

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

24-07-2026

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; Global groupings.

The Hindu Page no 8

Warning signals for India from NATO's Ankara summit

The heads of state or government of the 32 countries that are politico-military allies under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) met in Ankara, Türkiye, on July 7-8, 2026 for what is called the Ankara Summit. Their stated objective was to review progress made since the 2025 Summit in The Hague and to set out a roadmap for continuing delivery on NATO's key objectives.

The gathering in Ankara is being regarded as one of NATO's more successful summits, despite the abrasive presence of United States President Donald Trump, who devoted most of his speaking time to extolling the putative success of U.S. strategy and talking up the superiority of American weapons systems.

A strategic road map

Four substantive commitments came out of Ankara. First, the 32 NATO allies – too often divided by divergent objectives and capacities – agreed on their “ironclad commitment to (their) collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, and to the transatlantic bond”; second, the unanimous endorsement of “The Hague defence commitment”, in which all NATO members undertook last year to allocate at least five per cent of their respective Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) on defence by 2035 – an unprecedented hike over the two per cent spending pledge that existed earlier. Third, NATO declared its “unwavering support for Ukraine in defending its freedom, sovereignty and territorial integrity”, and fourth, the alliance partners vowed to build a high technology, high capacity, Europe-wide defence industrial base (DIB) – the term for the network of firms, factories, laboratories and skilled workers needed to build and sustain a country's military power.

The focus in Ankara was overwhelmingly on implementation – turning political commitments into military capability through investment, industrial capacity and innovation.



Ajai Shukla

Former Indian Army officer (colonel), who now analyses issues and events relating to defence

Europe's defence revival and commitments may create new challenges for India's defence needs

Russia accuses the U.S. and European democracies of unbridled expansionism, through NATO's progressive incorporation of East and Central European countries. These include Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and former Soviet republics that Moscow has historically regarded as lying within its sphere of influence. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was driven in part by the fear that Kyiv was inching towards joining the Atlantic alliance, a step that would have increased NATO's numbers from just 12 countries at its founding in 1949 to 31 now. The Russian invasion effectively blocked Ukraine, but spooked historically neutral Finland and Sweden into abandoning nonalignment and becoming NATO's 31st and 32nd members.

NATO's transformations

NATO, however, sees itself not as expansionist, but as merely adapting to Europe's changing strategic landscape. In 1990-91, with the relatively peaceful ending of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO shifted its focus to out of area operations in theatres such as the Balkans. After the 9/11 strikes in 2001 on the World Trade Center towers, NATO made another strategic shift, joining the Global War on Terror. Now, with Russia and China joining hands in a new era of superpower confrontation, NATO is adapting once again.

It was evident from the discussions at the Ankara Summit that Europe has prioritised the revitalisation of its DIB. The European defence industry was struggling to scale up production even before the five per cent defence spending pledge at The Hague. European defence industry giants, MBDA and Rheinmetall, have warned of shortages in ammunition production.

Operation Epic Fury, the U.S.-Israel bombing campaign against Iran, illustrates the inevitability of weapons and ammunition shortages when Asian allies' demands for U.S. weaponry compete with ongoing European needs. The U.S. has fired

more than 850 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Iran during this campaign. At the current production rate of 85 per year, replacing these would take a decade.

Many NATO members have capable defence industrial bases, but there is little coordination of alliance-wide priorities. The resulting strategic mismatch has been found during the Ukraine war to cluster in the critical categories of air defence missiles and interceptors, precision guided munitions, and artillery rockets. While the U.S. decision to allow Ukraine to produce Patriot air defence systems under licence is a strong signal of support to Ukraine, more needs to be done.

Without a major revitalisation of Europe's defence industry, NATO's five per cent pledge will only deepen its dependency on the U.S. Half of Europe's defence spending between 2022-2024, came from the U.S., up from 28% in 2019-2021. Foreign Military Sales notifications to the U.S. Congress for European customers have quadrupled since 2008 to \$76 billion in 2024.

Need for self-reliance

For the world's big arms buyers and especially for India, this spike in European demand is bad news. As NATO spends more, the international arms bazaar is shifting inexorably from a buyers' market to a sellers' market. The first sign of this was the delay by U.S. firm General Electric Aerospace in supplying India with F-404 fighter jet engines, which are critically needed for the Indian Air Force's Tejas light combat aircraft programme.

Looking ahead, as India's defence increasingly relies on new-age defence technologies and weaponry, such as drones, artificial intelligence, cyber and electronic warfare and resilient networks, it will become critical for its defence industry to achieve self-reliance in these technology realms, rather than relying on overstretched suppliers who have their own battles to fight.

GS Paper: GS Paper 2 & GS Paper 4.

Syllabus Topics: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability; RTI; Probity in Governance.

The Hindu Page no 9

Is corruption the biggest threat to India's future?



Shailesh Gandhi
Former Central Information Commissioner



Anjali Bhardwaj
A transparency activist associated with Satark Nagrik Sangathan

PARLEY

Corruption has shaped elections, toppled governments, and sparked some of the biggest public protests in independent India. With digitalisation and the Right to Information (RTI) Act, citizens were promised greater transparency. Yet has India actually become less corrupt?

