

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Page 05 : GS II : International Relations

The recent high-level engagement between India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington marks a significant "thaw" in bilateral relations. After a turbulent 2025 characterized by trade friction and punitive tariffs, the two nations have moved toward a strategic reset. This visit, centered on a landmark trade deal and cooperation in **critical minerals**, signals a shift from transactional disputes toward long-term technological and economic alignment under the current U.S. administration.

Key Pillars of the 2026 India-U.S. Engagement

1. The Landmark Trade Deal

The meeting follows a breakthrough phone call between Prime Minister Modi and President Trump. The deal addresses several core "pain points":

Tariff Rationalization: U.S. tariffs on Indian goods have been reduced from a high of **25%** (which sometimes reached 50% with penalties) to a reciprocal **18%**.

Energy Shift: India has reportedly agreed to significantly reduce or **stop purchasing Russian oil**, pivoting toward U.S. and potentially Venezuelan energy sources.

Market Access & Investment: India has committed to a massive **\$500 billion investment** and purchase plan for American energy, technology, and agricultural products.

Protection for Sensitive Sectors: Indian officials, including Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, have noted that **dairy and sensitive agriculture** sectors remain protected under the deal.

2. Critical Minerals and "Pax Silica"

A major highlight of the visit was India's participation in the **Critical Minerals Ministerial**.

De-risking Supply Chains: Both nations are formalizing cooperation in the exploration, mining, and processing of minerals like lithium, cobalt, and rare earths, essential for **semiconductors** and EVs.

Pax Silica Initiative: Launched in late 2025, this U.S.-led initiative aims to build a secure "silicon supply chain." India is a key invitee, positioning itself as a "trusted node" to counter China's dominance in the sector.

TRUST Initiative: The "Transforming Relationships Utilizing Strategic Technology" (TRUST) framework is being leveraged to reduce barriers in high-tech commerce and defense.

Jaishankar, Rubio welcome trade deal, discuss critical minerals, Quad cooperation

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Welcoming the trade deal, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent in Washington on Wednesday, where both sides agreed to "formalize" cooperation on critical minerals, and take forward their economic partnership.

The meetings came two days after a call between U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after which they announced a reduction in U.S. tariffs on Indian goods to 18%, and the cancellation of 25% penalty tariffs for the purchase of Russian oil.

The Centre has come under sharp criticism from the Opposition over the lack of transparency and scant details of the India-U.S. trade deal, and in particular the U.S. government's statement that India has agreed to "stop buying" Russian oil, cut tariffs for most U.S. goods to zero, give U.S. agricultural products market access, and commit \$500 billion for investments and purchase of American goods.

In a social media post, Mr. Jaishankar said that he had held a "wide-ranging conversation" with Mr. Rubio, and that discussions included "trade, energy, nuclear, defence, critical minerals and technology". "[We] agreed on the early meetings of various mechanisms to advance our shared interests," he said, though the two leaders did not take any questions from the media.



Hand in hand: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington. AP

Speaking at the event, Mr. Jaishankar "underlined challenges of excessive concentration" of critical mineral supply chains, and expressed support for U.S. initiatives to de-risk them.

Mr. Jaishankar held the meetings ahead of attending the U.S.-led Critical Minerals Ministerial in Washington on Wednesday that called for "preferential trade zones" to secure semiconductor supply chains, in an effort to work around China's recent restrictions on trade in critical minerals, and build alternate supply routes.

The countries attending were invited to take membership of a grouping that will be shaped by the U.S. and included about 50 countries.

Restoring ties
In a social media post, Mr. Jaishankar's participation in the event is significant as many of the other countries present were represented by their Energy Ministers, and indicates a desire by Delhi and Washington to move quickly on restoring ties ruptured by a year of tensions, and U.S. tariffs on Indian goods.

Mr. Jaishankar's visit to Washington, his seventh since Mr. Trump's re-election, has thus far not visited India.

"Secretary Rubio and Minister Jaishankar concluded their meeting by expressing their commitment to expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation through the Quad. They acknowledged that a prosperous Indo-Pacific region remains vital to advancing our shared interests," the U.S. State Department said.

3. Revitalizing the Quad

After the Quad (India, U.S., Japan, Australia) engagements were sidelined in 2025, Jaishankar and Rubio reaffirmed their commitment to the grouping. India is keen to host the **Quad Summit in 2026**, emphasizing a "Prosperous Indo-Pacific" as a shared strategic objective.

Strategic Significance for India

Feature	Strategic Benefit
Economic	Lower tariffs enhance the competitiveness of "Make in India" exports like textiles, leather, and solar modules.
Technological	Integration into the Pax Silica ecosystem accelerates India's Semiconductor Mission and AI goals.
Geopolitical	Reduces dependence on Russian energy while strengthening the partnership with the U.S. to balance China's regional influence.

Challenges and Criticism

Despite the diplomatic success, the deal faces domestic and international scrutiny:

Transparency: The Opposition in India has criticized the "scant details" and the lack of a formal public text of the agreement.

Strategic Autonomy: Concerns persist regarding whether the commitment to stop Russian oil imports compromises India's traditional policy of strategic autonomy.

Implementation Gap: Realizing the \$500 billion commitment will require significant structural adjustments within the Indian economy.

