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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS



JULY 1



**CONSISTENT
COMPREHENSIVE
AND CREDIBLE**



**UNIQUE AND BEST IN
QUALITY**

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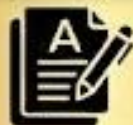
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Who is “Honourable” in the Indian republic?

A recent order of the Allahabad High Court, arising from a criminal writ petition, ventured into an unexpected question: Who is “entitled” to be addressed as “Honourable”? The issue before the court was minor. A complaint in an FIR had referred to a Member of Parliament without the honorific style of address. Raising this narrow procedural issue, the court declared that this particular style of address must be used for ministers, judges, and other “similar functionaries”.

At a cursory level, this may appear a matter of courtesy — or in this particular instance, a matter of failing to extend courtesy, whether inadvertent or deliberate. Consider it at length, and the matter raises a deeper constitutional question: What place do honorific titles have in a republic that explicitly abolished titles?

One need only look at Article 18, and the anti-feudal nature of the Constitution becomes clear. Article 18 forms part of the Constitution’s equality code. Its abolition of titles marked a decisive break from India’s colonial and feudal past. Colonial governance relied heavily on honorific distinctions — Raja, Maharaja, Nawab, Rai Bahadur, Sir — to reward loyalty to the colonial government and reinforce hierarchy. Titles created distance between rulers and the ruled.

The Constitution rejected that hierarchy. In a republic, citizens are not ranked by State-sanctioned honor. As for public office, India’s foundational document imagined this as service rather than status.

The provision contains a narrow exception: The State may confer academic and military distinctions and recognize certain exceptional individuals by granting them certain honors. The reason is clear. Academic titles recognize learning; military decorations recognize service in defense of the nation. That said, common understanding in the country doesn’t make honorifics out of such conferments.

The constitutional clarity on the matter makes the present development striking. The order does not formally confer a title. Yet, by declaring who is “entitled” to an honorific, it risks performing a similar function in practice. Judicial language does not operate in a vacuum. Where courts speak of entitlement to honor, they can normalize a hierarchy the Constitution sought to dismantle.

The social afterlife of titles has been long. Just days after the court’s order, media coverage of the 2020 Met Gala in New York introduced two Indian attendees as “Priyanka” Gaurani, Kamani, and “Maharaja” Jasna Fadniswathi Singh, invoking dynastic lineage as contemporary identifiers. The event has no connection to the court’s order, yet the coincidence is revealing. In two different arenas — constitutional adjudication and global popular culture — the vocabulary of rank resurfaced almost simultaneously.

The law withholds recognition from hereditary titles decades ago; public language continues to find occasions to revive them.

This brings us to the question: Does the dispensing of sovereign functions vest “honor” in a person or accountability? The high

court order links the honorific in the present instance to the exercise of sovereign functions. This reasoning deserves scrutiny.

In constitutional law, being a functionary for the sovereign is not a badge of prestige. It is the basis of accountability. The definition of “State” under Article 12 was expanded precisely so that those exercising public power could be held responsible for upholding fundamental rights. Sovereign authority is, thus, something citizens may question, challenge, and litigate against.

Recasting sovereignty as a ground for honorific entitlement reverses this logic. It shifts emphasis from accountability to prestige. Public office begins to appear less as a position of responsibility and more as a source of ceremonial distinction.

The order also creates an open category of “similar functionaries” who may be entitled to the honorific. Such open-ended language rarely contracts the ambit later. Over time, more offices may quietly acquire expectations of honorific address — not through law, but through habit, deference, and institutional culture.

There is also a practical paradox. Criminal law may investigate allegations against public officials, though prior sanction requirements often make such investigations difficult to initiate. Against this background, the language of honor sits utterly beside the language of accusation.

In effect, there is a fundamental opposition of underlying ethos between the language of criminal law in the country and the usage of honorifics for those who hold public office.

To describe a person facing criminal allegations as “blue life” produces immediate linguistic dissonance. Honorifics signal dignity and esteem; criminal allegations signal suspicion and scrutiny. This tension is not merely stylistic.

Language shapes perception. When attention shifts from the substance of allegations to the tone in which authority is addressed, focus moves from accountability to etiquette.

Tone policing becomes a subtle mechanism of power: What is said matters less than how respectfully it is said.

The deeper concern raised by this episode is cultural rather than doctrinal. The Constitution sought to exorcise India away from the vocabulary of rank and honor toward a language of public service and accountability. That transition remains incomplete.

When courts begin defining who is “entitled” to honorifics, the risk is not immediate legal violation but gradual constitutional drift. The republic begins to sound less like a community of equal citizens and more like a hierarchy of dignified offices.

India’s constitutional promise was clear: The State would no longer confer titles, except in narrow academic and military contexts.

The challenge today is to ensure that the republic does not slowly return to the language of rank that the Constitution sought to leave behind.



Sumit Baudh

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- **Key Terms and Explanations**
- **Article 18 (Abolition of Titles):** A foundational pillar of the Indian Constitution's equality code. It strictly prohibits the State from conferring any titles (except military or academic distinctions) and bars citizens from accepting titles from foreign states. It aims to ensure that no artificial, state-sanctioned hierarchies exist among citizens.
- **The Equality Code:** The collective framework of Articles 14 to 18 of the Constitution. Together, these articles guarantee equality before the law, prohibit discrimination, ensure equal opportunity in public employment, abolish untouchability, and eliminate titles, creating a flat legal landscape for all citizens.
- **Honorific Styles of Address:** Linguistic markers of deference—such as "Honourable" (Hon'ble), "Excellency," or "My Lord"—used in formal, judicial, or legislative communication. While not legally classified as hereditary titles, they function socially to elevate public officials above ordinary citizens.
- **Article 12 ("The State"):** The constitutional definition that identifies which entities qualify as the State for the enforcement of Fundamental Rights. It includes the government, Parliament, state legislatures, and local or statutory authorities, ensuring that anyone exercising public or sovereign power remains legally answerable to the people.
- **Tone Policing:** A socio-political mechanism where the focus of a dispute is shifted away from the validity or substance of an argument (or accusation) to the manner, tone, or level of respect with which it is delivered. In administrative law, this manifest when a legal petition is delayed or criticized simply because an official wasn't addressed with the expected ceremonial deference.
- **Constitutional Drift:** A gradual, often unnoticeable shift in institutional culture, habits, and language away from the core values of the Constitution. It does not involve a flagrant violation of text but rather a slow erosion of constitutional spirit through daily practice and unexamined traditions.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The intersection of legal mandates and ceremonial language exposes a core tension within modern democratic institutions: the challenge of balancing executive authority with egalitarian principles.

- **The Institutionalization of Hierarchy**

- The core thesis of this debate centers on the risk of institutionalizing social stratification through judicial mandates. When a court outlines who is "entitled" to be addressed with specific honorifics, it moves past standard courtesy and inches toward creating a legally recognized class system. Even if these directives do not technically violate the letter of Article 18, their practical effect mirrors the pre-republican structures that sorted individuals by state-approved prestige.

- **The Misconstruction of Sovereignty**

- A significant conceptual misstep occurs when the exercise of sovereign power is treated as a source of personal prestige rather than a framework for public accountability. In a constitutional democracy, holding a public office or executing state functions does not grant a badge of social superiority. Instead, it places a heavy burden of responsibility on the official. Expanding the definition of "The State" under Article 12 was deliberately designed to make public power transparent and challengeable, not to shield its holders behind protective linguistic barriers.

- **The Creep of "Similar Functionaries"**

- Using broad, open-ended categories like "similar functionaries" when assigning honorific privileges creates an institutional slippery slope. In administrative systems, vague terminology rarely leads to a reduction of privileges; instead, it tends to expand them. Over time, an increasing number of administrative, bureaucratic, and semi-judicial offices quietly absorb these expectations of deference, establishing a culture of entitlement through habit rather than statutory law.

- **Linguistic Dissonance in Criminal Jurisprudence**

- A sharp practical contradiction emerges when the vocabulary of high honor clashes directly with the standard procedures of criminal law. When an individual facing formal criminal allegations or serious investigation must still be addressed as "Hon'ble," it creates an uncomfortable stylistic and logical conflict. This insistence on ceremonial politeness can subtly distort the focus of legal proceedings, prioritizing the preservation of institutional ego over the objective evaluation of criminal accountability.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- The tension between democratic equality and the desire for official status is deeply rooted in India's transition from a colonial dependency to an independent republic.

- **The Colonial Architecture of Division (Pre-1947)**

- The British Empire systematically used titles and honorific systems as deliberate tools of colonial governance. By distributing titles like *Rai Bahadur*, *Khan Bahadur*, *Sir*, and *Knight Commander*, the colonial state secured the loyalty of local elites and landed aristocrats. This framework created a psychological and social barrier between British administrators (along with their favored collaborators) and the broader Indian population, reinforcing the idea that authority required public displays of subordination.

- **The Constituent Assembly's Egalitarian Vision (1948–1949)**

- During the drafting of the Constitution, the framers engaged in intense debates regarding the total eradication of titles. Leaders like K.T. Shah and H.V. Kamath argued that a true republic could not tolerate any state-sanctioned markers of aristocratic privilege. These deliberations culminated in Article 18, which was designed as a clean break from both colonial honors and centuries of regional feudal practices, ensuring that the state could no longer create or sustain a privileged class of citizens.

- **The Executive Flattening of Feudal Privileges (1971)**

- Despite the enactment of Article 18, several hereditary privileges and titles persisted among the former princely states via the system of Privy Purses. The passage of the 26th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1971 marked a major milestone by abolishing the Privy Purses and officially terminating the special status and titles of former rulers. This structural reform firmly established that the relationship between the Indian State and its citizens was entirely uniform and free from inherited rank.

- **The Judicial Boundary Line: The Balaji Raghavan Case (1996)**

- The constitutional boundaries of Article 18 were thoroughly tested when the validity of National Awards like the *Bharat Ratna* and the *Padma Awards* was challenged in *Balaji Raghavan v. Union of India*. The Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of these awards but drew a strict legal distinction:

- These awards are noble decorations recognizing exceptional merit and public service, not aristocratic titles.

- The court explicitly ruled that these honours **cannot** be used as prefixes or suffixes to the recipient's name.

- Any such usage would result in the forfeiture of the award, reaffirming that merit must not degenerate into a tool of social stratification.

UPSC COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS: CONSTITUTIONAL REPUBLICANISM VS. THE VOCABULARY OF RANK



ACCOUNTABILITY & SERVICE

POWER IS FOR PUBLIC GOOD.
burden of accountability is the basis.



EQUALITY CODE (ARTICLES 14-18)

ABOLITION OF TITLES (ART. 18).
All citizens are equal.



FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE

RESPECT EARNED THROUGH DUTY,
not ceremonial labels.



PRE prestige & STATUS

POWER CONFERS INHERENT HONOUR.
prestige vs. accountability.



RULER-RULED DIVIDE

CREATING DISTANCE AND
entitled DEFERENCE.



CEREMONIAL HONORIFICS

DEMAND FOR SYMBOLIC RESPECT
THROUGH labels.