This question has become pertinent as thousands of students hold protests seeking accountability after the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) paper was leaked earlier this year. Their campaign has revived memories of the India Against Corruption movement that galvanised the country more than a decade ago.

Is corruption the biggest threat to India's future? Shailesh Gandhi and Anjali Bhardwaj discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Nivedita Varadarajan.

For many, corruption is paying a bribe to get a service delivered. Has digitalisation helped reduce such petty corruption?

Anjali Bhardwaj: Corruption in India goes from the highest to the very lowest offices in the country and people find it difficult to access even their basic rights and entitlements. Unfortunately, digitalisation is being pushed as a magic wand, as if it would make everything alright. But experience on the ground shows that digitalisation by itself is not going to prevent corruption. If you just go into any government office today, it's an open secret that there will be somebody who will expect to be bribed.

In fact, with digitalisation, another layer has been added for the poor and the marginalised who find it very difficult to access services because they are often unlettered and do not have access to the Internet. They can't easily fill up forms on their own. Another middleman has been added. They have to go to these private cafes where they are charged obnoxious amounts [to get government services].

A proper grievance redressal mechanism needs to be put in place, where if somebody is facing corruption, they can file a complaint and it will be redressed in a time bound manner. A grievance redressal law is required, and it has not been brought through although Parliament had discussed it in great detail in 2014.

The Right to Information Act was intended to make the government accountable. Has the Act lived up to its promise?

Shailesh Gandhi: The Act was one of the best transparency Acts in the world. However, it has been murdered by Supreme Court judgments and bureaucracy. The law has now been



Going strong: Students shout slogans during a protest in solidarity with the ongoing protest at New Delhi's Jantar Mantar, in Amritsar on July 23. AFP

modified to such an extent by the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, that all information relating to corruption can be denied. A lot of countries do not have vigilance departments in most government departments. We have them in almost every government department, but they don't work. Now we also have a Lokpal burning ₹50-₹60 crore a year delivering nothing. Lokayukta has been there for years and yet we are not getting accountability.

Section 19 of the so-called Prevention of Corruption Act used to say that sanction for prosecution was required if a public servant was accused of corruption. In 2018, Section 17A was introduced, requiring government permission to investigate corruption charges. Our judicial system is creaking. Unless we enforce the rule, corruption cannot reduce.

How is DPDP undermining the RTI Act?

SG: The original Act had an 87-word definition for personal information. It said personal information which was not part of public activity or was intrusion of privacy could be denied, but with a caveat that information shall not be denied to Parliament or State legislatures; only that information could be denied to citizens. It was misinterpreted in the *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande* judgment which said that all personal information could be exempt. The *Puttaswamy* judgment also created such a theory without ensuring that there was a balance between right to information and right to privacy. In fact, right to privacy has been called a fundamental right without a balance act; it has made it easy for the government to refuse sharing all kinds of personal information. Your name is personal, your age is personal, everything is personal. Information is being denied and will slowly finish the RTI Act.

Does that make uncovering corruption so



In a democracy, it is important to ensure that institutions of accountability, which are the Executive, the Judiciary, and the Legislature, remain accountable and function properly. Unfortunately, these institutions have been systematically weakened

ANJALI BHARDWAJ

much harder now than before?

AB: The RTI Act came because of a very strong demand for an information access law. It has been used to access information to hold governments accountable.

We see that every year about six million RTI requests are filed in our country. Its the highest anywhere in the world. The law is used very vibrantly, not just to ensure accountability in the delivery of basic rights, but also to expose big ticket corruption. I can hardly remember any big scam that has got exposed in the country in the last 20 years where the RTI has not played a seminal role. Whether it is the Vyapam scam, the Adarsh Housing Society scam or the electoral bond scheme, the Act has been used. The Act has been very effective in exposing corruption and wrongdoing.

Unfortunately, we are also seeing how the CBI, the ED and the Lokpal have been completely compromised. Big-ticket corruption cases are just not being tackled.

Do weak institutions enable corruption, or does corruption weaken institutions?

SG: My submission is that we make great laws, but do not implement them. Unless there is punishment, corruption cannot be contained. Let me give you a bit of information. This was a study done by the Indian police general in 2008. A study observed the performance of the CBI's entire anti-corruption branch from 1980 to 1984. What was the outcome of that? About 280 people were accused of corruption in courts. 144 got convicted. The average time for investigation was 13.4 months, whereas the average time for the first trial was 88 months. In 2008, it was found that only four people had been in prison for more than 20 days – just four people.

Today, corruption is an 'all-profit, negligible-risk' activity. So long as this continues, there will be people who will take advantage of this. We make laws and we break laws. We should demand a road map for judicial delays to be less than one year. In less than one year over 90% cases should be decided; this is being done in various countries in the world. Second, all Information Commissioners are

appointed without any transparency. We expect people who are selected in a non-transparent manner to deliver transparency. How does this work? Lakhs of people were there on the roads of Delhi for the Lokpal. After the Lokpal was created, everybody lost interest. Nobody bothers whether they are delivering or not.

