

GENERAL STUDIES II

Third Path Doctrine 2026: Carney, Middle Powers & UPSC PYQs

Faculty/Author: Faculty Editorial Board**Date:** 14 October 2026**Platform:** Civil Service Gurukul Research Wing**Reading Time:** 5 Mins

At the World Economic Forum in Davos on 20 January 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney outlined a new approach to international cooperation amid intensifying US–China rivalry and declining confidence in the rules-based international order. Often described as the Third Path or Carney Doctrine, this approach emphasises values-based realism, strategic autonomy, domestic resilience and issue-specific coalitions among middle powers. For India, the framework has strong connections with multi-alignment, the Quad, BRICS, G20, SCO and Global South diplomacy. This UPSC-focused article explains the doctrine, its opportunities and limitations, previous-year examination questions and priority topics for 2027.

CIVIL SERVICE GURUKUL

UPSC | INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS | GENERAL STUDIES

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE | OCTOBER 2026

How Canada's Mark Carney proposes a new model of values-based realism, strategic autonomy, flexible coalitions and networked multilateralism — and why it matters for India's foreign policy.

14 October 2026 | Civil Service Gurukul | GS II | UPSC Prelims & Mains

1. Why Is the Third Path Framework in the News?

At the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on 20 January 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney outlined a new foreign-policy approach for an increasingly fragmented world.

He argued that intensifying great-power rivalry, economic coercion and declining confidence in international rules require countries to reconsider how they cooperate.

His proposed alternative emphasises stronger cooperation among middle powers, domestic resilience and flexible partnerships based on shared interests.

Core Idea

Instead of becoming excessively dependent on one powerful country, middle powers can strengthen their bargaining position by cooperating with one another across trade, technology, security and global governance.

The proposal is often described as the Third Path or Carney Doctrine. It is a policy framework rather than a formal treaty or international organisation.

2. Why Is the Rules-Based International Order Under Pressure?

The rules-based international order refers to international institutions, legal principles and arrangements that seek to regulate relations among states.

Examples include the UN Charter, international trade rules, multilateral conventions and institutional dispute-settlement mechanisms.

Major Contemporary Challenges

- US-China strategic and technological competition.
- Economic coercion and trade restrictions.
- Geopolitical conflicts and rival security groupings.
- Weaknesses in international dispute settlement.
- Unequal influence within global institutions.
- Concentration of critical minerals and supply chains.
- Growing use of sanctions and export controls.

The Third Path attempts to address these vulnerabilities without requiring countries to form an exclusive new geopolitical bloc.

3. The Three Pillars of the Third Path

A. Values-Based Realism

Combine commitments to sovereignty, territorial integrity and human rights with practical recognition of divergent national interests and political systems.

B. Middle-Power Cooperation

Encourage influential countries outside the dominant great power rivalry to coordinate their policies and strengthen their collective negotiating leverage.

C. Variable Geometry

Create different coalitions for different problems rather than depending on a single permanent grouping for every issue.

D. Domestic Resilience

Strengthen domestic industry, critical infrastructure, energy security, technology and supply-chain resilience.

Important Attribution

In his Davos address, Carney specifically associated values-based realism with Finnish President Alexander Stubb.

Carney combined this idea with middle-power cooperation and variable geometry to articulate Canada's proposed approach.

4. What Is Values-Based Realism?

Values-based realism attempts to balance principled international conduct with practical national interests.

Value-Based Component

- Respect for sovereignty.
- Territorial integrity.
- Human rights.
- International legal principles.
- Peaceful international cooperation.

Realist Component

- Recognition of power differences.
- Acceptance of conflicting national interests.
- Incremental diplomatic progress.
- Cooperation with partners holding different political views.
- Practical pursuit of national security and economic resilience.

Illustration

A country may defend freedom of navigation and international law while maintaining commercial relations with states that do not share all of its political values.

5. What Is Variable Geometry in Diplomacy?

Variable geometry refers to changing the composition of international partnerships depending on the issue being addressed.

Different problems may require different participating countries, institutions and negotiating arrangements.

Common Problem ?