Conclusion

The Jaishankar-Rubio meeting signifies that India and the U.S. are moving past the "tariff wars" of 2025 to focus on **technology-led diplomacy**. For India, the challenge lies in balancing this deep economic integration with the U.S. while maintaining its sovereign interests in energy and domestic agriculture. As both nations formalize their "Critical Minerals" partnership, the relationship is evolving from a standard trade partnership into a **"Trusted Tech Alliance"** aimed at securing the future of the global digital economy.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: India-US relations are moving from transactional trade diplomacy to technology-led strategic alignment. Examine this statement in the context of recent developments in trade, critical minerals, and semiconductor cooperation. **(150 Words)**

Page 06 : GS II : Social Justice

The Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs/NTs/SNTs) are intensifying their demand for a **separate Census column** and a **distinct Constitutional Schedule**. As India prepares for the 2027 Caste Census—the first of its kind since 1931—these communities argue that their current "misclassification" within the existing SC, ST, and OBC categories has led to political and economic invisibility.

Denotified tribes seek constitutional recognition, separate Census entry

Denotified tribes, nomadic tribes, semi-nomadic tribes seek 'separate column' in 2027 caste census, claiming they have been politically misclassified among SC, ST, OBC groups; they want sub-classification to highlight backwardness within grouping

Abhinay Lakshman

NEW DELHI

Denotified tribes, nomadic tribes, and semi-nomadic tribes across the country are coming together to push for a "separate column" for themselves in Census 2027. Their demand is for constitutional recognition of the denotified tribes in a Schedule, on a par with the existing classifications of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

In February 2027, India will conduct a caste enumeration for the first time since 1931. Five years after that 1931 Census, the origins of the Scheduled Castes list came into being in the form of the Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1936.

Half a century earlier, in 1871, a colonial law had classified entire communities, particularly nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, as "criminals". After the law was repealed in 1952, these groups came to be known as "denotified" tribes.

The Social Justice Ministry has now recommended

Count the uncounted

Denotified tribes seek 'separate column' and formal identity after decades of misclassification

Classification & numbers

- They were labelled 'criminal tribes' under the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871
- The Act was repealed in 1952, after which these communities were denotified



- The previous National Commission identified nearly 1,200 communities
- Nearly 267 communities remain outside the SC, ST, and OBC lists

Key demands

- Estimates suggest up to 7 crore people in Uttar Pradesh alone
- Separate Census column for denotified tribes
- Dedicated Constitutional Schedule
- Sub-classification to reflect graded backwardness within communities

to the Office of the Registrar-General of India that these denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes be included in the Census. The Office of the RGI has agreed to include them in next year's caste enumeration exercise. Ministry officials assured community leaders in North India in a virtual meeting on January 30.

Separate column

"But we have no idea how they will do this," B.K. Lodhi, a community organiser in Uttar Pradesh who was at the meeting, told *The Hindu*. "If we are not counted in a separate column, a separate code, in

the Census forms, we will be lost once again," said Balak Ram Sansi, 63, a Karnal-based organiser with the All India Denotified Nomadic Tribes Development Council.

Even as leaders from denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic communities across Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and other parts of North India are fighting to have their own Schedule, some leaders have started to stress the importance of recognising "graded backwardness" within this grouping as well.

They want the demand for sub-classification to go hand in hand with that for

a separate Schedule. These leaders, like Dr. Lodhi, are drawing their arguments from an August 2024 judgment, in which the Supreme Court paved the way for sub-classification of SCs and STs.

Denotified tribes

The Criminal Tribes Act was first enacted in 1871 and then amended in 1924, before being officially repealed on August 31, 1952. The 1871 Act said it was for the "registration, surveillance and control of certain criminal tribes and eunuchs", describing "criminal tribes" as "tribe, gang, or class of persons" that are "addicted" to committing non-bailable offences. "These communities were among the first to confront the British and sustained the struggle. That is why the colonial government classified us as 'criminal tribes,'" Mr. Sansi said.

The previous National Commission for Denotified Tribes, headed by Bhiku Ramji Idate, identified 1,200 such tribes, most of which have been assimilated in the SC, ST, or OBC classifications over the past seven decades. In its 2017 report, however, the Idate

Commission listed 267 DNT communities that have not been classified as such. Dr. Lodhi, who served as Deputy Secretary and Director (Research) to the Idate Commission, said, "Most of the DNTs have been amalgamated in the SC, ST, OBC lists and they are not able to compete in these categories because of how marginalised they are." Mr. Sansi said it was "politics" that led to the DNT communities being "misclassified".

No caste certificates

Despite schemes for DNTs run by both the State and the Centre, such as the SEED scheme, only a "minuscule" percentage of people are getting benefits, mainly because governments are not willing to issue DNT certificates, the leaders said.

The Social Justice Ministry has only spent ₹69.3 crore on the SEED scheme in the past five years (as of December 2025), compared to the planned expenditure of ₹200 crore. "The reason for this is that no State is issuing proper DNT community certificates for us despite reminders from the Centre," Dr. Lodhi said.

Historical Context: From "Criminals" to "Denotified"

Daily News Analysis

Criminal Tribes Act (1871): The colonial British government classified several nomadic and forest-dwelling communities as "hereditary criminals" to control and surveil them.

Repeal (1952): On **August 31, 1952**, the Indian government repealed the Act, "denotifying" these tribes. However, the social stigma of being a "criminal by birth" persists.

Idate Commission (2017): Headed by Bhiku Ramji Idate, the commission identified roughly **1,200 DNT communities**. It found that nearly 267 of these tribes were not classified under SC, ST, or OBC lists, leaving them without any affirmative action benefits.