THE LEGAL DILEMMA: LINGUISTIC DISSONANCE



THE EGALITARIAN REPUBLICAN IDEAL

THE NEO-FEUDAL HIERARCHY DRIFT

SOVEREIGNTY

EXPANDING PRIVILEGE: 'SIMILAR FUNCTIONARIES'



HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Pre-1947
(Colonial Titles)

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper I (Society)
GS Paper II (Polity/Governance)
GS Paper IV (Ethics)

NCERT LINKS

Class 11 Pol Science
(Rights/Equality)
Class 8 Civics

WAY FORWARD



HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Pre-1947 → 1949 (Article 18 Titles) Abolition)
1996 (Balaji Raghavan Case: Decorations vs. Titles, no prefixes)

ARTICLE 12 ('THE STATE')

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- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- The debate over state-enforced honorifics reflects a deep philosophical division regarding the nature of authority, human dignity, and the language of power within a democracy.

- **Republicanism vs. Feudal Assertions**

- At the heart of this issue lies the fundamental philosophical clash between the logic of a republic and that of a feudal order. Republican philosophy dictates that sovereignty originates from the bottom up—it rests entirely with *We, the People*, who temporarily delegate specific functional powers to representatives and administrators. Conversely, demanding specialized honorific styles implies a top-down model where authority flows downward from a dignified state structure, requiring ordinary citizens to offer symbolic deference to those in power.

- **Rawlsian Equality and the Preservation of Self-Respect**

- In John Rawls' theory of justice, the social basis of self-respect is identified as a vital primary good that a just state must protect. When public institutions legally enforce unequal linguistic protocols, they compromise this equal distribution of self-respect. If an ordinary citizen must navigate a complex landscape of mandatory institutional flattery just to interact with public offices, the democratic baseline of equal moral worth is quietly undermined.

- **The Distortion of Institutional Purpose**

- This issue can also be analyzed through the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic status:

- When institutional culture prioritizes external labels of prestige over the functional utility of the office, the primary democratic goal of public service is replaced by a focus on preserving bureaucratic status.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - Mandating separate linguistic standards for public officials deepens the long-standing "Ruler vs. Ruled" divide within Indian society. It reinforces historical patterns of hierarchy, encouraging a culture of submissiveness among ordinary citizens—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. When public offices require expressions of deep reverence, these spaces become intimidating, discouraging vulnerable populations from confidently accessing their legal rights and public services.
- **Political Dimension**
 - A reliance on ceremonial language slows down the process of democratic decentralization. It encourages a neo-feudal political culture where elected representatives and public administrators view themselves as a distinct political caste rather than accessible agents of the public. This focus on status shifts the political landscape away from performance-based evaluations, redirecting energy toward maintaining the outward pomp and display of political power.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - From a legal standpoint, insisting on honorific compliance introduces unnecessary procedural hurdles that can obstruct the delivery of justice. When law enforcement or judicial bodies spend valuable time correcting stylistic omissions in documentation (such as FIRs or petitions), they participate in tone policing. This diverts focus from the core substance of legal violations and directly conflicts with Article 14, which states that all individuals should stand on equal footing before the law without arbitrary prerequisites of etiquette.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - From an ethical perspective, enforcing honorific titles encourages administrative arrogance and diminishes the foundational civil service virtue of humility. Public service ethics require that an official's authority be legitimized by empathy, fairness, and dedication to duty. When the state provides institutional shortcuts to respect through mandatory honorifics, it reduces the incentive for officials to earn public trust through their actions, replacing internal ethical accountability with empty external protocol.
- **International Dimension**
 - This persistent attachment to archaic formal titles highlights a striking cultural contradiction on the global stage. As India projects itself internationally as a modern, forward-thinking digital democracy and a champion of egalitarian values in global governance, its domestic institutions continue to rely on antiquated expressions of colonial and feudal deference. This gap between external modernization and internal linguistic habits reveals an incomplete decolonization of the administrative mindset.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - While the connection between honorifics and economics seems subtle, a culture of deep administrative deference carries real financial and transactional costs. In systems where public officials are treated with exaggerated reverence, administrative access becomes a scarce commodity controlled by gatekeepers. This environment can foster rent-seeking behavior, where access to public resources depends on navigating layers of status and privilege, ultimately slowing down bureaucratic efficiency and increasing the friction of doing business.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**
- **Class 11 Political Science (Indian Constitution at Work) – Chapter 2: Rights in the Indian Constitution:** This chapter details the operational mechanics of the Right to Equality (Articles 14–18). It explains why the abolition of titles was essential to dismantle the discriminatory social networks left behind by colonial rulers and princely regimes.
- **Class 11 Political Science (Political Theory) – Chapter 3: Equality:** This text provides a critical theoretical look at the differences between formal legal equality and substantive social equality. It demonstrates how entrenched social status and institutional hierarchies can undermine political equality, directly illustrating how mandatory honorifics can compromise equal citizenship.
- **Class 8 Civics (Social and Political Life III) – Chapter 1: The Indian Constitution:** An introductory guide to the core features of a constitutional democracy. It outlines the transition from an autocratic system governed by the whims of rulers to a democratic nation anchored in the rule of law, highlighting why public offices must be defined by accountability rather than prestige.





- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper I: Indian Society**
- **Salient Features of Indian Society & Diversity of India:** Relates to the study of social stratification, the persistence of semi-feudal mindsets in modern India, and the ongoing cultural struggle to balance traditional hierarchies with modern constitutional ideals.
- **GS Paper II: Polity and Governance**
- **Indian Constitution:** Significant provisions, evolution, and fundamental features, specifically focusing on the Equality Code (Articles 14–18) and the evolving interpretation of Article 12.
- **Structure, Organization, and Functioning of the Judiciary and Executive:** Examines institutional norms, judicial reforms, administrative behavior, and the need to modernize public offices to ensure greater transparency and accessibility.
- **GS Paper IV: Ethics and Integrity**
- **Public/Civil Service Values and Ethics in Public Administration:** Direct relevance to accountability, humility, and public spirit as core virtues. It explores the ethical responsibility of public servants to minimize social distance and avoid administrative hubris.
- **Essay Paper & Optional Subjects**
- **Philosophical and Political Essays:** Provides excellent material for essays on democracy, decolonizing the institutional mind, equality, and the evolving relationship between citizens and the state.
- **Optional Subjects:** Highly relevant for **PSIR** (Paper 1: Indian Government and Politics, Section on Fundamental Rights) and **Sociology** (Paper 2: Social Structure and Stratification in India).

- **Way Forward**
- **Institutional Decolonization of Public Language**
 - Judicial and executive authorities should implement self-regulated directives to systematically simplify formal language. Archaic expressions like "My Lord," "Your Honour," and the mandatory prefixing of "Hon'ble" for every level of public office can be replaced with simple, professional, and egalitarian titles such as "Mr./Ms. Justice" or functional designations like "Minister" or "Director." This change preserves the institutional dignity of the office without demanding personal subordination from citizens.
- **Clarifying Guidelines for Legal and Administrative Filings**
 - The judiciary can issue clear practice notes stating that the absence of honorific titles in legal documents—such as FIRs, affidavits, or petitions—shall not be a ground for institutional admonishment, delay, or negative comment. Shifting the focus from administrative etiquette to substantive legal arguments ensures that tone policing never interferes with the speedy delivery of justice.
- **Modernizing Civil Service and Judicial Training**
 - The core curricula at national training academies (such as LBSNAA and judicial academies) should place greater emphasis on democratic humility and citizen-centric communication. Training programs must reinforce the principle that a public official's authority is validated by their accessibility, ethical conduct, and problem-solving efficiency, rather than their ceremonial rank or standard protocol.
- **Cultivating an Active and Equal Public Language**
 - Civil society, media organizations, and public institutions should adopt an egalitarian vocabulary that treats public positions as responsibilities rather than titles of nobility. Consistently using functional language helps break down deep-seated feudal mindsets, moving the public conversation away from the prestige of the office and toward the measurable performance and accountability of the individual holding it.



Civil Services Examination (Prelims)

1. Which of the following Statements is/are correct regarding Article 18 of the Constitution of India?

- 1.It prohibits the State from conferring any title, including military or academic distinctions.
- 2.It prevents an Indian citizen from accepting any title from a foreign State.
- 3.The Supreme Court has ruled that National Awards like the Padma Vibhushan cannot be used as prefixes or suffixes to the recipient’s name.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

2. One of the implications of equality in a society is the absence of:

- (a) Privileges
- (b) Restraints
- (c) Competition
- (d) Ideology

3. In the context of India, which one of the following principles is implied institutionally in the parliamentary government?

- 1.Members of the Cabinet are Members of the Parliament.
- 2.Ministers hold office till they enjoy confidence in the Parliament.
- 3.The Cabinet is headed by the Head of the State.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

Civil Services Examination (Mains)

- GS Paper II (Polity):** "The Right to Equality under the Indian Constitution is not merely a negative right against discrimination but a positive mandate to establish an egalitarian society." Discuss this statement with special reference to the constitutional prohibition of titles and its contemporary relevance in public administration.
- GS Paper IV (Ethics):** "Administrative hubris and an obsession with official protocol are major barriers between citizens and the state." Suggest practical measures to build a culture of democratic humility and accountability within the civil services.

India's 'Israel habit' meets West Asian realities

When leaders make foreign policy decisions, each may appear reasonable in isolation. However, their cumulative impact can be strikingly different from what was originally intended. As Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the funeral of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, India's deepening engagement with Israel perhaps falls into that category. What was once a mutually beneficial partnership between New Delhi and Tel Aviv seems to have become more of a habit than the product of serious strategic deliberation. Yet, sound policy cannot be guided by the momentum of habit, for habit and strategy often pull in opposite directions.

A reconfigured region

For one thing, it is important to acknowledge the gains from the partnership between India and Israel. India has received considerable military technology and know-how from Israel, as well as expertise in intelligence gathering derived from their extensive counter-insurgency experience. However, the more important question is not only what this relationship provides today, but also what it forecloses over time. Judged on those terms, the picture is not particularly encouraging.

West Asia has been undergoing one of its most intense geopolitical reconfigurations in years, and this one is different in scale. For the past decade, the region's regional arithmetic has rested on the assumption that Iran was a wounded, sanctions-strangled actor whose reach could be curtailed and ambitions contained. That assumption has now been tested and found wanting. American and Israeli military strikes on Iranian facilities have not produced the strategic calm that Tel Aviv had hoped for at the outset of this costly campaign. Iran responded with retaliatory missile and drone salvos and, more importantly, demonstrated that any blockade of the Strait of Hormuz could not be easily overcome by the rhetoric of carrier groups. Once again, the geography of energy has become the geography of coercion. The terms of the final agreement quietly confirm that Iran was not broken.

The last three months have made it clear that the United States-Iran confrontation is not a distant geopolitical contest for New Delhi. It has had a direct impact on India's economy. Most of India's oil imports pass through routes vulnerable to any prolonged conflict in the Gulf. Whenever the Strait of Hormuz becomes a flashpoint, the consequences are felt directly in Indian households. It is here that the strategic canon becomes more complicated, with every diplomatic choice carrying economic consequences. Strategic flexibility requires sharing comfortable alignments.

