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UNION BUDGET & FISCAL POLICY

Q1. The Union Budget 2026-27 sets a fiscal deficit target of 4.3% of GDP while simultaneously announcing new missions worth over Rs 1 lakh crore. Is fiscal consolidation compatible with an expansionary expenditure agenda, or is one of these goals being sacrificed?

opinion

Position (P): Fiscal consolidation and expansionary spending are compatible if the expenditure is capital-heavy and growth-generating rather than consumption-driven. Budget 2026-27 attempts exactly this calibration — the key question is whether the revenue assumptions underlying the 4.3% target are realistic.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Sceptics correctly note that announcing Rs 20,000 crore for CCUS, Rs 40,000 crore for Electronics Components Manufacturing, Rs 10,000 crore each for Container Manufacturing and SME Growth Fund — all multi-year missions — creates committed future expenditure that constrains fiscal flexibility. If GDP growth underperforms the 6.8-7.2% projection, the 4.3% target becomes a choice between cutting capital expenditure or missing the FRBM consolidation path.

Illustrate with specifics (I): Budget 2026-27 sets total expenditure at Rs 53.47 lakh crore with capital expenditure at Rs 12.2 lakh crore (3.1% of GDP). Effective capex including grants to states is Rs 17.1 lakh crore (4.4% of GDP). The consolidation path — from 5.1% (FY24) to 4.4% (FY26 RE) to 4.3% (FY27 BE) — is real but marginal in the last step. Interest payments already consume 26% of total expenditure, creating a structural rigidity. The FRBM Act 2003 mandates a debt-to-GDP target of 50% by March 2031; current debt-to-GDP stands at 55.6%, requiring sustained revenue growth for five consecutive years.

Link to governance (L): As a Finance Ministry official, I would argue that the composition of expenditure matters more than the headline number. Capital expenditure with multiplier effects (infrastructure, manufacturing) generates future tax revenue that funds itself over time. The risk is in revenue expenditure disguised as capital — and the budget transparency to distinguish the two is the governance test.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between fiscal deficit and primary deficit? Why does the primary deficit matter for assessing the sustainability of government borrowing?

Article 112 mandates the Annual Financial Statement. What are the three funds of the Government of India, and under which articles are they established?

Interest payments at 26% of expenditure are the single largest budget item. At what point does debt servicing become unsustainable, and how does India compare with other emerging economies?

Know Articles 112, 265, 266, and 267 cold — the Constitutional architecture of the Budget. The board values candidates who can distinguish between the FRBM Act's legal mandate and the political reality of fiscal slippage. The 16th Finance Commission under Dr. Arvind Panagariya is the current institutional anchor for fiscal federalism.

Q2. The Economic Survey 2025-26 reports India's GDP growth at 7.4% and CPI inflation at a historic low of 1.7%. Yet unemployment remains a concern and private investment has not reached pre-2019 levels. Is India experiencing "jobless growth"?

policy-critique

Position (P): The "jobless growth" characterisation is an oversimplification, but it captures a real structural tension: India's high-growth sectors — IT services, financial services, capital-intensive manufacturing — do not generate employment at the scale needed for 12 million annual labour market entrants.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The data actually shows improving employment indicators. The Economic Survey 2025-26 reports unemployment at 3.2% (FY24) down from 6% (FY18), and EPFO net additions at 131 lakh (FY24) versus 61 lakh (FY19). Female LFPR has risen sharply from 23.3% (FY18) to 41.7% (FY24). These are not the numbers of a jobless economy.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The disconnect lies in the quality of employment, not its quantity. The Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that a large proportion of new employment is in self-employment and unpaid family work – categories that often indicate disguised unemployment rather than productive labour absorption. The PLI scheme has generated 12.6 lakh direct jobs against Rs 2 lakh crore of investment – a capital intensity that suggests manufacturing growth is not translating into mass employment the way it did in East Asian industrialisation. India needs to grow labour-intensive sectors – textiles, food processing, leather, tourism – alongside capital-intensive ones.

Link to governance (L): As an administrator, I would focus on the MSME ecosystem – 23.24 crore people are employed in MSMEs, which constitute the backbone of labour-intensive employment. The Export Promotion Mission launched in February 2026 and the removal of the Rs 10 lakh courier export cap for MSMEs are steps in the right direction. But the structural challenge is credit access: MSMEs need faster MUDRA disbursals and simplified GST compliance to generate the employment density India requires.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the PLFS unemployment rate and the CMIE unemployment rate? Why do they differ significantly?

The PLI scheme covers 14 sectors. Name five and explain which are labour-intensive versus capital-intensive.

If you were posted as a District Industries Centre (DIC) officer, what three interventions would you prioritise to boost MSME employment in your district?

The EPFO data is your strongest counter to the “jobless growth” narrative – it captures formal sector employment additions and shows genuine improvement. But the board will push on quality versus quantity of employment. Know the PLFS methodology and the distinction between usual status (ps+ss) and current weekly status unemployment rates.

KERALA RENAMING & FEDERAL PROCESS

Q3. The Union Cabinet approved renaming Kerala as “Keralam” using Article 3. Some argue that requiring Parliament to rename a state – when the state itself has passed a resolution requesting it – undermines federalism. Do you agree?

opinion

Position (P): The Article 3 process does not undermine federalism in this case — it actually demonstrates a well-functioning federal process where the state legislature initiates, the President refers, the state expresses its opinion, and Parliament acts. The concern about federal autonomy is legitimate in principle but misplaced in the specific context of consensual renaming.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The deeper federal concern is valid: Article 3 gives Parliament the power not just to rename states but to alter boundaries, merge states, and create new states — all without requiring the affected state’s consent (only its opinion, which Parliament is not bound by). This asymmetry between the power to alter and the obligation to merely consult is a genuine limitation of Indian federalism, as the Sarkaria Commission and the Punchhi Commission both noted.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The renaming precedents are instructive: Madras to Tamil Nadu (1969), Mysore to Karnataka (1973), Uttaranchal to Uttarakhand (2007), Orissa to Odisha (2011), and Pondicherry to Puducherry (2006) — all proceeded through Article 3 by simple majority, amending the First Schedule, without constitutional controversy. Kerala was formed on November 1, 1956 under the States Reorganisation Act on linguistic lines recommended by the Fazl Ali Commission. The Malayalam-speaking population has always referred to the state as “Keralam” — the English anglicisation “Kerala” was a colonial inheritance. This is not a case of Parliament imposing its will on a state; it is Parliament formally ratifying a state’s expressed cultural identity.

Link to governance (L): The real federal concern lies not in renaming but in Article 3’s other powers — bifurcation and boundary alteration. The creation of Telangana from Andhra Pradesh in 2014 proceeded despite the AP Assembly’s rejection, demonstrating that Parliament’s power under Article 3 is genuinely supreme. As an administrator, I believe the solution is a constitutional amendment requiring state assembly consent for bifurcation (not just renaming), while retaining the existing consultative process for name changes.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between Article 3 (alteration of states) and Article 368 (constitutional amendment)? Why does renaming a state not require the special majority procedure?

The Berubari Union case (1960) and the subsequent 9th Amendment clarified the scope of Article 3. What was the legal issue in that case?

If a state passes a resolution to change its name but the Centre delays acting on it for years, what legal remedies does the state have?

The Article 3 vs Article 368 distinction is frequently tested. Renaming amends the First Schedule but uses Article 3's ordinary legislative procedure — not Article 368's special majority. The board may also probe why Union Territories can be renamed by a simple Act (no state legislature to consult), while states require the referral process.

FRONTIER NAGALAND TERRITORIAL AUTHORITY

Q4. The FNTA agreement grants 46 state subjects to six eastern Nagaland districts. Critics say this is a “consolation prize” because the Eastern Nagaland People’s Organisation originally demanded full statehood. Is the FNTA model an effective solution to sub-regional aspirations, or does it merely defer the statehood demand?

policy-critique

Position (P): The FNTA is a pragmatic and constitutionally sound intermediate solution that addresses the governance deficit without the political and demographic disruption of full statehood. Whether it defers or resolves the statehood demand depends entirely on the quality of its implementation over the next decade.

