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SPECIAL FOR UPSC & GPSC EXAMINATION

DATE : 31-12-25



The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

Wednesday, 31 Dec, 2025

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India has officially surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy, with a nominal GDP of \$4.18 trillion, according to a government statement. Sustained high growth, strong domestic demand, and favourable macroeconomic indicators have placed India on a trajectory to potentially overtake Germany and become the third-largest economy by around 2030. This development marks a significant milestone in India's post-reform economic journey and has important implications for global economic governance.

India is now the fourth largest economy: Centre

With GDP valued at \$4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan and is poised to displace Germany from the third rank in the next few years with a projected GDP of \$7.3 trillion by 2030, it says

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy with a size of \$4.18 trillion and is poised to overtake Germany to become the third largest by 2030, the government said on Tuesday.

With continuing good growth numbers, India is also the world's fastest-growing major economy, it said.

India's real GDP grew 8.2% in the second quarter of 2025-26, up from 7.8% in the first quarter and 7.4% in the fourth quarter of the last fiscal.

"With GDP valued at \$4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy and is poised to displace Germany from the third rank in the next 2.5 to 3 years with a projected GDP of \$7.3 trillion by 2030," said the government in a statement providing a snapshot of reforms in 2025.

The U.S. is the world's



Domestic drivers, led by robust private consumption, played a big role in supporting this expansion, the government has said. AFP

largest economy, and China occupies the second spot.

The growth momentum further surprised on the upside, with GDP expanding to a six-quarter high in Q2 of 2025-26, reflecting India's resilience amid persistent global trade uncertainties, it said.

Domestic drivers, led by robust private consumption, played a central role in supporting this expansion.

The release said international agencies have echoed this optimism and

cited projections made by various entities. The World Bank has projected a 6.5% growth in 2026, and Moody's expects India to remain the fastest-growing G20 economy with a growth of 6.4% in 2026 and 6.5% in 2027. The International Monetary Fund has raised its projections to 6.6% for 2025 and 6.2% for 2026, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development forecasts 6.7% growth in 2025 and 6.2% in 2026. Also, the S&P anticipates a growth of 6.5% in the current fiscal

and 6.7% in the next, the Asian Development Bank has lifted its 2025 forecast to 7.2%, and Fitch has raised its FY26 projection to 7.4% on stronger consumer demand.

"India is among the world's fastest-growing major economies and is well-positioned to sustain this momentum. With the ambition of attaining high middle-income status by 2047 - the centenary year of its independence, the country is building on strong foundations of economic growth, structural reforms, and social progress," the government said.

The release highlighted that inflation remains below the lower tolerance threshold, unemployment is declining, and export performance continues to improve. Furthermore, financial conditions have stayed benign, with strong credit flows to the commercial sector, while demand conditions remain firm, supported by a further strengthening of urban consumption.

Key Highlights from the News

- India recorded 8.2% real GDP growth in Q2 of 2025–26, the highest in six quarters.
- Growth has been domestically driven, led by robust private consumption and improving urban demand.
- India remains the fastest-growing major economy, despite global trade uncertainties.
- Multiple international agencies have expressed confidence in India's growth prospects:
 - International Monetary Fund projects 6.6% growth in 2025.
 - World Bank forecasts 6.5% growth in 2026.

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development expects growth above 6% in the medium term.
- Inflation is below the lower tolerance band, unemployment is declining, and credit flow to the commercial sector remains strong.

Factors Driving India's Economic Rise

Strong Domestic Demand: Private consumption has emerged as the primary growth engine, supported by rising incomes, urbanisation, and improved consumer confidence.

Macroeconomic Stability: Controlled inflation, stable financial conditions, and healthy banking sector balance sheets have created a conducive environment for investment and growth.

Structural Reforms: Reforms in taxation (GST), insolvency resolution (IBC), digital public infrastructure (UPI, DBT), and production-linked incentives (PLI) have enhanced efficiency and formalisation.

Demographic Dividend and Services Strength: A young workforce and global competitiveness in IT, digital services, and knowledge-based sectors continue to support long-term growth.

Significance for India and the World

Global Economic Standing: India's rise strengthens its voice in global institutions such as the G20, IMF, and World Bank.

Shift in Global Growth Centre: Reinforces the transition of economic dynamism from advanced economies to emerging markets.

Strategic and Geopolitical Impact: Economic strength underpins India's strategic autonomy and bargaining power in global trade and diplomacy.

Developmental Opportunity: Higher GDP provides fiscal space for social spending, infrastructure creation, and poverty reduction.

Challenges and Caveats

Per Capita Income Gap: Despite high aggregate GDP, per capita income remains relatively low.

Employment Quality: Job creation must keep pace with growth, particularly in manufacturing and formal sectors.

External Vulnerabilities: Dependence on energy imports and exposure to global financial volatility remain concerns.

Regional and Social Inequality: Growth must be inclusive to avoid widening disparities.

Conclusion

India's emergence as the world's fourth-largest economy is a landmark achievement reflecting the resilience of its domestic growth model and the cumulative impact of long-term reforms. However, translating this macroeconomic success into inclusive, employment-intensive, and sustainable development remains the central challenge. If India effectively leverages its demographic dividend, strengthens manufacturing, and deepens human capital, it will be well-positioned to realise its ambition of becoming a high middle-income country by 2047, aligning economic scale with social progress.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: India's rise to the fourth-largest economy is primarily measured using which of the following indicators?

- (a) GDP (PPP terms)
- (b) Real GDP growth rate
- (c) Nominal GDP at current prices
- (d) Gross National Income

Ans: (c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy. Analyse the domestic drivers behind this achievement and examine the challenges India must overcome to sustain this growth trajectory. (150 Words)

The life and political career of Khaleda Zia, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, offers a valuable lens to understand the evolution of India–Bangladesh relations and the functioning of regional diplomacy in South Asia. From the late 1970s to the mid-2010s, her engagements with successive Indian leaders reflected continuity in bilateral ties despite regime changes, domestic upheavals, and regional crises. Her role is particularly significant in the context of SAARC-centric regional cooperation and India's neighbourhood diplomacy.