Many strategic analysts have long believed that Washington's policy towards Israel is fixed and



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unchanging – a constant around which all regional policy revolves. That assumption now needs to be revised. The public differences between Washington and Tel Aviv, reflected in U.S. President Donald Trump's frequent outbursts against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, are no mere diplomatic squall. They appear to be genuine, notwithstanding Mr. Trump's well-known idiosyncrasies, because Washington's strategic calculus in West Asia has changed faster than expected.

The U.S. urgently needs off ramps, while Mr. Netanyahu, whose political survival is bound up with escalation, has little interest in de-escalation without achieving his maximalist objectives. The friction becomes evident when the patron and the client are at odds, and the once-blank cheque starts to float.

Iran cannot be ignored

Thus, the perception of a shift towards Israel, reflected in Mr. Modi's unexpected visit to Tel Aviv (February 25-26, 2020) just before the U.S. and Israel launched their coordinated attack on Iran (February 28, 2020), becomes riskier when it is made more explicit, as it could place India on the wrong side of a regional reconfiguration that neither Israel nor any third party can control. While Mr. Modi's personal absence from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's funeral is unsurprising, the choice of India's representatives is itself a deliberate signal. Pairing Minister of State for External Affairs Pooja Mathur with Bihar Governor Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain (retired) – himself a soldier-scholar shaped by counter-insurgency experience – may be read as a calibrated posture of political reassurance, while also subtly reflecting India's religious pluralism.

In other words, it reflects a posture that has internalised the war's central lessons without yet being willing to say aloud that Tehran's coercive capacity, demonstrated through the Strait of Hormuz and the missile exchanges, cannot be managed through the optics of Tel Aviv alone. This choice conveys an important diplomatic message of reassurance to Iran, which has demonstrated that it remains a regional heavyweight.

Moreover, Iran is a civilisational state with deep-rooted political and ideological networks across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the proven capacity to generate economic pressure that can bypass conventional military deterrence.

A nation that can dictate ceasefire terms to Mr. Trump after absorbing punitive strikes from the U.S. and Israel is not a nation that can be casually discounted. China also appears poised to expand its strategic and economic footprint in Iran, making it imperative for India to exercise greater caution. Greater alignment with Israel risks pushing Tehran further into the China-Pakistan strategic embrace.

There is also the matter of Europe, an underutilised and undervalued element in India's economic planning. India must recognise that Europe's political landscape has turned against Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon in ways, and at a pace, that would have been unimaginable two years ago.

More than sentiment, electoral arithmetic is at work. And electoral arithmetic often shapes trade policy and, eventually, the tone of bilateral negotiations. India's status-seeking desire to be seen as a responsible international actor, rather than merely a vast market, and its economic ambitions in Europe – including the operationalisation of the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement – may come under closer scrutiny in the context of its West Asia policy than New Delhi anticipates.

What is unusual about the present moment is that India has no option but to act strategically, independently, and decisively. It has leverage because it has maintained good relations with many Arab Gulf states, from which millions of Indian workers send remittances home. Although Saudi Arabia may once again have found tactical reasons to accommodate Islamabad, India's relationship with the United Arab Emirates has grown even stronger.

New Delhi's historical ties with Tehran, though constrained by shifting regional dynamics, have not been completely severed. More fundamentally, India's sheer size combined with its geostrategic attributes makes it an indispensable stakeholder in any emerging regional order. What India needs now is the political will to wield its leverage effectively in pursuit of clearly defined national objectives.

Beyond binary choices

India needs a sufficiently ambitious strategic imagination. But that does not mean choosing between Israel and Iran, for that would be far too simplistic, and history rarely rewards such simplifications. Herein lies the distinction between an adaptive, alignment-driven foreign policy – the kind that follows and adapts to alignments forged by others – and an architectonic foreign policy, which seeks to shape its own strategic environment.

For a country that claims to be 'Vishvabandhu', it is important to recognise that the credibility of such a claim will be tested in moments such as these, when the world is watching India's words and actions. New Delhi's most valuable strategic asset in the coming multipolar decade is its authentic voice as a champion of the Global South, and every visible alignment with Israel in a conflict in which the Global South overwhelmingly sympathises with the Palestinians risks putting that precious capital in jeopardy. The defence technologies provided by Tel Aviv are undeniably valuable. But the strategic price of appearing aligned in a conflict that has reshaped West Asia is no less real.

A changing West Asia demands strategic imagination, flexibility, and diplomatic balance from India

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Strategic Autonomy:** The capacity of a nation-state to pursue its national interests and adopt foreign policy choices without being constrained or dictated to by other structural powers. For India, this means maintaining independent relationships with adversarial capitals like Washington, Moscow, Tehran, and Tel Aviv simultaneously.

- **De-hyphenation:** A diplomatic strategy where a country conducts its bilateral relations with two mutual adversaries independently, evaluating each relationship on its own merits rather than through the prism of the conflict between them. India successfully applied this to Israel and Palestine, but the strategy faces limits when regional conflicts escalate into open warfare.

- **Geography of Coercion:** The strategic utilization of critical geographic chokepoints, territorial vulnerabilities, or regional proxy networks to project power and deter adversaries. A primary example is Iran's asymmetric capability to disrupt the **Strait of Hormuz**, a vital maritime throat through which a vast portion of global energy passes.

- **Vishwabandhu (Friend to the World):** India's contemporary foreign policy narrative that projects the nation as a reliable, consensus-building global actor, a bridge between the Global North and South, and a force for stabilizing fractured international relations.

- **Architectonic Foreign Policy:** A proactive diplomatic posture where a major power seeks to actively shape, construct, and influence its strategic external environment, rather than merely adopting an "adaptive alignment" that reacts to frameworks designed by other global powers.



- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The geopolitical realities of West Asia reveal that deep-seated assumptions regarding regional containment are being severely tested.

- **The Fallacy of Containment and the Resilience of Iran**

- For nearly a decade, global and regional strategies operated under the assumption that Iran was a structurally weakened, sanction-strangled actor whose regional reach could be permanently contained. Recent military confrontations, missile exchanges, and proxy dynamics have challenged this notion. Direct strikes have not yielded the strategic calm that proponents of maximum pressure anticipated. Instead, Iran has demonstrated a resilient coercive capacity and an ability to bypass conventional military deterrence through deep-seated civilizational, political, and ideological networks spanning Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

- **The Friction in External Patron-Client Dynamics**

- A critical shift is occurring in the calculations of major global powers. The strategic calculus of the United States in West Asia is evolving rapidly, creating visible policy frictions between Washington and Tel Aviv. When a global patron seeks stabilizing off-ramps while a regional ally pursues maximalist objectives tied to political survival, the resulting friction disrupts predictable security guarantees. This divergence means that external partners can no longer view Western policy toward the region as an unalterable constant.

- **The Vulnerability of India's Economic Corridors**

- The geopolitical contest in the Gulf is not a distant theater for New Delhi; it directly impacts the domestic economy. The vast majority of India's crude oil imports transit through maritime routes that become instantly vulnerable during regional escalations. When chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz face disruption, the economic shocks are felt directly across Indian households through inflationary pressures. Strategic flexibility is therefore an economic necessity, forcing India to shun comfortable, single-axis alignments.

- **The Global South Identity and Europe's Shift**

- India's desire to be seen as a responsible international actor rather than merely a vast consumer market depends heavily on its normative capital. The political landscape in Europe has grown increasingly critical of protracted military actions in Gaza and Lebanon. Over-alignment with one regional actor risks bringing India's broader economic ambitions—such as the highly anticipated India-European Union Free Trade Agreement—under intense scrutiny. Furthermore, visible over-alignment risks undermining India's credibility as a champion of the Global South, a constituency that overwhelmingly sympathizes with the Palestinian cause.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**
- **The Phase of Pro-Arab Ideological Posturing (1947–1991):** Following independence, India's West Asia policy was heavily anchored in the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. India voted against the UN Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. This stance was driven by the need to secure oil supplies from Arab nations, safeguard millions of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf, and counter Pakistani influence in Islamic forums. Formal diplomatic ties with Israel were withheld, though informal security channels existed.
- **The Post-Cold War Realignment and Normalization (1992):** The collapse of the Soviet Union, the changing global order, and India's balance-of-payments crisis forced a radical rethink. In 1992, under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, India established full diplomatic relations with Israel. This allowed New Delhi to diversify its defense procurement, access advanced counter-insurgency technologies, and acquire vital intelligence-gathering capabilities that proved crucial during the 1999 Kargil Conflict.
- **The Era of De-hyphenation and Strategic Partnerships (2014–2025):** The relationship with Israel was elevated to a strategic partnership characterized by high-profile standalone visits. Simultaneously, India strengthened ties with Arab Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, culminating in minilateral groupings like the **I2U2** (India, Israel, USA, UAE). This phase operated on the assumption that India could engage with all sides in watertight compartments without being forced to choose.
- **The Current Era of Complex Multi-Alignment (2026 and Beyond):** As structural changes reshape West Asia, the limits of simple de-hyphenation are being reached. Open regional conflicts are forcing India to adopt a more nuanced, calibrated diplomatic posture. This involves balancing its deep defense ties with Israel against its civilizational and connectivity-driven relationship with Iran, all while protecting its vast economic stakes in the Arab world.





INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL BALANCING ACT IN WEST ASIA: A STRATEGIC DEEP-DIVE FOR UPSC & APSC PREPARATION

I. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & KEY TERMS



STRATEGIC AUTONOMY:
Ability to pursue national interests independently (Washington, Moscow, Tehran, Tel Aviv)



DE-HYPHENATION:
Conducting bilateral relations with adversaries independently (e.g., Israel & Iran)



GEOGRAPHY OF COERCION:
Utilising strategic chokepoints/proxies for power (e.g., Iran & Strait of Hormuz)



VISHWABANDHU:
India as a global friend, bridge, and stabilizer



ARCHITECTONIC FOREIGN POLICY:
Proactively shaping the strategic environment

REALISM

(Security with Israel, energy with Arab states)

LIBERAL PRAGMATISM

(Interdependence, balancing national interests)

II. EVOLVING WEST ASIAN GEOPOLITICS



III. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ENGAGEMENT



[1947–1991] IDEOLOGICAL NON-ALIGNMENT:
Pro-Arab posture, oil security, diaspora welfare, countering Pakistan (UN Partition, NAM)



[1992] DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION:
Collapse of Soviet Union, BOP crisis, relations established with Israel (Defense, Intelligence, Cargil)



[2014–2025] ERA OF DE-HYPHENATION:
Strategic Partnerships with all, watertight compartments, high-profile visits, I2U2 minilateral



[2026+] COMPLEX MULTI-ALIGNMENT: Structural open regional conflicts require nuanced calibration. Civilizational ties vs. Defense ties.