Acknowledge the other side (A): ENPO’s original demand for a separate state of “Frontier Nagaland” was grounded in a real developmental gap: the six eastern districts — Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak, and Shamator — have consistently ranked among the most deprived in Nagaland on indicators like road connectivity, health infrastructure, and educational institutions. Delegating 46 subjects without fiscal autonomy or a separate state allocation from the Finance Commission may replicate the underfunding problem at a smaller scale.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The closest analogue is the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC, 2003), which was granted 46 subjects over four Assam districts as an alternative to the Bodoland statehood demand. Two decades later, the BTC has reduced ethnic violence significantly but has not closed the development gap with the rest of Assam — suggesting that administrative autonomy without fiscal empowerment has structural limitations. Article 371(A) protections for Nagaland — safeguarding customary law, land rights, and social practices — remain fully intact under the FNTA, which is constitutionally important. The agreement is the 12th northeast peace and autonomy agreement since 2019, reflecting a deliberate Centre strategy of graduated autonomy rather than state creation.

Link to governance (L): As a northeast affairs administrator, I would recommend three conditions for FNTA’s success: a dedicated annual financial envelope from the 16th Finance Commission (not just state-level redistribution), a transparent performance audit mechanism for the 46 subjects, and a

formal review clause after 10 years that reopens the statehood question if development indicators remain below the national average.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is Article 371(A), and how does it differ from Article 371 provisions for other northeastern states?

Name the eight recognised Naga tribes that ENPO represents. Why is their ethnic identity distinct from western Nagaland's tribes?

The Sixth Schedule under Article 244 provides autonomous district councils for tribal areas. How does the FNTA differ from a Sixth Schedule arrangement?

The BTC analogy is your strongest analytical tool — the board values candidates who can evaluate current policy by examining the outcomes of similar past experiments. Know the NSCN(IM) Framework Agreement of August 2015 and why it remains separate from the FNTA process.

GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT & ENVIRONMENT

Q5. The NGT approved the Rs 81,000 crore Great Nicobar development project, which requires clearing 130 sq km of tropical rainforest in a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Is India right to prioritise strategic infrastructure over ecological preservation?

ethical-dilemma

Position (P): This is not a binary choice between strategy and ecology — it is a question of whether the project's design adequately internalises its environmental costs. The strategic case for Great Nicobar is compelling; the environmental impact assessment process that approved it is not.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The strategic rationale is powerful: Great Nicobar is equidistant from Colombo, Port Klang, and Singapore. China operates Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and is expanding its Indian Ocean naval presence through the “String of Pearls” strategy. India's Andaman and Nicobar Command — its only tri-service command — and the Campbell Bay Naval Air Station represent India's southernmost military assets. An international transshipment terminal would allow India to capture cargo currently routed through Colombo and Singapore, generating strategic and commercial dividends.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The ecological cost is equally concrete: 130 sq km of forest means approximately 10 million trees. Great Nicobar is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (designated 2013) housing the Leatherback Sea Turtle (IUCN Vulnerable, WPA Schedule I, CITES Appendix I), the Nicobar Megapode (Endangered, endemic), and the Saltwater Crocodile. The Shompen tribe — a PVTG of approximately 400 individuals with first friendly contact only in 2001 — faces habitat disruption from the township component. The island sits on the Sunda Megathrust, site of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework commits India to protecting 30% of its land and ocean by 2030 — a commitment directly contradicted by clearing a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Link to governance (L): As an Environment Secretary, I would not block the project but would redesign it: reduce the township component (which displaces the Shompen without strategic justification), mandate a 1:10 compensatory afforestation ratio (not the standard 1:1 under CAMPA), require real-time biodiversity monitoring with automatic halt triggers, and ensure Free, Prior and Informed Consent from the Shompen community under the Forest Rights Act 2006 — as established by the Niyamgiri judgment (2013).

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Niyamgiri judgment, and which tribal community was involved? How does FPIC under FRA 2006 apply to the Shompen?

India has 75 PVTGs. What are the three defining criteria for PVTG classification, and which ministry administers the scheme?

The project is implemented by ANIIDCO. What is ANIIDCO, and why was NITI Aayog — rather than the Ministry of Environment — the conceiving body?

The Niyamgiri (Vedanta) precedent is the legal anchor for tribal consent in development projects. The board will probe whether you know the FRA 2006 Gram Sabha consent requirement and whether it applies to Scheduled Areas in Union Territories. Great Nicobar's strategic value is real — do not dismiss it — but show that you can hold both the strategic and ecological arguments simultaneously.

MEGHALAYA MINING TRAGEDY

Q6. Twenty-seven workers died in a rat-hole mine explosion in Meghalaya in February 2026, despite the NGT banning this practice in 2014. What does this

failure of enforcement reveal about India's regulatory architecture?

factual-analytical

Position (P): The Meghalaya mining tragedy reveals a fundamental weakness in India's regulatory architecture: the gap between judicial and quasi-judicial orders and their enforcement on the ground, particularly in areas where land governance is constitutionally fragmented between central laws and tribal autonomy provisions.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Meghalaya is a Sixth Schedule area under Article 244 — its Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) have governance powers over land, forests, and minor minerals. Coal in Meghalaya lies under privately-owned tribal land, unlike the rest of India where minerals vest in the state under the MMDR Act 1957. Enforcing a mining ban when the land itself is controlled by tribal communities and their ADCs — not by the state government — creates a jurisdictional complexity that simple judicial orders cannot resolve.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The NGT banned rat-hole mining in 2014 in *All Dimasa Students Union vs. State of Meghalaya*, citing environmental degradation including acid mine drainage that turned the River Lukha bright blue. The December 2018 disaster at Ksan village, East Jaintia Hills, trapped 15 miners — none survived. Workers are overwhelmingly inter-state migrants from Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar, falling outside effective coverage of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979 and the Employees' Compensation Act 1923. The Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS) under the Mines Act 1952 has jurisdiction but lacks ground presence in these remote, unregistered operations.

Link to governance (L): As a district officer in such a region, I would pursue three interventions: a mandatory registration system for all mining operations (including on private tribal land) enforced through ADC cooperation; deployment of DGMS inspectors funded by a cess on coal output; and an inter-state migrant workers' welfare programme with biometric registration to ensure compensation and emergency response coverage. The enforcement gap is not a legal gap — it is an institutional capacity gap at the district and block level.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Sixth Schedule, and how does it differ from the Fifth Schedule in terms of governance powers?

The MMDR Act 1957 governs mineral resources. Does it apply to coal on private tribal land in Meghalaya? Why or why not?

As a collector in East Jaintia Hills, you receive intelligence that rat-hole mining continues in your district despite the NGT ban. Walk me through your enforcement options and the constraints you face.

The Sixth Schedule's ADC powers are the key constitutional nuance here. The board will test whether you understand that ADCs in Meghalaya exercise quasi-legislative authority over land and minor minerals, which creates a genuine tension with central regulatory bodies like DGMS. The answer is not "just enforce the ban" — it is institutional design that bridges central regulation and tribal governance.

INDIA-FRANCE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Q7. India upgraded its relationship with France to a “Special Global Strategic Partnership” in February 2026. India now has this tier of partnership with only three countries — France, the USA, and Russia. What does this triangulation reveal about India’s strategic alignment?

opinion

Position (P): India’s triangulation with France, the USA, and Russia is not an alignment — it is a deliberate diversification strategy that maximises strategic autonomy by ensuring no single partner has leverage over India’s defence, technology, or energy supply chains.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Critics argue that maintaining equally elevated partnerships with three powers that are themselves in tension (US-Russia hostility post-Ukraine, France-US competition in the Indo-Pacific) is unsustainable in a genuine crisis. When forced to choose — on sanctions compliance, technology export controls, or military interoperability — India will have to prioritise, and the ambiguity that serves peacetime diplomacy becomes a liability.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The February 2026 visit delivered three concrete outcomes: 26 Rafale-Marine jets for INS Vikrant (India’s first indigenous aircraft carrier, commissioned September 2, 2022), India’s first private-sector helicopter manufacturing facility (Airbus H-125 + Tata Group in Karnataka), and reaffirmation of the 100 GW nuclear power target by 2047 including the Jaitapur plant (6 EPR units, 9,900 MW — the world’s largest planned nuclear park). France fills a specific strategic niche: it is a P5 member that backs India’s permanent UNSC seat, maintains an Indo-Pacific military presence through overseas territories, and is not subject to US CAATSA sanctions — meaning India can buy French defence equipment without the legislative risk it faces with Russian procurement.

