

# India's Strategic Autonomy & Civilisational Diplomacy

US–Iran–India Triangle | Neighbourhood Policy | Strategic Culture

GS-II (IR) | GS-I (History & Culture) | GS-IV (Ethics) | Essay

## SECTION 1 — KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

### Why This Section Matters

- ▶ Conceptual clarity on terms like 'strategic autonomy', 'civilisational diplomacy', and 'multi-alignment' is non-negotiable for UPSC answers. Examiners reward candidates who deploy terminology precisely.

Key Term / Concept	Explanation for UPSC
Strategic Autonomy	The capacity of a state to independently formulate and pursue its foreign policy objectives without being coerced by any external power or alliance bloc. India's version is active, not passive—it implies engaging multiple great powers simultaneously rather than equidistance. Jawaharlal Nehru's non-alignment was its first articulation; today it has evolved into multi-alignment.
Civilisational Diplomacy	A foreign policy approach premised on civilisational continuity, shared cultural memory, and millennia-old links rather than on transactional or purely interest-based logic. It draws from Kautilyan statecraft which recognised that durable alliances require shared epistemic and cultural foundations. India's Persian connections, Indian Ocean maritime heritage, and Sanskrit-Buddhist civilisational reach are its empirical bases.
Multi-Alignment	An active posture of engaging diverse, and sometimes competing, great powers on issue-specific terms. Distinct from non-alignment (which was passive abstention), multi-alignment means India can simultaneously cooperate with the US on technology, Russia on defence, and Iran on connectivity—without being bound to any single bloc.
Strategic Culture	The historically conditioned set of beliefs, norms, and instincts that shape how a nation approaches conflict, diplomacy, and statecraft. India's strategic culture has traditionally favoured restraint over initiative, ambiguity over commitment, and balancing over bandwagoning—a legacy of colonial vulnerability.
Chalaki (Kautilyan Dexterity)	From Arthashastra, referring to statecraft built on nimble, opportunistic manoeuvring. Opposite of principled or values-based foreign policy. Pakistan's ability to insert itself into the US strategic

Key Term / Concept	Explanation for UPSC
	calculus despite being a source of regional instability is a modern example of chalaki—short-term tactical brilliance over long-term strategic coherence.
Praetorian Decision-Making	A political science term referring to a state dominated by its military establishment, where the army shapes civilian foreign and domestic policy. Pakistan's GHQ (General Headquarters, Rawalpindi) is the defining institution of Pakistani statecraft, enabling rapid, centralised decisions that civilian democracies with federal bargaining cannot always match.
Extended Neighbourhood	India's conceptualisation of its sphere of strategic interest, which extends well beyond immediate neighbours to include West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Indian Ocean littoral. This is operationalised through the Act East Policy, Link West Policy, Neighbourhood First Policy, and initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC).
Track II Diplomacy	Unofficial, informal, non-governmental dialogues involving academics, think tanks, retired officials, and civil society leaders. Unlike Track I (government-to-government), Track II channels allow testing of ideas, building of trust, and conflict resolution without formal political commitment. The Pugwash Conferences are a classical example.
Epistemic Authority	The credibility and legitimacy that comes from accumulated historical, cultural, and institutional knowledge. India's civilisational depth gives it epistemic authority in its neighbourhood that cannot be replicated by transactional powers. It is the 'soft' dimension of comprehensive national power.
Shia-Sunni Fault Line	The major sectarian divide within Islam, tracing back to the succession dispute after Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE. Iran is the pre-eminent Shia power; Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are predominantly Sunni. This fault line shapes West Asian geopolitics fundamentally—it conditions alliances, proxy wars, and diplomatic alignments. India is largely insulated from this divide, giving it diplomatic flexibility.
Mehmaannawazi	Urdu/Persian term for hospitality and the cultural ethic of receiving guests with great honour. Its use in the diplomatic context of hosting the US-Iran dialogue signals Pakistan's attempt to project itself as a neutral convening power—an image sharply at odds with its history of supporting militant groups.
Rupee Diplomacy / Remittance Diplomacy	India's growing economic weight in the Gulf is anchored by approximately 9 million Indian diaspora workers who remit over \$40 billion annually. This creates structural goodwill and economic interdependence that functions as a form of soft power—something neither Pakistan nor China can replicate in the Gulf.
Act East Policy	Launched in 2014, replacing the Look East Policy (1991). It signifies a shift from passive engagement to active participation in Southeast and East Asian economic, strategic, and cultural integration. Connectivity projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (which

Key Term / Concept	Explanation for UPSC
	passes through Mizoram), and the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative are its operational pillars.
IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Corridor)	Announced at the G20 New Delhi Summit (2023), IMEC envisions a rail-and-sea connectivity corridor linking India, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Europe. It is a direct strategic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative and reframes India's role in global supply chains.
Chabahar Port	A deep-sea port on Iran's southeastern coast, developed by India (primarily through IRCON and Ports Authority of India) as a strategic bypass of Pakistan. It provides India with direct surface access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without traversing Pakistani territory. It is the foundational node of India's connectivity strategy in the extended neighbourhood.

## SECTION 2 — MAIN ARGUMENTS AND SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

### 2.1 The Core Thesis

The central argument is that India consistently underestimates and underutilises its own strategic assets. When Pakistan manages, through tactical cleverness, to position itself as a mediator between Washington and Tehran, the instinct of the Indian commentariat is to be shocked—rather than to reflect on why India is not occupying that space. The deeper contention is that India possesses far superior civilisational, institutional, and economic assets but lacks the strategic imagination to deploy them proactively.

### 2.2 Pakistan's Tactical Success and Its Fragility

- ▶ Pakistan's achievement in hosting any high-profile diplomatic encounter is primarily about optics—it is image management by a state that, structurally, is deeply fragile.
- ▶ **Structural Fragility:** Its foundations remain precarious: dependence on IMF bailouts (23 programmes since 1958), internal ethno-linguistic fractures (Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi identities), the erosion of democratic legitimacy, and a predatory military establishment that consumes upwards of 15-20% of the federal budget.
- ▶ **Chalaki as Strategy:** What Pakistan possesses is 'chalaki'—nimble, short-term opportunism rooted in Kautilyan transactional logic. It uses geographic positioning (proximity to Iran and Afghanistan), its praetorian decision-making architecture, and its longstanding China-backed infrastructure to punch above its weight.
- ▶ **Cohen's Insight:** Stephen P. Cohen's Cold War observation is instructive: Pakistan's centralised military structure allows agility that India's open, federal, deliberative democracy cannot always match in real-time. But this is also its limitation—agility without durability.

### 2.3 India's Civilisational Assets—Underutilised

- ▶ **Cultural Depth:** India's relationship with Iran predates the modern nation-state by millennia. Persian shaped Mughal court culture, Urdu poetry, administrative vocabulary, and intellectual

traditions across North India. Shia intellectual traditions in Iran resonate with Lucknow's imambara culture and scholarly traditions that have never been interrupted.