SAARC leader Khaleda Zia had a constant engagement with India's neighbourhood

From finding a mention as the wife of Bangladesh President in the diplomatic records of a 1979 banquet to hosting the Indian Prime Minister in SAARC summits, the Bangladeshi leader has a long history of interactions with the Indian leadership; her last noted interaction with Indian leadership was in 2015 when she met Modi in Dhaka

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

A part from deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia was the only Prime Minister from Bangladesh whose political and institutional interactions with the Indian leadership stretched back to the 1970s and continued till the 21st century.

Begum Zia, as she was known to the people of Bangladesh, started her public life as the spouse of then President of Bangladesh General Ziaur Rahman, and she was a witness to the diplomacy between India and Bangladesh during a difficult period in the 1970s.

Ms. Zia first found mention in Indian diplomatic records when Prime Minister Morarji Desai acknowledged her presence during a banquet in Dhaka during his visit to Bangladesh on April 16, 1979.

It was a visit that took place during a rough patch in bilateral relations. Just three-and-a-half years ago, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in Dhaka along with most of his fa-

mily members and Indira Gandhi, a well-wisher of Mujib, was out of power after being overthrown in the 1977 election.

Earlier, President Nilam Sanjiva Reddy had held a banquet for President Rahman on December 19, 1977, when he visited Delhi (without Ms. Zia) and was welcomed at the New Delhi airport by Desai.

The Rahmans were met by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when they became the first foreign guests that Indira met after being sworn into office for her last term in office in January 1980. The high-level visits between the two sides came at a sensitive period during 1977-1980 as Sheikh Hasina, one of the two surviving children of the slain Mujib, was based in India during this time. As relations improved between the two sides after President Rahman's meeting with Indira, Ms. Hasina returned to Bangladesh on May 17, 1981.

On May 30, 1981, President Rahman was assassinated in a failed military coup while he was on a visit to Chittagong. Hearing of the violent death, Indira



Rich history: Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. ANI/FILEPHOTO

said, "The shocking assassination of President Ziaur Rahman shows the instability which many developing countries are facing. We in India are vigilant and shall take all necessary steps to safeguard our interests."

First woman PM

In the first six months of 1991, the subcontinent witnessed several shockers. On April 29, Bangladesh was hit by one of the most destructive cyclones in history of the region and then on May 21, as India was get-

ting ready for the election, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. But prior to these developments, on March 20, Ms. Zia took charge as the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

On March 7, 1991, the Ministry of External Affairs had said, "Any government in Bangladesh as much as any government in India, realises the importance of good relations between the two neighbours. We had welcomed the return of democracy, when the results of the elections were an-

nounced a few days ago, and expressed our hope and intention to work with Bangladesh, to strengthen our bilateral relations, based on our mutual national interests."

India, like Bangladesh, was witnessing a transition and the outreach therefore was aimed at ensuring a working relationship with Prime Minister Zia. In the last week of May 1992, Ms. Zia was hosted by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. She made it clear that SAARC, a dream project of her late husband, was

She was a witness to diplomacy between India and Bangladesh during a difficult period in the 1970s

close to her heart.

Next year, during April 10-11, 1993, Rao visited Dhaka when Ms. Zia hosted the seventh SAARC summit and welcomed the King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck; President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom; Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala; Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and the Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. What made this outreach significant was that India and Bangladesh tried to put relations back on track after the regional tension spiked because of the demolition of Babri Masjid by Hindu karsevaks in Ayodhya.

Despite the tension, ties were maintained during this time and next year when a cyclone hit Bangladesh, India reached out with relief.

In her second full-fledged term during 2001-2006, the Gujarat riots of

2002 cast a shadow on bilateral ties and that apart, India's concerns on terrorism and insurgency did not attract sufficient attention from Bangladesh.

Yet, before the onset of political uncertainty in the second half of 2006, Ms. Zia visited India and held talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and signed a revised trade pact. Prior to that, she had hosted the 13th SAARC summit in November 2005. Her last visit to India took place during October 28-November 3, 2012, when she was the Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiya Sansad.

She met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. She started that trip by meeting her counterpart, then Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj.

Her last noted interaction with the Indian leadership was in June 2015 when she came to Hotel Sonargaon in Dhaka where Prime Minister Narendra Modi met several Bangladeshi leaders after the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement was sealed.

Key Dimensions of the News

1. Historical Continuity in Bilateral Relations

Khaleda Zia's interactions with India began during the Cold War-era turbulence in South Asia, when Bangladesh was navigating post-assassination instability after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's death. Her early presence in diplomatic engagements during the tenure of General Ziaur Rahman highlights how state-to-state relations often transcend individual governments. Despite ideological differences with Indian leadership at various points, diplomatic channels remained functional.

2. Democratic Transition and India's Neighbourhood Policy

Her assumption of office in 1991 as Bangladesh's first woman Prime Minister coincided with democratic transitions in South Asia. India's prompt outreach underlined a core principle of its neighbourhood policy: engagement with elected governments irrespective of political orientation, emphasising stability and cooperation.

3. SAARC as a Regional Anchor

- Khaleda Zia consistently attached importance to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an initiative closely associated with her late husband.
- Hosting the 7th SAARC Summit (1993) and the 13th SAARC Summit (2005) demonstrated Bangladesh's attempt to use regional multilateralism to manage bilateral tensions.
- Even during periods of strain—such as post-Babri Masjid demolition or Gujarat riots—SAARC summits provided diplomatic space for dialogue, reflecting the institutional value of regional forums.

4. Managing Bilateral Strains

Her tenure saw recurring frictions over:

- Cross-border terrorism and insurgency,
- Trade imbalances, and
- Domestic political developments in India and Bangladesh. Yet, dialogue continued, culminating in trade agreements and high-level visits, including meetings with Manmohan Singh and later interaction with Narendra Modi in 2015.

