

Q.1) "The India–UK Free Trade Agreement marks a new chapter in post-Brexit strategic realignment." Analyze the significance of this deal for both nations. (150 words, 10 marks)

Introduction

The proposed India–UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) represents a pivotal step in redefining bilateral ties post-Brexit. It seeks to deepen economic, strategic, and geopolitical cooperation, moving the relationship from symbolism to substantive mutual gains.

Body

Major Features of the Proposed Deal

1. **Tariff reduction:** slashes duties on priority goods such as automobiles, Scotch whisky, textiles, and pharmaceuticals.
2. **Easing of services trade:** opens up financial, legal, and digital services to enhance business linkages.
3. **Mobility and work visa commitments:** enables smoother professional and student movement aligned with demographic needs.
4. **Sustainability and labour standards:** mandates chapters on environment, labour rights, and gender equity to ensure ethical trade.
5. **Investment protection mechanisms:** institutes dispute resolution frameworks to foster investor confidence and robust economic ties.

Significance for India: Economic and Strategic Gains

1. **Boost to exports and services trade:** India can access tariff concessions in key sectors. Example: **Textiles and IT** — core components of India's **\$14.5 billion** exports to the UK in 2024–25 — will benefit from reduced barriers.
2. **Attracting investment and technology:** UK's strengths in fintech and green tech complement India's developmental ambitions. Example: With UK FDI in India now above **\$34 billion**, the FTA is poised to increase capital in renewables and digital infrastructure.
3. **Strategic balancing in the Indo-Pacific:** strengthens India's global posture amid rising regional tensions. Example: Closer coordination in **Indo-Pacific summits** and naval exercises reflects this deeper alignment.

Significance for the UK: Post-Brexit Outreach and Diversification

1. **Expanding non-EU trade portfolio:** India's rising 2024–25 trade volume of **\$21.34 billion** aids diversification. Example: Reduced tariffs promise growth in UK exports of vehicles, whisky, and legal services.
2. **Access to skilled workforce:** India's STEM talent can help fill gaps in the UK economy. Example: Recent student-friendly measures aim to reverse a **40% decline** in Indian students due to visa restrictions.
3. **Geopolitical partnership in the Global South:** improves the UK's standing in multilateral forums. Example: Joint advocacy at **WTO** and during climate negotiations reflects shared global agendas.

Mutual Gains: Deepening the Strategic and Cultural Connect

1. **Sustainable development and climate action:** both nations aim to co-lead on renewable energy and climate finance. Example: UK support via Climate Finance Leadership Initiative aids India's solar and infrastructure targets.
2. **Cultural and educational collaboration:** the Indian diaspora and student mobility strengthen bonds. Example: With nearly 99,000 Indian students in the UK in 2025, the deal supports further academic integration.
3. **Global institution reform and multilateralism:** shared commitment to a rules-based international order. Example: Cooperative announcements at recent UNSC and WTO forums underline this alignment.

Challenges and Considerations

1. **Sticking points in negotiation:** unresolved areas include agriculture, IP rights, and rules of origin, slowing progress.
2. **Visa and immigration friction:** domestic UK politics continues to complicate mobility clauses.
3. **Regulatory divergence and data norms:** aligning on digital trade remains a core challenge.

Way Forward

1. **Prioritise a balanced FTA:** adopt a phased, sector-specific approach to balance sensitivities and opportunities.
2. **Enhance institutional frameworks:** set up dedicated dialogues and regulatory committees for implementation.
3. **Invest in people-to-people ties:** boost cultural, student, and tourism exchanges to deepen engagement.
4. **Leverage technology cooperation:** partner on emerging tech in fintech, cybersecurity, and green innovation.

Conclusion

The India–UK FTA is more than a trade deal—it's a **strategic alignment of two democracies** recalibrating in a post-Brexit world. If implemented well, it could significantly reshape bilateral and global cooperation.

Q.2) "The 2025 cross-border strikes between India and Pakistan underscore the fragility of peace in South Asia, while also reaffirming the centrality of diplomacy in managing regional crises." Discuss in the context of recent developments. (150 words, 10 marks)

Introduction

The 2025 India–Pakistan escalation followed a terror attack in Kashmir, triggering strong but restrained Indian counterstrikes and swift diplomatic outreach. The episode reaffirmed **India's strategic maturity** and the **role of diplomacy** in preserving regional stability.

