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CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYSIS

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COMPILED BY

Sapna Chauhan

SUNDERNAGAR · MANDI · HIMACHAL PRADESH

1. Defence Acquisition Proposals worth ₹1.10 Lakh Crore Cleared

GS 2 / 3

- The **Defence Acquisition Council (DAC)**, chaired by Defence Minister **Rajnath Singh**, on Monday accorded **Acceptance of Necessity (AoN)** for a range of acquisition proposals for the armed forces estimated at **₹1.10 lakh crore**, with approximately **98% of the procurements** planned to be from **Indian industry**.
- For the **Army**, the DAC approved procurement of **Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) reconnaissance vehicles**, high mobility vehicles (HMTVs), self-propelled mechanical mine layers (MMLs), advanced light helicopters (ALHs), **trawl tanks** and the **Sarvatra Bridge System**.
- The trawl tanks and the Sarvatra Bridge System will provide **composite crossing capability** to fighting formations during operations in varied terrains.

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Defence acquisition proposals worth ₹1.10 lakh crore cleared

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

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According to the Defence Ministry, for the Army, the DAC approved the procurement of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) reconnaissance vehicles, high mobility vehicles (HMTVs), self-propelled mechanical mine layers (MMLs), advanced light helicopters (ALHs), trawl tanks and the Sarvatra Bridge System.

The trawl tanks and the Sarvatra Bridge System will



Rajnath Singh

provide composite crossing capability to fighting formations during operations in varied terrains.

Domestic boost

For the Navy, the DAC granted AoN for the procurement of Arudhra radars and the design, development and subsequent procurement of marine gas turbines (MGTs).

The Arudhra radars will replace existing air route surveillance radars at va-

rious naval air stations. Indigenous development of MGTs, which are crucial for warship propulsion, is expected to reduce dependence on foreign vendors.

For the Air Force, the Council approved several proposals aimed at enhancing the war-fighting capabilities of its fighters, transport aircraft and helicopters.

The DAC also cleared the procurement of ground-based multi-purpose jammers (GBMPJ), which will provide effective jamming capability against radars. Approval was also accorded for the installation of the Defence Forces Secure Access Card (DEFSAC) system, which will replace existing paper-based identity cards, passes and permits with interoperable radio frequency identification (RFI)-based smart cards.

DAC chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh clears acquisitions.



Sarvatra: truck-mounted multi-span mobile bridge in action.

Sarvatra Bridging System — Key Facts

- ❖ A **truck-mounted, multi-span mobile mechanical bridge** designed to quickly cross **wet and dry gaps** during military operations.
 - ❖ **Developer:** Research & Development Establishment (Engineers) of **DRDO**; **Manufacturer:** **BEML Limited** with industry partners such as L&T.
 - ❖ **Length & Span:** up to **75 metres** total bridge length using **five** individual **15-metre scissors-type** spans made of **aluminium alloy**.
- **Navy:** The DAC granted AoN for procurement of **Arudhra radars** and for the design, development and subsequent procurement of **Marine Gas Turbines (MGTs)**.
 - The **Arudhra radars** will replace existing air route surveillance radars at various naval air stations. Indigenous development of **MGTs** — crucial for **warship propulsion** — is expected to reduce dependence on foreign vendors.
 - **Air Force:** The Council approved several proposals aimed at enhancing the war-fighting capabilities of its **fighters, transport aircraft and helicopters**.
 - The DAC also cleared procurement of **Ground-Based Multi-Purpose Jammers (GBMPJ)**, which provide effective jamming capability against radars, and the installation of the **Defence Forces Secure Access Card (DEFSAC)** system — replacing paper-based identity cards, passes and permits with interoperable **Radio Frequency Identification (RFI)-based smart cards**.

Defence Acquisition Council (DAC)

- ❖ The **highest decision-making body** for **capital defence procurements** in India, responsible for granting in-principle approvals and Acceptance of Necessity for major acquisitions.
- ❖ **Set up** following recommendations of the **Group of Ministers on Reforming the National Security System**.
- ❖ **Chairman:** Raksha Mantri (Defence Minister). **Member Secretary:** Deputy Chief of Defence Staff (PP&FD).
- ❖ **Members:** Raksha Rajya Mantris, Chief of Defence Staff, Chiefs of Army, Navy & Air Force; Defence Secretary; Secretaries of Defence Production, Defence R&D and Defence Finance.