Relevant Partners ?

Issue-Specific Coalition ?

Collective Action

Illustrative Examples

Grouping	Major Focus	Nature
Quad	Indo-Pacific cooperation	Minilateral strategic partnership
G7	Coordination among advanced economies	Informal intergovernmental grouping
G20	International economic cooperation	Major multilateral economic forum

BRICS	Cooperation among major emerging economies and partners	Intergovernmental grouping
I2U2	India-Israel-UAE-US cooperation	Issue-focused minilateral grouping
IBSA	India-Brazil-South Africa cooperation	South-South trilateral forum

These institutions do not all have the same legal structure or membership model. They illustrate how different groups can cooperate on different issues.

6. Who Are Middle Powers?

Middle powers are states with meaningful economic, technological, military, diplomatic or normative influence that do not individually dominate the international system.

The term is analytical rather than a formally assigned international legal status.

Commonly Discussed Examples

- Canada.
- Australia.
- South Korea.
- Indonesia.
- Brazil.
- Several European countries.
- India, often also described as an emerging major power.

Characteristics

- Significant regional or international influence.
- Support for multilateral diplomacy.
- Ability to build coalitions.
- Specialised economic or technological strengths.
- Interest in maintaining foreign-policy flexibility.

UPSC Conceptual Trap

Permanent membership of the UN Security Council does not provide the sole definition of a great power.

Nor does the term middle power have a fixed list of officially recognised members. Country classifications differ across international-relations scholarship.

7. Third Path vs Traditional Non-Alignment

Dimension	Traditional Non-Alignment	Third Path Framework
Historical setting	Cold War bipolar rivalry	Contemporary great-power competition
Core concern	Autonomy from military blocs	Autonomy from asymmetric dependence and coercion
Cooperation	Non-Aligned Movement and related diplomacy	Flexible issue-specific coalitions
Economic emphasis	Development and decolonisation	Supply-chain resilience and diversification
Values	Sovereignty, anti-colonialism, peaceful coexistence	Principled and pragmatic diplomacy
Organisational status	NAM is an established movement	Third Path is a proposed policy approach

The two approaches share an emphasis on national independence, but emerged in different international contexts.

8. Relevance for India's Foreign Policy

A. Strategic Autonomy

India seeks the ability to take foreign-policy decisions based on national interests without automatic alignment with any major power bloc.

B. Multi-Alignment

India participates in several international forums with overlapping and sometimes competing geopolitical interests.

For example, India engages with the Quad, BRICS, G20, SCO and IBSA.

C. Global South Leadership

India seeks to amplify developing-country perspectives on development finance, climate justice, institutional reforms, food security and technology access.

D. Economic Resilience

Domestic manufacturing, diversified trade, digital infrastructure, critical minerals and technological development can reduce external vulnerability.

E. Reforming Global Governance

India supports reforms of international institutions, including more representative global decision-making structures.

India's Approach

India's existing multi-alignment strategy shares certain features with the Third Path. However, India has its own historical, geographical and strategic priorities and need not formally adopt Carney's framework.

9. How India Practises Flexible Coalition Diplomacy

Quad

India works with the US, Japan and Australia on Indo-Pacific issues and other areas of practical cooperation.

BRICS

India engages major emerging economies on development, global governance and international economic issues.

SCO

India participates in a Eurasian forum covering security, regional stability, connectivity and cooperation.

G20

India works with major economies on financial stability, development and global economic coordination.

Membership in multiple forums does not mean that India agrees with every position taken by every member country.

It can instead provide opportunities to pursue cooperation on selected issues while retaining diplomatic flexibility.

10. Potential Benefits of the Third Path

1. **Strategic autonomy:** Reduces overdependence on dominant powers.
2. **Collective bargaining:** Improves negotiating leverage for participating states.
3. **Supply-chain resilience:** Encourages diversification of trade and production.
4. **Institutional innovation:** Supports practical, issue-focused arrangements.
5. **Technology cooperation:** Opens opportunities for joint research and standards.
6. **Global governance:** May increase the influence of states outside dominant geopolitical blocs.