Body

Major Developments and Diplomatic Dynamics

1. **Terror trigger and escalation:** The April 22 Pahalgam attack killed 26 civilians. India launched **Operation Sindoor** targeting terror camps with precision, reinforcing its counterterror stance.
2. **Cross-border hostilities:** Pakistan escalated with drone sorties and shelling; India responded with calibrated strikes avoiding civilian harm.
3. **DGMO hotline diplomacy:** In May 2025, DGMOs agreed on restraint. India took the initiative to activate hotlines and propose disengagement.
4. **India's position on conflict resolution:** India reaffirmed that all issues with Pakistan must be addressed bilaterally, emphasizing that the **2003 ceasefire understanding** remains the primary framework for maintaining peace along the Line of Control.

Fragility of Peace in South Asia

1. **Trust deficit:** Frequent violations of ceasefire and use of proxies have eroded mutual trust, keeping the Line of Control volatile.
2. **Lack of institutional mechanisms:** Unlike Indo-China ties, India–Pakistan lack stable crisis de-escalation platforms, making responses ad hoc and risk-prone.
3. **Terror infrastructure in Pakistan:** India has consistently highlighted the continued sheltering of terror groups like **LeT and JeM** in Pakistan as root causes of instability.
4. **Domestic compulsions in Pakistan:** Shifts in Pakistan's civil–military balance often influence its India policy, derailing peace overtures with sudden escalations.

Centrality of Diplomacy in Crisis Management

1. **Swift diplomatic communication:** Despite tensions, diplomatic backchannels helped prevent miscalculation. India used direct communication and third-party mediation judiciously.
2. **Multilateral pressure on terror:** India rallied support through UNSC members to isolate Pakistan diplomatically over its inaction against terror networks.
3. **Respect for ceasefire agreement:** The **2003 ceasefire reaffirmation** in **2021** provided a baseline, and both sides have shown willingness to avoid full-scale conflict.
4. **Backchannel talks:** Though informal, alleged UAE-mediated backchannels may have reportedly facilitated mutual pullback, reaffirming diplomacy's quiet strength.

Way Forward

1. **Sustained diplomatic dialogue:** India must continue advocating for bilateral diplomacy rooted in zero tolerance for terror, without external mediation on core issues.
2. **Monitoring and verification:** Reviving joint **DGMO-level oversight** of ceasefire violations can help prevent misreporting and accidental escalations.

3. **Regional anti-terror framework:** India can push for a SAARC or BIMSTEC-based anti-terror protocol to regionalize counterterror efforts and isolate Pakistan's use of proxies.
4. **Designating TRF as terror outfit:** India's recent move to proscribe **The Resistance Front** under UAPA sends a strong message about internal and cross-border terror links.

Conclusion

While the 2025 strikes exposed South Asia's security fault lines, **India's emphasis on calibrated response and diplomacy reflects its maturity.** Long-term peace will require dismantling terror infrastructure and investing in institutionalized conflict resolution channels.

Q.3) "BIMSTEC holds the promise of linking South and Southeast Asia, yet remains underutilized." Analyze India's role in revitalizing the grouping in the current geopolitical context. (150 words, 10 marks)

Introduction

Formed in **1997**, **BIMSTEC** was envisioned as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia. Amid shifting Indo-Pacific dynamics and SAARC's stagnation, India has increasingly turned to BIMSTEC to promote regional connectivity and economic integration.

Body

India's Strategic Interests in BIMSTEC

1. **Linking Act East and Neighbourhood First:** BIMSTEC helps operationalise India's twin regional strategies across the Bay of Bengal.
2. **SAARC stagnation:** With Pakistan blocking SAARC progress, India sees BIMSTEC as a functional alternative.
3. **Maritime importance:** Bay of Bengal is central to India's **Indo-Pacific vision**, trade security, and energy routes.
4. **Countering China's influence:** Through BIMSTEC, India offers an inclusive, regional alternative to China's BRI and expanding maritime footprint.
5. **Promoting sub-regionalism:** BIMSTEC allows focused cooperation with like-minded nations, bypassing bilateral bottlenecks.

