

GS Paper: GS-2 & GS-3

Syllabus Topics: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; Security challenges and their

India must lead in securing the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb

In the heels of the Strait of Hormuz crisis comes the new threat – a Strait of Bab el-Mandeb crisis. On July 16, Reuters reported that Iran had instructed the Houthis to close the Strait (which is between Yemen and the Horn of Africa) if the United States attacked Iran's power plants.

Whether the Houthis have the capacity to threaten the Strait or whether this is part of Iran's signalling to the U.S. is secondary. What is important is that this represents a risk to one-third of India's entire trade.

Revisiting 2024

We have been here before. When the Gaza war started in October 2023, the Ansarallah group in Yemen, also known as the Houthis, claimed solidarity with the Palestinians and launched drones and missiles at Israel. From November 2023 to March 2024, the Houthis targeted at least 40 vessels in the Red Sea, claiming that the vessels were linked to or bound for Israel.

In response, the U.S., together with allies including Singapore and Sri Lanka, launched Operation Prosperity Guardian (December 2023) to ensure "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea. This was followed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024), which was adopted in January 2024. Israel also carried out unilateral strikes against the Houthis. The Indian Navy rescued the crew of a British tanker after it was set on fire (January 26-27, 2024). By the time the U.S. declared a ceasefire in May 2025, the Houthis had been weakened, but much of the damage had already been done.

Marine insurance companies tend to be highly risk-averse. With over 90% of the world's shipping insured by just 12 protection and indemnity (P&I) clubs, shipowners have limited room to negotiate. Between November 2023 and March 2024, at least 2,000 ships avoided the Suez Canal and instead sailed around the Cape of Good



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New Delhi's leadership can help prevent another major shipping crisis in the Red Sea

Hope. This delayed critical imports to India. Global shipping routes effectively reverted to what was being done 170 years ago. Egypt lost a quarter of the Suez Canal's revenue. By July 2024, Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat had filed for bankruptcy.

This time around, the situation is more unpredictable. With U.S. forces in the region focused on Iran, it is unclear whether they will seek to secure the Red Sea as they did before.

Even in 2024, when India-bound ships were attacked by the Houthis, New Delhi had to lean directly on Tehran to bring the attacks to a halt. But that was a different time for India-Iran ties. Meanwhile, the UN Security Council is more divided today than ever before, and even if it manages to call for "freedom of navigation" in the Red Sea, it is unlikely to pass a resolution approving a force to implement that call. China is also likely to again take a unilateral approach to protecting its shipping in the Red Sea through quid pro quos with the Houthis.

If the Houthis resume attacks on shipping in the Strait, the impact on India's economy – which is already reeling from the Strait of Hormuz crisis – would be dire. While India has now ordered that no Indian mariner be deployed on ships bound to or from the Strait of Hormuz, extending the same restriction to a busy route such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb would not be easy and would adversely affect the safety and welfare of thousands of Indian seafarers.

What India should do

In 2024, France stayed out of a U.S.-led operation to guard its role in mediating between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon. Those conditions no longer exist. However, France and Japan – two countries that need shipping lanes in the Red Sea for their connectivity with Asia and Europe respectively – maintain bases in Djibouti, perched on the Red Sea. Their navies have also

conducted joint drills with the Indian Navy, which creates an opportunity for India to pre-empt a recurrence of the events of 2024.

India therefore needs to pro-actively build a naval taskforce in collaboration with France and Japan to deter attacks on shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb.

India would also do well to engage Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They had refused to join the alliance against the Houthis in 2024, given their own stance on Gaza. This time, with their economies at stake, they may not stand by. On July 20, the Houthis announced a "maritime embargo" on Saudi ships, seen as a threat against their transit through the Bab el-Mandeb. India needs to engage with these nations proactively to help secure the Red Sea, from the Suez to Bab el-Mandeb, while keeping its other partners in the region informed.