IV. MULTIDIMENSIONAL IMPACT (UPSC LINKAGES)



UPSC PAPERS:

GS II: Bilateral, regional, global groupings; policies of countries impacting interests

GS IV: Ethical dilemmas in international relations

ESSAY: Strategic Autonomy in a Fragmented World; Geopolitics of Energy; India's Rise

V. NCERT LINKS & WAY FORWARD

CLASS XII POLY SC
(Contemporary World Politics: Alternative Centers of Power, International Organizations; Politics in India: External Relations)

WAY FORWARD & KEY STRATEGIES

- **Operationalize Calibrated Multi-Alignment** (agile, interests-driven, non-zero sum, independent civilizational ties)
- **Leverage Middle-Power Diplomacy & Arab Ties** (UAE, Saudi Arabia for regional stability & de-escalation framework)
- **Accelerate Strategic & Economic Diversification** (energy transition, new crude sources, finalizing trade agreements like India-EU FTA)



- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- **Realism vs. Liberal Pragmatism**

- The underlying logic of India's engagement is a classic manifestation of *Realpolitik*. Through a realist lens, India's deep security cooperation with Israel is vital for acquiring cutting-edge technology and intelligence necessary to secure its borders. However, pure structural realism must be tempered with pragmatic interdependence. India cannot afford to ignore Iran or the Arab states because its economic survival depends on their energy reserves, maritime trade routes, and absorption of Indian labor.

- **The Philosophy of Strategic Autonomy and the "Vishwabandhu" Construct**

- Philosophically, India rejects the binary, zero-sum worldview often imposed by Western alliance systems. The *Vishwabandhu* philosophy presumes that India can act as a stabilizing, moral force in a multipolar world. This requires an independent foreign policy that refuses to allow India's long-term geopolitical interests to be hijacked by the immediate conflict cycles of its partners. It asserts that a rising power must maintain open communication channels with all regional heavyweights to avoid being pushed into unfavorable geopolitical corners.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **Social Dimension**

- The human cost of West Asian instability is immense for India. Over 8.5 million Indian citizens reside and work in the Arab Gulf states. This diaspora is a vital socio-economic pillar, sending back billions of dollars in remittances annually that sustain millions of households domestically. Any perceived structural tilt that destabilizes India's standing in the Arab world directly threatens the welfare, safety, and economic security of this diaspora. Furthermore, India's rich domestic religious pluralism necessitates a balanced external posture to maintain social cohesion at home.

- **Political Dimension**

- Domestically, foreign policy choices can become intertwined with political narratives. The challenge for Indian statecraft lies in insulating long-term strategic decisions from short-term electoral arithmetic. Nuanced diplomatic actions—such as sending carefully calibrated representation to regional state funerals or balancing public statements—reflect a sophisticated political effort to maintain strategic flexibility without creating domestic polarization.

- **Legal Dimension**

- India has consistently championed a rules-based international order, emphasizing maritime freedom of navigation under the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**. Regional conflicts that endanger international waters place a legal obligation on maritime powers to protect trade routes. Furthermore, India must navigate the complex legal landscape of unilateral, non-UN sanctions imposed on nations like Iran, ensuring that its strategic infrastructure investments—such as the **Chabahar Port**—remain legally protected and operational.

- **Ethical Dimension**

- The ethical dimension involves balancing national security imperatives with global humanitarian values. While India relies on defense collaborations to protect its citizens from security threats, it also maintains a normative commitment to human rights, international humanitarian law, and the protection of civilians in conflict zones like Gaza and Lebanon. Upholding these ethical principles is central to maintaining India's moral authority on the global stage.

- **International Dimension**

- The geopolitical stakes involve a delicate balancing act between major powers. A visible over-alignment with one regional actor can push adversaries closer into the strategic embrace of the China-Pakistan axis, expanding Beijing's maritime and economic footprint in the Western Indian Ocean. Additionally, India must manage its strategic ties with a fluid US administration and an increasingly critical European Union while retaining its position as the undisputed voice of the Global South.

- **Economic Dimension**

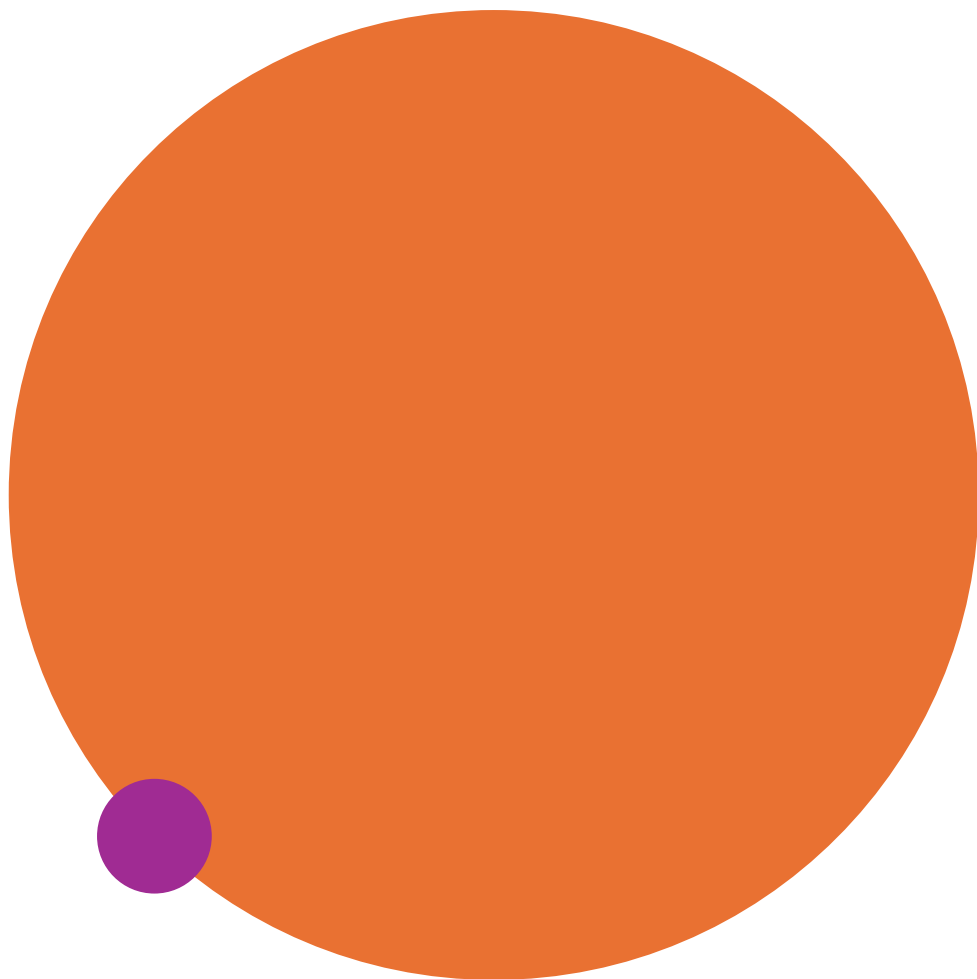
- Economic security is inextricably linked to regional stability. Beyond oil and gas imports, West Asia is an important market for Indian exports and a potential source of massive sovereign wealth fund investments. Prolonged instability disrupts regional connectivity initiatives, such as the proposed **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)**, and creates supply chain bottlenecks that hinder India's macro-economic growth targets.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**

- **Class XII Political Science – Contemporary World Politics (Chapters on "Alternative Centres of Power" and "International Organizations"):** These chapters provide a structural understanding of how multipolarity works and how regional organizations and heavyweights assert power outside traditional superpower blocks. It explains the limitations of unilateral military action and the role of global public opinion.
- **Class XII Political Science – Politics in India Since Independence (Chapter on "India's External Relations"):** This text outlines the foundational principles of Indian foreign policy, including the historical shift from Nehruvian Non-Alignment to modern pragmatic engagements. It helps students trace the evolution of India's traditional pro-Arab stance and its subsequent diversification toward Israel.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper II (International Relations):**
 - *Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.*
 - *Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, Indian diaspora.*
- **GS Paper IV (Ethics, Integrity, and Aptitude):**
 - *International Relations and Funding:* Examining the ethical dilemmas of balancing national defense procurement with global humanitarian values and international law.
- **Essay Paper:** Highly relevant for philosophical and strategic essay themes such as "*Strategic Autonomy in a Fragmented World*," "*The Balance Between National Interest and Global Morality*," or "*The Geopolitics of Energy and India's Rise*."
- **Optional Subjects:** Extremely high utility for **Political Science and International Relations (PSIR)** (Paper 2: India and the World) and **Geography Optional** (Strategic/Geopolitical significance of the Indian Ocean and West Asian chokepoints).





- **Way Forward**
- **Operationalizing a Calibrated Multi-Alignment**
 - India must move away from rigid alignment habits and embrace an agile, interests-driven diplomatic posture. While functional defense and intelligence cooperation with Israel should continue on its own merits, New Delhi must proactively reassure Tehran of their independent civilizational and economic ties. Diplomatic moves, such as sending high-level defense and civilian representatives to key state events, send a clear message that India will not allow its regional choices to be dictated by third parties.
- **Leveraging Middle-Power Diplomacy and Arab Ties**
 - India should utilize its significant diplomatic capital with powerful Arab Gulf states, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, to build a collective regional stability framework. Since these nations also seek to diversify their economies and prevent catastrophic regional wars, India can work alongside them to promote diplomatic de-escalation, protect shared maritime trade corridors, and ensure that vital waterways like the Strait of Hormuz remain free from conflict.
- **Accelerating Strategic and Economic Diversification**
 - To reduce its vulnerability to sudden geopolitical shocks, India must accelerate its domestic energy transition toward renewables while diversifying its external crude sourcing. Concurrently, New Delhi should finalize its long-term trade agreements, such as the India-EU FTA, by demonstrating that its foreign policy is stable, predictable, and independent of any single regional actor's conflict cycle. This will secure India's economic integration with global markets while preserving its core strategic autonomy.

Main Exam Questions

1. "India's relations with Israel have of late acquired a depth and diversity, which cannot be rolled back." Discuss. (*GS Paper II, 2018*)
2. The multi-lateral export control regimes and India's strategic autonomy in a changing global security architecture require careful balancing. Analyze with reference to India's engagement in West Asia. (*Reflected across GS Paper II themes*)
3. Critically examine the effect of political instability in West Asia on India's energy security and the economic well-being of the Indian diaspora. (*GS Paper II, 2017/2020 generalized theme*)

High-Probability Practice Prelims Questions

Q1. Consider the following pairs of maritime chokepoints and the bodies of water they connect:

1. Strait of Hormuz : Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman
2. Bab-el-Mandeb : Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden
3. Strait of Malacca : Andaman Sea and the South China Sea

Which of the pairs given above is/are correctly matched? (a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

The Indo-Pacific is here to stay, with or without Washington



RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

JAPANESE PRIME Minister Sanae Takaichi's visit to India this week highlights one important fact — the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct will live on. Whatever Washington's reasons are for restoring the name Pacific Command, the logic of the Indo-Pacific will continue to drive key regional actors like India and Japan.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit later this month to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand will reinforce the proposition. In sum, the Indo-Pacific will remain a critical theatre of India's national economic and security strategy.

It was the Trump administration that officially adopted the Indo-Pacific lexicon in 2017, during its first term. At the time, many in India's strategic community viewed the concept with deep suspicion. Was Washington trying to lure India into an anti-China alliance? Was this another attempt to compromise India's strategic autonomy? Today, the anxiety has simply reversed. If Washington no longer emphasises the Indo-Pacific, does it mean America is abandoning Asia? Is it preparing to build a condominium with China?

