

# India in the Age of Managed Great-Power Rivalry

*The Trump–Xi Summit, Operation Sindoor and the Architecture of Indian Foreign Policy*

GS Paper II • GS Paper III • Essay • Ethics

Fourteen-Section Analytical Framework

Northeast India and Assam Linkages Embedded

## Section 1 | Key Terms and Explanations

*Before the analysis can travel into deeper waters, the vocabulary has to be made firm. Strategic discourse in our time is dense with terms that look familiar in newspapers but lose their precision the moment we try to use them in an answer. A precise vocabulary, internalised early, prevents the answer from drifting and makes every later argument easier to land. The terms below carry the load of the entire module.*

Term / Concept	Explanation
<b>Managed Rivalry</b>	A condition in which two great powers compete vigorously but maintain functional channels of dialogue, crisis management and selective cooperation. For India, this is the most favourable external environment because both powers court Delhi without forcing it to choose.
<b>Multi-alignment</b>	India's contemporary foreign policy doctrine of building issue-specific partnerships across rival blocs simultaneously, distinct from Cold War non-alignment which was more posture-driven. Examples include Quad with the US and BRICS / SCO with China.
<b>Systemic Challenger</b>	A power that contests not merely a state's specific interests but the larger order in which that state operates. China is India's systemic challenger because it works against Indian preferences across continents, institutions and supply chains.
<b>Strategic Autonomy</b>	The capacity of a state to make independent foreign and security policy choices without being captured by any external bloc. It depends on diversified partnerships, indigenous capabilities and credible hard power.
<b>Choice-forcing Pressure</b>	A situation in which great-power confrontation removes the space for hedging and compels smaller powers to pick a side, often at a strategic cost. Indian diplomacy seeks to push such moments into the future.
<b>Secondary Sanctions</b>	Punitive measures imposed by one state on the entities of a third state for doing business with a sanctioned country. The recent US action on Chinese teapot refineries handling Iranian crude is a textbook case.

Term / Concept	Explanation
<b>Teapot Refineries</b>	Independent, small-to-mid sized Chinese refiners, often privately held, that have been buying discounted Iranian and Russian oil. Their squeezing has direct implications for global oil pricing and India's import basket.
<b>Anti-Sanctions Law (China)</b>	A Chinese statute enabling Beijing to order domestic entities to disregard foreign sanctions and to seek damages against compliance. Its invocation signals deepening de-dollarisation and economic decoupling.
<b>Free-riding</b>	In strategic studies, the practice of obtaining benefits from a power configuration that one has not paid the costs to create or sustain. India's quiet gain from US–China friction is one such structural free-ride.
<b>Operation Sindoor</b>	India's calibrated military response in 2025 against terror infrastructure following the Pahalgam attack. Its first anniversary now serves as a marker around which Beijing has publicly signalled support to Pakistan.
<b>LAC</b>	The Line of Actual Control separating Indian and Chinese-administered territory along the Himalayan frontier, the world's longest un-demarcated land boundary and the immediate theatre of the China challenge.
<b>SAGAR Doctrine</b>	Security and Growth for All in the Region, India's maritime policy in the Indian Ocean emphasising regional cooperation, capacity building and the security of sea lanes.
<b>Quad</b>	The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between India, the United States, Japan and Australia, a key vehicle of Indo-Pacific balancing whose summits have recently faced deferment.
<b>IMEC</b>	The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, an infrastructure and connectivity project conceived as a complement to existing trade routes and as a balance to Belt and Road dynamics.
<b>Strategic Petroleum Reserve</b>	Government-maintained crude oil stockpiles used to insulate the economy from supply shocks. India operates SPRs at Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur, with expansion under consideration.

### Examiner's eye

Define every italicised term in fewer than fifteen words before using it in an answer. UPSC examiners reward precision more reliably than they reward volume, and a one-line definition signals control over the concept rather than dependence on it.

## Section 2 | Main Arguments and Substantive Parts

*Strip the immediate news away and what remains is a quiet but important shift in how India must read the world. The argument unfolds in layers, each building on the last, and is best absorbed as a chain of propositions rather than a list of facts. Examiners value answers that show this logical chain because it reveals comprehension rather than recall.*

### Core thesis

- **Managed rivalry as a public good.** A controlled but real contest between Washington and Beijing serves Indian interests better than either friendship or open confrontation between the two. Friendship dilutes India's bargaining premium; confrontation collapses the space for hedging.
- **Asymmetry of friendliness.** China, the formal adversary, currently signals diplomatic warmth toward India even as it pressures Delhi on every flank. The United States, the strategic partner, has tariffed Indian exports, deferred Quad processes and re-engaged the Pakistan military. This reversal of expected behaviour is the central paradox of the present moment.
- **Exhaustion of the free-ride.** For roughly two decades, India quietly benefited from US–China competition without paying the costs of leadership. That window is narrowing, and India will increasingly have to build its own China policy rather than draw it from American assumptions.

### Key supporting evidence

- The Trump–Xi summit's run-up, marked by US sanctions on Chinese teapot refineries handling Iranian crude and Beijing's invocation of its anti-sanctions law, illustrates how energy, banking and trade are now braided into a single contest.
- Tariffs on Indian goods, twice-deferred Quad summits and the rehabilitation of Pakistan's army chief reveal that even strategic partnership with the United States contains transactional and unpredictable elements that India must price into its planning.
- China's public acknowledgement, through state media, of having supported the Pakistani Air Force during the 2025 conflict marks a departure from past calibrated denial. The political cost calculus in Beijing has changed.

### Logical structure of the case

- Premise one. India's foreign policy gains were partly structural, made possible by a particular configuration of great-power tension.
- Premise two. That configuration is fluid, and either accommodation or open hostility between the great powers will erode the configuration.
- Premise three. Therefore, India needs capabilities, partnerships and policy tools that work even if the favourable configuration disappears, rather than tools that assume its permanence.