Core Demands of the Movement

Separate Census Column & Code : The primary fear is being "lost" within broader categories. DNT leaders are demanding a specific code in the 2027 Census forms to ensure an accurate count, which is a prerequisite for evidence-based policy making.

Constitutional Schedule (The Fourth Category): Currently, India uses three main categories for affirmative action: SC, ST, and OBC. DNTs seek a **separate Schedule** on par with these, arguing that their historical marginalization is unique and requires a dedicated constitutional framework.

Sub-classification and "Graded Backwardness": Drawing from the **August 2024 Supreme Court judgment** on SC/ST sub-classification, DNT leaders argue that within the DNT grouping, some tribes are more backward than others. They seek a system that prevents the most dominant groups from cornering all benefits.

Implementation Hurdles: The SEED Scheme Case Study

The **SEED (Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs)** serves as a clear example of the gap between policy and reality:

Under-spending: Only ₹69.3 crore was spent out of a ₹200 crore budget (as of Dec 2025).

Certification Crisis: The primary barrier is that state governments are often reluctant or unable to issue **DNT Community Certificates**. Without these certificates, individuals cannot access scholarships, health insurance, or housing assistance under SEED.

Analysis of Challenges

Challenge	Impact on DNT Communities
Identity Overlap	Many DNTs are already listed as SC or ST in some states and OBC in others, causing confusion and legal hurdles.
Nomadic Lifestyle	Lack of permanent addresses makes it difficult for Census enumerators to track and record these populations accurately.
Lack of Data	Without an official census count, there is no "denominator" to calculate the required scale of reservation or

Daily News Analysis

Challenge	Impact on DNT Communities
	welfare funds.

Conclusion

The struggle of the Denotified Tribes represents a fight for social dignity as much as it does for economic benefits. For the 2027 Census to be truly inclusive, the Office of the Registrar General of India must ensure that the "invisible" DNT communities are assigned distinct identifiers. Moving forward, the government's ability to issue community certificates at the grassroots level will be the ultimate test of whether "denotification" leads to true "de-marginalization."

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Trace the evolution of the Denotified Tribes from the colonial period to the present. How does colonial-era stigmatization continue to influence their socio-economic conditions today? (150 Words)



Page 06 : GS III : Environment / Prelims exam

A 2026 study led by the **University of East Anglia (UEA)**, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, reveals that climate models significantly underestimate the temperature rise in India's medium-sized cities. While Global Climate Models (GCMs) focus on regional averages, they often fail to account for the **Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect**. The study warns that as the world approaches the **\$2°C\$** global warming threshold, Indian cities will experience warming up to **45% faster** than their surrounding rural hinterlands.

Indian cities could see far higher temperature rise than projected, says study

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

Climate models may be underestimating – by anything from half to two degrees – how much hotter India's non-metropolitan cities can get from global warming relative to rural areas, according to a study published on Wednesday.

The researchers, from the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, analysed how temperatures would rise in 104 “medium-sized” cities in tropical and sub-tropical regions under a 2 degrees Celsius warming scenario, the emissions path that the globe is currently on. Rather than asking how hot regions become on average, the study asks a different question: how much faster do cities warm than their



Study includes 18 Indian cities, and finds that all of them warm faster than nearby rural areas.

surrounding countryside?

The study found that in Patiala, Punjab, land surface temperatures could rise at double the rate of warming projected by global climate models in comparison to its surrounding rural region – an extreme “outlier.” This means that if the models used in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's assess-

ments predict a 2 degrees Celsius temperature rise in Patiala, the rise would actually be 4 degrees Celsius when urban heat-island effects are accounted for. An extra 2 degrees Celsius rise in temperature can have significant implications for susceptibility to heat strokes, water availability, and public expenditure on cooling.

Urban heat-island effect

The study includes 18 Indian cities, and finds that all of them warm faster than nearby rural areas. On average, Indian cities experience about 45% more warming than what Earth System Models (ESMs) project for the broader region. Urban heat-island effect is the tendency for cities to be hotter than nearby rural land.

Key Findings: The Urban-Rural Warming Gap

The research analyzed **104 medium-sized cities** (populations between 300,000 and 1 million) in tropical and subtropical regions.

The "Outlier" – Patiala: In Patiala, Punjab, land surface temperatures are projected to rise at **double the rate** of nearby rural areas. If regional warming is **\$2°C\$**, Patiala could see an actual rise of **\$4°C\$**.

Daily News Analysis

Affected Indian Cities: The study covered **18 Indian cities**, including **Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Patiala**. It found that all 18 warm significantly faster than their rural surroundings.

Underestimation by Models: Current Earth System Models (ESMs) often miss an additional **\$0.5°C\$ to \$2°C\$** of warming specifically occurring in urban centers due to local factors.

Understanding the Urban Heat Island (UHI) Effect

The UHI effect occurs when a city experiences much warmer temperatures than nearby rural areas. This is driven by several factors:

Surface Albedo: Dark surfaces like asphalt (roads) and concrete (buildings) absorb more solar radiation than natural vegetation.

Thermal Inertia: Urban materials store heat during the day and release it slowly at night, preventing the city from cooling down.

Lack of Evapotranspiration: Fewer trees and water bodies mean less natural cooling through water vapor release.

Urban Morphology: Tall buildings create "urban canyons" that trap heat and block wind flow.

Anthropogenic Heat: Waste heat from air conditioners, vehicles, and industrial activity adds to the temperature.

