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Edition : International Table of Contents

Page 05 Syllabus : GS 2 : Social Justice / Prelims	'Conscious' decision to separate funding from regulator, say officials on higher education Bill
Page 05 Syllabus : Prelims	India-Maldives joint military exercise EKUVERIN concludes
Page 07 Syllabus : GS 3 : Environment / Prelims	Inhalable microplastics, a hidden toxin worsening the air in our cities
Page 10 Syllabus : GS 2 : Governance / Prelims	The future of governance in post-Maoist India
Page 12 Syllabus : GS 3 : Indian Economy	Rupee breaches 91 level, turns weakest Asian currency in '25
Page 08 : Editorial Analysis Syllabus : GS 2 : International Relations	The Trump NSS, Europe's existential crisis The three revolutions reshaping American power India and the U.S.: 2005 versus 2025

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Page 05 : GS 2 : Social Justice / Prelims

The introduction of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025 marks a significant structural reform in India's higher education governance. By proposing the replacement of the University Grants Commission (UGC), AICTE, and NCTE with a single apex body and by separating regulatory, accreditation, standards-setting, and funding functions, the Bill seeks to operationalise key recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020. However, it has also triggered concerns regarding autonomy, federal balance, and political influence in higher education funding.

'Conscious' decision to separate funding from regulator, say officials on higher education Bill

Abhinay Lakshman
NEW DELHI

The Union government's decision to take away funding powers from the regulatory authority and create separate regulatory, accreditation, and standards councils for higher education institutions under the proposed Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025, was a 'conscious' move in keeping with the National Education Policy, 2020 suggestion to minimise conflicts of interest, senior government officials said on Tuesday.

They said that this is why the Bill has segregated the three roles of regulation, accreditation, and standards-setting. However, the officials said the grant-disbursal function currently being exercised by the University Grants Commission (UGC) is proposed to be performed by the Ministry of Education.

The new Bill has segregated the roles of regulation, accreditation, and standards-setting in the higher education sector. FILE PHOTO

Without providing details, Education Ministry officials said that under the proposed law, the mechanism that will be used to disburse grants to Central universities "will be similar to or better than the existing mechanisms". They added that institutional performance on regulatory compliance will continue to be a "major factor" in deciding the quantum of funds to be distributed, but not the only one, citing the need for a "holistic view" while giving grants.

The VBSA Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday amid objections from the Opposition, proposes an overhaul of India's higher education regulatory framework, replacing the UGC, the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), with a single apex commission – the VBSA, which will coordinate between a regulatory, an accreditation, and a standards councils, operating "autonomously". Most notably, it takes away grant-disbursal power from the regulatory authority, a power that UGC exercises in the current system.

A coalition of teachers' and students' associations and unions from across the country have raised objections, among others, about the proposition to take away funding power from the regulatory authority, noting that leaving it in the direct control of the Education Ministry would risk grants being subject to "political influence".

Education Ministry officials explained that even though the NEP 2020 had suggested a separate Council for disbursing grants that the UGC currently disburses to Central universities, "it was a conscious decision that this is not going to be possible" because of the multiplicity of "sources and funnels" through which higher education institutes across the country receive funding.

As soon as the government introduced the Bill in the Lok Sabha on Monday, it proposed that the Bill be sent for deliberation to a 31-member joint committee of Parliament.

Officials said the government hopes to engage in an intense discussion over the Bill's provisions and is encouraging suggestions to be submitted to the panel.

Key Provisions of the VBSA Bill, 2025

Structural Reorganisation

Establishes a single apex commission (VBSA).

Segregates functions into three distinct councils:

Regulation

Accreditation

Standards-setting

These bodies are intended to function autonomously but in coordination.

Separation of Funding from Regulation

Removes grant-disbursal powers from the regulatory authority.

Funding to Central universities will now be handled directly by the Ministry of Education.

Institutional performance and regulatory compliance will remain an important, but not exclusive, criterion for funding.

Alignment with NEP 2020

NEP 2020 advocates "light but tight" regulation and minimisation of conflict of interest.

The Bill reflects this by preventing a single body from regulating institutions while simultaneously funding them.

Rationale Behind the Government's Stand

Conflict of Interest Reduction: Combining regulation and funding, as under the UGC, could compromise objectivity. Separation is aimed at ensuring impartial regulation.

Administrative Practicality: Officials argue that creating a separate grants council, as envisaged in NEP 2020, is impractical due to the multiple funding channels (Central, State, project-based, externally aided).

Holistic Funding Approach: The Ministry claims funding decisions will not be mechanical but based on a broader assessment of institutional needs and outcomes.

Concerns and Criticism

Risk of Political Influence

Teachers' and students' bodies fear that placing funding directly under the Ministry may politicise grant allocation and weaken institutional autonomy.

Autonomy vs. Centralisation

While councils are termed "autonomous," real autonomy may be constrained if financial dependence on the executive increases.

Federal Implications

Higher education is a Concurrent List subject. Greater central control over funding may raise concerns among States and State universities.

Accountability Mechanism

The Bill lacks clarity on safeguards to ensure transparency and non-discriminatory funding decisions.

Significance for UPSC Answer Writing

Illustrates policy–implementation gap in NEP 2020.

Raises questions on regulatory independence, executive dominance, and institutional autonomy.

Relevant to debates on education governance reforms, federalism, and checks and balances in public administration.

Conclusion

The VBSA Bill, 2025 represents a decisive attempt to rationalise India's higher education regulatory architecture in line with NEP 2020 by addressing long-standing conflicts of interest within the system. While the separation of regulation and funding is conceptually sound, the success of the reform will depend on the robustness of safeguards against political interference, transparency in grant allocation, and genuine autonomy of the proposed councils. Parliamentary scrutiny through the Joint Committee provides an opportunity to refine the Bill so that efficiency, autonomy, and accountability are balanced in India's higher education governance framework.

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UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: **With reference to the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025, consider the following statements:**

1. The Bill proposes a single apex commission to replace the UGC, AICTE and NCTE.

2. Under the proposed framework, grant disbursal to Central universities will be carried out by an autonomous council under the apex body.

3. The separation of funding from regulation is in line with the recommendations of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A. 1 and 2 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Separation of funding from regulation in higher education is intended to reduce conflict of interest, but it also raises concerns of executive overreach. Discuss this statement in the context of the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025. **(250 Words)**

Page 05 : Prelims

The bilateral military exercise EKUVERIN between the Indian Army and the Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) concluded recently with a joint validation exercise at Thiruvananthapuram. The exercise marked the culmination of two weeks of structured and intensive joint training aimed at strengthening defence cooperation between the two Indian Ocean neighbours.