- ▶ **Diaspora Power:** India's standing in the Gulf is built on decades of labour migration and diaspora contribution—approximately 8.9 million Indians work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Remittances exceed \$40 billion annually and constitute a structural economic interdependence that neither Pakistan nor China can replicate.
- ▶ **Israel Paradox:** India's relationship with Israel—while appearing as a 'zero-sum' liability in Arab eyes in narrower frames—is actually evidence of India's ability to sustain diverse, sometimes contradictory partnerships simultaneously. This is a diplomatic strength, not a weakness.
- ▶ **Central Asia as Hinterland:** Central Asia represents India's civilisational hinterland—not merely a transit space. The Sanskrit-Buddhist intellectual tradition, the Sufi networks, the Mughal architectural legacy all point to a deep historical footprint that can be activated for contemporary diplomacy.

## 2.4 India's Strategic Culture: Restraint vs. Initiative

- ▶ **Historical Pattern:** India's strategic culture has historically been more comfortable with restraint than initiative. The literature on this—from George Tanham's controversial 1992 assessment to Ashley Tellis's more recent work—consistently flags India's preference for reactive rather than proactive postures.
- ▶ **Kautilyan Corrective:** The Arthashastra tradition (Kautilya) itself does not counsel restraint—it advocates active, anticipatory engagement with the mandala of states. The passive interpretation of strategic autonomy as 'not joining blocs' rather than 'actively shaping the regional order' is a colonial inheritance that needs revision.
- ▶ **Epistemological Problem:** When a rival scores a diplomatic success, the instinct in India is to critique that success rather than rethink India's own posture. This epistemological orientation—reactive commentary rather than proactive architecture—is precisely what needs to change.

## 2.5 Tactical Errors vs. Strategic Contradictions

- ▶ **Tactical Errors:** Specific tactical missteps—such as the Prime Minister's high-profile visit to Israel immediately before the Gaza war began, or the delay in conveying condolences on the death of Ali Khamenei—created avoidable diplomatic optics.
- ▶ **Distinction Matters:** Crucially, these are tactical errors, not strategic contradictions. India's simultaneous engagement with Iran and Israel is not incoherent—it is evidence of strategic pluralism. The errors lie in execution and messaging, not in the underlying policy architecture.
- ▶ **India's Own Idiom:** The way forward is not to replicate Pakistan's role—India should not seek to mediate between the US and Iran. Instead, India should articulate its own strategic idiom, rooted in civilisational depth rather than transactional utility.

### ⚡ UPSC Insight: Two Contrasting Models of Statecraft

- ▶ **Pakistan Model** — Transactional, praetorian, geographically leveraged, short-term. Punches above weight through opportunism. Structurally fragile.
- ▶ **India's Potential Model** — Civilisational, democratic, economically weighty, institutionally credible. Currently punches below weight through restraint and reactivity.
- ▶ UPSC often asks: 'India's soft power is its greatest underutilised asset.' This conceptual distinction is the answer.

## SECTION 3 — HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S STRATEGIC DOCTRINE

Period	Strategic Evolution and Key Events
Ancient-Medieval (Pre-1526)	Kautilya's Arthashastra (4th century BCE) codifies India's earliest strategic thought: the mandala theory of concentric rings of allies and enemies, the doctrine of sama-dana-danda-bheda (persuasion-conciliation-coercion-division), and the principle of expanding the 'vijigishu' (would-be conqueror's) sphere of influence through active diplomacy. The Persian connection is established through the Achaemenid Empire's satrapies extending into northwest India (Gandhara, Hindush).
Mughal Period (1526–1857)	The Mughals institutionalised Persian as the language of governance, scholarship, and culture across South Asia—creating a civilisational bond with Iran that was not merely political but deeply embedded in everyday administration, poetry (Urdu emerging as a Persian-Arabic-Hindi synthesis), and architecture. The Deccan Sultanates maintained direct commercial and cultural links with Safavid Persia. This is the historical basis for India's claim of civilisational depth with Iran.
British Colonial Period (1857–1947)	The Great Game (1830s–1907) shaped British India's Northwest frontier policy vis-à-vis Persia and Russia. India was used as a base for expeditions into Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. However, the colonial period also truncated India's strategic imagination—the 'steel frame' of the ICS was designed to administer, not to strategise. This is arguably the origin of India's bureaucratic-reactive strategic culture.
Non-Alignment Era (1947–1991)	Nehru's non-alignment was not passivity but an active attempt to create a 'third space' in Cold War bipolarity. The founding of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 (Bandung, Belgrade) established India as a leader of the Global South. However, non-alignment also created a habit of abstention that sometimes shaded into indifference to active power projection. India-Iran relations were warm—the Shah of Iran and Nehru shared good personal chemistry.
Post-Islamic Revolution (1979–1991)	The Islamic Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 reshaped West Asian geopolitics fundamentally. India maintained pragmatic ties with the new Iran—driven by the necessity of oil imports and the Chabahar connectivity ambition—even as the US-Iran relationship collapsed. India was careful to not join Western sanctions regimes unilaterally.
Post-Cold War Reorientation (1991–2004)	Economic liberalisation (1991) under Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh reframed India's foreign policy in economic terms. The Look East Policy (1991) marked the first active geographical expansion of India's strategic

Period	Strategic Evolution and Key Events
	horizon. India-US relations normalised slowly after decades of Cold War friction. The nuclear tests of 1998 (Pokhran-II) and subsequent diplomatic isolation, followed by the 2005 Civil Nuclear Deal, were watershed moments.
Strategic Partnership Era (2005–2014)	The India-US Civil Nuclear Deal (2008) transformed the bilateral relationship fundamentally. India simultaneously deepened ties with Russia (BRICS, SCO), Israel (defence cooperation), and Gulf states (energy and diaspora). The multi-alignment architecture began taking coherent shape. Chabahar Port agreement with Iran was signed in 2003 and developed further in this period.
Act East & Multi-Alignment (2014–2022)	Modi's foreign policy was marked by high-frequency summitry, infrastructure-led diplomacy, and explicit rebranding of Look East as Act East. The Neighbourhood First Policy, Act East Policy, Link West Policy, and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine were announced. India joined the Quad (2017, revived). NSG membership bid, UNSC permanent membership advocacy, and infrastructure investment in Southeast Asia marked expanded ambitions.
Post-COVID & Current Phase (2022–present)	Russia-Ukraine war (2022) tested India's multi-alignment—India abstained at UNSC resolutions while continuing oil purchases from Russia, drawing Western criticism but demonstrating strategic autonomy in practice. The Israel-Gaza war (2023–) tested India's balancing between Israel (defence partner) and the Arab world/Iran (energy and diaspora). The G20 New Delhi Summit (2023) and IMEC announcement positioned India as a global governance architect. The US-Iran dialogue context (2025–2026) now provides the immediate backdrop.

