

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE
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Page 01 & 04 : GS II : International Relations / Prelims Exam

In a significant escalation of the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban-led Afghanistan, an overnight airstrike on March 16, 2026, reportedly hit the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul. According to Afghan officials, the strike killed at least 408 people and injured over 260, marking the deadliest single incident since hostilities flared in early 2026. While Afghanistan labels the act a "crime against humanity," Pakistan maintains the strike precisely targeted military infrastructure (specifically Camp Phoenix) allegedly used by terror proxies like the TTP.

Core Analysis: The Pak-Afghan Conflict (2026)

1. Key Points of Contention

Target Discrepancy: The Afghan Taliban identifies the site as a 2,000-bed drug rehab center (formerly a US NATO base, Camp Phoenix). Pakistan claims the site was being used as an ammunition and technical storage facility for the **Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)**.

The "Open War" Declaration: Tensions have moved from border skirmishes along the Durand Line to what Pakistan's Defense Ministry has termed "open war." This follows a collapse of the Qatar-mediated ceasefire in late 2025.

Casualty Claims: The high death toll (400+) is being used by Kabul to seek international condemnation, while Islamabad dismisses these figures as "propaganda" to mask the presence of militants in civilian-adjacent zones.

2. India's Strategic Response

India's "unequivocal condemnation" is a notable shift in its neighborhood policy:

Sovereignty Argument: By calling the strike a "blatant assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty," India is positioning itself as a defender of Afghan territorial integrity, regardless of the regime in power.

Counter-Terrorism Narrative: India accused Pakistan of "externalizing internal failures," suggesting that Pakistan's domestic security issues (insurgency in Balochistan and KP) are being redirected through cross-border aggression.

Humanitarian Diplomacy: Highlighting that the attack occurred during **Ramzan** adds a moral dimension to India's diplomatic offensive against Pakistan at international forums like the UN.

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Afghanistan says 400 killed in Pak. airstrike on Kabul hospital

Bodies recovered from the drug rehabilitation centre as conflict between neighbours escalates; Islamabad rejects charge of targeting the hospital located beside former NATO base; it also dismisses claims of hundreds of casualties as 'propaganda'

Associated Press
 KABUL

Rescuers recovered more bodies from the rubble of a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul on Tuesday after officials said an overnight airstrike killed more than 400 people, in a dramatic escalation of the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan that is now in its third week.

Pakistan rejected Afghanistan's accusation that it targeted the hospital, insisting its strikes, which were also conducted in eastern Afghanistan on Monday, were aimed at military facilities. It dismissed Afghanistan's claims of hundreds of casualties as propaganda. Crowds gathered to search for their loved ones among the injured and the dead. It was not possible to independently confirm the toll.

The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan has seen repeated cross-border clashes as well as airstrikes inside Afghanistan. International calls for ceasefire have gone unheeded.

'Safe haven to militants' Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of providing safe haven for militants who carry out attacks inside Pakistan, especially for the Pakistani Taliban. The group is separate but closely allied with the Afghan Taliban who took over Afghanistan in 2021 in the wake of the chaotic withdrawal of U.S.-led troops. Kabul denies the charge.

In a late-night post on X, Afghanistan's deputy government spokesperson Hamdullah Ftriat said the airstrike hit the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospi-



Razed to the ground: Residents and volunteers at the site on Tuesday after Pakistani airstrikes hit a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul. AP

tal, a 2,000-bed facility in Kabul, at about 9 p.m. local time and that large sections of the facility had been destroyed.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Abdul Mateen Qani said on Tuesday that 408 people had been killed and 265 injured.

Night-time local television footage showed security forces using flash lights as they carried casualties from the site while firefighters struggled to extinguish the flames.

The Omid hospital was renamed and expanded in size roughly a year ago from the Ibn Sina Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital as part of government plans to stamp out drug addiction in the country.

The site, near Kabul's international airport, is located beside a former NATO military base, Camp Phoenix, where U.S. forces

used to train the Afghan National Army. After the Taliban seized power, the base was taken over by Afghanistan's new authorities. It was not immediately clear what was now housed on the site of the former base.

A reporter for the Associated Press in an area near the site at the time of the strike said he heard a military jet fly overhead, followed by a very powerful explosion.

Pakistan's Information Ministry said in an X post that the Pakistani military had "precisely targeted" Camp Phoenix, which it said was now a "military terrorist ammunition and equipment storage site."

However, it said that the hospital was "multiple kilometres" away from the former camp and accused Afghan officials of lying. Google Maps shows aning-

er location, east of Kabul city, also labelled as Camp Phoenix.

"Another important question also lingers, as to why would an alleged drug rehabilitation facility be collocated with lethal ammunition storage site in a military camp? This also remains unanswered," the Information Ministry wrote.

'Perpetrating horrors' Afghan government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid condemned the strike, accusing Pakistan of "targeting hospitals and civilian sites to perpetrate horrors". He said those killed were "innocent civilians and aid workers."

"We strongly condemn this crime and consider such an act to be against all accepted principles and a crime against humanity," he said in a post on X.

Act 'barbaric', direct threat to regional peace: India

Kallol Bhattacharjee
 NEW DELHI

India "unequivocally" condemned Pakistan's bombing of a hospital in Kabul, terming it "unconscionable" and "barbaric". "This heinous act of aggression by Pakistan is also a blatant assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty and a direct threat to regional peace and stability," External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Tuesday.

FULL REPORT ON
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Static Linkages (UPSC Syllabus Context)

I. The Durand Line Dispute

Historical Context: Established in 1893 between Sir Mortimer Durand and Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. It serves as the 2,670 km international border.

Issue: Successive Afghan governments (including the Taliban) have never formally recognized it, as it bisects the Pashtun ethnic homeland. This remains the root cause of border "fence" skirmishes.

II. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Definition: An umbrella organization of various Islamist militant groups operating along the Afghan-Pakistani border.

Security Paradox: Pakistan helped the Afghan Taliban return to power in 2021, hoping they would neutralize the TTP. Instead, the Afghan Taliban views the TTP as ideological brothers, leading to the current fallout.

III. India's Interests in Afghanistan

Strategic Depth: Preventing Afghanistan from being used as a base for anti-India terror activities.

Connectivity: Projects like the **Chabahar Port** (Iran) and the **Zaranj-Delaram Highway** are vital for India to bypass Pakistan and reach Central Asian markets.

Soft Power: India has historically focused on "Developmental Partnership," including the construction of the Afghan Parliament and the Salma Dam.