5. Symbolism of the 2015 Interaction

Her meeting with Modi after the Land Boundary Agreement symbolised closure of a long-standing dispute and underscored how even opposition leaders are stakeholders in foreign policy consensus in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Khaleda Zia's long engagement with India illustrates a fundamental principle of international relations: bilateral ties are shaped more by geography, institutions, and strategic interests than by individual leaders alone. Her career demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of regional cooperation in South Asia, especially through SAARC. For India, the narrative reinforces the importance of sustained engagement with neighbouring countries across political cycles, a key pillar for regional stability and long-term strategic influence.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: India–Bangladesh relations have shown greater continuity than change despite frequent political transitions in Bangladesh. **(150 Words)**

Page 08 : GS III : Indian Economy / Prelims Exam

India's industrial sector recorded a sharp acceleration in November 2025, with the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) registering 6.7% growth, the fastest in 25 months, led by an 8% expansion in manufacturing. While this data point appears encouraging at first glance, a closer examination suggests that the surge reflects temporary and seasonal factors rather than a durable turnaround. The editorial highlights why the optimism surrounding November's industrial numbers may be misplaced and what it reveals about underlying economic headwinds.

Why November Growth Appears Strong

Festive-season Restocking Effect: After festive sales in October, firms replenished inventories, leading to a short-term boost in manufacturing output. Such restocking-led growth is cyclical, not demand-driven, and typically fades quickly.

GST-related Demand Push: The government timed Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate reductions around the festive season, temporarily stimulating consumption. This accelerated purchases but borrowed demand from future months, making the effect transitory.

Consumer Goods Rebound

- Consumer durables grew 10.3% (12-month high).
- Consumer non-durables grew 7.3% (25-month high): However, these figures contrast sharply with the April–November trend, where consumer non-durables contracted by 1%, indicating weak mass consumption.

Mining Sector Recovery: Mining growth of 5.4% followed two months of contraction caused by an extended monsoon. Weather-related recoveries are inherently non-repeatable and do not signal structural improvement.

Structural Weaknesses Beneath the Spike

Weak Medium-term IIP Trend: IIP growth averaged only 3.3% during April–November 2025, the lowest for this period in all post-COVID years, underscoring the fragility of industrial momentum.

RBI's Cautious Outlook: The Reserve Bank of India has projected a slowdown in real GDP growth:

Q3 FY26: around 7%

Q4 FY26: around 6.5%: This aligns with the view that November's spike is an outlier.

Persistent External and Domestic Headwinds

Too good to last

The headwinds facing the economy are not going away soon

India's relatively strong industrial performance in November 2025, especially driven by the manufacturing sector as it was, was more likely a flash in the pan than the start of a consistent trend. The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew 6.7% in November, the fastest growth rate in 25 months. Within this, the manufacturing sector grew 8%, which also was the fastest in 25 months. On the face of it, this would look remarkable and heartening, especially since October 2025 had seen growth slow to a 14-month low. However, this surge in growth was more likely due to seasonal and one-off factors. According to economists, the strongest push for growth came from sellers re-stocking their supplies following the festive season. The second factor is that the government timed the Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate reductions to coincide with the festive season. This temporary bump in demand would have further eroded stock levels, which then need to be replenished. In fact, the consumer durables and non-durables sectors saw growth in November rebounding to 10.3% and 7.3%, a 12-month and 25-month high, respectively. The third factor that seems to have worked in November is the bounce back of the mining sector following two months of contractions due to an unseasonably long monsoon. The mining sector saw growth come in at a reasonably strong 5.4% in November 2025. All of these are legitimate reasons for growth to pick up, but are not sustainable ones. The electricity and mining sectors will be bound by the vagaries of the weather. Overall consumer demand has been sluggish and industry players are talking of the GST-related boost already ebbing. And the festive season will not come back around until October–November 2026.

In fact, the IIP grew just 3.3% in the longer April–November period, the lowest for these eight months in any of the post-COVID-19 pandemic years. The consumer non-durables sector contracted 1% during this period, showing that the boost in November is more an anomaly than a sign of things to come should not come as a surprise. The Reserve Bank of India, earlier this month, predicted that growth in Q3 would slow to 7% from an average of 8% in the first two quarters. The fourth quarter is predicted to slow even further, to 6.5%. All of the previous headwinds still exist. The 50% tariffs by the U.S. are still in place, private investment remains sluggish, foreign capital is pulling out of the country, the weakening rupee is making imports more expensive for an import-dependent economy, real wages are not growing fast enough, and consumer demand remains tepid. Ironically, November's positive industrial data bring into focus the headwinds the economy is really facing.

- High U.S. tariffs (50%) continue to constrain exports.
- Foreign capital outflows are pressuring financial markets.
- Rupee depreciation raises import costs in an import-dependent economy.
- Sluggish private investment and weak real wage growth are restraining consumption demand.

Demand-side Constraints: The absence of broad-based income growth and employment expansion limits sustained industrial recovery. Without a revival in mass demand, manufacturing growth remains vulnerable.

Implications for the Indian Economy

- Short-term data volatility should not be mistaken for structural strength.
- Overreliance on fiscal or tax-based demand stimuli risks creating stop-go cycles.
- Sustained industrial growth requires revival of private investment, export competitiveness, and real income growth.

Conclusion

The November 2025 IIP numbers, though impressive on the surface, are best interpreted as a statistical and seasonal aberration rather than a durable recovery. By highlighting the contrast between a one-month surge and weak medium-term trends, the data underscore the persistence of deep-rooted economic headwinds. For India's industrial growth to be sustainable, policy focus must shift from short-term demand boosts to structural drivers such as investment, productivity, and employment-led income growth.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements regarding consumer non-durables:

1. They are a good indicator of mass consumption demand.
3. Persistent contraction in this sector indicates stress in household purchasing power.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Ans : c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the major domestic and external headwinds currently constraining India's industrial growth. Suggest policy measures to convert short-term output gains into a sustainable growth trajectory. **(150 Words)**

Cleft lip and palate (CLP) represent one of the most common congenital anomalies in India, yet they remain under-recognised as a public health issue. Despite India accounting for the highest number of cleft births globally—around 36,000 cases annually—the country lacks comprehensive national epidemiological data and an integrated public health response. The article highlights both the scale of the problem and the limitations of India's current NGO-driven, fragmented approach to cleft care.

