



Sanskriti IAS

18th Mar 2026



IMPORTANT

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 1

CLOSE TO THE LATE AYATOLLAH KHAMENEI, HE WAS IRAN'S FORMER NUCLEAR NEGOTIATOR

Iran's security chief Ali Larijani killed, says Israel as war rages

Netanyahu says head of Basij militia also killed; no response yet from Iran

Parisa Hafezi, Jana Choukeir & Maayan Lubell
Dubai, Jerusalem, March 17



Ali Larijani was a former Speaker of Iran's Parliament. AP FILE

ISRAELI PRIME Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday said Israeli forces have killed Iran's security chief Ali Larijani, one of the most powerful figures in the Islamic nation. He also claimed that Gholamreza Soleimani, who led the volunteer Basij militia, has been eliminated too.

"This morning, we eliminated Ali Larijani... the boss of the Revolutionary Guards, that group of gangsters that effectively runs Iran. Alongside him, we also eliminated the commander of the Basij (Soleimani). They are the gangsters' assistants who are terrorising

PM MODISPEAKS TO AL NAHYAN, CONDEMNS ATTACKS ON UAE PAGE 9

the population on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities," he said in a statement. "We are undermining this »CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

LATEST



South Korean monks protest against President Trump's call to allies to send warships. AP

- NATO'S REFUSAL TO HELP A FOOLISH MISTAKE: TRUMP
- HITTING IRANIAN REGIME INFRA WITH NEW WAVE OF STRIKES, SAYS ISRAEL
- FUJAIRAH PORT HIT; DUBAI SHUTS AIRSPACE AGAIN
- DRONES TARGET U.S. EMBASSY IN IRAQ

MORE REPORTS, PAGES 16, 17, 18

Trump's counter-terror chief quits: 'Iran posed no imminent threat'

Clear we started this war due to pressure from Israel: Joe Kent



Julian E Barnes & Robert Draper
Washington, March 17

JOE KENT, one of the United States' top counterterrorism officials, announced his resignation on Tuesday, citing his opposition to the Iran war and what he said was Israel's in-

Joe Kent's wife was killed while fighting the Islamic State group in Syria in 2019. AP

fluence over the Trump administration's policies.

"I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran," Kent, the director »CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Iran security chief Larijani killed

regime in the hope of giving the Iranian people an opportunity to remove it. It will not happen all at once, and it will not happen easily," the Israeli PM said.

"At the same time, we are helping our American friends in the Gulf. I spoke at length with President Trump on this matter yesterday... There are many more surprises. By stratagems, you shall make war. We will not reveal all the stratagems here, but as I told you, there are many," Netanyahu said.

There was no immediate response from Tehran to Netanyahu's remarks. Iranian state

media published a handwritten note by Larijani commemorating Iranian sailors killed in a US attack whose funeral was expected on Tuesday.

Larijani, who was the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, would be the most senior figure assassinated since supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei was killed on February 28. A former nuclear negotiator and a close ally of Khamenei, he was seen in Tehran on Friday taking part in Quds Day rallies.

Later, the US offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information on senior Iranian

military and intelligence officials, including Larijani, as part of a list of 10 figures linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Larijani hails from one of Iran's most famous political families. A former parliamentary speaker and senior policy adviser, he was appointed to advise the late Khamenei on strategy in nuclear talks with the Donald Trump administration. He was sanctioned by the US Treasury in January as Tehran violently suppressed nationwide protests. It identified him as being "responsible for coordinating the response to the

protests on behalf of the supreme leader of Iran."

Soleimani's Basij militia is a part-time paramilitary force under the control of the IRGC that is often used to quell protests inside Iran.

The killings would strip Iran of key leaders as the Islamic Republic faces its greatest challenge in recent decades in its war with the US and Israel.

Meanwhile, the conflict in West Asia rages. There was no let-up in attacks by both sides on Tuesday, with Iran launching missiles on Israel overnight, underscoring that Tehran retains the capacity to carry out long-range strikes despite more than two weeks of pounding by US and Israeli forces.

REUTERS, with PTI inputs

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 1

Residents and volunteers at the drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul, Tuesday. AP

RELATED REPORT, PAGE 16

Pak strike on Kabul hospital kills 400; 'massacre dressed up as op', says India

Omid hospital treated hundreds, provided vocational training to locals

Shubhajit Roy
New Delhi, March 17

OVER 400 people were killed and more than 250 injured in an airstrike by Pakistan on a drug rehabilitation centre in Kabul, Afghanistan's Taliban government said Tuesday, sharply escalating tensions between the two neighbours.