Thirdly, the RTI Act should be strengthened. The amendment by the DPDP Act should be taken back. Finally, the media should take it on itself to track 10-15 celebrity corruption cases, track them and see how they have progressed.

AB: In a democracy, it is important to ensure that institutions of accountability, which are the Executive, the Judiciary, and the Legislature, remain accountable to the people of India and function properly. Unfortunately, these institutions have been systematically weakened.

The government has understood that the best way to not be transparent is to continue to work behind a veil of secrecy. To do this, they need to subvert the Information Commissioners' functioning. A way to do this is to not make appointments to the Information Commissioners. Since May 2014, when the BJP came to power, not a single Information Commissioner has been appointed to the central information commission till people approached the Supreme Court or the judiciary.

When the courts order an appointment, they are made in a completely non-transparent manner. We are also seeing that institutions like the ED, the CBI or the Lokpal, simply don't do the investigations that are required of them to hold those in power accountable. It's almost as if corruption is only being done by the Opposition.

Is corruption the biggest threat to the future?

AB: Well, yes, because corruption has a very real human cost. How can a country expect to be developed if corruption is not addressed? If there is massive corruption in the delivery of basic rights, like rations or healthcare or education, how can we hope to become a developed country? When there is corruption and crony capitalism, there is every incentive for those in power to subvert institutions.

SG: If India is at the 79th position in the rule of law index, we have no hope of being among the top nations of the world. We need to change that. We need to ensure that corruption cases are disposed of in less than a year.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections of the population by the Centre and States; Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector.

THE Hindu Page no 10

How should cities reclaim footpaths?

Why was the Street Vendors Act enacted? What does the Act require before vendors can be removed? What is the role of the Town Vending Committee? Can street vendors be evicted before a survey is completed? Why has Bengaluru's footpath drive come under scrutiny?

EXPLAINER

Rishita Khanna

The story so far:

Following the Supreme Court's recognition of the right to walk on safe, obstruction-free footpaths as a fundamental right, Bengaluru Development Minister Krishna Byre Gowda directed the five city corporations under the Greater Bengaluru Authority to launch a 10-day 'Safe Footpath' drive. The drive removed thousands of street vendors from pavements and cleared encroachments. While many welcomed the initiative, it also raised questions over whether the removals complied with the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, which seeks to balance pedestrians' right to walk with street vendors' right to livelihood.

Why was the Street Vendors Act enacted?

The Supreme Court's recognition of the right to walk does not mean street vending has no place on public streets. Long before the latest ruling, the court had repeatedly held that street vending is a 'legitimate' occupation protected under Article 19 of the Constitution, while making it clear that it can be regulated in the public interest.

Those judgments were born out of a recurring pattern – municipal bodies and police evicting vendors, mostly without notice, reducing years of livelihoods to rubble overnight.

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, was enacted to end such arbitrary removals by laying down the process for regulating street vending.

Contrary to popular perception, the Act is neither an anti-encroachment law nor one that gives vendors an unrestricted right over public spaces.



In Bengaluru, corporations started removing vendors before putting in place the mechanism through which the Act is meant to work. K. MURALI KUMAR

Instead, it seeks to balance two competing rights – the public's right to safe, obstruction-free footpaths and a street vendor's right to earn a livelihood. It lays down a step-by-step process that every city is expected to follow before deciding who can vend, where they can vend and when they can be removed or relocated.

What process does the Act prescribe before vendors can be removed?

The first step is the constitution of a Town Vending Committee (TVC), the backbone of the law.

The committee includes officials, police, planning authorities, resident representatives and street vendors themselves, who must make up at least 40% of its members, with representation for women and other marginalised communities. The idea is that decisions affecting vendors should not be taken without vendors having a seat at the table. Every subsequent step is expected to flow

through this committee.

Once the committee is constituted, the Act requires it to survey all street vendors.

The survey is meant to identify existing vendors before the authorities decide who can continue vending and under what conditions.

Moreover, the Act protects existing vendors during this process. It states that no street vendor should be evicted or relocated until the survey has been completed and Certificates of Vending have been issued. The protection was built into the law to prevent exactly the kind of arbitrary removals that had prompted its enactment.

Once the survey is completed, eligible vendors are issued a Certificate of Vending. It is official permission to vend at a specified location and under specified conditions. The certificate does not give a vendor ownership over public land. It only recognises the right to vend in accordance with the Act.

The Act does not prohibit the removal

of street vendors. It only requires that such action follow the process laid down under the law.

Why has Bengaluru's footpath drive come under scrutiny?

In Bengaluru, corporations started removing vendors before putting in place the mechanism through which the Act is meant to work.

Although Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar later promised relocation, the Act requires a TVC to identify vending and no-vending zones. Bengaluru does not have one.

While the Karnataka government acted on the Supreme Court's recognition of pedestrians' right to safe footpaths, the Street Vendors Act makes it equally clear that reclaiming those footpaths cannot become a justification for bypassing the safeguards enacted to protect street vendors' livelihoods. That balance, not the primacy of one right over the other, is the very foundation of the law.

