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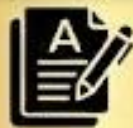
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Preparing the economy for war

India must accept a more conflict-oriented world and prepare its economy for war



One of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statements that didn't age well is the one he made in Samarkand on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in September 2022. "I know that today's era is not of war..." he said in his meeting with Vladimir Putin. This was seven months after the Ukraine war had begun, and the world was criticising India for not taking a stand against Russian aggression. Today, not only has that war still not ended, but another major conflagration has originated in West Asia, this time with America partnering Israel. Iran is retaliating not only against them but against neighbouring Islamic states as well. Last year, we too had a near war for four days with Pakistan after the Peshawar terrorist attacks, and Pakistan, meanwhile, has launched its own war against Afghanistan. And we have not even listed the wars going on in Africa.

Ideally, this should not be an era of war, given the common challenges humanity faces from multiple threats — from climate change to technological disruption — but this is clearly not an era for peace. For India, the current bill should be used to prepare ourselves for war so that we can prevent it from happening. The world over, rearmament is the name of the game. Europe is rearming, so is Japan, China and the United States never stopped their military arms race, and the Pakistan-China-Turkiye-Azerbaijan collaboration during Operation Sindoor tells us that our neighbourhood is just one miscalculation away from a wider sub-continental war where India may be fighting multiple forces, some seen, some unseen. Our eastern borders with Bangladesh, too, may not be as safe as they were under Sheikh Hasina, especially now that Jamaat-e-Islami is the main opposition party and has won most of its parliamentary seats in areas bordering India.

Wars are prevented only when potential adversaries know that they cannot win or achieve their objectives either by conflict or through the use of non-state operators and terrorism. In our neighbour-

hood, we have Pakistan, and Israel has Iran, which also sponsors terrorism against the Jewish state from multiple directions. The basis for the Israel-India friendship comes from a shared threat perception, of two countries living in the two most dangerous neighbourhoods in the world. But both have to fight their wars separately.

India has for too long been lackadaisical about defence and security spending. While this has changed under the Modi government, it is simply not happening fast enough in proportion to the threats emanating from global and neighbourhood forces. It took the Modi government several years to start ramping up domestic defence purchases and building indigenous capacities. Even while importing equipment, it was too hesitant. While ordering fighters from France in 2006-07, we did not consider whether the two squadrons ordered would be enough for our defence needs, when many more squadrons — from the MiGs to the Jaguars and Miages — were just their sell-by date. We are now far below our sanctioned strength of 42 squadrons (at 30 or below), and rushing to buy 114 Rafales, which too won't come for several years. Our indigenous Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (stealth fighter) programme is at least a decade away from production and deployment.

What is required is a change in our mindset from being a benign republic that chooses to noll with the punches rather than being prepared to fight. We need to accept the reality of a more conflict-oriented world. We do not need to become a war economy, but a war-adjacent one, one that can quickly turn its industrial and technological capability to produce war material, so that we can fight any war, deter any enemy. More so when modern wars may not be fought on the borders, but in the air, at sea, and in cyberspace, often using drones and missiles where no direct conflict with the enemy is required.

The additional lesson to learn from the Ukraine and Iran wars is that being strong alone is not good

enough if the other side is able to extend the war to domains like civilian and industrial infrastructure. Russia has been systematically demolishing Ukraine's power and other infrastructure, while Israel (unconsciously) did that in Gaza. Iran is now trying to do the same by attacking not just US and Israeli military targets, but also civilian targets in multiple countries, from Qatar to the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Oman, and even Saudi Arabia and Cyprus. This is the typical loser's gambit, where the weaker side tries to scorch the earth so badly that even its stronger enemies start wondering whether the fight is worth it. This is what we could expect from Pakistan, in case our conflicts go beyond days. They will target our civilian, industrial and services base. And, surely, they will try to generate communal tensions here so that our resolve is weakened as we fight as much on the internal front as the external one. Iran is trying to turn the Islamic street against its adversaries.

The following should be our priorities:
One, aggressively indigenise most of our fighting equipment, whether it is tanks, fighters, submarines, warships, or rocket and drone force. If needed, we should create some private monopolies with state support to enable the private sector to become defence champions by building production scale.
Two, rapidly scale up our cyber and information warfare capabilities.

Three, integrate civilian and defence industry partnerships so that civilian production capabilities can quickly be turned to war machinery when needed.

Four, integrate academia with the public and private sector defence units for a more aggressive technological upgrade.

Five, invest heavily in intelligence gathering, both through the use of technology and plain old human intelligence. The Ayatollah and the top leadership in Iran could not have been taken out only with eyes in the sky or tech eavesdropping.

Six, create protocols for state governments and the police to effectively coordinate civilian defence if industrial and civilian infrastructure is targeted. When power grids are down, refineries are hit, and water supplies are impacted due to missile strikes, we need to have effective leadership in civilian areas to keep the public calm while supplies are restored.

Seven, we must maintain sufficient stockpiles of not only war material, but also energy and other critical supplies, both for war and household use. The blocking of the Straits of Hormuz by the Iranians shows why reserves of oil will be vital to maintain our war capabilities and also serve our civilian needs.

Eight, we must have media and social media protocols in place for war time so that our enemies do not use fake and misleading information to demoralise the population.

The world is not a safe place any more, and we must be ready for anything our enemies throw at us. The author is a senior journalist.



BEYOND IDEOLOGY
R JAGANNATHAN

THE ECONOMIST MAGAZINE

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Defense Indigenization:** The process of developing and manufacturing defense equipment within the country to reduce reliance on imports.

- *Example:* Producing the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas domestically instead of buying foreign fighter jets.

- **Civil-Military Fusion (CMF):** Integrating civilian technological advancements, industrial capacity, and academic research with military strategies to enhance national power.

- *Example:* Using civilian space tech startups to launch dual-use satellites that can help agriculture in peacetime and provide surveillance during conflicts. * **Information Warfare (IW):** The use of information and communication technology to manipulate, degrade, or destroy an adversary's information systems while protecting one's own. This includes psychological operations and fake news.

- *Example:* Deepfake videos of political leaders spreading panic during a border standoff.

- **Civil Defense:** Measures taken to protect the civilian population and infrastructure from the effects of military attacks or natural disasters.

- *Example:* Establishing protocols to keep the power grid running if a cyberattack hits major substations.

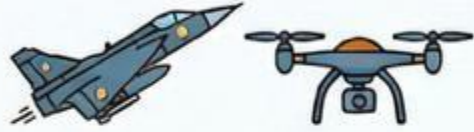
- **Strategic Stockpiling:** Maintaining emergency reserves of critical goods (oil, minerals, food, medicines) to ensure the country can survive supply chain disruptions during a war.

- *Example:* India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) built in underground rock caverns to hold crude oil for crisis situations.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**
- **Core Thesis**
- India should treat preparedness as deterrence: **not a call for militarism**, but a practical response to a world where conflict can expand beyond borders into **infrastructure, economy, and social cohesion**.
- **Key Arguments**
- **Peace cannot be assumed; preparedness reduces war probability**
 - Deterrence works when adversaries believe you can **absorb shocks and retaliate effectively**.
- **Future conflicts are multi-domain**
 - Not only land borders—also **air, sea, space, cyber, and narrative space**.
 - Drones/missiles allow striking deep targets without prolonged ground battles.
- **“Strong military” alone is insufficient**
 - If an adversary can cripple **power, fuel, logistics, financial networks, and morale**, the war outcome shifts even if frontline strength is high.
- **Indigenisation must be faster and deeper**
 - Imports create time lags (delivery cycles), vulnerability (sanctions/export controls), and maintenance dependence.
- **Whole-of-government and whole-of-society planning is essential**
 - Civilian agencies, states, police, industry, academia, and media protocols are part of national security.
- **The Policy Toolkit Emphasised (8-priority approach)**
- **Indigenise major platforms and munitions**
- **Scale cyber + information warfare**
- **Create civil–defence industrial partnerships (convertibility)**
- **Integrate academia with defence innovation**
- **Invest heavily in intelligence (tech + HUMINT)**
- **State-level civil defence protocols for infrastructure strikes**
- **Maintain stockpiles of energy and essentials**
- **Wartime media/social media protocols to prevent panic and demoralisation**

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue (Pre-independence → present)**
- **A) Pre-independence roots**
- Colonial-era **ordnance factories, dockyards, railways** created early military logistics capacity—but designed for imperial priorities, not national self-reliance.
- **B) Early Republic (1947–1962): Idealism meets security realities**
- Initial emphasis on development and diplomacy, but:
 - **1947–48 conflict** and border disputes exposed preparedness gaps.
 - Defence industry largely state-led; private sector role limited.
- **C) 1962 turning point and consolidation (1962–1971)**
- The 1962 war triggered a sharper focus on:
 - Capability building, procurement, and defence R&D.
- 1965 and 1971 wars reinforced the need for **logistics, ammunition, and industrial capacity**.
- **D) 1974–1998: Nuclear dimension + regional instability**
- Nuclear capability created a deterrence layer, but also encouraged:
 - **proxy strategies** by adversaries (terrorism, insurgency, deniable operations).
- **E) Post-1999 (Kargil onwards): Doctrine + technology + internal security**
- Shift towards surveillance, precision strikes, intelligence reform.
- **2008 terror attacks** made internal security reforms and coastal security central.
- **F) 2014 onwards: Procurement reforms + indigenisation push**
- Stronger emphasis on:
 - “Make in India” in defence, design-led manufacturing, private participation.
 - Corporate/innovation mechanisms (start-ups, iDEX-type approaches).
- Persistent issues remain: long procurement cycles, engine dependence, electronics/semiconductors vulnerability.
- **G) Current phase: Multi-domain threats**
- Cyberattacks, misinformation, drones, and infrastructure vulnerability make **civil preparedness + resilience** central.