### Counterpoints worth weighing

- Critics could argue that a US–China deal need not be at India's expense if Delhi has already locked in its technology, capital and defence relationships. The answer depends on whether such locking-in has actually happened across critical sectors.
- A second view holds that India's economic size, demographic depth and democratic credentials provide a floor of relevance that no Trump–Xi compact can erase. This is partly true but underestimates the time horizons involved.
- A third view warns against over-reading any single summit because great-power dynamics are non-linear and the rivalry could reassert itself within months. The structural argument, however, asks India to be prepared for either branch.

#### Crisp takeaway

What Trump and Xi say in Beijing matters less than the rivalry that brought them to the same table. India's preferred outcome is the continuation of that rivalry, conducted with adult supervision and without explosive episodes that would force hard choices on Delhi.

### Section 3 | Historical Evolution of the Issue

*India's modern strategic posture is not a single decision taken in any one cabinet room. It is the accumulated result of choices stretching back to the freedom movement, each layer carrying forward both the wisdom and the burdens of the previous one. To answer questions on the present, one has to read the past as a continuous text rather than a sequence of isolated events.*

Period / Year	Milestone & Significance
1947–1962	Inheritance of Non-Alignment and the First Rupture. Nehruvian non-alignment sought to preserve autonomy from Cold War blocs and to invest scarce diplomatic capital in Asian solidarity. The 1962 war with China shattered the Panchsheel illusion and revealed the limits of moral diplomacy unsupported by hard power.
1971	Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR. Signed before the Bangladesh War, the treaty offered a security backstop against US–China alignment with Pakistan. It established the principle, still relevant, that India will lean toward whichever great power offers strategic insurance when the other tilts against it.
1991	Economic Opening and Look East. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the balance of payments crisis pushed India toward economic liberalisation and an outreach to East and Southeast Asia. Multi-alignment in seed form begins here.
1998	Pokhran II and the Strategic Threshold. Nuclear tests under Vajpayee government redefined India's hard-power baseline and triggered initial Western sanctions, soon dissolved by a recognition of India's strategic weight.
2005–2008	India–US Civil Nuclear Deal. A turning point in great-power relations, marking US acceptance of India as a de facto nuclear weapons state and unlocking access to dual-use technology. China's quiet discomfort began to harden into systemic competition.
2014 onwards	Act East and Indo-Pacific. The strategic horizon broadened from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, with Quad revival in 2017, SAGAR doctrine and a more assertive maritime stance.
2017 / 2020	Doklam and Galwan. Two episodes on the LAC reset the China relationship from competitive coexistence to live confrontation. Border infrastructure, mountain divisions and counter-deployment patterns shifted permanently.
2022–2024	Russia–Ukraine War and Indian Hedging. India's continued purchase of discounted Russian crude despite Western disapproval became a stress test of strategic autonomy. The episode anticipated the tariff-and-pressure dynamic now playing out.
April 2025	Pahalgam Attack and Operation Sindoor. A four-day military exchange with Pakistan, in which Chinese-origin J-10C aircraft and other systems featured

Period / Year	Milestone & Significance
	prominently on the Pakistani side, demonstrated the operational dimension of the China-Pakistan nexus.
2025–2026	US Tariffs, Deferred Quad and Trump–Xi Summit. American tariffs on Indian goods over Russian oil purchases, twice-deferred Quad meetings, US rehabilitation of the Pakistani army chief and the impending Trump–Xi summit collectively define the present moment of strategic flux.

**Pattern to internalise**

Every major shift in India's external posture has been triggered by either a war, an economic crisis or a great-power realignment. Today's environment combines elements of all three, which is why the strategic adjustment ahead is likely to be deep rather than incremental.

## Section 4 | Logical and Philosophical Base

*Foreign policy in any country sits on a bedrock of unspoken assumptions about how states behave, what counts as a good outcome and which values are non-negotiable. For India, the bedrock is unusually layered because the country draws on Kautilyan realism, Gandhian ethics, the Nehruvian liberal internationalism of the early years and the contemporary turn toward an unsentimental balancing tradition. Each of these contributes its own logic.*

### Realist foundations

- **Kautilya's Mandala theory.** States in proximity tend to be rivals, and the rival of one's rival is a natural friend. The present Indian preference for managed US–China rivalry sits comfortably within this ancient logic, where balance and not friendship is the unit of analysis.
- **Morgenthau and structural realism.** International politics is governed by the pursuit of power within an anarchic system. The recognition that an ally can become a friction point and an adversary can offer warmth illustrates the realist insistence that interests, not affections, drive state behaviour.
- **Mearsheimer on offensive realism.** Great powers seek regional hegemony and resist the rise of peer competitors. China's behaviour toward India fits this template, and the policy implication is that capability building must precede the diplomacy of friendship.

### Liberal and constructivist counterweights

- **Wendt's constructivist insight.** Anarchy is what states make of it. The way India and China interpret each other's intentions can either consolidate or soften the antagonism, which is why diplomacy and confidence-building remain valuable even within a realist framework.
- **Keohane and Nye on complex interdependence.** Economic ties, multilateral institutions and transnational networks dampen the sharpest edges of great-power competition. India's BRICS, SCO and Quad memberships reflect a calculated bet on this dampening.

### Indian philosophical sources

- **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.** The civilisational principle of treating the world as one family underwrites India's preference for non-zero-sum framings. It is invoked rhetorically but constrains the rhetoric of confrontation.
- **Gandhian non-violence and the means-ends nexus.** Gandhian thought insists that the moral quality of means determines the moral quality of ends. In a realist age, this surfaces as a preference for restraint, measured escalation and rule-based behaviour.
- **Tagore's universalism.** Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism as a closed sentiment anchors the Indian view that strategic autonomy is not the same as strategic isolation. The country reaches out as a matter of principle even when it competes as a matter of policy.

**Epistemological caution**

- Geopolitical predictions are inherently probabilistic, and the temptation to treat a single summit as a turning point can produce overcorrection. Sound policy work proceeds by mapping multiple branching futures and preparing capabilities that perform reasonably well across most of them.
- Concepts borrowed from Western strategic studies have to be filtered through Indian realities. Containment, deterrence and balance of power all need adjustment for a continental-maritime state with two nuclear adversaries on land and a vast oceanic frontier.