Conclusion

The Kabul hospital strike signifies a breakdown of the "strategic depth" doctrine that Pakistan once sought in Afghanistan. For India, the escalation presents a dual-edged sword: while it diminishes Pakistan's influence in Kabul, the resulting regional instability and the rise of asymmetric warfare could spill over into the broader South Asian security architecture. The international community's inability to enforce a ceasefire suggests a looming humanitarian crisis that may require renewed multilateral intervention.

'Pakistan's bombing of Kabul rehab centre a barbaric act'

India responds to escalation in the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan after the Taliban administration revealed that the bombing led to the death of 400 people at the facility

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India on Tuesday "unequivocally" condemned Pakistan's bombing of Omid Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital in Afghanistan's capital Kabul on the night of March 16, terming it "barbaric" and "unconscionable".

The remarks from the official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) came hours after the bombing that marked an escalation in the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

The Taliban administration in Kabul had described the attack on the drug rehabilitation centre as a violation of Afghan airspace and revealed that the bombing led to the death of around 400 individuals who were seeking treatment in the facility.

"This heinous act of aggression by Pakistan is also a blatant assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty and a direct threat to regional peace and stability. It reflects Pakistan's persistent pattern of reckless beha-



viour and its repeated attempts to externalise internal failures through increasingly desperate acts of violence beyond its borders," said Ranjith Jaishwal, official spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs.

Former military base
The Omid Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital is a former U.S. military base that has been converted into a drug addiction treatment centre for Afghanistan's drug addicts. The base was taken over by the Taliban and converted into a rudimentary care centre after the end of the Ashraf

Ghani government in August 2021.

According to Khaama Press of Afghanistan, the Pakistan Air Force has continued bombing across Afghanistan over the past two days and apart from the Omid Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul, it has also bombed targets in Nangarhar province, including Achin, Shinwari districts and the Jalalabad airport.

Zabihullah Mujahid, spokesman of the Taliban administration, said, "Pakistani military regime has once again violated Afghanistan's airspace and target-

ed a drug rehabilitation hospital in Kabul, resulting in the death and injury of addicts who were undergoing treatment."

Responding to the incident, which marks the largest number of civilian deaths in a single airstrike since the conflict flared up last year between the two sides, Mr. Jaishwal said: "India unequivocally condemns Pakistan's barbaric airstrike on the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul on the night of March 16. This is a cowardly and unconscionable act of violence that has claimed the lives of a large number of civilians in a facility which can by no means be justified as a military target."

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge expressed condolences for "Afghan brothers and sisters", saying, "We condemn such acts against humanity in the strongest possible terms. Such barbarism must be strongly rejected globally."

Pakistan has claimed that the hospital was serving as an arms and ammunition depot.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Analyze India's evolving policy towards Taliban-led Afghanistan in light of recent regional conflicts. (150 Words)

Page 08 : GS III : Environment / Prelims Exam

The Union Budget 2026 has introduced a landmark ₹20,000 crore outlay for a "carbon credit programme." However, a significant policy "blur" has emerged regarding the primary beneficiaries of this fund. While the technical foundation—the DST's R&D Roadmap for CCUS (2025)—points toward heavy industry decarbonization, a parallel narrative suggests a shift toward "Carbon Farming" for Indian agriculturists. This analysis explores the tension between industrial Carbon Capture and nature-based Carbon Sequestration.

A bit of a blur over India's new carbon credit plan

A significant policy announcement in the Union Budget 2026, involving a massive ₹20,000 crore outlay for a carbon credit programme, has sparked a wave of confusion and conflicting reports, pitting a clear-cut governmental road map for heavy industry against a burgeoning narrative of a new income stream for India's farmers. At the heart of the debate is a fundamental question. Is this Budget allocation designed to fund Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS) technologies for smokestack industries? Or is it a pioneering scheme to help farmers earn carbon credits through sustainable agriculture? Evidence from official documents suggests the first, but a persistent parallel narrative, echoed in several media reports, insists on the second.

The first is the CCUS for "Hard-to-Abate" Industries. The unambiguous anchor for the Budget announcement is the "R&D Roadmap for CCUS", released by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in December 2025. This technical document, which forms the basis of the budgetary provision, leaves little room for ambiguity regarding its scope and intent. The road map explicitly identifies its target sectors, power, steel, cement, refineries, and chemicals. These are labelled as "hard-to-abate" industries where process emissions are concentrated, measurable, and technically challenging to eliminate through renewable energy alone. The proposed ₹20,000 crore over five years is earmarked for large-scale deployment of CCUS technologies, essentially capturing carbon dioxide from factory flue gases and either using it industrially or storing it underground.

Not on the list

Crucially, agriculture is conspicuously absent from this list of CCUS sectors. The road map acknowledges agriculture as a source of greenhouse gases (primarily methane and nitrous oxide) but only in an inventory context. It



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The strategy requires distinct focus on both 'smokestack' and 'soil' initiatives

explicitly excludes agriculture from CCUS strategies because agricultural emissions are diffuse, biologically mediated, and not suited to the point-source capture technology that defines CCUS. The road map draws a clear line between CCUS (preventing new industrial emissions) and Carbon Dioxide Removal or CDR (drawing down existing atmospheric CO₂), where agriculture, through soil carbon sequestration, biochar, and agroforestry, plays a starring role.

The second is the persistent counter-narrative of farmers as climate solutionists. Despite this clear industrial focus, articles and social media discourse have propagated a different story. This narrative posits that the budgetary outlay will directly enable farmers to participate in carbon markets by adopting regenerative practices, turning "farms into climate solutions".

The root of the confusion

This interpretation appears to conflate two distinct concepts. The Budget's CCUS fund (for industrial carbon capture) and the broader, evolving voluntary carbon market in India, where agriculture and forestry projects are already beginning to generate credits for global and domestic buyers. Proponents of the "farmer" narrative point to the growing global and domestic demand for nature-based carbon credits. Several private sector initiatives and State-level programmes are already piloting models where farmers are compensated for practices that enhance soil organic carbon. The confusion likely stems from the Budget's use of the term "carbon credit programme" in a broader sense, while its detailed architecture, as per the DST road map, is exclusively industrial.

Analysts say the confusion highlights a communication gap and a policy opportunity. The DST road map is a technically sound, sector-specific document, but the Budget's use of the more familiar term 'carbon credit' has blurred lines. Mention of a "programme" amid

discussion of agricultural carbon credits has led some to expect a funded scheme for farmers. This expectation is plausible, as the Agriculture Ministry has been exploring soil health and climate-resilient farming for years. A structured carbon farming programme is a logical next step, but it would need separate policy, funding, and institutional frameworks distinct from the costly, tech-heavy CCUS initiative.