Both reactions overestimate Washington's power to define India's strategic environment. What they reveal is a self-generated anxiety in Indian strategic discourse that swings wildly between concerns about

American "entrapment" and fears of American "abandonment".

The Indo-Pacific construct, when it emerged in the early 2000s, reflected the changing distribution of economic and military power in Asia driven by China's rise and assertion. What Americans call that reality matters less than the fact that Beijing's neighbours have no option but to deal with it — with or without American support.

In any case, the Indo-Pacific was not an American invention. Its modern political articulation came from Japan. In August 2007, during his historic address to the Indian Parliament, the late Shinzo Abe spoke of the "Confluence of the Two Seas". His argument was both simple and profound: The destinies of the Indian and Pacific Oceans had become inseparable, and the democracies along their littorals needed to work together to preserve an open regional order.

For Abe, this was not diplomatic rhetoric. It reflected Japan's assessment that China's rise had fundamentally altered Asia's strategic balance. The old Cold War alliance system centred exclusively on northeast Asia would no longer suffice. Japan needed stronger partnerships with India, Australia, Southeast Asia and Europe while reinforcing its alliance with the United States. The Indo-Pacific became the organising principle for that broader strategy.

Nearly two decades later, Prime Minister Takaichi has become the principal custodian of Abe's vision. Rather than retreating in the face of Washington's change of emphasis, Tokyo has doubled down. Speaking at Vietnam National University in Hanoi in May, Takaichi unveiled an updated "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, reaffirming the concept's validity despite shifts in American policy. Her updated

framework places new emphasis on resilient supply chains, critical minerals, economic security, maritime cooperation and stronger partnerships across the region.

Japan's credibility rests not merely on its diplomacy but on the transformation underway at home. Under Takaichi, Tokyo has accelerated the most ambitious expansion of Japanese defence capabilities since World War II. Defence spending crossed the 2 per cent of GDP threshold ahead of schedule. Long-range strike capabilities — including Tomahawk cruise missiles and extended-range indigenous missiles — are being deployed. Japan is reorganising its maritime forces, expanding its space capabilities, strengthening defence-industrial cooperation with partners, and building new security networks with Australia, South Korea, the Philippines and India. Tokyo's message is clear: Preserving a stable Indo-Pacific requires Japan to become a stronger strategic actor in its own right, not merely a dependent ally of the US.

The outcomes from Takaichi's visit will reflect that strategy. Tokyo and Delhi are preparing a joint declaration on economic security that, according to Japanese officials, will register their shared opposition to economic coercion. The two sides are expected to identify priority sectors, from semiconductors and critical minerals to clean energy, and to commit to coordinating their response when coercion is used.

Ironically, perhaps the strongest validation of the Indo-Pacific idea comes from China itself. Beijing dismisses the Indo-Pacific as an artificial construct. Yet, its own policies increasingly integrate the two oceans into a single strategic theatre. Over the past two decades, China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy and African re-

sources has steadily grown.

Beijing has built overland economic corridors linking western China to the Indian Ocean, established its first overseas military base in Djibouti, maintained a continuous naval presence across the Indian Ocean and developed an expanding network of dual-use commercial facilities stretching from Southeast Asia to the east coast of Africa. Chinese strategy increasingly treats the Indian and Pacific Oceans as one connected maritime space — which is precisely the logic underlying the Indo-Pacific concept.

India recognised this transformation nearly a decade ago when it formally embraced the Indo-Pacific as the widening arena of its strategic interests. There is little reason to abandon that framework simply because Washington has altered its vocabulary.

Delhi need not become captive to American enthusiasm or American indifference.

The Indo-Pacific ultimately rests not on American terminology but on Asian geography and Asian power politics. As China expands simultaneously into the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and as Japan emerges as an increasingly capable strategic actor, the integration of the two oceans will only deepen.

The Indo-Pacific, then, is a structural reality of Asian politics, not a shifting American narrative. India should focus on building its own capabilities and deepening partnerships with like-minded Indo-Pacific countries to strengthen the regional balance of power.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for *The Indian Express*. He is also associated with the Mohanlal Jaiswal Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University and the Council on Strategic and Defense Research, Delhi.

Delhi need not become captive to American enthusiasm or indifference. The Indo-Pacific ultimately rests not on terminology but on Asian geography and Asian power politics

- **Key Terms and Explanations**
- **Indo-Pacific Construct:** A geopolitical framework that treats the Indian and Pacific Oceans as a single, integrated strategic space. It replaces the older, narrower "Asia-Pacific" term by acknowledging that maritime security, trade routes, and power politics in both oceans are inextricably linked. *Example:* The regular coordination among India, Japan, Australia, and the US via the Quad exemplifies this unified approach.
- **Confluence of the Two Seas:** A conceptual phrase originally introduced to highlight the historical and contemporary merging of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It serves as the philosophical foundation of the modern Indo-Pacific strategy, suggesting that the destinies of these two maritime zones are inseparable.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** The capacity of a sovereign nation to pursue its national interests and adopt foreign policy choices without being structurally constrained or forced into dependence by external superpowers. *Example:* India's ability to maintain strong ties with Russia while simultaneously deepening its security partnership with Western democracies.
- **Strategic Entrapment vs. Abandonment:** A dual anxiety faced by middle powers in international alliances. *Entrapment* occurs when a nation fears being dragged into an unwanted conflict by a major ally. *Abandonment* is the converse fear—that the major ally will withdraw its security umbrella or change its strategic priorities, leaving the partner vulnerable.
- **US-China Condominium (G-2):** A theoretical geopolitical arrangement where the United States and China establish a bilateral duopoly, mutually agreeing to carve up spheres of influence to manage global politics. This scenario is deeply concerning to middle powers, as it minimizes their regional agency.
- **Economic Coercion:** The weaponization of trade, supply chains, and economic dependencies by a dominant power to force political concessions from another state. *Example:* Using trade embargoes, withholding critical components like semiconductors, or manipulating rare earth mineral supplies to punish a neighbor for its foreign policy choices.



- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- The core structural reality of contemporary Asian politics is that regional security frameworks are anchored in geography rather than the shifting vocabulary of extra-regional powers.

- **The Illusion of American Centricity**

- Regional security architecture does not begin or end with Washington's enthusiasm. While the formal adoption of the Indo-Pacific lexicon by the United States gave the concept global momentum, treating it purely as an American policy instrument is an analytical error. Middle powers often experience cyclical anxieties—oscillating between the fear of being entrapped in a Washington-led anti-China alliance and the fear of being abandoned if America changes its rhetorical focus. These anxieties overestimate Washington's power to uniquely define the strategic environment of Asian nations.

- **Regional Agency and Leadership**

- The true drivers of the Indo-Pacific framework are regional powers like Japan and India. This strategic architecture was conceptualized in Asia to address the profound shift in the regional balance of power caused by China's rapid rise. Rather than retreating when global alignments shift, nations like Japan are doubling down, expanding their defense expenditures beyond historical thresholds, and proactively deploying long-range capabilities. This indicates a transition from being passive security dependents to becoming independent strategic actors capable of upholding a free and open regional order.

- **Validation by Contradiction**

- Paradoxically, the strongest validation of the Indo-Pacific's structural reality comes from the actions of its vocal detractors. While some powers dismiss the Indo-Pacific as an artificial, politically motivated narrative, their state policies tell a completely different story. The creation of overland economic corridors linking continental landmasses to the Indian Ocean, the establishment of overseas military bases in critical choke points like Djibouti, and the construction of dual-use commercial port networks from Southeast Asia to Africa demonstrate an active, operational integration of the two oceans into a single strategic continuum.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **The Pre-2000s Era (The Asia-Pacific Paradigm):** During the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War years, global strategy was dominated by the "Asia-Pacific" concept. This framework focused primarily on Northeast Asia and the US-led "hub-and-spoke" alliance system with nations like Japan and South Korea. The Indian Ocean was treated as a distinct, largely insulated strategic theater, and India remained on the periphery of East Asian security calculations.
 - **The 2007 Turning Point (The Conceptual Seed):** The foundational blueprint for change occurred in August 2007. During a historic address to the Indian Parliament, the leadership of Japan articulated the vision of the "Confluence of the Two Seas." This speech formally challenged the traditional boundaries of regional security, arguing that the democratic nations along the Pacific and Indian Ocean littorals must collaborate to preserve an open maritime order.
 - **The 2017 Shift (Institutionalization):** A decade after its initial conceptualization, the framework gained formal institutional backing when the United States officially integrated the "Indo-Pacific" lexicon into its National Security Strategy. This period saw the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and a concerted effort to realign military commands, signaling that Washington recognized the shifting distribution of economic and military power in Asia.
 - **The Present Era (Consolidation and Autonomy):** By 2026, the framework has moved beyond its dependence on American policy stability. Faced with global shifts and changing rhetoric in Washington, regional powers like India and Japan have deeply anchored the Indo-Pacific into their national strategies. Japan's historic shift to increase defense spending to over 2% of its GDP and India's extensive security footprints across the Indian Ocean littoral demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific is no longer a passing policy fad, but a permanent structural feature of global politics.
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INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE: COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS FOR CIVIL SERVICES

KEY GEOPOLITICAL VOCABULARY

- 1 INDO-PACIFIC CONSTRUCT**

Integrated strategic space.
- 2 CONFLUENCE OF TWO SEAS**

Philosophical foundation.
- 3 STRATEGIC AUTONOMY**

Sovereign nation vs dependency chains
Independent choices.
- 4 STRATEGIC ENTRAPMENT VS. ABANDONMENT**

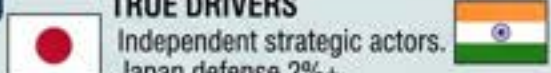
Dual anxiety.
- 5 US-CHINA CONDOMINIUM (G-2)**

Spheres of influence scenario.
- 6 ECONOMIC COERCION**

Weaponized trade.

MAIN ARGUMENTS & REGIONAL AGENCY

- 1 ILLUSION OF AMERICAN CENTRICITY**

• Washington focus shifts
• Anxieties overestimate US power.
- 2 TRUE DRIVERS**

Independent strategic actors.
Japan defense 2%+.
- 3 VALIDATION BY CONTRADICTION**

• Both detachable economic corridors and oversea military bases (Djibouti).
• Detractors active operationally.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION (TIMELINE)



LOGICAL & PHILOSOPHICAL BASE

- 1 GEOPOLITICAL REALISM**

• Prevent hegemony.
- 2 GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM**

• Physical continuity links destinies.
- 3 STRATEGIC RESILIENCE**

• Nation with partnership networks.
• Independent deterrent.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

- 1 SOCIAL**

Human Security, Blue Economy, HADR.
- 2 POLITICAL**

Multipolarity, Minilateralism (Quad)
- 3 LEGAL**

Upholding Maritime Law, UNCLOS, Rules-Based Order.
- 4 ETHICAL**

Anti-Coercion, Equal Sovereignty, Global Commons.
- 5 INTERNATIONAL**

Geopolitical Re-centering, Strategic Convergence.
- 6 ECONOMIC**

Choke points
Securing SLOCs, Supply Chain Resilience.

