranian groups intermixed with early Indians, contributing to the development of agriculture in northwestern India and eventually the urbanisation of the Indus Valley Civilisation. Thus, early genetic and cultural exchanges laid the foundation for long-term interaction between the two regions.

### Linguistic Roots: Indo-Iranian Heritage

A major pillar of India–Iran ties lies in their shared linguistic ancestry. Sanskrit and Avestan both evolved from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Proto-Indo-European language family. There are striking similarities in vocabulary, phonetics, and poetic structures—for example, Avestan “Ahura” corresponds to Vedic “Asura,” and “Asha” (truth) parallels Indian philosophical concepts. Such similarities indicate a common cultural and intellectual heritage preserved through oral traditions over centuries.



### Shared Religious & Philosophical Concepts

Ancient Iranian religion, especially the teachings of Zoroaster, emphasised moral order (Asha), which resonates with the Vedic concept of rta. Many religious terms, rituals, and cosmological ideas show parallels between early Indian and Iranian traditions. This reflects not just linguistic similarity but also a shared worldview rooted in ethics, cosmic order, and spirituality.

### Medieval Interactions: Persian Influence and Sufism

Cultural exchange intensified during the medieval period with the spread of Persian language and Sufi traditions. Persian became a lingua franca across India under various Sultanates and empires. Influential figures like Al-Biruni documented Indian society, while Rumi inspired spiritual and literary traditions. The interaction between Sufism and Bhakti movements enriched Indian culture, promoting devotional expression and challenging rigid social hierarchies.

### Linguistic and Cultural Legacy in India

Persian deeply influenced Indian languages, contributing a vast vocabulary still in everyday use (e.g., bazar, sarkar, kagaz). It also shaped administration, literature, and communication, remaining dominant until replaced by English under British rule. In arts and music, figures like Amir Khusrau played a key role in blending Persian and Indian traditions, laying the foundation of classical music forms and enriching cultural expression.



The India–Iran relationship is a testament to how civilizations evolve through sustained cultural exchange rather than conflict. From language and religion to art and governance, Iranian influences are deeply embedded in Indian heritage. Recognising these shared roots highlights the importance of civilisational dialogue in shaping resilient societies and underscores the need to preserve such connections in a rapidly changing global order.

## Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

### International Year of Asteroid Awareness and Planetary Defence

The year 2029 has been declared the International Year of Asteroid Awareness and Planetary Defence 2029 by the United Nations General Assembly to coincide with the exceptionally close flyby of the asteroid 99942 Apophis. On 13 April 2029, Apophis will pass at a distance of about 32,000 km from Earth—within the range of geostationary satellites—making it a rare, once-in-a-millennium astronomical event visible to the naked eye. This proximity offers a unique opportunity to enhance global awareness about asteroid science, risks, and planetary defence mechanisms.

#### Scientific Importance of Near-Earth Objects (NEOs)

Near-Earth Objects (NEOs) include asteroids and comets whose orbits bring them within 1.3 astronomical units of the Sun. Those that come within 0.05 AU of Earth's orbit and are larger than 140 meters are considered potentially hazardous.

According to NASA Center for Near-Earth Object Studies, over **36,000 near-Earth asteroids** have been identified. These objects are scientifically valuable for understanding the early solar system, but they also pose impact risks that require continuous monitoring.

#### Historical Evidence of Asteroid Threats

Past asteroid events demonstrate the real risks posed by NEOs. The Tunguska event 1908 remains the largest recorded impact, flattening vast forest areas without leaving a crater. Similarly, the Chelyabinsk meteor 2013 released energy equivalent to 440 kilotons of TNT, causing widespread damage and injuries. These incidents highlight the need for preparedness and early-warning systems to mitigate potential disasters.



#### Institutional Framework for Planetary Defence

The United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs has long recognised asteroid impact as a global threat requiring coordinated international action. Under the guidance of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, key mechanisms were established in 2014. The International Asteroid Warning Network facilitates global communication, risk assessment, and dissemination of warnings regarding potential impacts. Meanwhile, the Space Mission Planning Advisory Group focuses on developing technological strategies for asteroid deflection and building consensus on planetary defence measures.