THE GIST

The Street Vendors Act, 2014, was enacted to regulate street vending by balancing pedestrians' right to safe, obstruction-free footpaths with street vendors' right to livelihood, while preventing arbitrary evictions.

The Act requires authorities to constitute a Town Vending Committee, conduct surveys, issue Certificates of Vending and identify vending and no-vending zones before vendors are removed or relocated.

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Fundamental Rights; Role of civil services in a democracy.

The Hindu Page no 10

The right to protest and the limits of police power

What the Constitution, the BNSS and court rulings say about regulating demonstrations and the use of force

Devvanshi Bihani

The story so far:

People from across the country gathered at Jantar Mantar in central Delhi on July 20 for the Cockroach Janta Party's (CJP) "Chalo Sansad" march, carrying placards demanding reforms in the National Testing Agency (NTA) and the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Within hours, the demonstration descended into clashes. Police used tear gas and lathi charges to disperse protesters attempting to march towards Parliament. Tear gas enveloped parts of the protest route as demonstrators ran to escape the crackdown. Several nearby Metro stations were temporarily closed, and many demonstrators reported losing mobile connectivity during the march, making communication and coordination difficult.

The incident has again brought an old question into focus: how should a democracy police public protest?

Is the right to protest absolute?

The Constitution guarantees citizens the right to assemble peacefully under Article 19(1)(b). But that right is subject to "reasonable restrictions" under Article 19(3) in the interests of public order, the sovereignty and integrity of India, and other constitutionally recognised grounds. In practice, these restrictions are implemented through laws governing public order and policing.

The legal authority to regulate protests, however, comes from a range of statutes.

Was the CJP march unlawful?

Whether a protest is "unlawful" is a legal question that depends on the facts and circumstances of each case. Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), an assembly of five or more persons becomes an unlawful assembly only if its common object falls within specific categories, such as using criminal force, resisting the execution of law, committing an offence, or compelling another person by force or threat. A gathering that begins lawfully may also become unlawful if its

conduct changes over the course of the event.

Ahead of the march, Delhi Police said the CJP had not sought permission for a procession to Parliament. It also pointed to prohibitory orders issued under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), which barred protests, marches and demonstrations in the New Delhi district, except at the designated Jantar Mantar protest site with prior permission. As demonstrators attempted to march towards Parliament, officers stopped the procession and eventually used tear gas and lathi charges to disperse the crowd. The authorities' response has since come under judicial scrutiny, with the Delhi High Court seeking responses from the Centre and the Delhi Police on petitions alleging police brutality and excessive use of force.

What standards govern police action?

The National Human Rights Commission's Manual on Human Rights for Police Officers emphasises that effective policing and respect for human rights are

complementary rather than conflicting objectives.

It states that "A democratic country like India needs democratic policing, which is based on the idea of the police as protectors of the rights of citizens and the rule of law, while ensuring the safety and security of all equally." The manual also notes that human rights violations by police can have "a multi-dimensional impact" by eroding public confidence, bringing institutions into disrepute and "even escalating civil unrest at times."

The principles are consistent with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, which require force to be lawful, necessary and proportionate.

When can police use force?

Under the BNSS, an Executive Magistrate or an authorised police officer may order an unlawful assembly, or an assembly likely to disturb public peace, to disperse. If the assembly does not comply, the law permits it to be dispersed by force.

The Code of Conduct for the Police in India states that police should, as far as practicable, "use the methods of persuasion, advice and warning. When the application of force becomes inevitable, only the irreducible minimum force required in the circumstances should be used." Beyond the use of force itself, the protests also raised questions about police accountability after videos appeared to show some police personnel without visible name tags or with their faces covered. While the BNSS requires every police officer arresting to bear an

accurate, visible and clear identification of his or her name, it contains no corresponding requirement for police personnel engaged in crowd-control or the dispersal of assemblies.

How has the Supreme Court viewed protests?

A day after the clashes, a lawyer urged the Supreme Court to take *suo motu* cognisance of the alleged police excesses, citing videos circulating online. Chief Justice of India Surya Kant orally declined the request, saying, "We are not interested in videos... Don't waste our [court's] time, and don't waste your time."

Over the years, however, the Supreme Court has repeatedly laid down principles governing both the right to protest and the limits of police action.

In *Anita Thakur v. State of Jammu & Kashmir* (2016), the court held that the use of excessive force violates fundamental rights and awarded compensation to the injured protesters, emphasising that police action must remain reasonable and accountable.

More recently, in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India* (2018), the court reiterated that while authorities may regulate demonstrations to maintain public order, they cannot extinguish the right to protest altogether. In *Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police* (2020), arising from the Shaheen Bagh protests, it affirmed that dissent is a constitutional right but cannot result in the indefinite occupation of public spaces.

GS Paper: GS Paper 3.

Syllabus Topics: Major crops-cropping patterns in various parts of the country; Transport and marketing of agricultural produce.

THE Hindu Page no 12

Indian rice export rates hit 10-month high amid adverse weather concerns

Reuters

Indian rice export prices rose to a near 10-month high this week, driven by tight paddy supplies and concerns over the new-season crop after patchy monsoon rainfall, with adverse weather keeping traders on edge in major Asian hubs.