2. The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA)

GS 2

- The **CCPA** has intensified regulatory action against food companies for using **misleading “100%” marketing claims**.
- It is the **apex regulatory body** established to regulate matters relating to violation of consumer rights, **unfair trade practices**, and **false or misleading advertisements** that are prejudicial to public and consumer interest.
- **Established:** Constituted in **July 2020** under **Section 10(1) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019**.
- **Aim:** To protect, promote and enforce the rights of consumers as a **collective class** — preventing exploitative commercial conduct and ensuring marketplace integrity.



CCPA — apex consumer-rights regulator.

Powers & Functions of the CCPA

- ❖ **Suo Motu Inquiries:** Broad investigative powers to inquire into consumer-rights violations — suo motu, on complaints, or on Central Government directions — backed by a dedicated **Director-General-led Investigation Wing**.
- ❖ **Penalties for Misleading Ads:** Under **Section 21**, can order modification/withdrawal of false advertisements and impose financial penalties on **manufacturers, traders and endorsers**.
- ❖ **Product Recalls & Refunds:** Can direct recall of dangerous/hazardous/unsafe goods, mandate withdrawal of deficient services, and order **full refunds** to consumers.
- ❖ **Guidelines & Safety Alerts:** Issues binding guidelines to curb deceptive practices (**dark patterns, surrogate advertising, hidden service charges**) and issues consumer safety notices.



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3. India's Opportunity to Put BRICS Back Together

GS 2

- BRICS has strayed far from where it started. The **18th BRICS Summit** (New Delhi, **September 12-13, 2026**) gives India a huge opportunity

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to bring coherence back to the expanded group and give it direction as an effective body shaping global events.

- BRICS was formed to give a greater voice to **Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa** in global governance — particularly financial and economic institutions — and to aim for a **more equitable multilateral order**. India was initially an enthusiastic participant, seeing it as a vehicle for genuine reform.

- The first summit hosted by India (the 4th BRICS summit, **2012**) focused on **“Global Stability, Security and Prosperity.”** The Indian presidency helped lead to the **New Development Bank (BRICS Bank)** and the integration of a **counter-terrorism architecture** into BRICS’ work.
- **The China challenge:** China saw BRICS as a **counterpoise to Western domination**. It needed a group of emerging economies (nearly **20% of world GDP in 2010**) to amplify its ambitions, using **BRICS-Plus** and **BRICS Outreach** to court the **Global South** and consolidate a second pole in a future bipolar world.
- India, Brazil and South Africa realised Chinese support for reform of multilateral institutions was **selective**. India thus had both a reform agenda and the task of being a **counterweight** to China’s designs.
- India’s chairship theme has **four pillars** — **Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability** — drawing on PM Modi’s vision of **“Humanity First”** and a **“people-centric”** approach.
- There was a real danger the **principle of consensus** would be bypassed, pushing BRICS toward the **SCO** model where the majority bulldozes its views. India and Brazil resisted; the **2019 Brasilia Summit** was held with just the five original members.
- **Expansion tests cohesion:** BRICS now has **11 members** after adding **Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Indonesia**. It should not go the way of **SAARC**, paralysed by bilateral disputes.

India's opportunity to put BRICS back together

BRICS has strayed quite far from where it started. To be held this weekend (September 12-13, 2020) the 10th BRICS Summit, in New Delhi, gives India a huge opportunity to bring coherence back to the expanded group and give it direction if it is to be an effective body in shaping global events.

BRICS was formed to give a greater voice to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the emerging economies, in global governance and institutions, particularly financial and economic institutions, and to aim for a more equitable multilateral order. India was initially an enthusiastic participant, seeing the group as a vehicle for genuine reform of multilateral institutions. The first summit hosted by India (the fourth BRICS summit), in 2012, focused on the theme “Global Stability, Security and Prosperity,” tacitly reflecting a much broader geopolitical canvas. The Indian presidency helped lead to the establishment of the BRICS Bank, the New Development Bank. Other Indian initiatives followed, including the integration of a counter-terrorism architecture into BRICS’ work.