Link to governance (L): As an IFS officer, I would argue that the France partnership is India’s most uncomplicated “top-tier” relationship — there are no CAATSA concerns (unlike Russia), no technology denial regimes actively constraining the relationship (unlike periodic US restrictions), and no border dispute (unlike China). This makes France the partner of choice for sensitive dual-use technology transfers in nuclear, aerospace, and submarine domains.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is CAATSA, and how does it affect India’s defence procurement from Russia? Has India been sanctioned under CAATSA?

France’s Jaitapur nuclear project has been pending since 2009. What are the three primary reasons for the delay?

India’s nuclear doctrine rests on No First Use. How does the 100 GW nuclear power target interact with India’s civil-military nuclear separation under the India-US 123 Agreement?

The CAATSA angle is the strategic differentiator for France over Russia. The board values candidates who understand that India’s S-400 purchase from Russia created CAATSA risk, whereas Rafale procurement from France carries no equivalent legislative constraint. Know the India-US 123 Agreement (2008) and the NSG waiver (September 6, 2008) that enabled India’s civil nuclear partnerships.

INDIA-GCC FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Q8. India and the GCC signed Terms of Reference for a Free Trade Agreement in February 2026 after 20 years of negotiations. Given that India-GCC trade is already USD 178.56 billion without an FTA, what additional value does a formal agreement provide?

factual-analytical

Position (P): An FTA provides three categories of value that raw trade volume cannot capture: preferential tariff reduction (lowering the effective cost of Indian exports), regulatory harmonisation (simplifying compliance for Indian services exporters), and institutional dispute resolution (protecting Indian businesses and workers through treaty-level mechanisms rather than ad hoc bilateral goodwill).

Acknowledge the other side (A): The counter-argument is that FTAs have historically not served India well. The India-ASEAN FTA (2010) widened India’s trade deficit with ASEAN because Indian manufacturing could not compete with cheaper imports. India exited RCEP in 2019 precisely because

of this concern. An India-GCC FTA risks a similar outcome if GCC petrochemical exports flood Indian markets at preferential rates, undermining India's domestic refining and chemical manufacturing sector.

Illustrate with specifics (I): India-GCC trade at USD 178.56 billion constitutes 15.42% of India's global trade. India hosts approximately 10 million citizens in GCC countries remitting USD 40-45 billion annually — a critical macroeconomic stabiliser. The India-UAE CEPA (signed February 18, 2022; implemented May 1, 2022; negotiated in a record 88 days) is the template — it increased bilateral goods trade by approximately 12% in its first year. The China factor is real: China-GCC FTA framework was signed in 2023, and China's BRI investments across the Gulf are deepening. Without an India-GCC FTA, Indian exporters face a competitive disadvantage against Chinese goods entering GCC markets at preferential rates.

Link to governance (L): As a Commerce Ministry official, I would design India's FTA negotiation strategy around three priorities: offensive market access for Indian pharmaceuticals, textiles, and IT services (where India has comparative advantage); defensive carve-outs for petrochemicals and gold (where GCC imports could disrupt domestic industry); and a dedicated chapter on labour welfare for Indian workers in GCC countries to address kafala system reforms through treaty-level obligations rather than diplomatic requests.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Name all six GCC member states. When was the GCC founded, and where is its headquarters?

India exited RCEP in 2019. What were the specific concerns, and do similar concerns apply to an India-GCC FTA?

The IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) was announced at the G20 New Delhi Summit in September 2023. How does it complement an India-GCC FTA?

GCC members: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman (HQ Riyadh, founded 1981). The board expects you to know all six without hesitation. The India-UAE CEPA's 88-day negotiation timeline and first-year trade increase are strong empirical evidence for FTA value — use them.

CHANDRAYAAN-4 & SPACE TECHNOLOGY

Q9. ISRO identified Mons Mouton-4 near the lunar south pole as the landing site for Chandrayaan-4, India's first lunar sample-return mission. If

successful, India would be only the fourth country to achieve this. What is the strategic significance of lunar sample-return capability?

factual-analytical

Position (P): Lunar sample-return capability is not merely a scientific milestone — it validates six critical technologies (precision landing, sample collection, Moon ascent, rendezvous and docking in lunar orbit, re-entry, and Earth recovery) that are prerequisites for crewed space missions and, ultimately, for India's strategic autonomy in the emerging space economy.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Critics of expensive space missions argue that India should prioritise application-oriented space programmes — weather satellites, communication, navigation (NavIC) — over prestige missions. The counter-argument has merit in terms of immediate developmental impact, but it underestimates the dual-use technology spillovers of sample-return capability.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The landing site — Mons Mouton-4 at 84.289 degrees South, 32.808 degrees East — was identified using Chandrayaan-2 Orbiter's High Resolution Camera, analysed by the Space Applications Centre (SAC), Ahmedabad. The south pole's permanently shadowed regions contain confirmed water-ice at approximately 40 Kelvin (-233 degrees Celsius) — a future resource for crewed missions and in-situ propellant manufacturing. The prerequisite technology — orbital docking — was demonstrated by SPADEX (launched December 2024; SDX01 Chaser and SDX02 Target spacecraft). China's Chang'e 5 (2020) returned 1.731 kg from Mons Rumker; Chang'e 6 (2024) returned approximately 1.9 kg from the lunar far side. Chandrayaan-4 targets approximately 3 kg of regolith — an ambitious benchmark.

Link to governance (L): As a science policy adviser, I would emphasise that ISRO's cost efficiency — Chandrayaan-3 cost approximately Rs 615 crore, less than the production budget of many Hollywood films — makes India's space programme among the most cost-effective globally. The Gaganyaan crewed mission and Chandrayaan-4 together build the technology base for India's participation in the Artemis Accords-era lunar economy. India signed the Artemis Accords in 2023 — the commercial and strategic dividends of lunar presence will accrue to countries with demonstrated capability.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is SPADEX, and why is orbital docking a prerequisite for sample-return? What were the names of the two SPADEX spacecraft?

Compare India's space budget with NASA's and CNSA's. How does ISRO achieve cost efficiency?

India signed the Artemis Accords in 2023. What are the Accords, who leads them, and what are the key obligations?

The six critical technologies for sample-return form a natural enumeration that impresses boards. Know them in sequence: precision landing, sample collection, Moon ascent, rendezvous and docking, re-entry, Earth recovery. The Chang'e 5 and Chang'e 6 comparisons show you track the competitive landscape.

INDIA SEMICONDUCTOR MISSION & QUANTUM COMPUTING

Q10. India imports 95% of its semiconductors. The India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 targets 70-75% self-sufficiency by 2029. Is this target realistic given that global semiconductor manufacturing is dominated by TSMC in Taiwan and Samsung in South Korea?

policy-critique

Position (P): The 70-75% self-sufficiency target by 2029 is aspirational rather than realistic for cutting-edge chips, but it is achievable for mature-node semiconductors (28nm and above) which constitute the bulk of India's defence, automotive, and IoT requirements. The strategic value lies in reducing vulnerability, not in competing with TSMC at 3nm.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The sceptics' case is strong: semiconductor fabrication at advanced nodes requires not just capital but decades of accumulated process knowledge, a deep supplier ecosystem, and ultra-pure water and chemical supply chains that India does not yet have. TSMC alone accounts for approximately 55% of global foundry revenue. Intel's attempt to catch up through its IDM 2.0 strategy has cost over USD 50 billion with uncertain results — and the US has vastly more semiconductor infrastructure than India.