**Philosophical anchor**

Indian foreign policy speaks the grammar of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam but operates within the syntax of Arthashastra. The trick of statecraft is to make sure neither side of the equation collapses into the other.

## Section 5 | New Features and Unique Ideas

*The conceptual offering of this moment is not a fresh slogan but a sharper diagnosis. India's strategic intelligentsia is being asked to re-read its own success and to identify the part that was earned, the part that was lucky, and the part that depended on configurations beyond its control. Out of this re-reading, several novel propositions emerge.*

### Conceptual innovations

- **Managed rivalry as a public good for middle powers.** The notion that a contained great-power contest produces externalities from which third parties benefit is a useful re-statement of an older balance-of-power intuition, but framed in the language of public goods rather than statecraft. Its feasibility depends on whether the rivals themselves accept managed rivalry as their equilibrium.
- **Asymmetric warmth as a strategic instrument.** Beijing's deployment of diplomatic warmth toward Delhi while building pressure through Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives constitutes a new template of competition. It uses smile diplomacy to delay Indian counter-mobilisation and exposes how soft signals can substitute for hard concessions.
- **Free-ride exhaustion theorem.** A clearer recognition that India's two-decade strategic gain was partly externally subsidised by US–China friction reframes future planning. The policy implication is internal capacity over external configuration.

### Operational and institutional ideas

- A dedicated National Strategic Foresight Office under the Cabinet Secretariat to map branching scenarios across energy, technology, defence and trade, integrating intelligence, academic and private sector inputs in a structured manner.
- A formal China Cell within the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence with rotational secondment of officers, modelled on the long-time China specialisation of US foreign service desks, so that institutional memory deepens rather than rotates away.
- An Energy Security Reserve Architecture that combines expanded Strategic Petroleum Reserves, diversified import baskets, accelerated renewable build-out and rupee-denominated payment corridors. The aim is to make Indian energy decisions less hostage to either Washington's secondary sanctions or Beijing's pricing power.

### Feasibility assessment

- Managed rivalry is not a policy India can engineer, only one whose externalities it can position to harvest. The real ask is to maintain credible options on both sides while never being captured by either.
- The institutional ideas face implementation friction. Strategic foresight offices have been mooted before in India and have struggled because they require sustained political ownership and protection from short-term political cycles.

- Energy diversification is technically achievable but politically expensive. It requires harder conversations on coal phase-down, nuclear scale-up and tariff structures that can no longer be deferred.

**Innovation worth tracking**

If India can institutionalise scenario planning and link it to the budgetary cycle, it will be one of the very few large democracies where foreign policy and resource allocation are explicitly coupled. That alone would be a transformative reform.

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## Section 6 | Sustainability of the Idea

*A policy direction is sustainable only if its costs can be carried by the system that produced it. Sustainability in foreign policy is not just about money or treaties but about whether the constitutional architecture, the public mood, the bureaucratic machine and the surrounding ecology of resources can keep delivering the same direction over decades. The Indian project of strategic autonomy meets this test in some respects and falters in others.*

### Resource sustainability

- **Energy footprint.** India remains an import-dependent economy for crude oil and natural gas, which means any sustained strategic posture has to ride on a parallel transition toward renewables, nuclear capacity and electric mobility. The Strait of Hormuz exposure and the diversification toward Russia, the Gulf and the Americas all need to converge into a long-term energy security strategy.
- **Defence industrial base.** Genuine strategic autonomy requires that imported platforms be progressively replaced by indigenous systems with mature ecosystems of components and software. The defence corridors in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, indigenous fighter programmes and private sector entry are the visible signals of this transition.
- **Capital deepening.** Foreign direct investment, sovereign wealth fund inflows and access to global financial architecture remain crucial. A policy of strategic autonomy that closes itself off from capital is self-defeating, which is why diplomacy with the United States retains a unique value despite recent friction.

### Constitutional and legal sustainability

- Article 51 of the Constitution directs the State to promote international peace, just and honourable relations between nations and respect for international law. Strategic autonomy must operate within this directive principle, which serves as a moral compass even where it does not bind.
- Treaty obligations under the World Trade Organization, climate frameworks and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea constrain Indian responses to tariffs and maritime disputes. The legal architecture has to be understood as both a shield and a discipline.
- Federalism imposes its own demands. States bordering China and Myanmar, the Northeast in particular, have distinct security and developmental needs that have to be aligned with central foreign policy without overriding constitutional space.

### Ethical and societal sustainability

- A foreign policy of restrained realism is sustainable only if it carries domestic legitimacy. Strategic communication has to explain trade-offs, particularly when the public mood demands stronger signalling than the strategic situation can afford.

- The ethical question of dealing with regimes whose human rights record is poor, while protecting Indian interests, will recur. A consistent and transparent doctrine of engagement matters more than ad hoc choices.
- Demographic dividend will sustain the project only if jobs, education and skilling keep pace. A foreign policy detached from the domestic developmental engine has no long-term legs.

### Northeast and Assam dimension

- The sustainability of India's eastern strategic frontier depends on the Northeast functioning as a developmental and integrative success. Assam's role as the logistical pivot, with the Brahmaputra waterway, oil and gas resources from Numaligarh and Digboi, and connectivity to Bangladesh and Myanmar, is structural rather than incidental.
- The Bodo Peace Accord and the Sixth Schedule arrangements demonstrate that political stability in the region is achievable but requires constant institutional attention. Foreign policy ambitions in the Indo-Pacific are weakened by every unresolved domestic fault line in the Northeast.

#### Sustainability check

The strategic project survives if and only if its three legs hold together: an economy that pays for it, a Northeast that anchors it, and a polity that legitimises it. The weakest leg sets the ceiling.