The government faces the task of clarifying this distinction to manage expectations. The ₹20,000 crore CCUS programme is a critical pillar for decarbonising industry, a sector vital for growth but also responsible for a quarter of India's emissions. Its success is non-negotiable for meeting net-zero goals.

Simultaneously, the powerful narrative around farmers and carbon credits highlights a massive parallel opportunity. India's vast agricultural lands hold immense potential for carbon sequestration. A separate, well-designed policy to create a trusted domestic carbon market for agriculture could unlock enormous economic and environmental benefits, truly creating a "new income stream" for farmers.

A multi-sectoral approach is needed

The current debate underscores a pivotal moment in India's climate strategy. Budget 2026 has firmly placed its ₹20,000 crore bet on industrial decarbonisation through CCUS. The "farmer carbon credit" story, while not funded by this specific outlay, reflects a powerful and growing reality in the voluntary carbon space and a compelling demand for a parallel policy initiative. The path ahead requires the government to clearly demarcate these two crucial fronts in the climate fight – smokestack and soil – while advancing both with equal ambition. The confusion may be born of conflation today, but it points to the comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach India will need to forge a sustainable future.



Core Analysis: Smokestack vs. Soil

1. The Industrial Pillar: CCUS for "Hard-to-Abate" Sectors

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Daily News Analysis

The Budget allocation is primarily anchored in Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS) technologies.

Target Sectors: Power, steel, cement, refineries, and chemicals. These are "hard-to-abate" because renewable energy alone cannot eliminate their process emissions.

Mechanism: Capturing CO₂ from point sources (flue gases) and storing it underground or converting it into industrial feedstock.

Technical Nature: It is a capital-intensive, high-tech solution focused on preventing new emissions from entering the atmosphere.

2. The Agricultural Narrative: Carbon Farming

Despite the industrial focus, there is an expectation of a "new income stream" for farmers through Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR).

Methods: Soil sequestration, application of biochar, and agroforestry.

Economic Incentive: Farmers earn "carbon credits" for every ton of CO₂ they pull from the atmosphere and store in the soil, which can then be sold on voluntary carbon markets.

The Conflict: Agricultural emissions (methane and nitrous oxide) are diffuse (spread over vast areas), making them technically unsuitable for CCUS technology, which requires concentrated point sources.

3. The Root of Confusion: A Communication Gap

The "blur" identified by experts stems from the conflation of two distinct frameworks:

The CCUS Fund: A government-funded, tech-heavy industrial mandate.

The Voluntary Carbon Market: A market-driven space where private entities buy credits from farmers to offset their own emissions.

Policy Opportunity: While the ₹20,000 crore is likely for industry, the narrative highlights the need for a **formal Domestic Carbon Market (DCM)** specifically for the agriculture sector to manage expectations and provide structured income to farmers.

Static Linkages

I. Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage (CCUS)

Capture: Separating CO₂ from other gases produced at industrial facilities.

Utilization: Using CO₂ in enhanced oil recovery (EOR) or creating building materials (carbonated concrete).

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Storage: Permanent injection into deep geological formations

(saline aquifers or depleted oil/gas reservoirs).

II. Carbon Credit & Carbon Markets

Carbon Credit: A tradable permit representing the right to emit one tonne of CO₂ or its equivalent (CO₂e).

Compliance Market: Regulated by national or international regimes (e.g., EU Emissions Trading System).

Voluntary Market: Where businesses/individuals buy credits to meet "Net Zero" pledges voluntarily.

III. Soil Carbon Sequestration

Definition: The process by which CO₂ is removed from the atmosphere and stored in the soil carbon pool.

Benefits: Improves soil health, water retention, and crop resilience, directly aligning with India's National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA).

Conclusion

India's climate strategy is at a crossroads where it must balance "Smokestack" (Industrial) and "Soil" (Agricultural) decarbonization. While the Budget 2026 outlay prioritizes the former to meet global net-zero commitments, the government must clarify that carbon farming requires a separate institutional framework. A dual-track approach—funding CCUS for industry while regulating carbon markets for farmers—is essential for a comprehensive transition to a green economy.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS), consider the following statements:

1. It involves capturing carbon dioxide from industrial point sources.
2. It is mainly suitable for agricultural emissions like methane from rice cultivation.
3. It can involve storing carbon dioxide in geological formations.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Ans: (a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

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Ques: Explain the working of Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) technology. Evaluate its potential and limitations in the Indian context. **(150 Words)**

Page 08 : GS II : Social Justice / Prelims Exam

The recent outbreak of Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) at the Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home, resulting in several deaths, has once again brought the dismal state of India's prison infrastructure into the spotlight. With an average occupancy rate significantly exceeding 100% across various states, Indian prisons have transitioned from "correctional homes" to "public health hazards," where overcrowding and medical vacancies create a breeding ground for infectious diseases like TB, HIV, and HSV.

Core Analysis: The Prison Health Crisis

1. The Infrastructure-Disease Link

Overcrowding as a Vector: The Jalpaiguri facility reported a **171% occupancy rate**, while some sub-jails in West Bengal have historically hit **400%**. Such density makes isolation impossible, turning manageable infections into fatal outbreaks (e.g., encephalitis from HSV).

Epidemiological Risk: Prisoners are **five times more likely** to contract Tuberculosis (TB) than the general population due to poor ventilation. Similarly, skin diseases (30% prevalence in some Kerala jails) are a direct result of humidity and lack of personal space.

HIV & Screening Lapses: Shared equipment and inadequate entry-level screening lead to HIV prevalence rates significantly higher than the national average.

2. The Personnel Gap

The **India Justice Report 2025** highlights a systemic failure in medical staffing:

Medical Vacancies: A **43% vacancy rate** for medical officers means the inmate-to-doctor ratio is 2.6 times higher than the limit set by the **Model Prison Manual**.

Mental Health Neglect: With only **25 psychologists for 5.7 lakh inmates**, the mental health of prisoners—often exacerbated by long periods of incarceration as undertrials—is virtually ignored.