Illustrate with specifics (I): ISM 1.0, launched in December 2021 with Rs 76,000 crore, approved 10 projects worth Rs 1.60 lakh crore: Tata Electronics is building a 28nm fab in Dholera, Gujarat; Micron Technology and CG Power are establishing ATMP (Assembly, Testing, Marking, and Packaging) facilities in Sanand, Gujarat. ISM 2.0, allocated Rs 1,000 crore in Budget 2026-27, targets 3nm/2nm capability by 2035 — a more realistic advanced-node timeline. India's semiconductor market is USD 45-50 billion (FY25), projected at USD 100-110 billion by 2030. Separately, the Quantum Valley at Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh — with a 133-qubit quantum computing centre using IBM hardware — represents India's parallel bet on the next computing paradigm under the National Quantum Mission (Rs 6,003.65 crore, launched April 2023).

Link to governance (L): As an industry policy official, I would reframe the target: 70-75% self-sufficiency in volume terms (mature nodes for automotive, defence, telecom) is achievable by 2029 if Dholera comes online on schedule. Advanced-node self-sufficiency is a 2035 target that requires sustained R&D investment far beyond current allocations. The strategic priority should be ATMP capability — which India can build faster and which addresses the most immediate supply chain vulnerability.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between a fab (fabrication) and an ATMP (Assembly, Testing, Marking, Packaging) facility? Why is India starting with ATMP?

The National Quantum Mission targets 50-1,000 qubit systems. What is a qubit, and why does quantum computing matter for national security?

Taiwan's TSMC produces approximately 90% of the world's most advanced chips. If China were to invade Taiwan, what would be the immediate impact on India's electronics sector?

The fab vs ATMP distinction is the key technical nuance. India is starting with ATMP because it requires less capital, shorter construction timelines, and less process know-how — it is the “assemble before you manufacture” strategy. The board values candidates who understand this sequencing rather than simply citing the Rs 76,000 crore headline number.

SFDR TEST & DEFENCE TECHNOLOGY

Q11. India became the fifth country to master Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR) propulsion technology after the USA, Russia, France, and China. Why is this specific technology significant for India's air combat capability?

factual-analytical

Position (P): SFDR technology is strategically critical because it is the propulsion backbone for beyond-visual-range (BVR) air-to-air missiles with ranges exceeding 150 km — the class of weapon that determines air superiority in modern aerial combat. Without indigenous SFDR, India depends entirely on imports for this capability.

Acknowledge the other side (A): India already operates the French Meteor missile on its Rafale fleet — widely considered the best BVR missile in the world, with ramjet propulsion and a range exceeding 100 km. One could argue that import dependence for a critical weapon system is acceptable

if the supplier relationship is stable and the weapon is combat-proven.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The SFDR test on February 3, 2026 at ITR Chandipur, Odisha, validated three key subsystems: the nozzle-less booster, the SFDR motor, and the Fuel Flow Controller (FFC). SFDR enables air-breathing supersonic cruise using atmospheric oxygen, eliminating the need to carry oxidiser — this delivers dramatically higher range and sustained supersonic speed compared to conventional solid rocket motors. The technology is the propulsion basis for Astra Mk-3 (projected range 150-300+ km), directly addressing the range gap with China’s PL-15 missile (200-300 km) which equips the J-20 and J-16 fighters. DRDO labs involved: DRDL (Hyderabad, lead), HEMRL (Pune, propellant chemistry), and RCI (Hyderabad, guidance). India’s MTCR membership (since 2016) means indigenous development is essential — MTCR restricts transfer of missile technology with ranges exceeding 300 km.

Link to governance (L): As a defence procurement official, I would emphasise that indigenous SFDR capability transforms India from a buyer to a potential exporter of advanced missile systems. India’s defence exports have grown from approximately Rs 2,000 crore (2018) to Rs 21,000-23,000 crore (FY25), with a target of Rs 35,000 crore. SFDR-powered missiles could be a significant export product to friendly nations that lack indigenous BVR capability — generating strategic influence alongside revenue.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the MTCR, when did India join, and what are its key restrictions on missile technology transfers?

Name the five missiles developed under DRDO’s Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP) launched in 1983. Who led the programme?

India test-fired Agni-III in February 2026. What is the range of each Agni variant from Agni-I to Agni-V, and which is classified as an ICBM?

The PL-15 comparison is the strategic framing that impresses boards — it shows you understand the specific threat SFDR addresses. Know that IGMDP (1983) under Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam developed Agni, Prithvi, Akash, Trishul, and Nag. The board values candidates who can connect a technical achievement to a specific operational requirement.

DEEPFAKES & AI GOVERNANCE

Q12. The IT Amendment Rules 2026 mandate a 2-hour takedown window for deepfakes and require prominent labelling of all AI-generated content. Critics say this is unenforceable. Is regulatory ambition without enforcement capability good governance or performative lawmaking?

opinion

Position (P): Regulatory ambition that outpaces enforcement capability is not performative — it is standard-setting. The 2-hour window creates a legal standard against which platform behaviour can be measured, litigated, and penalised. The alternative — waiting until perfect enforcement is possible before legislating — means no regulation at all, because detection technology will always lag behind generative AI.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The enforcement concern is legitimate: current AI-detection tools have only 60-85% accuracy, and the 2-hour window is technologically demanding even for large platforms. Smaller platforms and regional-language content — where deepfake risk may be highest during elections — are least equipped to comply. Over-regulation risks driving harmful content to encrypted platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram) that are structurally resistant to content monitoring.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The IT Amendment Rules 2026, notified effective February 20, 2026, amend the IT Rules 2021 under Section 79 of the IT Act 2000. The key enforcement mechanism is loss of safe harbour — platforms that “knowingly permit, promote, or fail to act” on violative synthetic media lose their Section 79 immunity from liability. This is a powerful incentive because safe harbour is the legal foundation of platform business models in India. The EU AI Act (2024) takes a risk-based approach with fines up to 35 million euros; China’s Deepfake Regulations (2022) require real-name registration and mandatory watermarking. India’s approach is more flexible than the EU but creates a 2-hour standard that exceeds even the UK Online Safety Act’s requirements.

Link to governance (L): As a MeitY official, I would focus enforcement resources on three priorities: election-period deepfakes (where the harm is most acute and time-bound), non-consensual intimate imagery (where the harm to individuals is most severe), and systematic disinformation campaigns by state actors. Universal enforcement across all AI-generated content is neither feasible nor necessary — triage-based enforcement is both realistic and sufficient to establish the regulatory norm.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is Section 79 of the IT Act 2000, and why is safe harbour loss a more effective enforcement mechanism than monetary fines for platforms?

The K.S. Puttaswamy judgment (2017) established the right to privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21. How does it apply to deepfakes?

A deepfake video of a political candidate goes viral 48 hours before a state election. As an election observer, what are your powers under the Model Code of Conduct and IT Act?

Section 79 safe harbour is the regulatory fulcrum — the board will test whether you understand that losing safe harbour means the platform becomes liable for all user-generated content, not just the specific deepfake. This creates an incentive structure far more powerful than any fine. Know the K.S. Puttaswamy privacy framework and its five-part proportionality test.

INDUS WATERS TREATY

Q13. India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty after the Pahalgam terror attack and has now floated a Rs 5,129 crore tender for the Sawalkot hydroelectric project on the Chenab. Is using a water treaty as a coercive diplomatic tool legally defensible and strategically wise?

ethical-dilemma

Position (P): The suspension is legally defensible under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (Article 62, fundamental change of circumstances) but strategically risky because it sets a precedent that downstream states in India's own river basins — Bangladesh on the Brahmaputra, for instance — could invoke against India.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The moral argument for suspension is powerful: Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism, culminating in the Pahalgam attack, constitutes a fundamental breach of the mutual trust on which treaty relations are based. Continuing to honour a water-sharing treaty with a state that supports terrorism against India appears to reward bad-faith behaviour. The IWT (signed September 19, 1960 between PM Nehru and President Ayub Khan, brokered by the World Bank) has no exit clause — India's invocation of the Vienna Convention is the only available legal mechanism.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Sawalkot project (1,856 MW on River Chenab, Ramban, J&K) is the most concrete manifestation of the IWT suspension — NHPC's Rs 5,129 crore tender signals intent to exercise India's upstream capability on the Western Rivers beyond the treaty's run-of-river constraints. The IWT divides the Indus basin into Eastern Rivers (Sutlej, Beas, Ravi — allocated to

India, approximately 33 MAF) and Western Rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab — allocated to Pakistan, approximately 80 MAF). India's right on Western Rivers is limited to run-of-river hydropower, domestic use, and limited agriculture. Previous disputes — Baglihar (890 MW, 2007 Neutral Expert ruling favoured India) and Kishanganga (330 MW, 2013 PCA ruling allowed construction with flow conditions) — were resolved within the treaty framework.