Comparison: Regional vs. Urban Warming (Projected)

Feature	Global Climate Model (ESM) Projection	Actual Urban Projection (UEA Study)
Focus	Broader regional/rural hinterland	Localized urban core
Typical Warming	\$1.5°C\$ to \$2°C\$	\$3°C\$ to \$4°C\$ (in high-risk cities)
Key Drivers	Greenhouse gas concentrations	GHG + Urbanization + Infrastructure
Impact	General ecological shifts	Acute heat stress, mortality, energy surge

Implications for India

Public Health: Medium-sized cities are often less prepared than megacities (like Delhi or Mumbai) for extreme heat. This increases the risk of heat strokes and mortality among outdoor workers.

Energy Demand: Higher temperatures lead to a "feedback loop" where increased use of air conditioning releases more waste heat into the streets, further intensifying the UHI.

Daily News Analysis

Water Scarcity: Rapid warming accelerates the evaporation of local water bodies and increases urban water demand.

Policy Gap: Most Heat Action Plans (HAPs) in India are based on regional weather station data, which may be under-reporting the actual heat felt in the densest parts of the city.

Conclusion

The UEA study serves as a wake-up call for urban planners in India. It suggests that "one-size-fits-all" climate projections are insufficient for city-scale resilience. To mitigate this "amplified warming," Indian cities must transition toward "**Cool Roof**" technologies, increase urban green cover (the **Miyawaki method**), and protect local wetlands. As medium-sized cities represent the next frontier of India's urban growth, integrating UHI-aware data into the **Smart Cities Mission** is no longer optional—it is a survival necessity.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, consider the following statements:

1. Urban areas tend to have higher night-time temperatures compared to rural areas due to heat retention by built-up surfaces.
2. High surface albedo of concrete and asphalt is a major cause of Urban Heat Island formation.
3. Reduced evapotranspiration in cities contributes to higher urban temperatures.

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: Critically examine why medium-sized Indian cities are more vulnerable to extreme heat stress compared to metropolitan cities. Suggest suitable urban planning and policy interventions.

Page 09 : GS II : International Relations

The expiration of the **New START** treaty on February 5, 2026, marks the end of an era in bilateral arms control between the U.S. and Russia. Coupled with a deepening diplomatic rift within NATO—exacerbated by President Donald Trump's pressure on Denmark regarding **Greenland**—the traditional architecture of nuclear deterrence is facing an unprecedented rupture. As great power rivalry intensifies, the world is shifting from "integrated deterrence" toward a more fragmented and volatile nuclear landscape.

A turning point for nuclear deterrence

The rupture between Europe and Donald Trump's U.S. over Greenland may be papered over in time, but Europe's trust in the U.S. as a reliable North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally has been irreparably broken. As the last remaining arms control treaty limiting Russia's nuclear arsenal comes to an end, conversations about defending Europe are acquiring a sharper edge.

NATO came together in 1949 as a defensive nuclear alliance against the Soviet Union with the U.S. as its *primum inter pares*—the ultimate guarantor of the security of its western European members. Now, the hegemon has turned on its own alliance, over Mr. Trump's desire to acquire Greenland, a sovereign territory under the jurisdiction of NATO member Denmark. Mr. Trump's bullying and economic warfare has broken trust, and without trust NATO as a nuclear alliance is hollowed out. How Europe responds to this rupture will shape not only the future of the continent's security, but also the future of conversations about nuclear deterrence. Depending on whether the new security architecture of Europe privileges nuclear deterrence, thinking about nuclear weapons will either be updated to reflect the lessons of the 80 years since a nuclear weapon was last detonated, or continue to echo conversations that took place when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) separated the world into nuclear haves and have-nots.

The nuclear conversation
 The intervening years since the NPT restrained horizontal proliferation have seen threats to world security shift from nuclear rivalry to terrorism and extremism; climate change; economic stress; inequality; and regional rivalries. While none of these is easily addressed by nuclear weapons, conversations about nuclear possession and use



Priyanjali Malik
 writes on nuclear politics and security

continue to privilege nukes as the ultimate guarantor of peace and security even as great power rivalry returns to the global stage.

Moreover, discussions about "what deterrence" have to have ossified. At the dawn of the nuclear age, when possessors were still building their arsenals, there was a debate on whether deterrence rested on certainty or uncertainty. Some believed that uncertainty was enough; that allowing an adversary to not be certain that any adventurism would not be countered with a nuclear response was enough for deterrence to work. A form of this deterrence arguably operated between India and Pakistan between the 1980s and 1998. Israel, with its opaque nuclear status, also relies on this uncertainty. For the rest of the nuclear possessors, a complex interplay of great power politics led to growing stockpiles and an emphasis on the certainty of a nuclear response. Testing demonstrated intent and number of weapons indicated resolve.

Yet, even as nuclear states were racing to stockpile warheads, a taboo on nuclear use was gaining strength. A nuclear weapon has not been deployed since 1945. While nuclear threats have been issued, and states have developed ever smaller and more "useable" weapons (tactical or battlefield nukes), nuclear use, to the best of our knowledge, has never been seriously contemplated.

Arms control agreements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union/Russia, along with the global non-proliferation architecture may have contributed to sparing the world another Hiroshima, but thinking on nuclear deterrence remains essentially unchanged. And now, after a sharp reduction in nuclear stockpiles between the U.S. and Russia, the pendulum may be swinging back.