WAY FORWARD: PROACTIVE POLICIES

- 1 INSTITUTIONALIZE MINILATERALISM**

Strengthen flexible coalitions.
- 2 EXPAND MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS (MDA)**

Satellites, IFC-IOR
Radars, Satellites, Info Fusion.
- 3 SECURE ECONOMIC SECURITY**

Semiconductor, green energy, rare earth supply
Securing critical tech & minerals.
- 4 STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT**

Deep-water port vs compared to opaque loans
Offer transparent alternatives.

LINKAGES WITH NCERTs & UPSC SYLLABUS

NCERTs

XII Pol Science: Alt Centres, Security
XI Geo: India Location

UPSC SYLLABUS
GS II: Groupings, developed/developing politics
GS III: Border security, infrastructure
Essay; PSIR Optional

UPSC CSE PREVIOUS YEARS' QUESTIONS & HIGH-YIELD PRELIMS

- Questions by year: 2023, 2022, 2020, 2020,
- 2017 (summarized: 2017 (summarized: 2017)

PRELIMS HIGH-YIELD FOCUS





- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- Understanding this maritime framework requires looking beyond immediate policy actions to the underlying principles governing interstate behavior.

- **Geopolitical Realism and Balance of Power**

- At its core, the framework operates on the realist assumption that international politics is anarchic, and state behavior is primarily driven by the distribution of material power. The rapid economic and military expansion of a single dominant power naturally disrupts the status quo, creating systemic instability. In response, surrounding states must employ balancing strategies—not necessarily to trigger conflict, but to build a stable equilibrium that prevents unilateral hegemony and ensures that no single entity can dictate regional rules.

- **Geographical Determinism**

- The arguments rest on the philosophical principle that physical geography is the ultimate, unchanging foundation of foreign policy. Alliances may shift, and political leaders may change their rhetoric, but the physical continuity of the oceans remains absolute. Because global supply chains, energy corridors, and maritime trade routes flow uninterrupted from the Persian Gulf through the Malacca Strait to the Sea of Japan, security shocks in one ocean instantaneously impact the other. Geography links the destinies of these littoral states regardless of their political choices.

- **Strategic Resilience and Self-Reliance**

- The philosophical orientation of regional actors has shifted from reliance on external security guarantors toward independent strategic capability. The underlying logic dictates that a sustainable regional order cannot be built on the enthusiasm or indifference of an extra-regional superpower. Instead, true regional stability is achieved when middle powers build independent military deterrents, protect their own economic security, and establish mutual, issue-based partnerships with like-minded neighbors.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
- **Human Security and Livelihoods:** The maritime domain is vital for the livelihood of millions of individuals in coastal communities across Asia and Africa. Ensuring safe, unhindered open waters is essential for protecting traditional fishing rights, addressing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and maintaining blue economy initiatives that sustain coastal populations.
- **Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Coordination:** The region is highly vulnerable to climate-induced natural disasters, tsunamis, and cyclones. The collaborative frameworks established under this security umbrella allow for synchronized Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, directly impacting human survival during crises.
- **Political Dimension**
- **Multipolarity vs. Hegemony:** The central political struggle is between a vision of a multipolar Asia where all nations maintain their sovereignty, and a unipolar regional structure dominated by a single superpower's sphere of influence.
- **The Rise of Minilateralism:** The geopolitical landscape has shifted away from rigid, Cold War-style formal alliances toward flexible, issue-based "minilateral" groupings (such as the Quad, India-Japan-Australia trilateral). These platforms allow countries to collaborate on specific challenges without sacrificing their broader strategic autonomy.
- **Legal Dimension**
- **Upholding the Rules-Based International Order:** A key priority is the preservation of international maritime law, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Regional actors place great emphasis on freedom of navigation and overflight, challenging unilateral attempts to alter established maritime boundaries or create artificial islands to claim exclusive sovereignty.
- **Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:** The framework advocates for peaceful, legal resolution of maritime territorial conflicts rather than the use of military or economic force to create a *fait accompli*.
- **Ethical Dimension**
- **Anti-Coercion and Equal Sovereignty:** From an ethical standpoint, the regional discourse champions the rights of smaller nation-states (such as ASEAN members and Pacific Island nations) against geopolitical bullying and debt-trap diplomacy, asserting that all sovereign nations deserve an equal voice in regional affairs regardless of their size or military weight.
- **Preserving the Global Commons:** This architecture approaches maritime trade routes and the open ocean as global commons that belong to all humanity, making their monopolization or militarization by any single country an ethical concern.
- **International Dimension**
- **Geopolitical Re-centering:** Global geopolitics has fundamentally shifted from the Euro-Atlantic theater to the maritime corridors of Asia, turning this region into the primary arena for great-power competition and strategic cooperation.
- **Strategic Convergence of Middle Powers:** This environment has fostered a unique alignment among middle powers. Nations like India, Japan, Australia, France, and various ASEAN states are weaving a web of overlapping security arrangements, reducing their historical dependence on a single superpower protector.
- **Economic Dimension**
- **Securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs):** The region contains critical economic choke points, including the Strait of Malacca, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz. Unimpeded access to these waters is vital for global commerce, as they carry more than half of the world's container traffic and two-thirds of global oil shipments.
- **Supply Chain Resilience and Economic Security:** The focus has expanded beyond simple trade routes to protecting high-tech supply chains. Joint investments in semiconductor manufacturing, secure telecommunications networks, and the extraction and processing of critical minerals are designed to prevent any single nation from weaponizing economic interdependence.

Linkages with NCERTs

Class XII Political Science (*Contemporary World Politics*):

- *Chapter on "Alternative Centres of Power"*: This chapter details the rise of alternative economic and political power centers like Japan, China, and regional blocs like ASEAN. It connects directly to how these nations are reshaping Asian geography and challenging historical Western dominance.

Class XII Political Science (*Contemporary World Politics*):

- *Chapter on "Security in the Contemporary World"*: The text's exploration of non-traditional security threats, cooperative security, and the global balance of power provides the necessary theoretical background to understand modern minilateral coalitions and maritime defense strategies.

Class XI Geography (*India: Physical Environment*):

- *Chapter on "India - Location"*: This chapter analyzes India's strategic geographic position at the head of the Indian Ocean, illustrating how its long coastline and peninsula projecting into the sea make it a natural, indispensable hub for any maritime security architecture connecting East and West Asia.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 2: Governance, Constitution, Polity, Social Justice and International Relations**
- **Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests:** This is the most direct linkage. It covers India's strategic partnerships within the Quad, bilateral defense frameworks with Japan and Australia, and evolving maritime security initiatives.
- **Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests:** Focuses on how shifts in US foreign policy and China's assertive maritime and continental strategies directly impact India's security and economic autonomy.
- **GS Paper 3: Technology, Economic Development, Bio-diversity, Environment, Security and Disaster Management**
- **Security challenges and their management in border areas; linkages of organized crime with terrorism:** Covers the security of India's coastal borders, Island territories (Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep), and the monitoring of Sea Lines of Communication against piracy, maritime terrorism, and state-sponsored incursions.
- **Investment models and Infrastructure:** Relates directly to India's involvement in regional infrastructure initiatives, such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and supply chain resilience programs designed to counter unilateral infrastructure networks.
- **Essay Paper & Optional Subjects**
- **Strategic Themes:** The topic is highly relevant for analytical essays focusing on India's foreign policy, multipolarity, or maritime security challenges.
- **Political Science and International Relations (PSIR) Optional:** Directly impacts Paper 2 (Section B: India and the World), specifically topics related to India's Foreign Policy, changing security environments, and relations with major global powers.

- **Way Forward**

- To navigate this complex environment effectively, regional actors must adopt proactive, sustainable policies that reinforce security and economic resilience.

- **Institutionalizing Strategic Resilient Minilateralism**

- Nations must continue to strengthen flexible coalitions like the Quad and India-Japan-Australia partnerships without forcing them into rigid, formal military alliances. The focus should be on expanding practical maritime cooperation, conducting regular joint naval exercises, and implementing shared logistics and refueling agreements. This collective capability ensures that even if individual major powers alter their diplomatic terminology, the operational reality of regional cooperation remains intact.

- **Expanding Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)**

- India must enhance its capabilities as a primary security provider in the region. This requires expanding its coastal radar networks, deploying advanced satellite surveillance, and strengthening information-sharing hubs like the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR). By building comprehensive real-time tracking of both military and commercial vessels across critical choke points, regional actors can counter covert maritime incursions and ensure the safety of the global commons.

- **Accelerating Economic Security and Supply Chain De-risking**

- True strategic autonomy cannot exist without robust economic defense. Governments must collaborate to secure critical technology chains by setting up joint semiconductor manufacturing facilities, diversifying clean energy components, and investing in alternative processing hubs for rare earth elements. Developing these redundant supply networks protects regional economies from being vulnerable to sudden trade embargoes or economic coercion.

- **Strategic Infrastructure Investment along the Maritime Littorals**

- Instead of letting smaller littoral states rely on opaque, high-interest development loans that can compromise their sovereignty, middle powers should offer transparent, sustainable infrastructure alternatives. Collaborative efforts like the development of high-standard deep-water ports, digital connectivity corridors, and resilient coastal infrastructure in Southeast Asia, East Africa, and the Pacific Islands offer these nations viable choices, keeping the regional environment open, balanced, and democratic.

- **UPSC CSE Mains Questions (GS Paper 2)**

- **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 that changing nature of global politics in this context with special reference to the Indo-Pacific region.
- **2022:** "The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is transforming itself into a trade bloc from a military alliance, in present times." Discuss.
- **2020:** "Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India?" (*Theme: Regional balancing and overlapping security architectures*)
- **2017:** "What is the significance of Indo-Pacific Regional Dialogue (IPRD) in the context of maritime security and cooperation in the region?"

- **UPSC CSE Prelims Historical Themes (High-Yield Practice Focus)**

- **Context of Maritime Choke Points:** Questions tracking the geographic locations of strategic straits (e.g., Strait of Malacca, Sunda Strait, Lombok Strait, Bab-el-Mandeb) and their proximity to Indian island territories like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **International Conventions:** Multiple past questions focusing on the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), distinguishing between Internal Waters, Territorial Waters, Contiguous Zones, and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).
- **Regional Groupings:** Conceptual questions identifying the member nations, foundational declarations, and operational goals of regional bodies such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), East Asia Summit (EAS), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).





T.R. RAMACHANDRAN

It was reported recently that large cities will soon have bypass or ring roads to reduce congestion and facilitate mobility. This is a welcome move but availability of land will be an issue which, if not sorted out, can threaten the best laid plans. We look at some options.

Highways bring huge economic development along the margins and abutting areas. However, the benefits — accessibility, increase in land costs — mostly accrue linearly to lands right alongside the road or highway and rarely reach inner areas. Lack of planning in respect of the surrounding areas and the fact that most lands are privately owned imply that facilities come up haphazardly: small eateries, shops etc. causing congestion and traffic pile-ups. The primary role of a highway is to connect endpoints and reduce travel time. Such facilities have quite the opposite effect. Linear urbanisation along highways also brings in other problems like garbage and lack of civic amenities.