Link to governance (L): As a water resources administrator, I would caution that the long-term consequences of treaty abrogation must be weighed against the short-term coercive utility. India is an upper riparian on the Indus but a lower riparian on the Brahmaputra (where China's dam-building upstream affects Northeast India). If India normalises treaty suspension as a diplomatic tool, China gains a precedent for unilateral action on Brahmaputra diversions. The strategically wiser approach may be to maximise India's utilisation within the treaty's existing provisions — India currently uses only about 93% of its IWT entitlement on Eastern Rivers — rather than abrogating the treaty itself.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and what does Article 62 (rebus sic stantibus) specifically require for a party to invoke fundamental change of circumstances?

Name the six rivers of the Indus basin from east to west, and identify which are Eastern and Western Rivers under the IWT.

If you were posted as a district collector in Ramban, J&K, how would you manage the displacement and rehabilitation challenges of the Sawalkot project?

The Brahmaputra reciprocity argument is the highest-value analytical point in this answer — it shows the board that you think about second-order consequences. The six rivers in order (east to west): Sutlej, Beas, Ravi (Eastern/India) and Chenab, Jhelum, Indus (Western/Pakistan). Know the Baglihar and Kishanganga precedents by year and outcome.

EXERCISE MILAN & MARITIME SECURITY

Q14. Exercise MILAN 2026 saw 74 nations participate — nearly doubling the 42 nations from 2022. As a naval strategy, what does India gain from hosting the world's largest multilateral naval exercise?

opinion

Position (P): India gains three strategic dividends from MILAN: interoperability with partner navies (the operational dimension), diplomatic influence as a “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean (the strategic dimension), and intelligence-sharing relationships that strengthen maritime domain awareness (the information dimension).

Acknowledge the other side (A): Sceptics argue that multilateral exercises with 74 nations are primarily pageantry — the operational interoperability achieved in a one-week exercise with dozens of navies of varying capability is limited compared to deep bilateral exercises like Malabar (India-US-Japan-Australia). The counter-argument has merit: MILAN’s value is more diplomatic than tactical.

Illustrate with specifics (I): MILAN was founded in 1995 at Port Blair with just four nations — Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. The 13th edition at Visakhapatnam, hosted by the Eastern Naval Command under Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi (Chief of Naval Staff, appointed April 2024), included exercises in PASSEX, CASEX, GOPLAT protection, underwater domain awareness, and HADR. India operates a 2.37 million sq km Exclusive Economic Zone, and 95% of India’s trade by volume moves through sea lanes. The IFC-IOR (Information Fusion Centre — Indian Ocean Region), launched in 2018 at Gurugram, is the institutional backbone for the maritime domain awareness that MILAN operationalises. MILAN’s expansion from 4 to 74 nations reflects India’s SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region, PM Modi, 2015, Mauritius) and Act East Policy (2014).

Link to governance (L): As a strategic affairs adviser, I would note that MILAN’s 74-nation footprint exceeds even China’s naval exercise participation count — a significant soft power metric in the Indo-Pacific competition. The Colombo Security Conclave (India, Sri Lanka, Maldives; Seychelles joined as the fourth member in February 2026) provides the standing institutional framework that MILAN exercises feed into. India’s challenge is converting exercise relationships into standing security partnerships with binding commitments.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the QUAD (India-US-Japan-Australia) and the Colombo Security Conclave in terms of scope and strategic purpose?

India’s Andaman and Nicobar Command is the country’s only tri-service command. Why is a tri-service command structure important for island territories?

The Malacca Strait handles approximately 25% of global trade. What is India’s strategic interest in the Strait, and how does the Andaman and Nicobar Islands’ geographic position relate to it?

The growth trajectory from 4 nations (1995) to 74 nations (2026) is your strongest factual evidence of India's expanding maritime influence. The board values the SAGAR doctrine citation and the IFC-IOR institutional linkage — these show you understand the policy architecture behind the exercise.

RBI MONETARY POLICY

Q15. The RBI held the repo rate at 5.25% in February 2026 after cutting 125 basis points from the 6.50% peak. With CPI inflation at 1.7%, is the RBI being too cautious in its easing cycle?

policy-critique

Position (P): The RBI's caution is warranted because headline CPI at 1.7% understates the inflation risk: food inflation remains at 6.2% and is vulnerable to monsoon disruption, while core inflation at 3.8% reflects the genuine domestic price trend. A central bank that cuts rates based on headline CPI alone risks having to reverse course sharply if food prices spike.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Industry and the Finance Ministry have argued that the repo rate at 5.25% — with real rates above 3% against CPI — is restrictive for investment. Private capex has not recovered to pre-2019 levels, and the transmission lag means rate cuts take 6-9 months to flow through to borrowers via the External Benchmark Lending Rate (EBLR). Delaying further cuts delays the investment recovery.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The MPC is a 6-member statutory body under the RBI Act 1934 (Sections 45ZA-45ZL, inserted by the Finance Act 2016), meeting six times a year, targeting 4% CPI with a plus/minus 2% band. Governor Sanjay Malhotra (appointed December 2024) holds the casting vote. The current rate structure: repo 5.25%, CRR 4%, SLR 18%, MSF 5.50%. Since October 2019, all floating-rate retail and MSME loans must be linked to an external benchmark (RLLR) — this has significantly improved monetary policy transmission. The February 2026 hold with a “neutral” stance signals data-dependency: the MPC will cut if food inflation moderates but will not pre-commit to a rate path.

Link to governance (L): As an economic adviser, I would support the RBI's approach of conditional easing — cutting when data warrants but maintaining optionality. The five-year review of the inflation targeting framework (due March 2026) is the structural opportunity to address whether food inflation should receive a lower weight in the targeting metric, given that rate hikes cannot cool supply-driven food prices. This is the most consequential monetary policy question India faces.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the repo rate, the SDF rate, and the MSF rate? Why does the corridor between them matter for money markets?

The MPC has three external members. How are they appointed, and what prevents political influence over their votes?

Explain the concept of “real interest rate.” If nominal repo is 5.25% and CPI is 1.7%, what is the real rate, and is it appropriate for India’s growth stage?

The food inflation versus core inflation divergence (6.2% versus 3.8%) is the analytical crux. The board tests whether you understand that monetary policy tools cannot address supply-side food inflation — rate hikes make credit expensive without reducing vegetable prices. This is why the framework review matters.

CBDC-BASED PDS

Q16. India launched the world’s first CBDC-based Public Distribution System in February 2026, using programmable e-Rupee tokens for food grain entitlements. Is programmable money that restricts how citizens spend their entitlements compatible with individual economic freedom?

ethical-dilemma

Position (P): Programmable welfare delivery is ethically justified when the programme’s purpose — food security — requires that the entitlement be used for food and not diverted. The restriction is not on citizens’ general economic freedom but on the use of a specific public benefit designed for a specific purpose. This is analogous to food stamps in the United States, which have been restricted to food purchases since their inception.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The libertarian and rights-based objection is serious: once the government establishes the principle that it can programme how citizens spend welfare transfers, the infrastructure exists to extend programmability to other domains — restricting alcohol purchases, gambling, or even political donations. The slippery slope from food-specific tokens to comprehensive behavioural control through programmable money is not hypothetical; China’s social credit system demonstrates how digital financial infrastructure can be repurposed for surveillance.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The CBDC-PDS pilot launched on February 15, 2026 in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. The e-Rupee (e-Rs) retail CBDC — in pilot since December 2022 — is now encoded to be usable only at registered Fair Price Shops, auto-expiring if unused, and generating a full audit trail.

India's PDS under the NFSA 2013 serves approximately 81 crore beneficiaries through 5.4+ lakh FPS shops. Historical PDS leakage has been estimated at 30-40% — ghost beneficiaries, diversion to open markets, quality substitution. DBT since 2013 has transferred Rs 36+ lakh crore and eliminated approximately 9 crore ghost beneficiaries. The CBDC model adds a layer beyond DBT: not just targeted delivery but programmatic enforcement.