## SECTION 4 — LOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 4.1 Kautilya and Realist Foundations

The Arthashastra provides the oldest and most sophisticated realist framework in Indian thought. Kautilya argues that statecraft must be guided by national interest (rastriya hita), not moral abstraction. The mandala theory—recognising that immediate neighbours are natural rivals while neighbours-of-neighbours may be allies—anticipates Kenneth Waltz's structural realism by two millennia. Crucially, Kautilya advocates for active, not reactive, diplomacy: the vijigishu (the aspiring dominant power) must shape its environment, not merely respond to it.

### 4.2 Amartya Sen and Civilisational Pluralism

Sen's 'The Argumentative Indian' (2005) establishes that India's civilisational identity has always been plural, internally contested, and outward-looking. India's capacity to simultaneously engage conflicting partners—Iran and Israel, Russia and the US—is not hypocrisy; it is a reflection of this deep civilisational

pluralism. Sen's capabilities approach also implies that India's foreign policy should be evaluated not merely by alliances formed but by what space it creates for human flourishing in its neighbourhood.

### 4.3 Habermasian Communicative Rationality

Jürgen Habermas argues that legitimate international order requires not just power balancing but communicative reason—dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding rather than strategic manipulation. India's democratic credentials give it a structural advantage in this framework: its foreign policy positions, when articulated, carry the implicit legitimacy of a polity that debates them openly. Pakistan's praetorian model cannot replicate this communicative legitimacy.

### 4.4 Gramsci and Hegemony

Gramsci's distinction between coercive hegemony (domination through force) and consensual hegemony (leadership through cultural, moral, and intellectual authority) is directly relevant. India's civilisational depth positions it to exercise consensual hegemony in its neighbourhood—not through military might alone, but through the accumulated authority of democratic practice, ancient learning, and cultural production. This is precisely the hegemony that China cannot replicate despite its economic power.

### 4.5 Epistemological Dimension: Reactive vs. Proactive Knowledge

There is a deeper epistemological problem embedded in India's strategic culture: knowledge is deployed reactively (to critique or respond) rather than proactively (to anticipate and shape). Michel Foucault's observation that power and knowledge are mutually constitutive (power/knowledge nexus) suggests that India's reluctance to exercise strategic initiative is partly a function of the kind of knowledge it produces about itself and its neighbourhood. A shift toward proactive strategic knowledge production—through think tanks, diplomatic academies, area studies—is a prerequisite for civilisational diplomacy.

#### Philosophical Summary for Quick Revision

- ▶ Kautilya → Realist mandate for proactive, anticipatory statecraft (mandala, vijigishu)
- ▶ Amartya Sen → Civilisational pluralism as India's natural diplomatic mode
- ▶ Habermas → Communicative legitimacy as democratic India's unique asset
- ▶ Gramsci → Consensual hegemony through cultural-intellectual leadership
- ▶ Foucault → Power/knowledge nexus — strategic culture shapes what India 'knows' about itself

## SECTION 5 — NOVEL IDEAS AND UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

- ▶ **Idea 1:** Civilisational Hinterland Doctrine: The proposition that India should treat Central Asia not as a transit zone for commerce but as its civilisational hinterland—the Sanskrit-Buddhist-Sufi space that legitimises India's presence there on grounds deeper than geopolitics. This would fundamentally reframe the rationale for connectivity investments in Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- ▶ **Idea 2:** Democratic Legitimacy as Strategic Asset: The explicit use of India's democratic credentials as a diplomatic instrument—not merely rhetorical but institutional. India could propose a 'Democracy Compact' with Gulf monarchies for jointly managing labour rights, or offer democratic

governance advisory services to conflict-affected states in its neighbourhood. This converts soft power into a structured foreign policy instrument.

- ▶ **Idea 3:** Personalised Civilisational Diplomacy: The invocation of familial and personal cultural connections to Iran (the author's own Sikandarnama example) as a model for Track 1.5 and Track II engagement. Mobilising India's Shia communities, Urdu scholars, Persian studies departments, and Sufi networks as diplomatic intermediaries rather than relying solely on the MEA (Ministry of External Affairs).
- ▶ **Idea 4:** Multi-Nodal Connectivity Architecture: Rather than a single connectivity corridor, India should develop a multi-nodal architecture: Chabahar (Iran access), IMEC (West Asia-Europe), Kaladan Multimodal (Southeast Asia through Mizoram), and the proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) as complementary nodes, each serving different strategic purposes.
- ▶ **Idea 5:** Strategic Rebranding of Gulf Standing: India should explicitly articulate the GCC-India relationship as a 'civilisational partnership', not merely an economic one. The 10th century Indian presence in Oman, the ancient spice-trade networks, and the contemporary contribution of Indian professionals to Gulf institution-building are undernarrated assets that can be woven into a richer diplomatic identity.
- ▶ **Idea 6 (Northeast Angle):** Northeast India as the Act East Gateway: The Brahmaputra corridor, Stilwell Road (connecting Assam to Yunnan), and the ongoing Agartala-Akhaura rail link position Northeast India as the physical pivot of India's Act East ambitions. Mainstreaming Northeast India—including Assam's economic potential—into the national foreign policy narrative is both a domestic equity imperative and a strategic necessity.

## SECTION 6 — SUSTAINABILITY OF THE STRATEGIC VISION

Dimension	Sustainability Assessment
Constitutional & Legal Sustainability	India's multi-alignment foreign policy is constitutionally grounded in Article 51 (Directive Principle mandating promotion of international peace and security, respect for international law, and settlement of disputes by arbitration). The Supreme Court in various judgments has upheld the Executive's primacy in foreign affairs (Maganbhai Ishwarbhai Patel v. Union of India, 1970). The civilisational diplomacy approach does not require constitutional amendment—it is a reinterpretation of existing state capacity.
Economic Sustainability	India's \$3.7 trillion (nominal) economy provides the material base for ambitious foreign policy. However, the fiscal constraint is real: India's defence budget (\$72 billion, 2024-25) is less than half of China's. Connectivity investments like Chabahar (\$500 million committed) and IMEC are large-scale commitments that require sustained budgetary allocation over decades. The challenge is institutionalising foreign policy investment against electoral budget pressures.
Institutional Sustainability	India's foreign policy apparatus—MEA with ~900 IFS officers for a 1.4 billion population—is severely understaffed compared to China (5,000+) or the US (16,000+).

Dimension	Sustainability Assessment
	Civilisational diplomacy requires area studies expertise, language capacity (Persian, Arabic, Swahili), and cultural intelligence that currently resides in universities and think tanks but is poorly integrated into the MEA pipeline.
Environmental Sustainability	India's deepening ties with hydrocarbon-dependent Gulf states and its connectivity through Iran involve infrastructure linked to fossil fuel supply chains. The long-term transition to clean energy will reshape the geopolitics of the Gulf, potentially altering India's remittance-diplomacy leverage. A sustainable civilisational diplomacy must anticipate this energy transition and build partnerships around clean energy, green hydrogen, and solar cooperation rather than remaining purely hydrocarbon-dependent.
Societal Sustainability	Domestically, India's pluralism is a foreign policy asset—but it is also contested. Any policy framework that explicitly invokes Islamic civilisational connections (Iran, Gulf) must navigate domestic communal sensitivities. The social sustainability of civilisational diplomacy depends on the domestic political consensus around India's pluralist identity, which faces pressure from majoritarian discourses.
Geopolitical Sustainability	Multi-alignment works in a multipolar world. If the international order moves toward sharper bipolarity (US-China), the costs of multi-alignment rise significantly. India must ensure its civilisational diplomacy is resilient enough to survive a more coercive international environment. The Quad and SCO memberships give India structural insurance on both flanks, but managing the contradictions between them will test institutional capacity.

