

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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The constitution of a high-level committee to investigate the repeated failures of the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) marks a significant turning point for the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Long regarded as India's "workhorse," the PSLV's recent setbacks—specifically the PSLV-C61 (May 2025) and PSLV-C62 (January 2026) missions—have raised concerns regarding quality assurance and organizational processes.

Panel to probe repeated failures of PSLV, says ISRO

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

A committee that includes K. Vijay Raghavan, former Principal Scientific Adviser, and S. Somanath, former Chairman, India Space Research Organisation (ISRO), will probe "systemic issues" underlying the successive failures of the ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV).

While technical committees probe and submit 'failure analysis reports' when mishaps occur, this committee, *The Hindu* has reliably learnt, will investigate questions on whether "organisational" problems may have played a role in the debacles involving the PSLV.

On January 12, the PSLV-C62 failed in its mission to deliver 16 satellites into orbit, and crashed into the sea after the third stage of the rocket failed to ignite. This was similar to the May 18, 2025 failure of the PSLV-C61, in which, too, the third stage failed to



On January 12, the PSLV-C62 failed in its mission to deliver 16 satellites into orbit as the rocket failed to ignite in the third stage. PTI

fire, destroying as a result the EOS-09 satellite intended for the government's strategic needs.

The committee members consist of experts who are external to the ISRO, and are expected to table their findings to ISRO Chairman V. Narayanan before April.

On February 3, *The Hindu* reported that National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, who is also a member

of India's Space Commission, visited the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, reportedly in connection with the failure of the PSLV-C62 mission.

"A national-level expert committee has been constituted and is reviewing the reason for the anomaly in the PSLV vehicle," the ISRO said in a statement to *The Hindu*.

The PSLV's failures would be the core focus of

the report, and the committee would be looking into the processes in the manufacture, procurement, and assembling of various components of the rocket. This has implications for other rockets, too, *The Hindu* was told, because they have commonalities.

Report in a week

India's space ecosystem now involves several private companies and, therefore, the probe will not only be about which part or component failed, and who was responsible, but also whether there is a process in place to fix accountability, and how it may be improved.

A technical committee of the ISRO will first table a report on the PSLV-C62 incident this week, *The Hindu* has learnt through reliable sources.

The ISRO's historical response to rocket failures has been to have a Failure Analysis Committee probe the reasons, and publicise its findings. This, however,

has not taken place in the case of both the PSLV-C61 and PSLV-C62.

The Failure Analysis Committee report of the May 18 mishap was sent to the Prime Minister's Office before the PSLV-C62 launch, but its details have not been made public.

The Failure Analysis Committee, constituted by the ISRO Chairman, is a body of experts within ISRO to lead in the event of a major incident. It is expected to reconstruct the chain of events leading up to a failure, and recommend corrective action before the rocket is cleared to fly again. The committee members include experts within ISRO as well as relevant experts from academia.

At a press conference on February 2, the Union Minister of State for Science and Technology, and Earth Sciences, Jitendra Singh, said that a "third party appraisal" was ongoing. (With inputs from Hemant C.S. in Bengaluru)

Introduction

For decades, the PSLV has been the backbone of India's space program, boasting a success rate of over 90% and placing over 350 satellites into orbit. However, the failure of two consecutive missions within a year—both occurring during the third stage (PS3) of flight—has prompted the government to move beyond standard technical "Failure Analysis Reports." The formation of an external committee, led by former Principal Scientific Adviser K. Vijay Raghavan and former ISRO Chairman S. Somanath, signals a shift toward addressing deep-seated "systemic" and "organisational" issues rather than just technical anomalies.

Key Issues and Technical Challenges

The investigation focuses on why the third stage, a solid rocket motor, failed in both instances.

Failure Modes: PSLV-C61: Experienced a drop in combustion chamber pressure.

PSLV-C62: Suffered from a "roll-rate disturbance" (uncontrolled spinning), leading to deviation from the trajectory and the loss of 16 satellites, including the strategic EOS-N1.

The "Solid Motor" Constraint: Unlike liquid stages, solid motors cannot be throttled or shut down once ignited. This makes them hyper-sensitive to manufacturing defects or propellant cracks.

Systemic vs. Isolated: The similarity in the stage of failure suggests that these are not random glitches but are rooted in the manufacture, procurement, or assembly phases.

Strategic and Economic Implications

National Security: The loss of Earth Observation Satellites like EOS-09 and EOS-N1 creates "intelligence gaps" in border surveillance and disaster management.

Commercial Credibility: NewSpace India Limited (NSIL) competes globally based on PSLV's reliability. Successive failures could lead to a spike in insurance premiums and a loss of trust from international clients (e.g., US, France, Japan).

Privatization Hurdles: As ISRO transitions manufacturing to the HAL-L&T consortium, the probe will examine if Quality Assurance (QA) standards are being effectively transferred to private partners.

Organizational Accountability

Unlike previous instances, the results of the PSLV-C61 failure analysis were not made public, leading to calls for greater transparency. The new committee is tasked with:

Reviewing the accountability framework within ISRO.

Assessing the "third-party appraisal" process to restore global and domestic confidence.

Evaluating the impact on future high-stakes missions like Gaganyaan (India's human spaceflight program).