Link to governance (L): As a district welfare officer, I would support CBDC-PDS because the primary victims of PDS leakage are the poorest beneficiaries who lose their entitled food grains. Programmability protects their rights more than it restricts them. The ethical safeguard I would insist on: sunset clauses on programmability (tokens expire but the underlying entitlement does not), full transparency about what data is collected and retained, and no extension of programmability to unconditional cash transfers like PM-KISAN.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between a CBDC and UPI? Why does the government need a Central Bank Digital Currency when UPI already processes billions of transactions?

The NFSA 2013 provides for two categories of beneficiaries: Priority Households and Antyodaya Anna Yojana. What are the entitlements under each?

China's digital yuan has raised surveillance concerns globally. How would you ensure India's e-Rupee does not become a tool for state surveillance of citizens' spending?

The food stamps analogy is your strongest ethical anchor — it shows the board that programmable welfare delivery is not unprecedented. The distinction between conditional transfers (food-specific) and unconditional transfers (cash) is the ethical boundary. Know that PM-KISAN (Rs 6,000/year) is unconditional and should NOT be programmable — making this distinction shows ethical nuance.

RAMSAR WETLANDS & CONSERVATION

Q17. India reached 98 Ramsar wetland sites in February 2026 — the highest in South Asia. Is India's rapid addition of Ramsar sites a genuine conservation achievement, or is it a case of listing sites on paper without ensuring effective management?

policy-critique

Position (P): India's expansion from 26 Ramsar sites in 2014 to 98 by February 2026 — a 276% increase — is a genuine diplomatic and policy achievement in terms of global environmental commitments. But the listing-to-management gap is real: many Ramsar sites lack functional management plans, adequate budgets, and effective enforcement against encroachment.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The government's position — that Ramsar listing brings international recognition, triggers domestic legal protections, and creates accountability mechanisms — is correct in principle. Each listing requires a Ramsar Information Sheet documenting ecological character, threats, and management, which creates a baseline for monitoring. The Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules 2017, issued under the Environment Protection Act 1986, mandate state-level Wetland Authorities and Wetland Health Cards.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The two newest sites — Patna Bird Sanctuary (Etah, Uttar Pradesh) hosting Bar-headed Goose and Northern Pintail, and Chhari-Dhand Wetland Reserve (Kutch, Gujarat) hosting Lesser Flamingo and the Indian Wild Ass (*Equus hemionus khur*) — demonstrate India's ecological diversity. Tamil Nadu leads with 20 Ramsar sites. The Ramsar Convention (signed February 2, 1971 in Ramsar, Iran; 172 contracting parties; 2,520+ global sites) operates on the "wise use" principle. India has been a party since 1982. India's wetlands cover approximately 15.9 million hectares — about 5% of land area. Chilika Lake (Odisha) was India's first Ramsar site (1981) and the largest coastal lagoon in Asia. However, a 2021 Comptroller and Auditor General report found that many Indian Ramsar sites lack updated management plans and that state Wetland Authorities are non-functional in several states.

Link to governance (L): As a district officer with a Ramsar site in my jurisdiction, I would prioritise three actions: operationalise the State Wetland Authority at the district level with monthly monitoring reports, integrate wetland buffer zone protection into the district's land-use plan to prevent encroachment, and establish a community-based wetland management committee involving fishing communities and farmers whose livelihoods depend on the wetland ecosystem.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the "wise use" principle under the Ramsar Convention? How does it differ from strict preservation?

India's first Ramsar site was Chilika Lake. What ecological crisis did Chilika face in the 1990s, and how was it restored?

The Wetlands Rules 2017 replaced the 2010 Rules. What was the key change, and why did environmental groups criticise the 2017 version?

The listing-to-management gap is the analytical frame the board will push on. Know that Chilika Lake's Ramsar status was threatened in the 1990s due to siltation and reduced sea-water exchange, and that restoration through mouth-opening engineering is considered a Ramsar success story. The CAG audit finding on non-functional Wetland Authorities is a strong factual citation.

BANGLADESH ELECTIONS & NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY

Q18. Bangladesh held its first post-Yunus elections in February 2026, with the BNP emerging as the largest party and the Awami League barred from contesting. What are the implications for India-Bangladesh relations?

opinion

Position (P): The BNP-dominated government represents a significant shift in India-Bangladesh relations. India's historically close ties with the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina were the foundation of bilateral cooperation on connectivity, counter-terrorism, and water management. A BNP government will be more transactional and less automatically aligned with Indian interests.

Acknowledge the other side (A): India must accept that its preference for a particular government in a neighbouring country cannot override that country's democratic process. The Awami League's removal in August 2025 and the subsequent interim administration under Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus (Nobel Peace Prize 2006 for Grameen Bank microfinance) reflected genuine domestic discontent. India's perceived closeness to Hasina has already created anti-India sentiment in sections of Bangladeshi public opinion.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The BNP under Tarique Rahman (son of former PM Khaleda Zia, residing in the UK) is expected to adopt positions more critical of India on three fronts: water management (the Farakka Barrage and Teesta water-sharing are longstanding grievances), connectivity projects (BNP may recalibrate the terms of Indian transit through Bangladesh), and security cooperation (the intelligence-sharing architecture built under Hasina may be reviewed). India recognised Bangladesh on December 6, 1971 and played the decisive military role in Bangladesh's independence. The Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 — a Modi-Hasina achievement — resolved the 68-year-old enclaves issue by exchanging 162 enclaves. This institutional architecture should survive a government change, but the political warmth will diminish.

Link to governance (L): As an MEA official, I would recommend that India pursue three immediate priorities: reaffirm the Land Boundary Agreement as an accomplished bilateral achievement that no government should reverse, offer early unconditional outreach to the BNP government to establish

working relationships before positions harden, and accelerate the Teesta water-sharing agreement to remove the most toxic irritant from the relationship. Neighbourhood policy must be institution-based, not personality-based — India’s over-reliance on the Hasina relationship is itself a lesson in strategic planning.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Farakka Barrage, when was it commissioned, and what is the Bangladesh grievance regarding it?

The Teesta water-sharing agreement has been pending since 2011. What prevented its conclusion, and which Indian state is the primary obstacle?

India’s “Neighbourhood First” policy aims to prioritise relations with immediate neighbours. Name India’s land neighbours and assess which bilateral relationship is currently the most challenging.

The Teesta issue is the single most important India-Bangladesh irritant. Know that West Bengal’s objection (under then-CM Mamata Banerjee) prevented the 2011 agreement and that Article 253 gives Parliament the power to implement international treaties but water is a State List subject (Entry 17, List II). The board values the constitutional nuance behind India’s inability to sign a water treaty that a state government opposes.

114 RAFALE DEAL & AIR POWER

Q19. India approved the procurement of 114 Rafale jets at Rs 3.25 lakh crore — the largest single defence deal in India’s history. With 96 to be manufactured in India by HAL-Dassault, is this a genuine Make in India achievement or a repackaging of import dependency?

policy-critique

Position (P): The 114-Rafale deal is a genuine step toward defence manufacturing capability transfer, but it is not self-reliance. Manufacturing 96 jets in India builds industrial capacity, workforce skills, and supply chain infrastructure — but the intellectual property, design authority, and critical subsystems (engine, radar, EW suite) remain with Dassault and its French suppliers. True self-reliance requires the AMCA (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft, India’s 5th-generation fighter, expected circa 2035).

Acknowledge the other side (A): The deal's defenders correctly note that India's IAF has approximately 31 operational squadrons against a sanctioned strength of 42 — the minimum for a two-front war scenario. The MiG-21 fleet (inducted 1963) is being retired. LCA Tejas Mk1A production (83 ordered from HAL) is delayed. India cannot wait for the AMCA to fill the squadron gap — the Rafale is the available, combat-proven solution that addresses an immediate operational need.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The deal uses the Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) route — the same as the 2016 deal for 36 Rafales. The 18 fly-away jets come directly from France; the 96 Made-in-India jets will be assembled at HAL's facility in a HAL-Dassault partnership. Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP) 2020 mandates minimum 30% offset investment back into India's defence and aerospace sector. The Rafale's key weapons — METEOR BVR missile (ramjet, 100+ km range), SCALP/Storm Shadow cruise missile (300+ km), RBE2-AA AESA radar, and SPECTRA electronic warfare suite — represent the highest tier of 4.5-generation capability. India's total Rafale fleet after this deal will be 176 jets (36 IAF from 2016 deal, 26 Navy approved, 114 new IAF).

