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The Democracy Quotient: Why India's Middle Power Moment Begins at Home

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GS2

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Can a country lead a coalition of middle powers on the strength of delivery alone, or does the health of its own democracy set the ceiling on its convening power?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Great powers dictate; middle powers can only convene. Convening is a moral transaction as much as a material one, because states join a coalition led by a country whose institutions they can predict. A Mint column of 27 July 2026 by Rajrishi Singhal argues that India's claim to lead such a grouping rests finally on what he calls its "democracy quotient". The government rejects the yardsticks that claim rests on, but the underlying test survives the dispute: legitimacy abroad is manufactured at home.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

GS Paper 2 (International Relations) takes the bulk of this, through the syllabus hooks "bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests", "effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests", and "important international institutions, agencies and fora, their structure and mandate". **GS Paper 2 (Polity and Governance)** supplies the second half, through "important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability" and the comparison of India's constitutional scheme with that of other countries. **GS Paper 1** carries the historical spine: "effects of colonisation" and the redrawing of national boundaries after [decolonisation](#).

For **Prelims**, hold the institutional specifics: the [International Solar Alliance](#) (ISA) and its Gurugram headquarters, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), the Global Biofuels Alliance (GBA), the India, Brazil and South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), the three Voice of Global South Summits, and the November 2022 working paper of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister on global perception indices. For **Mains**, the transferable idea is the difference between hard power, soft power and [normative](#) power, and the proposition that convening capacity is a distinct fourth currency in a fragmenting order.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In International Relations theory a middle power is a state with insufficient capability to impose outcomes alone but sufficient capability to shape them in concert with others. The literature distinguishes a **positional** reading, which ranks states by gross material capability, from a **behavioural** reading, which identifies middle powers by their conduct: a preference for **multilateral** solutions, coalition building, compromise brokering and the defence of a rules-based order. Canada, Australia, South Korea, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, South Africa and the Nordic states are the countries conventionally so classified. India is an awkward fit, because its aggregate economy and military place it near the top tier while its per capita indicators and institutional reach place it lower, which is precisely why the label is argued over rather than assumed.

India's actual multilateral machinery is substantial and largely of recent construction.

VEHICLE	FOUNDED OR HOSTED	INDIA'S ROLE	WHAT IT DEMONSTRATES
G20 Presidency	1 December 2022 to 30 November 2023; New Delhi Summit 9 to 10 September 2023	Chair; secured African Union entry as a permanent member	Agenda-setting inside a great power forum
Voice of Global South Summit	1st, 12 to 13 January 2023 (125 countries); 2nd, 17 November 2023; 3rd, 17 August 2024 (123 countries)	Convener and host	Representation claim for the developing world
International Solar Alliance	Announced with France at CoP21, Paris, 30 November 2015; treaty in force 6 December 2017	Co-founder; headquarters at Gurugram	First treaty-based intergovernmental body headquartered in India
Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure	UN Climate Action Summit, 23 September 2019	Initiator; secretariat in New Delhi	Norm entrepreneurship on adaptation
Global Biofuels Alliance	G20 New Delhi Summit, 9 September 2023	Founding member with Brazil and the United States	Issue-specific plurilateralism
IBSA Dialogue Forum	Brasilia Declaration, 6 June 2003	Founding member	Democracy as the explicit membership criterion
Quad	Leaders' level from March 2021	Member with the United States, Japan and Australia	Alignment without alliance obligations

The framing has shifted alongside the machinery, from *vishwaguru*, teacher to the world, to *vishwabandhu*, friend to the world, a deliberately less hierarchical formulation that fits a convening role better than a tutoring one. Strategic autonomy has correspondingly been recast as multi-alignment: simultaneous membership of the Quad, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with no bloc holding a veto over the others.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Scarcity produces predation

The column opens with Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, popularly called *The Three-Body Problem* after its first volume, in which a planet orbiting three suns is rendered gravitationally unpredictable by Newtonian physics, forcing its civilisations through alternating cycles of prosperity and obliteration. Singhal reads the work as an allegory for climate disasters and the resource competition that follows, and as an interrogation of which domestic political arrangements leave a nation-state open to external depredation.