Prioritising cleft care as a health issue

More than 7,50,000 cleft surgeries were performed in India in the last 25 years by the international NGO Smile Train. This amounts to 30,000 surgeries annually. It is the highest by any organisation in the private or public sector. But the figures don't shine in India where one in 700 children are born with lip and/or palate deformity every year and there is a backlog of 7,000 corrective surgeries annually.

Smile Train India is among the NGOs that support and partner with skilled surgeons to provide free cleft surgeries and related care. While its contribution has benefited 7.5 lakh children so far, others, including Mission Smile, Operation Smile, Transforming Cleft and Healing Smile Foundation, have collectively benefited another 15 lakh children in the last 20 years. Their efforts deserve appreciation. However, they still fall short in India, where, despite recording the highest number of cleft births globally, has no national epidemiological data on cleft lip/palate.

Cleft lip/palate is a facial birth defect that occurs when certain tissues and structures do not fuse during pregnancy due to genetic factor or maternal nutrition deficiencies. It leaves newborns with a gap in the upper lip and the roof of the mouth. Independent surveys estimate that 36,000 babies are born with cleft abnormalities in India every year. About 68% of them rely on government hospitals for initial diagnosis, yet there are 17.5 lakh children with unrepaired clefts.

The situation in India

The situation is complex: there is lack of documentation of birth anomalies, and parental counseling on care and treatment is woefully inadequate. Also, the high cost of surgery deters families from seeking help. A decade ago, the Lancet Surgery Commission estimated a burden of 18.7% untreated Orofacial Clefts (OFC) in India. A 2022 report of the



Soma Basu

Comprehensive cleft care for children in India is driven by the non-profit private model. The government has achieved little in creating awareness or making cleft surgeries accessible and affordable to all

Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington's School of Medicine, stated that children with OFCs in India were 1.5 times more vulnerable to severe malnutrition compared to other children under five. It also says one-third of the cleft lip and palate-related malnutrition deaths can be prevented with timely surgical treatment and proper nutrition.

Free or subsidised surgery and follow-up treatment are provided by NGOs in collaboration with mostly city-based private hospitals because government hospitals lack specialised infrastructure and trained personnel. The fragmented cleft care offered by government hospitals are not aggregated in public databases, maybe because India is yet to nationally recognise craniofacial anomalies as a notifiable disease.

The World Health Organization has formally recognised craniofacial anomaly in the Global Burden of Disease initiative. This is what perhaps led the NITI Aayog to initiate conversations around birth defects. The National Birth Defect Awareness Month launched in August 2024 on the theme 'Breaking Barriers: inclusive support for children with birth defects including clefts' helped discuss prevention, early identification, and timely management of common congenital malformations.

Surgeons play a key role in minimising birth defects. While people think of cleft lip and/or palate as a cosmetic deformity, it impacts a child's ability to speak, swallow, hear, and breathe. If not surgically corrected, babies with a cleft lip have difficulty nursing and require special feeding techniques. Children with a cleft lip get bullied and struggle with school and with communication. Employment and marriage become challenging. All this leads to psychological trauma and affects confidence. Ignorance and superstitions strengthen the stigma surrounding the disfigurement, and treatment is

marked by a rural-urban divide.

Every health challenge requires collaboration. Smile Train India and others address the gaps in cleft services with a sustainable and scalable global health model. This empowers local doctors as equal partners by providing support in training and covering surgical costs. As per the 2011 Census, 68.8% of the population in rural areas need to be covered aggressively. Collaborating with the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram and ASHA for clear communication on early screening of birth defects and deficiencies is a way forward. In the absence of hospital partners in interior areas, timely medical intervention, with incentives that cover travel cost, surgery and hospital stay, and post-operative support including speech therapy, is imperative.

The way forward

UNICEF estimates that about 2.5 crore children are born in India annually. The 2022 National Family Health Survey states that 1.35 crore children are born in government hospitals, where cleft care in detected cases can ideally start at birth and life-transforming surgery can be done after three months of birth. It is time for policymakers to recognise cleft deformity as a health issue and opt for better management at the grassroots level, where there is limited awareness and access. The government can devise a multi-level approach to address underserved communities. NGOs are trying to expand the footprint but government hospitals, where almost 50% of India's children are born, need to upgrade.

Health experts say cleft missions help strengthen government healthcare systems by improving surgical infrastructure, increasing access to affordable care, training the local workforce, and breaking social taboos. The success of cleft surgeries is measured by improved functionality, which depends on the age at which the child is brought for treatment.

Magnitude and Nature of the Problem

- Incidence: Approximately 1 in 700 children in India is born with cleft lip and/or palate.
- Backlog: Around 17.5 lakh children live with unrepaired clefts, with an annual backlog of nearly 7,000 surgeries.

- Health Impact: CLP is not merely cosmetic. It affects feeding, speech, hearing, breathing, and nutrition, increasing vulnerability to severe malnutrition and mortality.
- A study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (2022) found that children with orofacial clefts are 1.5 times more likely to suffer severe malnutrition, and one-third of related deaths are preventable with timely surgery and nutrition.

Current Response: Strengths and Gaps

1. Role of NGOs

- International and domestic NGOs such as Smile Train and others have collectively enabled over 22 lakh surgeries in the last two decades. Their model focuses on:
- Partnering with local surgeons,
- Covering surgical costs, and
- Providing training and post-operative support.
- While impactful, this approach remains insufficient to meet national demand and is largely concentrated in urban, private hospitals.

2. Weak Public Health Integration

- India lacks national-level documentation of cleft anomalies.
- Craniofacial anomalies are not notified diseases, leading to underreporting.
- Government hospitals, where nearly 50% of institutional births occur, often lack specialised infrastructure and trained personnel for cleft care.