Key Points for Prelims

Exercise Name: EKUVERIN

Participating Countries: India and Maldives

Forces Involved: Indian Army and Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF)

Venue (Latest Edition): Thiruvananthapuram, India

Nature of Exercise: Bilateral military exercise

Core Focus Area:

- Counter Insurgency Operations
- Counter Terrorism Operations
- Operations in contemporary and asymmetric warfare environments

Objectives:

- Enhance interoperability between the two armed forces
- Improve operational synergy and coordination
- Share best practices, tactics, and standard operating procedures
- Strengthen mutual trust and military-to-military relations

Observers:

- Major-General R.D. Sharma (Indian Army)
- Brigadier General Abdulla Ibrahim (MNDF)

INBRIEF

India-Maldives joint military exercise EKUVERIN concludes

The bilateral military exercise EKUVERIN between the Indian Army and the Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) concluded with a joint validation exercise in Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday, marking the culmination of two weeks of intensive training. The validation phase was witnessed by Major-General R.D. Sharma of the Indian Army and Brigadier General Abdulla Ibrahim from the Maldivian side, along with observer delegations from both countries. The Indian Army said that the exercise focused on Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorist operations in contemporary operational environments, with the aim of enhancing interoperability, operational synergy.

Observer delegations from both countries

Strategic and Regional Significance

Maldives is a key maritime neighbour of India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

EKUVERIN complements India's broader maritime and neighbourhood policy frameworks such as:

Neighbourhood First Policy

Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)

The exercise reinforces India's role as a net security provider in the IOR and contributes to regional stability, especially in the context of non-traditional security threats like terrorism.

Prelims-Oriented Takeaways

EKUVERIN is a bilateral army-level exercise, not naval or air force.

Focus is on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, not conventional warfare.

Maldives National Defence Forces (MNDF) is the unified defence force of Maldives.

Such exercises enhance defence diplomacy and capacity building among smaller island nations.

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Conclusion

The successful conclusion of Exercise EKUVERIN highlights the deepening defence cooperation between India and Maldives. By focusing on counter-terrorism and interoperability, the exercise contributes to collective security in the Indian Ocean Region and aligns with India's strategic objective of fostering a stable, secure, and cooperative neighbourhood.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : The term "EKUVERIN", seen in news, is best associated with which one of the following?

(a) A multilateral naval exercise in the Indian Ocean

(b) A bilateral air force drill between India and Maldives

(c) A bilateral army exercise aimed at enhancing interoperability

(d) A joint coast guard patrol arrangement

Ans : (c)

Page 07
Syllabus : GS 3 : Environment / Prelims

Urban air pollution in India has conventionally been understood through the lens of particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) and gaseous pollutants such as sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and ozone. However, recent scientific evidence has revealed a new and alarming dimension of atmospheric pollution: inhalable microplastics. A pioneering study published in Environment International highlights how these microscopic plastic particles are increasingly present in the air of Indian cities, posing serious and under-recognised risks to public health and environmental governance.

Inhalable microplastics, a hidden toxin worsening the air in our cities

A study which researched the threat posed by inhalable microplastics has warned that they can also smuggle in toxic co-pollutants, including heavy metals such as lead and cadmium, and hormone-disrupting chemical compounds like diethyl phthalates; researchers found atmospheric lead levels to be highest in Kolkata, followed by Delhi

Neelanjana Rai

On successive weekends in November, hundreds of Delhi residents gathered at India Gate holding placards that read, "I miss breathing" and "right to live, not just survive". Winter's onset has once again plunged the National Capital Region into dense smog, with the air quality index refusing to exit 'severe' (301-400) or 'very poor' (201-300) levels.

Even now, regulators are scrambling to enforce graded action plans to mitigate the concentration of PM2.5 and PM10 particles in the air.

Into this toxic mix, new research has introduced a previously overlooked problem known as inhalable microplastics. According to scientists, they pose a direct and alarming risk to human health.

Atmospheric pollution has traditionally been associated with the so-called criteria pollutants; aside from the two size-wise groups of particulate matter, these include carbon monoxide, lead, sulphur oxides, nitrogen oxides, and ozone. Of late, however, they've been joined by respirable emerging contaminants – including inhalable microplastics – fuelled in no small part by the production of 400 million metric tonnes of plastics every year. The world also releases 52.1 million tonnes a year of plastic waste into the environment.

A first-of-its-kind comprehensive study published in *Environment International* in November examined inhalable microplastics in India. These are plastic particles smaller than 10 micrometres (µm). The researchers, led by Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Kolkata professor Gopala Krishna Darbha, monitored ambient concentrations at human breathing height (1.5 m) in five highly populated markets in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai.

Thus, the team estimated the average concentration of inhalable microplastics in all four cities to be 8.8 µg/m³.

This "means the average city resident is breathing in about 132 micrograms every single day," Dr. Darbha said. "This is a very high daily dose of pollution. The most critical factor is the size of these particles. They are so tiny that they can bypass our natural defences and penetrate deep into the lungs. This chronic exposure presents a serious, ongoing risk to public health."

Researchers, however, said that the greater danger is these plastic particles serving as Trojan horses that smuggle in toxic co-pollutants, including heavy metals like lead and cadmium and hormone-disrupting chemical compounds like diethyl phthalates. The team found atmospheric lead levels to be highest in Kolkata, followed by Delhi.

A smoggy winter morning, in Gurugram, on December 16, 2025. PTI

The team members also found, reportedly for the first time, that the inhalable microplastics can also carry microbes, including harmful fungi like *Aspergillus fumigatus*, that contain antibiotic-resistance genes, meaning they could spread infections that don't respond to common antibiotics.

By comparing this information with major toxicology databases, the team found that breathing these contaminated plastic particles was associated with a higher risk of cancer, hormone-related diseases, breast problems, and respiratory illnesses.

Time and place

In all four cities, winter evenings had a mean inhalable microplastic concentration of 32.7 particles/m³ while non-winter evenings averaged 18.8 particles/m³, reflecting a 74% seasonal increase during winter.

There was a significant inter-city variation as well: the data revealed that the residents of Delhi and Kolkata were exposed to high concentrations of inhalable microplastics – 14.18 µg/m³ and 14.23 µg/m³ respectively – whereas Mumbai (2.65 µg/m³) and Chennai (4 µg/m³) fared much better.

"The major factors here are meteorological conditions," Dr. Darbha said alluding to Mumbai and Chennai being coastal cities. "Second is urban population density, and the third is waste mismanagement."

Zeroing in on the particles themselves, the researchers identified 11 kinds of plastics in the air, most of them coming from places the researchers said people usually overlook.

> The most critical factor is the size of these particles. They are so tiny that they can bypass our natural defences and penetrate deep into the lungs. This chronic exposure presents a serious, ongoing risk to public health
>
> GOPALA KRISHNA DARBHA
> INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH KOLKATA

"The particles were primarily less than 100 µm in size (56.2%), followed by 100-500 µm (24.7%) and over 500 µm (19.1%). Fragments were more common than filaments," the team wrote in its paper.

"Larger filament-shaped airborne microplastics typically ... originate from synthetic textiles or toy fillings. Smaller fragments, often secondary airborne microplastics, arising from packaging, tyre wear, household release, cosmetics, mini- and micro-industries, construction, [and] were more prevalent due to their small size and weathering, particularly in areas like Sealdah Market and Chandni Chowk."