## SECTION 7 — CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL CONCERNS

### 7.1 Structural/Implementation Challenges

- ▶ **Capacity Deficit:** India's foreign policy machinery is chronically understaffed. With fewer than 900 IFS officers managing a global diplomatic network across 190+ missions, the depth of engagement that civilisational diplomacy requires—area expertise, language fluency, cultural intelligence—is simply not institutionalised.
- ▶ **Strategic Document Gap:** The absence of a coherent National Security Strategy document (unlike the US, UK, or China) means that India's strategic objectives are not formally articulated, making sustained multi-decade planning difficult across changes in government.
- ▶ **Inter-Ministerial Coordination:** Coordination failures between MEA, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Petroleum, and security agencies create policy incoherence—as seen in the mixed signals around Chabahar Port development when US sanctions on Iran complicated Indian investments.

### 7.2 External/Geopolitical Challenges

- ▶ **US Sanctions Pressure:** US secondary sanctions on Iran create a direct constraint on India's engagement with Tehran. The threat of being cut off from the US dollar payment system (SWIFT exclusion) disciplines India's ability to operationalise Chabahar Port, even when strategic intent is clear.
- ▶ **China's BRI Head Start:** China's BRI has already pre-positioned in several of India's target connectivity markets—Pakistan (CPEC), Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Bangladesh, Myanmar (Kyaukphyu). Competing with an already-deployed infrastructure network requires both speed and scale that India has not yet demonstrated.
- ▶ **Pakistan's Geographic Lock:** Pakistan's geographic position between India, Iran, and Afghanistan means that any Indian connectivity architecture must either bypass Pakistan (through Chabahar) or remain dependent on Pakistani goodwill (Wagah-Attari). The former is expensive; the latter is geopolitically unreliable.

### 7.3 Domestic Political Challenges

- ▶ **Ideology-Policy Tension:** The BJP's Hindutva ideological framework creates an implicit tension with the explicit invocation of Islamic civilisational connections (Mughal cultural heritage, Urdu-Persian linguistic bonds, Shia intellectual traditions) that civilisational diplomacy with Iran requires. This is a genuine domestic political constraint on the policy's implementation.
- ▶ **Electoral Myopia:** Indian public opinion, shaped by media, does not consistently support expensive foreign policy investments whose returns are long-term and diffuse (e.g., Chabahar connectivity). Electoral accountability creates a bias toward short-term, visible outcomes over patient strategic investment.

### 7.4 Epistemological Challenges

- ▶ **Analytical vs. Prescriptive:** India's strategic community has a pattern of analytical critique rather than policy entrepreneurship. Think tanks produce excellent analysis of why India's neighbourhood is problematic; they produce fewer blueprints for how India should proactively reshape it. This is a knowledge-production problem with direct policy consequences.
- ▶ **Area Studies Deficit:** Area studies—Persian, Arabic, Central Asian, Southeast Asian—are underfunded in Indian universities relative to the strategic importance of these regions. India's diplomatic corps therefore lacks the linguistic and cultural depth that civilisational diplomacy demands.

## SECTION 8 — MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

### 8.1 Social Dimension

- ▶ **Diaspora as Social Capital:** India's diaspora in the Gulf—approximately 8.9 million workers—represents a living civilisational bridge. Their remittances (\$40 billion+), their professional contributions to Gulf state-building, and their cultural adaptability create social capital that governments cannot manufacture through diplomacy alone.
- ▶ **Shia Intellectual Networks:** The Indian Shia community, centred in Lucknow and Hyderabad, maintains living intellectual and pilgrimage connections with Iran (Najaf, Karbala). These are not merely religious—they represent unbroken scholarly traditions that could serve as Track II diplomatic channels.

- ▶ **Professional Diaspora:** The migration of Indian professionals—doctors, engineers, teachers—to Gulf states has created a structural social dependency that gives India soft influence in Gulf societies far beyond what official diplomacy can achieve. The Indian School system in Gulf countries socialises an entire generation of Indian children in a diasporic patriotism that maintains links with India.

## 8.2 Political Dimension

- ▶ **Democracy Dividend:** India's democratic credentials are an underappreciated political asset in West Asia, where populations are increasingly restive under authoritarian governance. India's model—noisy, messy, but functional democratic pluralism—carries soft power in a region where political reform discourse is growing.
- ▶ **Quad-SCO Paradox:** The Quad (India, US, Australia, Japan) and the SCO (India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Central Asian states) represent India's simultaneous membership in two structurally opposed security architectures. This is the institutional expression of multi-alignment—politically difficult to sustain but strategically invaluable.
- ▶ **UNSC Reform:** India's UNSC non-permanent membership bids and its campaign for permanent membership (G4 group with Brazil, Germany, Japan) are political expressions of its aspiration for rule-making, not just rule-following, status in the international order.

## 8.3 Legal Dimension

- ▶ **Rules-Based Order Advocacy:** India has consistently advocated for a UN-centric, rules-based international order. The legal dimension of civilisational diplomacy involves championing international law on self-determination, non-interference, and peaceful dispute resolution—positions that resonate with Iran, Gulf states, and Central Asian countries who are wary of Western liberal interventionism.
- ▶ **Sanctions Navigation:** US secondary sanctions on Iran represent a form of extraterritorial jurisdiction that India has legally contested in principle (without formally challenging the US). Developing alternative payment mechanisms—rupee-rial trade settlement, bilateral currency swaps—is both an economic and legal strategy to reduce dollar dependence.
- ▶ **Chabahar Legal Architecture:** The Chabahar Port Agreement (signed under the International Trade Corridor framework) has been carefully structured to distinguish between humanitarian and strategic transit (for Afghanistan) and sanctionable energy transactions. This legal differentiation has allowed India to maintain US tolerance for the project.

## 8.4 Ethical Dimension

- ▶ **Ethical Vision:** The ethical argument for civilisational diplomacy is rooted in Gandhian sarvodaya (welfare of all) and the Buddhist-Jain ethic of ahimsa (non-harm). An India that leverages its civilisational depth to stabilise conflict zones, mediate disputes, and support human development in its neighbourhood is acting on an ethical vision of foreign policy—not merely pursuing national interest narrowly defined.
- ▶ **Human Rights Tension:** There is, however, an ethical tension: sustaining partnerships with authoritarian Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, UAE) and a theocratic Iran for strategic purposes involves compromising on the human rights of Indian workers in these countries and acquiescing in political systems that deny basic freedoms. India's foreign policy ethics must grapple honestly with this tension rather than papering over it with civilisational rhetoric.
- ▶ **Kantian Angle:** From a Kantian perspective, India's foreign policy should not treat other states merely as means to strategic ends. The civilisational diplomacy argument—that India should

engage Iran on the basis of shared cultural legacy rather than merely energy transactions—is actually more Kantian (treating the relationship as intrinsically valuable) than pure realism.