3. Rural–Urban Divide and Social Stigma

- Nearly 69% of India's population lives in rural areas, where awareness, early diagnosis, and access to surgery are limited.
- Superstition, stigma, and lack of counselling delay treatment, worsening functional and psychological outcomes.

Policy and Institutional Context

- The World Health Organization recognises craniofacial anomalies under the Global Burden of Disease framework, underscoring their public health relevance.
- In India, the NITI Aayog has initiated discussions on birth defects, and the National Birth Defect Awareness Month (2024) marked a step towards mainstreaming the issue.
- Existing schemes like Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) and frontline workers (ASHA) offer a ready platform for early screening and referral, but coordination remains weak.

Way Forward: What Needs to Be Done

Recognise CLP as a Public Health Issue

- Notify craniofacial anomalies and integrate them into national health databases.

- Generate reliable epidemiological data for planning and resource allocation.

Strengthen Government Health Infrastructure

- Upgrade district and medical college hospitals with specialised surgical and speech-therapy services.
- Train surgeons and allied health professionals through public-private partnerships.

Early Detection and Continuum of Care

- Initiate screening at birth in government hospitals, where 1.35 crore births occur annually (NFHS-5).
- Ensure follow-up care including nutrition support and speech therapy.

Target Rural and Underserved Areas

- Provide travel, surgery, and post-operative incentives for poor families.
- Use community health workers to combat stigma and improve awareness.

Conclusion

Cleft lip and palate exemplify a neglected yet preventable cause of disability and child mortality in India. While NGOs have filled critical gaps, reliance on charitable interventions cannot substitute for a systemic, state-led public health approach. Recognising cleft deformity as a health issue, strengthening government hospitals, and embedding cleft care within maternal and child health programmes are essential to ensure early intervention, reduce stigma, and improve life outcomes. Addressing CLP effectively aligns with India's broader goals of inclusive healthcare, child nutrition, and human capital development.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques : Non-governmental organisations have played a major role in cleft care in India, but their efforts remain insufficient. Discuss the strengths and limitations of the NGO-led model of cleft care and examine why stronger state involvement is necessary. **(250 words)**

The Supreme Court's decision to stay the Delhi High Court order suspending the life sentence of Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case has reignited critical debates on the law governing suspension of sentence, judicial discretion in grave offences, and the adequacy of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in addressing crimes committed by powerful elected representatives. The case sits at the intersection of criminal procedure, child protection law, and constitutional values of equality and justice.

Law on 'suspension of sentence'

In life imprisonment cases like Kuldeep Singh Sengar's, what factors must appellate courts weigh before suspending a sentence? Does the Delhi High Court's view that an MLA is not a 'public servant' under the POCSO framework expose a gap that weakens protection against aggravated abuses by elected representatives?

LITTER & SPIRIT

Kartik Singh

In December 20, a three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, comprising C.J. Surya Kant, Justice J.K. Maheshwari and Justice A.G. Masih, issued notice and stayed the Delhi High Court's judgment suspending the life sentence of a former four-time MLA, Kuldeep Singh Sengar and granting him bail pending appeal in the 2007 infamous Unnao rape case. The intervention came just six days after the High Court, on December 23, suspended Sengar's life sentence, which triggered intense public debate.

The case stems from allegations that in June 2017, the survivor, then a minor, was raped by the convict, the then-sitting MLA, at his residence. Amid allegations of police inaction and intimidation, the probe was transferred to the CBI in April 2018, and the trial shifted to Delhi pursuant to the SC's directions. On December 16, 2019, the trial court in Delhi convicted Sengar, and by a separate order on December 20, 2019, sentenced him to imprisonment for the remainder of his natural life.

Once a trial concludes, an accused is either acquitted or convicted. A conviction displaces the 'presumption of innocence' and renders the sentence operative, requiring the convict to undergo the awarded punishment. However, the conviction remains appealable, and during the pendency of appellate scrutiny, the convict may, under Section 389 of the CrPc, 1973 (now Section 430 of the BNSS, 2023), seek suspension of the execution of the sentence and consequential bail if in custody, keeping its enforcement in abeyance. Importantly, 'suspension of sentence', which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.

When do courts suspend a sentence? The law draws a clear distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, often punishable with life imprisonment, where it is an exception. In *Bhagwan Rama Shinde Gosai vs. State of Gujarat* (1989), the SC held that when a fixed-term sentence is under appeal, appellate courts must liberally exercise their discretion to suspend the sentence, barring exceptional circumstances. Conversely, in serious offences or those punishable with life imprisonment, such as Sengar's case, 'suspension of sentence' under Section 389 CrPc is rare and must follow an objective assessment of factors including the nature and gravity of the offence, the manner of its commission, and the desirability of releasing the convict on bail, as reiterated by the top court in *Shivani Tragi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2024), an acid attack case.

In allowing Sengar's 'suspension of sentence' application, the High Court focused primarily on his conviction under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act, which criminalises 'aggravated' penetrative sexual assault by a 'public servant' on a child and attracts punishment under Section 6. Under the criminal law framework, offences committed by persons in positions of trust or authority, such as police or armed force personnel, public servants, and staff of institutions including hospitals, jails, or educational



Public voices: Women stage a protest demanding justice for the Unnao gangrape victim outside Delhi High Court in New Delhi, Aug.

establishments, are treated as 'aggravated' and subjected to enhanced punishment, reflecting legislative recognition of abuse of power and heightened victim vulnerability.

Definition of public servant

Importantly, the POCSO Act does not define the term 'public servant'. Under Section 2(2) of the POCSO Act, undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC (1860), CrPc (1973), the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, or the Information Technology Act, 2000. Among these, only the IPC defines 'public servant' under Section 21, encompassing categories such as judges, military officers, and arbitrators, etc., but not elected legislators. Relying on this statutory scheme and the top court's ruling in *R.S. Nayak vs. A.R. Antulay* (1984), the HC held that an MLA does not qualify as a 'public servant' under the IPC and, consequently, the POCSO Act. This is a departure from the trial court's approach, which had sustained Sengar's conviction under Section 5(c) by importing the broader definition of 'public servant' from Section 20(4)(b) of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988, which includes any person holding an office to perform a public duty.