A rules-based maritime response

It needs to be emphasised that this would be a theatre-specific "Trade Protection Task Force" of navies, rather than a strategic alliance. In addition to ships and personnel, the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region hosted by India could provide the necessary maritime domain awareness, while France and Japan could complement these efforts with on-ground logistical support. The constituent navies could agree on joint rules of engagement in response to any hostile attacks. They could provide security cover or escorts requested by commercial and civilian vessels transiting the Strait, especially those bound for Europe, India, or Japan. The task force would serve as a lasting demonstration of India's resolve to ensure "respect for maritime rules and norms" as part of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

India has both the responsibility and the capability to prevent the Bab el-Mandeb from becoming a literal "Gate of Tears" this time.

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Syllabus Topics: Government policies and interventions; Fundamental Rights; Internal security challenges through communication networks. (The hindu Page no 10)

Where does the law stand on internet shutdowns?

What questions arise following the internet shutdown in Delhi during the CJP protest?

Rizmi Lia M.

The story so far:

Mobile internet services were shut down in parts of Central Delhi during the 'Chalo Sansad' protest organised by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP). Thousands of people gathered on the opening day of the Parliament's Monsoon Session, to demand the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan following the NEET paper leaks and irregularities in the CBSE school examination process. The internet shutdown, which remained in place until the evening, drew condemnation from the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) and the Software Freedom Law Centre, India (SFLC).

What is an internet shutdown?

According to web rights advocacy organisation Access Now, an internet shutdown is defined as "an intentional

disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to control the flow of information." They take many forms, from full network disruptions to slowing down internet speed or blocking platforms.

Most internet shutdowns are ordered when large numbers of people are expected to gather for political reasons, peaceful demonstrations, violent protests or religious celebrations, according to the International Federation of Journalists.

Under Section 20(2)(b) of the Telecommunications Act, 2023, telecommunication services may be suspended only on the occurrence of a public emergency or in the interest of public safety, on the grounds specified in that provision, and for reasons recorded in writing. "A protest, by itself, is not a lawful ground for suspending internet services. Under Section 20(2) of the Telecommunications Act, 2023, a

suspension may be ordered only during a public emergency or in the interest of public safety, and only for specified purposes such as maintaining public order. The order must be reasoned, published, limited in area and duration, and issued by the competent authority under the Telecommunications Suspension Rules, 2024. The government must also consider whether less restrictive measures would be sufficient," said Apar Gupta, Advocate and Founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation.

Which law governs internet shutdowns?

Internet shutdowns in India were earlier governed by Section 5(2) of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 and the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. These have now been replaced by Section 20 of the Telecommunications Act, 2023 and the Telecommunications (Temporary Suspension of Services) Rules, 2024.

Despite the updated legal framework, a review by the Digital Defenders Network found that several shutdown orders issued by State governments since late 2024 continue to invoke the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885 and the 2017 Rules.

For instance, the Secretary, Home Department, Uttar Pradesh, issued an internet suspension order applicable to the district of Bareilly on October 2, 2025, invoking Section 7 of the Telegraph Act read with Rule 2(1) of the 2017 Rules.

By continuing to rely on these outdated provisions, some States appear to have bypassed the procedural safeguards introduced under the 2024 Rules.

The current suspension order accessed by *The Hindu* as released by the Ministry of Home Affairs, was imposed across 150 cell sites according to an industry source. It stated that the order was imposed under Clause (b) of Sub-section (2) of Section 20 of The Telecommunication Act, 2023 read with 2024 Rules.

Where does India stand in terms of internet shutdowns?

India continues to record one of the highest numbers of internet shutdowns in the world. Access Now's 2025 report recorded 65 shutdowns across 12 States and Union Territories.

Jammu & Kashmir has recorded the highest number of internet shutdowns in the country, with about 449 since 2012, followed by Rajasthan (115) and Manipur (62), as per the SFLC Internet Shutdown

Tracker. India has recorded about 24 shutdowns in 2026 (as of July 22).

What limits has the SC placed?