3. The Legal and Judicial Dimension

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Prison outbreak

India's overcrowded jails pose a serious health risk to inmates

The public health crisis in India's prisons is distinguished by its poorer infrastructure and a general disregard for treating ailments until they become inconvenient. A prisoner does not lose the right to health, a point courts have repeatedly stressed; yet, between August 20, 2025, and March 9, 2026, around 92 inmates at the Jalpaiguri Central Correctional Home were infected with herpes simplex virus (HSV) and seven of them died. HSV is common in the general population but experts have said that in immunocompromised or overcrowded populations with poor care, it can lead to encephalitis, which is often fatal. The Home's 171% occupancy rate rendered good hygiene and isolation a luxury. According to the 2023 Prison Statistics of India, district prisons in West Bengal have reported occupancy rates exceeding 160% and certain facilities, such as the Kandi Sub-Jail, have historically reached staggering levels of over 400%. While the State has many foreign national inmates, overcrowding is a persistent fact of India's correctional facilities. In 2023, 30% of inmates in 10 prisons in Kerala were found to have skin diseases caused by humidity and a lack of personal space. A 2023 study in *The Lancet Public Health* found prisoners in India five times more likely to develop tuberculosis (TB) than the general population. In 2025, the Home Ministry ordered prison screening camps as unventilated environments allow TB to spread rapidly. The Nagpur and Indore central jails had major COVID-19 outbreaks.

According to the India Justice Report 2025, HIV prevalence among inmates is also significantly higher than the national average due to shared equipment and inadequate screening at entry. Mandatory, comprehensive medical screening could catch many of these infections before they become injurious, which also requires facilities to have the requisite personnel. But the report also flagged a 43% vacancy rate for medical officers, resulting in the number of inmates per doctor being 2.6 times higher than recommended by the Model Prison Manual. There are also only 25 psychologists for India's 5.7 lakh inmates. Filling this gap requires integrating prisons into the National Health Mission, ensuring a sufficient number of health workers trained to manage outbreaks, and enforcing the Manual's standards uniformly across States. As West Bengal's actions in 2020 illustrate – temporarily releasing thousands of undertrials to relieve overcrowding in the South 24 Parganas District Correctional Home and the Barurpur Central Jail – the solutions are not confined to health. The judiciary must fast-track cases involving undertrials, who constitute the majority of inmates, expand the use of bail and non-custodial alternatives for minor offences and expedite the repatriation of foreign nationals.

Daily News Analysis

Rights of Inmates: The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the **Right to Health** is a fundamental right under **Article 21**, which a prisoner does not forfeit upon incarceration.

The Undertrial Burden: A majority of inmates are undertrials. The delay in judicial proceedings leads to "perpetual overcrowding," which cannot be solved by health interventions alone but requires legal reform.

Static Linkages

I. Relevant Committees & Reports

Justice Mulla Committee (1983): Recommended that prison staff should be properly trained and organized into different cadres, emphasizing the rehabilitative aspect of prisons.

Justice Krishna Iyer Committee (1987): Focused on the rights of women prisoners and suggested specialized treatment for them.

Model Prison Manual (2016): Provides detailed guidelines on diet, hygiene, medical services, and classification of prisoners, which are currently poorly implemented across States (as Prison is a **State Subject** under the Seventh Schedule).

II. Important Judicial Pronouncements

Charles Sobhraj v. Superintendent, Central Jail (1978): Asserted that "right to life" includes the right to basic health and dignity even behind bars.

Rama Murthy v. State of Karnataka (1996): The Supreme Court identified overcrowding as a primary ground for prison reform.

III. Prison Statistics India (PSI) Report

Published annually by the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**. It serves as the primary data source for understanding occupancy rates, demographics of inmates (caste/religion), and custodial deaths.

Way Forward: A Multi-Pronged Strategy

Sector	Proposed Action
Health	Integrate prisons into the National Health Mission (NHM) to ensure standardized care and funding.
Staffing	Immediate recruitment to fill the 43% vacancy in medical cadres and increase the number of psychologists.
Legal	Expand the use of Section 436A of CrPC (now BNSS), allowing release of undertrials who have served half their

Sector	Proposed Action
	maximum potential sentence.
Technology	Use of E-Prisons project for real-time monitoring of inmate health profiles and court dates.

Conclusion

The Jalpaiguri HSV outbreak is a symptom of a deeper malaise in India’s criminal justice system. Prisons cannot be treated as isolated "black boxes" of the state; they are extensions of the public health landscape. Addressing this requires moving beyond temporary releases to systemic shifts: filling medical vacancies, fast-tracking undertrial cases, and strictly adhering to the Model Prison Manual. As the judiciary notes, a sentence of imprisonment is a loss of liberty, not a loss of the right to remain alive and healthy.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Which of the following committees is correctly matched with its focus area?

Committee	Focus Area
1. Mulla Committee	Prison reforms
2. Krishna Iyer Committee	Women prisoners
3. Sarkaria Commission	Prison administration

Select the correct answer:

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

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The prison system in India suffers from systemic issues such as staff shortages and poor healthcare infrastructure. Discuss and suggest a multi-dimensional reform strategy. **(150 Words)**

Page 10 : GS II : International Relations / Prelims Exam

In the evolving landscape of a multipolar world, the BRICS grouping (originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) has transitioned from a purely economic bloc to a strategic powerhouse. Under India's 2026 Presidency (Theme: "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability"), Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) have emerged as the "core strategic pillars." This analysis examines how BRICS is leveraging collective scientific capacity to challenge Western technological hegemony and address Global South challenges.

On scientific collaborations in BRICS

BRICS functions as a collaborative force aimed at establishing a multipolar world system. Cooperation in science, technology and innovation has been a key agenda for the grouping and has expanded over the years to include socially relevant areas such as energy, water, health and the environment.

FULL CONTEXT

**Krishna Kavi Scientist
 Sacha Saha**

The BRICS grouping, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, is a globally significant collective defined by its substantial scientific and technological capacity, natural resources, and total population. Since its formation, the group has evolved into a prominent international voice, representing countries that seek to challenge and provide an alternative to Western hegemony. BRICS functions as a collaborative force aimed at establishing a multipolar world system. While the group's position on global finance and macroeconomic issues are widely recognised, the depth of cooperation among member states regarding science, technology, and innovation (STI) remains less publicised.

At a time in which global scientific collaboration is increasingly dictated by geopolitical tensions, techno-nationalism, and strategic competition, identifying and maximising its functions and export routes, BRICS assumes a critical role in the global STI landscape. Through this platform, member countries can coordinate their strategies, amplify their collective voice in global economic, governance, and influence development finance through institutions like the New Development Bank.

