GPS Interference

Mains syllabus: *GS3 - Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life, disaster management.*

Why in the news?

Recently, GPS interference has emerged as one of the biggest challenges for seafaring vessels and aircraft.

What is GPS interference?

- **Global Positioning System (GPS)** – It is a *space-based radio-navigation system*, owned by the U.S. Government and operated by the United States Air Force (USAF).
- It can pinpoint a *3 dimensional position to meter-level accuracy* and time to the 10-nanosecond level, worldwide and 24/7.

- **GPS Interference** – It refers to spoofing or jamming, two types of *deliberate cyber-attacks on GPS signals*, which disrupt or deceive vehicles' navigation systems.
- While both are often used synonymously with each other, spoofing and jamming refer to slightly different.

GPS jamming	GPS spoofing
Involves a ***device (jammer)*** emitting strong radio signals on GPS frequencies to *overpower weaker signals.*	Involves a device transmitting signals on the same frequencies used by GPS satellites, *blocking the GPS receivers* from acquiring or maintaining the right satellite signals.

It disrupts the functioning of GPS systems by *rendering receivers unable to determine location or time.*	Unlike jamming, which disrupts signals entirely, it *deceives the receiver into trusting false data*.

- **Causes** – GPS interference can occur due to various reasons, *not all of them malicious.*
  - Electromagnetic radiation from nearby devices
  - Adverse atmospheric conditions like ionospheric disturbances, solar activity (such as flares)
  - Intentional jamming/spoofing.

Why is it dangerous?

- **Disrupts military operations** - Spoofing can cause a pilot to *misjudge the aircraft's position,* increasing the chance of collisions with terrain or other aircraft.
  - In 2024, reports indicated up to 700 daily GPS spoofing incidents globally, highlighting the scale of the threat.
- **Interrupts civilian transport** – It can severely disrupt civilian transport by causing navigational errors, leading to *potential collisions, groundings, and traffic chaos*.
- **Disrupts maritime navigation** – It can also lead to *piracy, disastrous events.*
  - Persian Gulf and the Red Sea amid ongoing conflicts are one of the vulnerable regions.

*Maritime tech consultancy Windward's Q1 2025 data show a 350% rise in **spoofing incidents in the Red Sea** alone compared to 2024–with some vessels having experienced sudden position jumps of hundreds of nautical miles.*

- **Rising conflicts between nations** – If one nation suspects another of GPS interference, it can lead to accusations, *diplomatic tensions, and even retaliatory measures,* potentially escalating the situation.
- **Airspace avoidance** – For aircraft, spoofing is one of the primary risks of being in the airspace of countries in war.
- It force the nations to immediately avoid these areas as a preventive measure.
    - **For example**, avoiding respective airspace during Russia and Ukraine conflict.
- **Navigation dependence vulnerability** - A mere dependence on GPS navigation is dangerous, if GPS interference happens, leads to *disruptions in daily operations and disasters*.
    - **For instance**, during the 1999 Kargil war and during in 2009 and 2012 Brahmos missile tests - US denied access to GPS.
- **Displays false information** – Leading to collision of ships, aircraft accidents, and civilian vessel crashes etc.

How it can be prevented?

- **Using alternative navigation systems** - Aircraft experiencing GPS spoofing mid-air can rely on other navigation systems like
    - **Inertial Navigation Systems (INS)** – It use *gyroscopes and accelerometers* to track the aircraft's current position based on its last known location.
    - **VHF Omnidirectional Range (VOR) and Distance Measuring Equipment (DME)** – It provide ground-based radio navigation, allowing pilots to further cross-check their position.
    - **Instrument Landing Systems (ILS)** – They are critical for precision approaches during landing, are unaffected by GPS spoofing.
- **Enhancing crew training** - Pilots are also encouraged to listen carefully to the control room to pick up any chatter of suspected GPS spoofing and become immediately cautious of the possibility.
- **Employing alert systems** - Involving *sophisticated technology to alert* and take control of the aircraft/ships from auto-pilot mode to the manual mode.
- **Effective Use of terrestrial navigation** – It involves manual position fixing using land-based aids like lighthouses and radars, the immediate alternative to maintain situational awareness.

What lies ahead?

- *Diversifying navigation systems* can be to mitigate the risks of GPS interference in the future.
- *Multi-constellation Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS)* systems can be adapted to mitigate against GPS interference.

Reference

The Indian Express| GPS Interference Threats