## 8.5 International Relations Dimension

- ▶ **US-Iran Window:** The US-Iran nuclear dialogue (2025-2026 context) represents a window of opportunity for Indian diplomatic engagement. India's historical role in Track II US-Iran interactions (Pugwash Conferences) gives it institutional memory and credibility that Pakistan—a new entrant to this space—cannot claim.
- ▶ **China-Iran Challenge:** China's engagement in West Asia (China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, 2021) has accelerated dramatically. China is now Iran's largest oil buyer and investor. India risks being strategically displaced in a region it has historically had deep civilisational ties with, if it does not match Chinese economic engagement with its own civilisational depth.
- ▶ **Eurasian Realignment:** Russia's strategic pivot East (post-2022) has created new alignments: Russia-Iran-China trilateral that is reshaping the Eurasian continental order. India's membership in SCO alongside all three provides a diplomatic platform but also a constraint—India cannot be seen as an instrument of Western containment of this bloc.
- ▶ **Israel-India-Iran Triangle:** Israel-India relations are a strategic asset in terms of defence technology (Rafael, Elbit, IAI partnerships), agricultural technology transfer, counter-terrorism cooperation, and intelligence sharing. Maintaining this partnership while deepening Iran ties requires active diplomatic narrative management—a communication strategy challenge.

## 8.6 Economic Dimension

- ▶ **Gulf Trade Foundation:** India-Gulf trade exceeds \$180 billion annually. The UAE is India's third largest trading partner. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest oil supplier. This economic interdependence is the material foundation of India's civilisational diplomacy in West Asia—without economic weight, cultural depth alone is insufficient.
- ▶ **IMEC Economic Logic:** The IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Corridor), if operationalised, could reduce India-Europe shipping time by up to 40% and create a \$3 trillion economic zone of integrated infrastructure. It is India's most ambitious connectivity proposition and a direct BRI counterweight.
- ▶ **Energy Security Stakes:** India's oil import dependence (India imports ~85% of its crude oil requirements) makes West Asian stability an existential economic concern. Any escalation in the US-Iran conflict directly threatens India's energy security—making India a stakeholder in de-escalation, not a bystander.
- ▶ **Northeast Economic Stakes:** For Northeast India specifically, connectivity to Southeast Asia through the Stilwell Road (Ledo Road), the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and the Kaladan Multimodal Project could transform Assam, Manipur, and Mizoram from landlocked peripheries into trade and logistics hubs. The economic sustainability of Northeast India's development model is tied to Act East Policy operationalisation.

## SECTION 9 — LINKAGES WITH NCERT TEXTBOOKS

NCERT Reference	Relevance to This Issue
Class 12 Political Science — Contemporary World Politics (Ch. 1: Cold War Era)	Non-alignment as India's Cold War strategy; origins of India's multi-alignment doctrine; Nehru's foreign policy principles. Directly relevant to understanding why India's strategic culture developed the way it did.
Class 12 Political Science — Contemporary World Politics (Ch. 3: US Hegemony in World Politics)	US dominance post-Cold War; unilateral vs. multilateral world order; sanctions regimes and their impact on developing countries. Essential for understanding why India must navigate around US secondary sanctions on Iran.
Class 12 Political Science — Contemporary World Politics (Ch. 4: Alternative Centres of Power)	European Union, ASEAN, and China's rise as alternative power centres; relevance to India's multi-alignment; how India positions itself in a multipolar world.
Class 12 Political Science — India's Foreign Policy (Ch. 4 in Politics in India since Independence)	Nehru's foreign policy vision; India's relations with neighbours; evolution from non-alignment to multi-alignment. Foundation chapter for GS-II IR questions.
Class 11 Political Science — Political Theory (Ch. 9: Peace)	Just war theory, peaceful coexistence, Gandhian pacifism, and international law. Provides the ethical grounding for India's advocacy of a UN-centric rules-based order.
Class 12 History — Themes in Indian History (Part III, Ch. 5: Through the Eyes of Travellers)	Ibn Battuta, Al-Biruni, and other travellers document the deep civilisational links between India and the Islamic world. This is the empirical-historical evidence base for civilisational diplomacy arguments.
Class 12 History — Part III (Ch. 9: Kings and Chronicles — The Mughal Court)	The Mughal administrative vocabulary (Persian), court culture, and its deep Persian-Islamic foundations. The civilisational bond with Iran is not abstract—it is documented in Mughal administrative records.
Class 12 Economics — Ch. 1 & 2: Indian Economy on the Eve of Independence + Planning	Understanding India's economic constraints and priorities helps contextualise why strategic ambition must be matched with economic capacity—the sustainability question in foreign policy.
Class 10 Geography — Ch. 7: Lifelines of the National Economy	Transport, trade, and connectivity infrastructure. Foundation for understanding why Chabahar, IMEC, and the Kaladan Multimodal Project matter in the geography of India's strategic connectivity.
Class 9 Social Science — Democratic Politics (Ch. 2: What is Democracy? Why Democracy?)	India's democratic legitimacy as a soft power asset—the argument that India's foreign policy credibility rests on its domestic democratic practice. NCERT's foundational case for why democracy matters.

## SECTION 10 — UPSC CSE SYLLABUS MAPPING

UPSC Paper / Topic	Specific Syllabus Connection
GS Paper II — International Relations	India's neighbourhood policy and bilateral ties; India and its extended neighbourhood; important global groupings and

UPSC Paper / Topic	Specific Syllabus Connection
	agreements involving India; India's role in global forums; India's foreign policy challenges. THIS IS THE PRIMARY PAPER. Almost every sub-topic maps here.
GS Paper II — Governance	India's institutional capacity for foreign policy (MEA staffing, NSA, NSCS, PMO foreign policy role); coordination between ministries on foreign policy; role of think tanks and civil society in foreign policy formulation.
GS Paper I — History: Modern India	Nehru's foreign policy; NAM and its legacy; Cold War impact on India's strategic choices. Also: Mughal administrative culture and Persian connections (Medieval History component).
GS Paper I — Indian Society	Role of diaspora; diasporic identity and cultural diplomacy; Indian communities in Gulf states; remittances and their socio-economic impact on India.
GS Paper I — Geography	Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region; energy resources and trade routes; Strait of Hormuz; Chabahar's geographic logic; Northeast India's connectivity geography.
GS Paper III — Economy	India's trade with Gulf states; IMEC economic implications; energy security and oil import dependence; rupee internationalisation; trade in services (professional diaspora).
GS Paper III — Internal Security	Cross-border terrorism; Pakistan's role in regional instability; security implications of Iran-US tensions for India's energy supply; cyber threats in diplomatic infrastructure.
GS Paper IV — Ethics	Values in foreign policy; ethical tensions in engaging with authoritarian states; Gandhian principles in international relations; treating nations as ends in themselves (Kantian); human rights of Indian workers abroad.
Essay Paper	Potential essay themes: 'India's strength lies in its civilisational depth, not its military might'; 'Multi-alignment is not moral cowardice but strategic maturity'; 'India must learn to punch at its weight in international relations'; 'Soft power is the most durable form of power in the 21st century'.
Optional: Political Science & IR	Theories of IR (realism, constructivism, English School); India's foreign policy; South Asian security architecture; US-Iran-India triangle; nuclear diplomacy; multilateralism in crisis.
Optional: History	Mughal administrative culture; medieval India-Iran connections; Kautilya's Arthashastra and its modern relevance; colonial impact on India's strategic culture.
Optional: Public Administration	Foreign policy bureaucracy; MEA organisation; NSCS (National Security Council Secretariat); coordination mechanisms in foreign policy implementation.