These members are also vital contributors to global trade, energy production, and the supply of essential natural resources. The 2022 launch of BRICS+ signaled a move towards a more inclusive forum, fostering development and political cooperation across the Global South to reduce technological dependencies. This collaboration is now a concrete effort to build shared capacities through various framework programmes. The group's explicit membership has expanded to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Iran.

Cooperation in STI
 Cooperation in STI has been a part of the BRICS agenda since its early years. It was formally recognised in 2011 and has consolidated in moving between senior officials and the BRICS Ministers of Science, Technology, and Innovation. A 2008-2011 action plan of understanding Fundamental and operational agenda for collaborative research and capacity building. This framework has since expanded the scope of cooperation, allowing member states to leverage their complementary strengths to address shared developmental challenges and advance frontier sciences.

The first BRICS Action Plan for Innovation Cooperation (2012-2020) tasked the Science, Technology, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship Partnership (STIEIP) Working Group with implementing various programmes. These initiatives focused on strengthening networks, the role of youth and women in STI, and collaboration regarding technology transfer and business incubators. Over time, BRICS has moved from early joint research calls focused on fundamental science toward prioritising innovation and technology transfer.

These priorities were formally identified in annual ministerial declarations. The BRICS Ministers of Science, Technology,



Summit dialogue (R) leaders started in the 13th annual BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro on July 15, 2019.

and Innovation meet once a year to approve and sign strategic documents. Within each member country, one or two lead agencies coordinate the activities, issue calls for proposals, and prepare project files for approval during the respective country's presidency. For example, during India's chairmanship, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) were the lead agencies.

A clear emphasis on innovation-driven and technology-enabled ecosystem is evident in recent summit outcomes and initiatives such as BRICS and the BRICS Technology Transfer Centre (TTC). The TTC has made notable progress in creating policy frameworks and institutional links for cross-border technology commercialisation. However, despite this progress, large-scale commercialisation of these technologies remains limited.

The focus of BRICS joint research calls has transitioned from basic science and enabling technologies to include more socially relevant areas such as energy, water, health, and the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, prompting a pivot to public health, vaccine research, biosecurity, and digital health. Recent calls have incorporated high performance computing (HPC), artificial intelligence, information and communication technology (ICT), and space-related applications. Scientific collaboration has strengthened over time, with a growing focus on artificial intelligence and data-intensive science.

While working groups reflect these progress areas across different fields, significant progress is being made in ICT and HPC, highlighted by the establishment of the BRICS Institute of Future Networks, as well as in space cooperation following a 2021 intergovernmental agreement. Conversely, areas that require heavy infrastructure or are more exploratory, such as megascience projects and ocean research, the 2020 Declaration of Intent articulated that leadership from a multipolar world is essential to address global challenges. The declaration outlines a vision for all governments to be

equitable, inclusive, and development-oriented, moving the partnership towards a strategic collaboration with shared economic and societal objectives. While the 2023-24 Action Plan focused on working and thematic frameworks, subsequent plans aim to scale progress for greater impact, focusing on biotechnology, climate tech, industrial innovation, and AI. Under India's 2026 Presidency, with the theme "Building for Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability", the group is positioned to deepen its scientific partnership, the goal is to leverage expanded membership to strengthen capacities and address challenges like digital divides, public health crises, and climate resilience. However, participation from non-members remains limited, among the most recent additions, only Egypt and Iran joined the call for proposals issued last December. Additionally, the Chair BRICS Research Centre on New Quality Productive Forces was recently inaugurated in Beijing. This centre serves as an international platform for academic exchange and technological research.

Challenges and concerns
 When compared to nations like South Korea, the National Innovation System (NIS) of BRICS countries exhibit various strengths and weaknesses. Specifically, government expenditure on research and development (R&D) is relatively lower across the group, with the exception of China. Research suggests that the link between BRICS nations and South Korea is weak, and neither countries are leading. Data has significant catching up to do according to various innovation indicators. With expansion into BRICS+, the innovation systems of new members also require assessment and strengthening. This strengthening could be a priority for BRICS over the next decade, with the potential to eventually replace their governments across the broader Global South. As noted by Stanford University visiting scholar Isha Dattani, the heterogeneity of economic development and scientific capacity makes it difficult to reconcile differing interests. Consequently, BRICS+ may need to focus on cultivating the "joint link" between specific members. Comparisons to the European Union (EU)

suggest that BRICS could learn from the EU's wide variety of STI programs, as BRICS currently offers more limited options. Further, although competition for funding is intense, the most funding available remains modest. Experts suggest that these programmes must reach a new qualitative level to effectively respond to major global challenges. Currently, however, research into STI cooperation among BRICS nations is limited, and the existing mechanism lacks a framework for regular study to provide data-driven inputs to member countries.

A way forward
 While BRICS countries have achieved significant collaboration, there are questions regarding whether the current framework is sufficient to manage STI cooperation. The current system, where the lead role rotates annually with the presidency, is not ideally suited for long-term requirements. BRICS could potentially establish a central mechanism above the EU's structure program, establishing a Secretariat to manage funds, handle all proposals, monitor progress, and review outcomes.

Developing a law framework. Mega-science projects could also foster deeper cooperation. The framework for STI cooperation should occasionally expand beyond joint funding schemes to include technology projects, a shared promote research that the governance of STI and the impact of emerging technologies on BRICS+ nations. This would facilitate greater coherence in international treaty negotiations and help build capacity for STI governance. In conclusion, while STI cooperation within BRICS has progressed significantly since 2010 despite various constraints, there is substantial room for improvement. Making the framework more effective, agile, and credible will enhance the group's legitimacy in the global arena. As the Chair of BRICS in 2026, India has the opportunity to lead this transition. (Krishna Kavi Scientist is Adjunct Professor of Law, Research Cell at I.I.T. Kharagpur, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, Odisha and Information Systems for Developing Countries (ISDC), New Delhi.)

THE GIST

BRICS has emerged as a key transitional voice on global finance and macro-economic issues. However, the cooperation among member states on science, technology, and innovation remains less publicised.

Scientific collaboration among BRICS nations has strengthened over time, but more that require many frameworks or an more incentives such as mega science projects and joint or joint research have developed slowly.

While existing grassroots effort have shared development priorities, their progress varies across different fields. There are questions regarding whether the current framework is sufficient for future needs.



Core Analysis: The STI Architecture of BRICS

1. Evolution of Cooperation

Formalization: STI cooperation was formally recognized in 2011, but the **2015 MoU** established it as a strategic pillar.