The emergence of the China challenge
However, China had other plans. At the time, even if it was not anti-West, China saw BRICS as a counterpoise to western domination — a view that India also initially shared in the context of reform. More importantly, China needed a group such as BRICS, consisting of emerging economies, to amplify its global ambitions, given that BRICS countries accounted for nearly 20% of world GDP in 2010. Further, China wanted to use BRICS mechanisms such as BRICS-Plus and BRICS Outreach to reach out to the Global South and consolidate their profile as a second pole in a future bipolar world.

Suddenly, India not only had a reform agenda on its hands but also had to be a counterweight to China’s larger designs on BRICS. India, Brazil and South Africa soon realised that Chinese support for the reform of multilateral institutions was selective. For example, China resisted supporting the three countries’ bid for permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council. Consequently, India started focusing more on BRICS consolidation and intra-BRICS matters to resist Chinese grandstanding. In fact, this year’s theme for India’s chairship has four pillars — Resilience, Innovation, Cooperation and Sustainability — and draws on Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vision of “Humanity First” and a “people-centric” approach to BRICS cooperation. In addition, there was a real danger that the principle of consensus, which had kept BRICS a cohesive group, would be bypassed and that BRICS would go the way of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where the majority can bulldoze their views through. India and Brazil resisted these efforts. The 2019 BRICS Summit in Brasilia was held without any other invited guest countries — just the five original members. But in 2020, under the Russian presidency, probably the first non-consensus chair’s statement on COVID-19 was issued.



I.S. Tirumurti
Chair, Steering Committee, Dorian Centre for International Relations, former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations, New York, and former Secretary of BRICS

bypassing the sacred principle of consensus. If non-consensus documents are increasingly emerging, as we saw at the BRICS Foreign Ministers’ meeting in May 2020 in New Delhi due to the inability of the new members to agree, then BRICS will cease to be effective.

Membership expansion tests BRICS cohesion
But then, it was difficult to resist the Chinese juggernaut. China pushed for the expansion of the New Development Bank and then for the expansion of BRICS itself. India resisted, as did Brazil. But that was not to be, and BRICS now has 11 members, following the addition of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia, as well as 10 partner countries.

India’s sagacity has now been vindicated, as the new members of BRICS have started fighting among themselves. With the original five have their differences, some of them serious, they know how to address them with maturity for the greater good of the group. The new members do not have any such compunctions and are subverting BRICS through their bilateral conflicts. BRICS should not go the way of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), with bilateral disputes paralyzing the group.

In addition, the basic over the direction BRICS should take has begun. India has tried to keep BRICS as a “non-West” group, as opposed to the increasing pressure from some members to turn BRICS into an anti-West group. An anti-West slant has become increasingly difficult to avoid, with China competing with the United States for global leadership. Russia at war with Ukraine with the full backing of Europe, and Iran being bombarded by the U.S. and Israel. It becomes even harder to maintain the “non-West” line when Brazil and India have been subjected to punitive tariffs by U.S. President Donald Trump, and the U.S. Congress is considering legislation that would give the President the power to levy punitive tariffs on countries importing Russian oil. The question being asked is how can India keep BRICS from becoming anti-West at a time when the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, the U.S.) is being enunciated by the U.S., India-U.S. relations are under great pressure, Pakistan is being courted by the U.S. at India’s expense, and global institutions are being made dysfunctional by the West? The more erratic the U.S. is vis-à-vis BRICS, the greater the chances of BRICS going in the wrong direction. Fortunately, India’s effort to prevent an anti-western drift is shared by many other BRICS members, since they too have much to gain by engaging with multiple actors from different camps in their national interest. They want change, but not geopolitical realignment with China and Russia. This is the direction of BRICS’s future.