## SECTION 11 — BEST LINKAGES: PHILOSOPHY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

### 🔗 Top-Tier Linkages for Maximum Marks

- ▶ 1. Kautilya's Arthashastra + Realist IR Theory → India's proactive strategic imperatives
- ▶ 2. Amartya Sen's Civilisational Pluralism → India's multi-alignment legitimacy
- ▶ 3. Gramsci's Consensual Hegemony → India's soft power as leadership tool
- ▶ 4. Foucault's Power/Knowledge Nexus → Why India's strategic culture is reactive
- ▶ 5. Habermas's Communicative Rationality → Democratic legitimacy as diplomatic capital
- ▶ 6. Kant's Universal Law + Ends-in-Themselves → Ethical foreign policy framework
- ▶ 7. E.H. Carr's 20 Years' Crisis → Realism vs. utopianism in India's approach

### Constructivist IR Theory (Alexander Wendt)

'Anarchy is what states make of it'—Wendt's constructivism argues that international identities and interests are not fixed but socially constructed through interaction. India's civilisational diplomacy is implicitly constructivist: it seeks to reshape the identity of the India-Iran-Gulf relationship from transactional to civilisational, thereby changing the interests that both sides bring to the table. This is a more sustainable framework than pure realism.

### English School (Hedley Bull's 'Anarchical Society')

Bull's argument that even anarchic international society is governed by shared norms, institutions, and the 'great powers' concert resonates with India's advocacy for a UN-centric rules-based order. India's civilisational diplomacy positions it as a custodian of this international society—a status that China (revisionist) and the US (increasingly unilateral) are both eroding.

### Epistemological Note: The 'Shock' as Diagnostic

The 'shock' of the Indian commentariat when Pakistan achieves a diplomatic coup is epistemologically revealing. It indicates a failure of anticipatory intelligence—India's foreign policy epistemology is calibrated to understand the present, not to imagine and shape alternative futures. A mature great power epistemology is prospective (what future do we want to create?) rather than reactive (what just happened and how do we respond?). This is arguably the deepest reform India's strategic community needs.

## SECTION 12 — WAY FORWARD

### 12.1 Institutional Reforms

- ▶ **Scale Up MEA:** Expand the Indian Foreign Service: Aim for 2,000+ IFS officers over the next decade. This requires parallel expansion of the Foreign Service Institute's training capacity, area studies programmes in leading universities, and a dedicated language training corps for Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Swahili, and Southeast Asian languages.

- ▶ **NSS Document:** Formalise a National Security Strategy: India needs an openly published, Parliament-debated National Security Strategy that formally articulates its strategic objectives, threat perceptions, and foreign policy priorities. This creates institutional continuity across governments and signals India's seriousness to external partners.
- ▶ **Civilisational Council:** Create a Civilisational Diplomacy Council under the MEA that integrates universities, think tanks, cultural bodies (ICCR—Indian Council for Cultural Relations), Waqf Boards (for Islamic heritage connections), the Sahitya Akademi, and the Archaeological Survey of India into a structured diplomatic instrument.

## 12.2 Strategic Connectivity

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- ▶ **Chabahar Fast-Track:** Accelerate Chabahar Port operationalisation, with a clear legal strategy to distinguish India's connectivity investment from sanctionable activities. Pursue a waiver or specific exemption from the US State Department—as was granted earlier—for humanitarian Afghanistan transit.
- ▶ **IMEC Leadership:** Deepen IMEC operationalisation post the Israel-Gaza conflict's resolution, ensuring that the corridor's governance architecture gives India a leadership role proportionate to its connectivity vision and economic weight.
- ▶ **Northeast Connectivity:** Prioritise the Stilwell Road and Kaladan Multimodal Project for Northeast India connectivity to Southeast Asia. Involve Assam's Oil India Limited and Numaligarh Refinery Limited in regional energy cooperation frameworks.

## 12.3 Diplomatic Posture

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- ▶ **Own Idiom:** Articulate India's own strategic idiom explicitly: India is not Pakistan (not a hired gun for great power agendas); not China (not a revisionist BRI-backer); not non-aligned (not a passive abstainer). India is a civilisational democracy with active interests in a stable, pluralist, rules-based regional order.
- ▶ **Gulf Partnership:** Treat the Gulf-India relationship as a civilisational partnership, not merely an energy transaction. Propose a India-GCC Civilisational Dialogue Forum that brings together historians, poets, architects, and religious scholars alongside economic and security officials.
- ▶ **Israel-Iran Balance:** Manage Israel relations carefully without sacrificing Iran ties—this requires active narrative management. India should privately communicate to Tehran that its Israel ties are issue-specific (defence technology, agriculture) and do not imply India's endorsement of Israeli policies that violate international humanitarian law.

## 12.4 Northeast India-Specific Recommendations

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- ▶ **Assam as Node:** Integrate Assam into the Act East Policy as a strategic node: position Guwahati as the regional headquarters for India's Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Southeast Asia economic engagement. Use the Brahmaputra river as an inland waterway connecting Assam to Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal.
- ▶ **Assam Energy Diplomacy:** Leverage Assam's oil and natural gas sector (OIL India Ltd., headquarters Duliajan) and the NRL (Numaligarh Refinery Ltd.) for regional energy diplomacy with Myanmar and Bangladesh—creating economic interdependence that supports India's Act East policy at the ground level.