Condemning the "barbaric" attack, India called it a "heinous act of aggression by Pakistan" and "a blatant assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty".

Rejecting the Afghan charge, Pakistan said it "precisely targeted military installations and terrorist support infrastructure" Monday night.

In New Delhi, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, 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. Pakistan is now trying to dress up a massacre as a military operation."

"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 behaviour and its repeated attempts to externalise internal failures through increasingly desperate acts of violence beyond its borders," he said.

"That this attack was carried out during the holy month

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

E. EXPLAINED

From skirmishes to conflict

Skirmishes that used to occur frequently along the Durand Line have escalated into a conflict in which Pakistan and Afghanistan are targeting each other. Islamabad accuses Kabul of providing safe havens to the TTP and Baloch insurgents, and of allowing attacks from its soil — a charge Afghanistan rejects. A fragile ceasefire effected last year collapsed this year after a wave of attacks.

Pak strike on Kabul hospital kills 400

of Ramzan, a time of peace, reflection, and mercy among Muslim communities across the world, makes it all the more reprehensible. There is no faith, no law, and no morality that can justify the deliberate targeting of a hospital and its patients," he said.

The international community, Jaiswal said, must hold the perpetrators of this criminal act accountable and ensure that the wanton targeting by Pakistan of civilians in Afghanistan ceases without delay.

"India extends its deepest condolences to the bereaved families, wishes a swift recovery to those injured, and stands in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan in this tragic moment. We also reiterate our unwavering support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan," he said.

This is the third statement

by the Indian government in the last one month on Pakistan's attacks on Afghanistan, but this is the sharpest statement so far.

Established in 2016, the Omid hospital in Kabul has treated hundreds of people, and also provided them with vocational training such as tailoring and carpentry to make them more employable.

On Tuesday, Pakistan claimed its armed forces struck a target that was "Camp Phoenix", several kilometres away from the hospital. Pakistan launched Operation Ghazab l'il Haq on the night of February 26, following firing by the Afghan Taliban from across the border.

Richard Bennett, the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Afghanistan, said he was "dismayed" by fresh reports of Pakistani airstrikes and civilian deaths.



GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

GS 1 : SOCIETY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 18

China's ethnic unity law shows little tolerance for diversity

Rishika Singh

New Delhi, March 17

CHINA'S TOP legislative body last week adopted a law for securing "unity and harmony" among the country's ethnic groups, presenting the state's view of its cultural diversity.

What does the law say?

According to a translation from China Law Translate, a community project affiliated with the Yale Law School, its preamble mentions shared identity and unity. It speaks of a struggle of "jointly resisting foreign aggression," referencing colonial rule in the 19th century, and recognises the Communist Party as "the vanguard" of the people. China Law Translate told *The Indian Express* over email: "The main thrust of the law is integration, emphasising that while ethnicities have their own valuable traditions and languages, there must be a common sense of identity as 'Chinese People' and building this conception requires some assimilation." While integration generally means diverse parts coming together, assimilation sees groups mirroring the practices of the dominant group to blend in.

Some key provisions are:

- **Article 10:** "Matters of ethnic unity and progress are not to be interfered with by foreign forces... using excuses such as ethnicity, religion, or human rights." This is likely referencing global criticisms for human rights violations in the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

- **Article 15:** "Schools and other educational institutions are to use the nation's common language and script as the basic language..." China Law Translate said this meant emphasised Mandarin, even in cases where minority languages are used.

UNITY AS ASSIMILATION

- The establishment of a Communist state in 1949 saw it extend control over frontier regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.
- Religious displays have been restricted under the "Sinicisation" of religion, to be subsumed under the Han Chinese culture.

- **Article 40:** "No organisation or individual may interfere with the freedom of marriage on grounds such as ethnic identity, customs, or religious beliefs." It may cover objections by religious officials of minority groups.

What is China's ethnic composition?

Officially, China recognises 56 ethnic groups, including the Hans, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, and the Mongols. Today, the Han Chinese constitute over 90% of the population and are the largest group in Taiwan.

Former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, in his book *How China Sees India and the World*, wrote, "The main challenge faced by successive Chinese empires was the perennial attacks by fierce nomadic tribes ranging across its northern and western peripheries... In some cases, these tribes themselves became Sinicised and, in turn, assumed the attitudes and mores of the heartland Chinese. The homogeneity of the latter-day Chinese is more a cultural rather than ethnic homogeneity, reinforced by shared attitudes and a unified script."

