

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

28-09-2026

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UN Sea Level Declaration

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On September 24, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Declaration on Sea Level Rise by consensus.

Perhaps its most important provision concerns international law. The Declaration affirms that low-lying countries especially threatened by rising seas, such as Fiji, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, will continue to retain their statehood, sovereign rights, and UN membership. It also says maritime zones will continue to be defined in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, even if rising waters cause coastlines to retreat further inland.

The Declaration arose from a high-level meeting in 2024 and which member countries had since negotiated under a mandate calling for an action-oriented agreement. Spanning four pages, the Declaration organises action around (i) science and data, (ii) adaptation and financing, (iii) livelihoods, socio-economic development, data-sharing, and early-warnings, and (iv) the legal consequences of sea-level rise.

It also calls on countries to respond to sea-level rise in a way that addresses livelihoods and cultural heritage and with the involvement of affected communities.

The world's low-lying island states — which have organised themselves as the Alliance of Small Island States in international fora, including the COP



The current global mean sea-level rise is 4-5 mm/year. LOOK UP LOOK DOWN
PHOTOGRAPHY/UNSPLASH

climate talks — need these assurances because the seas surrounding them threaten to swallow most or all of their habitable territory in the coming decades. If they do, the Declaration will ensure their citizens continue to retain their nationality and economic rights.

The pact also commits UN member countries to continue to engage on issues related to sea-level rise, including a high-level meeting before the 84th session of the General Assembly ends.

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GS 2: POLITY

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The pitfalls of mandatory FIRs

On August 5, the Supreme Court, in *G. Ganesh v. State of Tamil Nadu and Others*, reiterated that the police must register an FIR upon receiving any information about a missing 'person'. The court clarified that the expression 'person' did not refer only to missing children but included every person.

The Supreme Court in May issued certain directions which inter alia included setting up a special portal by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) dedicated to human trafficking, registration of an FIR without waiting for any preliminary enquiry or leaving it to the guardians or family of the missing person to first search for him/her, activating the anti-human trafficking units (AHTUs) of districts, restoring the recovered child to the rightful guardian in accordance with law and Aadhaar verification or issuance of an Aadhaar card.

Presumption for children

The directions issued in *G. Ganesh* are no different from the directions issued by the Supreme Court in *Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) versus Union of India and Others* in January 2013, in which the court was dealing only with 'missing children'. The court then issued two directions. The first related to mandatory recording of FIR so that police authorities are activated in taking steps to trace the child. Second, the court asked each State to set up a Special Juvenile Police Unit at every police station in accordance with the provisions of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Rules, 2007.

In May 2013, when Madhya Pradesh expressed



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some doubt with respect to the provisions of Section 154 CrPC (now Section 173 BNSS), which relates to information in cognisable cases, the court said that there will be an initial presumption of either abduction or trafficking, unless, in the investigation, the same is proved otherwise.

Second, at least one specially trained police officer at each police station was directed to be designated as a Juvenile Welfare Officer as per Section 63 of the JJ Act, 2000. In case a missing child is not recovered within four months from the date of the FIR, the matter is to be forwarded to the AHTU.

While, in the case of a missing child, the presumption of a cognisable offence to set the law in motion is understandable, as a child's consent has no relevance in law, such a presumption may be problematic when an adult leaves the house of his or her own volition.

Adults have agency

It is a matter of common knowledge that many adults leave their homes to live together as partners or get married without the consent of their parents. But in some cases, couples have been killed (in the name of family honour) after being found, with or without the assistance of the police.

It is also undisputed that initially every such case is reported as a missing-person case. If an FIR is registered in every case, it will become the duty of the police to trace such couples or an adult and hand them over to their parents. A person may leave information indicating his or her willingness before leaving, but the police would

still trace them to verify it. Thus, consenting couples may still face unnecessary police investigation.

The case of *G. Ganesh* involved a one-year-and-10-month-old child who went missing from Chennai in 2011, following which a 'child missing' case was registered. The case was transferred first to the Central Crime Branch and then to a Special Investigation Team, but the child remained untraced for 14 years. The petitioner alleged that the MHA guidelines issued in June 2013 for missing children were not followed and that the case was not transferred to the AHTU after four months. The Madras High Court dismissed the petition in March 2025, holding that the police had made all efforts to trace the child and that the 2013 guidelines were not applicable in 2011.