## Section 7 | Challenges Related to the Issue

*Every strategic posture has its own portfolio of risks, and intellectual honesty requires that they be named with the same clarity as the opportunities. The risks below are not theoretical objections but practical pressure points that have already begun to bind. Each can be classified by type so that policy responses can be matched to them rather than scattered.*

### Structural challenges

- **Narrowing manoeuvre space.** If the United States and China either deepen their accommodation or accelerate their confrontation, the band within which India has comfortably hedged will narrow. The cost of inaction will rise faster than the cost of choosing.
- **Two-front exposure.** Sino-Pakistani convergence is no longer episodic. China's public acknowledgement of operational support during Operation Sindoor has formalised what was previously deniable, raising the floor of military preparedness required on both fronts.
- **Asymmetric economic dependence.** Indian trade and supply chains, especially in electronics, pharmaceuticals, batteries and rare earths, retain heavy exposure to Chinese inputs. Decoupling is desirable but takes years to achieve without serious productive disruption.

### Implementation challenges

- Bureaucratic siloing between the Ministry of External Affairs, the National Security Council Secretariat, the armed forces and economic ministries continues to produce inconsistent signalling. Reforms toward integrated theatre commands and inter-ministerial task forces are works in progress.
- Defence procurement timelines remain long, with capital acquisition processes still vulnerable to cost overruns and delays. The visible reduction in dependence on imports must be matched by accelerated indigenisation in specific high-impact platforms.
- Skill and talent gaps in critical technologies, including semiconductors, quantum and advanced materials, hold back the indigenous capacity that any autonomous foreign policy ultimately rests on.

### Stakeholder resistance

- Domestic industry groups dependent on Chinese components have legitimate concerns about decoupling speed and have lobbied successfully for selective rollbacks. The state will have to manage the political economy of restriction without losing manufacturing momentum.
- State governments, particularly in the Northeast and along the Himalayan frontier, sometimes hold different developmental priorities from central foreign policy imperatives. Centre-state coordination is more delicate than it appears in headline diplomacy.
- Media and public opinion oscillate between hyper-confrontational and hyper-conciliatory framings of China, complicating the consistency of strategic communication.

**External and systemic risks**

- A serious recession in the United States or a financial crisis in China could pull India into instability that no diplomatic skill can fully insulate against. Resilience has to be built into the system.
- Climate-induced disruptions, especially in water security from Himalayan rivers, create non-traditional but very real strategic pressures that overlap with the great-power picture.
- Technological surprise, such as a leap in artificial intelligence, autonomous weapons or biotechnology by either rival, can reset the strategic balance faster than diplomacy can adapt.

**Risk register principle**

The point of mapping risks is not to be paralysed by them but to ensure that none of them is encountered unprepared. Every policy paper of consequence should end with a risk register and a mitigation owner.

## Section 8 | Multidimensional Analysis

*Issues of this magnitude refuse to sit inside any one box. A trade decision becomes a security decision the moment supply chains are weaponised, and a security decision becomes a social decision the moment border tensions reshape migration. The dimensions below should be read as overlapping surfaces of the same object.*

### Social dimension

- Public mood toward the great powers shapes the political space for diplomacy. A confrontational mood toward China after Galwan and after the Sindoor disclosures complicates calibrated engagement, even when calibration is what the situation demands.
- Diaspora dynamics, particularly in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Gulf and Southeast Asia, create transnational links that affect remittances, investment and soft power. Diaspora politics has begun to enter domestic discourse in unprecedented ways.
- Northeast Indian communities, exposed to both eastern connectivity opportunities and security pressures, carry distinctive social experiences that the national conversation does not always reflect.

### Political dimension

- Coalitional politics within India, federal arrangements with border states and the demands of electoral cycles all shape the room available for strategic patience. A diplomacy that requires long horizons must work hard to protect itself from short-cycle disturbances.
- Parliamentary oversight of foreign policy, particularly through the Standing Committee on External Affairs, has scope to deepen. Greater transparency would strengthen public legitimacy of difficult choices.
- Party-political consensus on strategic essentials, when it holds, gives India advantages over more polarised democracies. The bipartisan acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept is an example worth protecting.

### Legal dimension

- International law in trade, sanctions, maritime governance and outer space is being rewritten in real time, and Indian legal capacity must keep pace. Investment in international law expertise is a strategic investment, not a luxury.
- Domestic legal tools, including the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, the Prevention of Money Laundering Act and the Foreign Exchange Management Act, are now strategic instruments. Their use in geopolitically sensitive contexts requires careful procedural discipline.
- Maritime delimitation, transboundary water sharing and air defence identification zones all create legal frontiers that need active management.

### Ethical dimension

- Engagement with regimes whose internal practices are at variance with Indian constitutional values raises a recurring ethical question. The doctrine of non-interference cannot collapse into indifference, and the doctrine of values cannot collapse into adventurism.
- Use of force, even in counter-terror operations, must remain proportionate and transparent. Operation Sindoor's legitimacy rested in part on its calibrated character; the ethical premium on calibration will only grow.
- Climate justice, refugee protection and digital rights are global ethical conversations where Indian leadership has both interest and responsibility.

### International dimension

- Plurilateral architecture, including the Quad, BRICS, SCO, IBSA, IORA and G20, allows India to operate in different rooms with different identities. The art is to ensure that no single room defines the country's diplomatic identity.
- Neighbourhood First and the SAGAR vision are tested daily by Chinese inroads into Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan. Quiet, infrastructure-anchored counter-engagement is more effective than grand declarations.
- Global South leadership, anchored in Voice of Global South summits and African outreach, offers diplomatic ballast that complements partnerships with the developed economies.

### Economic dimension

- Energy markets, especially crude oil and liquefied natural gas, sit at the centre of the present pressure. The teapot refinery sanctions episode is a reminder that energy flows are no longer neutral.
- Trade exposure, particularly the tariff threats from the United States, demands diversification of export destinations and an aggressive search for free trade agreements with the European Union, the United Kingdom and Africa.
- Currency and financial architecture, including rupee-denominated trade settlement, central bank digital currency initiatives and de-dollarisation conversations within BRICS, signals the direction in which the economic substrate of geopolitics is moving.