Core Pillars of Strategic Readiness



Defense Indigenization (Atmanirbharta)

Shifting from a global buyer to a domestic builder of critical military hardware.



Civil-Military Fusion (CMF)

Integrating civilian tech, academic research, and industrial capacity into military strategy.



Strategic Stockpiling

Maintaining emergency reserves of oil, minerals, and food to survive supply disruptions.

The 8-Point Strategic Toolkit

Establishing protocols to counter deepfakes, misinformation, and psychological operations during conflict.



Industrial Elasticity

Developing civilian production lines that can rapidly scale or convert to military output.



Critical Infrastructure Protection:

Hardening power grids, refineries, and telecom networks against cyber and hybrid attacks



Information Warfare Defense



Boost iDEX & Defense Startups

Funding deep-tech innovation to bridge the gap between academia and the military.



National Cyber Resilience

Creating a unified command involving military, private tech giants, and civic authorities.

Feature	War Economy (Total Mobilization)	War-Adjacent Economy (Strategic Resilience)
Resource Focus	Total diversion to military	Civilian-led with "surge" capacity
Industry	State-controlled production	Dual-use (Civil & Military) integration
Objective	Active combat sustenance	Deterrence and shock-absorption

The Way Forward for India




- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **A) Realism in International Relations**
 - The international system is **anarchic**; states prioritise survival.
 - Peace is maintained through **power, deterrence, alliances, and resilience**, not goodwill alone.
- **B) Security Dilemma**
 - One state's defensive measures can appear offensive to another, triggering an arms spiral.
 - UPSC angle: why preparedness must be paired with **transparency, doctrine clarity, and diplomacy**.
- **C) Clausewitzian logic (war as politics by other means)**
 - War is not random; it is a tool to achieve political ends.
 - Therefore, **economic and societal endurance** becomes part of strategy.
- **D) Social contract and constitutional purpose of the state**
 - Citizens accept state authority partly because the state ensures **security and order**.
 - But constitutionalism also demands that security measures be **proportionate, lawful, and rights-respecting**.
- **E) Indian strategic tradition (useful enrichment)**
 - **Kautilya's Mandala theory**: neighbourhood dynamics and pragmatic statecraft.
 - **Dharma (ethical restraint) + Kutayuddha (deception/strategy)**: helps discuss ethics of information war.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **Social**
- **Civil resilience:** disaster-style preparedness for conflict shocks.
- Risks of **rumour-driven panic** (fuel, food, migration).
- Need community trust in institutions and transparent communication.
- **Political**
- Requires stable bipartisan consensus on national security basics.
- Civil–military coordination and parliamentary oversight strengthen legitimacy.
- Federal coordination: states as frontline managers of civilian order.
- **Legal**
- Cyber/information actions must remain within:
 - IT law frameworks, criminal law, evidence rules, and proportional restrictions.
- Emergency powers must meet constitutional standards.
- **Ethical**
- Surveillance vs privacy; propaganda vs truthful communication.
- Ethical intelligence: human sources, targeted operations, collateral minimisation.
- “Ends justify means” thinking can erode democratic legitimacy.
- **International**
- Deterrence posture influences neighbours and partners.
- Security cooperation (intel-sharing, tech partnerships) vs strategic autonomy trade-offs.
- Managing escalation with crisis hotlines and diplomatic channels.
- **Economic**
- Defence production can generate:
 - jobs, MSME ecosystems, tech spillovers (materials, aviation, electronics).
- But opportunity costs are real—hence emphasis on **efficiency + dual-use innovation**.

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- **Linkages with NCERTs**
 - **Polity / Political Science**
 - **Class XI – Indian Constitution at Work**
 - Federalism, emergency provisions, executive power, rights vs restrictions (crisis governance).
 - **Class XII – Contemporary World Politics**
 - Security, conflict, power politics, deterrence, regional instability.
 - **Class XII – Politics in India Since Independence**
 - Post-independence security challenges, wars, internal security evolution.
 - **Economics**
 - **Class XII – Introductory Macroeconomics**
 - Government expenditure, fiscal policy, deficits, inflation risks in supply shocks.
 - **Class XI – Indian Economic Development**
 - Industrial policy, self-reliance debates, role of public/private sector.
 - **Geography (selective utility)**
 - **Class XII – Human Geography**
 - Transport/logistics as strategic infrastructure; industrial location factors; resource security.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 3 (highest overlap)**
 - Defence technology; indigenisation; borders; internal security challenges.
 - Cyber security, money laundering/terror financing linkages (via grey-zone threats).
 - Infrastructure resilience, energy security, logistics, supply chains.
- **GS Paper 2**
 - Centre–State relations in civil defence and policing during crises.
 - International relations: shifting geopolitics, alliances, regional security.
 - Governance: crisis communication, institutional coordination, public order.
- **GS Paper 1**
 - Post-independence consolidation and wars; social cohesion and communal harmony.
 - World history themes: nature of modern warfare and state capacity (only as background).
- **GS Paper 4 (Ethics)**
 - Proportionality, rights vs security, truth in public communication, leadership under crisis.
 - Ethical dilemmas in intelligence, surveillance, and misinformation control.
- **Essay**
 - Peace and preparedness; “security as precondition for development”; resilience; technology and society.
- **Optional linkages**
 - **PSIR:** realism, deterrence, strategic culture, national security doctrine.
 - **Public Administration:** whole-of-government coordination, crisis management.
 - **Economics:** industrial policy, fiscal sustainability, strategic trade.
 - **Sociology:** social cohesion, rumours, collective behaviour in crises.

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- **Way Forward**
 - **1) Build resilience as a national mission (not only a defence agenda)**
 - National Critical Infrastructure Resilience Plan:
 - redundancy in grids, secure telecom, hardened data centres, rapid repair contracts.
 - **2) Defence procurement reform for speed + integrity**
 - Reduce time-to-contract; standardise requirements; stable multi-year orders.
 - Lifecycle costing, performance-based logistics, and transparent audits.
 - **3) Indigenisation with depth, not slogans**
 - Prioritise chokepoints: engines, sensors, chips, electronic warfare, propulsion, special alloys.
 - Strengthen testing/certification labs and design capabilities.
 - **4) Create competitive “national champions” without cronyism**
 - Long-term procurement visibility + export facilitation
 - But also:
 - competition where possible, anti-monopoly safeguards, outcome-linked incentives.
 - **5) Scale cyber and information defence**
 - Cyber command maturity: incident response drills, zero-trust architecture, bug bounty culture.
 - Information defence:
 - rapid official communication, public media literacy, platform coordination under law.
 - **6) Institutionalise civil defence with federal clarity**
 - State-wise civil defence SOPs:
 - blackout protocols, shelter guidance, essential supply continuity, hospital surge plans.
 - Joint drills: NDMA-style routines adapted for conflict contingencies.
 - **7) Strategic reserves and supply-chain security**
 - Expand and diversify energy reserves and critical spares.
 - Encourage domestic capacity for essential pharmaceuticals and electronics.

Previous Years' UPSC Questions (PYQs)

Mains:

GS 3 (2020): What are the determinants of left-wing extremism in Eastern part of India? What strategy should Government of India, civil administration and security forces adopt to counter the threat in the affected areas? *(Theme: Internal security preparedness)*

GS 3 (2019): What is the CyberDome Project? Explain how it can be useful in controlling internet crimes in India. *(Theme: Cyber security infrastructure)*

GS 3 (2017): The North-East region of India has been infested with insurgency for a very long time. Analyze the major reasons for the survival of armed insurgency in this region. *(Theme: Border management and security)*

GS 3 (2014): How is the 'Make in India' programme different from earlier 'manufacturing' policies? *(Theme: Self-reliance, adaptable to defense)*

Prelims:

Questions frequently appear regarding specific defense technologies (e.g., Agni missiles, S-400), cyber security terms (ransomware, zero-day), and international agreements (Wassenaar Arrangement).

CWright Mills, the American sociologist and author of the two classics *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* and *The Power Elite*, often talked about the 'great celebration'. He used the term to refer to the Eisenhower era, when America was celebrating itself not only as a victor from a world war, but also as a great democracy.

Mills noted that while one tended to emphasise the official America, one tended to forget the silences, the doubts, the distances created by such a term. His idea of the great celebration can be used in the Indian context. When we talk about the Union government today, we are talking about a great celebration.

In this context, one has to emphasise three things. Modi's achievement in winning electorally for the third time has given him a sense of permanence while the iconic pictures of Indira Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru fade.

The second point is that Modi is seen as an astute person who has managed to innovate and even 'tame' Trump on tariff and trade.

And the third point is the artificial intelligence summit recently held in Delhi, which emphasised a new tryst of destiny between corporate power and the political elite.

In this context, one has to ask whether AI as a great celebration can be understood as it is, or whether it needs something more. In terms of its silences, availability of alternatives and the political economy AI has to be reworked to be understood. There is a necessity for dissent and critical imagination, and there is a silence about it.