All this can be solved if planning for the marginal lands is also part of highway development. However, this means more land acquisition. Landowners rarely cooperate in the planning process willingly and usually create impediments in acquisition. Therefore, land acquisition continues to be the bane.

The lack of availability of land, not just for roads, but for all infrastructure, is increasingly being flagged as one of the major concerns in the economy needing urgent structural reforms as underway in labour or banking. The amended land acquisition laws with Rehabilitation & Resettlement (R&R) policies and special laws like those for highways have made things easier and faster but opposition continues, leading to delays and increased costs.

There is urgent need, therefore, to examine how the issues relating to land acquisition and road margin planning can be addressed.

PROTESTS AGAINST ACQUISITION
Some years back, we needed land for several highway projects in Tamil Nadu, specially greenfield bypasses, but protests by landowners were a challenge. Of course, that lands abutting roads are valued several times higher is well known and people were happy with the idea of the road but only as long as their own village or lands were kept out of it.

It took a lot of time to even arrive at an alignment because every time an alignment was proposed one group would oppose it and suggest a

realignment that would specifically avoid their own lands or village. This would invariably be tinged with political colour and result in multiple (and) alignments; many projects would get stalled, sometimes ending in law and order issues.

Typically, landowners protest because they are faced with a triple whammy. One, loss of land which is often the only productive, income generating asset owned. Two, low compensation because of payments based on guideline values rather than market prices. Three, and most important, the mortification of sacrificing their asset at a low price only to see the value of a neighbour's land increasing several-fold (courtesy the new infrastructure) which is denied to them. This is quite understandable; therefore there is a need to make it a win-win situation. It was in this context that a land pooling scheme for roads was proposed and announced.

Broadly, it was like any other land pooling scheme for town planning or industries but with a portion of land

In AP, the way land was acquired for the Amaravati Township project through land pooling is something that should be replicated for all projects requiring land

Land pooling for infrastructure and roads

INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT. Making landowners partners in development by handing a portion of land to them



along the road margins proposed to be handed back to those who lost land. This meant that the width of the corridor acquired for the highway would increase so that there would be sufficient land available beyond the road margins for handing over to the original owners. When I discussed this with a group of farmers from Srisati who were losing land, they were very unimpressed.

It has taken some time for an overall policy to be evolved between different departments since it straddles many sectors — Housing, Industries, Revenue etc. Necessary amendments in the relevant acts and rules and the notifications have all been published with implementation beginning. Meanwhile, several other States have implemented land pooling schemes of different kinds. In AP, the way land was acquired for the Amaravati Township project through land pooling is something that should be replicated for all projects requiring land. Though there were challenges these are now hopefully behind us.

THE ADVANTAGES

The advantages of such pooling are obvious.

(i) The land owner loses land but gets back a portion whose value with road access and proper infrastructure may be several times that of the undeveloped land.

(ii) No single land-owner is a net loser or gainer since everyone in the

neighbourhood loses/gains land equally to green-eyed goliath sport!

(iii) Better — area wide, rather than linear — planning results utilities, open spaces and appropriate infrastructure provisioning can be systematic.

(iv) The alignment of roads and road grids need not be altered to suit vested interests.

(v) Delays due to court cases are avoided.

(vi) The costs of land acquisition could be managed through 'betterment levies' on the lands benefitted.

(vii) Road Grids to increase the number of holdings with planned access would lead to moderation in land prices.

(viii) Fragmented government lands can be consolidated into larger parcels. Landowners will need to be partners in an inclusive development process. A situation may well arise where people come forward with voluntary gifts of land for roads realising the benefits due to a corridor (like enhanced land value).

So, instead of payments to the land owners there could also be partnerships and competition (challenge mode) for road projects! This would be something akin to joint development of land by public and infrastructure provisioning departments.

The author was Secretary, SH&PM, AP in 1990 and recently and Principal Secretary, Highways, GoA in Andhra Pradesh, representing the people.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**
- **Land Pooling Model:** A collaborative land-assembly mechanism where a group of landowners voluntarily hands over their contiguous land parcels to a government agency or development authority. The authority treats the entire area as a single unit, develops state-of-the-art infrastructure (such as roads, utilities, and parks), and then returns a fraction of the developed land (e.g., 50–60%) to the original owners.
 - *Simple Example:* Imagine ten farmers owning fragmented, inaccessible agricultural land worth ₹10 Lakh each. Under land pooling, they surrender it. The state builds a massive highway grid through it. Even though they receive only half their land back, its value skyrockets to ₹1 Crore due to direct road access and commercial potential.
- **Linear Urbanization:** This refers to the ribbon-like, unplanned growth of commercial and residential structures directly along transport corridors, such as national highways and state bypasses. Because planning is often confined strictly to the road width, the margins develop haphazardly with small eateries, shops, and workshops. This ultimately creates severe bottleneck zones, traffic congestion, and civic mismanagement, defeating the original purpose of a high-speed highway.
- **Guideline Value vs. Market Value:**
 - *Guideline Value:* The minimum estimation of land value fixed by the state government for property registration and stamp duty purposes. It is often historically lagging and artificially low.
 - *Market Value:* The actual price that a willing buyer is ready to pay to a willing seller in an open market, driven by demand, speculation, and future economic potential. The wide gulf between these two values is the root cause of agrarian discontent during state-led land acquisitions.
- **Betterment Levies:** A form of tax or financial assessment imposed by the state on private landowners whose property values have appreciated significantly due to public infrastructure investments (like a new expressway, metro corridor, or ring road) funded by taxpayer money. It serves as a mechanism for the state to recoup its infrastructure capital.
- **Greenfield Bypasses:** Completely new road transport projects executed on previously undeveloped, rural, or agricultural land, bypassing congested urban centers entirely. This is distinct from brownfield projects, which involve widening or upgrading existing operational roads.
- **Road Grid Infrastructure:** Moving away from a single linear road to a network of interconnected horizontal and vertical roads. This distributes spatial accessibility evenly across an entire region, preventing a localized monopoly on commercial growth along a single highway margin.



- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **The Paradox of Modern Highway Development**

- Highways are undeniable catalysts for macroeconomic growth, yet their localized impact is often highly unequal. Economic benefits like accessibility and sharp land value appreciation accrue linearly, rewarding only the landowners whose properties directly abut the road. The inner, landlocked areas remain isolated. This stark disparity creates an unsustainable development model, encouraging chaotic, unregulated commercial growth right on the highway margins. Consequently, high-speed bypasses are quickly choked by traffic pile-ups, turning potential economic corridors into localized bottlenecks.

- **The Litigious "Triple Whammy" of Land Acquisition**

- Traditional, coercive land acquisition has long been a major challenge for state administrative machinery. Landowners naturally resist state takeover due to three compounding grievances:

- **Loss of Core Productive Assets:** For an agrarian household, land is not merely real estate; it is a multi-generational, income-generating asset and a safety net.

- **Depressed Compensation Rates:** Calculations based on outdated government guideline values rather than real-world market dynamics leave farmers feeling shortchanged.

- **The Agony of Relative Deprivation:** A farmer forced to surrender land at a low price must watch from the sidelines as a neighbor—whose plot was spared simply because it sat a few meters away from the alignment—reaps a massive windfall as their land value increases multiple times over.

- **Land Pooling as a Participatory Paradigm Shift**

- Transitioning to a land pooling framework reframes landowners as active equity partners in urban transformation rather than displaced victims of state development. By expanding the planning zone well beyond the narrow road margins, the state can systematically orchestrate area-wide development.

- This structural shift offers several clear advantages:

- It ensures equity across the entire neighborhood, eliminating the toxic "winner-takes-all" dynamic.

- It bypasses political maneuvering and localized friction over road alignments, as no single owner faces complete asset liquidation.

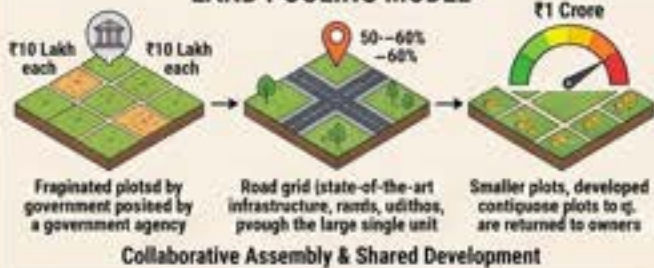
- It eliminates protracted, decades-long court battles, drastically lowering project gestation periods.

- It enables the state to recover infrastructure deployment costs organically by leveraging betterment levies and consolidating fragmented public lands.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**
- **The Colonial Era and the Legacy of Eminent Domain (1894)**
 - The roots of land conflict in India trace back to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894. Grounded firmly in the colonial doctrine of *Eminent Domain*, this framework asserted that the state held ultimate sovereign power over all land within its jurisdiction for the "public good." Compensation was minimal, resettlement was virtually non-existent, and the affected population had little to no legal recourse. This established a deep-seated, generational distrust between the agrarian community and state developmental authorities.
- **Post-Independence Industrialization and the Infrastructure Push (1947–2000s)**
 - Following independence, India embarked on ambitious nation-building programs, including major dams, heavy industrial zones, and eventually mega-highways like the Golden Quadrilateral. However, the legal architecture remained tethered to the outdated 1894 Act. Millions of citizens faced displacement with minimal rehabilitation, triggering intense social friction, environmental movements, and a wave of litigation that routinely stalled vital infrastructure projects for decades.
- **The Statutory Pivot: The RFCTLARR Act of 2013**
 - Driven by widespread social discontent, Parliament enacted the *Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (RFCTLARR) Act, 2013*. This legislation fundamentally transformed the landscape by mandating:
 - Social Impact Assessments (SIA).
 - Strict consent clauses (up to 80% for private projects).
 - Compensation packages up to four times the market value in rural zones.
 - While it brought much-needed historical justice and equity, the financial burden on the state exchequer grew enormously. The resulting fiscal strain and procedural delays forced policymakers to seek more sustainable alternatives for assembling land.
- **The Modern Era of Cooperative Land Assembly (Present Day)**
 - Faced with high statutory compensation costs and persistent local resistance, progressive states began pioneering collaborative alternatives. Landmark initiatives, such as the Town Planning Schemes in Gujarat and the large-scale implementation of the Amaravati Township project in Andhra Pradesh, demonstrated the viability of land pooling. Today, this philosophy is increasingly applied to linear infrastructure, moving away from state-enforced acquisition and toward voluntary, market-driven partnerships and challenge-mode bidding for highway corridors.