China, Russia and the U.S. are ambitiously modernising their nuclear stockpiles. China has reportedly added 100 warheads a

year since 2022 to reach a total of 600. In 2015, the U.K. reversed a 2006 decision to reduce its stockpile and is at 225 warheads. The last remaining arms control agreement between Russia and the U.S. – New START – expires on February 5, and if both states start increasing their stockpiles from the current 5,459 and 5,277, respectively, it will send a clear message of moving back to Cold War ideas of deterrence.

Lessons from Ukraine

The war in Ukraine should have led to a more serious debate about what deters. Russian President Vladimir Putin had made nuclear threats before his invasion and then again in October 2022. Yet those threats were countered not by the certainty of a nuclear response, but by the certainty of a robust response that left the nuclear element unclear. It is worth remembering that Ukraine – a non-nuclear country – has been able to defend itself against a nuclear adversary. Yes, it has had help and yes, it has lost territory, but Ukraine has not yet been defeated by its nuclear neighbour.

Therefore, what happens in the next few months as Europe comes up with a security architecture that does not rely on the U.S could reshape nuclear thinking.

Apart from some tepid discussion about how France and the U.K. might extend their nuclear umbrella to cover Europe, most of the previous debate appeared to return to hugging the U.S. ever closer. In the meantime, an ad hoc grouping of mainly European states, called the Coalition of the Willing, has come together to guarantee Ukraine's security. Ukraine now has experience in defending itself against a nuclear state. Against this backdrop, whether Europe chooses to base its new security architecture on some sort of replacement nuclear alliance, or on a defensive alliance that may have a nuclear element, will shape future discussions about nuclear weapons and deterrence.

At the dawn of the nuclear age, when possessors were still building their arsenals, there was a debate on whether deterrence rested on certainty or uncertainty

1. The Expiration of New START

The **New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START)** was the last remaining legally binding limit on the world's two largest nuclear arsenals.

The Limits Lost: The treaty capped deployed strategic warheads at **1,550** and delivery vehicles (missiles/bombers) at **700**.

Verification Void: Its expiration ends the regime of on-site inspections and data exchanges, increasing the risk of "mirror-imaging" and miscalculation.

Tri-polar Rivalry: For the first time, the U.S. faces a "two-tier deterrence" challenge, with **China** rapidly modernizing its arsenal (reaching ~600 warheads) alongside Russia's ~5,500.

2. The Greenland Crisis and NATO's Trust Deficit

A significant "black swan" event in 2026 has been the U.S. administration's pursuit of Greenland, a sovereign territory of Denmark.

The Rupture: President Trump's threats of punitive tariffs (up to 25%) and "hard way" rhetoric to acquire Greenland have hollowed out the core principle of NATO: **sovereign equality**.

Erosion of Article 5: If the "primus inter pares" (the U.S.) uses economic warfare or coercion against a fellow member, the credibility of the **Article 5** collective defense guarantee vanishes.

Strategic Shift: The **2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS)** now explicitly prioritizes "Homeland Defense" and the Arctic, treating European conventional defense as a secondary responsibility of European states themselves.

3. Lessons from the Ukraine War (2022–2026)

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has provided a new "laboratory" for understanding modern deterrence:

The "Nuclear Taboo" vs. Persistence: Despite Russia's nuclear signaling, Ukraine—a non-nuclear state—has successfully defended its sovereignty using conventional means and Western intelligence.

Coalition of the Willing: In early 2025/2026, a 35-nation "Coalition of the Willing" (including the UK, France, and Germany) emerged to provide Ukraine with security guarantees independent of formal NATO/U.S. structures.

Peacekeeping Frameworks: The **Paris Declaration (Nov 2026)** established a blueprint for a "Multinational Force for Ukraine" (MFU) to act as a reassurance force post-ceasefire, signaling a European-led deterrence model.

4. Europe's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

Europe is now forced to contemplate a security architecture that does not rely solely on the "U.S. Nuclear Umbrella."

The "European Pillar": Discussions are moving toward a **European Security Council (ESC)** and a standing pan-European military force (100,000+ troops).

Nuclear Extension: Debates are intensifying over whether the **UK** (225 warheads) and **France** (300 warheads) can or should extend their "nuclear umbrella" to cover the rest of Europe.

Pax Silica and Technical Autonomy: Europe is attempting to de-risk its supply chains (energy, semiconductors, and minerals) to avoid being "coerced" by either the U.S. or China.

Comparative Deterrence Philosophies

Daily News Analysis

Era	Focus of Deterrence	Primary Mechanism
Cold War	Certainty of Retaliation	Massive Stockpiles; MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction)
Post-NPT (1980s-90s)	Uncertainty	Opaque programs (Israel); "Reciprocal Restraint" (India-Pak)
2026 Shift	Defensive Resilience	Conventional precision, cyber, and "Coalitions of the Willing"

Conclusion

The current geopolitical climate represents a "**return to realism**." The collapse of New START combined with the transactional nature of the transatlantic alliance has forced a rethink of 80 years of nuclear theory. For India, these developments emphasize the necessity of "**Multi-alignment**" and self-reliance in critical technologies. The world is moving away from the "Nuclear Haves and Have-nots" paradigm toward a messy, multi-polar order where deterrence is as much about economic and technological resilience as it is about warhead counts.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The expiration of the New START treaty marks not just the end of arms control, but the end of predictability in nuclear deterrence. Critically examine this statement in the context of contemporary great power rivalry.



Page 10 : GS I : Social Issues

In late January 2026, the Supreme Court of India stayed the implementation of the **UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026**. This new framework was intended to replace the 2012 guidelines to address institutional casteism following the tragic deaths of students like Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi. However, the regulations have faced intense legal and social pushback for being "vague" and "exclusive," leading the Court to revive the older 2012 framework pending a judicial review.