In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020), the Supreme Court held that access to the internet is closely connected to the freedoms of speech and trade under Articles 19(1)(a) and 19(1)(g).

The Court held that any shutdown must be backed by law, pursue a legitimate objective, be necessary and proportionate, and be the least restrictive measure available. Orders must also be limited in scope and duration, accompanied by detailed reasons, published and reviewed by a competent committee. The Court observed that "complete broad suspension of telecom services, be it the internet or otherwise, must be considered by the State only if 'necessary' and 'unavoidable'.

Can orders be challenged in court?

Yes. A shutdown may be challenged before a High Court under Article 226 or, in an appropriate case, before the Supreme Court under Article 32. Courts can examine whether the order was lawful, proportionate and properly limited in area and duration.

"Indefinite suspensions are unlawful. The government must publish its orders and provide reasons capable of judicial review. Under the 2024 Rules, a suspension order cannot remain in force for over 15 days," Mr. Gupta said

GS Paper: GS-2 & GS-3

Syllabus Topics: Government policies and interventions; Development processes and the development industry (NGOs); Science and Technology.
(Indian express page no 11)

Science thrives on a global outlook, an inclusive culture. FCRA makes it difficult



VIKRAM PATEL

SUCCESSIVE GOVERNMENTS have proclaimed their vision for India to become a powerhouse of scientific research. The current NDA regime has launched new initiatives to catalyse the science ecosystem — these include the Anusandhan National Research Foundation, the introduction of national rankings of research institutions, and the institution of fellowships to attract diaspora scientists to work in Indian institutions. However, India continues to be a laggard amongst its peer nations in high-impact research productivity. None of the country's institutions figures in the top 100 of any global ranking. Many of our brightest minds continue to seek opportunities abroad, and the work of scientists is powering the rankings of their adopted institutions and, by extension, the countries in which they are located. The success of the national science ecosystem requires not just the talent of individual researchers but also a global outlook and an inclusive culture. At the heart of such an ecosystem is collaboration and partnerships between institutions within and across countries. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) has been a singular obstacle to India's science ecosystem.

First, a bit of history. The Act's genesis lies in the late 1960s, when the government suspected foreign agencies, such as the CIA, of funding trade unions, student bodies, and political organisations to undermine India's democracy. This prompted the then home minister to raise the issue in Parliament in 1969, leading to a consensus that foreign money should not be allowed to undermine the state behind the mask of charity. After due parliamentary process, the FCRA came into force on August 5, 1976 — it aimed to ensure that voluntary organisations functioned "in a manner consistent with the values of a sovereign democratic republic". Since then, successive govern-

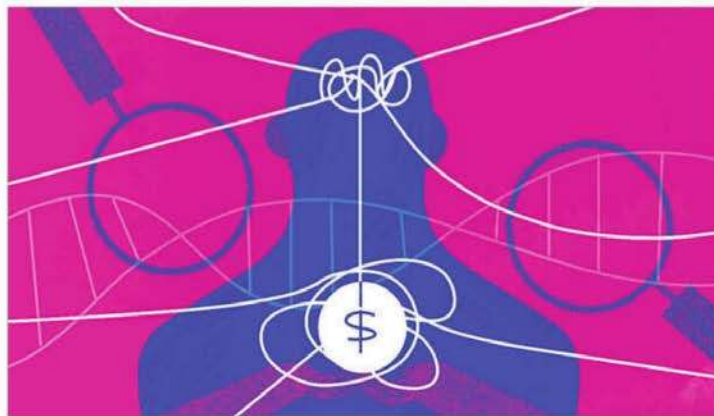


ILLUSTRATION: C R SANKUMAR

ments have tightened the regulations through multiple amendments, culminating in the most recent ones, which have ramped up the regulatory compliance for NGOs and amplified the powers of the state to terminate FCRA approval and seize the assets of organisations. It is not my intention in this article to question the rationale or legality of the FCRA, but to highlight how the FCRA, from its inception, has been throttling the work of NGOs whose work is related to science.