In modern China, non-Han cultural displays have been viewed as at odds with Communist ideas, and, as analysts have argued, competing with the party in terms of authority. The state has increasingly focused on the Uyghur Muslims from a security perspective. The recent carrot and stick approach in frontier areas has included mass surveillance, punishments and large infrastructure projects to boost job creation. Coming alongside a gradual in-migration of Han people, this is feared to fuel resentment among the locals.

Why has the law come about now?

The law is a continuation of ideas propagated under Chinese President Xi Jinping. For instance, it frames "ethnic unity" as part of the goal of "rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation after what is perceived as years of suppression under foreign rule. Xi has emphasised it repeatedly.

Part of achieving this goal is solidifying China's territorial claims over Hong Kong, which enjoys some independence under the 'One Country, Two Systems' scheme, and Taiwan, an island that functions independently. China has increasingly displayed its military might around the island, and Xi undertook rare visits to Tibet and Xinjiang last year.

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 18

How the global energy shock threatens India's Goldilocks era

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, March 17

INDIA HAS always been dependent on the world's energy producers on account of it having to import a vast majority of its fuel needs. But the last half-a-decade, starting with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the US and Israel's attacks on Iran and the subsequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz, has shown just how vulnerable the economy is.

The impact is already visible on the rupee, which has had to contend with weak foreign direct investment and portfolio outflows over the last one year. The Indian currency, which fell below 90- and 91-per-dollar in December, breached 92 earlier this month and ended at 92.38 on Tuesday, hovering close to its all-time low of 92.48. If crude oil prices remain elevated, even 100-per-dollar may not be far away.

According to a scenario analysis by QuantEco Research's economists, while the potential hit will be minuscule if oil averages around \$80 per barrel in 2026-27 (up from \$70 per barrel in 2025-26), the impact could become "non-linear and broad based" at higher levels: at \$100/barrel in 2026-27, the rupee could weaken to as much as 98.5-per-dollar, they found.

The Indian economy has posted impressive growth rates recently, both under the old and new GDP series, clocking in at 7.8% in the final three months of 2023. Inflation, too, has settled comfortably below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) 4% target, with inflation as per the updated Consumer Price Index (CPI) at 3.21% in February. However, this positive growth-inflation mix is now under threat.

"The Goldilocks narrative of strong growth and low inflation persists under the new GDP and CPI series, but is challenged by higher crude oil prices and fuel shortages," Nomura economists said last week.

Shock to growth, inflation

After retreating from \$100/barrel-plus levels, global crude oil prices remain highly volatile and elevated. The average price of India's crude oil basket so far in March is \$108.23/bbl, up 57% from February. And while the US has granted India a 30-day waiver to buy Russian oil stuck at sea, this isn't seen as a "game changer" by Nomura.

Meanwhile, the gas shortage has already forced the government to prioritise certain sectors and hike the price of household cooking gas by Rs 60 per cylinder, among other measures. The cooking gas

• What happens if crude price spikes?

A higher average crude oil price in 2026-27 will hurt growth, raise inflation, weaken the rupee, and widen the CAD

	FY26	FY27 pre-war	FY27 post-war		
Crude oil price assumption (\$/bbl)	70	70	80	90	100
GDP growth	7.6%	6.6-6.8%	6.5-6.7%	6.4-6.6%	6-6.2%
CPI inflation	2.1%	4.0%	4.2%	4.6%	5.1%
Current account balance (% of GDP)	-1.1%	-1.2%	-1.6%	-1.9%	-2.2%
Rupee's exchange rate (per USD)	91.5	93.0	95.5	97.0	98.5

Note: FY27 post war figures are statistical scenarios, not QuantEco Research forecasts; oil price assumption is FY27 average; bbl refers to barrel; Source: QuantEco Research

price hike by itself may push up inflation in March by 12-13 basis points (bps), according to Barclays; Nomura has already raised its forecast for average CPI inflation in 2026-27 by 70 bps to 4.5%.

The growth story is similar, with the RBI's projections pegging GDP growth (as per the old series) at 6.9-7% in the first two quarters of 2026-27, with risks "evenly balanced". Economists at ICICI Securities Primary

Dealership, however, have cut their forecast for next year by 50 bps to around 7% even if the acute supply disruptions are "largely resolved in a month". And if the conflict drags on longer and movement of energy via the Strait of Hormuz remains problematic, the resultant hit to global growth would be an additional headwind for India.

Footing the bill

Some costs due to the West Asia war are already piling up, with the Finance Ministry having sought Parliamentary approval to spend another Rs 19,230 crore on fertiliser subsidy in 2025-26 itself. An Economic Stabilization Fund, with a corpus of Rs 1 lakh crore, is also being set up.