One of the best ways of trying to understand this is to look at the national movement, which was pluralistic, dialogical and deeply experimental. It included arguments from the theosophists, the Marxists, the Gandhians. It created a plurality that helped shape the imagination. Gandhi was an exemplar of this tremendous sense of experimentation.

What kind of epistemology underlies AI and how does one reflect on it? One has to ask whether AI is restrictive or open-ended in terms of information, and the consequences of the definitions it offers to the theory of freedom.

The second exemplar I want to cite is C V Raman, who not only won the first Nobel Prize in physics for India, but was, in a deep and fundamental way, an original man. When asked to open chemical laboratories of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, he said they were

We are celebrating artificial intelligence without understanding how it redefines democracy. It can infuse a polity with creative imagination if common people can have a say on it

THE QUESTIONS WE ARE NOT YET ASKING OF AI

SHIV VISVANATHAN



Social scientist associated with the Campaign for a group representing alternative imaginations.



SHREYAS KESHAV

tombs for burying scientific instruments.

What one wants to emphasise here is not the animosity but the sense of autonomy Raman would say he would rather find out one more property of a diamond than worry about its industrial uses. He kept a certain distance between government and science. How does one create a dialogue, a distance, a plurality between government and science? Where does autonomy stand in the question of AI? Who are the dissenters? Where are the pluralists of the day?

The last exemplar I want to cite is Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, who developed many of his theories when still at the Presidency College in Madras. He tried to hold on to these theories during his Cambridge years, when Arthur Eddington and others were battering him. Chandrasekhar survived to win another Nobel in physics.

What one has to understand here is the autonomy, the confidence, and the quiet non-violent way in which he proceeded with an alternative way of thinking.

AI needs such plurality. The question is, how do we create this? One has to worry about a set of social experiments. We need exemplars who are dissenters. We need exemplars who are dissenters. We need alternative ways of thinking.

The second question is: what is the epistemological status of AI? Why does it not have corresponding ethical experiments, which are required so that AI does not get contaminated by power?

AI, which today is a corporate initiative, has to be a democratic initiative tomorrow. There has to be a democracy of knowledge systems. One has to have a notion of cognitive democracy. AI can help us create the possibilities of a new

kind of experimental democracy.

What I want to emphasise is not so much the technical logic of experimentation, but the social experimentation that goes into science. Gandhi emphasised this in the national movement. In a similar way, we need local experimentation, local responses to technology.

The second example I want to suggest is that of the knowledge panchayat. Debates on science policy tend to be exotic and full of expertise. There seems to be little place for the ordinary person. The knowledge panchayat would allow ordinary people to express their ideas about, say, AI—their articulation of their own interests. AI must create around itself a nest of knowledge panchayats that create the possibilities of critique, openness and transparency.

The third example is that we need an ethics centre. Ethics in the old sense will not do when we are dealing with AI. We need a research centre completely autonomous of government, which raises the whole question of ethics and AI as a new kind of scientific responsibility. The idea of Pugwash can no longer be restricted to nuclear energy; it has to spread to new technologies. The kind of debate that has taken place in biotechnology has to now take place in AI too.

One also has to look at the militarisation of AI. How do peace groups react to its potential aspects? This kind of transparency would add much to the imagination of India as a new kind of democracy.

AI is both text and pretext for the new democratic imagination. It can become the possibility of a new non-violent science. But for that, one needs new kinds of professionalism, new kinds of ethics, and a new way of looking at science as a way of creating life.

This brings us to livelihood. What does AI offer in terms of jobs? Is there an obsolescence of old livelihoods? What is AI capable of eliminating? There is a silence about these questions. What is frightening is the celebration of AI in the presence of ignorance of the issues we are confronting.

AI is not just a philosophical or ethical issue. It becomes an opportunity for a new kind of social creativity. It allows democracy not just to be about representative issues, but about a creative imagination. The future becomes very important. AI and futuristics are deeply correlated. Democracy has to be equally future-sensitive. Democracy, epistemology, freedom—all become terms within which we capture the imagination of the subject.

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- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- Understanding the foundational vocabulary is crucial for grasping the broader implications of technology on society.

- **Cognitive Democracy:** This concept argues that democracy should not be limited to political representation (voting) but must extend to the realm of knowledge creation and validation. It advocates for ordinary citizens to have a say in how knowledge and technology are developed and deployed.

- *Simple Example:* Instead of a tech corporation solely deciding how an agricultural AI algorithm works, local farmers (the end-users) are involved in designing the parameters of the AI to ensure it respects traditional farming knowledge.

- **Epistemology:** The branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge—how we know what we know, and what differentiates justified belief from opinion. In the context of technology, it questions whether AI-generated data is open-ended and pluralistic, or restrictive and biased.

- **Knowledge Panchayat:** A conceptual grassroots democratic body designed to debate, critique, and regulate local applications of science and technology. It draws inspiration from traditional Indian local self-governance.

- **Pugwash Movement:** Originally a network of scientists focused on reducing the danger of armed conflict and seeking solutions to global security threats (particularly nuclear weapons). An "AI Pugwash" suggests a similar global, autonomous coalition to prevent the militarization of AI. * **The "Great Celebration":** A sociological concept describing periods where a society uncritically glorifies its dominant power structures or technological advancements, often silencing dissent, ignoring inequalities, and stifling critical imagination.



- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The discourse surrounding modern technology often overlooks its socio-political ramifications. Several core substantive arguments emerge when viewing AI through a critical democratic lens:

- **The Illusion of the "Great Celebration":** There is a tendency for the political elite and corporate powers to form a nexus, framing technological advancement purely as a victory. This narrative creates a sense of permanence and inevitability that silences critical questions about political economy, the availability of alternatives, and the right to dissent.

- **Erosion of Scientific Autonomy:** For science to truly serve society, it must maintain a healthy, critical distance from the state and corporate power. When scientific institutions become mere instruments of the state, they lose the autonomy required to conduct ethical and pluralistic experiments.

- **The Democratic Deficit in AI:** AI development currently lacks grassroots participation. The debate on technology policy tends to be exoticized and restricted to "experts," leaving little room for the ordinary citizen whose life is most impacted by these algorithms.

- **The Need for Institutional Ethics:** Ethics in the age of AI cannot rely on outdated frameworks. There is a profound need for autonomous research and ethics centers, entirely independent of the government, to handle the unique scientific responsibilities and the potential militarization of AI.



- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- The relationship between science, the state, and the public in India has evolved significantly.

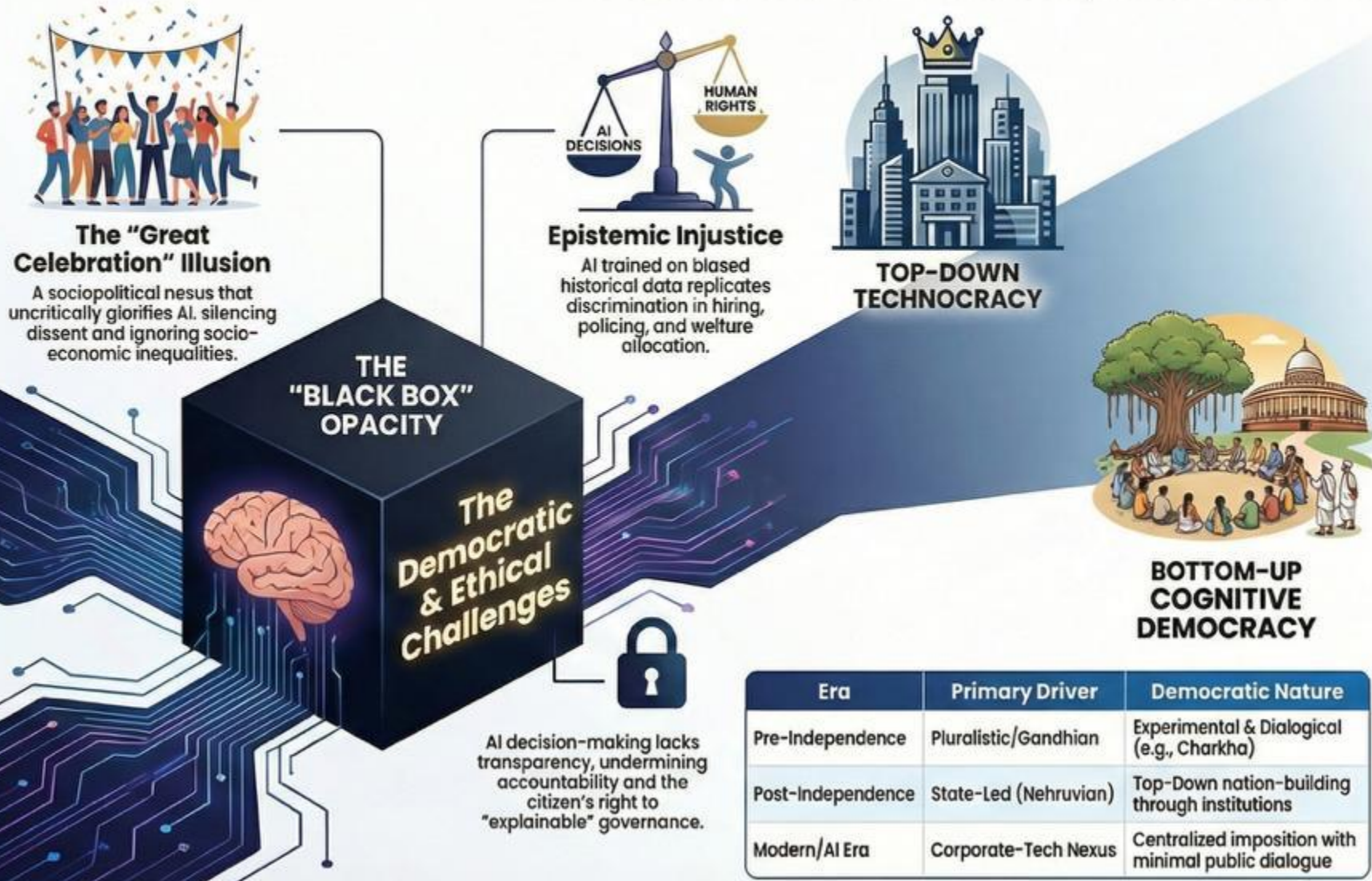
- **Pre-Independence (Pluralism and Experimentation):** The Indian national movement was deeply dialogical and experimental. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi viewed technology not as an end in itself, but as a tool for human empowerment (e.g., the Charkha as a symbol of decentralized, self-reliant technology). Debates flourished among various philosophical schools (Marxists, Gandhians) regarding the role of industrialization.