Link to governance (L): As a defence acquisition official, I would frame the deal's value in three metrics: squadron gap closure (from 31 to closer to 42), technology absorption (what manufacturing capability India retains after the deal), and export potential (whether India-made Rafale components can be exported to third countries under a re-transfer agreement with France). The third metric is the real test of whether this is Make in India or assembly in India.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the IGA route and the competitive procurement route under DPP/DAP? Why was IGA chosen?

INS Vikrant was commissioned on September 2, 2022. The 26 Rafale-Marine jets are for this carrier. What aircraft does INS Vikrant currently operate?

India's indigenous AMCA is a 5th-generation fighter expected around 2035. What distinguishes a 5th-generation fighter from a 4.5-generation fighter like the Rafale?

The squadron gap (31 versus 42) is the operational urgency argument. The board will test whether you know that the MiG-21 retirement creates a faster depletion than the Rafale delivery can fill. Know the LCA Tejas Mk1A status (83 ordered, production delayed) and the AMCA timeline (2035) — these show you understand the full fighter acquisition landscape.

LENACAPAVIR & GLOBAL HEALTH

Q20. Lenacapavir, a twice-yearly injectable HIV prevention drug, showed 100% efficacy in clinical trials among women in sub-Saharan Africa. As a public health administrator, how would you advocate for its introduction in India?

situational

Position (P): I would advocate for India’s drug regulator (CDSCO) to fast-track Lenacapavir approval through the New Drug Application pathway, while simultaneously negotiating a voluntary licence with Gilead Sciences for Indian generic manufacturers — leveraging India’s position as the “pharmacy of the world” and its track record of producing affordable generics.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The counter-arguments against rapid introduction are that India’s HIV epidemic profile differs from sub-Saharan Africa — India has approximately 2.4 million people living with HIV (NACO, 2024) with a concentrated epidemic (rather than generalised), and the existing oral PrEP regimen (tenofovir-emtricitabine) is available through the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP). A new injectable at scale requires cold-chain infrastructure and trained healthcare workers for biannual administration — adding logistical complexity.

Illustrate with specifics (I): Lenacapavir’s 100% efficacy in PURPOSE-1 and PURPOSE-2 trials is unprecedented for HIV prevention. The current oral PrEP has approximately 99% efficacy when taken daily, but adherence is the critical barrier — studies show only 40-60% sustained adherence among high-risk populations. A twice-yearly injection eliminates adherence as a variable entirely. India’s ART programme under NACP Phase IV already reaches over 1.7 million people on treatment. The generic manufacturing pathway is well-established: India produces approximately 80% of the world’s affordable antiretrovirals. Gilead has previously granted voluntary licences to Indian manufacturers (for Sofosbuvir for Hepatitis C), creating a precedent for Lenacapavir.

Link to governance (L): My three-step advocacy plan as a public health administrator: first, submit a regulatory brief to CDSCO recommending inclusion in the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rules 2019’s fast-track pathway for drugs addressing unmet medical needs; second, engage with Gilead through the Department of Pharmaceuticals for a voluntary licence (or, if necessary, invoke Section 84 of the Patents Act 1970 for compulsory licensing); third, design a targeted rollout through the existing NACP district-level infrastructure, focusing on key populations (female sex workers, MSM, transgender persons, injecting drug users) where the adherence barrier is highest.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is compulsory licensing under the Patents Act 1970, and when has India invoked it? Cite the specific case.

India produces 80% of the world's affordable ARVs. What is the TRIPS Agreement, and how does India's Section 3(d) protect access to affordable medicines?

As a district health officer, you learn that HIV stigma is preventing high-risk populations from accessing PrEP at government clinics. What community-based interventions would you implement?

The Natco vs. Bayer compulsory licence (2012, for Nexavar/sorafenib) is the landmark Indian case — know it cold. Section 3(d) of the Patents Act (preventing evergreening by denying patents for new forms of known substances unless they show enhanced efficacy) was upheld by the Supreme Court in Novartis vs. Union of India (2013). The board values candidates who can connect drug access policy to the TRIPS flexibilities India champions at the WTO.

AI IMPACT SUMMIT & GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Q21. India hosted the AI Impact Summit in February 2026, resulting in the New Delhi Declaration endorsed by 88 countries. India's approach prioritises "access and inclusion" over "existential risk," which is the focus of the US and EU frameworks. Is India right to frame AI governance differently from the West?

opinion

Position (P): India is right to prioritise access and inclusion because its AI governance challenge is fundamentally different from the West's. For India, the primary risk is not that AI becomes too powerful but that its benefits remain concentrated in a few countries and corporations while 1.4 billion Indians are excluded from the productivity gains.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The existential risk camp — represented by the Bletchley Park Declaration (2023, UK, 28 nations) and the Seoul Summit (2024, South Korea) — argues that frontier AI systems pose risks that transcend national development stages. If a misaligned artificial general intelligence (AGI) poses catastrophic risks, India's development priorities become irrelevant. This argument is not dismissible — the precautionary principle warrants attention to tail risks even when immediate priorities lie elsewhere.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact, built on seven "Chakra" pillars — democratising AI resources, economic growth, secure and trusted AI, AI for science, social empowerment, human capital development, and resilient AI systems — includes a Charter for the

Democratic Diffusion of AI proposing shared compute access and open foundational models. India's AI Mission (approved 2024, Rs 10,372 crore over 5 years, nodal ministry MeitY) funds public compute infrastructure, Indian language AI models, and AI safety research. India assumed the presidency of GPAI (Global Partnership on AI, founded 2020) in 2023. The Paris Summit (2025, France) attempted to bridge access and safety — India's New Delhi Declaration extends this, reflecting India's Global South leadership identity.

Link to governance (L): As a technology policy adviser, I would argue that India's framing is strategically shrewd: by championing AI access for the Global South, India positions itself as the voice of 130+ developing nations at a moment when AI governance norms are being set. This diplomatic capital — 88 endorsements for the New Delhi Declaration — gives India structural influence in AI governance comparable to its influence in climate negotiations through the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR). The substance must follow the diplomacy: India needs 100,000+ GPUs of public AI compute to train sovereign foundation models in Indian languages.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the EU AI Act 2024? How does its risk-based approach differ from India's principles-based approach?

GPAI (Global Partnership on AI) was founded in 2020. What is its mandate, and how does India's presidency shape the agenda?

A private AI company develops a model that can generate realistic biological weapon instructions. As a government regulator, what powers does India currently have to restrict its deployment?

The CBDR analogy (climate governance to AI governance) is a powerful framing that shows conceptual sophistication. Know the EU AI Act's four risk tiers (unacceptable, high, limited, minimal) and why India has deliberately avoided this prescriptive approach. The board values candidates who understand that AI governance is a new domain where norms are being contested, not settled.

BRAHMAPUTRA TUNNEL & NORTHEAST DEVELOPMENT

Q22. India approved its first underwater rail-cum-road tunnel beneath the Brahmaputra River at Rs 18,662 crore. As a Northeast India development officer, how would you ensure this infrastructure project delivers equitable economic benefits to communities on both banks?

situational

Position (P): Infrastructure alone does not generate equitable development — it creates connectivity that can either distribute economic activity or concentrate it further. As a development officer, my priority would be ensuring that the economic activation plan for both terminals — Gohpur (north bank) and Numaligarh (south bank) — is designed before the tunnel opens, not after.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The conventional view is that infrastructure creates its own economic multiplier: roads bring markets, markets bring investment, investment brings jobs. The evidence from India’s highway expansion programme is more mixed — National Highway connectivity has accelerated urbanisation at highway nodes while sometimes bypassing interior communities. The risk is that the Brahmaputra tunnel primarily benefits the Numaligarh Refinery (expanding from 3 MMTPA to 9 MMTPA) and transit traffic, while Gohpur’s largely agrarian economy sees limited local benefit.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The 15.79 km dual-tube tunnel and 33.7 km total corridor reduce a 240 km detour via Kaliabhomora Bridge to a direct crossing, connecting 4 railway stations, 2 airports, and 2 inland waterway terminals. The Brahmaputra is a braided river with a width of 10-15 km in Assam, in Seismic Zone V — the project is flood-proof and all-weather, which addresses the chronic connectivity disruption that isolates the north bank during monsoon. The corridor generates approximately 80 lakh person-days of construction employment. The river originates as the Tsangpo in Tibet (Chemayungdung glacier), enters India as Siang/Dihang in Arunachal Pradesh, and exits as the Jamuna in Bangladesh.