India's Revitalization Efforts

1. **Institutional strengthening:** India led efforts to adopt the **BIMSTEC Charter (2022)**, giving legal and structural clarity.
2. **Financial and technical support:** India contributes to the BIMSTEC Secretariat and offers capacity-building across sectors.
3. **Sectoral leadership:** India leads in key areas—security, environment, counterterrorism, transport, and connectivity.
4. **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity:** India played a key role in drafting and funding infrastructure corridors under this plan.

5. **Digital and energy initiatives:** Push for regional energy grid, coastal shipping, and digital public infrastructure cooperation.
6. **Security cooperation:** Hosting annual National Security Chiefs' meetings to tackle terror, trafficking, and maritime crime.

Challenges Hindering BIMSTEC's Potential

1. **Slow implementation:** Project delays, weak funding, and bureaucratic inertia slow regional progress.
2. **Asymmetry among members:** Economic and institutional gaps create dependency on India and uneven participation.
3. **Overlapping forums:** Multiple regional platforms dilute focus and create coordination fatigue.
4. **Limited visibility:** BIMSTEC lacks public awareness, reducing stakeholder pressure for accountability.
5. **China factor:** Some Southeast Asian members balance India with China, reducing BIMSTEC's cohesion.

Way Forward

1. **Prioritise connectivity:** Fast-tracking the **Kaladan Project** and **India–Thailand–Myanmar Trilateral Highway** is vital.
2. **Strengthen institutional mechanisms:** Establish dispute resolution and project monitoring frameworks.
3. **Promote economic integration:** Push for **BIMSTEC FTA** and value chain development in trade, tourism, and services.
4. **Enhance visibility:** Public diplomacy and media outreach can build grassroots support for BIMSTEC projects.
5. **Align with Indo-Pacific strategy:** BIMSTEC should complement India's maritime diplomacy and regional security efforts.

Conclusion

BIMSTEC remains a **promising but underleveraged regional platform**. For India, revitalising it is not just strategic—it is essential. A proactive, sustained push can transform BIMSTEC into a cornerstone of India's regional leadership.

Q.4) "The evolution of the Quad from a maritime security grouping to a broader economic and strategic platform reflects changing Indo-Pacific realities. In this context, Critically assess the relevance of the Quad for India." (250 words, 15 marks)

Introduction

The Quad began in 2004 as a tsunami response mechanism and was formalised in **2007** under Japanese PM **Shinzo Abe's** leadership. It has since expanded beyond security into a strategic partnership aligned with India's regional goals.

Body

Quad's Evolution: From Security Grouping to Strategic Partnership

1. **Early military focus:** Initial emphasis was on maritime security and naval exercises like Malabar to counter regional threats.
2. **Formalisation in 2007:** Shinzo Abe championed Quad as a strategic vision among **four democracies**.
3. **Expansion post-COVID:** Shift towards economic cooperation, critical tech, health, and climate response marked a functional broadening.
4. **2023 Vision Statement:** 'Enduring Partners for the Indo-Pacific' formalised Quad's long-term, non-military strategic role.
5. **Working structure:** Six thematic working groups on climate, cyber, health, infrastructure, tech, and space guide its functional agenda.

Relevance of Quad for India

1. **Strategic alignment without alliance:** Informal nature of Quad preserves India's autonomy while enhancing security cooperation.
2. **Counter to China's influence:** Helps India respond to China's maritime assertiveness and infrastructure diplomacy in the region.
3. **Economic cooperation:** Initiatives like **QUIN, Ports of the Future**, and clean energy chains align with India's development goals.
4. **Technology & innovation:** Open RAN, semiconductor cooperation, and space data sharing benefit India's digital and scientific ecosystem.
5. **Disaster & health support:** Logistics network, cancer moonshot, and health partnerships build India's soft power and resilience.