But there is a much larger question. Both the U.S. and China are enunciating parallel visions of the world and playing by their own rules, rather than internationally negotiated ones. Both are, in effect, challenging existing international norms and global institutions and setting up parallel structures and standards in emerging areas such as Artificial Intelligence, digital and internet governance, data ownership, state control, 5G/6G and telecom, satellite navigation, and electric vehicles. Neither is looking for reform of existing institutions. China has just set up a new World AI Cooperation Organisation in Shanghai, in addition to other parallel initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative and the Digital Silk Road, which challenge the Bretton Woods institutions and their governance and financing models. They see BRICS as one of the vehicles through which to pursue their broader goals. For example, the push for the digitalization through the establishment of a parallel BRICS currency is receiving a lukewarm response, since many members are uncomfortable with a renminbi-dominated currency and would prefer merely interlinking payment systems, central bank digital currencies and national-currency transactions. Nevertheless, after the success of its pilot project, China is formally launching its ambitious mBridge, an alternative financial payment system. The last thing India wants is an alternative Bretton Woods system dominated by China.

India can course correct BRICS
The 2020 Summit in Delhi provides an opportunity for course correction, and India has worked hard to persuade the new members to overcome their political differences. In a world in flux, India has to be a force for the good through which to pursue their broader goals. For example, the push for the digitalization through the establishment of a parallel BRICS currency is receiving a lukewarm response, since many members are uncomfortable with a renminbi-dominated currency and would prefer merely interlinking payment systems, central bank digital currencies and national-currency transactions. Nevertheless, after the success of its pilot project, China is formally launching its ambitious mBridge, an alternative financial payment system. The last thing India wants is an alternative Bretton Woods system dominated by China.

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The Delhi summit offers India a chance to restore BRICS’s original purpose.

- India has tried to keep BRICS a **“non-West”** group rather than an **anti-West** one — increasingly difficult with China competing with the U.S., Russia at war in Ukraine, and Iran being bombarded by the U.S. and Israel.
- As BRICS’ profile rises and more countries seek to join, India should **proactively embrace the BRICS reform agenda** to serve its larger interest of **multi-alignment** — or others will take BRICS in a different direction.

4. Ground Control — ISRO & Space Technology for Development

GS 3

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Ground Control

ISRO must focus on space technology as a tool for development

The irony was evident: on the day the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) had its greatest success of the year — the launch of its first geosynchronous imaging satellite (EOS-05) on a temperamental GSLV — its employee organisations demanded clarity on its long-term plans. But this grievance was long in the making. Since the Indian Space Policy of April 2023, the message has been clear that ISRO would, one day in the unspecified future, stop making commercial satellites and launch rockets. Clearly inspired by NASA, it expects to focus on ambitious exploratory missions and, literally, moonshots. Why would a space agency ramping up space missions upset a section of employees? This is not the paradox it presents. The letter, co-signed by nine employee associations, and addressed to the chairman, seeks clarity on staff-strength, recruitment and the outsourcing of core functions. ISRO says that it will “not be privatised or reduced”; IN-SPACE, set up to facilitate private participation, says the agency will “not be diminished”, only that the industry’s role must grow. Both are silent on the core concern — potential job losses. This brings up an underlying tension that ISRO must deal with: does its vision of India’s space sector align with its founding principles, of not being enamoured of space races and being laser-focused on space technology as a tool for social development? Or is the image of power, where India is one of a handful of

as a tool for social development? Or is the image of power, where India is one of a handful of space-faring countries with a mushrooming of ‘space startups’, now the bedrock of that vision?

With a budget 16 times the Department of Space’s — \$24.4 billion against ₹13,705 crore — NASA too has scaled back since the 1960s: from 0.7% of American GDP in 1966 to 0.1% now, and from 36,000 civil servants at Apollo’s peak to about 14,000 today. Unlike NASA, which in its early years designed and made every nut and bolt, ISRO has always had a manufacturing relationship with the private sector (Walchandnagar, L&T). What is different is that the buzz is not about established companies building on experience but new entrants with fleeting foreign capital, most interested in satellite data as a service. No sector can hope to be static; survival can mean significant changes to how it operates. There is yet no serious reckoning with the might of China’s space programme. If India’s space sector in 2035 is to be known as a source of export earnings, a nucleus of value-added services that brings in jobs and absorbs skilled labour, then hard choices taken today may be worth it. But jumping onto a bandwagon of space — as fuel for the science fiction fantasy of billionaires and colonial notions of conquest, to align with some misplaced notion of an ‘exclusive’ club — is foolhardy. ISRO must have a transparent policy that spells this out.