Issues surrounding UGC regulations

What prompted the Supreme Court to halt the UGC's revised equity framework? Why has the definition of caste-based discrimination triggered opposition from unreserved categories? Why does the court believe certain provisions may be open to misuse?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

The Supreme Court has stayed the University Grants Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026 (UGC regulations, 2026), holding that they are ambiguous and can be misused. The court has issued notice to the Centre and has held that the UGC's 2012 regulations on the subject will continue to remain in force for the time being.

What is the background?

In 2012, the UGC framed regulations aimed at promoting equity and preventing discrimination on university campuses.

These regulations defined "discrimination" as any act that nullifies or impairs equality of treatment in education, including denial of access to education, imposition of undignified conditions, or the maintenance of separate educational or social spaces on the basis of caste, creed, religion, language, ethnicity, gender, or disability. They also provided for the setting up of Equal Opportunity Cells and the appointment of an anti-discrimination officer as part of a grievance redressal mechanism.

After the suicide of Rohith Vemula in 2016 and Payal Tadvi in 2019, following allegations of caste discrimination, their mothers had moved the Supreme Court for stricter enforcement of the 2012 regulations.

During the course of the hearing of these petitions, the UGC constituted a committee to review the existing framework. The revised regulations published in 2026 were the culmination of this review.



A protest being held in Lucknow against the new UGC equity guidelines. SANDEEP SAXENA

Why are the 2026 regulations controversial?

The UGC Regulations, 2026 define 'discrimination' as any unfair, differential, or biased treatment against any stakeholder – students, faculty members, or staff – on the grounds of religion, race, caste, gender, place of birth, disability, or any of them.

The main controversy arose because of the definition of 'caste-based discrimination' in the new regulations. It is defined as discrimination solely based on caste or tribe against members of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (SC, ST, and OBC).

Members of the general or unreserved categories have alleged that this is biased and presumes that they would always be the perpetrators of caste-based discrimination against underprivileged sections. Further, there are no provisions for punishing 'false' or 'motivated' complaints, which can adversely affect stakeholders.

What did the court rule?

In *Mritunjay Tiwari versus Union of India*, the Supreme Court observed that some provisions of the regulations are ambiguous and could be misused. Further, it has framed four 'substantive' questions of law to be addressed in this case, out of which the first two questions are pertinent to the current controversy.

First, whether a separate definition of 'caste-based discrimination' bears a reasonable nexus to the objectives of the regulations, and whether it is necessary, considering that the regulations already define 'discrimination' as including unfair or differential treatment on the grounds of caste. Second, whether this definition of 'caste-based' discrimination will affect the sub-classification of the underprivileged sections.

What constitutional principles are at stake?

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law. Article 15 prohibits

discrimination by the State only on the grounds of race, religion, caste, sex, or place of birth. These provisions reflect the concept of 'formal' equality, which is essential in any democratic society.

Article 15 also enables the State to make special provisions for OBC, SC, and ST. This reflects the concept of 'substantive' equality, which is based on the belief that formal equality is not sufficient to redress the difference between groups that have enjoyed privileges and those that have been historically underprivileged and discriminated against. This is pertinent not only for affirmative actions aimed at the advancement of backward classes but also for policies aimed at preventing discrimination. Laws like the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, SC and ST (Prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989 are examples of such differential treatment.

It may be a valid argument that the 2026 regulations provide grievance redressal mechanisms against 'discrimination' and that a definition of 'caste-based discrimination' does not serve any additional purpose. However, the government is well within its rights to recognise a specific and serious subset of discrimination within the broader ambit of discrimination. In India, 'caste-based discrimination' is asymmetric and is more detrimental to SC, ST, and OBCs.

Nonetheless, educational campuses are meant to ideally foster the atmosphere of shedding caste identities; any ambiguity that may precipitate it should be avoided.

The government may engage with all stakeholders to refine the regulations that would address the issues raised. More importantly, as per the original petition of aggrieved mothers in 2019, the regulations should be strictly enforced to protect the underprivileged from any form of discrimination.

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THE GIST

▼ The Supreme Court stays the UGC Regulations, 2026, citing ambiguity and possible misuse, and keeps the 2012 regulations in force.

▼ The dispute arises from the definition of 'caste-based discrimination', limited to SC, ST and OBCs, which is alleged to be biased and lacking safeguards against false complaints.

▼ The case raises questions on equality under Articles 14 and 15, and the need for a separate definition of caste-based discrimination in higher education.

Key Controversy: Defining "Caste-Based Discrimination"

The crux of the opposition lies in **Regulation 3(c)**, which introduces a specific definition for caste-based discrimination separate from the general definition of discrimination.

Provision	Definition in 2026 Regulations
Regulation 3(e): General Discrimination	Any unfair or biased treatment based on religion, race, caste , gender, place of birth, or disability. (Applicable to all stakeholders).
Regulation 3(c): Caste-Based	Specifically defined as discrimination " only " against members of the Scheduled Castes (SC) ,

Provision	Definition in 2026 Regulations
Discrimination	Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC).

Why the Opposition from Unreserved Categories?

Asymmetry in Justice: Critics argue that 3(c) assumes caste discrimination is **unidirectional**. It implies that only SC/ST/OBC members can be victims, leaving general category students without a remedy if they face bias (e.g., from an SC/ST/OBC faculty member or administrator).