11. Limitations and Criticisms**Divergent Interests**

Middle powers may disagree on trade, security, human rights and regional disputes.

Dependence on Major Powers

Many states remain reliant on major powers for markets, defence technology or critical supply chains.

Institutional Fragmentation

Multiple small coalitions may weaken coordination and produce overlapping rules.

Implementation Gaps

Coalitions may lack adequate finance, leadership, formal enforcement or long-term political commitment.

Critical Mains Insight

The Third Path is most credible when supported by domestic capacity, reliable partnerships and practical institutions.

Without these foundations, flexible coalition diplomacy may produce many declarations but few measurable outcomes.

12. The Way Forward for Inclusive Multilateralism

- Reform the UN and international financial institutions.
- Strengthen representation of developing economies.
- Build issue-specific coalitions with clear objectives.
- Diversify critical supply chains and economic partnerships.
- Improve transparency and accountability in multilateral arrangements.
- Promote technology sharing and development finance.
- Use coalition diplomacy to complement rather than replace universal institutions.

A successful global governance architecture requires both flexible cooperation and institutions with broad international legitimacy.

13. Actual UPSC Previous Year Questions**Authenticity Note**

The following questions appeared in UPSC Civil Services examinations. The examination year and paper type are indicated for each.

They are related to multilateral groupings, India's foreign policy and strategic partnerships, rather than being direct questions about the 2026 Third Path speech.

UPSC PRELIMS 2022

PYQ 1. G20 Common Framework

With reference to the "G20 Common Framework", consider the following statements:

1. It is an initiative endorsed by the G20 together with the Paris Club.
2. It is an initiative to support Low Income Countries with unsustainable debt.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Correct Answer: (c) Both 1 and 2

The G20 Common Framework supports coordinated debt treatment for eligible low-income countries, with participation by the G20 and Paris Club.

Trend: UPSC tests the purpose and institutional composition of global initiatives.

UPSC PRELIMS 2023

PYQ 2. G20 Membership and Priorities

Consider the following statements about G20:

1. The G20 group was originally established as a platform for Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors to discuss international economic and financial issues.
2. Digital public infrastructure is one of India's G20 priorities.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only

- (c) Both 1 and 2
(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Correct Answer: (c) Both 1 and 2

The G20 originated as a forum for finance ministers and central bank governors in 1999. Digital public infrastructure was an important priority during India's G20 presidency.

Trend: UPSC combines institutional history with recent priorities.

UPSC MAINS 2021 | GS II

PYQ 3. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India?

Model Answer Framework

- Explain SCO's regional security objectives.
- Discuss counter-terrorism and Eurasian cooperation.
- Analyse India's strategic and diplomatic interests.
- Explain connectivity and regional security challenges.
- Discuss differences among member states.

Third Path Link: India's SCO participation illustrates cooperation within groupings whose members may have differing geopolitical interests.

UPSC MAINS 2022 | GS II

PYQ 4. I2U2 Grouping

How will I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE and USA) grouping transform India's position in global politics?

Model Answer Framework

- Explain I2U2 membership.
- Discuss economic and technological cooperation.

- Highlight food security and infrastructure investments.
- Analyse India's relations with West Asian partners.
- Discuss opportunities and limitations of minilateralism.

Third Path Link: I2U2 demonstrates issue-specific coalition diplomacy.

UPSC MAINS 2022 | GS II

PYQ 5. BIMSTEC and SAARC

Do you think that BIMSTEC is a parallel organisation like the SAARC? What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the two? How are Indian foreign policy objectives realised by forming this new organisation?

Model Answer Framework

- Identify member states and geographical coverage.
- Compare objectives and institutional arrangements.
- Discuss India's neighbourhood and Act East priorities.
- Analyse connectivity, trade and regional cooperation.
- Recognise institutional and political limitations.

Third Path Link: Regional cooperation can occur through multiple overlapping arrangements.

UPSC MAINS 2023 | PSIR OPTIONAL PAPER II

PYQ 6. Quad and Strategic Balancing

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) performs an important role in India's strategic balancing act to withstand the dominance of China in Asia. Discuss.