He then traces the resource war as a historical constant. The first probably occurred around **2500 BCE in Sumeria**, in modern-day Iraq, over control of irrigated farmland, a dispute conventionally identified with the city-states of Lagash and Umma. In **1991** Iraq attacked Kuwait over oil. In **2003** the United States attacked Iraq under the stated pretext of eliminating weapons of mass destruction, in the column's reading to control oilfields. Colonial extraction of natural resources through brutal and coercive methods, he argues, created prosperity for European powers, while the violent appropriation of Native American land and the systematic destruction of its tribes allowed settler colonies in the United States to generate agricultural surpluses.

The contemporary ledger

The pattern, the column argues, is live. In Russia's war with Ukraine it finds undertones of resource acquisition beneath the ego: **Donetsk**, which used to produce half of Ukraine's coal and finished steel, now services the Russian military; **Kherson**, a major agricultural hub for cereals, sunflowers and vegetables, now adds to Russian exports; **Zaporizhzhia**, which the column says once supplied about **25 per cent of Ukraine's electricity**, is now a strategic asset for Moscow. It reads Donald Trump's repeated threats to annex **Greenland**, though couched in geopolitical terms, as plausibly reflecting its vast untapped **rare earth** reserves, and China's **Belt and Road Initiative** as a mechanism for binding resource-rich but underdeveloped nations in crippling debt.

The middle power moment

Canadian Prime Minister **Mark Carney**, in his special address to the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting at Davos on **20 January 2026**, called on middle powers to combine over shared values, arguing that the post-Cold War rules-based order had suffered "a rupture, not a transition" and urging a new plurilateralism against economic coercion by great powers. His formulation, that middle powers must act together because if you are not at the table you are on the menu, was initially met with scepticism given the ideological divergence among middle powers, but has resonated again amid renewed superpower belligerence.

The column engages **N.K. Singh**, former civil servant and Chairman of the Fifteenth Finance Commission, whose essay “The Middle Power Moment” in the International Monetary Fund’s *Finance and Development* of June 2026 argues that India, with its growing economic weight, is well positioned to build bridges across fragmented blocs and shift the world from confrontation towards “conscious cooperation”, a modern adaptation of non-alignment based on overlapping interests rather than ideology.

The column’s claim

Singhal’s objection is that this case does not price in what he sees as an apparent democratic deficit. He notes that an increasing number of population cohorts, **students, farmers and sportspersons**, have had to take to the streets to be heard, and characterises the administration’s response as silence and suboptimal engagement. He does not deny India’s potential to be part of a middle-power multilateral resurgence. His point is comparative and historical: in the mid twentieth century, when many former colonies were gaining independence and a great many chose authoritarian rule, India stood out for choosing democracy and democratic institutions, and it is that choice, not its economic size, that earned it global admiration. Regaining some of that admiration, he argues, is the **precondition** for leading anyone.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Carry in **the Three Currencies of Convening Power**.

- ① **Material weight.** Market size, military capacity, technological depth. It buys a seat but not followers. Every middle power by definition lacks enough of it to act alone.
- ② **Institutional credibility.** Whether partners can predict how a state will behave when its interests are inconvenient. Predictability is produced by working courts, contestable elections, a free press and a functioning legislature. This is Singhal’s variable.
- ③ **Delivery record.** What the state actually supplies to others: vaccines, solar finance, disaster-resilient infrastructure standards, digital public goods, debt relief advocacy.