Readers may wonder what NGOs have to do with science in the first place. After all, many of us think of NGOs as primarily concerned with the provision of services such as education or healthcare or promoting rights-based activities (the latter being, unsurprisingly, the most sensitive sector for governments). I believe that those formulating the FCRA rules in government don't seem to recognise that many globally renowned research institutions in India are categorised as NGOs and, as such, fall under the purview of the FCRA. Examples include both institutes which have diverse scientific portfolios such as the Public Health Foundation of India, Christian Medical College (Vellore), St John's

Medical College, Ashoka and KREA universities, as well as niche institutions that work in specific fields such as Sangath, the Schizophrenia Research Foundation and the Centre for Mental Health, Law and Policy in the mental health field; the Centre for Chronic Disease Control and Dr Mohan's Diabetes Centre in the non-communicable diseases field; and M S Swaminathan Research Foundation and ATREE in biodiversity and environmental science. This vast and diverse ecosystem is, perhaps inadvertently, experiencing collateral damage from regulations designed to prevent foreign interference in India's democratic polity in multiple ways, not least through strangling the opportunity for these institutions to collaborate internationally and with each other in the country.

I offer two concrete examples to illustrate these observations. The first is the rule that foreign funds received by an NGO in India can never be repatriated out of the country. This regulation flies in the face of the reasonable requirement by international funders that unspent funds from a research project must be returned upon completion of a project. But, even more worryingly, it also means that no Indian NGO can

ever be the lead institution in an international collaboration because it cannot fulfil the obligations of a lead institution to transfer funds from the parent grant to a foreign institution. The second example is the 2020 change to the FCRA, which stopped NGOs receiving foreign donations from sharing those funds with any other NGO in India, even those legally registered to receive foreign funding. This was a deliberate shift from a "regulated transfer" model to an outright prohibition on sub-granting. In effect, this meant a shutdown of collaboration within the country, not only hurting smaller, grassroots NGOs that historically relied on larger NGOs re-granting foreign funds to them, but also hindering science, which requires engagement with communities, as is the case with many studies concerned with health and development.

It is important to note that the source of the funds for NGOs working on scientific endeavours are not donations but grants from renowned international research bodies such as the Wellcome Trust or the National Institutes of Health. These are hard-earned in globally competitive bids with selection through a transparent process of peer review; it is for this reason that such awards are highly prized by institutions such as mine because they reflect world-class scientific minds. In India, on the other hand, instead of honour and prestige, such foreign grants are viewed with suspicion.

There is an easy remedy to this matter — to bring nuance into the classification of NGOs in India and recognise the immense diversity of the roles that they play. In the case of NGOs engaged in scientific activities, this role can be readily identified through existing regulatory procedures such as recognition by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, and FCRA rules can be tailor-made for this sector of NGOs. Such a measured strategy would not undermine the goal of the government to regulate the NGO sector. At the same time, it would also not cause collateral harm to the globally renowned institutional ecosystem for science in India.

The writer is the Paul Farmer Professor at Harvard Medical School and co-founder of Sangath, which works on mental health

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Paper: GS-2 & GS-3

Syllabus Topics: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; Effects of liberalization on the economy. (Indian express page no 10)

Trade deals need to be set in strategy, not expediency



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

DEAR EDITOR I disagree

A fortnightly column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it

A RECENT editorial in this newspaper argued that a deal with the United States now will go a long way in reducing the uncertainty that has marred relations between the countries, while expanding trade ('Ahead of the big deal, strike a careful balance', *IE*, July 17). But the proposed India-United States trade agreement is about far more than trade. It is about how a rising India engages the world's largest economy while preserving the strategic confidence, policy flexibility and institutional freedom that will define its next phase of growth.

Even after agreements with the UK, Australia and Europe, no market matches the scale, investment capacity, technological depth and strategic importance of the US. Equally, America has strong reasons to deepen its economic engagement with India. It seeks access to one of the world's fastest-growing consumer markets, a trusted strategic partner in an uncertain Indo-Pacific and an economy that will shape demand for digital and financial services. Neither country can fully realise its ambitions without a deeper partnership with the other.