“Ground Control”: ISRO must focus on space technology as a tool for development.

will **“not be diminished”** — only that industry’s role must grow. Both are silent on the core concern: **potential job losses**.

Since the **Indian Space Policy of April 2023**, the message has been clear: **ISRO** would one day stop making commercial satellites and launch rockets, and — inspired by NASA — focus on **ambitious exploratory missions and moonshots**.

A letter co-signed by nine employee associations, addressed to the chairman, sought clarity on **staff-strength, recruitment and outsourcing of core functions**. ISRO says it will **“not be privatised or reduced”**; IN-SPACE says the agency

- NASA — with a budget **16 times** the Department of Space (**\$24.4 billion vs ₹13,705 crore**) — has scaled back since the 1960s: from **0.7% of U.S. GDP in 1966 to 0.1% now**, and from **36,000 civil servants** at Apollo’s peak to about **14,000 today**.
- Unlike NASA (which once made every nut and bolt), ISRO has always had a **manufacturing relationship with the private sector** (Walchandnagar, L&T). What is different now is the **buzz around new entrants with fleeting foreign capital**, most interested in **satellite data as a service**.
- No sector can be static; survival means change. There is yet **no serious reckoning with the might of China’s space programme**. If India’s space sector in **2035** is to be a source of **export earnings** and value-added services that create jobs and absorb skilled labour, hard choices taken today may be worth it.

Enabling Bodies — IN-SPACe & NSIL

- ❖ **IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion & Authorisation Centre):** a **single-window clearance and authorisation agency** for space launches, launch-pad set-up, buying/selling satellites and disseminating high-resolution data. It also shares technologies, products, processes and best practices with **Non-Government Entities (NGEs, incl. private firms)** and government companies.
- ❖ **New Space India Limited (NSIL):** responsible for **commercialising space technologies and platforms** created through public expenditure — and for manufacturing, leasing or procuring space components, technologies, platforms and other assets from the private/public sector.



5. U.S. Tariffs Are Not What Is Holding Back Indian Research

GS 2 / 3

THE HINDU · PAGE 8 · ARINDAM GOSWAMI

U.S. tariffs are not what is holding back Indian research

Tariff wars with the United States have ebbed and flowed for years. After months of escalation, Washington and New Delhi stepped back a few months ago. The penalty tied to India's purchases of Russian oil went, the reciprocal tariff was cut, and medicines and most electronics stayed exempt. Exporters treated it as relief. But an old worry in policy circles is worth testing: that high American tariffs will choke research in the industries that they touch, and set back India's move into higher-value production.

The reality

That worry rests on a mistaken assumption that the sectors exposed to American tariffs are the sectors where India does its research.

Consider the impact of the 2019 loss of duty-free access and the 2025 tariff hit on sectors such as organic chemicals, plastics, base metals, machinery, auto components, and leather. Now consider how much these industries do in research. Indian metals firms spend about 0.4% of sales on R&D, compared with a global average of nearly 1.6%. Auto and parts makers spend a little over 2%, versus a global average of 5%, while electrical equipment firms spend less than 2%, against the same 5% global benchmark. These industries were research-thin long before any tariff arrived. The sectors most exposed to trade shocks and the sectors that invest in research barely overlap. India's research effort is concentrated in pharmaceuticals and automobiles, and almost everything else does little. A tariff on chemicals or steel cannot cut research spending that was never there.

This also takes the air out of the claim that tariffs are holding back Indian innovation. Patenting and research spending in the exposed sectors show no clear break during the tariff years that can be attributed to the duties. These sectors had been on a low-research path well



Arindam Goswami

Research Analyst at the Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru

The sectors most exposed to trade shocks barely overlap with those that invest in research

before 2018 and stayed on it. The tariffs are a symptom of a trading relationship under strain.

Research is a fixed and risky investment that pays off only when a product sells at scale. A firm facing a smaller export market can retreat to cheaper, undifferentiated goods, or invest in products that a tariff cannot easily replace. Indian industry has chosen the first path for decades, and a tariff does not change that habit.

Where tariffs do matter is narrow. Of the two sectors that account for most of India's research, pharmaceuticals secured an exemption in the February deal, while automobiles did not. The 25% U.S. duty on auto parts remains, and metal tariffs raise input costs for downstream engineering and component firms. So, the live risk to India's research base runs through autos — not the broad manufacturing economy that fills the headlines.