Shift in Focus: The grouping has moved from "Fundamental/Basic Science" to "**Innovation and Technology Transfer.**"

Recent initiatives like **iBRICS** and the **BRICS Technology Transfer Centre (TTC)** aim to commercialize research across borders.

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Social Relevance: Post-COVID-19, priorities have shifted to "Socially Relevant Areas" including vaccine research, biosecurity, digital health, and climate-resilient technologies.

2. Key Pillars of Collaboration (2025-26)

Artificial Intelligence (AI): The **2025 Declaration on AI** elevated AI from a sub-theme to a central pillar. It advocates for an equitable, development-oriented governance model, contrasting with the often restrictive regulatory frameworks of the West.

Space & High-Performance Computing (HPC): Significant progress is seen in the **BRICS Institute of Future Networks** and the 2021 Intergovernmental Agreement on Space Cooperation.

New Quality Productive Forces: The inauguration of the **China-BRICS Research Centre** in Beijing focuses on frontier technological research to drive modern industrialization.

3. Challenges & Constraints

Institutional Instability: Cooperation currently lacks a **permanent secretariat**. The leadership and coordination rotate annually with the presidency, hindering long-term project monitoring.

Economic Heterogeneity: With the expansion to **BRICS+** (including Iran, Egypt, UAE, etc.), the vast difference in Gross Domestic Expenditure on R&D (**GERD**) makes it difficult to align interests. Currently, China is the only member with R&D spending comparable to advanced economies like South Korea.

Uneven Participation: While the bloc has expanded, active participation in research calls remains concentrated among older members (plus Egypt and Iran).

Static Linkages

I. The Concept of "Techno-Nationalism"

This refers to the link between a nation's technological capabilities and its national security/economic competitiveness.

BRICS Context: By collaborating on STI, members seek to bypass Western "Export Controls" and "Sanctions," creating an alternative technological ecosystem.

II. India's Role & Institutional Framework

Lead Agencies: In India, the **Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)** and the **Department of Biotechnology (DBT)** coordinate BRICS STI activities.

New Development Bank (NDB): While primarily for infrastructure, the NDB is increasingly looked upon to provide development finance for large-scale innovation projects.

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III. Comparison with Global Frameworks

EU's Horizon Program: A benchmark for BRICS. The EU has a centralized fund and secretariat, which experts suggest BRICS should replicate to move to a "new qualitative level."

The Way Forward: India's 2026 Presidency

As the Chair in 2026, India has a unique opportunity to institutionalize these scientific gains:

Establishing a Secretariat: To manage funds and monitor long-term "Mega-science Projects" (e.g., Deep Sea Mining or Polar Research).

Bridging the Digital Divide: Leveraging India's "Digital Public Infrastructure" (DPI) model to help new BRICS+ members catch up.

STI Governance Research: Moving beyond just funding projects to researching the impact of emerging tech on Global South societies.

Conclusion

BRICS STI cooperation represents a "concrete effort to reduce technological dependencies." While the expansion to BRICS+ adds complexity, it also offers a broader base for "Paired Links" (bilateral science partnerships within the bloc). For India, leading this transition in 2026 is not just about scientific exchange, but about defining the rules of global technology governance in a multipolar era.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The term "Techno-nationalism" refers to:

- (a) Promotion of traditional industries through subsidies
- (b) Linking technological development with national power and security
- (c) Nationalization of all technology companies
- (d) Restricting foreign direct investment in IT sector

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "BRICS is evolving from an economic grouping into a strategic technological alliance." Discuss in the context of recent developments. (250 Words)

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In March 2026, the global economy is grappling with a "war cloud" as the conflict in the Middle East escalates, specifically involving Iran and the UAE. This geopolitical instability has pushed oil prices above \$100 a barrel, creating a volatile environment for the U.S. Dollar (USD) and forcing major central banks (Fed, ECB, BoE, BoJ) to recalibrate their monetary policies. The situation mirrors the "price shocks" of 2022 but with a different set of macroeconomic drivers.

Core Analysis: Geopolitical & Economic Interplay

1. The "Strait of Hormuz" Crisis

Supply Chain Chokepoint: The partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran is the primary driver of the \$100+ oil price. As a critical waterway for global energy, any disruption here directly impacts inflation expectations worldwide.

Selective Traffic: The suggestion that Iran might allow ships destined for India and China to pass indicates a strategic use of "energy diplomacy" to maintain ties with major Asian powers while under pressure from the West.

2. Currency Market Dynamics

USD Directionless: Typically a "safe haven," the USD is currently struggling for direction. Unlike 2022, when a hawkish Fed and weak global growth supported a strong dollar, current drivers are "missing" or inconsistent.

The Yen's Vulnerability: The Japanese Yen has weakened toward the 160 level. As a net energy importer, Japan is disproportionately hit by rising oil prices, leading to a "sell-off" despite verbal interventions by authorities.

Euro's Decline: The Euro hit its lowest level since August 2025 (\$1.1409), reflecting Europe's sensitivity to energy supply shocks and the potential for the ECB to hike rates further in 2026 to curb inflation.

3. Central Bank Dilemma: The 2022 Lesson

Investors are anticipating a return to the "tightening cycle" logic:

Inflation Expectations: Central banks are now more likely to "react quickly" to avoid the persistent inflation seen post-pandemic.

Rate Hikes vs. Cuts: Before the conflict, markets were pricing in rate cuts; now, they are pricing in two ECB rate hikes for 2026. This shift highlights how geopolitical conflict can instantly reverse the "monetary easing" narrative.

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Dollar struggles for direction as focus shifts



Under war cloud: U.S. dollar banknotes are seen in this illustration. REUTERS

Reuters
 "The U.S. dollar lacked a clear direction on Tuesday as investors shifted their focus to central bank meetings, amid uncertainty about the conflict in the Middle East and the oil price outlook. The Middle East conflict and its economic impact remained in the spotlight with oil prices above \$100 a barrel on worries about supply with the Strait of Hormuz mostly shut. Crude futures dropped in the previous session after some vessels sailed through the critical waterway."

"If Iran allows ships destined for India, China and South Asia that could significantly reduce the pressure on supply," said Mohit Kumar, an economist at Jefferies.

Control of Strait traffic
 "At the same time Iran can claim to retain control of the Strait traffic." Iran launched fresh attacks on the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, the kind of strikes on U.S. Gulf allies that President Donald Trump said had not been expected.

Investors are now wondering whether economies are returning to a 2022-style environment, when central banks launched a major tightening cycle.