Washington may also have underestimated India by assuming that the goodwill and political symbolism of the Howdy Modi moment would translate into greater negotiating flexibility and acceptance of US preferences in a bilateral agreement. It did not. Tariffs, public pressure and shifting geopolitical signals may have tested the relationship, but they did not fundamentally alter India's negotiating posture, reminding both capitals that political chemistry has its limits, whereas sound public policy demands pragmatism, reciprocity and an unwavering commitment to long-term interests.

That is precisely why these negotiations deserve greater public reflection. The pursuit of immediate economic gain, or the political satisfaction of announcing a successful agreement, could gradually narrow the policy choices available to future governments. Every bilateral negotiation requires accommodation. None should diminish a nation's long-term strategic confidence.

Diplomatic engagement has become more transactional and, on occasion, un-

comfortably patronising. Tariffs, sanctions, export controls, technology restrictions and financial access have become instruments of geopolitical influence. India has navigated these changes with composure. That composure should continue, but New Delhi must remain anchored in strategic judgement rather than tactical expediency.

The commitments India accepts today may well become the standards the US expects from it and others tomorrow. Trade agreements increasingly establish geopolitical precedents, not merely commercial obligations. That is why every clause deserves to be negotiated with an eye on the next decade rather than the next news cycle. The concerns over forced labour should also prompt introspection, not indignation. India should eliminate exploitative labour practices because they weaken our economy, diminish our reputation and betray our own values, not because another country expects it.

Equal care is required in areas extending beyond merchandise trade. Labour mobility, digital trade, data governance, and emerging technologies will shape India's development long after tariff schedules are forgotten. The defining lesson of contemporary geopolitics is unmistakable: Technology that a nation does not own can, one day, be used to influence, constrain or coerce it. Trade agreements must preserve India's sovereign ability to govern its data, regulate its digital economy and shape its technological future. The same discipline should guide India's approach to food and energy security.

Agreements of this consequence acquire greater durability and public confidence when subjected to scrutiny before becoming binding national commitments. Such scrutiny strengthens international agreements by giving them wider political ownership and democratic legitimacy. The understandable desire to conclude an agreement within a political timetable should never outweigh the responsibility of preserving India's long-term strategic choices. We should negotiate for the economy we aspire to become, not merely the economy we happen to be.

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GS Paper: GS-2

Syllabus Topics: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability; Parliament and State Legislatures– structure, functioning, conduct of business. (Indian express page no 10)

The voice of India's youth must be heard inside Parliament



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE TRUE measure of a constitutional democracy lies not in the authority it wields to enforce compliance, but in the humility with which it engages dissent. A secure republic treats peaceful protest as an opportunity to look into a mirror reflecting the anxieties of its citizenry. A fragile executive, by contrast, treats that same mirror as an enemy, shattering it with lathis and turning a blind eye when the glass pieces fall on the streets outside the gates of power, cutting the veins of its citizens.

What the nation has witnessed in recent days on the streets of the national capital is a deeply troubling demonstration of democratic atrophy. Citizens, primarily young students and peaceful activists, many inspired by the symbolic leadership of the fasting Sonam Wangchuk, gathered to demand accountability on issues touching their very futures. The response from the apparatus of the state was not a dialogue, but a crackdown, silencing their voices with violence and detentions.

Lathi charges broke through crowds of non-violent demonstrators, sending nearly a hundred young men and women to hospital emergency wards with fractures, contusions, and trauma. The sight of police officers wielding batons against unarmed youth, while internet blackouts and closed metro stations throttled the flow of both information and people, felt less like the rou-

tine maintenance of public order in a constitutional republic and more like the heavy-handed oppression of a police state. I spoke to a young man at Jantar Mantar who had been hit on the head and below the eye with a lathi and still wore a large bandage to stanch the bleeding. My heart broke to see what the custodians of law and order had done to a youth who was peacefully distributing water to the protesters.