Policy imperative

According to Dr. Darbha, the current air quality index may capture "a certain percentage of nanoplastics" but describes the existing evidence as "too preliminary" to correlate AQI values with inhalable microplastics. He did say workers such as traffic police and labourers are especially vulnerable, since "tyre-wear particles seem to be more carcinogenic and may be a severe threat to their lungs. Policy reform is needed to protect such vulnerable groups."

The study also said the particles persist in the air due to low gravitational settling velocity.

"The government should ban single use plastic and many such polymers," he said, adding that cotton-based clothing is preferable to synthetics and that "recycled and refurbished polyester or reused fabrics ... are capable of releasing these tiny plastics."

He also said that uncontrolled waste disposal, improper waste segregation, and burning emitted poisonous gases and smaller particulate matter, some of which could piggyback on the inhalable microplastic particles into our lungs.

Overall Dr. Darbha said the study provides a new baseline for an emerging environmental crisis: "This is a starting point, and we are definitely looking forward to more results coming up in the country, to have more knowledge-sharing in the ... scientific community as well as among the common public to have more awareness."

Against the backdrop of the accumulating evidence of the persistence and harms of microplastic and nanoplastic pollution, the researchers also expressed hope that the Indian government would take serious measures regarding plastic disposal and worsening air quality.

(Neelanjana Rai is a freelance journalist who writes about indigenous communities, environment, science and health. neelanjana189@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Atmospheric pollution has traditionally been associated with criteria pollutants; they have now been joined by respirable contaminants fuelled by the annual production of 400 million metric tonnes of plastics, and the release of 52.1 million tonnes of plastic waste

Researchers found that inhalable microplastics can also carry microbes that contain antibiotic-resistance genes; these contaminated plastic particles were also found to be associated with a higher risk of cancer, hormone-related diseases, breast problems, and respiratory illnesses

In all four cities, winter evenings had a mean inhalable microplastic concentration of 32.7 particles/m³ while non-winter evenings averaged 18.8 particles/m³. There was significant inter-city variation: Delhi and Kolkata fared much worse than Mumbai and Chennai

Key Findings of the Study

Nature of the pollutant: Inhalable microplastics are plastic particles smaller than 10 micrometres, small enough to penetrate deep into human lungs and bypass natural respiratory defences.

Extent of exposure: The study estimates an average concentration of 8.8 µg/m^3, implying that an urban resident inhales about 132 micrograms of microplastics daily.

Inter-city variation: Exposure levels were highest in Kolkata and Delhi, while Mumbai and Chennai showed relatively lower concentrations, largely due to favourable coastal meteorology and better dispersion.

Seasonal trend: Concentrations increased by nearly 74% during winter, indicating the role of temperature inversion, stagnant air, and reduced dispersion.

Health and Environmental Implications

Trojan horse effect: Inhalable microplastics act as carriers for toxic co-pollutants, including heavy metals like lead and cadmium and endocrine-disrupting chemicals such as phthalates. This magnifies their toxicity beyond that of plastic alone.

Microbial carriage and antimicrobial resistance: The study reports that airborne microplastics can transport harmful microbes, including antibiotic-resistant fungi, raising concerns about respiratory infections that may be difficult to treat.

Chronic disease burden: Toxicological mapping links prolonged exposure to higher risks of cancer, hormonal disorders, respiratory diseases, and reproductive health issues, compounding India's existing public health challenges.

Sources and Drivers

Urban activities: Tyre wear, synthetic textiles, packaging materials, construction activities, and household waste contribute significantly.

Waste mismanagement: Open dumping, poor segregation, and waste burning accelerate the fragmentation of plastics into airborne microplastics.

Urban morphology and density: High population density and congested markets, such as Chandni Chowk and Sealdah, intensify exposure.

Governance and Policy Gaps

Regulatory blind spot: Current air quality monitoring frameworks, including the Air Quality Index (AQI), do not explicitly account for inhalable microplastics.

Occupational vulnerability: Groups such as traffic police, street vendors, and construction workers face disproportionate exposure risks.

Plastic governance challenges: Despite policies like the Single-Use Plastic Ban, enforcement gaps persist, and synthetic textiles remain largely unregulated from an air-pollution perspective.

Way Forward

Integration into air quality frameworks: Microplastics should be recognised as an emerging air pollutant and integrated into monitoring and health-risk assessments.

Strengthening waste management: Improved segregation, recycling, and strict control on open burning are critical.

Preventive strategies: Encouraging natural fibres, regulating tyre composition, and promoting circular economy principles can reduce emissions at source.

Research and awareness: Long-term epidemiological studies and public awareness campaigns are essential to inform policy and behavioural change.

Conclusion

The discovery of inhalable microplastics in India's urban air signals a paradigm shift in how air pollution must be understood and addressed. Beyond being a solid waste problem, plastics have now emerged as a respirable environmental toxin with complex health implications. Addressing this challenge requires an integrated approach that combines scientific research, regulatory innovation, effective waste governance, and public awareness. As India grapples with worsening urban air quality, recognising and acting upon this hidden pollutant is crucial for safeguarding public health and achieving sustainable urban development.

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UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to inhalable microplastics, consider the following statements:

1. Inhalable microplastics are plastic particles smaller than 10 micrometres in size.

2. Due to their size, they can bypass the upper respiratory defence mechanisms and reach deep lung tissues.

3. They are exclusively produced from primary industrial plastic pellets.

4. They can act as carriers of heavy metals and pathogenic microorganisms.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

A. 1, 2 and 4 only

B. 1 and 3 only

C. 2 and 4 only

D. 1, 2, 3 and 4

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Inhalable microplastics represent a new frontier in urban air pollution. Discuss their sources, health impacts, and the challenges they pose to existing air quality governance frameworks in India. (150 Words)

Page 10 : GS 2 : Governance / Prelims

The Maoist insurgency in India's central and eastern tribal belt has often been explained through the prism of poverty, underdevelopment, and socio-economic deprivation. While these factors remain important, recent scholarship underscores that governance failure, particularly in Fifth Schedule areas, has been a decisive driver of alienation among adivasi communities. As India witnesses a decline in Maoist violence and increasing surrenders, the challenge before the state is not merely counter-insurgency but the creation of a credible, inclusive, and rights-based governance framework in post-Maoist regions.

The future of governance in post-Maoist India

India's Fifth Schedule areas became the hotbed of Maoist insurgencies due to administrative neglect, exacerbating discontent and a lack of representation of tribal groups in local bodies. Effective governance is crucial to address these issues and mitigate the ongoing challenges in these regions

FULL CONTEXT

Niranjan Sahoo

A key element missing in the dominant discourse around the evolution and growth of the Maoist movement is governance. An overwhelming volume of empirical literature accounts the rapid growth of the Maoist movement in the 1990s and early 2000s to underdevelopment, and structural socio-economic issues. This is evident from the scores of official, non-official and scholarly articles which have attempted to study the "root causes" for insurgency in central and eastern India (popularly called the Red Corridor). These articles have argued for an accelerated development push to address the acute material needs of an impoverished population which includes many vulnerable tribes. As a result of these articulations, the Indian state has been relying on a "two-pronged" approach (combining security and development) to counter the Maoist threat.