Model Answer Framework

- Explain the Quad's membership and purpose.
- Discuss Indo-Pacific strategic cooperation.

- Analyse China's regional influence.
- Evaluate India's strategic autonomy.
- Clarify that the Quad is not a collective-defence treaty.

Third Path Link: The Quad illustrates flexible cooperation among partners with overlapping interests.

14. UPSC PYQ Trend Analysis

The six selected questions span Prelims, General Studies Mains and PSIR Optional.

They should be analysed by paper type rather than treated as one statistical series.

Year	Exam	PYQ Theme	Preparation Lesson
2022	Prelims	G20 Communication Framework	Functions and membership of initiatives
2023	Prelims	G20 origin and priorities	Institutional facts with current affairs
2021	GS II Mains	SCO	Critical assessment of groupings
2022	GS II Mains	I2U2	New minilateral arrangements
2022	GS II Mains	BIMSTEC and SAARC	Comparative regional institutions
2023	PSIR Optional	Quad and China	Strategic balancing and autonomy

Prelims Trend: Institutional Precision

Prelims questions often require accurate knowledge of organisational functions, historical origins, membership and policy initiatives.

Mains Trend: Comparative Analysis

Mains questions require students to evaluate the benefits, constraints and strategic implications of participation in international groupings.

PSIR Optional Connection

Political Science and International Relations students should additionally revise realism, liberal institutionalism, balance of power, multipolarity and non-alignment.

Editorial Trend Conclusion

The most useful connections to the Third Path are India's strategic autonomy, issue-based coalition diplomacy, the role of middle powers and reform of global institutions.

These are qualitative syllabus-linked inferences, not measurable probabilities of future UPSC questions.

15. Most Important Topics for UPSC 2027

Priority I: Very High

VERY HIGH

1. Third Path and Values-Based Realism

- Mark Carney's January 2026 speech
- Values-based realism.
- Variable geometry.
- Domestic economic resilience.
- Middle-power cooperation.
- Rules-based international order.

VERY HIGH

2. India's Strategic Autonomy

- Non-alignment and multi-alignment.
- India's relations with the US and China.
- Issue-based foreign-policy cooperation.
- Balancing interests and principles.
- India's role in a multipolar order.

VERY HIGH

3. International Groupings

- Quad: Members, objectives and nature.

- BRICS: Emerging-economy cooperation.
- G20: Role and institutional characteristics.
- SCO: Objectives and importance for India.
- I2U2: Members and sectoral cooperation.
- IBSA: South-South cooperation.

Priority II: High

HIGH

4. Global South and Middle Powers

- Meaning and characteristics of middle powers.
- Global South diplomacy.
- Reforming UN institutions.
- Development finance.
- Climate justice and cooperation.
- Technology partnerships.

HIGH

5. Minilateralism vs Multilateralism

- Conceptual differences.
- Advantages of flexible coalitions.
- Risks of fragmentation.
- Examples: Quad and I2U2.
- Relationships with universal institutions.

HIGH

6. US-China Rivalry

- Trade and technology restrictions.
- Semiconductor supply chains.

- Critical minerals.
- Indo-Pacific security.
- Strategic dependencies.
- Economic coercion.

Priority III: Supporting

MEDIUM

7. International Relations Theory

- Realism and liberal institutionalism.
- Balance of power.
- Multipolarity.
- Hedging.
- Complex interdependence.
- Networked governance.

16. Original Prelims Practice MCQs

Important: The following are original Civil Service Gurukul practice questions. They are not historical UPSC PYQs.

Question 1. Third Path Doctrine

Consider the following statements:

1. The Third Path was discussed by Mark Carney at Davos in January 2026.
2. It encourages issue-specific coalitions.
3. It is a formal UN treaty.

Which statements are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) All three

Answer: (b)

The framework encourages flexible cooperation, but it is not a formal UN treaty.

Question 2. Variable Geometry

Variable geometry in international relations most closely refers to:

(a) Permanent military alliances only.

(b) Different coalitions for different issues.

(c) Replacing the UN with one global government.

(d) Complete economic isolation.