India's 5% broken par-boiled variety <RI-INBKN5-P1> was quoted at \$356-\$361 per tonne, up from last week's \$352-\$357. Indian 5% broken white rice was priced at \$355 to \$360 per tonne.

"Paddy prices have risen as market supplies remain tight. Exporters are raising their offers to re-



Exporters are raising their offers to reflect higher procurement costs, said a trader.

flect higher procurement costs," a Kolkata-based trader said.

Thailand's 5% broken rice <RI-THBKN5-P1> was quoted at \$450 to \$460 per tonne, slightly higher from \$445-\$450 last week.

"The price increase was driven by domestic fac-

tors," a Bangkok-based trader said.

"Only regular customers were making purchases, with no large lots coming in yet, while spot or occasional buyers are purchasing less," the trader said, adding that there were also concerns about the upcoming crop yields.

Another trader said that demand has been quiet while the supply situation would be more clear next month. In Bangladesh, rice prices have risen over the past week, especially for fine varieties, amid concerns over tightening supplies after successive weather-related shocks.

Traders cited higher paddy prices and recent

flood damage, which affected crops across at least 28,610 hectares in 12 districts, including paddy fields and rice seed beds.

Earlier this year, heavy pre-monsoon rains and upstream inflows damaged the country's summer rice crop in the northeastern wetlands, leaving it with an estimated rice production shortfall of more than 200,000 metric tons.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, 5% broken rice <RI-VNBKN5-P1> was offered at \$430 on Thursday, down from a range of \$445-\$450 last week. "Supplies are building up from the ongoing summer-autumn harvest," a trader based in Ho Chi Minh City said.

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Indian Constitution– features, amendments, significant provisions and basic structure; Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure.

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 10

Restoration of J&K statehood calls for a phased and negotiated roadmap

IT HAS been seven years since Jammu & Kashmir was downgraded to a Union Territory. It has been five years since the Union government committed in Parliament to restore statehood. It has been four years since delimitation was done. It has been three years since the Supreme Court was assured of restoration. It has been two years since an elected government took office.

Yet, so far, there has not even been a serious conversation about it. The only response from the Centre, a clear and consistent one, has been an assurance wrapped in ambiguity: Statehood will be restored at the "appropriate time". The "appropriate time" is not a date on the calendar; it is whatever time suits the present dispensation. At the "appropriate time" is not a promise but an instrument of power. Every demand for a date is an indicator of impatience, and every postponement a proof of prudence.

Faced with growing public disillusionment locally over the Omar Abdullah-led government's performance, the National Conference recently launched an outreach drive. After civil-society consultations, it called for a protest in New Delhi on July 20.

The National Conference positioned its protest as a broad-based political initiative rather than a party-specific agitation. Though well-placed to lead the J&K parties and wider civil society by virtue of a strong electoral mandate, all the Valley-centric parties decided not to participate in the protest. This has turned a potential show of strength into a display of fragmentation, thereby significantly reducing the political pressure on the Union government to act.

Without a united front at least from the Valley, the Centre can easily treat the demand as partisan rather than regional, and delay statehood restoration on its own timeline.

Being a constituent of the INDIA bloc, the National Conference had also reached out to the national and regional parties to build a wider constituency of support and gain greater political traction. This could have provided an opportunity to frame the demand as a larger federal issue that touches upon the basic structure of India's constitutional arrangements. For the most potent blueprint for the restoration of statehood is not a political manifesto of any party, but an agenda for federal democratic polity of India. But that was not to be.

As the National Conference assembled in New Delhi for the restoration of statehood for J&K, the refrain in the lacklustre affair was unfulfilled promises rather than rights denied. Speeches, slogans and bytes invoked constitutional morality, legislative assurances, judicial precedents and political commitments. These are valid, necessary political arguments but have limited relevance in the current context.

For the Centre, it is amply evident that security and "normalcy" are the non-negotiable pre-conditions for restoring statehood. This is not a temporary hurdle. Until these concerns are credibly addressed, arguments based only on constitutional grounds will remain secondary in the decision-making process at the highest levels.

The restoration of statehood is not a simple administrative deci-



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sion or a one-sided concession. It will be the outcome of a political bargain in which enhanced powers and privileges will come with greater responsibilities, aka conditionalities. This is already visible in the case of Ladakh, where statehood has been made contingent on meeting certain revenue and self-sustainability criteria. J&K is unlikely to be treated differently.

This is why the political leadership in J&K needs to move beyond making a legal case. Engaging substantively with the Centre's stated concerns on security and governance could prove more consequential than constitutional arguments alone. The tragic killing of a police officer on Amarnath Yatra duty, the first terror attack in the Valley since Pahalgam, serves as a stark illustration of why constitutional arguments alone are insufficient without credible progress on the ground.

Treating the security issue as a chicken-and-egg problem — the lack of full powers is cited as the reason for limited initiative — is technically correct but politically unwise because it restricts the space for political agency. While the elected government's limited powers are a structural constraint, demonstrating statecraft even within the current framework could help build credibility with the Centre.