- **Post-Independence (State-Led Science):** The Nehruvian era focused on building massive scientific institutions (CSIR, IITs). While this established a strong scientific base, the narrative was heavily state-driven. However, pioneering scientists often fought to maintain the autonomy of these institutions against bureaucratic overreach, emphasizing that laboratories should not become "tombs for burying scientific instruments."

- **Liberalization to Present (Corporate-Tech Nexus):** Post-1991, the driver of technological innovation shifted heavily toward the private sector. Today, with the advent of AI, the balance of power has tilted toward massive tech conglomerates, often operating in tandem with state interests, leading to a centralized, top-down imposition of technology with minimal public dialogue.

AI & THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY:

A Multidimensional Analysis for UPSC CSE



The Way Forward: Building Cognitive Democracy



Establish "Knowledge Panchayats"

Grossroots deliberative bodies where citizens debate and regulate local applications of science and technology.



Autonomous Ethics Architecture

Creating statutory, independent bodies (like the Election Commission) to audit algorithms for human rights violations.

Era	Primary Driver	Democratic Nature
Pre-Independence	Pluralistic/Gandhian	Experimental & Dialogical (e.g., Charkha)
Post-Independence	State-Led (Nehruvian)	Top-Down nation-building through institutions
Modern/AI Era	Corporate-Tech Nexus	Centralized imposition with minimal public dialogue


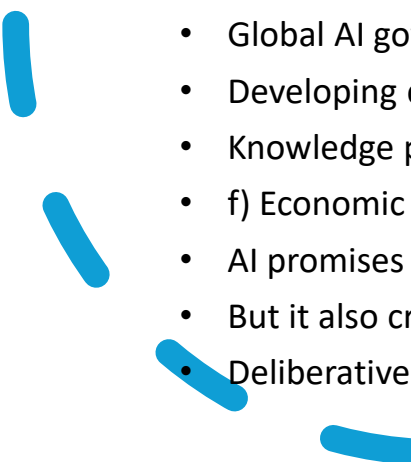


Algorithmic Impact Assessments

Mandating public consultations and transparency for AI systems used in public service delivery.

- Logical and philosophical base
- a) Democratic theory
 - Democracy is not only about voting but also about who participates in defining problems, interpreting evidence and choosing technological paths.
 - The argument extends democratic theory from political institutions to knowledge systems—“epistemic democracy”.
- b) Gandhian ethics and non-violence
 - Gandhian thought emphasises small-scale technology, self-rule, moral responsibility and non-violence.
 - Applying this to AI implies: minimise harm, be transparent, remain close to the lived experience of the weakest, and allow local experiments instead of one-size-fits-all mega-systems.
- c) Philosophy of science and technology
 - Science and technology are seen as socially shaped, not value-neutral.
 - AI systems embody assumptions about normality, risk, merit and deviance; therefore, their design must be open to democratic questioning.
- d) Epistemology: plurality of knowledges
 - The article implicitly rejects epistemic monopoly (only one “scientific” way of knowing).
 - It supports multiple knowledges—scientific, indigenous, artisanal, experiential—each contributing to understanding AI’s impacts.
- e) Ethics of care and responsibility
 - There is an ethics-of-care flavour: technology must consider the vulnerable, displaced, jobless and culturally marginalised.
 - Responsibility is relational—between state, corporations, citizens, and non-human nature.



- 
- Multidimensional analysis
 - a) Social dimension
 - AI can reinforce or reduce inequalities depending on design—e.g., biased recruitment algorithms vs inclusive health diagnostics.
 - Knowledge panchayats can empower marginalised groups to question harmful deployments (predictive policing, credit scoring).
 - b) Political dimension
 - AI is becoming central to governance (welfare targeting, surveillance, smart cities).
 - Democratising AI decisions could deepen decentralisation and participatory governance, but also challenge entrenched political-bureaucratic structures.
 - c) Legal dimension
 - Issues of data protection, privacy, algorithmic accountability, and due process are central.
 - New laws may be needed for AI-specific harms (autonomous decision-making, deepfakes) and for recognising deliberative forums as part of decision-making.
 - d) Ethical dimension
 - Core values: autonomy, dignity, fairness, transparency, responsibility, and non-maleficence.
 - AI can either erode autonomy (nudging, manipulation) or enhance it (assistive tools), depending on normative design.
 - e) International dimension
 - Global AI governance debates (OECD principles, UNESCO recommendations, EU AI Act).
 - Developing countries like India face asymmetry: global firms control infrastructure and IP; local communities bear consequences.
 - Knowledge panchayats and cognitive democracy could become models of South-centric AI governance.
 - f) Economic dimension
 - AI promises productivity gains, new industries and cost savings in service delivery.
 - But it also creates job displacement, gigification of work, and concentration of wealth in a few platforms.
 - Deliberative mechanisms can guide choices about taxation, social security, reskilling and public investments.
- 

Linkages with NCERTs

Class 6–8 Social and Political Life (Civics)

- Concepts: democracy, local government, Panchayati Raj, participation.
- Use: Connect knowledge panchayats and experimental democracy to the basic ideas of participation and Gram Sabha.

Class 9 Democratic Politics – I

- Chapters: “What is Democracy? Why Democracy?”, “Democratic Rights”.
- Use: Extend definitions of democracy to include knowledge/technology decisions; link AI with rights (privacy, equality).

Class 10 Democratic Politics – II

- Chapters: “Power Sharing”, “Working of Institutions”.
- Use: Discuss AI as a new site of power, need for power-sharing between experts, corporations and citizens.

Class 11 Political Theory

- Chapters: “Democracy”, “Liberty”, “Equality”, “Justice”.
- Use: Cognitive democracy, non-violent science and AI ethics all fall under debates on what a just and egalitarian democracy requires.

Class 11 Sociology – Introducing Sociology / Understanding Society

- Themes: social change, globalisation, science, technology and society.
- Use: AI as a driver of social change, cultural anxieties, changes in work and communication.

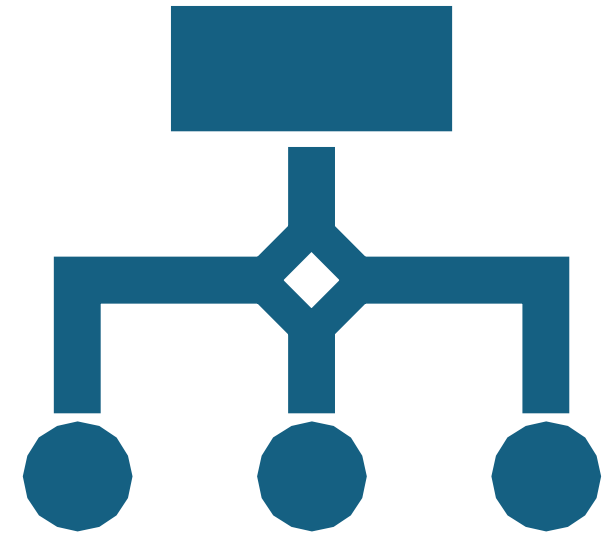
Class 12 Political Science – Contemporary World Politics & Politics in India since Independence

- Themes: globalisation, human rights, science and technology in politics; debates on development and displacement.
- Use: Link AI to development vs displacement debates similar to big dams, nuclear power.

Class 12 Sociology – Social Change and Development in India

- Chapters: “Globalisation and Social Change”, “Mass Media and Communications”, “Social Movements”.
- Use: AI-driven platforms, algorithmic media, digital social movements.

- Linkages with UPSC CSE syllabus
- GS Paper I (Society)
 - Indian society, social change, globalisation, effects of technology on social structure, women, vulnerable sections, and urbanisation.
 - AI's impact on social relations, employment, inequality, and cultural practices.
- GS Paper II (Polity and Governance)
 - Constitution and democratic values, devolution of powers, Panchayati Raj, citizen participation, e-governance.
 - AI in governance, need for transparency and accountability, knowledge panchayats as innovative participation mechanisms.
- GS Paper III (Science & Tech, Economy, Environment)
 - Developments in S&T and their applications; indigenisation of technology; issues relating to intellectual property rights.
 - Indian economy and employment; inclusive growth; infrastructure and investment in digital economy.
 - Environmental issues linked to technological choices (data-centre energy use, e-waste).
- GS Paper IV (Ethics, Integrity, Aptitude)
 - Ethics in public and private relationships; moral thinkers; work culture; probity in governance.
 - Application of ethical principles to AI decision-making, responsibility gaps, transparency.