#### Global Awareness and Public Engagement

The declaration of 2029 as the International Year aims to promote education, international cooperation, and preparedness. It complements initiatives such as International Asteroid Day, which is observed annually on 30 June to commemorate the Tunguska event and raise awareness about asteroid hazards and crisis response strategies. The visibility of 99942 Apophis during its close approach is expected to serve as a powerful tool for engaging the global public and scientific community.

## Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

### Implications for Governance and International Cooperation

Asteroid threats transcend national boundaries, making planetary defence a matter of global governance. The 2029 initiative underscores the importance of data sharing, coordinated response mechanisms, and collaborative research among nations. It also highlights the dual nature of asteroids—as both potential hazards and valuable resources—thus linking planetary defence with future space economy prospects.

### Prelims model questions

Q. The year 2029 has been declared the International Year of Asteroid Awareness and Planetary Defence to mark the close approach of:

- (a) Halley's Comet
- (b) Bennu
- (c) 99942 Apophis
- (d) Vesta

Answer: (c)

Q. With reference to Near-Earth Objects (NEOs), consider the following statements:

- 1. They include both asteroids and comets.
- 2. They are objects whose orbits bring them within 1.3 AU of the Sun.
- 3. All NEOs are classified as potentially hazardous.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

### Prelims model questions

Q. Which of the following correctly matches the asteroid-related events?

- 1. Tunguska event – 1908
- 2. Chelyabinsk meteor – 2013
- 3. Chicxulub impact – 2020

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

Q. Which of the following statements regarding global planetary defence mechanisms is/are correct?

- 1. The International Asteroid Warning Network provides early warnings and risk assessment.
- 2. The Space Mission Planning Advisory Group focuses on asteroid deflection strategies.
- 3. Both operate under the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs framework.

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (d)



## PRELIMS CORNER :

1) The annual range of temperature in the interior of the continents is high as compared to coastal areas. What is / are the reason / reasons? (2013)

1. Thermal difference between land and water
2. Variation in altitude between continents and oceans
3. Presence of strong winds in the interior
4. Heavy rains in the interior as compared to coasts.

Select the correct answer using the codes given below.

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

2) Consider the following statements: (2015)

1. The winds which blow between  $30^{\circ}$  N and  $60^{\circ}$  S latitudes throughout the year are known as westerlies.
2. The moist air masses that cause winter rains in North-Western region of India are part of Westerlies.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

## CASE STUDY

### 'Not marrying maid': Supreme Court



Recent observations by the Supreme Court of India reflect a broader transformation in India's family system. Marriage is increasingly being viewed not as a hierarchical institution but as a partnership based on equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibilities. The traditional notion of rigid gender roles—where domestic work was primarily assigned to women—is gradually being questioned.

Historically, Indian families operated within a patriarchal framework, where men were seen as breadwinners and women as homemakers. However, with rising education, urbanisation, and women's workforce participation, these roles are evolving. The expectation that household chores are solely a woman's duty is giving way to the idea of shared domestic responsibilities.

Judicial pronouncements now increasingly reflect contemporary social realities. The Supreme Court's emphasis that "marriage is a partnership, not a one-sided arrangement" signals a progressive interpretation of marital relations. It also clarifies that refusal to perform household chores alone cannot be automatically equated with cruelty, highlighting a move away from outdated expectations.