This does not mean other factors such as governance, justice redressal and other issues have been completely neglected in the official discourse. On several occasions, policy makers and official reports have sought to bring attention to creating good governance frameworks and quicker justice redressal mechanisms to address the long-standing grievances of the affected population. But there has been little effort to understand the governance challenges that intensified the Maoist insurgency in different cycles.

Unpacking challenges of governance

While the Maoist insurgency has evolved in different phases since the Naxalbari uprising (1967), the movement in its current avatar has largely been concentrated around the Fifth Schedule areas of central and eastern India – States with substantial tribal populations.

The Fifth Schedule was conceptualised and offered as a new social contract to the *adivasis* in these regions, by the framers of the Constitution, taking into account the special needs of the population. The Schedule provided a legal framework and instrumentality for governance of these tribal homelands. It offered special provisions such as the Tribal Advisory Council with three-fourth of members from the *adivasi* population and a special financial provision via the tribal sub-plan. Further, the Governor of each State was given discretionary powers to oversee the enforcement of these provisions, particularly with respect to checking land alienation.

However, extensive provisions notwithstanding, the local populations were subjected to the severest forms of discrimination and exploitation in everyday life. As recorded in the Planning Commission's Expert Committee Report (2008), a vast region with abundant natural resources was reduced to penury due to state neglect and poor governance. That these special provisions were of little use is evident from tribal populations' persistently low social and economic status compared to other social groups. The Oxford University Multidimensional Poverty Index in 2010 ranked the region worse than Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, for tribal populations, the far bigger challenge was how to exercise their rights over the land and forests. Despite legal safeguards and constitutional protection against arbitrary land acquisition, millions of them were dispossessed to penury. In his seminal study, writer Walter Fernades found that "more tribals have lost their land since the commencement of economic liberalisation than any time in the post-independent history".

Returning home: Maoists with copies of the Constitution of India, after they surrendered at the police lines in Jagdalpur in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district, on October 17. PTI

Thus, while the Constitution makers imagined a new lease of life for the *adivasis* under the Fifth Schedule, successive governments failed to bring up appropriate governance structures to transform this lofty vision into reality. The same colonial structures and administrative forms, rules of business, and justice system were retained for Scheduled Areas, which made tribal groups, with very low literacy, barely able to understand these rules and the modern justice system.

A lack of representation

What deepened the alienation was the complete absence of locals in the administrative units implementing provisions enumerated in the Fifth Schedule. B.D. Sharma, the then commissioner of the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Commission, succinctly put that "the personnel who are overwhelmingly outsiders carried their attitudes, bias and lived experiences while performing day to day tasks". Importantly, apex bodies such as a separate Ministry of Tribal Welfare, and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes created to oversee the execution of special provisions for the tribal population, as vividly observed by the Mungekar Committee (2009), did very little to stop the exploitation.

Moreover, while the Governors are constitutionally assigned to protect the interests of *adivasis* in Schedule areas, not a single Governor has acted since Independence in these regions. These institutions have been further handicapped by weak and ineffective service delivery institutions such as health, education, revenue, police, and the judiciary.

The lone exception was the Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas Act (PESA), 1996. PESA was enacted to address *adivasi* underrepresentation and alienation in the form of "self-governance". These democratic forums were envisioned to create space for *adivasis* to take their own decisions on welfare issues, land, natural resources, livelihood and preservation of culture and their way of life. While PESA made some substantial changes by improving political representation at the lower level of governance, key provisions were routinely violated. The Expert Committee Report (2008) found flagrant violations of PESA by the appointed officials. One of the most abused provisions has been with regards to land acquisition.

To sum up, governance maladies and relatively low political priority accorded to the Fifth Schedule in many ways created a fertile ground for the Maoist leadership to mobilise the aggrieved *adivasi* population against the Indian state. The growing governance deficits which directly impacted development, welfare functions and mitigation of local grievances created an opportunity for the Maoists to spread their ideologies of a people's government (*janatan Sarkar*). There is a rich body of evidence that indisputably credits tribal frustrations, anger and low trust in governance institutions as the reasons that drove many *adivasis* to support Maoist ideology and revolutionary missions. Many relied on the Maoist movement as some sort of instrument to get justice from state agencies such as the police, forest and revenue departments (which they often viewed as corrupt and oppressive). For instance, the entire Dandakaranya region largely characterised by extreme underdevelopment and poor governance was easily captured by the underground Maoists in the 1990s with the promise of providing ownership to *adivasis* over lands, and the forest (under the broad slogan of *Jal, Jungle and Zameen*). Persistent governance and development deficits created a space for Maoists to run parallel governments (offering critical services such as paramedics, schools, food rations and speedy justice through kangaroo courts) in many of their strongholds.

Need for a new imagination

Going forward, India must pay close attention to governance paradoxes that continue to plague most regions under the Fifth Schedule. In recent years, there has been visible improvement in key service functions, particularly with respect to welfare schemes and critical infrastructure (roads, electricity, telecom) in Maoist affected regions. Both the Centre and affected States have found ways to improve service delivery functions via digital technology and cash transfer. However, critical service delivery institutions such as justice, health, education, policing, and revenue functions remain thin and unsatisfactory. Persistent structural bottlenecks (under-representation of locals) in the existing governance system have a significant bearing in their effectiveness.

On the other side, crucial rights-based legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and PESA need greater political push from the Centre as well affected States. The FRA which remains a key legal tool to protect the rights of *adivasis* and forest dwellers to access forest resources for their sustenance is batting for its survival today. While many core provisions have been violated by state institutions, there have also been amendments and judicial interventions in recent years which have diluted its original mandate and effectiveness. In addition, the enactment and expansion of the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act, 2016 has grossly diluted legal safeguards, apart from affecting the livelihoods of forest dwellers in India. Similarly, PESA despite initial promises faces growing resistance from the States concerned. Under pressure to unlock huge mineral deposits, most State governments in Fifth Schedule Areas have undermined the powers granted to Gram Sabhas under PESA, particularly on the issues of granting consent for mining/land acquisition. Incidentally, the most widespread violations of PESA has been in the most Maoist-affected State of Chhattisgarh.

Thus, going forward priorities must include the reversal of political and administrative under-representation of *adivasis*. While there are mandatory quotas at the local levels, considering these self-governing bodies lack real autonomy and financial power, representation remains largely performatory. The permanent bureaucracy (overwhelmingly non-tribal) still calls the shots. Given the persistent alienation and trust deficits among the local population, the post-Maoist Fifth Schedule Areas governance vision can benefit by borrowing some feathers from the Sixth Schedule Areas which are governed by Autonomous Districts/Zonal Councils. In short, post-Maoist India needs a new governance charter.

Niranjan Sahoo is Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation, Delhi.

THE GIST

- While the Maoist insurgency has evolved in different phases since the Naxalbari uprising (1967), the movement in its current avatar has largely been concentrated around the Fifth Schedule areas of central and eastern India – States with substantial tribal populations.
- As recorded in the Planning Commission's Expert Committee Report (2008), a vast region with abundant natural resources was reduced to penury due to state neglect and poor governance.
- Going forward, India must pay close attention to governance paradoxes that continue to plague most regions under the Fifth Schedule.

