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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Above the Line: The Case for Anticipatory Statecraft

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THE LIFT LINE

A state that only responds to events has already surrendered the initiative to whoever created them, so the real measure of a great power is not how well it manages crises but how few it is surprised by.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

India's foreign policy has grown in reach and confidence, yet it remains substantially reactive, moving from one external shock to the next, whether a border standoff, a coup in the neighbourhood, a sudden shift in an oil supplier or a great-power realignment that was visible long before it arrived. Anticipatory statecraft is the discipline of forecasting geopolitical change and positioning early to shape it, rather than absorbing it after the fact. It rests on strategic foresight, scenario planning and horizon-scanning, and on the institutional capacity to turn that foresight into policy. For an aspirant, the theme sits at the centre of GS2 international relations because it connects the machinery of diplomacy, the National Security Council Secretariat, the Ministry of External Affairs, think tanks and area-studies expertise, to the larger goal of **strategic autonomy** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/strategic-autonomy/>) in a multipolar and unstable world.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood; **bilateral** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/bilateral/>), regional and global groupings and agreements involving India; effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests; the machinery of foreign policy.

For **Prelims**, hold the institutional map: the National Security Council and its Secretariat, the Strategic Policy Group and the National Security Advisory Board; the Ministry of External Affairs and its Policy Planning and Research Division; the difference between the executive's treaty-making power and Parliament's oversight; and the meaning of strategic autonomy as the freedom to make sovereign choices without alignment. For

Mains, argue that institutional capacity, long-range planning cells, funded area studies and a professionalised diplomatic cadre, is the hidden infrastructure of an effective foreign policy, and that foresight is cheaper than crisis management.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's diplomatic tradition was built for a different world, one of non-alignment, careful balancing and a small, elite foreign service managing a limited set of relationships. That model served the Cold War decades, but the current environment is faster and more crowded. Great-power competition, supply-chain weaponisation, technology export controls, climate shocks and instability across the neighbourhood all move quickly and interact. A structure optimised for careful reaction is repeatedly caught off guard.

The recurring pattern is telling. Major shifts, a neighbour drifting into another power's orbit, a trade corridor being reconfigured, a technology regime tightening, are rarely bolts from the blue. The signals are usually present for months or years. What is often missing is a system that reads those signals early, tests plausible futures against them and pre-positions options before the moment of decision arrives. That gap, between available information and institutional response, is what anticipatory statecraft is designed to close.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Reactive diplomacy carries a hidden cost

Crisis-driven diplomacy looks decisive but is expensive. Options narrow as a situation hardens, bargaining leverage (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/leverage/>) falls once a crisis is public, and scarce senior attention is consumed by firefighting that foresight could have prevented. The cost is measured not only in money but in lost initiative.

Foresight is a capacity, not a forecast

Anticipatory statecraft is not about predicting a single future correctly. It is about scenario planning, mapping several plausible futures, and horizon-scanning, watching weak signals early, so that the system is rehearsed for a range of outcomes and can move first when one materialises.

DIMENSION	REACTIVE STATECRAFT	ANTICIPATORY STATECRAFT
Trigger	Crisis after it breaks	Weak signals before it breaks
Time horizon	Days and weeks	Years and decades
Instrument	Damage control	Scenario planning, horizon-scanning
Leverage	Low, options narrowed	High, options still open
Capacity needed	Crisis cells	Planning cells, area studies, think tanks

The institutional deficit

Foresight needs owners. A well-resourced National Security Council Secretariat, a strong Policy Planning Division, a funded ecosystem of think tanks and deep area-studies expertise on regions India cannot afford to misread are the machinery that converts analysis into pre-positioned policy. Thin institutions produce thin foresight.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Treat foresight and autonomy as two sides of one coin. Strategic autonomy is the ability to choose freely, but a state that is perpetually surprised cannot choose freely, because it is forced to react on terms others have set. The transferable frame for GS2 is that autonomy is not only about avoiding alignment; it is about widening the menu of options and keeping them open long enough to choose. Anticipation widens the menu; reaction shrinks it. The examiner rewards the candidate who links the abstract ideal of strategic autonomy to the concrete institutions, planning cells, research funding, professional cadre, that make it operational, rather than treating autonomy as a slogan.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Fast, multipolar, shock-prone world -> reactive diplomacy catches India off guard -> options narrow, leverage falls, senior attention consumed by firefighting -> anticipatory statecraft: horizon-scanning + scenario planning read weak signals early -> institutional capacity (NSCS, Policy Planning, think tanks, area studies) converts foresight into pre-positioned options -> India shapes shifts instead of absorbing them -> wider menu of choices = genuine strategic autonomy

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Invest in the machinery of foresight.** Strengthen the National Security Council Secretariat and the MEA's Policy Planning Division with dedicated long-range planning cells, so that thinking about the next decade is someone's full-time job and not an afterthought squeezed between crises.
- ❷ **Fund the knowledge base.** Build deep area-studies expertise and a well-resourced think-tank ecosystem on the regions and technologies India cannot afford to misread, since foresight is only as good as the underlying understanding.
- ❸ **Institutionalise scenario planning.** Make structured horizon-scanning and multi-scenario exercises a routine input into decision-making, so that policy is stress-tested against several futures rather than a single assumed one.

- 4 **Professionalise and expand the cadre.** Grow and specialise the diplomatic and analytic workforce, because a small service stretched thin will always default to reaction, however talented it is.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly asked about strategic autonomy, the machinery of India’s foreign policy and India’s response to a shifting global order. This editorial converts those themes into a question of institutional design, which is precisely the applied analysis the examiner rewards over a narration of doctrine.

Practice question: “Strategic autonomy in a multipolar world depends less on avoiding alignment and more on the institutional capacity to anticipate change.” Critically examine with reference to India’s foreign-policy machinery. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Ministry of External Affairs* (<https://www.mea.gov.in/>), *National Security Council Secretariat* (<https://www.nscs.gov.in/>)

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