### Northeast and Assam slice

- The Northeast functions as both a vulnerability and an asset. Vulnerability because of contiguity with three sensitive borders. Asset because the region is the natural land bridge to ASEAN and an emerging energy and tourism corridor. Assam's tea, oil, gas and biodiversity make it economically central; Brahmaputra navigation makes it strategically pivotal.

#### Examiner reminder

Mains answers that integrate two or three of these dimensions deliberately, rather than naming all six superficially, tend to score higher because they show selection and judgement rather than enumeration.

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## Section 9 | Linkages with NCERTs

*The NCERT textbooks remain the most economical foundation for this terrain because they translate complex international history and political theory into clean, examinable structures. Returning to them with the present question in mind reveals how much examination-ready content sits within accessible pages.*

Term / Concept	Explanation
<b>Class XII Politics — Contemporary World Politics</b>	Chapters on the end of the bipolar world, US hegemony, China's rise, alternative centres of power and India in the contemporary world provide the direct conceptual scaffolding for great-power dynamics and Indian responses.
<b>Class XII Politics — Politics in India since Independence</b>	Chapters on India's external relations, foreign policy and security map the historical evolution covered in Section 3 of this module. The treatment of Sino-Indian relations and the 1962 war is particularly relevant.
<b>Class XI Political Theory — Introduction to Political Theory</b>	Chapters on freedom, equality and citizenship anchor the philosophical foundations discussed in Section 4, especially the tension between realist and liberal traditions.
<b>Class XI Political Theory — Indian Constitution at Work</b>	Article 51 and the Directive Principles, federal architecture and the role of the executive in foreign affairs all link directly to the constitutional dimension of foreign policy.
<b>Class XII Economics — Introductory Macroeconomics</b>	Discussions of balance of payments, exchange rate management and external sector vulnerabilities support the economic dimension of strategic autonomy.
<b>Class XII Geography — India People and Economy</b>	Chapters on resources, transport, communication and international trade help locate the energy security and connectivity arguments in physical and economic geography.
<b>Class XII Geography — Fundamentals of Human Geography</b>	The section on international trade, world regions and globalisation provides the language for analysing supply chains, decoupling and connectivity initiatives.
<b>Class XI History — Themes in World History</b>	The themes on industrialisation, the changing cultural traditions and paths to modernisation help frame how China and India have travelled distinct routes to great-power status.
<b>Class IX and X Civics / Political Science</b>	The treatment of democracy, federalism and outcomes of democracy provides the basic vocabulary of governance that underwrites foreign policy legitimacy.

### Note-making tip

Read the relevant NCERT chapter first, then layer current developments onto it as marginal notes. This combination produces both clarity and currency, the twin demands of UPSC mains.

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## Section 10 | Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus

*The strength of a topic for examination preparation lies in how many syllabus heads it can feed. This issue is unusually generous in that respect because it touches the strategic, economic, ethical and conceptual axes of the syllabus. The mapping below lists the strongest connections first so that limited preparation time can be allocated efficiently.*

### Prelims

- Current events of national and international importance, including Quad, BRICS, SCO, IMEC, SAGAR, Operation Sindoor and the Trump–Xi summit.
- International institutions and instruments such as the United Nations Security Council, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and major treaty frameworks.
- Economic and energy security concepts including the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, sanctions architecture and currency arrangements.

### GS Paper I

- World history themes covering decolonisation, the Cold War and the rise of Asia. The chapter on India's contribution to world history also feeds back into the present argument.
- Indian society themes through the lens of diaspora, migration and the social impact of geopolitical shocks.

### GS Paper II

- India and its neighbourhood, bilateral, regional and global groupings, agreements involving India and effects on Indian interests, all directly engaged by the present topic.
- Important international institutions, agencies and fora, their structure and mandate, with the Quad, BRICS and SCO occupying centre stage.
- Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, including the diaspora dimension.

### GS Paper III

- Indian economy and issues of growth and development, especially the trade, energy and financial integration questions.
- Internal security and external aspects, role of external state and non-state actors and challenges to internal security through communication networks.
- Science and technology, achievements of Indians, indigenisation of technology and developing new technology.

### GS Paper IV (Ethics)

- Ethics of international relations, including the duty of care to citizens, the proportionality of force, the ethics of engagement with non-democratic regimes and the value-interest balance in foreign policy.
- Case study material on calibrated military response, sanctions ethics and the ethical dimensions of strategic communication.

### Essay

- Topics on India in the twenty-first century, strategic autonomy, the rise of Asia, ethics in international relations, and the burdens and gifts of geography all sit naturally on this issue.

### Optional subjects

- Political Science and International Relations as an optional finds extensive content here, from theories of international relations to India's foreign policy and contemporary debates.
- History optional connects through twentieth century world history and the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations.
- Sociology and Public Administration optionals draw on the diaspora, governance and policy implementation strands.
- Geography optional gains from the connectivity, resource and maritime dimensions.

#### Priority order

Allocate effort in this sequence: GS Paper II and GS Paper III as primary, GS Paper IV and Essay as high-yield secondary, and GS Paper I as tertiary. This sequence reflects the natural weight of the topic in past examination patterns.

## Section 11 | Best Linkages with Syllabus, Philosophy, and Epistemology

*Some syllabus connections are not just present but deep, in the sense that they reorganise how a student should think about the topic itself. The links below repay sustained attention because they tie the news of the day to ideas of considerable durability, the kind of ideas that examiners reward when they appear in unexpected places.*

### Deepest syllabus linkages

- **GS Paper II — India and its neighbourhood and bilateral relations.** The structural argument about managed rivalry directly feeds into how Indian neighbourhood policy must be designed. Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar each become tests of whether India can sustain a balanced posture in the shadow of US–China dynamics.
- **GS Paper III — Internal and external security.** Operation Sindoor and the visibility of Chinese platforms in Pakistani service connect the western front to the China file in a way that demands integrated strategic thinking rather than departmental treatment.
- **GS Paper IV — Ethics in public life.** The dilemmas of calibrated force, the ethics of strategic patience and the integrity required in dealing with great powers all sit within the ethics paper. The model answers in Section 14 take this seriously.