- Way forward
- 1) Institutionalise participatory AI governance
 - Set up multi-level knowledge panchayats (local, sectoral, national) that review AI projects in health, welfare, policing, education and environment.
 - Link their recommendations to statutory bodies (parliamentary committees, regulatory authorities) to avoid tokenism.
- 2) Embed constitutional and ethical principles in AI policy
 - Operationalise principles like equality, non-discrimination, privacy and dignity in AI laws and guidelines.
 - Mandate impact assessments (social, ethical, environmental) before deploying major AI systems, with public consultations.
- 3) Promote cognitive justice and inclusive expertise
 - Recognise and fund collaborations between computer scientists, social scientists, ethicists, and affected communities.
 - Encourage citizen science projects and local data initiatives where communities co-own and interpret data.
- 4) Build public capacity and awareness
 - Integrate basic AI literacy, digital rights and ethics into school and college curricula.
 - Use local languages, stories and case studies to explain how AI affects everyday life and rights.
- 5) Balance innovation with social protection
 - Create robust reskilling and social-security frameworks for workers whose livelihoods are threatened by AI.
 - Support labour-intensive sectors that generate dignified work even in an AI-rich economy (care work, ecological restoration, local crafts).
- 6) Foster global–local dialogue
 - Participate actively in global AI governance forums, while foregrounding experiences of the Global South and vulnerable communities.
 - Share best practices on participatory AI governance and learn from similar experiments abroad (citizen assemblies, digital consultations).

- UPSC Prelims
- Questions on Artificial Intelligence applications (health, agriculture, education, governance).
- Questions on e-governance, digital economy, and data protection.
- UPSC Mains – GS papers
- **GS-2**
- 2020s: Questions on “role of civil society in democracy”, “citizen charter”, “e-governance – applications, models, limitations and successes”.
- Questions on devolution to Panchayats and municipalities, and participatory governance.
- **GS-3**
- Repeated questions on AI, robotics, IoT and their applications and challenges.
- Questions on inclusive growth, jobless growth, and impact of technology on employment.
- Questions on ethical issues in S&T, biotechnology, nuclear energy, etc.
- **GS-4**
- 2024: “The application of Artificial Intelligence as a dependable source of input for administrative rational decision-making is a debatable issue. Critically examine from ethical point of view.”
- Earlier case studies involving surveillance technologies, social media, data misuse, and automation.

TUNE IN, TURN ON, CO-OP



T K Arun

Less than a fortnight ago, God launched Bharat Taxi, a cooperative of drivers to compete with mobility platforms like Uber and Ola. Why does it not occur to our trade unions to organise workers into cooperatives, instead of letting government take the initiative?

Government intervention in co-ops is the route for bureaucratic and political capture. Co-ops come under the control of Registrar of Cooperatives, and of the ruling party or parties, whose functionaries in government wield control over the registrar. The only co-ops that serve its members, rather than assorted politicians, are the 'Amal model' cooperatives, insulated from government interference.

India's trade unions do have a history of organising co-ops. Indian Coffee Board Workers' Cooperative was formed by communist trade union leaders, led by A K Gopalan, after the Coffee Board shut down coffee houses and laid off workers. The cooperative has run Indian Coffee Houses successfully for decades.

In Kerala, laid-off bidi workers were organised into a co-op that launched a rival bidi brand, called Dinosh, in north Kerala. Kerala Dinosh Bidi Cooperative was a successful operation so long as smoking was mainstream, and the bidi, a popular smoke.

But Kerala's co-ops predated unions. The movement has its roots in social reform. At the turn of the 20th c., social reform movements, against caste and against outdated traditions within castes, changed conservative Kerala society forever. These



Capitalism in new colours

social reform movements unleashed societal dynamics that allowed Kerala to realise the Constitution's goal of democracy to a greater extent than in other states.

A reformer named Vagbhatananda advised young, unemployed youth who approached him for guidance to form a cooperative and bid for public works projects. They formed Ursulungal Labour Contract Cooperative Society in 1925, and bid successfully for some road works. It never looked back. Today, the co-op has a turnover of ₹1,900 cr; has built and owns a cyber park that serves as an SEZ, office complexes, tourism projects and a craft village. It's the preferred contractor for public works.

Today, emergence of gig work not just creates an opportunity to go

and other bits of social security.

The new labour code on social security does cover gig workers. Given the informal arrangements within which much of gig work takes place,

Indian Coffee Board Workers' Cooperative was formed after Coffee Board shut down coffee houses and laid off workers. The cooperative has run Indian Coffee Houses successfully for decades

it would be challenging to enforce official norms. It would be simpler to organise gig workers into a cooperative that provides for all worker protections, and builds cost into the fee for services of the gig worker that the co-op charges the platform.

A strike by gig workers on New Year's Eve had triggered much online debate about their exploitation at the hands of platforms that engage them. Notably, the money not spent on the gig worker's welfare goes to enrich not the platform but the consumer, who gets the service at a rock-bottom price. If cost of the gig worker's welfare is included in the cost of the service, it takes away nothing from the platform's revenues, but only serves to increase the cost to the consumer by a tiny fraction.

Platforms are affected only if such costs are borne by some of them, but not by their competition. If the law could uniformly be endorsed, and all platforms pay their gig worker benefits as proscribed, it would be a level

playing field for platforms and consumers would pay for workers' benefits. If gig workers were agglomerated by a cooperative, which gave them their benefits and built the cost into fees it charges platforms for gig worker services availed of from the co-op, the effect would be the same as successful enforcement of the code on platforms.

Drivers, house help, electricians, plumbers, beauticians, home nurses and assorted other functions are eminently amenable to being offered by worker co-ops. Workers might have much enthusiasm to offer, but may not have the knowledge or skill to successfully run co-ops. This is where unions come in handy. Organising workers is their job. They can hire professionals, leveraging the scale they have.



Why have unions not ventured into forming co-ops except as stray forms of relief for laid-off workers? This has to do with ideology rather than practicality. Unions are conditioned to see employers and workers as 'class enemies'. If the cooperative owned by workers is their employer, that enmity becomes unreal. As direct producers who also control the production process, co-op members must reckon with the responsibilities of management and even entrepreneurship. Unions would much rather shirk this complexity and save themselves from being branded as 'class collaborators' and betrayers by some of their comrades.

It is time unions turned their attention to giving participation in the process of globalised growth the broadest social base possible. Even as they continue with traditional union work in formal sectors, if unions form cooperatives that own and run units in the informal sector, workers would be better off, by far, than they are at present.

Who is afraid to be owner, worker and comrade all turned into one?



Unions are conditioned to see employers and workers as 'class enemies'. If the cooperative owned by workers is their employer, that enmity becomes unreal

ve gig workers an organisational structure from within which to operate, but also an imperative to form an organisational structure that would provide them with at least some of the protections that regular employees receive — healthcare, safe working conditions, retirement benefits

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Cooperative (Co-op):** An autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.

- *Example:* Amul (GCMMF) where farmers own the processing and marketing infrastructure.

- **Gig Economy:** A free market system in which temporary positions are common and organizations hire independent workers for short-term engagements.

- *Example:* A driver taking rides on Uber or a delivery partner for Zomato.

- **Registrar of Cooperatives:** A government-appointed official who oversees the registration, auditing, and functioning of cooperatives. This role is often criticized for being a tool for political interference.

- **Labour Code on Social Security:** One of the four new labor codes in India aimed at extending social security benefits (like insurance and pensions) to all workers, including those in the unorganized and gig sectors.

- **Class Enemies vs. Class Collaborators:** Marxist terms often used by trade unions. "Class enemies" refers to the antagonistic relationship between capital (owners) and labor. "Class collaboration" is a pejorative used when unions work too closely with owners, allegedly betraying workers' interests.





- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The core thesis suggests that **Worker Cooperatives** are a more sustainable and dignified alternative for gig workers than relying on state-led initiatives or exploitative private platforms.
- **The Problem of State-Led Cooperatives:** When the government initiates "cooperatives" (like the recent Bharat Taxi), they often become extensions of the bureaucracy. This leads to political capture where party functionaries, rather than workers, reap the benefits.
- **The Success of Worker-Led Models:** History shows that when workers lead (e.g., Indian Coffee House, Kerala Dinesh Beedi, or Uralungal), the outcomes are more resilient. These models insulate workers from the whims of private capital and the inefficiency of the state.
- **The Gig Imperative:** Gig work is often "informal by design." Platforms keep costs low by avoiding employer-employee relationships. A cooperative can act as a "collective employer," providing health insurance and retirement benefits by building these costs into the service fee.
- **Consumer Responsibility:** Currently, the consumer benefits from "rock-bottom prices" at the expense of worker welfare. A cooperative model would marginally increase prices for consumers to ensure a social safety net for the provider.
- **The Ideological Barrier:** Trade unions often avoid cooperatives because it blurs the line between "worker" and "owner." Becoming an owner-entrepreneur requires a shift from a "confrontational" mindset to a "managerial" one.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-Independence (Early 1900s):** Credit cooperatives emerged to save farmers from moneylenders. Social reformers like Vagbhatananda in Kerala promoted "Labour Contract Cooperatives" (ULCCS, 1925) to provide dignified work.

