



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC WHITE SPACES:
SMALL TABLES, BIG DIVIDENDS**

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Context

- The presence of the **European Union's institutional leadership** as chief guests at the **Republic Day of India on January 26, 2026** representing a 27-member bloc rather than a single national capital.
- It marks a shift in India's diplomatic focus, from bilateral relationships to **coalition-based engagement** in a fragmented world.

Why White Spaces Matter in International Relations?

- **White Spaces** are areas of global governance where problems are urgent, collective action is needed, but **no major power or institution can credibly lead**.
- These have multiple actors with their interests, and risks, but **lack a convenor who can coordinate solutions**.
- Examples include emerging technology governance, supply-chain resilience, climate adaptation finance, pandemic preparedness, and maritime security for smaller states.
 - ♦ Almost every country and institute agrees something must be done, but **no one can impose a solution**.

Decline of Centralized Leadership

- The **United Nations** provides legitimacy and norms, but struggles to deliver when major powers disagree.
- The **G20** is increasingly shaped by domestic politics and agenda disputes.
- **Great power rivalry**, especially **between the US and China** limits the ability of any single actor to lead without resistance.
 - ♦ As a result, many global challenges fall into governance gaps: too political for technocratic bodies, too technical for political forums.

India's Diplomatic White Spaces

- India's **greatest opportunities lie in the 'white spaces'** of global diplomacy: **areas where no major power leads**, but where **coordination is urgently needed**.
 - ♦ In such arenas, India can shape outcomes by forming **coalitions for rule-making and global public goods**, provided it selects sustainable priorities.
- **India & Europe:** The participation of **EU's institutional leadership** at India's Republic Day Parade underscores momentum toward the **long-delayed India-EU FTA**, covering **data governance, sustainability norms, and market access rules**.
 - ♦ If approached strategically as a '**de-risking compact**', the **India-EU FTA** offers India:
 - Access to European markets;
 - Positioning in restructured global value chains;
 - Insurance against U.S. trade volatility;
 - ♦ The EU's eagerness stems from **its desire to reduce dependency on China** and **hedge against US unpredictability**.

Concerns and Issues in India's White Space Diplomacy

- **Balancing Too Many Coalitions:** India's engagement in 2026 is diverse, from the **EU FTA, BRICS Chairmanship, QUAD leadership**, and participation in the **new US-led groupings** like Pax Silica and '**Board of Peace**'.
 - ♦ It risks **diluting focus and capacity**. India may struggle to sustain attention across multiple platforms without clear prioritization.

- **Lack of Coherent Narrative:** India's white space diplomacy lacks a **unified narrative** or framework that explains its purpose and direction to partners unlike **China's Belt and Road** or the **US's Indo-Pacific strategy**.
 - ♦ It can make coalition partners uncertain about India's long-term intentions.
- **Economic and Regulatory Constraints:** The proposed **India–EU FTA**, while promising, involves **stringent sustainability, data, and competition standards**.
 - ♦ For Indian firms, especially MSMEs compliance could be **costly and complex**, potentially eroding competitiveness unless accompanied by domestic regulatory reform.
- **Trade Vulnerabilities:** India's export base remains **narrowly diversified**, and protectionist tendencies persist.
 - ♦ If India views the FTA only as a geopolitical hedge, not an economic modernization project, it may fail to leverage the full benefits of deeper integration with Europe.
- **Fragmented Membership of BRICS:** The expanded **BRICS+** includes countries with **divergent political systems, priorities, and alignments**. There is a **growing perception** that BRICS is drifting into **anti-West rhetoric** and **de-dollarisation advocacy**.
 - ♦ It weakens cohesion and complicates India's effort to steer the group toward concrete outcomes.
- **Operational Gaps in QUAD:** QUAD has strong political visibility but **limited institutional structure**.
 - ♦ Commitments on **maritime security, supply chain resilience, and technology cooperation** into measurable action remains difficult.
- **Global Forums:** Large multilateral platforms such as the **UN** and **G-20** are showing strain.
 - ♦ The **UN** struggles with delivery, and **G-20** suffers from **agenda fragmentation and political boycotts**, with US domestic politics narrowing its global scope.

India's Balancing Role

- **BRICS:** Channelling into **credible development financing** via the **New Development Bank (NDB)**.
 - ♦ Avoid drifting into **anti-West rhetoric** or **de-dollarisation** campaigns, which could deter investment and technology inflows.
 - ♦ Emphasize **reform over rejection**, positioning India as the **bridge between the Global South and established powers**.
- **QUAD:** If India hosts the **QUAD Summit in 2026**, the goal should be to **translate capability into service**, particularly in the **Indian Ocean region**.
 - ♦ The Quad's agenda on **maritime awareness and port resilience** directly benefits regional states seeking autonomy without entanglement in rivalries.
 - ♦ India's own **Operation Sagar Bandhu** in Sri Lanka (post-Cyclone Ditwah) demonstrated how **quickly deployable assets** can serve regional needs **without diplomatic friction**.
- **AI and Emerging Coalitions:** The **AI Impact Summit** in India (**February 2026**) offers India a platform to shape global technology governance by convening **governments, corporates, and researchers**.
 - ♦ Simultaneously, new US-led groupings, from **Trump's 'Board of Peace'** to the **'Pax Silica' Alliance** on **AI and semiconductors** highlight how rapidly new diplomatic tables are forming.
 - ♦ India needs to **choose wisely**, participating where its values and capacities align with **sustainable influence**.

Conclusion: Building the Right Tables

- In 2026, **global power is diffused**, and traditional institutions are strained. India's success will depend not on joining the biggest tables, but on **making the smaller tables work**, coalitions where rules are shaped, problems solved, and trust built.

- India's edge lies in **pragmatic multilateralism**:
 - ♦ Partnering with **Europe** on standards,
 - ♦ Steering **BRICS** toward functionality, and
 - ♦ Using the **Quad** to deliver tangible regional benefits.
- That is how India can turn diplomatic white spaces into **strategic opportunities** — and shape the global order from the middle out.

Source: TH

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] What are 'India's diplomatic white spaces'? How these can enhance India's strategic autonomy and global influence in a changing international order.