The real problem

The problem to worry about predates this trade fight and will outlast it. India spends a very small percentage of its output on research, a figure that remains well below that of the countries it wants to compete with. The private industry share is also well below the global leaders. What industry does spend tends to go toward routine development and testing rather than research that creates new products. By one comparison, Nvidia alone spends nearly as much on research as all of Indian industry combined.

This is the backdrop for the government's ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development and Innovation scheme, launched late last year. It offers long-tenure, low-cost capital to firms in sunrise and strategic areas such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technology and biotechnology. The ambition is overdue. But the money is pointed at the frontier, while the industries most exposed to trade shocks

and most in need of moving up the value chain are older sectors that the scheme is not designed for. A chemicals or auto-parts maker that has never run a research programme will not start now because of a loan aimed at deep tech.

That is the opportunity the tariff episode offers. A trade shock tells an exposed industry that its products are vulnerable. The useful response is to move those firms into differentiated products that a tariff cannot easily undercut, which means investing in research. Incentives can be weighted towards core research rather than routine testing and aimed at exposed sectors instead of being spread thin. The higher costs that metal tariffs cause on downstream engineering firms can be offset for those that keep up research spending. Pharmaceuticals and autos also deserve protection in any further negotiations, because tariffs in these sectors can affect innovation. Sheltering an exposed industry without asking anything in return preserves low-value production. Support should be tied to research effort, so that relief rebuilds capability rather than freezing the status quo.

Time to measure research better

None of this works without better measurement. India's official research figures arrive years late and undercount private spending. A country that cannot see where its research is going cannot steer it. A faster, firm-level record linking research spending to exports would let policymakers act before the damage shows.

The tariff truce gives India time. The tariffs were never the main thing holding back Indian research. The task is to fix what is: an economy whose exposed industries do too little research, while its research strength is in a few sectors that could be vulnerable to the next trade shock.

The views expressed are personal

The sectors most exposed to trade shocks barely overlap with those that invest in research.

- The penalty tied to India's purchases of **Russian oil** went, the reciprocal tariff was cut, and **medicines and most electronics stayed exempt**. A

lingering worry is that high American tariffs will choke research in the industries they touch.

- That worry rests on a **mistaken assumption**: that the sectors exposed to American tariffs are the sectors where India does its research.
- Consider the 2019 loss of duty-free access and the 2025 tariff hit on **organic chemicals, plastics, base metals, machinery, auto components and leather**. These are **research-thin** sectors: Indian metals firms spend about **0.4% of sales on R&D** (global average ~1.6%); auto and parts makers a little over **2%** (global ~5%); electrical equipment firms less than **2%** (global ~5%). They were research-thin **long before any tariff arrived**.
- This deflates the claim that tariffs are holding back Indian innovation — patenting and research spending in the exposed sectors show **no clear break** during the tariff years attributable to the duties. These sectors were on a low-research path well before 2018 and stayed on it. Tariffs are a **symptom of a trading relationship under strain**.
- India's official research figures arrive **years late and undercount private spending**. A country that cannot see where its research is going cannot steer it. A faster, **firm-level record linking research spending to exports** would let policymakers act before the damage shows.
- The tariff truce gives India time. The task is to fix what **is**: an economy whose exposed industries do **too little research**, while its research strength sits in a few sectors that could be **vulnerable to the next trade shock**.

6. Teen Agency Beyond Meta's Reckoning

GS 3

- Meta's **\$17.1 billion settlement** with U.S. States is making headlines as a reckoning over **addictive platform design**. Yet little is said about how **teen agency** emerges in a media environment built to predict the most tempting feed. **THE HINDU · PAGE 9 · NIKHILA NATARAJAN**
- Debates on youth and technology have historically focused on **media effects** — what teens do with media, or what media does to teens. Nearly 100 years ago the **Payne Fund Studies** first examined the impact of movies on children; with every new

wave of technology, youth are cast as **passive, trapped or targeted**.