Conclusion

While ISRO remains a symbol of national pride and scientific excellence, the recent PSLV debacles highlight the "growing pains" of an agency transitioning from a R&D-focused body to a commercial and strategic powerhouse. The K. Vijay Raghavan committee's findings will be crucial in ensuring that the PSLV regains its status as a reliable workhorse. For India to achieve its 2030 space ambitions, it must harmonize its rapid launch pace with a foolproof, transparent, and accountable manufacturing ecosystem.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), consider the following statements:

1. PSLV is a four-stage launch vehicle using alternating solid and liquid propulsion stages.
2. The third stage of PSLV uses liquid propellant.
3. PSLV is primarily used for launching satellites into Sun-synchronous orbit (SSO).

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Repeated failures of the PSLV raise concerns beyond technical anomalies. Discuss the organisational and systemic challenges in India's evolving space ecosystem. **(250 words)**



GS II : Social Justice

1. India's National HPV Vaccination Rollout

The Union Health Ministry is initiating a massive public health campaign to combat cervical cancer, the second most common cancer among Indian women.

Key Features of the Plan

Target Group: Girls aged 14 years. This age is selected to ensure maximum preventive benefit before potential exposure to the Human Papillomavirus.

The Vaccine: Gardasil, a quadrivalent vaccine. It protects against four types of HPV:

Types 16 & 18: Responsible for over 80% of cervical cancer cases in India.

Types 6 & 11: Responsible for most cases of genital warts.

Dosage: Scientific evidence supports that a single dose provides robust, long-term protection for this age group.

Cost & Access: The vaccine will be free of cost and voluntary, administered through government facilities like Ayushman Arogya Mandirs.

Why it Matters (UPSC Perspective)

Health Burden: India sees nearly 80,000 new cervical cancer cases and 42,000 deaths annually.

Policy Shift: Transitioning from individual/private healthcare to a Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) style rollout ensures equitable access.

Global Alignment: Over 90 countries have adopted the single-dose schedule, improving affordability and logistics.

Health Ministry set to roll out free HPV vaccination plan targeting girls aged 14

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry is set to launch a nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme targeting girls aged 14.

The vaccination will be voluntary and free of cost, ensuring equitable access across socio-economic groups.

India will use Gardasil, a quadrivalent HPV vaccine, for protection from HPV types 16 and 18, which cause cervical cancer, and types 6 and 11.

"Global and Indian scientific evidence confirms that a single dose provides robust and durable protection when administered to girls in the recommended age group," a senior Health Ministry official said.

"The nation-wide programme will target girls aged 14 years, an age at which the HPV vaccine offers maximum preventive benefit, well before potential exposure to the virus," they said.

To ensure uninterrupted availability and quality, India has secured HPV vaccine supplies through a transparent, globally supported procurement mechanism.

"Under India's partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, Gardasil vaccines, which are approved by India's drug regulator and widely used internationally, have been made available for the national programme. The procurement follows stringent quality and cold chain standards, enabling the government to provide the vaccine free of cost to eligible girls across all States and Union Territories," the official said.

Safety shot

The Centre's nation-wide HPV vaccination programme targeting girls aged 14 will begin soon

- A single-shot of Gardasil, a vaccine that provides protection against HPV types 16 and 18, which cause cervical cancer, and types 6 and 11 will be used
- The vaccination will be voluntary and free of cost. It will be administered exclusively at designated government health facilities
- Cervical cancer remains the second most common cancer among women in India



HPV vaccination under the national programme will be conducted exclusively at designated government health facilities, including the Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (Primary Health Centres), Community Health Centres, Sub-District and District Hospitals, and Government Medical Colleges. Each vaccination session will be carried out in the presence of trained medical officers, supported by skilled healthcare teams, and equipped for post-vaccination observation and management of any rare adverse events.

Common ailment

Cervical cancer remains the second most common cancer among women in India, with nearly 80,000 new cases and over 42,000 deaths reported annually. Scientific evidence establishes that almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by persistent infection with high-risk types of HPV, particularly HPV types 16 and 18, which together account for more than 80% of cervical cancer cases in India.

Despite being largely preventable through vaccination and early screening, cervical cancer continues to impose a heavy burden on women and families.

"The forthcoming HPV vaccination programme directly addresses this challenge by preventing HPV infection before it can progress to cancer," the Health Ministry said.

HPV vaccines are among the most extensively studied vaccines worldwide, with evidence demonstrating 93-100% effectiveness in preventing cervical cancer caused by vaccine-covered HPV types. The vaccine is non-live, does not cause HPV infection, and has a good safety record, supported by more than 500 million doses administered globally since its introduction in 2006.

Meanwhile, globally, over 90 countries are implementing single-dose HPV vaccination schedules, improving coverage and affordability. Several countries have already demonstrated substantial reductions in HPV infection, precancerous lesions, and cervical cancer incidence following widespread vaccination.

India's approach is grounded in global best practices, national disease burden evidence, and expert recommendations of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, a Health Ministry official said.

GS III : Science & Tech

2. HIV Research: The "Capsid" Breakthrough

A new study in Science Translational Medicine has confirmed that the HIV capsid (the protein shell protecting the virus's genetic material) is an exceptional drug target because the virus cannot easily mutate it without "breaking" itself.

The Role of Lenacapavir

Mechanism: Approved in 2025, Lenacapavir is the first capsid-based inhibitor. Its unique "poor solubility" allows it to be injected once every six months, creating a slow-release reservoir.

The Resistance Paradox: While HIV is known for rapid mutations (leading to drug resistance), researchers found that to escape Lenacapavir, the virus must mutate its capsid.

The "Fitness Cost": These mutations make the virus significantly weaker. Resistant strains replicated at only **20-30%** of the level of the original virus.