"The Fed will announce its policy decision on Wednesday, with the European Central Bank, the Bank of England and the Bank of Japan following a day later.

They are all expected to keep rates unchanged, but investors will focus on any clues as to how policymakers might respond to the war in the Middle East.

"I think central banks will closely monitor the development of inflation expectations as a lesson from the previous price shock," said Antje Praefcke, forex analyst at Commerzbank.

"And they may also react more quickly than they did after the pandemic," she added.

Traders are pricing in almost two European Central Bank rate hikes in 2026, a sharp shift from the roughly 50% chance of a cut seen before the conflict began. "It is a different environment from 2022, with the Russia-Ukraine war beginning," said Paul Mackel, global head of forex research at HSBC.

"The U.S. dollar had other supportive drivers, including a hawkish Federal Reserve and weaker global growth. These are now missing," he added. The single currency was down 0.15% at \$1.1490. On Monday, it reached \$1.1409, its lowest level since August 2025.

HSBC's Mackel sees euro/dollar at a 1.10-1.12 range, if Gulf energy supply restrictions persist.

The U.S. dollar index, which measures the value of the greenback against a basket of six major foreign currencies, was up 0.05% at 99.90. It hit 100.54 on Friday, its highest level since May 2025.

The Japanese yen weakened to 159.31 per dollar, just shy of the crucial 160 level, despite verbal warnings from Japanese authorities. It's down more than 2% against the dollar since the war began at the end of February.

Static Linkages

I. The Strait of Hormuz

Geography: A narrow waterway between the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. It is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint.

Strategic Importance: Approximately one-fifth of the world's total oil consumption passes through this strait daily. For India, which imports ~85% of its crude, the stability of this route is a matter of National Energy Security.

II. Monetary Policy Transmission

Hawkish vs. Dovish: A "Hawkish" stance involves raising interest rates to fight inflation (strengthening the currency). A "Dovish" stance involves lowering rates to stimulate growth (weakening the currency).

Currency Appreciation/Depreciation: High oil prices lead to an increased demand for USD (since oil is priced in dollars), leading to the depreciation of currencies of oil-importing nations like India (INR) and Japan (JPY).

III. The U.S. Dollar Index (DXY)

It measures the value of the USD against a basket of six currencies: Euro, Swiss Franc, Japanese Yen, Canadian Dollar, British Pound, and Swedish Krona. The Euro carries the highest weight (~57.6%).

Conclusion

Aim, Think & Achieve

The 2026 Middle East conflict has introduced a "supply-side shock" that threatens to derail the global "soft landing" hopes. For India, the volatility in the USD and oil prices poses a dual challenge: a rising import bill and potential imported inflation. The shift in focus from "growth support" to "inflation containment" by central banks suggests that the era of high-interest rates may persist longer than previously forecasted.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Explain how rising crude oil prices impact inflation, exchange rates, and current account balance in India. **(150 Words)**

India's West Asia reset, more sinned against than sinning

During the past month, Indian policy towards West Asia has stirred domestic controversy. As substantive Indian interests are at stake, a professional assessment, based on two trends, is offered without wading into the domestic political blame game.

A link to two trends

First, over the past decade, India has raised its diplomatic engagement with West Asia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made 15 visits to the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – some after a multi-decade hiatus. He also visited Israel twice, and the Palestinian Authority and Iran each once. Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) have been signed with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, and similar negotiations are underway with the GCC and Israel.

With over \$160 billion in bilateral trade and 10 million diaspora, the GCC ranks as India's largest socio-economic partner. Last decade's engagements spurred synergy, although the promised investments have lagged. India's political gains include a de-hyphenation with Pakistan, greater strategic convergence with stronger defence and security tie-ups and growing acceptance of India as a responsible and friendly status quo power.

Second, the Gulf monarchies' ardour for a foreign power is normally rooted in the foreign power's potential contribution to the security and stability of their royal family, state and region – in that order. Exceptional turmoil in West Asia since October 2023, and a three-week-old war with the GCC countries under direct Iranian drone and missile attacks and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, have accentuated their search for a better security paradigm than the eight-decade-old regional Pax Americana.

The recent reset in India's diplomacy in West Asia largely acknowledges the aforementioned two trends and attempts to harness them to serve India's national interest. To their credit, India's policymakers have finally realised which side of the bread is buttered, and have launched a qualitative upscaling of a symbiosis with key West Asian countries. Recent initiatives, such as Mr. Modi's visit to Israel and his individual phone calls to all his GCC counterparts during the early days of the hostilities, have not only assured them of India's categorical support to their security and stability but also conveyed that India shares and prioritises their concerns at this critical juncture. Later, he also spoke with his Iranian counterpart.

The new doctrine is clearer-sighted and emphasises hard diplomacy. This reset is bereft of two traditional aspects that often dampen the bilateral amity: First, India did not chant the traditional please-all mantras that left all



Mahesh Sachdev

is a former Indian Ambassador with an interest in West Asia and oil matters

stakeholders partially satisfied and India at the margins of the arena. There was no attempt to "balance" its public policy on controversial issues such as the "two-state solution" and Iran's quest for nuclear technology. Second, India's statements reflected its views without needless third-party citations. This demonstrates India's growing confidence as a credible and autonomous power.

Some domestic detractors have criticised the policy reset on multiple grounds. First, Mr. Modi's Israel visit (February 25-26) that concluded two days before Tel Aviv unleashed a military campaign against Iran is seen as untimely. Second, the perceived abandonment of India's traditional support for Palestinians and Iran is seen as immoral. Third, South Block is accused of surrendering India's sovereign autonomy to western dictates. Fourth, this activist reset may lead to strategic overreach with concomitant challenges such as exposure to security threats and costly defence tie-ups abroad.

The dates of the Prime Minister's visit to Israel were likely to have been set weeks in advance without any premonition of the February 28 offensive. The West Asia situation being perennially on the front burner makes any such visit risky, giving the ex-post facto criticism of the timing an unfair advantage of 50:50 hindsight. At the same time, the focus of the visit being bilateral renders it in a different domain.

Where other international actors stand

The perceived "immorality" of India's reset is largely misdirected and should be aimed at more worthy targets, such as China, Russia and Pakistan. Beijing siphoned off nearly 90% of the sanctioned Iranian oil exports, rendering only lip service to Tehran; Russia, which signed a 20-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with Iran last year, has also underdelivered. And last year, Pakistani generals promised to nuke Israel if it attacked Iran; they are now U.S. President Donald Trump's favourites. Similarly, even the Arabs and Muslim states were conspicuously silent during the Gaza conflict.