Governance Deficits and the Roots of Insurgency

The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution was envisaged as a special social contract to protect tribal interests through safeguards such as Tribal Advisory Councils, the Tribal Sub-Plan, and discretionary powers of Governors to prevent land alienation. However, these constitutional promises remained largely unfulfilled.

Key governance failures included:

- Administrative neglect and colonial continuities: Retention of complex legal-administrative systems alien to tribal social realities, making access to justice difficult.
- Land and forest alienation: Despite constitutional protections, large-scale displacement due to mining, infrastructure projects, and forest policies eroded livelihood security.
- Institutional apathy: Bodies like the Tribal Advisory Councils, Governors' offices, and even national-level commissions failed to effectively intervene.
- Under-representation of locals: Governance institutions were dominated by non-tribal officials, leading to distrust, cultural insensitivity, and weak accountability.

These failures created fertile ground for Maoist mobilisation, particularly in regions like Dandakaranya, where insurgents exploited governance vacuums by offering parallel systems of justice, welfare delivery, and land control under the banner of Janatana Sarkar.

Limits of the Security–Development Paradigm

India's counter-Maoist strategy has relied on a dual approach of security operations and development initiatives. While recent years have seen improvements in infrastructure, digital service delivery, and welfare transfers, core governance institutions—policing, judiciary, health, education, and revenue administration—remain weak.

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Moreover, development without participatory governance has often deepened alienation. The erosion of trust in state institutions led many adivasis to perceive Maoist structures as more accessible and responsive, despite their coercive nature.

Role of Rights-Based Legislations

Legislations such as the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) and the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) were intended to correct historical injustices by empowering Gram Sabhas and recognising forest-based livelihoods. However:

- PESA provisions, especially regarding consent for land acquisition and mining, have been routinely violated by State governments.
- FRA has faced dilution through administrative practices, judicial interventions, and competing laws such as the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act, 2016, which prioritises environmental accounting over tribal livelihoods.

These trends risk recreating conditions of exclusion even in a post-insurgency context.

Towards a New Governance Imagination

Post-Maoist India requires a qualitative shift in governance, not merely incremental reforms. Key priorities include:

Deepening political and administrative representation of adivasis, beyond symbolic quotas, by granting real financial and decision-making autonomy to local bodies.

Strengthening PESA and FRA implementation through political commitment and legal safeguards.

Reforming governance structures by drawing lessons from Sixth Schedule areas, including greater autonomy through district or regional councils.

Restoring trust in institutions by ensuring culturally sensitive administration, transparent policing, and accessible justice delivery.

Conclusion

The decline of Maoist insurgency offers India a critical opportunity to reimagine governance in its Fifth Schedule areas. Sustainable peace cannot be secured through security operations or welfare delivery alone; it depends on restoring constitutional faith among tribal communities through meaningful self-governance, rights protection, and institutional accountability. A post-Maoist governance charter rooted in participation, autonomy, and justice is essential not only to prevent the resurgence of extremism but also to fulfil the Constitution's original promise to India's adivasi populations.

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UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution of India, consider the following statements:

1. It provides for Tribal Advisory Councils with a majority of members from Scheduled Tribes.

2. The Governor has discretionary powers to prevent land alienation in Scheduled Areas.

3. The Fifth Schedule mandates the creation of Autonomous District Councils similar to the Sixth Schedule.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Evaluate the role of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 in addressing tribal alienation. Why has its potential remained largely unrealised? **(150 Words)**

Page 12 : GS 3 : Indian Economy

The Indian rupee breaching the 91 per U.S. dollar mark in 2025 and emerging as the weakest Asian currency reflects heightened global and domestic economic uncertainties. While currency depreciation often raises concerns over inflation, external debt, and capital flows, policymakers and experts suggest that the present movement of the rupee may be part of a calibrated and strategic adjustment rather than a sign of macroeconomic distress. Understanding the drivers and implications of this depreciation is crucial for assessing India's external sector resilience.

Key Factors Behind Rupee Depreciation

Global Macroeconomic Pressures

Rising U.S. bond yields have strengthened the dollar, triggering capital reallocation towards safer assets.

Expectations of a Bank of Japan rate hike have led to the unwinding of the yen carry trade, increasing global risk aversion and pressuring emerging market currencies.

Capital Outflows

Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) withdrew nearly $2.7 billion in early December, reflecting risk-off sentiment amid global trade tensions.

Such outflows directly weaken the rupee by increasing demand for dollars.

Trade and Geopolitical Uncertainty

Uncertainty surrounding the India–U.S. trade negotiations and the broader global trade-war environment has adversely affected investor confidence.

Protectionist signals from the U.S. administration have added to volatility in currency markets.

Policy Stance of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)

The RBI's relatively limited intervention suggests a conscious choice to allow market-determined movements, rather than defending a specific exchange rate level.

Is the Depreciation a Cause for Concern?

Rupee breaches 91 level, turns weakest Asian currency in '25

With India's growth strong and inflation contained, policymakers may be 'comfortable' allowing some depreciation, currency experts opined

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI

The rupee on Tuesday breached one more psychological mark by depreciating beyond 91 to 91.14 on the spot market against the U.S. dollar during intraday trade, making it one of the weakest major currencies globally this year and the weakest in Asia in 2025.

But it gained a bit during the day to close at 90.93 as compared with it's previous close of 90.78, down nearly 16 paise, a fresh all time low.

Anindya Banerjee, Head Currency and Commodity Research, Kotak Securities, said the pressure on the currency is being driven by three key factors: sentiment, capital flows, and the global macro backdrop. "The uncertainty around the pending India-U.S. trade deal and the broader trade-war environment is weighing on markets. From a flows perspective, foreign portfolio investors have pulled out close to $2.7 billion in the first two weeks of December alone, already among the largest monthly outflows this year, with the month still unfinished," he said.

He said globally rising U.S. bond yields and expectations of a Bank of Japan rate hike have triggered an unwinding of the yen carry trade.

"This has led to risk aversion across equities, credit, crypto, and some commodities, adding speculative pressure on emerging-market currencies, including the rupee," he added. Stating that the rupee may head towards 92, he said, RBI's relatively limited intervention so far appeared deliberate.

"With India's growth strong and inflation contained, policymakers may be comfortable allowing some currency depreciation, especially in a global trade-war environment where a weaker currency can support export competitiveness," he said.

"And on a day when the rupee has reached 91, I think it is important to also flag that we have been expecting [it] for a while, but not wide depreciation. And there are strategic and tactical decisions involved in the rupee," said Neelkanth Mishra, Chief Economist of Axis Bank, Head of Global Research at Axis Capital, and part time member at the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council (PMEAC).

"I think the RBI is letting the currency move around a bit. It's not a bad idea. We will have to see at what level they [would say] in the three-to-six-month basis, more than this volatility is not allowed. I think the mistake was in pegging it [rupee to $] at 83. Those past sins are still haunting us," he emphasised.