Scientific Significance

Vulnerability: It proves that some parts of a virus are so essential that the "evolutionary cost" of changing them is too high for the virus to remain effective.

Combination Therapy: Reaffirms that while the virus might escape one drug, it cannot survive a "multi-blockade" strategy (using capsid inhibitors alongside traditional drugs).

Future Targets: This success encourages scientists to look at the protective shells of other viruses (like Hepatitis or Flu) as potential drug targets.

Scientists confirm HIV capsid is a good drug target despite resistance

A new study has found that to escape a drug called lenacapavir, HIV has to damage one of its own components, the capsid; the finding reaffirms the belief that the viral capsid is a good drug target and that the virus cannot afford to change it too much, opening the door to a new generation of drugs

Arum Panchapakesan

In 1987, four years after the discovery of HIV as the causative agent of AIDS, scientists reported the first drug effective against the virus, called zidovudine. Zidovudine targeted a viral enzyme called reverse transcriptase, and prevented the virus from completing its life cycle. However, zidovudine was no magic bullet. It could hold the virus at bay for a while, but HIV quickly learned to outsmart it, and the resulting drug resistance meant many patients soon lost the drug's protective effect.

It quickly became clear why zidovudine alone would keep HIV in check. The virus is prone to copying "mistakes" when it turns its RNA into DNA, generating endless new variants. Some of these variants possess the property of drug resistance. Importantly however, these changes can't happen just anywhere. Some parts of the virus are so essential to its survival that they must remain largely unchanged. Altering them would break the virus itself.

So researchers decided to aim more drugs at these "must keep" regions, where the virus has little room to evolve. The insight led to the development of multiple antiretroviral drugs targeting different viral proteins, including reverse transcriptase, protease, and integrase, laying the foundation for combination therapies that could suppress the virus far more effectively and durably.

Provocative question

In 1989, a paper in the journal *Science* detailed how another protein of HIV, called the capsid, folds into its unique protective shape. The study was important because the capsid is a structure that protects the virus's RNA from the environment. The work provided the breakthrough to understanding how the capsid folds into its unique 3D structure. Soon, the same team reported that most mutations in the capsid protein could render HIV incapable of infecting cells, showing that it was much more vulnerable than previously believed.

The discovery raised a provocative question: If the capsid was so essential, and so fragile, could it itself be a drug target? For years, the answer seemed to be 'no'. Scientists at major pharmaceutical companies started working on potential molecules that could latch onto the capsid and disrupt its carefully balanced structure, effectively stopping the virus in its tracks.

While one candidate seemed promising, it had a persistent problem: it didn't easily dissolve in water. Since solubility was a basic requirement for most medicines to circulate reliably in the body, the researchers had to keep tweaking it to see if they could improve its solubility while maintaining its potency.



A vial of lenacapavir at the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation's Maphumulo Research Site, in Cape Town, South Africa (1/11/2025)

Then, after more than two decades of persistence, the problem was turned on its head.

On June 18, 2025, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved lenacapavir, the world's first capsid-based HIV inhibitor. Its poor solubility, once a liability, became its greatest strength. Instead of being taken daily, lenacapavir is injected under the skin of the abdomen just once every six months, forming a slow-release reservoir that steadily delivers the drug into the bloodstream.

The results were astonishing: in clinical trials, it prevented HIV infection in high-risk individuals with 100% effectiveness. Lenacapavir was not a cure but, as a science article put it, it may be the next best thing to an HIV vaccine.

Acting solo

However, one hard-learned lesson from four decades of HIV research is that no single drug has ever escaped resistance. Given enough time, the virus finds a way, which is why HIV is always treated with combinations of drugs and never one alone.

In a study published recently in *Science Translational Medicine*, researchers from across the U.S., including the pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, examined viruses from patients who received lenacapavir as part of treatment, rather than prevention, and identified a small set of changes in the

The certainty that viral capsid is a very good drug target opens the door to a generation of drugs that target the capsid, with the reassurance that resistance will come at a high cost to the virus

capsid protein, most commonly involving positions known that reduced the drug's effectiveness. Importantly, these resistance mutations emerged primarily when lenacapavir was acting alone, without other fully active drugs in the regimen. When lenacapavir was used in proper combination therapy, viral suppression was largely maintained, reinforcing the long-standing rule of HIV treatment: that the virus can escape one blockade but not many at once.

To test whether the resistance came at a price, the researchers engineered the drug-resistant viruses in the laboratory. They took capsid sequences from patients who had developed resistance, inserted those exact mutations into a standard laboratory HIV strain, then watched how these altered viruses behaved.

The results were striking. Viruses carrying the strongest resistance mutations often replicated at less than 20-30% of normal levels, even in the absence of the drug. In effect, escaping lenacapavir meant HIV had to damage

one of its own components, the capsid, and that was the cost of its survival.

Shells of other viruses

The study reaffirmed the longstanding belief that the viral capsid is actually a very good drug target and that the virus can't afford to change it too much. This certainty opens the door to a new generation of drugs that target the capsid, with the reassurance that resistance will come at a high cost to the virus. With this proof in hand, researchers can now explore capsid-focused strategies more aggressively, combining them with existing therapies. Beyond HIV, the work also adds to proof that it's a good idea for researchers to examine the protective shells of other viruses, which may be similarly vulnerable.