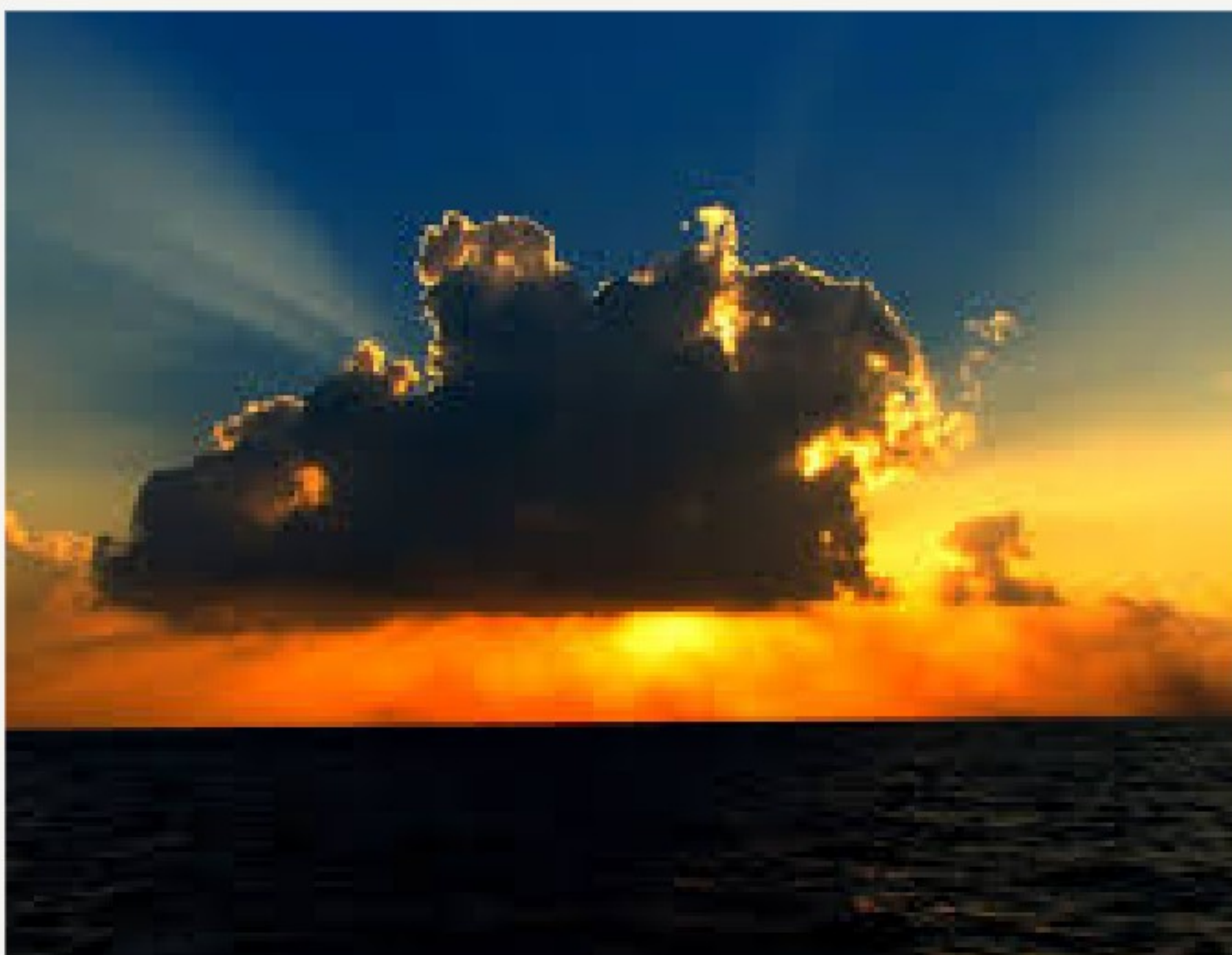
# Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) The correct answer is a

The annual range of temperature refers to the difference between the highest and lowest temperatures recorded over a year. This range is significantly higher in the interiors of continents compared to coastal areas primarily due to the thermal properties of land and water. Land heats up and cools down much faster than water because it has a lower specific heat capacity. As a result, continental interiors experience very hot summers and very cold winters, leading to a large annual temperature range. In contrast, coastal areas are influenced by nearby oceans, which heat and cool more slowly, thereby moderating temperatures and reducing seasonal extremes.

The other factors listed do not adequately explain this phenomenon. Variation in altitude affects temperature locally but does not account for the general difference between coastal and inland regions. Strong winds are not a consistent feature of interiors and, in fact, tend to moderate temperature differences by mixing air masses. Similarly, rainfall patterns do not directly determine temperature range; moreover, coastal regions typically receive more rainfall than interiors.

Thus, the primary reason for the higher annual temperature range in continental interiors is the differential heating and cooling of land and water.