From the Union's point of view, the restoration of statehood may be seen as a decision to be taken at an appropriate time. However, from the perspective of J&K, it will be a process. Statehood cannot simply be restored by an executive order

changing its status. Such a move would leave the underlying administrative and financial distortions created since 2019 largely unaddressed. Converting the former state into a Union Territory did not just alter its administrative boundaries, it fundamentally changed its governance DNA and deepened J&K's dependence on the Centre.

It is high time to move away from the binary of statehood restoration to what it will entail, politically and administratively. A more strategic approach would require the J&K political leadership to move from episodic mobilisation to a sustained, multi-track engagement. In the short term, this would mean building a unified negotiating position across parties on the benchmarks for "normalcy" that the Centre considers non-negotiable.

In parallel, the focus should shift to negotiating a time-bound framework, possibly through a structured administrative mechanism of unwinding the central controls. Without such a phased and negotiated roadmap, the demand for statehood risks remaining a recurring political slogan instead of becoming a manageable political settlement.

It is unlikely that the recent Delhi protest will be the starting point of a political process for statehood with status. To reach a milestone on that road, the Valley-centric political leadership needs to prioritise pragmatic sequencing over fragmented posturing. This will determine if J&K can convert public sentiment into concrete constitutional gains in the coming years.

The writer is the former finance minister of J&K

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests; Effect of policies and politics of developed/developing countries. (IE PAGE NO 10)

US-Saudi nuclear pact can reshape West Asia balance



ANIL SASI

The US and Saudi Arabia have signed a controversial deal that could potentially enable the latter to kickstart a civilian nuclear programme. Heralded as a "peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement", the 30-year pact effectively seeks to offer "great access for American companies in the Saudi nuclear energy program", according to the US Department of Energy (DoE).

Text from the deal is yet to be made public. First reported by the *Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, the deal could allow Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium — which is primarily to be used as fuel for power plants, but can also be diverted to make nuclear bombs. President Donald Trump said the deal would not allow this.

The US DoE noted that along with the co-operation deal, a "bilateral safeguards agreement" was also signed. However, some US media reports said the guardrails are not strong enough.

Trump also said — after the signing of the agreement — that it was "totally subject to" Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords, which would establish diplomatic relations with Israel. The Kingdom has long refused to recognise Israel without a pathway toward a Palestinian state. It is unclear whether the pact contains any such clause.

Why the deal raises questions

While the deal's fine print is awaited, two major issues need flagging.

ONE, this could potentially set off an arms race in a volatile region where there is already a nuclear power (Israel) and one that is on the cusp of getting there (Iran).

While the agreement marks a major diplomatic and strategic victory for Saudi Arabia, it also has the potential to reshape power dynamics in West Asia, multiple experts have said in their early comments. Its announcement also comes as fighting escalates between the US and Iran. Saudi Arabia, a longtime American ally, hosts multiple US bases, which have been targeted by these Iranian attacks. It also comes two days after Iran's allies in Yemen, the Houthis, announced a "maritime block-



ade" against the Kingdom.

"It is a fact that if a country can produce its own nuclear fuel, then it becomes a much bigger risk for building nuclear weapons. The fine print in the safeguards agreement would need to be read carefully," a Delhi-based representative of a US think tank told *The Indian Express*.

TWO, this deal has to be ratified by the US Congress, which could be an uphill task despite Trump's Republican Party controlling both chambers of the US legislature.

The broad support that Israel enjoys in the US legislature is simply not there for Saudi Arabia. The deal likely stems from the meeting that Saudi Arabia's ruler Mohammed bin Salman had with Trump last November, the person quoted above said.

This analyst indicated that the US and Saudi Arabia undertook a joint study to enable the latter to enrich uranium on its soil to produce fuel at an American-built enrichment facility, instead of relying on imported fuel. The study was a precursor to the deal that's now been signed.

The 123 Agreement

While this deal has been in the making for more than a decade, no American president has taken the final step to clinch it so far. The key element of this deal is what is called a 123 Agreement that allows the US to share nuclear technology with other countries. India is one such signatory.

US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. NY FILE

Regional tensions

The Saudi deal could embolden Iran to build a nuclear weapon, potentially pushing it further towards China & Russia.

Israel — which Trump has now brought into the pact's equation — has warned that a such a deal could pave the way for Saudi Arabia to develop nuclear weapons.

"This agreement, named after Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act of 1954, is a legally binding agreement that Washington DC requires before engaging in significant nuclear cooperation with another country. These agreements facilitate the transfer of nuclear materials, equipment and technology for peaceful purposes, while ensuring compliance with international nonproliferation standards. They also provide a framework for technical exchanges, scientific research, and safeguards discussions. This has to go through the US legislature, which could be a potential impediment, the analyst quoted earlier said."

In the case of India, the 123 Agreement signed with the US effectively ended the technology denial regimes that had been in place for three decades. Under the pact, India agreed to place some of its civilian nuclear facilities under India-specific safeguards in perpetuity while getting uninterrupted fuel supply to the reactors placed under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

The risk of proliferation

There are two other areas of the deal that have raised concerns. One is the possibility that Saudi Arabia might be able to conduct largely unfettered domestic uranium enrichment, and two, there could be some limitations on the inspections regime, different in case of this agreement than some of the other agreements signed by the US.