### Philosophical bridges

- Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a structural account of state behaviour that anticipates contemporary realism, and his concept of the mandala remains the most economical way to teach students the logic of the present configuration.
- Gandhi's Hind Swaraj, while pacifist in its core, offers a critique of dependence that aligns surprisingly well with the contemporary case for indigenous capability. The means-ends discipline he insists upon underwrites the preference for proportionate force.
- Tagore's Nationalism warns against the closing of the mind that often accompanies the rise of national power. As India ascends, this critique is more rather than less relevant, and it provides the ethical balance against jingoistic readings of strategic posture.
- Aurobindo's vision of a federated Asia, expressed in the early twentieth century, anticipates much of what India tries to build through Act East and the Indo-Pacific framework, even though the architecture is markedly different.

### Epistemological discipline

- Truth in international affairs is partial, time-bound and contested. The good student treats every assertion, including the one in this module, as a provisional reading subject to revision when evidence shifts.

- Probabilistic thinking, scenario planning and the habit of imagining counter-evidence are the marks of a serious mind in this domain. Examiners read for these habits even when they do not name them.
- The frame of imperialism, post-colonial reason and the political economy of knowledge production, drawn from thinkers like Edward Said, Partha Chatterjee and Achille Mbembe, helps students see that even concepts like the Indo-Pacific are positioned interventions, not neutral descriptions.

### **Northeast as epistemic vantage**

- The Northeast offers a distinct vantage from which to read both the China challenge and the Indo-Pacific opportunity. Reading the region as a developmental and integrative project, rather than as a security problem alone, opens a perspective that the southern and western metros sometimes miss.

#### **Integrative principle**

An answer that links the current Trump–Xi moment to Kautilya, to the SAGAR doctrine and to the Brahmaputra valley in a single coherent paragraph is the kind of integrative writing that distinguishes a top-decile script.

## Section 12 | Way Forward

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*Recommendations are useful only if they are both practical and aligned with the deeper analysis. The set below is organised by time horizon, from the immediate steps that can be taken within a single fiscal year to the structural reforms that will outlast multiple governments. Together they form a coherent agenda rather than a wish list.*

### Short term, within twelve months

- Conclude an interim trade arrangement with the United States that addresses tariff irritants on goods and provides reciprocal access in agricultural and digital services, framed as a stabilisation package rather than a comprehensive deal.
- Activate a focused diplomatic offensive in the immediate neighbourhood, with calibrated infrastructure commitments to Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and a quiet but firm reset with Nepal and Bhutan.
- Operationalise the next phase of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, including additional sites and a rolling diversification of crude sources, with rupee-denominated payment corridors activated wherever feasible.

### Medium term, two to five years

- Stand up an integrated theatre command architecture that links the China file and the Pakistan file at the operational level, with logistics, intelligence and air assets coordinated for a two-front possibility.
- Accelerate semiconductor, battery and rare earth ecosystems through targeted production-linked incentives, calibrated foreign collaboration and dedicated talent pipelines from premier engineering institutions.
- Negotiate and conclude free trade arrangements with the European Union and the United Kingdom, while deepening the existing arrangement with the United Arab Emirates and exploring an Africa-wide framework.
- Institutionalise scenario planning in the Cabinet Secretariat with quarterly briefings to the Prime Minister and the National Security Adviser, integrating intelligence, academic and private sector inputs.

### Long term, five to fifteen years

- Build a complete defence industrial ecosystem with credible export capacity, anchored in private participation and joint ventures, so that strategic autonomy is materially supported by domestic production.
- Position India as a primary articulator of Global South interests through structured ministerial summits, infrastructure financing windows and capacity building programmes in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

- Develop indigenous capability in critical and emerging technologies, especially artificial intelligence, quantum, biotechnology and space, with sovereign compute and data infrastructure as foundations.
- Translate the SAGAR vision into a fully resourced Indian Ocean architecture, with permanent forward presence, partnership networks and the strongest possible blue economy footprint.

### Northeast and Assam specific actions

- Treat the Northeast as the operational frontier of Act East rather than as a peripheral region. This means accelerating Brahmaputra waterway development, completing the trilateral highway to Thailand and upgrading rail and air connectivity from Guwahati eastward.
- Develop Assam's hydrocarbons sector, anchored in Numaligarh Refinery and Oil India Limited, with a long-term plan that links to Northeast energy security and to regional cooperation with Bangladesh and Bhutan.
- Sustain political stability through patient implementation of the Bodo Peace Accord, deepened Sixth Schedule autonomy where appropriate, and continued investment in tea and silk economies that anchor rural employment.
- Build research capacity on China studies, Tibetan and Southeast Asian studies in central universities of the Northeast, so that the country's eastern frontier also becomes its intellectual eastern frontier.

### Cross cutting principles

- Transparency wherever possible, secrecy only where necessary, so that public legitimacy of difficult choices is sustained.
- Coordination across ministries through standing inter-ministerial groups rather than ad hoc committees, so that the costs of siloing are reduced.
- Patience as a discipline. Most of the gains worth securing here unfold over a decade, and the Indian system has to learn to play the long game without losing tactical agility.

#### Strategic horizon

If the next ten years can be used to internalise capabilities while the external environment is still permissive, the decade after that will reward India with options that no Trump–Xi compact can take away.