Consequently, the HC held, prima facie, that Sengar's case did not fall within the category of rape committed by a 'public servant' under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act or Section 262(2)(b) IPC. This finding formed the central basis for suspending his sentence and granting regular bail. The HC also noted that Sengar had undergone seven years of imprisonment, and, relying on *Kashmira Singh vs. State of Punjab* (1977), observed that prolonged incarceration could cause injustice if the conviction or sentence were ultimately modified.

Addressing the survivor's apprehension of threat, rooted in a documented history of systemic intimidation, the custodial death of her father (for which Sengar stands convicted under Section 304(II) IPC), police callousness, and the 2019 truck-car accident that critically injured her and her lawyer and killed her two aunts, the HC noted that the SC had granted her CrPF protection in August 2019. Nevertheless, the HC held that 'suspension of sentence' could not be denied solely on the apprehension that

police or paramilitary forces might fail in their protective duties, as such a premise would undermine their role.

In a case that laid bare a prolonged struggle for justice, structural barriers and deep institutional failures in confronting entrenched power, the suspension of a life sentence raises serious concerns.

First, while the HC is legally correct in holding that it could not expand the statutory definition of 'public servant' by amending the legislation to import the broader meaning under the PCA, its interpretation could have been more purposive. The resulting anomaly is troubling: while a *patwar* (village accountant) or police constable qualifies as a 'public servant' and attracts punishment under the POCSO Act, an elected MLA does not. This ambiguity in the POCSO framework was also flagged by the SC bench. By narrowing the scope of the POCSO Act, a special, victim-centric statute designed to protect children, the HC accorded insufficient weight to its object and intent. Offences under Section 5(c) are undoubtedly graver than corruption offences by MPs or MLAs: while corruption undermines governance, offences under the POCSO Act involve the direct abuse of children, causing severe physical and psychological trauma with lasting social consequences.

The apex court has repeatedly cautioned against interpretive literalism that weakens POCSO's protective core. In *Attorney General for India vs. Satish* (2020), it rejected the Bombay HC's untenable narrow interpretation that grouping a minor through clothing, without direct 'skin-to-skin' contact, did not amount to 'touch' or 'physical contact' so as to attract the offence of 'sexual assault' under Section 7 of the POCSO Act. Similarly, in *Independent Thought vs. Union of India* (2017), the SC harmoniously and purposively interpreted child protection law by reading down Exception 2 to Section 375 IPC, which had exempted non-consensual sexual intercourse with one's wife aged between 15 and 18, from the offence of rape. Together, these rulings affirm that when child protection is at stake, statutory interpretation must advance, not dilute, the law's protective purpose. Second, the HC's decision rests primarily on the *prima facie* inapplicability of Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act and the period of

incarceration already undergone. However, the SC has held that in cases involving life imprisonment, 'suspension of sentence' under Section 389 CrPc requires the appellate court to assess whether the convict has a fair chance of acquittal. Recently, in *Obholal Yadav vs. State of Haryana* (2023), the apex court set aside a 'suspension of sentence', holding that in life imprisonment cases, suspension is warranted only where the convict demonstrates a palpable or gross error in the trial court's judgment. Sufficient to show that the appeal may succeed and result in acquittal. In Sengar's case, the HC ought to have examined whether the non-applicability of Section 5(c) would lead to his complete acquittal. Further, in *Shivani Tragi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2024), the SC clarified that long incarceration alone cannot justify 'suspension of sentence' in life imprisonment cases.

In the same vein, in *Janna Lal vs. State of Rajasthan* (2025), involving a POCSO conviction carrying a 20-year sentence, the SC set aside an order suspending sentence, holding that once the trial court has found the victim to be a minor, such a finding cannot be lightly unsetled at the suspension stage.

Third, the HC should have accorded greater weight to the undisputed record of intimidation and violence, including the survivor's father's death, alleged witness tampering, and the exceptional security measures required during trial.

What is next? The HC's literal interpretation highlights a statutory framework that recognises authority only when formally merged, not when exercised through entrenched political power, as seen in the definition of 'public servant'. This limitation is legislatively inherited, not judicially created. While legality and justice often align, they do not always converge. Beyond legal questions, the case also exposes how the criminal justice system operates for survivors of sexual violence. It lays bare the fact that, in reality, the fundamental right of equality before law and equal protection of laws under Article 14 of our Constitution is not truly treated as equal for every individual. Yet, these courageous survivors bear the cost not to vindicate the system, but to reveal its limits and expand justice for all. Kartik Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

The law draws a distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, where it is an exception.

'Suspension of sentence', which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.

The POCSO Act does not define the term 'public servant'. The Act says undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC, CrPc, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, or the IT Act, 2000.

Legal Framework: Suspension of Sentence

- Under Section 389 of the CrPc, 1973 (now Section 430 of the BNSS, 2023), appellate courts may suspend the execution of a sentence during the pendency of an appeal. Key principles evolved by the Supreme Court include:
- Post-conviction presumption: Once conviction, the presumption of innocence no longer operates; suspension of sentence is an exception, especially in life imprisonment cases.

- In *Bhagwan Rama Shinde Gosai vs State of Gujarat*, the Court held that suspension is generally liberal for short-term sentences.
- Conversely, in serious offences, including life imprisonment, suspension requires strict scrutiny of the nature of offence, gravity, and likelihood of acquittal, as reiterated in *Shivani Tyagi vs State of Uttar Pradesh*.
- Recent jurisprudence, such as *Chhotelal Yadav vs State of Jharkhand*, clarifies that long incarceration alone is insufficient; the appellate court must assess whether there is a palpable error indicating a real chance of acquittal.