In a note, Finrex Treasury Advisors said the rupee made a new lifetime low as dollar buying continued with news that U.S. President Donald Trump had not agreed to the new proposals as he wanted agri and its products to be included in the proposal which India had not agreed to.

(With inputs from Ashokamithran T)

Currency cauldron: Uncertainty around the India-U.S. trade deal and the trade-war environment is weighing on markets. REUTERS

Not necessarily. Several macroeconomic fundamentals remain strong:

Robust economic growth relative to peers.

Contained inflation, providing policy space.

Adequate foreign exchange reserves, enabling the RBI to intervene if volatility becomes excessive.

Experts argue that moderate depreciation can:

Improve export competitiveness in a challenging global trade environment.

Act as a shock absorber against external disruptions, rather than depleting reserves to defend an artificial peg.

However, risks persist:

Higher import costs, especially for crude oil and fertilisers.

Increased external debt servicing burden.

Potential inflationary pressures if depreciation becomes disorderly.

Broader Policy Implications

The episode underscores the limitations of implicit currency pegging, as past attempts to hold the rupee at fixed levels have created adjustment pressures later.

A managed float regime, with tolerance for gradual depreciation but resistance to excessive volatility, appears more sustainable.

Structural measures such as export diversification, reduced import dependence, and stable trade agreements remain critical for long-term currency stability.

Conclusion

The rupee's fall beyond 91 per dollar reflects a complex interplay of global financial tightening, capital outflows, and trade-related uncertainties rather than domestic macroeconomic weakness. With growth strong, inflation under control, and adequate reserves, the RBI appears comfortable allowing a measured depreciation as part of a broader macroeconomic strategy. The key challenge lies not in preventing depreciation per se, but in ensuring that currency movements remain orderly, predictable, and aligned with India's long-term economic fundamentals. In this sense, the recent rupee movement may represent strategic flexibility rather than policy failure.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : The recent depreciation of the Indian rupee reflects global macroeconomic pressures as well as evolving policy choices of the Reserve Bank of India. In this context, examine the factors behind the rupee becoming the weakest Asian currency in 2025. Discuss the potential benefits and risks of allowing a calibrated depreciation of the currency.

Page : 08 : Editorial Analysis

The three revolutions reshaping American power

Anil Raman
is Research Fellow, Takshashila Institution and a retired brigadier

When United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio proposed restructuring the G-20 into an elite "inner caucus" of powerful states, it should have dominated the week's geopolitical news. It signalled a major reordering of global economic governance, shifting rule-making to a narrower group and weakening emerging economies. Yet, the proposal barely registered. It was immediately eclipsed by the release of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), that embodied the same underlying ideological shift. Days later, the Heritage Foundation, the intellectual core of U.S. President Donald Trump's MAGA project, issued its own blueprint, Restoring America's Promise: 2025-26.

The alignment between the G-20 restructuring, the NSS, and Heritage 2026 reveals three simultaneous revolutions in American statecraft: a transformation of political morality, a recasting of foreign policy, and a restructuring of global economic governance. The common thread is the institutionalisation of exclusion and the acceptance of unequal burdens as policy design rather than error. In this sense, cruelty functions as an analytical term, capturing a system in which harm is anticipated, normalised, and strategically deployed.

Shrinking of civic space

The first revolution is internal. Mr. Trump's political project dismantled the traditional moral architecture of American public life. Norms of restraint, institutional deference and civic responsibility gave way to an ethos where transgression signalled authenticity and the erosion of shame became a political asset. The NSS integrates this shift into formal doctrine by treating internal cultural cohesion, ideological alignment and demographic stability as national security requirements.

The Heritage document demands bureaucratic remaking, ideological vetting, and mass personnel turnover. The NSS echoes this through sovereign autonomy, institutional suspicion and domestic culture as security treating independent institutions not as correctives but as obstacles to political will.

Cruelty here takes the form of permissive indifference: hardship from administrative purges, narrowing civic space, or punitive regulatory change is not acknowledged as collateral damage but folded seamlessly into the architecture of governance.

The central thread around the internal, external and economic policies is an 'architecture of cruelty', where harm is anticipated, normalised, and strategically deployed

Foreign policy around conditionality

The second revolution is external. The U.S. traditionally relied on predictable commitments and institutional stability. Even Mr. Trump's first-term disruptions occurred within recognisable boundaries. The 2025 NSS departs sharply from this tradition.

Alliances are reframed as conditional transactional contracts with obligations justified continuously. The Western Hemisphere displaces Europe and the Indo-Pacific as the primary theatre, reviving the Monroe Doctrine. Migration, a domestic concern, is elevated into the central security threat, while institutions once amplifying American power are described as constraints on sovereignty.

The Heritage document provides the ideological framework. It frames multilateral bodies as infringements of sovereignty, border control as geopolitics, and allied compliance as contingent on ideological alignment, not shared interest.

The result is neither isolationism nor traditional realism. It is selective dominance: assertion where leverage is high, retreat where obligations are costly, and judging partnerships by conformity not capability. The structural effect is fragile alliances, revisionist adversaries and a fragmentation of global order.

The third revolution is economic. Mr. Rubio's G-20 proposal is not an administrative adjustment but the formalisation of a tiered global economy, an architecture of privileged rule-makers and peripheral rule-takers. Decision-making on debt relief, trade standards and climate finance will consolidate within a narrower circle of states with the capacity to shape outcomes.

The NSS fits precisely within this trajectory. Its emphasis on reshoring, tariff leverage and industrial sovereignty promoted toward a hemispheric economic model centred on North America. Heritage 2026 expands on the logic: globalisation is treated as a strategic vulnerability and multilateral economic systems as threats to national autonomy.

The consequences will be felt disproportionately by countries with limited negotiation power. Debt restructuring will become more conditional, supply chain diversification more politically selective, and access to global capital more closely tied to geopolitical alignment. The predictable hardship that follows, from inflationary pressures to disrupted export markets, will fall on global and domestic workers.

Cruelty here is systemic: unequal distribution of economic pain is treated as a mechanism for stabilising a more hierarchical global order

A return of imperial logic

Across these three revolutions runs a common thread: the restoration of a colonial-imperial mindset. Not territorial colonialism but a structural world-view built on hierarchy, entitlement, and the presumption that the strong may impose costs while the weak absorb them.

The NSS provides bureaucratic vocabulary; the Heritage supplies the ideological foundations.

The analytical utility of cruelty lies in naming this organising logic. It captures a system where the suffering generated by policy is neither incidental nor unfortunate but integrated into the functioning of the political and economic order.

The G-20 restructuring and the 2025 NSS are manifestations of the same deeper shift. The world is entering an era where the U.S. seeks to protect its sovereignty through contraction, assert influence through hierarchy, and reshape global governance through exclusion.

The final irony is that the victims of this reordering are not confined to distant shores. They live in Maputo and Dhaka, yes, but also in Harlan, Kentucky. The architecture of cruelty is global, but its consequences are intimate. It reaches the world, but it also circles back home.