The four plus decades of HIV research are a reminder that scientific progress is often slow, uneven, and unglamorous. For years, capsid inhibitors were under scrutiny and may have even been abandoned permanently if not for those researchers who kept at it, unwilling to abandon an idea they believed the science supported. If the story of lenacapavir teaches us anything, it is that sometimes, breakthroughs are the result of persistence and not inspiration. (Arum Panchapakesan is an assistant professor at the Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education, Chennai. arum.panchapakesan@gmail.com)

THE GIST

The capsid is a structure that protects the virus's RNA from the environment

Most mutations in the capsid protein could render HIV incapable of infecting cells

Lenacapavir, the world's first capsid-based HIV inhibitor, is injected under the skin of the abdomen once every six months, forming a slow-release reservoir that steadily delivers the drug into the bloodstream

Comparison: Preventative vs. Therapeutic Innovation

Feature	HPV Vaccination	HIV Capsid Inhibition
Primary Goal	Prevention (Prophylactic)	Treatment & Prevention (PrEP)
Mechanism	Stimulates immune system to block infection.	Physically disrupts the viral shell.

Daily News Analysis

Feature	HPV Vaccination	HIV Capsid Inhibition
Public Health Impact	Elimination of cervical cancer over generations.	Long-acting "vaccine-like" protection for high-risk groups.
Administration	Single dose (for 14-year-olds).	Injection once every 6 months.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques : The "capsid" of a virus refers to:

- (a) The viral genetic material
- (b) The outer lipid membrane derived from host cells
- (c) The protein shell that encloses viral genetic material
- (d) The enzyme responsible for viral replication

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Explain the concept of "evolutionary fitness cost" in the context of HIV capsid-targeting drugs. How does this reshape antiviral drug design strategies? **(250 Words)**



Page 04 : Prelims Exam

On **February 24, 2026**, the United Nations officially launched a high-impact road safety initiative in India, focusing on a sustainable financing framework to curb the rising toll of traffic accidents. The project, titled "**Sustainable Financing for Road Safety in India: A Collaborative Approach**," aims to tackle what UN officials call a "silent pandemic."

1. Project Overview & Scope

Funded by the **UN Road Safety Fund (UNRSF)**, the project targets four specific Indian states that represent diverse geographic and administrative challenges:

- Rajasthan** (North)
- Assam** (Northeast)
- Tamil Nadu** (South)
- Kerala** (South)

The project is coordinated by the **UN Resident Coordinator's Office** and involves technical support from global bodies including the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, **UNICEF**, and **UNESCAP**.

2. Key Objectives: The "Safe Systems" Approach

The initiative moves beyond traditional awareness by focusing on **institutional capacity** and **financing**. Its core goals align with the **Second Decade of Action for Road Safety (2021-2030)**:

- Capacity Building:** Strengthening national and sub-national agencies to implement existing road safety action plans.
- Financing Frameworks:** Developing a coordinated model to ensure road safety projects have consistent, long-term funding rather than relying on sporadic grants.
- Targeted Reduction:** Aiding India in meeting the global goal of **reducing road traffic deaths and injuries by 50% by 2030**.

3. The Scale of the Crisis in India

During the launch in New Delhi, **Jean Todt**, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, highlighted alarming statistics that underscore the urgency for India:

Fatalities: India reports approximately **1.54 lakh (154,000) deaths** annually—roughly **600 deaths per day** or **25 every hour**.

Economic Impact: The World Bank estimates that road crashes cost India roughly **7% of its GDP** annually due to lost productivity and healthcare burdens.

UN launches road safety project in four Indian States

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The United Nations on Tuesday launched a project in partnership with four Indian States for a road safety financing framework.

To be implemented across Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Assam under the coordination of the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, the project will focus on building capacities for the effective implementation of road safety action plans and on reducing road fatalities and serious injuries. Jean Todt, United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, told *The Hindu* that the world was not on track to achieve the pledge to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by at least 50% by 2030 under the "Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030."

Demographics: Road accidents are the **leading cause of death** for the younger generation in India, significantly impacting the country's future human capital.

"India has 1% of the world's vehicles but accounts for 11-15% of global road deaths. This is no longer acceptable." — **Jean Todt**, UN Special Envoy.

4. Complementary Campaign: #MakeASafetyStatement

Parallel to the financing project, the UN launched the Indian leg of the **#MakeASafetyStatement** global campaign.

Global Champion: Cricket legend **Sachin Tendulkar** has been designated as a Global Champion for Road Safety to influence public behavior.

Core Messages: The campaign focuses on simple, life-saving actions:

Wearing certified helmets (combatting the "fake helmet" epidemic).

Consistent use of seat belts.

Avoiding "distracted driving" (texting/mobile use).

Respecting pedestrians and cyclists.

5. UPSC Relevance: Analysis

Federalism in Action: The project's success depends on the cooperation between the UN and State Governments, highlighting the importance of Sub-national Diplomacy.

SDG Linkage: This directly contributes to SDG Target 3.6 (Halving road traffic deaths) and SDG 11.2 (Providing access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems).

Policy Gaps: While India has the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act 2019, the UN envoy noted that enforcement and road engineering remain the weak links.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Road safety primarily falls under which of the following in India's constitutional scheme?

- (a) Union List
- (b) State List
- (c) Concurrent List
- (d) Residuary Powers

Ans: c)

Page 10 : GS II & III : International Relations & Indian Economy / Prelims Exam

The global trade architecture, long anchored by the World Trade Organization (WTO), is undergoing a structural transformation. Recent trade deals signed by U.S. President Donald Trump—specifically with nations like India, Malaysia, and Bangladesh—depart from established norms of Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) treatment and Article XXIV of the GATT. By introducing the Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ART), the U.S. has created a new, "legally suspicious" category of trade relations that prioritizes bilateral leverage over multilateral rules.