- **Post-Independence (1950s-70s):** The state promoted cooperatives as part of the planned economy. However, this also led to the "Registrar Raj," where the state gained excessive control. Notable exceptions like the "Amul Model" succeeded by keeping the state at arm's length.

- **The Trade Union Shift:** Unions historically focused on the formal sector (factories/mines). As formal jobs shrank, some unions stepped in to save dying units (e.g., Indian Coffee House) via worker takeovers.

- **The Digital Era (2010s-Present):** The rise of algorithmic management (Uber/Ola/Swiggy) created a new class of "platform laborers." The 2020 Social Security Code recognized them for the first time, but implementation remains a hurdle.



Empowering the Gig Economy: The Worker Cooperative Revolution

THE CHALLENGE: INFORMAL BY DESIGN

THE COOPERATIVE SOLUTION: AGGREGATOR COOPERATIVES

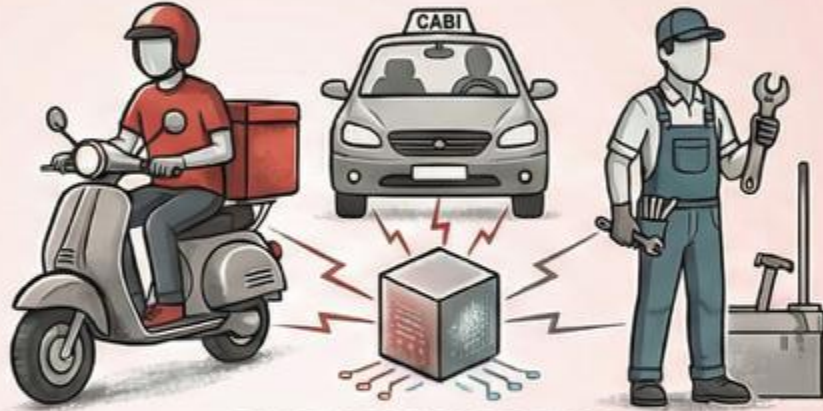


THE TRAP OF STATE-LED MODELS

Initiatives like "Bharat Taxi" risk political capture, benefiting party functionaries over actual workers.

THE VULNERABILITY OF THE 'PRECARIAT'

Gig workers lack insurance and pensions, treated as "service units" by opaque algorithms.



PLATFORM CAPITALISM & OPAQUE ALGORITHMS



THE COLLECTIVE EMPLOYER MODEL

Cooperatives act as middlemen, building health and retirement costs directly into service fees.



Internalized Health & Retirement Costs



Platform & Consumer



CONSTITUTIONAL & LEGAL PILLARS

Backed by Article 43B (Promotion of Co-ops) and the 2020 Social Security Code.



CONSUMER-SUBSIDIZED EXPLOITATION

Low platform prices are currently "subsidized" by the worker's lack of a social safety net.

COMPARISON OF GOVERNANCE MODELS

PLATFORM-LED GIG WORK		WORKER-LED COOPERATIVE	
Private Venture Capitalists	Ownership	Democratic (1 Member, 1 Vote)	
Profit Maximization	Primary Goal	Member Welfare & Dignity	
Externalized/Absent	Social Security	Internalized in Service Fee	

PROVEN RESILIENCY



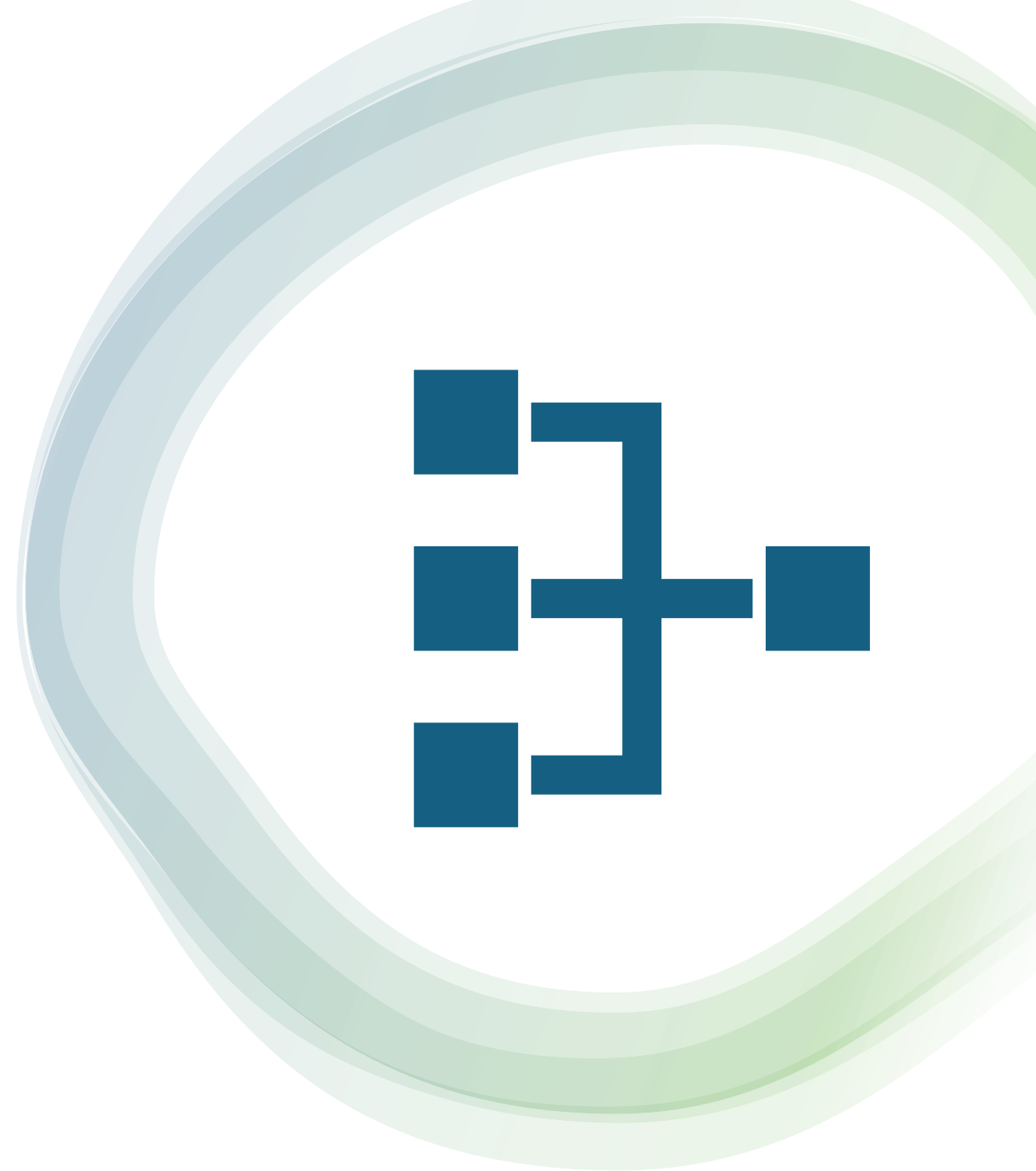
Amul




Uralungal (ULCCS)

These proven models demonstrate that worker-ownership survives market shifts.

- Logical and Philosophical Base
- The argument rests on pragmatic socialism over rigid Marxism. Logic: Co-ops blend ownership and work, enforcing self-discipline (e.g., Uralungal bids/projects succeed via member accountability).
- **Assumptions:**
- Unions skilled at organizing but ideologically rigid—class enmity blinds them to worker-employer fusion.
- Markets globalized; informal needs entrepreneurial unions.
- **Philosophical Foundations:**
- Gandhian trusteeship: Wealth for society, not exploitation—Amul echoes this.
- Constitutional (Art 43A: worker participation; Preamble's socialism).
- Critiques Marx: Co-op members as "direct producers" reject alienation, embracing responsibility over perpetual conflict.
- It's Aristotelian mean—balance confrontation and cooperation for equity.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - Co-ops can reduce insecurity and improve dignity, especially for migrants and low-income workers.
 - Can professionalize “invisible” care work (home nursing, domestic work) through training and standards.
 - Risk: exclusion of weaker workers if entry rules become rigid or fees too high.
- **Political Dimension**
 - Co-ops can democratize economic power at local level—new leadership can emerge from worker communities.
 - Risk: party politicization and capture, particularly if contracts and subsidies become linked to patronage.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - Questions arise on:
 - worker classification (employee vs independent),
 - liability and insurance,
 - Need clear grievance redress and dispute resolution frameworks.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - Central ethical tension: **low consumer prices vs fair worker welfare.**
 - Co-ops advance fairness, transparency, and voice, but must guard against internal exploitation and discrimination.
- **International Dimension**
 - Globally, debates on “future of work” stress:
 - decent work standards,
 - India’s approach affects its reputation on labour standards and inclusive growth narratives.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - Co-ops can support inclusive growth by converting precarious labour into organized service enterprises.
 - Better incomes can raise local consumption and reduce vulnerability.
 - However, scale and productivity gains require tech adoption and managerial capability.