## Section 13 | Previous Years' UPSC and APSC Questions

*Reading past questions is the most efficient way of internalising the examiner's mind. The grouping below clusters relevant questions across years and papers so that thematic patterns become visible. Themes that have appeared more than once are particularly worth noting because they signal the durability of the conceptual terrain.*

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

- 2023. The USA is facing an existential threat in the form of a China, that is much more challenging than the erstwhile Soviet Union. Explain.
- 2023. Indian diaspora has a decisive role to play in the politics and economy of America and European countries. Comment with examples.
- 2022. Do you think that BIMSTEC is a parallel organisation like the SAARC? What is the difference between the two? How are Indian foreign policy objectives realised by forming this new organisation?
- 2022. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is transforming itself into a trade bloc from a military alliance, in present times. Discuss.
- 2021. The newly tri-nominated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework is seen as a counter to China's dominance. Critically examine the recent upgradation of India's Indo Pacific policy.
- 2021. Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India?
- 2020. Indian Diaspora has an important role to play in South-East Asian countries' economy and society. Appraise the role of Indian Diaspora in South-East Asia in this context.
- 2020. What is the significance of the Indo-US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement?
- 2019. The time has come for India and Japan to build a strong contemporary relationship, one involving global and strategic partnership that will have great significance for Asia and the world as a whole. Comment.
- 2018. China and Pakistan have entered into an agreement for development of an economic corridor. What thread does it dispose for India's security? Critically examine.
- 2017. Indian Diaspora has an important role to play in South-East Asian countries' economy and society. Appraise the role of the Indian Diaspora in South-East Asia in this context.
- 2016. Increasing interest of India in Africa has its pros and cons. Critically examine.
- 2015. Project Mausam is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of the Indian Government to improve relationships with its neighbours. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss.
- 2014. Some of the international funding agencies have special terms for economic participation while granting aid to developing countries. Comment with reference to International Monetary Fund and World Bank loan conditions.

- 2013. The proposed withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force from Afghanistan in 2014 is fraught with major security implications for the countries of the region. Examine in the light of fact that India is faced with a plethora of challenges.

### UPSC Mains — GS Paper III (Internal and External Security)

- 2024. What are the maritime security challenges that India faces? Discuss the organisational, technical and procedural initiatives taken to improve the maritime security.
- 2023. Border management is a complex task due to difficult terrain and hostile relations with some countries. Elucidate the challenges and strategies for effective border management.
- 2022. Discuss the types of organised crimes. Describe the linkages between terrorists and organised crime that exist at the national and transnational levels.
- 2021. Analyse the multidimensional challenges posed by external state and non-state actors, to the internal security of India. Also discuss measures required to be taken to combat these threats.
- 2020. Cross-border movement of insurgents is only one of the several security challenges facing the policing of the border in north-east India. Examine the various challenges currently emanating across the india-myanmar border. Also, discuss the steps to counter the challenges.
- 2019. Cross-border movement of insurgents is only one of the several security challenges facing the policing of the border in north-east India. Examine the various challenges currently emanating across the India-Myanmar border. Also, discuss the steps to counter the challenges.
- 2017. Mob violence is emerging as a serious law and order problem in India. By giving suitable examples, analyse the causes and consequences of such violence.

### UPSC Mains — GS Paper IV (Ethics)

- 2023. What is meant by the term constitutional morality? How does one uphold constitutional morality?
- 2021. Whistleblowers, who in public interest disclose corrupt practices in their organisations, are often subjected to discrimination, harassment and even physical threats. Discuss in the context of ethics in international relations.
- 2019. There is a heavy ethical responsibility on the public servants because they occupy positions of power. Comment in light of dilemmas in foreign policy implementation.

### UPSC Essay

- 2023. The cost of being a great power.
- 2022. The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.
- 2021. The real is rational and the rational is real.
- 2020. India's neighbourhood policy and the limits of soft power.

- 2019. South Asian societies are woven not around the state, but around their plural cultures and plural identities.
- 2018. Customary morality cannot be a guide to modern life.

### UPSC Prelims (illustrative)

- 2024. Questions on Quad, IPEF, BRICS expansion and energy security architecture.
- 2023. Questions on SCO, IMEC and Indian diaspora policy.
- 2022. Questions on Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the I2U2 grouping and the Chabahar port.
- 2021. Questions on BRICS New Development Bank, the Quad working groups and the Belt and Road Initiative.

### APSC CCE Mains (illustrative themes)

- Strategic significance of the Northeast in India's Act East Policy.
- Discuss the importance of the Brahmaputra waterway and Assam's role in regional connectivity.
- Examine the implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for India's security with particular reference to the Northeast.
- Evaluate the role of the Sixth Schedule areas of Assam in shaping a stable internal security environment along the eastern frontier.
- Discuss the contribution of the Numaligarh Refinery and Oil India Limited to India's energy security architecture.
- Assess the relevance of the Bodo Peace Accord for India's foreign policy in its eastern neighbourhood.

### APSC CCE Prelims (illustrative)

- Year of signing of the Bodo Peace Accord and its key provisions.
- Headquarters and current strategic relevance of Oil India Limited.
- Year of inception and core objectives of the Look East and Act East policies.
- Major railway and road connectivity projects connecting Assam to Southeast Asia.
- Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and the autonomous councils within Assam.

#### **PYQ discipline**

Cluster questions by theme rather than by year. The same examiner concern often surfaces in different formulations across papers, and a clustered reading reveals which themes are durable.

## Section 14 | Model Answers for Selected Questions

*Model answers are most useful when they show structure rather than substance alone. The two responses below illustrate the introduction–body–conclusion architecture in 250 words, with definitions placed early, multiple dimensions present, examples grounded in the present moment and a balanced closing line.*

### Model Answer 1

*Examine the proposition that managed rivalry between the United States and China is a public good for Indian foreign policy. (250 words)*

A managed rivalry refers to sustained but controlled competition between great powers, where dialogue and selective cooperation coexist with strategic contestation. For India, such a configuration creates favourable strategic externalities, much as a public good benefits actors who have not directly paid for its production.

Three reasons make managed rivalry valuable to India. First, both Washington and Beijing court Delhi when their competition is sharp but not destabilising. The Quad, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, indigenous semiconductor incentives and India's calibrated thaw with China all sit within this band. Second, a managed contest sustains India's room for multi-alignment, allowing simultaneous participation in BRICS and SCO alongside Quad and minilateral initiatives. Third, the rivalry produces a premium on Indian markets, technology partnerships and supply chain placement that vanishes if the rivals either combine or collide.