- This framing ignores how **adolescence itself** shapes media use. Teen media use fits a developmental-psychology framework: **a race car that can go very fast, but whose brakes are still being built** — creating both opportunities and risks.
- Across the **13-to-16 age group**, teens say short-form videos are **shrinking their attention spans**. They open an app for a quick distraction, only to be stuck for hours on **YouTube Shorts or TikTok**.
- **Peer dynamics** drive how teens move across apps, with platform design acting as an **amplifier**. On **Instagram and Snapchat**, where popularity is quantified through public likes and follower counts, every interaction becomes a **scoreboard**.
- For an adolescent **hyper-sensitive to social inclusion and exclusion**, this design is incredibly stressful — a concern borne out by early evidence from **Australia's social media ban**.

Teen agency beyond Meta's reckoning

Meryl is 13. She describes YouTube Shorts as "so addicting"; holding her attention "just long enough" that she loses track of everything else. She is one of dozens of teens who have participated in the research at the Teens, Family, and Technology Lab at Rutgers University. While the 13-year-old's language is not unusual, teen voices are still largely missing from broader debates about social media use.

Meta's \$17.1 billion settlement with U.S. States is making headlines as a reckoning over addictive platform design. However, not much has been said about how teen agency emerges in a media environment built to predict the most tempting feed. Debates about youth and technology have historically focused on media effects: either what teens do with media, or what media does to teens. Nearly 100 years ago, the Payne Fund Studies marked the first systematic exploration of this dynamic, examining the impact of movies on children. With every new wave of technology, the storyline persists. Youth audiences are typically spoken for — cast as passive, trapped or targeted by new tech.

This framing misses the point. It ignores how the experience of adolescence itself shapes media use, and why certain types of media design captivate teens. Teens' media use resonates with a powerful framework from developmental psychology: a race car that can go very fast, but whose brakes are still being built. That speed creates both opportunities and risks. Teens are primed to learn



Nikhila Natarajan
Co-founder of the Teens, Family, and Technology Lab at Rutgers University

more rapidly than at any other stage of development. Yet that power makes teens more vulnerable to negative stimuli. This heightened sensitivity exists alongside a crucial asymmetry: their ability to plan and prioritise (what to do first, what next) develops gradually, even as teens exhibit heightened sensitivity to "rewards" (easily persuaded by things that are pleasing). In today's media, these rewards arrive via personalised recommendations. When short-form video loops shrink the gap between media experiences to 15 or 30 seconds, the onus of decision-making becomes the young person's problem at a time when the braking system is still getting built.

Whistleblowers, Silicon Valley defectors, and documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* have laid bare how platform design choices erode human agency. What remains absent from public commentary is what teens' vocabularies reveal about their developmental needs. Across the 13-to-16 age group, teens say that short-form videos are shrinking their attention spans. But their reflections point to a persistent entry point: boredom.

Boredom, peer dynamics
Boredom is a developmental driver. As adolescents shift their orientation toward peers and crave greater independence, they continue to live under adult restrictions. They then open an app seeking a quick distraction, only to find themselves stuck for hours on platforms such as YouTube Shorts or TikTok.

Peer dynamics drive how teens move across different apps, with platform design acting as an amplifier. On platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, where popularity is quantified

through public likes and follower counts, every interaction gets a scoreboard. For an adolescent hyper-sensitive to social inclusion and exclusion, this design is incredibly stressful. Early evidence from Australia's social media ban bears this out. Two systematic surveys by Bursztnyn and colleagues found that Australian teens report needing roughly 70% of their peers to quit social media before they're willing to quit themselves.

Research at the Teens, Family, and Technology Lab shows that adolescents navigate an average of 7 to 12 different platforms daily. Instagram and Facebook exist within a competitive teen media inventory alongside Snapchat, YouTube, Pinterest, Discord, Spotify, and more. Here, teens' recalibration of media practices, and parents' concerns for their children's wellbeing act as powerful competitive forces.

While Meta and other platforms chase top-line revenues, some teens are crafting micro-frictions to push back. Pinterest is a big hit with girls who want to escape performative sociality; music streaming competes with short-form video apps; and some teens are deleting apps intermittently. These are behavioural signatures of adolescent metacognition — literally, thinking about thinking. Yet AI-fuelled media design continues to operate at the limits of adolescent development, exacerbating tensions between the intentional and accidental. Understanding the contradictions of adolescent development invites us to reconsider teen media use in a new light — as a striving for agency.