Presumption of Perpetrator: The framework is perceived as institutionalizing a bias where general category students are seen exclusively as potential offenders, which they claim violates the right to equality under **Article 14**.

Absence of Safeguards: Unlike the 2012 rules, the 2026 version reportedly lacks penalties for **false or motivated complaints**, raising fears of the law being used for personal vendettas or "settling scores" on campus.

Supreme Court's Reasoning for the Stay

In Mritunjay Tiwari vs. Union of India (2026), the bench comprising **Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi** flagged several "dangerous" ambiguities:

1. The Threat of Segregation

The Court expressed alarm over **Regulation 7(d)**, which mentions "segregation" or "allocation" of hostels and classrooms on "transparent criteria."

"For God's sake, don't do that... We should not go to the stage of segregated schools and hostels as seen in the US in the past." — **The Bench**

2. Omission of Ragging

The 2026 rules omitted specific mentions of **ragging**—a major form of campus harassment present in the 2012 rules. The Court noted that a general category student resisting ragging by a reserved category senior could potentially face a "counter-complaint" of caste discrimination under 3(c) without having a specialized remedy for the ragging itself.

3. Regional & Cultural Bias

The bench noted that discrimination often occurs based on **region** (e.g., North-South divide) or **physical appearance** (e.g., students from the Northeast). By focusing narrowly on a specific definition of caste, the regulations might overlook these real-world harms.

Constitutional Dilemma: Formal vs. Substantive Equality

The case forces a dialogue between two types of equality:

Formal Equality (Art. 14 & 15): The law should be blind to identity and treat everyone exactly the same.

Daily News Analysis

Substantive Equality (Art. 15(4)): The State must make special provisions for historically marginalized groups (SC/ST/OBC) because they do not start from the same baseline as privileged groups.

The Court's concern is that while seeking substantive equality, the 2026 regulations may have created a "regressive" framework that divides society into rigid silos rather than fostering a "casteless" academic environment.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court has directed the Union Government to form an expert panel of academicians and jurists to redesign the language of the 2026 Regulations. The goal is to move from a punitive, exclusionary model to a universal, inclusive framework that protects marginalized students without creating "legal vacuums" for others. Until this review is complete, the 2012 Regulations remain the law of the land to ensure campuses do not remain entirely unregulated.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Examine the concerns raised by the Supreme Court regarding vagueness, segregation, and absence of safeguards in the UGC Regulations, 2026. What lessons does this hold for rights-based regulatory frameworks in India? (150 Words)



The U.S. trade deal – gains from economic diplomacy

India's trade playbook is working strongly, steadily and at scale. Its new trade architecture resembles a newly built expressway, anchored in strategic trade agreements that will enable faster, more predictable movement for trade. After concluding a major free trade agreement with the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom and other partners, India has now secured a consequential trade deal with the United States.

The road to this deal was neither short nor simple. Shaped through a demanding and intricate process, the deal stands as a testament to the strength, steadiness and foresight of Indian negotiators. After nearly a year of sustained dialogue, technical negotiations and quiet diplomacy, India and the U.S. agreed upon the lower tariff of 18%. The reduction of U.S. tariffs on Indian goods to this competitive level is a huge boost to Indian exports, providing improved market access, policy certainty and avenues for new strategic partnerships.

A growing network of partnerships

The India-U.S. trade deal represents an important outcome in India's expanding network of international trade partnerships. The trade agreements with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the U.K., and the EU give India preferential market access to the whole of Europe. Agreements with Australia and New Zealand make India a key partner of the Pacific, trade agreements with Oman and United Arab Emirates provide greater access to West Asia, and the latest deal with the U.S. deepens India's stronghold in America – a clear reflection of India's deep integration with the world.

The U.S. is the largest import market in the world and India's biggest export destination, accounting for almost one-fifth of India's total exports. Indian exports to the U.S. span a wide range of sectors, which includes apparel, gems and jewellery, agricultural products, footwear, leather and several other manufacturing products, supporting both employment and manufacturing value chains in India. With the elevated U.S. tariff levels of 50% last year, several Indian exporters were at a competitive



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disadvantage in this critical market. The revised tariff not only provides meaningful relief and improves India's relative position *vis-à-vis* competing suppliers but also provides a constructive basis for advancing discussions under the ongoing India-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). By easing immediate trade frictions, the agreement creates space to address broader issues such as regulatory cooperation, market access and supply chain under the BTA.

The gains and broader implications

The clearest gains from the tariff reduction are likely to accrue to employment-intensive export sectors, particularly apparel. The U.S. is the world's largest apparel import market, and with Indian exports now facing an 18% tariff, lower than key competitors such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, Indian manufacturers regain price competitiveness in several high-volume categories. Similar dynamics apply to gems and jewellery (where margins are highly sensitive to tariff changes and the U.S. remains a critical destination), as well as to marine products, processed foods, footwear and leather (where even modest tariff moderation materially improves landed costs). A lower tariff will enhance export viability across these sectors and support India's positioning in diversified global supply chains, further encouraging these industries to go for capacity expansion.

On the whole, the reduction in U.S. tariffs on Indian goods immediately enhances India's competitive position relative to several major exporting nations that face higher duties, including China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. This competitive positioning builds up India's export sectors and supports the country's long-term goal of becoming a global manufacturing hub.

Beyond immediate economic relief, the deal opens pathways for long-term growth and boosts the overall India-U.S. economic relationship. It encourages joint ventures, technology partnerships and investment in high-value sectors, fostering innovation, employment and

Industry must use the opportunities that the India-U.S. trade deal presents

skill development.