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Daily News Analysis

The Trump NSS, Europe's existential crisis

Priyanjali Malik
writes on nuclear politics and security

With the Trump Administration's National Security Strategy making it clear that American support to Europe is now faint, it remains to be seen how Europe responds

Hope is not a strategy. For most of this year, European leaders have hoped that the Trump Administration has not actually meant its President's oscillating support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its Vice-President's berating his European hosts in Munich over their liberal values and immigration policies, President Donald Trump's tirade against migration at the United Nations, and of course his mercurial support for Ukraine. The hope was that, all things considered, America would ultimately stand with Europe.

The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy – a 33 page document that spends much time congratulating the President for saving America from apparently terminal decline as it charts an unapologetically MAGA-esque America-first mercantilist position – appears not to notice Africa, Australia and New Zealand. It sweeps by Asia as it focuses strongly on perceived trade imbalances with China and lands squarely on a defence of the 'Western Hemisphere' according to American interests while lamenting the decline of Europe. Europe is a problem, not an ally.

The stand on Europe

In 'Promoting European Greatness', the NSS warns of Europe's 'civilizational erasure', precipitated by the European Union (EU)'s policies on migration and freedom of speech, 'the suppression of political opposition', and the 'loss of national identities and self-confidence'. In case there was any doubt about which migrants were unwelcome, the NSS declares that if Europe continues on its present trajectory, 'within a few decades ... certain NATO members will become majority non-European.' The U.S. will help Europe regain its 'former greatness' by choosing 'patriotic European parties' to promote what this administration views as 'genuine democracy' and 'unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history'. To most Europeans, at best this reads as a meddling in the internal politics of sovereign nations, and at worst as regime change.

Europe, the NSS states, needs to stand on its own feet, assume 'primary responsibility for its own defense' and re-establish 'strategic stability with Russia'. NATO 'cannot be a perpetually expanding alliance', a warning of course to Ukraine, but also an interesting glossing over of Sweden and Finland's accession to the alliance after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. In this document, the threat is not Russia and its invasion of a sovereign nation, but Europe's cultural decay. The tramp of the jackboots of 1930s Europe echos with every mention of civilisational decline.

Of course, an administration's national security strategy is not policy, but a guide to its thinking. They can and have been over-ridden by events, most notably George H.W. Bush's 1990 NSS, which was overtaken by the fall of the Berlin Wall, German reunification and the first Gulf War. Observers could chart the evolution of the administration's thinking in the two subsequent iterations of 1991 and 1993.

As a high-level document, the NSS often provides the lens through which to interpret an administration's foreign policy goals and is assumed to set the tone for the administration's national defence strategy, its Quadrennial Defense Review and national military strategy. Mr. Trump's famously mercurial nature might caution against viewing it as declared policy. However, given that this is a Congress-mandated document, it is more than just a rhetorical exercise: while it should not be taken literally, it should be taken seriously.

What Europe's response could be

As the dust settles, Europe now faces three options in responding: it can ignore the NSS and hope that it will go away; its leaders can dial up their flattery of Mr. Trump in the hope that he will change his mind on Europe; or Europe can face up to the prospect that Mr. Trump's America is not a reliable ally and that they will need to fend for themselves.

Europe tried a mixture of the first two strategies after J.D. Vance's outburst at the Munich Security Conference. After some tepid talk of needing to pull together to see off Russian President Vladimir Putin's 'imperialist' ambitions in trying to 'rewrite history' or the need for Europe to wean itself off U.S. dependence, Europe doubled down on doing whatever it would take to keep America in NATO and Europe. Britain flattered Mr. Trump with an invitation for an unprecedented second state visit. Germany's Friedrich Merz forgot about his observations of February this year as Chancellor-in-waiting that his 'absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe ... so that ... we can really achieve independence from the USA'.

Germany has since abandoned half-explored plans of developing European capabilities and ordered more American military kit, which is dependent on American intelligence to work. NATO's Hague Summit of June this year will be remembered as much for European states agreeing to raise their military spending to 5% of GDP as for Secretary-General Mark Rutte's calling Mr. Trump 'Daddy'.

The third option will not be easy. Europe has never defended itself as an entity and there is no concept of integrated European defence. Even limited projects of joint development of military kit tend not to get very far, as the stalled Franco-German project on sixth generation fighter jets demonstrates. If the U.S. pulls American troops out of Europe – as this administration has periodically hinted it might do – then Europe will have a serious manpower problem that experiments in 'voluntary' conscription will not even begin to address. Then there is the question of nuclear deterrence and Britain's uneasy post-Brexit relationship with the EU and Europe.

The state of the world order

How Europe responds will have implications beyond the continent. Mr. Trump's NSS, with its attack on transnational institutions (that he insists 'undermine political liberty and sovereignty'), its dismantling of the post-war trading order in favour of a mercantilist America-first policy; and the signalling of a U.S. retreat into its own 'Hemisphere' (however that might be defined, and with the implication that China and Russia are free to carve up the rest of the world as long as they do not impinge on America's trading footprint) have profound implications for the rest of the world. The post-war world order that America helped shape and uphold is imperfect and crumbling. The power imbalances at the United Nations and the Bretton Woods Institutions that help anchor expectations of peace, security, development and trade reflect an outdated world order. But, however imperfect this rules-based system might be, it is still a bulwark against a descent into a Hobbesian free-for-all, where might makes right.

The debate about this National Security Strategy is, therefore, not about a document that might shed light on an administration's thinking. It is about whether Europe chooses to defend a rules-based liberal order or defers to a President whose transactional and racist view of the world will have consequences that stretch far beyond his borders.

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Daily News Analysis

India and the U.S.: 2005 versus 2025

Amitabh Mattoo
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In 2005, when I served on the Prime Minister's Task Force on Global Strategic Developments chaired by K. Subrahmanyam, India and the U.S. stood at the threshold of a historic transformation. Washington had declared that it wished to "help India become a major world power in the 21st century." It was an extraordinary statement, not merely because of what it promised but because of the confidence it reflected. The U.S. then still believed that strengthening responsible rising powers would strengthen the world. That belief seemed to form, for many, the bedrock of the civil nuclear breakthrough and of a strategic partnership built on a shared sense of possibility.

The U.S.'s retreat

Reading the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) is therefore an unsettling experience. The document is saturated with self-praise. It claims to have "brought our nation – and the world – back from the brink of catastrophe and disaster" and asserts that "no administration in history has achieved so dramatic a turnaround in so short a time." But this assertiveness feels defensive. It projects a nation unsure of its place in a world it no longer fully comprehends, yet unwilling to concede that uncertainty even to itself. The result is a strategy that is less a map for global action and more an exercise in national reassurance.

The contrast with the intellectual spirit of 2005 could not be sharper. Then, Washington spoke the language of partnership. Today, it speaks the language of burdens. "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over," the strategy declares. Global leadership, once embraced with ease, is now treated as a cost to be minimised. The overriding imperative is not to elevate the international system but to lighten America's load.