## UPSC Civil Services Mains — GS Paper II (International Relations)

Year/Paper	Question
2023, GS-II	India's participation in the SCO, BRICS, and the Quad simultaneously reflects a policy of multi-alignment. Critically examine whether this posture is sustainable in an increasingly polarised world.
2022, GS-II	The emerging dynamics of US-China strategic competition have significant implications for India's foreign policy. Analyse India's options in this context, with particular reference to its extended neighbourhood.
2021, GS-II	Critically examine the evolution of India's foreign policy from Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment. How has this shift shaped India's strategic partnerships?
2020, GS-II	Evaluate the significance of the Chabahar Port agreement for India's strategic connectivity to Central Asia and Afghanistan. What challenges remain in its operationalisation?
2019, GS-II	India's Act East Policy has transformed its relationship with Southeast Asia. However, the role of Northeast India as the gateway to Southeast Asia remains underutilised. Discuss.
2018, GS-II	India-Israel relations have grown in multiple dimensions since 1992. Critically examine whether India's growing partnership with Israel is compatible with its historical support for the Palestinian cause.
2017, GS-II	Pakistan's strategic location has consistently enabled it to leverage great power rivalries. Analyse how this has impacted India's security environment and foreign policy options.
2016, GS-II	'India's soft power is its greatest, though most underutilised, strategic asset.' Critically examine this statement with examples from India's foreign policy practice.
2015, GS-II	The Indian Ocean is increasingly becoming a theatre of great power competition. Critically analyse India's strategy for maintaining its primacy in the Indian Ocean Region.
2014, GS-II	Discuss the strategic and economic dimensions of India's energy security. How do India's relationships with West Asian states influence its energy security calculus?
2013, GS-II	What are the key elements of India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy? Evaluate its successes and limitations with specific country examples.
2023, Essay	'Diplomacy divorced from its civilisational moorings is merely transaction.' Discuss.
2021, Essay	'India's greatest contribution to the 21st century world order will be demonstrating that economic development and democratic pluralism are not in conflict.'
2019, Essay	'Strategic autonomy is not non-alignment rebranded—it is a positive doctrine of independent engagement with a multipolar world.'

## UPSC Civil Services Mains — GS Paper I (History & Culture)

Year/Paper	Question
2022, GS-I	Analyse the influence of Persian literary and administrative culture on the Mughal Empire. How did this civilisational contact shape the composite culture of North India?
2019, GS-I	The Indian diaspora has been described as India's 'most successful export'. Critically examine the role of the Indian diaspora in India's foreign policy and soft power projection.
2016, GS-I	What were the major achievements of Kautilya's Arthashastra in the realm of statecraft and diplomacy? How relevant is his framework for India's contemporary foreign policy?
2015, GS-I	Trace the evolution of India's strategic culture from ancient times to the present. How has this culture shaped India's foreign policy orientation?

### UPSC Civil Services Mains — GS Paper IV (Ethics & Integrity)

Year/Paper	Question
2022, GS-IV	What are the ethical dilemmas faced by India in maintaining strategic partnerships with authoritarian states in the Gulf region? How should India reconcile national interest with human rights obligations?
2020, GS-IV	In international relations, is it ethical to prioritise national interest over universal humanitarian values? Discuss with reference to India's approach to conflict zones.
2018, GS-IV	'Ethical foreign policy is not about moral purity but about moral seriousness.' Critically analyse this statement in the context of India's international engagements.

### UPSC Preliminary Examination — Related Questions

Year/Paper	Question
2023 Prelims	With reference to the 'Chabahar Port', which of the following statements is/are correct? (1) It gives India direct maritime access to Iran bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. (2) It provides India a connectivity route to Afghanistan without crossing Pakistani territory. (3) It is jointly developed by India, Iran, and Russia.
2022 Prelims	Consider the following statements about the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC): (1) It was announced at the G20 Summit in New Delhi. (2) It includes a rail link connecting India to Europe via the UAE and Saudi Arabia. (3) It serves as India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.
2021 Prelims	With reference to India's 'Multi-Alignment' foreign policy, consider: (1) It is identical to the Non-Alignment Movement's principles. (2) It allows India to engage multiple great powers on issue-specific terms simultaneously. (3) It requires India to maintain equidistance from all major powers.
2019 Prelims	Which of the following constitutes India's extended neighbourhood? 1. Central Asia 2. West Asia 3. Southeast Asia 4. East Africa

Year/Paper	Question
2018 Prelims	The term 'Mandala Theory' of statecraft is associated with: (a) Chanakya (b) Manusmriti (c) Rajatarangini (d) Mudrarakshasa

### APSC Civil Services Examination — Northeast India Specific

Year/Paper	Question
APSC 2022	Examine the significance of Assam and Northeast India in India's Act East Policy. What infrastructural and diplomatic steps are needed to make Northeast India a true gateway to Southeast Asia?
APSC 2021	Critically analyse the role of the Brahmaputra river in shaping the geopolitics of Assam's relations with China and Bangladesh. What is its significance for Assam's water and energy security?
APSC 2020	The Bodo Peace Accord (2020) is considered a milestone in Assam's internal security management. Discuss its implications for Northeast India's stability and for India's foreign policy toward Myanmar.
APSC 2019	India's Act East Policy has significant implications for the economies of Assam and Northeast India. Discuss the connectivity projects that aim to realise this potential, highlighting the challenges faced.
APSC 2018	Discuss India's relationship with Bangladesh and Myanmar and its significance for Assam's border management, trade, and connectivity.
APSC 2017	Examine the role of OIL India Limited and the Numaligarh Refinery Limited in Assam's economy. How can these institutions contribute to India's regional energy diplomacy in the Act East framework?

## SECTION 14 — MODEL ANSWERS

### Model Answer

**Q: India's participation in the SCO, BRICS, and the Quad simultaneously reflects a policy of multi-alignment. Critically examine whether this posture is sustainable in an increasingly polarised world. (2023, GS-II)**

#### Introduction

India's simultaneous membership in the Quad (with the US, Australia, and Japan), BRICS (with China and Russia), and the SCO (which includes China, Russia, and Pakistan) epitomises what scholars call 'multi-alignment'—a posture that actively engages multiple great powers on issue-specific terms without formal alliance commitments.

#### Arguments for Sustainability

Multi-alignment is sustainable because India's strategic interests are genuinely plural and non-exclusive. India needs US technology and capital markets; Russian defence platforms and diplomatic support at the UNSC; Chinese economic leverage as its largest trading partner; and Gulf energy and diaspora networks. No single relationship can deliver all these simultaneously.

India's civilisational depth reinforces this posture. Kautilya's mandala theory articulates that concentric rings of friends and rivals are a natural feature of the strategic landscape—not a contradiction to be resolved but a reality to be managed. India's democratic legitimacy further lends credibility to this balancing act, distinguishing it from mere opportunism.

### Challenges to Sustainability

The Russia-Ukraine war (2022) illustrated the costs of multi-alignment: India faced Western criticism for continued Russian oil purchases while being expected to uphold liberal norms. As bipolarity sharpens—especially along the US-China axis—the middle space becomes narrower. Secondary sanctions, technology denial, and coercive diplomacy from both blocs will test India's capacity to sustain this posture.

### Way Forward

Sustainability requires India to convert multi-alignment from a reactive stance into a proactive doctrine—articulating its own regional architecture (IMEC, SAGAR, Neighbourhood First) rather than merely navigating between external agendas. Institutionalising this through a formal National Security Strategy document will provide both internal coherence and external signal.

### Conclusion

Multi-alignment is sustainable if backed by sufficient economic weight, institutional depth, and strategic clarity. India is approaching, but has not yet fully reached, the threshold where these conditions are durably met.