The deal could potentially set off an arms race in a region that already has a nuclear power (Israel) — and one on the cusp of getting there (Iran)

While US Energy Secretary Chris Wright said the deal will "uphold the highest standards of nuclear safety", the key question is how well regulated is the transfer of American nuclear technology in the Saudi pact? Also, will the safeguards ensure that this Saudi deal is strictly restricted to civil application only?

If an enrichment provision is indeed part of the pact, it would differentiate this agreement from another one that was signed by the US in 2009 with Saudi Arabia's neighbour, the United Arab Emirates, under which Abu Dhabi does not produce its own fuel and is subject to a number of other restrictions.

The Saudi deal could also embolden Iran in its resolve to get a nuclear weapon, and potentially pivot it further towards China and Russia to attain this objective. Incidentally, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, told CBS News in 2019 that his country was not planning to acquire a nuclear weapon, but that "without a doubt if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, we will follow suit as soon as possible".

While it is unlikely to be an open-ended deal that enables the Saudis to enrich uranium, the big concern is whether the level of safeguards provided in the pact will be sufficient to keep the Kingdom from developing a bomb. Israel — which Trump has now introduced into the equation — has long warned that a deal of this kind could pave the way for Saudi Arabia to develop nuclear weapons. This raises larger questions for nuclear proliferation in West Asia and on the broader scale of global nuclear proliferation.

One of the key incentives cited by the US government to enter into this agreement is that it does provide opportunities for American nuclear players, particularly Westinghouse, to make significant sales to Saudi Arabia. Nuclear companies have traditionally been big donors to Trump. For Saudi Arabia, there is the potential of cutting back on its use of its own oil for electricity generation if it can take recourse to nuclear generation. But the risks that a badly drafted nuclear deal poses is also very real.

The deal also raises questions about a conflict of interest. The Trump Organisation has several financial dealings with Saudi Arabia and other countries in that geography. In just 2024, Trump and his family businesses raised about \$50 million from documented deals connected to Saudi Arabia. This includes hospitality, casino deals and crypto interests.

GS Paper: GS Paper 2.

Syllabus Topics: Structure, organization and functioning of the Judiciary; Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections; Judicial pendency.

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 13

Fast-track courts: When they can be established, where they lag

Vineet Bhatta & Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, July 23

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi's promise to set up fast-track courts (FTCs) to take up paper leaks has turned attention to what's seen as a silver bullet for judicial delays.

What are fast-track courts?

There is no single central legislation that governs these courts. The 14th Finance Commission (2015-2020) recommended FTCs to expedite the trial of heinous crimes such as murder, kidnapping, and property disputes pending for over five years. It also recommended them for cases involving vulnerable demographics, such as women and children.

In 2019, following an amendment to the criminal laws and a directive from the Supreme Court, the Union government launched a centrally sponsored scheme to establish fast-track special courts (FTSCs). Funded partially by the Nirbhaya Fund, these courts are exclusively for the time-bound trial of rape cases and offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.

Can it be set up for an individual case?

The creation of special courts must satisfy Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law. In *State of West Bengal vs. Ambar Ali Sarkar* (1952), the Supreme Court struck down a law that allowed the government to arbitrarily pick cases for special courts simply for the "object of speedier trial".

The court warned that "speed" is too vague and elusive a criterion on its own. To survive constitutional scrutiny, the cases chosen must have a rational, objective basis — such as the nature of the offence or the vulnerability of the victims. However, courts have of late been less compelled to draw the same red line, especially amid public demand. The SC directed the Centre to establish a special court to handle the 2G case, ensuring a day-to-day trial. It will have to be seen if the NEET case, which is being heard in a Delhi court, will be sent to a special court by the government or through a court order.

How quick are fast-track courts?

Litigants do not have an automatic statutory right to a fixed deadline for their trials. The *Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha San-*

High case load

- FTCs can help expedite the legal process for specific, high-priority offences.
- But high case load remains a persistent challenge, owing to factors such as a lack of physical infrastructure and quality of investigation, and for the other parts of the legal process to work in conjunction.

hita recommends that trials should ideally be completed within two years and trials for sexual offences within two months.

Under the FTSC scheme, each FTSC is expected to dispose of 41-42 cases per quarter, or at least 165 cases annually.

In the landmark *P. Rama Chandra Rao v. State of Karnataka* ruling (2002), a seven-judge Constitution Bench ruled it is "neither advisable or feasible, nor judicially permissible to draw or prescribe an outer limit for conclusion of all criminal proceedings."

How have FTCs performed?

As of January, 862 regular FTCs were functioning across 21 states and union territories. Alongside them, 774 FTSCs — including 398 exclusive POCSO courts — were operational across 29 states and UTs.

The disposal rate for the special courts is around 96%, meaning that many cases were either heard or dismissed. On average, an FTSC disposes of about 9.5 cases per month, compared to the 3.3 cases cleared by a regular trial court of similar jurisdiction.

However, the volume of litigation means pendency is a persistent challenge.

By the end of 2023, over 2.4 lakh cases were still pending in FTSCs.