Link to governance (L): My three interventions as a development officer: first, establish a District Economic Activation Committee on both banks with representation from local chambers of commerce, agricultural cooperatives, and self-help groups, tasked with preparing a “corridor economic plan” two years before the tunnel opens. Second, designate 30% of the Rs 18,662 crore project expenditure for local material procurement and local labour hiring. Third, create a “last-mile connectivity fund” from the project budget to build feeder roads from the tunnel terminals to interior villages and tea gardens — ensuring the tunnel’s benefits are not captured only by the two terminal towns.

Cross-Questions from Board:

The Brahmaputra is in Seismic Zone V. Name the two major earthquakes in the region and their magnitudes. What engineering challenges does seismicity create for an underwater tunnel?

India has 111 National Waterways designated under the National Waterways Act 2016. The Brahmaputra is NW-2. How does inland waterway transport complement road and rail connectivity in the Northeast?

The North Eastern Council (NEC) coordinates development in the eight northeastern states. What is NEC’s constitutional basis, and has it been effective?

The “last-mile connectivity” concept differentiates your answer from generic infrastructure advocacy. The board tests whether you understand that a tunnel connecting two points benefits those two points — the governance challenge is distributing benefits to the hinterland. Know that the NEC was established under the NEC Act 1971 and functions under the Ministry of DoNER.

BHAVANTAR BHUGTAN YOJANA & AGRICULTURAL POLICY

Q23. The Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana — a price deficiency payment model for farmers — was discussed for national revival in February 2026. Is direct price deficiency payment a better model than MSP-based government procurement for supporting Indian farmers?

policy-critique

Position (P): Price deficiency payments are structurally superior to MSP-based procurement for crops where government procurement is minimal — namely pulses, oilseeds, and coarse cereals. For rice and wheat, where FCI procurement infrastructure exists and serves NFSA’s food security mandate, the procurement model remains necessary. The policy answer is not either-or but crop-specific.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Farmer unions’ primary objection to BBY is trust: a deficiency payment depends on accurate market price data, and mandis in India are not transparent enough to generate reliable price signals. If the reference market price is manipulated downward (through cartel buying or inadequate mandi infrastructure), the deficiency payment becomes a subsidy to traders, not a support to farmers. The procurement model, for all its inefficiency, guarantees a floor price through physical purchase.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana was piloted in Madhya Pradesh in 2017 under CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan for oilseeds and pulses. The mechanism is straightforward: if the market price of a notified crop falls below the MSP, the government pays the farmer the difference directly to their bank account via DBT. This avoids the inefficiency of government procurement, storage, and disposal — FCI’s economic cost of wheat is approximately Rs 3,000 per quintal, far above the MSP of approximately Rs 2,200. India’s MSP system covers 23 crops but effective government procurement exists only for rice and wheat. For arhar (pigeon pea), urad, moong, soybean, and groundnut — where MSP frequently exceeds market price — farmers have no effective price support because NAFED’s procurement capacity is limited.

Link to governance (L): As an agriculture secretary, I would recommend a dual-track approach: retain FCI procurement for rice and wheat (to maintain NFSA’s food security buffer stock); implement BBY nationally for pulses, oilseeds, and coarse cereals (where procurement is impractical). The critical infrastructure requirement is reliable, real-time mandi price data — the eNAM (electronic National Agriculture Market) platform launched in 2016 can provide this if mandi integration is accelerated. Currently, only approximately 1,000 of India’s 6,900+ mandis are integrated on eNAM.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between MSP and market price? Who recommends MSP, and which body finalises it?

PM-KISAN provides Rs 6,000 per year to all farmer families. How does this income support model differ from MSP-based price support and BBY-based deficiency payments?

The Swaminathan Commission (2006) recommended MSP at C2+50%. What is C2 cost, and why has the government not fully implemented this recommendation?

The CACP (Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices) recommends MSP; the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) finalises it. Know the three cost concepts: A2 (actual paid-out cost), A2+FL (including family labour), and C2 (comprehensive cost including land rent and interest on capital). The Swaminathan C2+50% formula is the single most-debated agricultural policy recommendation — the board will test whether you know what C2 includes and why the government uses A2+FL instead.

INTEGRATED CROSS-TOPIC QUESTION

Q24. February 2026 saw India announce seven new High-Speed Rail corridors, approve a Rs 81,000 crore island development project, clear 130 sq km of forest, reach 98 Ramsar wetland sites, and commit to 30% land protection under the Kunming-Montreal Framework. As a senior IAS officer, how do you reconcile India’s simultaneous pursuit of infrastructure-led growth and environmental commitments?

situational

Position (P): The reconciliation is not philosophical but procedural: India needs both infrastructure and conservation, and the quality of the reconciliation depends on the quality of planning, sequencing, and institutional design at the project level. The answer is not to choose between them but to build the

institutional capacity to do both simultaneously.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Environmentalists rightly argue that the arithmetic does not add up: India cannot clear 130 sq km of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve forest at Great Nicobar while claiming to protect 30% of its land under the Kunming-Montreal Framework. Infrastructure announcements receive immediate political credit; environmental damage reveals itself over decades. This temporal asymmetry between political incentives and ecological consequences is a genuine governance challenge.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The February 2026 data illustrates the tension precisely. Budget 2026-27 announced seven High-Speed Rail corridors (Mumbai-Pune, Pune-Hyderabad, Hyderabad-Bengaluru, Hyderabad-Chennai, Chennai-Bengaluru, Delhi-Varanasi, Varanasi-Siliguri), the Surat-Dankuni Freight Corridor, and 20 new National Waterways — alongside a Rs 20,000 crore CCUS Mission and India’s NDC commitment of 45% emissions intensity reduction by 2030 and net-zero by 2070. India’s non-fossil fuel capacity reached 46.8% of installed capacity (NDC target: 50% by 2030). The CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) fund holds over Rs 50,000 crore collected from projects that diverted forest land — but the compensatory afforestation planted rarely matches the ecological value of the natural forest destroyed.

Link to governance (L): As a senior IAS officer, I would institutionalise three mechanisms: first, mandatory Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) at the corridor level — not project-by-project EIA, but cumulative impact assessment across all seven HSR corridors mapped against ecologically sensitive zones. Second, a “biodiversity offset market” where infrastructure projects in biodiversity-rich areas must fund conservation of equivalent ecological value elsewhere — moving beyond the CAMPA afforestation model to genuine ecological equivalence. Third, a Cabinet-level Environment and Infrastructure Coordination Committee that resolves conflicts at the planning stage, not after projects are announced and communities have mobilised opposition. The reconciliation is possible, but it requires institutional design that does not currently exist at the required scale.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)? Why does India currently lack a legal framework for SEA?

The Forest Conservation Act was replaced by the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam 2023. What are the key changes, and why did environmental groups oppose them?

As a district collector, you receive simultaneous orders to facilitate a National Highway expansion through a reserve forest and to protect the same forest under the Ramsar Convention. Walk me through how you would navigate this conflict.

The SEA versus EIA distinction is a high-value analytical point — EIA assesses individual projects while SEA assesses the cumulative impact of policies, plans, and programmes. India has no statutory SEA framework, which is why corridor-level infrastructure planning does not systematically account for environmental cumulative impacts. The board rewards candidates who can identify the institutional gap, not just describe the problem.

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