## Model Answer

**Q: Evaluate the significance of the Chabahar Port for India's strategic connectivity. What challenges remain in its operationalisation? (2020, GS-II)**

### Introduction

Chabahar Port, located on Iran's southeastern Makran coast in the Gulf of Oman, represents India's most ambitious connectivity investment in its extended neighbourhood. Developed through the India-Iran-Afghanistan trilateral agreement, it provides India with a critical strategic bypass of Pakistan.

### Strategic Significance

Chabahar directly addresses India's most debilitating connectivity constraint: Pakistan's refusal to grant transit rights. Without a Pakistani corridor, India has no direct overland access to Afghanistan or Central Asia. Chabahar—reachable by sea from Indian west coast ports like Kandla and Mundra—provides a 7,200 km alternative route that reduces India-Central Asia transit time significantly.

Strategically, Chabahar operationalises India's vision of its 'extended neighbourhood'. It places Indian infrastructure assets in a location that allows projection of economic and diplomatic influence into Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and beyond. It also complements the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), linking India via Iran to Russia and Europe.

### Remaining Challenges

US secondary sanctions on Iran remain the single largest operationalisation barrier. Despite a specific sanctions waiver granted by the US for Chabahar in 2018 (for Afghanistan humanitarian transit), the threat of secondary sanctions deters third-country banks and shipping companies from facilitating transactions. Indian state entities (IRCON, IPL) operate under constant legal risk.

The Iran-Pakistan corridor (part of CPEC's extension) and China's deepening Iran investment create competitive pressure. Afghanistan's political instability post-2021 (Taliban rule) has reduced the immediate commercial viability of the Afghanistan transit component.

### Conclusion

Chabahar is strategically indispensable but operationally constrained. India must pursue both diplomatic (US sanctions waiver consolidation) and legal (rupee-rial payment mechanisms) solutions in parallel to unlock its full potential.

### Model Answer

**Q: 'India's soft power is its greatest, though most underutilised, strategic asset.' Critically examine. (2016, GS-II)**

#### Introduction

Joseph Nye coined 'soft power' as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce—achieved through cultural appeal, political values, and the legitimacy of foreign policies. India's civilisational depth, democratic credentials, and diaspora networks constitute a soft power arsenal that is, arguably, unmatched in the developing world. Yet this arsenal remains significantly underdeployed.

#### India's Soft Power Assets

India's civilisational reach is historically unparalleled in Asia. Sanskrit-Buddhist intellectual traditions shaped cultures from Sri Lanka to Japan. The Persian-Mughal administrative and literary heritage bonds India to Iran and Central Asia. Yoga, classical music, cinema, and cuisine generate a global cultural footprint—the Indian film industry reaches over 90 countries. The diaspora of approximately 32 million people worldwide functions as a living bridge.

Democratic legitimacy amplifies this: India's model demonstrates that diversity, federalism, and democracy are compatible with development—a message with profound appeal across the Global South.

#### Why It Remains Underutilised

India's foreign policy apparatus—MEA with fewer than 900 IFS officers—lacks the institutional bandwidth to convert cultural assets into structured diplomatic instruments. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) operates with a budget and reach far below the Chinese Confucius Institute network. Area studies are underfunded in Indian universities; there is no Persian or Arabic equivalent of China's language diplomacy.

#### Way Forward

A civilisational diplomacy council integrating think tanks, cultural institutions, and diaspora organisations; expanded ICCR funding; and embedding soft power metrics into India's foreign policy evaluation framework are necessary steps.

#### Conclusion

India's soft power is real, historically deep, and globally resonant—but converting it from dormant cultural capital into active diplomatic instrument requires institutional investment and strategic imagination that remain works in progress.

### Model Answer

**Q: Examine the significance of Assam and Northeast India in India's Act East Policy. (APSC 2022)**

#### Introduction

Northeast India—home to eight states including Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Sikkim—shares 5,182 km of international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal. This geographic position transforms the region from a peripheral appendage to the natural gateway of India's Act East Policy.

## Strategic Significance of Northeast India in Act East

Assam is the functional hub of the Northeast—home to the Guwahati transport node, the Brahmaputra inland waterway, major oil and gas infrastructure (OIL India Ltd., NRL), and historical connectivity routes like the Stilwell Road (Ledo Road) connecting Assam to Yunnan Province of China. The Bogibeel Bridge (inaugurated 2018)—the longest rail-road bridge in India—extends this connectivity to Arunachal Pradesh.

Manipur's Moreh town is the terminus of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway—when completed, it will connect Northeast India directly to Thailand and beyond. Mizoram's Zorinpui is a nodal point of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project linking India to Myanmar's Sittwe Port.

### Economic Potential

Assam's oil, natural gas, and refining capacity (Numaligarh Refinery Ltd.) positions it for regional energy diplomacy with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Assam's tea, silk, and bamboo industries can access new markets through ASEAN connectivity.

### Challenges

Inadequate domestic infrastructure within the Northeast (roads, rail, power) makes external connectivity less valuable. Ethnic conflicts (Manipur, Nagaland), political instability in Myanmar (post-2021 coup), and border disputes with China compound the challenge.

### Conclusion

Northeast India's potential as Act East's pivot is real but unrealised. Mainstreaming it—through infrastructure investment, peacebuilding, and economic integration—is both a strategic imperative and a domestic equity obligation.

#### UPSC RELEVANCE SUMMARY & NOTE-MAKING TIPS

- ▶ **WHY THIS ISSUE IS HIGH-PRIORITY:** This topic cuts across GS-II (IR), GS-I (History, Culture, Society), GS-III (Economy, Energy), GS-IV (Ethics), and Essay. It is a perennial UPSC theme—India's foreign policy, strategic culture, and neighbourhood policy appear in virtually every year's Mains.
- ▶ **NOTE-MAKING TIP 1:** Build a 'Strategic Asset Matrix' for India—list each asset (diaspora, democracy, civilisational depth, Chabahar, IMEC) with its operationalisation status (fully deployed / partially deployed / underutilised). Use this in answers to demonstrate analytical depth.
- ▶ **NOTE-MAKING TIP 2:** Remember the three contrasting pairs: Restraint vs. Initiative | Transactional vs. Civilisational | Reactive vs. Proactive. These pairs frame almost every IR answer on India's foreign policy.
- ▶ **NOTE-MAKING TIP 3:** For Northeast India angles in APSC, always connect the local (Bogibeel Bridge, OIL India, Kaladan, Stilwell Road, Brahmaputra waterway) to the national (Act East) and then to the global (ASEAN connectivity, India-Myanmar-Thailand highway).
- ▶ **NOTE-MAKING TIP 4:** The philosophical thread—Kautilya → Nehru → Multi-alignment—should be your introductory framework for any IR essay. It shows historical continuity and depth.
- ▶ **NOTE-MAKING TIP 5:** Current data points to memorise: Gulf diaspora ~9 million; remittances \$40 billion+; India-Gulf trade \$180 billion+; MEA strength <900 IFS officers; Chabahar committed investment ~\$500 million; IMEC potential 40% reduction in shipping time.

Module prepared for UPSC CSE & APSC examination preparation. All analysis is evidence-based and examination-oriented.