The counter-argument, stated fairly. The Government of India formally rejects the measurement on which the second currency is usually scored. The Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister published a working paper in **November 2022**, “Why India Does Poorly on Global Perception Indices: Case Study of Three Opinion-Based Indices”, by Sanjeev Sanyal and Aakanksha Arora. It argued that the Freedom in the World index, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index rest on the opinions of a small group of unnamed experts, that the questions are worded so subjectively that no objective answer is possible, and that these opaque scores feed the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators and thereby affect sovereign risk assessment. The Ministry of External Affairs has separately dismissed such judgements as inaccurate and distorted, and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has framed them as the verdicts of self-appointed custodians applying invented rules. The **substantive** version of the government’s position is stronger than the rhetorical one: convening power in the Global South has historically tracked delivery rather than index scores, and India’s partners in the ISA, CDRI and the Voice of

Global South Summits joined for capacity and finance, not for a V-Dem ranking. A serious answer holds both halves together: the measurement can be methodologically weak and the underlying institutional question can still be real.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture three concentric rings. The outer ring is the resource-scarce, climate-stressed world the column describes, in which great powers convert scarcity into coercion, whether through annexation, war or debt. The middle ring is the plurilateral layer: ISA, CDRI, GBA, IBSA, the Voice of Global South Summits, the constructed rooms where middle powers assemble because none of them can act alone. The inner ring is domestic: courts, elections, press, legislature, federal bargaining. The column's argument is a single arrow running outward from the inner ring to the middle one. Institutional credibility at home determines how many states will sit in the room India builds, and only a full room gives India [leverage](#) against the outer ring. Weaken the core and the middle ring thins; thin the middle ring and the outer ring dictates terms.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Build the measurement India wants to be judged by.** Rather than only contesting V-Dem, Freedom House and the EIU, fund a transparent, methodologically published index of institutional quality anchored in Indian and Global South research institutions, with open data and replicable code, so that the objection becomes constructive rather than defensive.
- ❷ **Institutionalise grievance channels so that protest is not the only channel.** The column's specific charge is that students, farmers and sportspersons had to take to the streets. [Statutory](#) pre-legislative consultation, functioning standing and select committee scrutiny, and time-bound response mechanisms convert street mobilisation back into institutional process.
- ❸ **Convert convening into treaty-backed capacity.** Follow the ISA template: a signed framework agreement, a permanent secretariat and a dedicated finance window. Summits create goodwill; treaty organisations create durable convening power that survives changes of government.
- ❹ **Anchor the middle power coalition in issues, not ideology.** Given how ideologically scattered middle powers are, the workable coalitions are issue-specific: critical mineral supply chain diversification, debt restructuring reform, multilateral development bank capital adequacy and cross-border digital public infrastructure.
- ❺ **Treat judicial and legislative capacity as a foreign policy investment.** Judicial vacancies, parliamentary sitting days and the disposal record of information commissions are conventionally treated as domestic housekeeping. In the framework above they are inputs into external credibility and should be budgeted as such.

- 6 **Pair vishwabandhu with verifiable delivery.** Publish outcome data on India's Global South commitments, including vaccine supply, credit lines, capacity-building slots and disaster response, so that the friendship claim is auditable by the very states being courted.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly asked whether India's rising material position has cost it its normative standing. GS Paper 2 (2019): "The long-sustained image of India as a leader of the oppressed and marginalised nations has disappeared on account of its newfound role in the emerging global order. Elaborate." GS Paper 2 (2021) asked candidates to examine India's influence in Africa in the light of Africa's expected growth decades. On the domestic side, GS Paper 2 (2021) asked candidates to explain the doctrine of constitutional morality with the help of relevant judicial decisions. This editorial is the bridge between those two halves of the paper, which examiners increasingly test together.

Practice question: "India's capacity to lead a coalition of middle powers is set less by its economic weight than by the credibility of its domestic institutions." Critically examine, with reference to India's plurilateral initiatives. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: Can a country lead a coalition of middle powers on the strength of delivery alone, or does the health of its own democracy set the ceiling on its convening power?

Sources: Mint, Ministry of External Affairs, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, PIB, International Solar Alliance

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