Equally jarring has been the government's disgraceful manhandling of the protesting Leader of the Opposition and the environmentalist-educator Sonam Wangchuk's hunger strike. For three weeks, Wangchuk sat in quiet, disciplined fast at Jantar Mantar, a historic venue designated precisely for the public expression of grievance. His method was classically Gandhian: Self-abnegation as an appeal to the conscience of the state. The smart thing for the government to do would have been to send a minister with a glass of nimbu-pani and the assurance of a discussion in Parliament, to urge him to break his fast.

Yet, rather than engaging in a spirit of constructive conciliation, the state chose the path of coercion. Under the cloak of medical necessity, police forces descended upon the protest site to forcibly remove the frail 59-year-old activist to a government hospital. The line between medical intervention and state custody became dangerously blurred, and even here the government was found wanting in basic humanity. The appalling treatment of Rahul Gandhi, who was bodily lifted and dragged into detention, was a betrayal of the democratic compact.

A state that fears the moral authority of an unarmed protester reveals a profound lack of confidence in its own narrative. The pattern of suppression, the targeting and arrest of student leaders, and the physical intimidation di-

rected at protest organisers speak to a broader political strategy: Render the movement leaderless, criminalise its protests, and wear out public outrage.

The scene on the streets represents a failure of governance; the response inside the halls of Parliament so far represents a systemic failure of legislative duty. As central Delhi burned with frustration and tears, one might have reasonably expected the sacred precincts of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to reverberate with urgent debate. The Opposition moved numerous notices demanding a suspension of business to discuss the breakdown of law and order, the grievances of the protesting youth, and the excessive force used by law enforcement.

These notices were met with summary rejections, procedural stonewalling, and unyielding governmental indifference. The message conveyed to the nation was unmistakable: The grievances echoing across the streets outside were unwelcome on the carpeted floors inside. When the executive insulates itself from parliamentary discussion, it strikes at the fundamental design of parliamentary democracy — a system where the executive is accountable to the legislature, representing the sovereign will of the people.

The government has done well, even if belatedly, to signal its willingness for a parliamentary discussion. For, if Parliament is not the forum for the nation's elected representatives to ventilate public grievances, interrogate executive overreach, and seek solutions to pressing social crises, then what purpose does it serve? It cannot be reduced to a glorified notice-board for ministerial announcements, nor an administrative rubber stamp to pass the government's Bills.

When a government closes the door to parliamentary debate and deploys police lathis on public streets, it creates a dangerous vac-

uum. Dissent does not disappear simply because it is beaten out of public sight; it merely turns inward, festering into cynicism and alienation among the young, like the female students at Jantar Mantar who told me in disbelief of being manhandled by policemen and witnessing demonstrators being assaulted with brutality by men in plain clothes wielding lathis studded with nails.

Democracy is sustained not by the enforcement of silence, but by the welcoming of open debate. The right to peaceful assembly under Article 19(1)(b) of our Constitution is not a privilege conceded by the state at its convenience; it is a foundational right forged in our freedom struggle. To treat peaceful demonstrators as security threats or law-and-order nuisances is to forget that the very architects of our republic were themselves courageous protesters who chose the weapon of satyagraha over submission.

The path forward to preserve our democratic compact requires an immediate course correction. An independent judicial inquiry must be instituted into the excessive use of force, pellet injuries, and lathi-charges against non-violent protesters. Accountability is essential for wrongdoing both here and in the conduct of examinations. The government must unconditionally engage with representatives of the protesting students rather than relying on police containment. And the Speaker and the Treasury benches must allow uninhibited discussion on the public's grievances on the floor of the House. That is what Parliament is for, and it must reclaim its pride of place as the deliberative sanctuary of the republic.

It is time to prove to the youth of India that their voices need not be battered and bruised on the streets to be heard in the corridors of power.

The author is a fourth-term Congress MP from Thiruvananthapuram

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