- 
- **Linkages with NCERTs**
 - **Economics (Class 11) – Indian Economic Development**
 - **Employment & informal sector:** Nature of unemployment, informalisation, role of institutions.
 - **Inclusive growth:** How institutions shape distribution and welfare.
 - **Economics (Class 12) – Introductory Macroeconomics / Indian Economy themes**
 - **Money, credit, and institutions:** Why access to finance matters for small producers and collectives.
 - **Government and welfare role:** Public policy tools for social protection.
 - **Political Science (Class 11) – Indian Constitution at Work (themes)**
 - **Rights and participation:** Freedom of association; democratic functioning of institutions.
 - **Federalism and governance:** State role in regulating co-ops and labour.
 - **Sociology (NCERT themes across Class 11–12)**
 - **Work, labour, and social change:** Changing nature of occupations; migration; urbanization; inequality.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 3 (Top linkage)**
- **Inclusive growth and issues arising from it**
- **Labour reforms; social security; employment**
- **E-commerce and digitization; technology disruption**
- **Infrastructure and services sector dynamics**
- **Economic development: institutional reforms**
- **GS Paper 2**
- **Government policies and interventions for development**
- **Welfare schemes and mechanisms**
- **Governance: transparency, accountability, citizen-centric administration**
- **Pressure groups and associations (trade unions), role in democracy**
- **Federal issues in cooperative governance**
- **GS Paper 1**
- **Society: urbanization, migration, changing nature of work**
- **Social empowerment and equality**
- **Role of social reform movements (Kerala-type context) in enabling democratic institutions**
- **GS Paper 4 (Ethics)**
- **Justice, fairness, dignity of labour**
- **Ethical issues in corporate/platform economy**
- **Public vs private responsibility for welfare**
- **Leadership and accountability within co-ops**

- **Way Forward**
- **A. Build “Cooperative Autonomy with Accountability”**
- Reduce discretionary interference by registrars; make interventions **rule-based and time-bound**.
- Mandatory **transparent audits**, online disclosure of key financials, and member access to records.
- Fast-track dispute resolution mechanisms for co-op elections, accounts, and mismanagement.
- **B. Unions as Cooperative Incubators**
- Create “Union-Coop Cells” with professionals:
 - legal, accounting, tech, HR, compliance.
- Provide governance training:
 - member rights, meeting processes, voting, conflict resolution.
- Promote women’s participation in care and service co-ops (home nursing, domestic work, health aides).
- **C. Portable Social Security Architecture**
- Use unique worker IDs and portable benefits so workers keep coverage even if they shift between platforms.
- Co-ops can act as benefit administrators:
 - collect contributions,
 - purchase group insurance,
 - maintain welfare accounts.
- **D. Tech and Market Strategy**
- Build interoperable systems:
 - easy onboarding, digital payments, grievance portal.
- Quality assurance:
 - training, certification, service standards, customer feedback norms with due process.
- Branding based on trust:
 - “fair work certified” services can attract conscientious consumers.

Targeted Killing of Khamenei and US attack on Iran's Sovereignty: Violation of International Law?

OPINION

DR.S.KRISHNAN, ANKIT
GAJRAJ & HONEY RAJ

The United States and Israel opened their war on Iran this weekend with a sudden strike on its longtime supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While the war as a whole has been broadly denounced as illegal by critics who point to its lack of authorization from Congress or the United Nations Security Council, the ayatollah's killing raises particular legal questions.

It is extraordinarily rare for a country to deliberately and openly kill the leader of another sovereign nation — even during legally uncondemned wars. As a result, the question has rarely come up. A very rare precedent of sorts came in March 2003, when the Bush administration tried to kill Saddam Hussein on the cusp of the Iraq war, a conflict Congress had authorized — but that airstrike missed its target.

Khamenei's assassination represents a new stage in the erosion of the international norm against assassination. This norm has long been understood as part of a broader framework protecting sovereignty and prohibiting the use of force outside armed conflict.

Under international law, the killing of a state official outside an armed conflict will almost invariably violate the prohibition on the use of force, state sovereignty, and/or international human rights law. The directly targeted killing of foreign adversaries, once rejected as beyond the pale, has become a prominent issue in debates over U.S. security policy. The shortsighted policies driving the US's so-called "global war on terror" were undermining the norm and risking spilling over to justify the killing of state officials. In the wake of Khamenei's assassination, this statement no longer seems to hold true.

A GRADUAL ACCEPTANCE OF ASSASSINATION

The norm's erosion was already visible in the January 2020 killing of Qasem Soleimani. The Trump administration initially invoked self-defence and imminence, before shifting to claims that Soleimani had "American blood on his hands". International reactions were limited; a joint statement by

France, Germany, and the United Kingdoms focused on regional stability without directly condemning or indeed mentioning the killing. Subsequent cases reinforced this pattern. The Biden administration justified the 2022 killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri with the assertion that "justice has been delivered", without any articulation of its compatibility with international law.

This apparent acceptance of assassination as a tool of statecraft rests on two interrelated mechanisms: routinisation and legitimisation. With the US adoption of the practice, now strategically renamed "targeted killings", assassination became increasingly routinised as a tool of statecraft.

The assassination of Ali Khamenei differs from the killings of the past two decades insofar as sitting heads of state have historically occupied a distinct normative category. When states plotted against foreign leaders during the Cold War (for instance, the US repeatedly attempted to assassinate Fidel Castro), they always did so covertly and rarely acknowledged responsibility when exposed. In later decades, when the US targeted foreign leaders such as Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein, it was careful to claim that their deaths would have been an inadvertent consequence of a strike undertaken in self-defence. Such was the stig-

ma against targeting heads of state that, as late as 2022, some authors argued that the norm erosion triggered by targeted killings would remain "compartmentalised" to the targeting of non-state actors.

Today, both democratic and authoritarian states employ it, and targets have expanded beyond suspected terrorists to include scientists, political opponents, bloggers, journalists, state officials, and sitting heads of state during armed conflict. Alongside covert poisoning and car bombs, methods have evolved to include drone strikes and AI-assisted targeting. The practice now spans objectives of counterterrorism, deterrence, regime security, and strategic signalling. What was once treated as an exceptional and contested measure has been bureaucratized and normalised as a tool of policy within self-proclaimed liberal democracies such as the United States and Israel. The definitional move from "assassination" to "targeted killing" facilitated this process by situating such operations within the vocabulary of armed conflict after 9/11.

UNDECLARED US-IRAN CONFLICT

It may seem that the US and the Middle East are currently embarking on yet another forever war. But the truth is that this is just the latest instalment of an undeclared military conflict

between the two nations that has been ongoing since the 1960s. For Americans, the war began in 1979, when Iranian students seized the US embassy in Tehran and held 52 diplomats hostage for 444 days. For Iranians, it began with US support for the Shah and its subsequent backing of Iraq throughout the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. The conflict has claimed many civilian lives. On July 31988, the US warship Vincennes downed Iran Air Flight 655, a civilian flight bound for Dubai. The USS Vincennes misidentified the Airbus as a military aircraft and shot it down, killing all 290 people on board. More recently, on 28 February 2020, a US-Israeli missile hit a girls' school in southern Iran, killing over 150 civilians, most of them children. Iran also shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 on January 8, 2020. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps mistook the civilian plane for a US military flight, and fired two surface-to-air missiles that killed all 176 passengers, mostly Iranian civilians.

PROHIBITION OF AGGRESSION AS A JUS COGENS NORM

One of the first *jus cogens* norms identified by the International Law Commission (ILC) is aggression. Although there is a lack of consensus on the prohibition of the use of force as a *jus cogens* norm, aggression

has garnered acceptance as a *jus cogens* norm. The UNGA defines aggression as "the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations." Although it replicates the provision on the use of force under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.

This distinction is pronounced in the ILC Draft Conclusions on the identification and legal consequences of peremptory norms of general international law (*jus cogens*), which prefers aggression over aggression in its non-exhaustive list.

UNITED STATES AGGRESSION AND LIMITS OF SELF-DEFENCE

The US reckons preemptive strike falls within the ambit of self-defence. However, I argue that this defence is untenable as self-defence cannot justify the acts of aggression.

First, the UNGA Resolution 3381 lays down a list of acts that constitute aggression. Specifically Article 3(d) of the resolution reads, "An attack by the armed forces of a State on the land, sea or air forces, or marine and air fleets of another State". The US B-2 bomber dropped bombs over the nuclear sites in Bushehr, Natanz and Isfahan. Trump claims the strikes "completely obliterated" Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities. According to the Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, the attack has "obliterated Iran's nuclear ambition." Therefore, these air attacks unambiguously constitute aggression. The rationale behind these attacks and coercive diplomacy is to thwart the Iranian enrichment and curb the regional hegemony of Iran.

However, this legally does not entitle the U.S. to commit aggression. As the UNGA resolution highlights, "[N]o consideration of whatever nature, whether political, economic, military or otherwise, may serve as a justification for aggression." Therefore, self-defence cannot be a ground to justify aggression because it is immune to exceptions.

Second, on several occasions, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had the opportunity to interpret self-defence for acts of aggression. In the *Nicaragua* case (1986), the United States tried to deploy collective self-defence for Nicaragua's alleged acts of aggression against El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica. However, the US failed to fulfil the requirement of self-defence, as the ICJ observed, "The declaration and the request of El Salvador made publicly for the first time in August 1984, do not support the contention that in 1980 there was an armed attack capable of serving as a legal foundation for United States activities which began in the

second half of that year."