The evolving nature of trade agreements

U.S. President Donald Trump's trade agreements create a new category within established international trade agreements. The fact, however, that these deals are not in accordance with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization make them legally suspicious

ECONOMIC NOTES

Prabhash Ranjan

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed several trade agreements with countries such as Malaysia, Cambodia, Argentina, and Bangladesh. These agreements have been signed under the shadow of intimidating and illegal tariffs. The U.S. has also announced a trade agreement with India, for which the two sides have issued a joint statement. Trade agreements exemplify the legalisation of international trade relations. But are all trade agreements the same? Can the India-U.S. trade deal, once finalised, be compared to India's recent agreements with the EU or the U.K.?

The U.S. refers to agreements signed by Mr. Trump as Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ART), as opposed to Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). This creates a new category in international trade deals, which now consists of three typologies.

Multilateralism

At the core of international trade treaties is the robust multilateral trade agreement established by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The GATT untethered the global American project of creating a non-discriminatory trading regime firmly grounded in the most-favoured-nation (MFN) rule (this WTO rule specifies that if a special favour is granted to one country, such as lower tariffs, then it has to be extended to all other WTO members as well).

The U.S. established a multilateral trading arrangement, based on an unconditional MFN rule, due to the pursuit of trade protectionism during the interwar years. Further, the formation of the WTO in 1995 provided an institutional architecture to this multilateral trade project. The WTO expanded trade beyond goods to include services and intellectual property, and established an



New terms: PM Narendra Modi with U.S. President Trump, at Hyderabad House in New Delhi in 2020. PH

intricate dispute settlement mechanism. While some view the WTO as part of a global imperialist state, its one-country-one-vote principle provides developing countries with some agency and an opportunity to forge alliances and bargain with the developed world.

Preferential trade agreements

Interestingly, while the WTO establishes a trading regime based on non-discrimination, it allows its members to sign preferential trading agreements on a non-MFN basis. Two such arrangements are recognised in Article XXIV of GATT – free trade areas and Customs Unions (CUs). However, since these arrangements are an exception to the MFN principle, they are subject to stringent conditions. For instance, an FTA creating a free trade area should cover 'substantially all trade' between its constituents. Likewise, a CU

should not only cover 'substantially all trade' but also have a common external trade policy for non-members. These stringent conditions aim to make FTAs and CUs building blocks rather than impediments to trade multilateralism.

Until the 1980s, these arrangements were not popular among countries. However, in the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of FTAs. While most FTAs are bilateral, some are quite large, covering 10 to 15 countries, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. Many of these FTAs are WTO-plus, that is, they go beyond the topics covered by the WTO, by including rules on labour, environment, and foreign investment protection. These FTAs are criticised for thrusting new obligations on developing countries. However, as these FTAs are notified to the WTO as a mandatory legal

requirement, they provide countries adversely affected by them with an opportunity to raise questions and scrutinise them.

Agreements on reciprocal trade

The ARTs that the Trump administration has been signing with WTO members are not signed under Article XXIV of the GATT. This makes these agreements legally suspicious. While GATT Article XXIV-type FTAs have an institutional linkage with the WTO, ARTs are completely independent. The most alarming element of these ARTs is that they exemplify the Trump administration's 'America First' trade policy. While the U.S. continues to impose tariff rates inconsistent with its WTO obligations, its trading partner is strong-armed into either eliminating or drastically reducing tariff rates on U.S. goods. Moreover, in addition to WTO-plus characteristics, these ARTs contain several one-sided provisions aimed at bolstering U.S. interests. For instance, Article 4.1 of the U.S.-Bangladesh ART provides that if the U.S. adopts a trade measure to protect its economic or national security, and notifies Bangladesh of the same, the latter, too, in accordance with its domestic laws, shall adopt a complementary restrictive action in support of the former. A provision like this effectively ties the interests of the U.S.' partner to the U.S. Another key feature of these ARTs is that they restrict the data sovereignty of U.S. treaty partners. For instance, Article 3.4 of the U.S.-El Salvador ART proscribes El Salvador from imposing customs duties on electronic transactions.

In sum, the U.S. ARTs are imperial in nature. Additionally, because these ARTs are not notified to the WTO, other countries can't scrutinise them. These agreements are an attempt to deracinate trade multilateralism and should be stoutly resisted by developing countries.

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THE GIST

At the core of international trade treaties is the robust multilateral trade agreement established by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of FTAs. While most FTAs are bilateral some are quite large, covering 10 to 15 countries, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement.

The most alarming element of U.S. President Trump's ARTs is that they exemplify the Trump administration's 'America First' trade policy.

The Three Typologies of Trade Agreements

International trade relations are now categorized into three distinct frameworks:

1. Multilateralism (The WTO Standard)

Core Principle: Based on the **Most-Favored-Nation (MFN)** rule (Article I of GATT), which prevents discrimination between trading partners.

Agency: Provides a "one-country-one-vote" system, giving developing nations a platform to negotiate against economic giants.

Institutional Strength: Features a binding Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM) to resolve conflicts through international law.

2. Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs/FTAs)

Legal Basis: Recognized under **GATT Article XXIV** as an exception to MFN.

Conditions: Must cover "substantially all trade" and ensure that barriers against non-members do not increase.

Transparency: These must be notified to the WTO, allowing for global scrutiny and ensuring they act as "building blocks" for global trade.

3. Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ART)

Nature: Purely bilateral and "independent" of the WTO framework.

Mechanism: Often signed under the threat of unilateral tariffs (e.g., Section 232 or IEEPA-based reciprocal tariffs).

Terms: These agreements often include one-sided "security" clauses (as seen in the U.S.-Bangladesh ART) or restrictions on **data sovereignty**.

Contextual Focus: The U.S.-India Trade Dynamics (2025–2026)

The U.S.-India relationship serves as a primary case study for this "New Era" of trade:

The February 2026 Framework: The U.S. and India reached a "framework for an Interim Agreement" on reciprocal trade.

Reciprocity vs. Sovereignty: Under this deal, the U.S. agreed to lower its "Reciprocal Tariff" on Indian goods (from 25% to 18%) in exchange for India eliminating barriers on U.S. agricultural products and ICT goods.

The Oil Factor: A significant geopolitical element was introduced where the U.S. removed specific punitive tariffs in exchange for India's commitment to reduce **Russian oil imports**, framing economic trade as a national security compliance test.

Legal Volatility: In late February 2026, the **U.S. Supreme Court** struck down several unilateral tariffs as an overreach of executive power. This has led India and others to pause negotiations to reassess the legal standing of these ARTs.

Static Context: GATT Article XXIV

To understand why ARTs are "legally suspicious," one must look at the static legal requirements for an FTA:

Internal Liberalization: Duties must be eliminated on "substantially all" trade between the partners.

External Impact: The agreement must not result in higher trade barriers for third-party countries.

Daily News Analysis

The ART Deviation: ARTs often target specific "reciprocal" sectors without covering "substantially all trade," thus failing the legal test of Article XXIV and potentially violating WTO law.

Critical Comparison: India's Trade Strategy

Feature	India-EU/UK FTA (Standard)	India-U.S. ART (New Category)
Legal Basis	GATT Article XXIV	Executive Discretion / Bilateral Joint Statements
Scope	Comprehensive (Substantially all trade)	Targeted / Sectoral Reciprocity
WTO Status	Notified & Scrutinized	Independent / Not Notified
Sovereignty	Mutual concessions	Linked to U.S. security/geopolitical goals

Conclusion

The rise of Agreements on Reciprocal Trade signifies a move toward "Imperial Trade", where economic engagement is weaponized to serve the national security interests of a hegemon. For India, while these deals offer immediate tariff relief, they risk eroding long-term policy autonomy and undermining the multilateral system that protects developing nations. As the U.S. judiciary begins to check executive trade powers, the future of these "suspicious" agreements remains uncertain.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "The rise of bilateral 'reciprocal' trade arrangements signals a weakening of multilateral trade governance." Examine. (250 words)

The interplay between the Right to Privacy (Article 21) and the Right to Information (Article 19) has reached a critical juncture. While the DPDP Act was enacted to safeguard personal data following the landmark Puttaswamy (2017) judgment, its Section 44(3) significantly alters the RTI Act. By substituting the nuanced exemption in Section 8(1)(j) with a broader restriction, critics argue the law has shifted from a "Right to Know" toward a "Right to Deny," sparking intense judicial scrutiny in early 2026.

Does the Data Act dilute the Right to Information Act?

Why is a blanket exemption to any information which relates to personal information problematic?

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

The petitions challenging the amendment to the Right to Information (RTI) Act that provides blanket exemption for personal information, through a section in the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, has been referred to a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court.

How was the DPDP Act framed?

The Supreme Court in *Puttaswamy* (2017) had declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right primarily under Article 21 (right to life and liberty). It is also an overarching right that includes freedom of speech and expression (Article 19). In this judgment, the court had directed that the government must put forth a data protection regime.

The government had constituted a committee under the chairmanship of

Justice B.N. Sri Krishna to deliberate and report on the data protection framework. The committee submitted its report and a draft Bill on data protection in July 2018. Subsequently, in August 2023, Parliament passed the DPDP Act, 2023. The DPDP Act provides the legal framework for the protection of personal data of individuals (known as data principals) which they share with other persons, companies and government entities (data fiduciaries).

What is the controversy?

The RTI Act, 2005 was enacted to provide citizens with the right to seek information from public authorities. Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act stipulated that information which relates to personal information, the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of an individual need not be provided. However, if the appropriate authority was satisfied that larger public

interest justified the disclosure of such information, the same could be provided.

Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act amends section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. It provides a blanket exemption to any information which relates to personal information without any exceptions. The statement of objects and reasons while introducing the DPDP Bill is silent about the aim of this amendment. It may be inferred that it is to protect the fundamental right to privacy of public officials that cannot be abridged or taken away by parliamentary law. However, this amendment has been challenged in the Supreme Court, through a series of petitions, on the ground that it is *ultra vires* the Constitution. This has now been referred to a Bench considering 'constitutional sensitivity' of the questions involved.

What can be the way forward?

The Supreme Court has in various cases viewed the right to information as integral

to Articles 19 and 21. The RTI Act has had a significant impact on increasing the transparency and accountability of public authorities. Previously, the personal assets and liabilities of public servants, which they are required to periodically submit to government, were disclosed by Public Information Officers under the RTI Act if it served larger public interest. This had been used to probe any allegation of corruption by public servants. However, with the current amendment, such information would be declined on the ground that it is related to personal information. It enables rejecting requests concerning even procurement records, audit reports or public spending on the premise that it could be 'personal information'. The court had remarked that it might lay down the guidelines as to what is meant by 'personal information'. This is a welcome step. However, the amendment of the RTI Act through the DPDP Act, 2023 should be repealed. It should revert to the earlier position which allowed the disclosure of personal information if it fulfilled larger public interest. This provision already contained the required proportionate balance, between the needs for privacy and disclosure, with respect to the personal information of public officials.