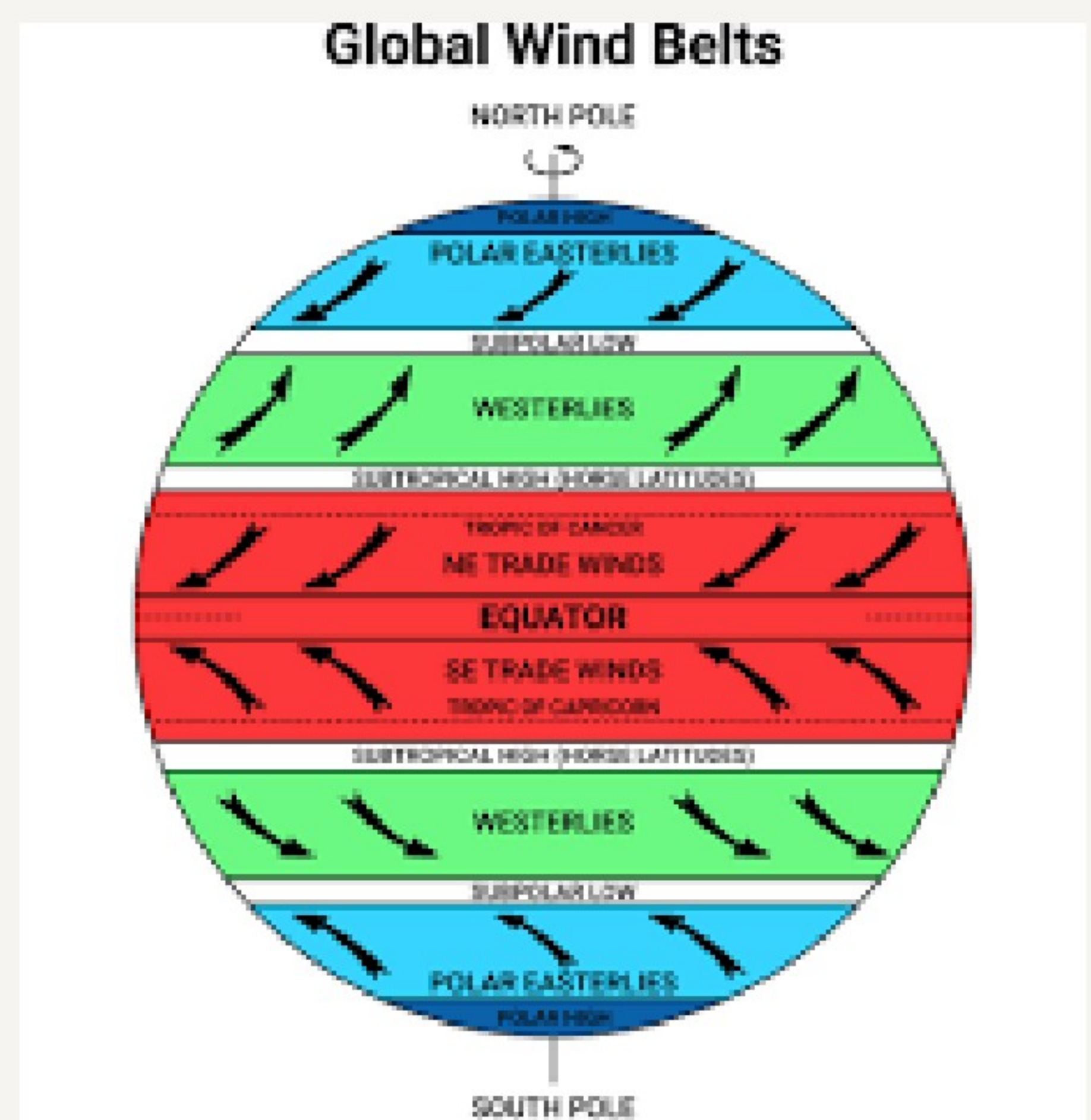


2) The correct answer is (b)

Statement 1 is incorrect. The winds that blow between  $30^\circ$  and  $60^\circ$  latitudes in both hemispheres are known as the westerlies, as they generally move from west to east. However, the statement is factually inaccurate because it mentions that these winds blow "throughout the year" uniformly between  $30^\circ$  N and  $60^\circ$  S, which is not precise. The westerlies are not symmetrically or continuously distributed across these latitudes in both hemispheres at all times. In reality, their extent and intensity vary seasonally due to shifting pressure belts and land-sea contrasts. In the Southern Hemisphere, although westerlies are stronger and more continuous over oceans, their exact latitudinal spread is not fixed year-round. Hence, the statement is conceptually flawed.

Statement 2 is correct. The winter rainfall in the northwestern parts of India is caused by western disturbances, which are extratropical cyclones originating in the Mediterranean region. These systems are embedded within the westerlies and are carried eastward by them. As they move towards the Indian subcontinent, they bring moisture and cause rainfall and snowfall during winter months, particularly in regions like Punjab, Haryana, and the western Himalayas.

Thus, only Statement 2 is correct.





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