For India, it consolidates global economic leadership and strengthens the country's capacity to engage in high-value international partnerships. For the U.S., it highlights the advantages of partnering with India to drive innovation, expand markets and reinforce supply chains. Progress on tariffs supports deeper engagement across regulatory co-operation, digital trade, clean energy and innovation-led sectors. The deal creates a mutually beneficial cycle of growth and opportunity, laying the foundation for collaboration that extends beyond commerce.

From a strategic perspective, closer economic ties complement cooperation in wider forums such as the Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.) where supply-chain resilience and trusted partnerships are central priorities. A stable trade relationship reinforces these objectives.

From tariffs to trust, a strategic reset in ties

This trade deal is more than a temporary adjustment of tariffs. It restores trust, unlocks economic opportunities and shores up a constructive strategic relationship. The India-U.S. partnership is poised to expand in areas which include technology, defence, energy and high-value manufacturing.

The deal demonstrates how thoughtful negotiation and shared priorities can turn complex challenges into lasting opportunities. It reveals how two democracies, when willing to engage thoughtfully, can craft solutions that serve national interests while advancing global stability. The India-U.S. trade deal is not just an economic milestone. It represents a renewed, balanced and strategic partnership, setting the stage for deeper cooperation and mutual prosperity in the decades ahead.

The India-U.S. trade improves access to the most important export destination, strengthens competitiveness across key sectors and supports the next phase of bilateral economic engagement. With policy momentum in place, the focus now shifts to industry to leverage these opportunities through investment, scale and enhanced competitiveness.

GS Paper II : International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Discuss how tariff rationalization under the India-US trade deal can strengthen India's manufacturing ecosystem and integrate MSMEs into global value chains. (250 Words)

Context :

The conclusion of a landmark trade deal between India and the United States in early February 2026 represents a strategic reset in bilateral relations. After a year of "tariff wars" where duties on Indian goods peaked at 50%, the new agreement slashes the effective tariff rate to 18%. This deal is not just a commercial transaction but a complex piece of economic diplomacy that balances India's quest for market access with its geopolitical alignment, effectively positioning India as a primary alternative to China in global supply chains.

1. The Core of the Deal: Tariff Rationalization

The most immediate outcome of the negotiations is the reduction of U.S. "reciprocal" tariffs.

Tariff Rollback: The U.S. reduced the base reciprocal tariff from 25% to 18%.

Removal of Penalties: Crucially, a 25% punitive levy—imposed in August 2025 due to India's purchase of Russian crude oil—has been rescinded.

Effective Rate: For several sectors like electronics and pharma, concessions may bring the effective rate as low as 12-13%.

Sectoral Impact: Reclaiming the Edge

The deal provides a "sweet spot" for Indian exporters compared to regional competitors:

Competitor	Effective Tariff Rate (Approx.)	India's Strategic Advantage
India	18% (Effective 12-16%)	Lowest in the region; gains price competitiveness.
Vietnam	19-20%	India gains a 2-3% margin edge.
Bangladesh	20% (some categories 35%)	Immediate revival for Indian apparel clusters.
China	30% to 47.5%	India becomes a decisive "China-Plus-One" alternative.

2. India's Concessions: The Cost of Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy is a "two-way street," and India has made significant commitments to secure this deal:

The Energy Pivot: India has reportedly agreed to halt or significantly reduce purchases of Russian crude oil, shifting its energy security calculus toward the U.S. and potentially Venezuela.

"Buy American" Commitment: India has pledged to purchase up to \$500 billion in American goods—spanning LNG, coal, defense technology, and aircraft—over the coming years.

Market Access: There is a move toward "zero tariffs" on several U.S. goods, including agricultural products (tree nuts, cotton, and soybean oil), which has raised concerns among domestic farmers regarding subsidized U.S. imports.

3. Strategic and Macroeconomic Implications

Daily News Analysis

Re-energizing "Make in India" : By lowering the "landed cost" of Indian products in the U.S. (India's largest export market), the deal encourages Deep Manufacturing over simple assembly. It integrates Indian MSMEs into the global value chain for high-volume categories like apparel, footwear, and engineering goods.

Currency and Capital Stability: The resolution of trade uncertainty has arrested the Foreign Portfolio Investment (FPI) outflows seen in 2025. This is expected to stabilize the Rupee (which hit a low of ₹91.98/\$ in early 2026) and narrow the Current Account Deficit (CAD).

The "Pax Silica" and iCET Framework

The deal reinforces the iCET (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology). It paves the way for India to join the U.S.-led Pax Silica initiative, securing supply chains for semiconductors and green energy (solar cells and modules).

4. Challenges and Criticism

Transparency Issues: The Opposition has criticized the government for a lack of a published text, calling it a "surrender" to U.S. interests, particularly regarding the sudden shift away from Russian oil.

Agriculture Vulnerability: Opening the market to U.S. agricultural products could trigger distress in the poultry and dairy sectors, which have traditionally been protected.

Technical Barriers: Even with 18% tariffs, Indian exports still face Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) hurdles and strict U.S. IPR standards.

Conclusion

The 2026 India-U.S. trade deal is a "Strategic Window." It moves the bilateral relationship from transactional friction to a predictable, rules-based partnership. While the \$500 billion commitment and the energy pivot are heavy prices, the resulting export competitiveness and geopolitical "de-risking" from China offer India a path toward its goal of *Viksit Bharat 2047*. The focus now shifts from negotiation to implementation—converting this market access into actual manufacturing scale.