Nowhere is this shift more stark than in the treatment of India. Cooperation is acknowledged but is instrumental. India is framed less as a civilisational actor and more as a component in America's China calculus. The NSS states that the U.S. must "continue to improve commercial (and other) relations with India to encourage New Delhi to contribute to Indo-Pacific security, including through continued quadrilateral cooperation with... 'the Quad'." In this framing, India is not an end in itself but a means to a balance-of-power arrangement the U.S. seeks to preserve.

In 2005, India's rise was an objective; now, it is a function. This narrowing is part of a broader retreat from internationalist confidence. The so-called Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, declaring an intent to "assert and enforce" hemispheric exclusivity, speaks to a nation turning inward. The irony is difficult to miss. In 2005, when India spoke of strategic autonomy, many in Washington bristled. In 2025, when America claims an expansive and unilateral autonomy, it calls it realism.

The document's tone reinforces this inwardness. It catalogues a series of claimed diplomatic triumphs, resolving multiple global conflicts "from Cambodia and Thailand" to "Pakistan and India". These read less like diplomatic achievements and more like political assertions crafted for domestic effect. Strategy becomes performance, and performance becomes a substitute for engagement with the world's real fissures.

For India, the implications are clear. The U.S. that sought to create strategic space for India in 2005 is not the U.S. reflected in the NSS – it is preoccupied with its own vulnerabilities, identity, and hierarchy of burdens. It demands more from partners yet offers less in return. It speaks of shared interests while retreating from shared responsibilities. It calls for burden-sharing but often means burden-shifting.

This does not diminish the importance of India-U.S. cooperation. It simply changes its foundations. India cannot rely on the assumption that Washington will invest in India's rise as a matter of strategic design. India's rise will depend on India. Partnership will endure where interests converge and remain measured where they do not. As the NSS itself insists, partners must increasingly "assume primary responsibility for their regions," a polite but unmistakable signal that U.S. support will be conditional and limited.

The path forward

The lesson of 2005 remains valuable because it reminds us of the conditions under which strategic transformations occur: confidence on both sides and a belief that the other's ascent strengthens one's own. The 2025 strategy lacks that confidence. It is shaped by grievance at past overreach, suspicion of institutions, and a preoccupation with restoring an earlier notion of American primacy.

India therefore must resist the temptation to interpret this document through the lens of earlier hopes. The era that produced the civil nuclear breakthrough was an era of widening horizons for both India and the U.S. The era that produced this strategy is one of contracting horizons for the U.S. and expanding responsibilities for India. If India is to be a major world power in the 21st century, it will not be because any external actor wills it. It will be because India possesses the strategic confidence and material capacity to act independently within a fragmented global order.

Paradoxically, the 2025 strategy makes that reality clearer than its authors intend. By reducing the scope of American commitments, it widens the space for others. For India, the challenge is not to fill a vacuum but to craft a role suited to its scale, interests, and civilisational temperament. The assumptions of 2005 cannot return, but the aspiration that animated them is ours to pursue.

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy document marks a profound departure from the logic articulated in 2005. For India, the implications are clear.

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GS Paper 2 : International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question : The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy marks a shift from alliance-based leadership to transactional and conditional partnerships. Critically examine the implications of this shift for the future of NATO and European security architecture. (150 words)

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Context :

The 2025 United States National Security Strategy (NSS), released under the Trump Administration, marks a decisive ideological and strategic shift in American statecraft. Unlike earlier strategies that upheld alliance-based leadership and multilateral global governance, the document reflects a pronounced inward turn — prioritising sovereignty, transactional partnerships, and regional dominance over global stewardship. As highlighted in the editorials, this shift has profound implications for Europe's security architecture, the stability of the rules-based international order, and India's strategic engagement with the United States. Together, these analyses reveal a world transitioning from cooperative multilateralism towards hierarchical, conditional, and fragmented power politics.

Core Arguments and Analysis

1. Europe's Existential Dilemma and Strategic Abandonment

The NSS recasts Europe not as a strategic ally but as a declining civilisational entity burdened by migration, liberal values, and cultural fragmentation. NATO is no longer framed as a cornerstone of collective security but as an overextended alliance from which Europe must gradually disengage.

- The emphasis on Europe assuming "primary responsibility for its own defence" signals a potential U.S. military retrenchment.
- The document downplays Russian aggression while foregrounding Europe's cultural and demographic anxieties, an inversion of traditional threat perception.

This places Europe at a crossroads: continue strategic dependence on an unreliable U.S., or undertake the difficult task of building autonomous defence and deterrence capabilities — including nuclear dimensions — for which institutional readiness remains weak.

2. Three Revolutions in American Power: Internal, External, and Economic

The NSS, read alongside the Heritage Foundation's blueprint and proposals such as restructuring the G-20, reflects three systemic transformations:

- **Internal Revolution:** Domestic culture, demographic cohesion, and ideological conformity are securitised. Independent institutions are viewed as constraints rather than stabilisers, shrinking civic space and normalising governance through exclusion.
- **External Revolution:** U.S. foreign policy shifts from predictable alliances to conditional, transactional engagements. Multilateral institutions are portrayed as infringements on sovereignty, while migration is elevated as a central security threat. This produces fragile alliances and emboldens revisionist powers.
- **Economic Revolution:** The move towards a tiered global economic order — privileging a few rule-makers — undermines inclusive global governance. Mercantilism, reshoring, and tariff leverage replace cooperative globalisation, disproportionately harming developing economies.

Across these dimensions, "cruelty" operates not as an unintended outcome but as a structural feature — where unequal burdens and anticipated hardship are integral to policy design.

3. India–U.S. Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Instrumental Engagement

The contrast between 2005 and 2025 is stark. In 2005, the U.S. viewed India's rise as intrinsically beneficial to the global order. The civil nuclear agreement symbolised confidence in shared growth and responsibility.

In the 2025 NSS, however:

- India is framed primarily through the prism of U.S.-China competition.
- Cooperation is instrumental, conditional, and region-specific rather than civilisational or transformative.
- Burden-sharing increasingly resembles burden-shifting, with reduced U.S. willingness to underwrite regional stability.

This signals that India's rise is no longer an American strategic objective but an Indian responsibility. Strategic autonomy, once contested, is now implicitly expected.

Implications for the Global Order

The NSS represents a broader retreat from the post-war liberal international order. By attacking multilateral institutions, promoting hemispheric exclusivity, and legitimising hierarchical governance, the U.S. risks accelerating a Hobbesian international environment where power outweighs norms. While the existing global order is imperfect and asymmetrical, its erosion without credible alternatives increases instability, especially for middle and developing powers.

Conclusion

The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy is not merely a policy document; it is a reflection of a deeper ideological transformation in American governance and global engagement. For Europe, it poses an existential challenge to security dependence. For the world, it signals the weakening of multilateral norms. For India, it clarifies an essential truth: external sponsorship of its rise can no longer be assumed.

In a fragmented and hierarchical global order, India's strategic future will depend on its own material capabilities, diplomatic agility, and civilisational confidence. Paradoxically, by contracting American commitments, the NSS widens strategic space for autonomous actors. The challenge before India is not to replace U.S. leadership, but to navigate this transition with realism, restraint, and long-term strategic vision.

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