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THE GIST

▼
The Supreme Court in *Puttaswamy* (2017) had declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right.

▼
The RTI Act, 2005 was enacted to provide citizens with the right to seek information from public authorities.

▼
Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act amends section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. It provides a blanket exemption to any information which relates to personal information without any exceptions.

The Core of the Controversy: Section 8(1)(j)

The amendment essentially removes the "balancing test" that previously allowed for the disclosure of personal information if it served a larger public interest.

1. The Previous Framework (Pre-DPDP)

Qualified Exemption: Information could be withheld only if it had no relationship to public activity or would cause an "unwarranted invasion of privacy."

Public Interest Override: Even if information was personal, a Public Information Officer (PIO) could disclose it if "larger public interest" justified it.

Parliamentary Parity: A crucial proviso stated that information which cannot be denied to Parliament shall not be denied to any person.

2. The New Framework (DPDP Amendment)

Blanket Exemption: The clause now simply exempts "information which relates to personal information."

Removal of Override: The "public interest" and "public activity" tests have been deleted.

Daily News Analysis

Status of the Proviso: The parity with Parliament has been removed, creating a legal vacuum where citizens have fewer rights to information than legislators.

Why a "Blanket Exemption" is Problematic

A total prohibition on personal information creates several "blind spots" in democratic accountability:

Shielding Corruption: Historically, RTI was used to access asset declarations, educational qualifications, and disciplinary records of public servants. Under the new regime, these can be rejected as "personal information," making it harder to track "disproportionate assets" or "fake certificate" cases.

The "Bureaucratic Risk-Aversion" Effect: The DPDP Act carries heavy penalties (up to ₹250 crore) for data breaches. This incentivizes PIOs to take the "safest" route: denying any request that mentions a name, phone number, or address.

Impact on Social Audits: Critical information regarding welfare beneficiaries (PDS, MGNREGA) or procurement audits can be classified as personal, shielding public spending from community scrutiny.

Press Freedom: Investigative journalists may be treated as "Data Fiduciaries," potentially requiring them to seek consent from the very officials they are investigating.

Static Context: Fundamental Rights in Conflict

Right	Constitutional Basis	Primary Objective
Right to Information	Article 19(1)(a)	Transparency, accountability, and informed citizenry.
Right to Privacy	Article 21	Autonomy, dignity, and protection of personal data.
The Balance	Puttaswamy Doctrine	Rights are complementary; restrictions must be proportionate and the least restrictive possible.

Conclusion

The 2026 referral to a Constitution Bench highlights that the RTI-DPDP conflict is not merely a statutory overlap but a fundamental constitutional question. By removing the "public interest override," the amendment risks making privacy a "cloak for opacity." A healthy democracy requires a Harmonious Construction where personal privacy is protected without dismantling the tools of public accountability.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: The Right to Privacy was declared a fundamental right in which case?

- (a) Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India
- (b) ADM Jabalpur
- (c) Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India
- (d) Shreya Singhal

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss how the doctrine of harmonious construction can resolve the apparent conflict between the RTI Act and the DPDP Act. **(250 Words)**



India's trade strategy in a multipolar world

India's recent global trade strategy aims to boost exports and strengthen its position as a leading global trade partner. This has resulted in ambitious free trade agreements and a stronger presence in key international economic forums. In 2023, India updated its Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) with the goal of increasing exports to \$2 trillion by 2030, reinforcing a framework of strategic autonomy that supports sovereign decision-making while engaging major global powers. According to the Department of Commerce's 2025 Year-End Review, India recorded a 6.05% annual increase in total exports – merchandise and services combined – reaching \$825.25 billion.

A shift in approach

For many years, India adopted a cautious approach to free trade agreements (FTA), engaging primarily with economies that were similar in structure and stages of development. In recent years, however, New Delhi has shifted to a more proactive trade strategy, pursuing intensive negotiations and concluding comprehensive FTAs with major developed economies that were previously beyond reach. According to recent estimates, India's network of FTAs is projected to cover nearly 71% of its total export basket by 2026 – an extraordinary increase from approximately 22% in 2019. This rapid expansion reflects a decisive shift away from primarily regional trade arrangements toward deeper integration with advanced economies such as Australia, the European Union (EU), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States, signalling India's broader strategic ambition to integrate into global value chains and high-value markets.

A major development in India's trade diplomacy is the India-EU Free Trade Agreement, signed on January 27, 2026 after nearly two decades of negotiations. Described as "historic" by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, it creates a vast free trade zone covering nearly two billion people.

The agreement reduces or eliminates tariffs on



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over 90% of traded goods, boosting market access for Indian exporters, especially in textiles, leather, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and marine products. It enhances India's competitiveness against exporters such as Bangladesh and Vietnam. The FTA also removes tariffs on many pharmaceutical exports, strengthens regulatory cooperation, and lowers production costs by easing access to advanced European machinery and inputs. It is also expected to foster digital trade, boost investor confidence, and strengthen long-term economic resilience. Widely regarded as the "mother of all deals", the agreement represents a transformative boost to India's export ecosystem and marks a decisive shift in India's broader global trade strategy.

The deal with the U.S.