Challenges Faced by Quad

1. **Lack of institutional structure:** No formal treaty or secretariat limits Quad's crisis response capability.
2. **Unequal burden-sharing:** Varying economic capacities and strategic commitment lead to implementation gaps.
3. **Conflicting external ties:** India's SCO, Russia ties and Australia's China trade ties create internal contradictions.
4. **Speculations of Asian NATO:** Security-heavy focus has triggered geopolitical concerns, especially from China.
5. **Diverging China strategies:** India sees China as a rival; others manage economic dependencies while opposing militarism.

India's Specific Concerns

1. **Geopolitical balancing:** Quad engagement may strain ties with Iran and ASEAN members wary of bloc politics.
2. **Indian Ocean vs Pacific focus:** India's primary interests lie in the Indian Ocean, while others tilt towards Pacific.
3. **Strategic ambiguity:** Lack of clear Indo-Pacific doctrine within India creates misalignment with Quad's broader goals.

Way Forward for Strengthening Quad

1. **Clear Indo-Pacific strategy:** Quad should harmonise economic and security goals to reassure regional players.
2. **Membership expansion:** Including Indonesia, Singapore can improve legitimacy and regional ownership.
3. **Strengthen India's maritime doctrine:** India needs a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy integrating naval, diplomatic, and economic dimensions.
4. **Institutionalise Quad coordination:** Establishing a Quad Secretariat or working group mechanism can streamline action and ensure continuity.

Conclusion

Quad's evolution into a strategic platform provides India with economic, technological, and geopolitical leverage. **As EAM Jaishankar aptly noted, "The Quad is for something, not against someone"**—underscoring its constructive and inclusive character.

Q.5) "India's engagement with China is increasingly defined by a mix of competition, conflict management, and selective cooperation." Discuss in light of recent diplomatic outreach and the evolving post-Galwan dynamics. (250 words, 15 marks)

Introduction

The **Galwan clash of 2020** marked a turning point in India–China relations, ending decades of fragile stability. Since then, India has adopted a **firm yet measured approach**, balancing national interest with regional and global responsibilities.

Body

Post-Galwan Shifts in India–China Relations

1. **Militarised border management:** India has strengthened its border infrastructure to ensure deterrence and quick response.
2. **De-escalation talks:** India has consistently pursued dialogue, leading 21 rounds of Corps Commander talks despite limited reciprocity.
3. **Changed political tone:** India now links overall ties to border peace, ensuring accountability and strategic clarity.
4. **Public and strategic trust deficit:** The loss in Galwan united Indian political will against unilateralism and coercion.

Elements of Competition

1. **Border infrastructure race:** India has accelerated LAC upgrades to ensure parity and readiness.
2. **Regional influence rivalry:** India promotes transparent, inclusive initiatives like **SAGAR and Act East** over China's opaque BRI model.
3. **Technology and trade concerns:** India's bans and scrutiny of Chinese tech align with national security and digital sovereignty.
4. **Strategic partnerships:** India's Quad engagement reflects proactive hedging, not bloc politics.

Conflict Management Mechanisms

1. **Military-level talks:** India remains committed to dialogue even under provocation, avoiding miscalculation.
2. **Working Mechanism for Consultation (WMCC):** Regular diplomatic talks reinforce India's preference for peaceful resolution.
3. **Border protocols:** India has upheld agreements despite their repeated testing by Chinese actions.
4. **Avoidance of escalation:** India's restraint reflects maturity and commitment to regional stability.

Selective Cooperation

1. **BRICS and SCO platforms:** India engages constructively without compromising on core concerns.
2. **Trade interdependence:** India remains cautious, aiming to balance trade asymmetry while maintaining supply chain continuity.
3. **Global South coordination:** India and China align selectively on multilateral issues like climate and development equity.
4. **Crisis diplomacy:** India has kept channels open even during crises, reflecting its status as a responsible power.

Way Forward

1. **Border status quo restoration:** India rightly insists on restoring the status quo ante for forward movement.
2. **Balanced economic ties:** India aims to diversify trade and reduce critical dependencies.
3. **Multilateral cooperation:** India remains open to issue-based cooperation where interests align.
4. **Strategic hedging:** India will continue building resilient coalitions while avoiding zero-sum strategies.

Conclusion

India's China policy today blends firmness with foresight. **As EAM Jaishankar noted, "The state of the border will determine the state of the relationship."** India seeks peace—but not at the cost of principle.

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