The Core Controversy: 'Public Servant' under POCSO

- The Delhi High Court's suspension order rested substantially on its prima facie view that an MLA is not a "public servant" for the purpose of Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act, which criminalises aggravated penetrative sexual assault by a public servant on a child.
- POCSO does not define "public servant" and borrows definitions from statutes like the IPC.
- Section 21 IPC excludes elected legislators, unlike the broader definition under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988.
- Relying on *R S Nayak vs A R Antulay*, the High Court rejected importing the PCA definition.
- This literal interpretation exposes a statutory gap: lower-level officials qualify as "public servants" under POCSO, but elected representatives wielding immense real power do not. Such an outcome appears inconsistent with the object and purpose of a victim-centric, child-protection statute.

Purposive Interpretation and Child Protection

- The Supreme Court has consistently emphasised purposive interpretation where child rights are involved:
- In *Independent Thought vs Union of India*, it read down marital rape exception for minors.
- In *Attorney General for India vs Satish*, it rejected a narrow reading that diluted POCSO protections.
- Against this jurisprudential backdrop, the High Court's approach risks weakening the protective core of POCSO, especially in cases involving abuse of political power.

Broader Concerns in the Sengar Case

Inadequate Weight to Intimidation History: The record includes custodial death of the survivor's father, alleged witness intimidation, and extraordinary security arrangements. These factors are relevant to the "desirability of release," a key test under Section 389.

Equality Before Law (Article 14): Differential outcomes based on formal statutory definitions rather than actual power exercised raise concerns about substantive equality and access to justice for survivors.

Legislative vs Judicial Responsibility: While courts cannot rewrite statutes, this case highlights the need for legislative intervention to explicitly include elected representatives within aggravated categories under POCSO.

Conclusion

The Unnao case underscores that while suspension of sentence is a procedural safeguard, its exercise in life imprisonment and POCSO cases must remain exceptional and victim-sensitive. The Delhi High Court's interpretation of "public servant" exposes a legislative blind spot that undermines accountability of elected representatives for aggravated sexual crimes against children. The Supreme Court's intervention restores immediate balance, but durable justice demands statutory clarity, purposive interpretation, and a criminal justice system that meaningfully confronts power asymmetries. Only then can the promise of child protection and equality before law under the Constitution be realised.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the suspension of sentence under Indian criminal law, consider the following statements:

1. Suspension of sentence results in suspension of conviction itself.
2. In cases involving life imprisonment, suspension of sentence is the rule rather than the exception.
3. Long incarceration alone is a sufficient ground for suspension of sentence in life imprisonment cases.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) None of the above

Ans: d)

UPSC Mains - Essay Exam Practice Question

Ques : Where law ends, justice must not. (300 words)

A multipolar world with bipolar characteristics

As 2025 draws to a close, a highlight is that the United States has undertaken its largest troop mobilisation in the Caribbean in decades. Its Navy has deployed its most advanced aircraft carrier, along with fighter jets, amphibious vessels, attack submarines and tens of thousands of troops, as it intensifies its pressure on Venezuela in an effort to force President Nicolás Maduro from power.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), released in early December 2025, identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority. Reviving the 19th century Monroe Doctrine, the document asserts that the U.S. must deny influence or control by outside powers (read China) in Latin America and ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains under American political, economic and military influence.

The push to reinforce American primacy in Latin America coincides with U.S. President Donald Trump's waning interest in Europe, another long-standing U.S. sphere of influence. Since the end of the Second World War, the U.S. has served as Europe's primary security guarantor. If Washington kept western Europe together through a tightly knit alliance during the Cold War, it expanded this security umbrella to eastern Europe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, creating a large transatlantic bloc. Under Mr. Trump, however, the U.S. is no longer interested in shouldering the burden of European security – a position explicitly articulated in the NSS. Why is America, at a moment when Russia and China are seeking to overturn the U.S.-built and U.S.-led security and economic order, stepping back from Europe while moving to consolidate its influence in the Western Hemisphere?

It is difficult to discern a cohesive doctrine in Mr. Trump's foreign policy, marked by the President's impulses and unpredictability. Yet, even these impulses, this unpredictability and his ideological orientation rooted in Christian nationalism and America's might cannot ignore the structural shifts reshaping the international order. Mr. Trump is not the 'President of peace' that he claims to be – he has already bombed six countries, even if he has stopped short of a full-scale war.

At the same time, Mr. Trump, despite his rhetoric about American military and economic dominance, recognises that he no longer lives in a unipolar world. His reluctant aggression and strategic recalibration are reflections of the changes now taking shape in the global balance of power.

Three great powers

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a new order emerged with the U.S. at its centre. There was no other great power positioned to challenge American primacy. The unipolar moment, however, has since passed. While future historians may better identify the precise point of



Stanly Johny

rupture, one such moment was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The ensuing conflict in eastern Ukraine, the tepid western response, and Russia's ability to endure despite sanctions reinforced the limits of the 'rules-based order'.

The end of unipolarity, however, does not mean the end of American dominance. The U.S. remains, and will remain, for the foreseeable future, the world's pre-eminent military and economic power. What has changed is that Washington is no longer the sole great power shaping geopolitical outcomes. China and Russia now occupy that space as well, deepening what Realist thinkers describe as the inherently anarchic nature of the international system.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was America's principal rival, and in the 1970s, Washington reached out to China to exploit fissures within the communist bloc. Today, the U.S. identifies China as its principal and systemic challenger. This, in turn, leaves open the possibility of a reset in ties with Russia – an idea embraced by Mr. Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) ideologues, who frame Russia as part of a shared 'Christian civilisation'.

The reigning power versus the rising power

The U.S. faces a unique challenge in China. The Soviet economy, in its prime in the early 1970s, reached about 57% of the U.S. GDP, before it began slowing down. China's economy, now the world's second largest, already amounts to about 66% of the U.S. economy. China continues to grow at a faster pace, steadily narrowing the gap.

As China's economic power expands, it is being converted into military capability (it has already built the world's largest Navy, by number of ships). Like other great powers, Beijing is seeking to establish regional hegemony and global dominance. So, a prolonged contest between the U.S., the reigning power, and China, the rising power, appears unavoidable. The situation is comparable to 19th century Europe, when a rising imperial Germany threatened to upstage Britain during Pax Britannica, unsettling the 'Concert of Europe'.