Then there is the cost of higher global crude oil prices, which have brought down the margins of domestic oil marketing companies (OMCs) close to four-year lows as these higher prices haven't been passed on to consumers at the pump. This will hurt their dividend to the Centre — and if the government decides to reduce the excise duty, tax collections will be hit. Either way, the carefully-constructed fiscal deficit and debt-to-GDP targets of 4.3% and 55.6% of GDP are at risk just a few weeks after the 2026-27 Budget was presented.

GS 2: SOCIAL ISSUES : VULNERABLE SECTIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE : 18

• POLICY

Why Transgender Protection (Amendment) Bill 2026 has attracted criticism

Anagha Jayakumar & Partha Sarathi Biswas
New Delhi, Pune, March 17

A BILL introduced in Parliament last week seeks to make major changes to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, drawing criticism from transgender and LGBT+ groups across the country. The Transgender Protection (Amendment) Bill 2026 seeks to remove the right to gender self-identification, recognised by the Supreme Court in its landmark 2014 judgment, and introduce medical certification for identity recognition.

Definition in the 2019 Act

The 2019 Act defined a transgender person as one whose gender does not match the gender assigned to that person at birth. These include —

- Trans men and trans women, regardless of their having undergone gender-affirming (officially sex reassignment) surgery, hormone therapy or other therapies

- Persons with intersex variations
- Genderqueer persons (interpreted as including non-binary identities)
- Persons with such sociocultural identities as *kinmar*, *hijra*, *aravani* and *jogta*

This definition differentiates between sex — which refers to one's biological status as male or female based on one's anatomy, chromosomes, and hormone prevalence — and gender, a construct that determines roles, behaviours and attributes that society deems acceptable for men and women. So one's gender identity, or a person's sense of self and their gender, may or may not correlate with the sex assigned at birth.

What 2014 judgment entailed

In *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014), the Supreme Court recognised the transgender community as the "third gender" and affirmed equal applicability of fundamental rights under the Constitution to trans persons. It also affirmed the right to self-identify one's gender, meaning a person could thus identify as male, female or third gender.



A protest against the Bill in Bhubaneswar. #1

The court told the government to frame laws to ensure legal recognition to the transgender community as the third gender and take steps for their welfare.

In 2019, the Centre implemented the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, which provided for the legal recognition of the community. In practice, this meant the inclusion of the third gender (other) in

all official forms, the formation of the Transgender Welfare Board, and a mechanism to distribute transgender identity cards. These cards allow trans persons to access various government welfare schemes. Around 32,420 such cards have been issued to date.

Changes proposed in the Bill

NARROWER DEFINITION: The Bill calls the definition of a trans person under the 2019 Act "vague" and only recognises the subset of persons with sociocultural identities such as *kinmar* and *hijra*. It creates a new category describing any adult or child who has been compelled to assume a transgender identity through mutilation, emasculation, castration, amputation, or surgical, chemical, or hormonal procedures.

REMOVAL OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION: A key outcome of *NALSA v. Union of India* was captured in Section 4(2) of the 2019 Act, which enshrined the right to self-identify. The Bill says the Act was not intended to protect "each and every class of persons with various gender identities, self-perceived

sex/gender identities or gender fluidities".

MEDICAL BOARD: Under the 2019 Act, a transgender person applied to the District Magistrate and received a certificate of identity, without any medical examination or clinical gate-keeping. The new Bill mandates the formation of a medical board led by a Chief/Deputy Chief Medical Officer, at the centre or state/UT level. The DM must now take the board's recommendations, as well as those of other medical experts where relevant, before issuing a certificate of identity.

PUNISHMENT: The Act authorised punishments from six months to two years of prison, plus a fine, for pushing a trans person into forced or bonded labour, denying access or right of passage to a public place, forcing a trans person to leave their place of residence, household or village; and for causing harm, injury, or endangerment.

The Bill adds four clauses, attracting at least five years rigorous imprisonment and a fine. Two of these pertain to kidnapping and injuring a person to force assumption of trans identity. The other two punish forcing

a person to present as transgender and engage in begging, servitude or bonded labour.

Criticism of the Bill

Trans persons and activists say the amendment has taken away the right to individual self-determination of gender. Pune activist Kadambari Shaikh called this a violation of human rights. "Our identity should not need approval from others... Any change in the law must protect this right and support the freedom and dignity of transgender persons," she said.

Anil Ukarande, founder of *yutak*, an LGBT+ organisation, said: "The amendment has talked about a medical board... For a trans person, this would be difficult, given the deep transphobia in society."

The new definition recognises only transgender persons from certain "sociocultural" backgrounds, which are "centres of power as well as exploitation", he added.

Partha Sarathi Biswas is a Pune-based journalist