There was no occasion for the Supreme Court to *suo motu* take up the issue of missing adults. The May judgment also does not indicate that the States were heard on the issue. While the court's intention to deal firmly with human trafficking cannot be doubted, not allowing even a small window for the police to conduct a preliminary enquiry is difficult to fathom. A week or fortnight could allow the police to filter cases where there is credible information that the person reported missing was neither abducted nor trafficked. A blanket presumption of kidnapping or trafficking in every case of a missing adult, without any evidence, is against the spirit of the statute. To that extent, the court needs to review its direction mandating the registration of an FIR.

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

Kashmir as India's gateway to Eurasian opportunity

India stands at a critical demographic crossroads. With one of the world's largest youth populations, the country possesses an immense economic advantage. Yet, a youthful population becomes a genuine demographic dividend only when young citizens are educated, skilled, gainfully employed and provided with meaningful opportunities. Otherwise, that demographic promise risks turning into social disillusionment.

China, despite its comparable population, is moving in the opposite demographic direction. Decades of low fertility have accelerated the ageing of its population. India, by contrast, possesses an extraordinary reservoir of young people entering the workforce. The central question is whether the country can create the economic opportunities and infrastructure needed to harness this potential.

The aspiration-reality gap

The smartphone revolution has intensified this challenge. A young person in a town or remote village can now see within seconds how the rest of the world lives, studies, works and travels. Global possibilities are visible on high-definition screens, even as tangible opportunities remain painfully out of reach.

This has created a widening divide between aspiration and reality. The horizons of young Indians have expanded far faster than the institutions and economies around them. Access to higher education has widened, yet meaningful employment opportunities have not kept pace. A college degree is no longer a guarantee of a job, leaving many without financial security or the dignity that comes with economic independence. When heightened aspirations collide with limited opportunities, frustration inevitably follows, often finding expression in protests over recruitment, examination irregularities, examination and test paper leaks, unemployment and systemic failures.

Kashmiri youth share these aspirations but carry a compounding historical burden. Decades of conflict, political uncertainty and economic isolation have deepened their sense of insecurity and constrained their opportunities. Too often, young Kashmiris have been viewed through a narrow security lens, as potential liabilities rather than national assets.

Yet, Jammu and Kashmir, like the rest of India, has a large young population with its own aspirations. Its youth seek the same basic things as young people elsewhere: economic



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independence, dignity, opportunity and a future in which they are not permanently viewed with suspicion.

Jammu and Kashmir possesses an exceptional combination of natural wealth and geographic significance. Its rivers offer substantial hydroelectric potential, its mountains contain valuable mineral resources, and its landscapes sustain a major tourism economy. Yet, its most underutilised strategic asset may be its location.

Focus on Kashmir's historic crossroads

For centuries, Kashmir was never a cul-de-sac. It was a thriving crossroads. Historic caravan routes linked Kashmir and Ladakh with Central Asia, Tibet and the broader Indian subcontinent. These routes carried far more than merchandise. They connected people, ideas, philosophies, literature, cultures and skills. The arrival of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, revered as Shah-i-Hamadan, is deeply embedded in Kashmiri history and is traditionally associated with the arrival of Persian and Central Asian craftsmen who enriched Kashmir's celebrated handicraft traditions. The historical lesson is clear: connectivity creates economic ecosystems.

Today, Indian strategic thinking needs to look beyond the immediate constraints posed by the Line of Control with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control with China. Where political and security conditions permit, India needs a pragmatic framework to gradually restore Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh to the role they historically occupied: that of a bridge connecting South Asia with Central Asia and the wider Eurasian landmass.

For this, India needs a diplomatic road map alongside its infrastructure road map. Reopening traditional routes towards Pakistan or Central Asia cannot happen without sustained engagement with neighbouring countries. With Pakistan, the objective should be to explore confidence-building measures and trade connectivity wherever feasible. With China, India should pursue practical dialogue on trans-Himalayan connectivity wherever economic interests and security concerns can be reconciled.