Russia is the weakest link among the three powers. It is a relatively smaller economy with a shrinking sphere of influence. But Russia's nuclear arsenals, expansive geography, abundant energy and mineral resources and its demonstrated willingness to use force to achieve its strategic objectives keep it in the great power constellation. From Moscow's perspective, the country drifted into the wilderness in the 1990s before announcing its return in 2008 with the war in Georgia. Since then, it has sought to rewrite the post-Soviet security architecture in Europe. As the West, having expanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into the Russian sphere of influence, responded to Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine with sweeping sanctions on Russia and military support for Kyiv, Moscow moved ever closer to China. Russia and China

have found common ground in opposing the western 'rules-based order' – Russia thinks that the order denies it its rightful place in the world and seeks to revise it accordingly, while China, by contrast, as Rush Doshi argues in *The Long Game*, wants to replace it with a China-centric order.

Fluid multipolarity

All three great powers today understand that the world is no longer organised around a single centre of authority. In that sense, the world is already multipolar. But unlike the post-Second World War and post-Cold War transitions, the structures of the new order have yet to fully emerge. During the Cold War, the world was divided into two ideological blocs and two largely separate economic systems. Today, China lacks the kind of satellite state networks that characterised the 20th century superpowers, while the U.S. is reassessing the sustainability of its alliance frameworks, including its commitment to Europe.

Russia, with its own great power ambitions, is wary of being seen as a Chinese ally irrespective of its close strategic partnership with Beijing. This opens a window for a Washington-Moscow reset. But the war in Ukraine remains a stumbling block. Russia may not want to challenge America's global leadership, but it certainly wants to re-establish its primacy in its sphere of influence.

Thus, there are three great powers with divergent interests that are pulling the global order in different directions, rendering the emerging multipolarity fluid rather than as a structured system akin to the post-Second World War order. This also means that middle powers, including superpower allies such as Japan and Germany, and autonomous actors such as India and Brazil, would continue to hedge their bets.

Mr. Trump wants Europe to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security, reset relations with Russia and reassert American primacy in its immediate neighbourhood even as Washington prepares for a prolonged great power competition with China. The idea is to return to the classic offshore balancing. Even if Mr. Trump fails in executing it, future American Presidents may not be able to ignore the shifts that he has initiated. Russia, for its part, seeks to carve out a sphere of influence. China aims to preserve its close strategic partnership with Russia to keep the Eurasian landmass within its orbit, while establishing regional hegemony in East and Southeast Asia – moves that would cement its status as a long-term superpower, much as the U.S. did by asserting its hegemony in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century, and across the Atlantic in the 20th century. In this fluid landscape, Russia has emerged as the new 'swing great power' between the two superpowers, paradoxically lending the emerging multipolar order a distinctly bipolar character.

stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in

GS Paper I : International Relations

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question : The unipolar moment has passed, but American dominance has not. Critically examine this statement in the context of the evolving global order marked by the rise of China and the resurgence of Russia. (150 words)

Context :

As global power equations continue to shift, the international system in 2025 increasingly reflects a multipolar structure with strong bipolar tendencies. The renewed assertion of U.S. power in the Western Hemisphere, China's rise as a systemic challenger, and Russia's role as a disruptive yet pivotal actor underline the erosion of the post-Cold War unipolar order. The article situates these developments within the foreign policy orientation of the United States under Donald Trump, highlighting how structural changes in global power, rather than mere leadership choices, are reshaping world politics.

From Unipolarity to Fluid Multipolarity

End of the Unipolar Moment: After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower. However, events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and China's sustained economic rise exposed the limits of the U.S.-led "rules-based order". The world today no longer revolves around a single centre of authority.

Persistence of U.S. Primacy: Despite the erosion of unipolarity, the United States remains the most powerful military and economic actor. Its recent troop mobilisation in the Caribbean and revival of the Monroe Doctrine signal an effort to consolidate regional hegemony, even as Washington recalibrates commitments elsewhere, particularly in Europe.

Three Great Powers, Unequal but Influential

United States: The reigning power, seeking to preserve global leadership while shifting towards offshore balancing.

China: The rising power, converting economic strength into military capability and aiming for regional hegemony in East and Southeast Asia.

Russia: The weakest economically but strategically consequential due to nuclear capabilities, energy resources, and willingness to use force.

Bipolar Characteristics within Multipolarity

U.S.–China as the Central Axis: Unlike the Cold War, where ideology structured bipolar rivalry, today's contest is primarily geoeconomic and geopolitical. China's economy, already around two-thirds the size of the U.S. economy, and its expanding naval power make prolonged rivalry unavoidable.

Russia as a 'Swing Great Power': Russia occupies a unique position. While strategically aligned with China against the Western order, it remains wary of becoming a junior partner. This creates space for tactical manoeuvring between Washington and Moscow, giving the system bipolar dynamics within a multipolar setting.

Absence of Fixed Blocs: Unlike Cold War alliances, today's order is fluid. China lacks a formal alliance network comparable to NATO, and the U.S. is reassessing long-standing security commitments, especially in Europe. This fluidity prevents the crystallisation of a stable multipolar order.

Implications for Middle Powers

- Countries such as India, Brazil, Japan, and Germany are hedging rather than bandwagoning, leveraging issue-based alignments instead of rigid alliances.
- Strategic autonomy and flexible diplomacy gain importance in a world where power centres are multiple but competition is concentrated.

Conclusion

The contemporary international system is neither truly multipolar nor fully bipolar. It is a fluid, transitional order, shaped by the rivalry between the United States and China, with Russia acting as a critical swing power. While American dominance has not ended, it is increasingly contested. In this evolving landscape, rigid alliance structures give way to strategic hedging, and global stability depends less on fixed orders and more on adaptive diplomacy. For countries like India, this moment offers both risks and opportunities to navigate a complex, competitive, and uncertain world.