Answer: (b)

Variable geometry involves flexible issue-specific coalitions of participating states.

Question 3. Middle Powers

Consider the following statements:

1. Middle power is a fixed legal status under the UN Charter.

2. Middle powers may influence international institutions and diplomacy.

3. Their influence may come from economic, technological or normative capabilities.

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) All three

Answer: (b)

Middle power is an analytical category, not a formal UN legal classification.

Question 4. International Groupings

Which of the following pairs are correctly matched?

1. Quad — India, USA, Japan and Australia.
2. I2U2 — India, Israel, UAE and USA.
3. IBSA — India, Brazil and South Africa.

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) All three

Answer: (d)

All three pairs are correctly matched

17. High-Priority Mains Practice Questions for 2027

These are original syllabus-based practice questions, not guaranteed predictions of future UPSC papers.

GS II | 15 Marks

"The Third Path Doctrine reflects a shift from rigid geopolitical alignment towards flexible coalition diplomacy." Critically examine.

GS II | 15 Marks

Discuss the relevance of values-based realism and variable geometry for India's strategic autonomy in the emerging world order.

GS II | 15 Marks

Can middle powers collectively strengthen rules-based multilateralism amid intensifying US-China competition? Analyse the opportunities and limitations.

GS II | 10 Marks

Distinguish multilateralism from minilateralism using examples relevant to India's foreign policy.

GS II | 15 Marks

Evaluate how India's participation in Quad, BRICS, SCO and G20 demonstrates multi-alignment rather than traditional bloc politics.

18. Three-Day Revision Strategy

Day	Topics	Practice
Day 1	Third Path, values-based realism, middle powers	Concept map and 15 MCQs
Day 2	Quad, BRICS, G20, SCO, I2U2 and IBSA	Institution comparison and PYQs
Day 3	Strategic autonomy, India and world order	Two 250-word Mains answers

19. Fifteen Facts for Last-Minute Revision

1. Mark Carney delivered his Davos address on 20 January 2026.
2. The Third Path addresses great-power rivalry and international uncertainty.
3. Values-based realism combines principles with pragmatism.
4. Carney associated values-based realism with Alexander Stubb.
5. Variable geometry means different coalitions for different issues.
6. The Third Path is not a formal international treaty.
7. Middle power is an analytical classification.
8. The Quad comprises India, Australia, Japan and the United States.
9. I2U2 comprises India, Israel, UAE and the United States.

10. IBSA comprises India, Brazil and South Africa.
11. India is a member of G20, BRICS and SCO.
12. Strategic autonomy is an important principle of India's foreign policy.
13. Multi-alignment allows cooperation with different partners.
14. Domestic resilience can reduce exposure to external coercion.
15. Flexible coalitions can complement broader multilateral institutions.

20. Conclusion

The Third Path represents an attempt to respond to a more fragmented, competitive and uncertain international order.

Its emphasis on middle-power cooperation, values-based realism, domestic resilience and issue-specific partnerships provides a possible model for more flexible international cooperation.

However, the framework faces substantial challenges, including divergent national interests, unequal resources and continued dependence on major powers.

For India, the Third Path is relevant because it overlaps with existing approaches to strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and Global South diplomacy.

Final UPSC Takeaway

Study the Third Path through five dimensions: values-based realism, middle-power diplomacy, variable geometry, India's strategic autonomy and reform of multilateral institutions.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who proposed the Third Path in 2026?

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney advocated middle-power cooperation at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

What is variable geometry?

It is an approach involving different coalitions for different issues based on shared interests and practical cooperation.

Is the Third Path a formal organisation?

No. It is a proposed foreign-policy framework.

What is values-based realism?

An approach balancing fundamental principles with realistic assessments of power and national interests.

How is the framework relevant to India?

It connects with India's strategic autonomy, multi-alignment and participation in multiple international forums.

UPSC Syllabus Relevance

GS II – International Relations

GS II – Global Institutions

India's Foreign Policy

Strategic Autonomy

Multilateralism

Middle Powers

Quad

BRICS

G20

SC

PSIR Optional

UPSC PYQ Analysis

UPSC 2027

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