LAW STILL MATTERS

If the international community remains silent following actions surrounding the murder of Ali Khamenei, silence risks becoming complicity. Normalising preventive war weakens the post-1945 rules-based order and encourages nuclear proliferation as vulnerable states seek survival through deterrence. The consequences may include escalating arms races, erosion of diplomacy and heightened risk of confrontation among nuclear powers.

Accountability mechanisms still exist — independent investigations, international legal proceedings, diplomatic pressure and multilateral restraint. The issue is not punishment alone but preservation of global order. When force replaces law as the organising principle of international politics, instability becomes permanent. Silence, in such moments, is not neutrality. Silence becomes participation in the crime.

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- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Jus Cogens:** These are "peremptory norms" of international law from which no derogation is permitted. Think of them as the "unbreakable rules" of the world.

- *Example:* The prohibition of genocide or the illegal use of force against another state.

- **Targeted Killing:** The intentional, premeditated, and deliberate use of lethal force by a state or its agents against a specific individual not in their physical custody.

- *Example:* A drone strike hitting a specific military commander in a non-combat zone.

- **State Sovereignty:** The principle that a state has exclusive authority over its territory and domestic affairs, free from outside interference.

- **Anticipatory/Preemptive Self-Defense:** A legal claim that a state can use force to prevent an "imminent" attack.

- *Example:* Striking a missile silo because there is intelligence it will be fired within the hour.

- **UN Charter Article 2(4):** The cornerstone of international peace which prohibits the "threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The core thesis posits that the assassination of state officials (specifically citing the 2026 scenario of Ayatollah Khamenei) represents a terminal erosion of the international norm against political assassination.

- **Routinisation of "Targeted Killings":** What was once a covert, "deniable" act during the Cold War has become a declared, overt tool of statecraft. The transition from "assassination" (illegal) to "targeted killing" (presented as a security necessity) is a semantic shift used to justify lethal force.

- **Violation of Sovereignty:** The article argues that striking a high-ranking state official on their own soil is an act of aggression. It challenges the U.S. justification of "self-defense," noting that for self-defense to be legal under the *Nicaragua Case* (ICJ) standards, there must be a high threshold of an "armed attack" already underway or truly imminent.

- **The "Global War on Terror" Paradigm:** Since 9/11, the distinction between "war" and "peace" has blurred. This allows states to treat the entire world as a battlefield, targeting non-state actors and state officials alike under the guise of counter-terrorism.



- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Cold War Era (Pre-1990s):** Covert operations were common (e.g., attempts on Fidel Castro), but states rarely admitted to them. There was a "norm of denial" to maintain the veneer of international law.

- **Post-9/11 (2001–2010):** The U.S. "War on Terror" introduced the drone program. Focus shifted to non-state actors (Al-Qaeda). The legal justification was the "Authorization for Use of Military Force" (AUMF).

- **The Shift to State Officials (2020):** The killing of Qassem Soleimani marked a shift from targeting "terrorists" to targeting "state military officials." This moved the needle from counter-terrorism to undeclared interstate conflict.

- **The Present (2026):** The hypothetical or actual targeting of a Head of State (Khamenei) represents the final collapse of the distinction between military targets and political leadership, potentially triggering a state of "forever war."

Targeted Killing vs. International Law: The Erosion of Global Order



THE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS VS. MODERN PRACTICE

2(4) UN CHARTER ARTICLE 2(4)
DEFINITION: Prohibits the threat or use of force against any state's territorial integrity or political independence.

THE SELF-DEFENSE LOOPHOLE (ARTICLE 51)
KEY FINDING: States increasingly stretch "imminent threat" to justify preventive strikes against foreign state officials.

JUS COGENS (PEREMPTORY NORMS)
STATISTIC: These are "unbreakable rules," like the prohibition of aggression, that no state can legally bypass.

IMPACT ANALYSIS TABLE

	DIMENSION	PRIMARY IMPACT
	Legal	Erodes the sanctity of the UN Charter and ICJ jurisdiction.
	Political	Creates power vacuums and strengthens hardliners in targeted nations.
	Economic	Triggers oil price volatility and disruptions to global trade routes.

EVOLUTION OF LETHAL STATECRAFT



Logical and Philosophical Base

Realism vs. Idealism: The arguments rest on the tension between *Realpolitik* (states will do whatever is necessary for survival) and *Legalism* (states must follow the UN Charter to prevent global chaos).

The "Slippery Slope" Logic: If the international community remains silent when a "rogue" leader is killed, it sets a precedent that makes *any* leader a legitimate target, leading to global instability.

Philosophical Foundation: This draws from the "Just War Theory" (St. Augustine/Aquinas)—specifically *Jus ad Bellum* (the right to go to war). If the cause isn't a direct response to aggression, the act is philosophically "unjust."

- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **A. Social dimension**

- Civilian casualties and trauma can harden public opinion.
- Refugee flows and diaspora insecurity increase.
- Long-term: societies may normalise violence, weakening peace constituencies.

- **B. Political dimension**

- Strengthens hardliners on all sides (“they only understand force”).
- Shrinks space for moderates and negotiated settlements.
- Domestic politics in many states rewards “toughness,” punishes compromise.

- **C. Legal dimension**

- Erodes the credibility of the prohibition on force if stretched too far.
- Creates precedents other states can cite (“you did it, so can we”).
- Expands grey zones: covert war, cyber, proxies, deniable strikes.

- **D. Ethical dimension**

- **Right to life vs national security**

- **Due process vs emergency logic**

- **Means-end dilemma:** even if goals are security, methods may be unjustifiable.

- A useful ethics line for answers: *Security policies must be effective, but also legitimate—otherwise they sow future insecurity.*

- **E. International dimension**

- Polarisation in multilateral forums.
- Arms race dynamics, alliance consolidation.
- Nuclear non-proliferation regime stress: states seek “ultimate deterrence.”

- **F. Economic dimension**

- Oil and shipping disruptions → inflationary shocks.
- Defence spending rises; development spending squeezed.
- Investment uncertainty; sanctions and counter-sanctions distort trade.

Linkages with NCERTs

A. Class 12 Political Science (Contemporary World Politics)

Chapters on the UN and its reforms

- Links to UNSC effectiveness, veto, collective security vs unilateral action.

US hegemony and world politics

- Helps explain why rule-making and rule-bending can coexist.

Security in the contemporary world

- Traditional vs non-traditional security; terrorism; nuclear risks.

B. Class 11 Political Science (Political Theory)

Rights

- Right to life, limits on state power, legitimacy of coercion.

Peace

- Philosophical bases of peace, conflict resolution, ethics of war.

C. Class 10 Civics (Democratic Politics / Outcomes of Democracy)

Accountability and rule of law

- Useful to connect domestic constitutionalism with international rule-based conduct.

Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus

GS Paper 2 (Strongest linkage)

International Relations

- UN Charter principles, sovereignty, non-intervention.
- India's position in West Asia, strategic autonomy, diaspora safety.

International institutions

- UNSC reform, multilateralism, effectiveness of global governance.

GS Paper 3

Internal security

- Terrorism, cross-border threats, security vs liberty debates.

Science & tech / nuclear and strategic issues

- Nuclear non-proliferation logic, strategic stability.

GS Paper 4 (Ethics)

Ethical dilemmas in:

- targeted killing,
- civilian harm,
- proportionality,
- truth/verification in intelligence-based decisions.

- **Way Forward**
- **A. Strengthen restraint + clarity on use of force**
- Push for clearer multilateral standards on:
 - imminence,
 - necessity and proportionality,
 - transparency after strikes (public legal justification, not vague claims).
- **B. De-escalation architecture**
- Hotlines, crisis communication channels, third-party mediation.
- Regional security dialogues focused on:
 - maritime safety,
 - missile risk reduction,
 - protection of civilians.
- **C. Accountability toolkit (realistic, not idealistic)**
- Independent fact-finding and reporting mechanisms.
- Targeted diplomatic costs for unlawful force (where consensus exists).
- Strengthen compliance incentives: trade, technology, and diplomatic engagement tied to restraint.
- **D. Nuclear risk reduction (critical)**
- Reinforce non-proliferation and verification pathways.
- Promote civilian nuclear safety norms and “no-strike” understandings near sensitive facilities.
- Encourage negotiated arrangements rather than coercive postures.



- **A. UPSC Mains-style PYQ themes (repeated across years)**
- **UNSC reform and effectiveness in maintaining peace**
- **Use of force, sovereignty, and intervention**
- **International terrorism and cross-border countermeasures**
- **Nuclear order, deterrence, and proliferation risks**
- **Ethical governance in national security decisions**
- **B. Practice questions (PYQ-patterned)**
- *“International law permits the use of force only in exceptional circumstances.” Discuss the conditions and their misuse in contemporary conflicts.*
- *Targeted killing of individuals across borders raises legal and ethical dilemmas. Examine with reference to sovereignty, self-defence, and human rights.*
- *Why does the UN system struggle to prevent escalation in major power conflicts? Suggest reforms that are realistic, not utopian.*
- *Preventive war weakens international stability. Do you agree? Substantiate with arguments.*
- *Nuclear deterrence may prevent war, yet it can incentivise proliferation. Explain this paradox.*
- *Discuss how intelligence uncertainty affects democratic accountability in national security decision-making.*
- *Evaluate India’s options in West Asian instability with focus on energy security and diaspora protection.*





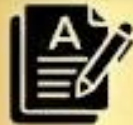
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