1. KEY TERMS & EXPLANATIONS

LAND POOLING MODEL



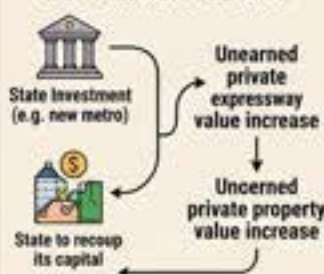
LINEAR URBANIZATION



GUIDELINE VALUE vs. MARKET VALUE



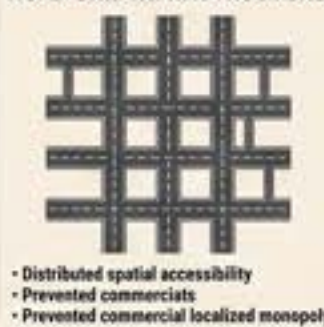
BETTERMENT LEVIES



GREENFIELD BYPASSES



ROAD GRID INFRASTRUCTURE



AXIA ACADEMY

RISE ABOVE THE REST

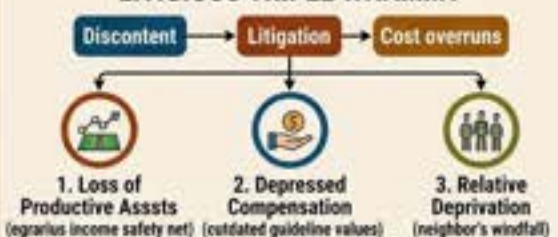
TRANSFORMING INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING: LAND POOLING vs. LINEAR URBANIZATION & BEYOND

2. MAIN ARGUMENTS

PARADOX OF DEVELOPMENT



LITIGIOUS TRIPLE WHAMMY



5. MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS



3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION



PARTICIPATORY PARADIGM SHIFT



6. LINKAGES

NCERT LINKAGES



UPSC CSE SYLLABUS MAPPING

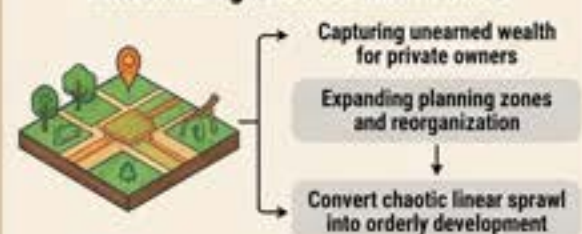


4. LOGICAL & PHILOSOPHICAL BASE

From Utilitarian Extraction to Rawlsian Justice



Internalizing Positive Externalities



Market-Driven Incentives

Replaces state coercion with economic incentives, treating land as a dynamic financial asset

7. WAY FORWARD & APSC

WAY FORWARD Flow



APSC FOCUS (Assam-specific)

- Dedim's economic future economy via 'Act East Policy' or continues linear urbanization on NH 37?
- Regional planning to address immorization to address linear urbanization on NH 37?



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- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- **From Utilitarian Extraction to Rawlsian Justice**

- The conceptual transition from traditional land acquisition to land pooling marks a profound shift in governance philosophy. Traditional acquisition relies on a strict **Utilitarian calculation**: the state sacrifices the property and livelihood of a small minority of farmers along a road alignment to achieve the "greater good" of enhanced connectivity for millions of commuters.

- In contrast, the land pooling model aligns closely with **John Rawls' Concept of Distributive Justice**. It ensures that the structural benefits of development do not worsen inequality. By making every affected landowner a shareholder in the future value of the asset, the poorest or most vulnerable stakeholder is not left worse off by the state's actions.

- **The Logic of Internalizing Positive Externalities**

- When the state builds public infrastructure, it creates immense **positive externalities**—unearned wealth generated for private owners whose lands happen to sit next to the new infrastructure. Under traditional models, this wealth is captured entirely by private speculation, leading to haphazard growth and unearned windfalls.

- Land pooling uses clear economic logic to solve this: it expands the planning zone so the state can capture and manage these positive externalities. By reorganizing the space, the state converts chaotic, linear sprawl into orderly, area-wide development. This allows the community to share in the wealth generated by public investments.

- **Replacing Coercion with Market-Driven Incentives**

- At its core, land pooling replaces state coercion with economic incentives. Coercive acquisition treats land as a static commodity with a fixed past value, which naturally invites resistance and legal challenges. Land pooling, however, treats land as a dynamic financial asset tied to future growth. This framework addresses the psychological and economic anxieties of the agrarian community, transforming a zero-sum conflict into a collaborative, positive-sum outcome.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
 - **Social Dimension**
 - **Preservation of Communal Ties:** Traditional displacement shatters rural community networks, forcing rural households to scatter. Land pooling returns developed plots within the same geographic area, keeping local social capital and community ties intact.
 - **Reducing Relative Deprivation:** It prevents the social friction that occurs when one farmer becomes wealthy overnight from a highway-facing plot while their neighbor is displaced and left with nothing. Equalizing gains across the area supports broader social cohesion.
 - **Political Dimension**
 - **Mitigating Rent-Seeking Behavior:** Road alignments are frequently targets for political interference, as vested interests lobby to alter routes to protect or enrich specific private holdings. Land pooling uses an inclusive, area-wide design that reduces the incentive for such political manipulation.
 - **Fostering Collaborative Governance:** The model requires close cooperation between distinct government entities, including Housing, Highways, Industries, and Revenue departments. This helps break down administrative silos and promotes more integrated governance.
 - **Legal Dimension**
 - **Bypassing Litigious Impediments:** Project delays often stem from constitutional and civil challenges over property rights and compensation under Article 300A. Land pooling relies on voluntary partnerships, which helps avoid injunctions, write petitions, and costly court battles.
 - **Streamlining Statutory Frameworks:** Implementing this model requires updates to state-level town planning acts and highway regulations. This drives modernization across administrative and property law frameworks.
 - **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Upholding Human Dignity in Development:** Coercive acquisition can treat individuals as mere obstacles to macroeconomic growth. Land pooling respects individual autonomy by treating farmers as vital partners in the development process.
 - **Generational Justice:** Land provides long-term security across generations. Returning developed, high-value real estate ensures that future generations benefit from economic modernization rather than losing their foundational security.
 - **International Dimension**
 - **Enhancing Global Competitiveness:** Delays in land assembly slow down India's infrastructure delivery, which directly impacts its performance on global benchmarks like the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (LPI). Efficient land assembly models make the country a more attractive destination for foreign direct investment.
 - **Adopting Proven Global Models:** This approach aligns with successful international practices, such as the *Land Readjustment Schemes* used extensively in Japan, South Korea, and Germany to build efficient infrastructure without facing severe social backlash.
 - **Economic Dimension**
 - **Unlocking Fiscal Relief for the State:** Upfront land acquisition under the 2013 rules requires massive capital outlays. Land pooling reduces these initial infrastructure costs, allowing public funds to be deployed more effectively elsewhere.
 - **Spurring Sustainable Local Economies:** By shifting from narrow linear sprawl to organized road grids, the model creates well-planned commercial zones. This prevents haphazard growth, generates long-term tax revenues for local bodies, and moderates real estate prices across the region.
-

Linkages with NCERTs

Class 12 Geography (India: People and Economy)

Chapter 10: Transport and Communication

- *Connection:* This chapter examines the critical role national highways and expressways play in driving economic integration across India. Reviewing it helps students see how modern land assembly models directly address the physical and spatial challenges of building these transport corridors.

Class 11 Economics

Chapter 8: Infrastructure

- *Connection:* This chapter highlights infrastructure as a foundation for economic growth, while noting that project delays and high capital costs often limit its potential. Land pooling offers a practical solution to these issues, illustrating how policy innovations can overcome structural economic challenges.

Class 10 Democratic Politics-II

Chapter 7: Outcomes of Democracy

- *Connection:* This section looks at the balance between development goals and individual rights within a democratic framework. It provides a helpful context for analyzing how land pooling moves away from top-down state coercion toward participatory, consensus-based governance.



- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **General Studies Paper 1 (GS1)**
- **Urbanization, their problems and their remedies:** The concept directly addresses the issues of *linear urbanization*, chaotic peripheral sprawl, and the challenges of managing suburban expansion.
- **General Studies Paper 2 (GS2)**
- **Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation:** This involves analyzing the operational challenges of the RFCTLARR Act of 2013 and assessing state-led alternatives like the land-pooling models used in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat.
- **General Studies Paper 3 (GS3)**
- **Infrastructure (Roads, Highways); Land Reforms in India; Investment Models:** This is the strongest syllabus connection. The topic deals directly with innovative land assembly, reducing project gestation periods, public-private partnerships, and alternative financing through betterment levies.
- **General Studies Paper 4 (GS4 - Ethics)**
- **Public/Civil service values and Ethics in Public administration; ethical dilemmas:** This highlights the classic administrative challenge: balancing the state's power of *Eminent Domain* for public utility against an ethical commitment to protect individual property rights and vulnerable livelihoods.

- **Way Forward**

- **Enacting a Model Linear Land Pooling Act:** Parliament and state legislatures should design a dedicated legal framework tailored specifically for linear infrastructure, like highways and high-speed rail. Existing town planning schemes are often built for circular, concentric urban expansion. A specialized law would provide a predictable legal process for landowners and developers along long transport corridors.

- **Establishing Cross-Departmental Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs):** To prevent projects from stalling in bureaucratic silos, states should set up dedicated SPVs. These units would bring together officials from Highways, Housing, Revenue, and Industry departments under one roof, streamlining planning, land assembly, and infrastructure delivery.

- **Introducing Challenge-Mode Bidding for Communities:** Infrastructure planning can adopt competitive models. The central government could introduce a "Challenge Mode" where local communities and clusters of villages compete for proposed highway alignments by voluntarily offering pooled land. This approach transforms infrastructure acquisition into a sought-after local opportunity.

- **Leveraging Technology for Transparent Property Management:** To build trust among participating landowners, projects should use secure, modern technology. Integrating blockchain-backed land registries with precise GIS drone mapping ensures that original property records are immutable. It also provides landowners with clear, verifiable information on where their developed plots will be located.

- **Designing Fair and Balanced Financial Reinvestment Models:** Compensation structures should look beyond physical land returns. Land pooling agencies can provide immediate financial support through steps like multi-year annuity payments or commercial tax exemptions during the project construction phase. This helps protect livelihoods during the transition period before the land's value appreciates.



UPSC CSE Prelims Questions (Conceptual & Applied)

Q1. With reference to the 'Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013', consider the following statements:

1.It mandates Social Impact Assessment (SIA) for all land acquisition processes undertaken by the government.

2.The consent of at least 80 percent of affected landowners is mandatory for all public-private partnership (PPP) projects. *Which of the statements given above is/are correct?*

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Q2. The power of 'Eminent Domain' of the State in India is conceptually linked to which of the following provisions? (a) Article 19(1)(g)

(b) Article 300A

(c) Ninth Schedule exclusively

(d) Article 31C

UPSC CSE Mains Questions

•**GS Paper 3 (2018):** "With respect to the New Land Acquisition Act, 2013, what are the major changes that have been introduced? How far do you think it will affect industrialization and infrastructure growth in India?"

•**GS Paper 1 (2021):** "Discuss the various socio-economic problems associated with the phenomenon of rapid urbanization and unplanned expansion at the peripheries of major Indian cities."

•**GS Paper 3 (2014):** "National Highway projects in India have run into significant delays and cost overruns. Analyze the structural reasons behind this with special emphasis on land assembly and environmental clearances."



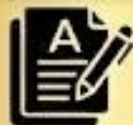
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