In a 2026 Lok Sabha response, the Ministry of Law and Justice stated that delays in disposal are caused by many factors, which "include availability of physical infrastructure, complexity of facts involved, quality of investigation, nature of evidence, co-operation of stake holders viz. bar, investigation agencies, legal representation, forensic support, witnesses and litigants and proper application of rules..."

Advocate Kartik Venu, a criminal trial lawyer, told *The Indian Express*: "Fast track courts will not answer the issue of heavy case burdens, case dockets, lack of judicial officers to hear them, natural delays over the course of a trial based on the twists and turns that trials normally take." He said FTCs also require accompanying infrastructure.

The efficacy of fast-track courts varies according to subject matter, Venu said. In POCSO and IPC, he said, they have been an "utter failure" given the sheer volume of work and courts' inability to allocate specific judges. "In the Prevention of Corruption Act... there is perhaps a healthier ratio," he said.

GS Paper: GS Paper 3.

Syllabus Topics: Indian Economy– Issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development; Environmental sustainability.

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE NO 13

ECONOMY

The many benefits of replacing paper currency notes with durable plastic ones

Siddharth Upasani
New Delhi, July 23

LAST WEEK, a tender floated by a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) subsidiary revealed the central bank's intention to go ahead with a trial of plastic notes, some 15 years after a similar field trial was announced.

The Bharatiya Reserve Bank Note Mudran Pvt Ltd's (BRBNMPL) tender invited bids for 3.4 crore polymer sheets that are to be used to print currency notes. These aren't just any old plastic sheets but have special security features. The tender said the 3.4 crore sheets were an "immediate requirement" — once field trials were successful, BRBNMPL would look to buy larger quantities. But is there any benefit in replacing paper notes (made with 100% cotton) with plastic ones?

The 2012 trials

In September 2009, the RBI invited bids to procure 100 crore pieces of Rs 10-notes. These notes were to be introduced for a field trial in Kochi, Mysuru, Shimla, Jaipur and Bhubaneswar — different climatic zones that would test the resilience of the

notes. The trial, however, went nowhere.

"Though we had envisaged a trial of plastic notes in 2012/13, it remained a plan only," a former central bank official told *The Indian Express*. "No decision had then been taken to proceed for procurement."

In its annual report for 2014-15, the RBI said that while the Rs 10 plastic notes were technically evaluated, "certain technical infirmities emerged and the process could not be taken further".

First issued by Australia in 1988, plastic banknotes are now used in over 50 countries, including the UK, Canada and New Zealand. Even our neighbours such as Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore use plastic currency, albeit not exclusively.

Better for the environment

The biggest advantage plastic notes provide over paper notes is that they are far more durable, lasting anywhere between two to six times longer depending on the denomination (small denomination notes are handled more frequently, which reduces their life).

A longer life means fewer plastic notes need to be manufactured. Printing fewer

Plastic notes may reduce RBI's printing costs



SOURCE: RBI. *HIGH COST WAS DUE TO DEMONETISATION, WHICH LED TO HIGHER THAN USUAL PRINTING OF NEW NOTES

notes also reduces costs related to making them — even though one plastic note is more expensive to make than a paper one — distributing them and destroying them.

In 2013, a study by The Energy and Resources Institute, at the RBI's request, found

that replacing cotton-based notes with plastic ones would have "significant" environmental benefits. "Polymer/plastic banknotes (and the waste from production) can be granulated and recycled into useful plastic products such as compost bins,

plumbing fittings and other household and industrial products. The base material of polymer is a non-renewable resource, but due to its recyclability, it has more than one life," the RBI said in its 2012-13 annual report.

Money and numbers

In the last three years, for every four new notes the RBI supplied, it destroyed three soiled ones. Durable plastic notes will not have to be destroyed so frequently, reducing costs as well as environmental impact.

The RBI spends thousands of crores every year to print currency notes. Just over the last decade, it has spent Rs 52,095 crore to print nearly 26,000 crore pieces of notes. This is a big sum, even for the RBI, and has accounted for 15-44% of its total expenditure, excluding provisions.

There is a security advantage too. According to UK firm De La Rue, which supplies notes to over half of all central banks, plastic notes are more secure as most counterfeit notes are produced on paper. As such, counterfeit rates have fallen in countries where currency notes are made of polymer. In India, the number of counterfeit

notes detected in 2025-26 rose to 2.3 lakh pieces, up from 2.17 lakh in 2024-25.

Import concerns

Despite all the positives of plastic notes, one issue remains: the possibility that India may end up having to import the sheets that are used to print banknotes.

While the tender expressly said bidders must ensure that their operations in Pakistan or China, if any, must be "suitably firewalled" from those in India, depending on a foreign entity for your legal tender is a vulnerability.

But this wouldn't be a first. The RBI has gradually reduced its import of paper and ink needed to make notes, with Bank Note Paper Mill India Pvt Ltd starting domestic production of watermarked paper around a decade ago. In August 2018, BRBNMPL's ink factory in Mysuru became operational.

Given these existing facilities, any shift to plastic must be gradual for two reasons. One, considerable investment has already been made. Two, more investment will be required for the plastic transition.

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