Early in February 2026, India and the U.S. signed a framework for an interim agreement on reciprocal trade, restating their commitment to advancing negotiations on a broader U.S.-India Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The interim framework is designed to progressively reduce tariffs across a range of products, thereby facilitating greater Indian exports to the U.S. market and enhancing overall market access.

The agreement also prioritises strategic collaboration in critical sectors such as rare earths and semiconductors. This cooperation is expected to support India's ambitions in high-technology manufacturing, reinforce its electronics export capacity, and strengthen its emergence as a reliable global hub for electronics and semiconductor-related production. By diversifying export destinations and reducing overdependence on specific markets, the pact enhances India's strategic and economic flexibility. Strategically, India's recent global trade agreements collectively signal a major shift toward enhancing its role as a leading player in the global trading system. This shift is visible across four key dimensions. First, deeper engagement with advanced economies such as the EU and the U.S. provides India with preferential access to some of the world's most

lucrative and high-demand markets. Such access is expected to significantly strengthen India's export potential and global market presence with benefits flowing to labour intensive sectors integrating the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises into the Global Value Chains. The agreements are across continents that reinforces India's strategic attempt to diversify and not become overly dependent on any single geography.

Second, FTAs reduce barriers on both exports and imports of intermediate goods, enabling Indian firms to integrate more effectively into global supply chains and improve their global competitiveness. This integration is especially beneficial for high-growth sectors such as technology, electronics, pharmaceuticals and services, all of which depend heavily on seamless cross-border movement of inputs and components.

Third, trade agreements serve as strategic instruments for enhancing India's diplomatic influence. By establishing deeper economic interdependence with major powers, India strengthens its role in global economic governance and positions itself as a more influential voice in shaping trade norms and standards.

At the core

India's evolving global trade strategy is central to its ambition of becoming an economic superpower and achieving Viksit Bharat. After opting out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, India adopted a calibrated approach – boosting domestic manufacturing through production-linked incentives and infrastructure expansion while deepening global integration. Trade agreements with Australia, the EU, the UAE, and the U.K. aim to expand market access, attract investment, and diversify exports. By strengthening supply chains, promoting digital and services trade, and integrating into global value chains, India seeks to scale high-value exports and position itself as a leading force in global commerce.

Free trade agreements and trade reforms are key to propelling India's exports and global presence

GS Paper III : Indian Economy

UPSC Mains Practice Question: How do high-standard FTAs contribute to strategic autonomy rather than undermine it? Discuss in the context of India's 2026 trade trajectory. (250 Words)

Context :

In 2026, India's trade strategy has reached a "watershed moment." Moving beyond its traditional hesitation, New Delhi has pivoted toward a **proactive FTA (Free Trade Agreement) regime**. With the goal of reaching **\$2 trillion in exports by 2030**, India is leveraging "strategic autonomy" to sign landmark deals with the EU and the U.S., effectively embedding itself into the global value chains (GVCs) of the West while maintaining its sovereign economic interests.

The Strategic Pivot: From 22% to 71%

The most striking feature of India's current strategy is the scale of its ambition.

Expansion: In 2019, only 22% of India's export basket was covered by FTAs. By 2026, this has surged to **71%**.

Shift in Partners: India has moved from signing deals with "structurally similar" developing economies to "complementary" advanced economies (Australia, UAE, UK, EU, and USA).

The "Mother of All Deals": The **India-EU FTA (Jan 2026)** is the crown jewel of this strategy, eliminating tariffs on 90% of goods and providing Indian textiles and pharma a competitive edge over rivals like Vietnam and Bangladesh.

Key Dimensions of India's Trade Diplomacy

Dimension	Strategic Objective	Impacted Sectors
Market Access	Entry into high-demand, lucrative Western markets.	Textiles, Leather, Marine products, MSMEs.
GVC Integration	Lowering barriers on intermediate goods and components.	Electronics, Semiconductors, Auto-components.
Strategic Autonomy	Diversifying trade partners to avoid over-dependence on China or any single bloc.	Rare earths, Critical minerals, Energy.
Norm Setting	Transitioning from a "rule-taker" to a "rule-maker" in global trade governance.	Digital trade, Services, Intellectual Property.

The U.S. Interim Agreement: A New Model

Unlike the comprehensive EU deal, the **U.S.-India Interim Agreement (Feb 2026)** follows the **Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ART)** logic discussed in previous reports, but with a focus on "High-Tech Diplomacy":

Sectoral Focus: Prioritizes **Semiconductors** and **Rare Earths** over a total goods sweep.

Geopolitical Alignment: Uses trade to reinforce India's position as a "reliable partner" in the global electronics supply chain, contrasting with the volatility of other manufacturing hubs.

Static Context: Why "Viksit Bharat" needs FTAs

For a developing economy to become a "Viksit Bharat" (Developed India) by 2047, it must overcome the **"Middle-Income Trap."** Historically, no nation has achieved developed status without:

Export-Led Growth: High-volume manufacturing for global markets.

Technological Leapfrogging: Moving from low-value assembly to high-value R&D and component manufacturing.

Service Integration: Leveraging the "Global Capability Centers" (GCCs) model to export high-end services (IT, Design, Legal).

Conclusion

India's 2026 trade trajectory signals a departure from protectionism toward **"Calibrated Globalism."** By opting out of the RCEP but signing bilateral deals with the EU and U.S., India is choosing a path of "Quality over Quantity"—favoring deep integration with high-standards markets that bring in technology and investment, rather than just raw trade volume. This strategy is central to India's rise as a "Vishwa-Mitra" (Global Friend) and an economic superpower.