While the Indian reset is a long-overdue recognition of the tectonic geopolitical shifts in West Asia, the pendulum swung to the other extreme and is being gradually realigned with national interests. The regional dynamic being notoriously mercurial, India should strive to keep its options more open. The Palestine Cause cannot be wished away forever. At the end of the day, Iran would remain an important player for India as an oil supplier and as a large market for Indian products, reconstruction projects and services. Iran, which borders Pakistan and Afghanistan, could be a strategic ally. Further, if subterranean trends such as growing Arab unease with the American and Israeli Armageddon, the

Saudi-UAE rift, the Iraq-Iran estrangement, and aggressive positioning by Pakistan and Türkiye are taken on board, a more nuanced reset would have suitably underscored continuity and inclusion. In retrospect, India could have reacted faster to the developments, such as the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader and the appointment of his successor. Political correctness should not make India taciturn, as the diplomatic doublespeak offers many ways to skin the proverbial cat. India's relations with the U.S. and Israel are not so fragile as to be upended by our agreeing to disagree. Finally, India could have rendered more humanitarian relief to millions affected by the hostilities.

An opportunity for India

The ongoing reset should accommodate two incipient, but profound, regional movements with long-term positives for India. First, the long-standing "Oil-for-Security" compact between the Washington-led West and the moderate Arab regimes has become a collateral casualty of the ongoing U.S.-Israel war against Iran. The U.S. joined Israel in attacking Iran without prior notification to the GCC, ignoring the latter's cautionary advice. The West not only failed to protect them from Iranian retaliation, but its military bases on their soil became lightning rods for the Iranian attacks. Now, they fear that the U.S. may abruptly conclude the campaign, leaving them to face Iran's wrath. Once the dust settles, the GCC states may reduce their reliance on the U.S. and diversify their security partnership options to countries such as India, which are less likely to act as a Praetorian Guard. India's response to any such proposal ought to be based on a careful SWOT analysis with clear rules of engagement.

Second, the Iranian retaliations against the GCC have disrupted business activity and supply chains, and an early return to 'business as usual' appears unlikely. The GCC's appeal as an oasis of eco-political stability in the turbulent region has taken a serious long-term knock, leading to some stakeholders' clamour for a "GCC+1" strategy. India's eco-diplomacy must strive to position India as a viable and attractive alternative hub to the GCC's ritzy but fragile hotspots, which thrived by weaning away capital and talent from India. The current commotion is a historic opportunity to seize what is rightfully ours.

To remain relevant and effective, a country needs a dynamic foreign policy grounded in realism and national interest. Its execution requires the right mix of consistency, agility and modulation. As India's West Asia policy matures, it is relevant to recall British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston's maxim, "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual..."

India needs balance, sensitivity and agility to leverage emerging opportunities in West Asia

GS Paper II : International Relations

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question: "India's West Asia policy is transitioning from balancing to hard realism." Critically examine in the context of recent geopolitical developments. (250 Words)

Context :

In early 2026, India's West Asia policy has undergone a fundamental "reset," moving away from traditional "balancing" (non-alignment) toward a doctrine of Hard Realism. Authored by former Ambassador Mahesh Sachdev, this assessment highlights how India is navigating a regional "Armageddon"—a conflict involving Israel, the U.S., and Iran—while prioritizing its own strategic autonomy and socio-economic interests with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Core Analysis: The New West Asia Doctrine

1. The Shift from "Mantra" to "Hard Diplomacy"

For decades, India practiced a "please-all" policy, frequently citing the "Two-State Solution" or supporting Iran's nuclear rights to maintain balance. The 2026 reset abandons this:

Decisive Engagement: PM Modi's direct outreach to Israel and individual GCC leaders during hostilities signals that India now prioritizes **security and stability** over ideological rhetoric.

De-hyphenation: India has successfully separated its ties with Israel from the Palestine issue, and its ties with the Arab world from the Pakistan factor.

2. The "Oil-for-Security" Vacuum

The 80-year-old **Pax Americana** (U.S. protection of Gulf monarchies in exchange for oil) is crumbling:

The Catalyst: The U.S. and Israel launched strikes against Iran without notifying GCC allies, leaving these monarchies vulnerable to Iranian retaliation.

The Opportunity: GCC states are now looking to diversify security partners. India, viewed as a "responsible status quo power," is a primary candidate for this new security paradigm.

3. The "GCC+1" Strategy

The conflict has shattered the image of the Gulf as a stable "oasis" for business.

Economic Hub Shift: As supply chains in the Gulf are disrupted by Iranian drone strikes and the closure of the **Strait of Hormuz**, India is positioning itself as an alternative "stable hub" for capital and talent that previously flowed to Dubai or Doha.

Criticisms and Rebuttals

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Daily News Analysis

Criticism	Strategic Rebuttal
Timing: PM's Israel visit occurred just before the offensive.	Visits are planned weeks in advance; West Asia is perennially volatile, making "perfect timing" impossible.
Immorality: Abandoning Palestine and Iran is seen as a betrayal.	International relations are governed by interests. Critics should look at Russia and China, who have "underdelivered" on their treaties with Iran.
Strategic Overreach: Risk of being dragged into costly foreign defense tie-ups.	India's engagement is based on a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) to ensure autonomy.

Static Linkages

I. India-GCC Relations

Socio-Economic Weight: The GCC is India's largest trading partner (~\$160 billion) and hosts a **10 million-strong diaspora**, sending vital remittances.

CEPA: India has signed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with the **UAE** and **Oman**, serving as blueprints for future trade with the entire bloc.

II. Strategic Autonomy

The reset demonstrates that India no longer requires "third-party citations" (Western or UN approvals) to validate its foreign policy. This is a hallmark of a **"Leading Power"** rather than a "Balancing Power."

III. The Iran Factor

Despite the tilt toward the GCC and Israel, Iran remains a "strategic ally" due to its border with Afghanistan/Pakistan and its role in the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)**.

Conclusion

India's West Asia reset is a long-overdue transition to **Realpolitik**. By recognizing that the U.S. security umbrella is leaking, India is stepping in not as a "Praetorian Guard," but as a credible partner for stability. However, as the author warns, the "Palestine Cause" and the "Iran Factor" cannot be ignored forever. The path forward requires a "nuanced reset" that balances India's new-found assertiveness with its traditional role as a provider of humanitarian relief and a champion of inclusivity.