This transition could begin with a phased connectivity strategy. India should identify historically important trade corridors that could eventually be revived as modern economic corridors, beginning with those where security and diplomatic conditions are most conducive. This does not mean opening every route at once.

Pilot corridors could be developed and expanded progressively on the basis of experience.

Security cannot be ignored in any such endeavour. But security and connectivity need not automatically be treated as opposing objectives. Properly regulated connectivity can create greater economic interdependence and potentially provide stronger incentives for stability.

The same principle should guide India's approach to Central Asia. Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh could become India's northern economic gateway, giving Indian businesses greater access to Central Asian markets while bringing investment, tourism and commerce to the region. The benefits would extend far beyond Kashmir.

A road to opportunity

A functioning land corridor creates opportunities at every stage, from construction, transport and warehousing to hospitality, manufacturing, agriculture, logistics, finance, technology and services. Unlike air connectivity, whose economic benefits are concentrated around a limited number of nodes, a trade corridor can generate economic activity across a wider geography through which it passes.

Most importantly, it could give the young people of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh something far more valuable than another promise. It could give them wings to fly towards new horizons.

India's demographic advantage is a window of opportunity, not a permanent condition. We cannot afford to allow a generation to grow up watching possibilities on smartphones while encountering closed doors in the real world.

For Jammu and Kashmir, the answer may lie partly in reopening doors that history once kept open. The Silk Road was never only about silk. It was about the movement of goods, people, ideas and possibilities.

It is time to view Kashmir not merely through the prism of conflict, but through the lens of enterprise, connectivity and integration. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke of abandoning beaten paths and searching for new ways to address difficult issues. The ancient roads across the Himalayas do not belong merely in history books. Reimagined as modern economic arteries, they could become pathways to opportunity, giving the next generation not another reason to wait, but a road towards a better future.

Reconnecting Kashmir's historic routes could unlock economic opportunities for its youth

GS 3: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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New equilibrium

As the U.S. and China recalibrate ties, implications for other nations are huge

In the surface, Chinese President Xi Jinping's Washington visit appeared to be more about ceremony than substance. President Donald Trump rolled out the red carpet, personally welcoming the Chinese leader at the base where he landed. The last time that a U.S. President accorded such an honour to a foreign leader was when John F. Kennedy welcomed British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in 1962. Mr. Trump also laid out a grand state dinner at the White House, inviting some of the biggest names in tech and business in the U.S. Beyond the optics, the concrete outcomes from the Trump-Xi talks were modest. The most immediate one was an agreement for both leaders to meet twice this year at the APEC summit in Shenzhen and the G-20 in Miami, marking an unusual four meetings in one year, with Mr. Trump having visited Beijing in May. Both sides also agreed to operationalise a board of trade and investment. No new trade agreement was reached, although both have extended for another two months the trade truce agreed to at Busan last year as well as an arrangement for a \$30 billion reciprocal tariff reduction. China reaffirmed its commitment to buy \$17 billion worth of agricultural products annually, but offered no new ones. Other long pending issues such as semiconductors, rare earths and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan appear deferred for now. Both did, however, announce the establishment of a new dialogue on Artificial Intelligence and the opening of a channel for incidents, amid growing concerns over the consequences of an unregulated AI race.

The modest outcomes from the Xi visit should not obscure the broader shift that recent U.S.-China engagement has underlined. The agreement between the world's two biggest powers to pursue what they call a constructive relationship of strategic stability based on fairness, respect and reciprocity points to a new equilibrium. Their relationship certainly remains beset by serious structural challenges and will remain one marked by rivalry. At the same time, both sides appear eager to set a floor to ensure a rivalry that is more managed, stable and predictable. Countries in the region will be watching closely how this may temper an "America First" Washington's appetite to push back against China in waters far from home. New Delhi will need to carefully watch this evolving new equilibrium. The recent U.S. tariff threats aimed at India have offered a stark contrast to the measured language with which Washington has been engaging Beijing. For long, a strand of Indian strategic thinking has been predicated on the assumption that U.S. strategy in the region was centred on the idea of a relationship with India as a bulwark against Chinese influence. That assumption increasingly appears open to question.