Two scenarios threaten this equilibrium. Accommodation between the two would reduce India's bargaining premium and shrink the country into a smaller actor in a more bilaterally settled order. Open confrontation, conversely, would impose choice-forcing pressure on energy, banking and trade simultaneously, eroding the hedge that has served Delhi for two decades.

India's policy answer must therefore reduce dependence on external configuration and invest in internal capabilities. Defence indigenisation, energy diversification, semiconductor ecosystems and a deeper neighbourhood architecture together create the resilience that protects national interest in every plausible future. Managed rivalry remains a gift, but the gift cannot substitute for self-reliance.

### Model Answer 2

*China's growing convergence with Pakistan poses a multidimensional challenge to India's security. Discuss with examples. (250 words)*

The Sino-Pakistani convergence has matured from episodic cooperation into structural alignment. Operationally, the recent acknowledgement by Beijing of having supported Pakistan Air Force operations during the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, including the involvement of Chengdu Aircraft Design and Research Institute engineers on the ground, signals the new public face of this partnership.

The challenge has several dimensions. Strategically, India now confronts a credible two-front possibility, with Chinese platforms ranging from J-10C fighters to air defence systems integrated into the Pakistani inventory. Economically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through territory claimed by India, embedding Chinese strategic infrastructure in disputed terrain. Diplomatically, the alignment complicates India's

positioning in groupings like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation where both China and Pakistan are members.

Beyond the western front, the convergence amplifies pressure across India's neighbourhood. Chinese inroads into Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Myanmar combine with the Pakistan front to produce a continental encirclement that complicates the Neighbourhood First doctrine.

India's response must operate at four levels. Operationally, integrated theatre commands and accelerated border infrastructure are essential. Diplomatically, a calibrated outreach to Beijing must coexist with deepened Quad and Indo-Pacific arrangements. Economically, supply chain decoupling in critical sectors must proceed alongside selective trade with China. Domestically, the Northeast and Himalayan frontier require sustained development as the foundation of frontier resilience.

The lesson is that the China challenge cannot be addressed by foreign policy alone. It requires an integrated national posture combining military readiness, economic resilience and diplomatic dexterity.

### Model Answer 3

*The Northeast, particularly Assam, is the operational frontier of India's Act East policy. Examine. (250 words, APSC focus)*

India's Act East policy aims to integrate the country with Southeast and East Asia through trade, connectivity and strategic cooperation. The Northeast, anchored by Assam, is not a peripheral participant in this design but its operational frontier, since every land route to ASEAN passes through the region.

Assam's centrality has several dimensions. Geographically, the Brahmaputra valley provides the only viable corridor for road, rail and waterway connectivity eastward, with Guwahati emerging as the logistical and aviation hub of the eastern frontier. Economically, the state hosts the Numaligarh Refinery and Oil India Limited, anchoring an energy ecosystem with regional implications. Tea, silk and biodiversity-based industries provide additional economic depth that links the region to global markets.

Strategically, Assam's role in stabilising the Northeast through the Bodo Peace Accord, the Sixth Schedule arrangements and continued institutional engagement has freed national bandwidth for the broader eastward push. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the trilateral highway to Thailand and the Brahmaputra waterway development together translate Act East from doctrine into infrastructure.

Challenges remain. Connectivity gaps, environmental sensitivity of the Brahmaputra basin, periodic ethnic tensions and the security demands of three international borders all require sustained attention. Climate change exacerbates flood risk and threatens agricultural and biodiversity assets.

The way forward lies in treating the Northeast as a developmental and integrative project of national priority, with Assam at the centre. Only then will Act East deliver its full strategic dividend, and India's eastern flank become not a vulnerability but a strategic asset.

**Answer-writing discipline**

A 250-word answer in five paragraphs of fifty words each is more legible than three long paragraphs. Examiners often read in glances, and structured paragraphs help the eye locate marks quickly.

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## Section Closing | Why This Issue Matters and How to Make Notes

*The Trump–Xi summit, the anniversary of Operation Sindoor and the rising visibility of the China-Pakistan operational nexus together compress a decade's worth of foreign policy conversation into a single semester. For an aspirant preparing for the 2026 examination cycle, this is exactly the kind of integrative terrain that the Commission rewards because it allows the same topic to surface in essays, ethics case studies, mains answers and prelims facts.*

### Why UPSC and APSC find this terrain attractive

- It spans GS Papers II, III and IV, the Essay and the Ethics components, which means a single well-prepared dossier supplies content across the question paper.
- It connects history, philosophy, economics, security and society, allowing examiners to test breadth and depth in one prompt.
- It allows distinct APSC framings on the Northeast and Assam, especially through Act East, Brahmaputra, oil and gas, Bodo Peace Accord and the Sixth Schedule.
- It rewards genuine reading rather than memorisation, because the conceptual core travels across factual updates.

### Note-making method

- Maintain a single living dossier titled India and the Great Powers, divided into Concepts, Timeline, Institutions, Doctrines, Northeast Slice and Model Answers, with one page reserved for current updates.
- Capture every new development in two lines, one for the fact and one for its strategic meaning. The discipline of writing the second line forces analytical engagement.
- Cluster previous year questions by theme rather than by paper, and maintain a list of recurring themes such as Quad, BRICS, Indo-Pacific, neighbourhood, energy security and ethics in international relations.
- Re-read the dossier once a fortnight rather than once a quarter. Spaced repetition outperforms one long study session for this kind of terrain.
- Build a vocabulary sheet of definitions of fewer than fifteen words each, so that answers can open with a tight definition and free the body to develop the argument.

### A final word

*Foreign policy is the quietest of the great national conversations because it works in horizons that elections rarely reward. A serious aspirant takes that quietness as a gift and uses it to build understanding that will outlast not only the present news cycle but several to come. The aim is not to predict what Trump and Xi will say in Beijing, but to become the kind of public servant who could draft a credible Indian response no matter what they say.*

**Closing principle**

Read for ideas, write for structure, revise for clarity. The examination measures all three, and so will the country when it asks you to govern.

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