Peer dynamics drive how teens move across apps, with platform design as an amplifier.



VEDANTA · Practice Zone

MAINS + PRELIMS

Mains Practice Questions

Q1 The Defence Acquisition Council's clearance of proposals worth ₹1.10 lakh crore, with 98% sourced from Indian industry, reflects the convergence of national security and *Atmanirbharta*. Discuss how indigenous defence procurement strengthens both India's war-fighting capability and its defence industrial base. **(250 words, 15 marks)**

Link: DAC, AoN, Sarvatra Bridge (DRDO-BEML), Arudhra radars, indigenous MGTs, DEFSAC — GS-3 (Defence & Security) / GS-2 (Government policies).

Q2 “India’s challenge in BRICS is to keep it a ‘non-West’ rather than an ‘anti-West’ grouping.” In light of BRICS expansion and the 2026 New Delhi Summit, examine how India can steer the reform agenda to advance its strategy of multi-alignment. **(250 words, 15 marks)**

Link: BRICS expansion to 11, consensus vs SCO/SAARC model, four pillars of India’s chairship, “Humanity First” — GS-2 (International Relations).

♦ Prelims MCQs

1. The Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) is chaired by which of the following?

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| (a) National Security Advisor | (b) Chief of Defence Staff |
| (c) Raksha Mantri (Defence Minister) | (d) Defence Secretary |

2. Consider the following about the Sarvatra Bridging System:

1. It is designed by the R&D Establishment (Engineers) of DRDO. 2. It provides up to 75 metres of bridge length using five 15-metre spans. 3. The spans are made of aluminium alloy.

Which are correct?

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| (a) 1 and 2 only | (b) 2 and 3 only |
| (c) 1 and 3 only | (d) 1, 2 and 3 |

3. The Arudhra radars, recently cleared by the DAC, are intended primarily to:

- | | |
|---|---|
| (a) Replace air route surveillance radars at naval air stations | (b) Provide ballistic-missile early warning |
| (c) Guide the S-400 system | (d) Serve as airborne fire-control radars |

4. The DEFSAC system approved by the DAC is best described as:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (a) A ground-based multi-purpose jammer | (b) An RFI-based secure access smart-card system |
| (c) A marine gas turbine programme | (d) A CBRN reconnaissance vehicle |

5. The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) was constituted under which provision?

- | | |
|--|---|
| (a) Section 10(1), Consumer Protection Act, 2019 | (b) Section 21, Consumer Protection Act, 1986 |
| (c) Article 21 of the Constitution | (d) FSSAI Act, 2006 |

6. Under which section can the CCPA order modification/withdrawal of false advertisements and penalise endorsers?

- (a) Section 5
- (b) Section 12
- (c) Section 21
- (d) Section 34

7. The 18th BRICS Summit (2026) is being hosted by which country, and BRICS currently has how many members?

- (a) China; 10 members
- (b) India; 11 members
- (c) Brazil; 9 members
- (d) Russia; 11 members

8. Which of the following joined BRICS in its recent expansion?

1. Egypt 2. Indonesia 3. Saudi Arabia 4. Argentina

- (a) 1, 2 and 3 only
- (b) 1, 3 and 4 only
- (c) 2 and 4 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

9. In the context of India's space sector, IN-SPACe functions primarily as:

- (a) The commercial arm marketing ISRO technologies
- (b) A single-window clearance & authorisation agency
- (c) A DRDO missile-development body
- (d) A regulator of telecom spectrum

10. As per the editorial on Indian research, which pairing is correct regarding R&D spend (as % of sales)?

- (a) Indian metals ~0.4% vs global ~1.6%
- (b) Indian metals ~5% vs global ~2%
- (c) Indian autos ~10% vs global ~2%
- (d) Indian electrical ~8% vs global ~1%

✓ ANSWER KEY

- | | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------|
| 1 → (c) | 2 → (d) | 3 → (a) | 4 → (b) | 5 → (a) |
| 6 → (c) | 7 → (b) | 8 → (a) | 9 → (b) | 10 → (a) |