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India's Drive Towards Paperless Trade: Recent Developments and the Way Forward

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Abstract

The recent geopolitical climate arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, tensions in West Asia, rising trade protectionism and increasing geo-economic fragmentation is contributing to high trade and logistics costs and disrupting global supply chains. In this evolving environment, reducing trade costs and improving supply chain resilience have become key policy priorities for enhancing trade competitiveness. In this context, paperless trade systems have emerged as important tools to address border inefficiencies, reduce delays and streamline cross-border movement of goods.

This policy brief examines recent developments in India's paperless trade initiatives and assesses India's preparedness for deeper engagement with cross-border paperless trade frameworks, particularly the Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA). The brief analyses emerging global frameworks, India's evolving legal and institutional architecture for paperless trade and the incorporation of paperless trade provisions in India's recent regional trade agreements (RTAs).

The study finds that India has made substantial progress in developing digital and institutional infrastructure for paperless trade through initiatives such as the ICEGATE, SWIFT, faceless assessment and BharatTradeNet, among others. At the same time, the proposed Draft Trade Facilitation Bill seeks to address gaps in legal interoperability by providing legal recognition to electronic trade documents. India's recent RTAs also reflect a gradual shift towards stronger commitments on paperless trade and interoperability. Taken together, these developments indicate that India is increasingly prepared for deeper engagement with CPTA, which can help reduce trade costs, strengthen regional integration and enhance India's role in shaping cross-border paperless trade frameworks in the Asia-Pacific region.

Key Words: *Cross-Border Paperless Trade, Trade Facilitation, CPTA, ESCAP, Digital Trade, Regional Trade Agreements, Trade Costs, India, Asia-Pacific.*

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List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADB	Asian Development Bank Institute
AEO	Authorised Economic Operator
APAC	Asia-Pacific
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CETA	Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement
CoO	Certificate of Origin
CPTA	Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific
e-CoO	Electronic Certificate of Origin
EODES	Electronic Origin Data Exchange System
EU	European Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
ICEGATE	Indian Customs Electronic Gateway
ITA-1	Information Technology Agreement-1
JSI	Joint Statement Initiative
LPI	Logistics Performance Index
MLETR	Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records
NTFAP	National Trade Facilitation Action Plan
PGA	Partner Government Agency
RTA	Regional Trade Agreement
SPS	Sanitary and Phyto-Sanitary

SWIFT	Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade
TFA	Trade Facilitation Agreement
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNTF	UNESCAP Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation
UNTC	United Nations Treaty Collection
UAE	United Arab Emirates
WPEC	Work Programme on Electronic Commerce
WTO	World Trade Organization

India's Drive Towards Paperless Trade: Recent Developments and the Way Forward

Arpita Mukherjee, Prabir De, Pritam Banerjee and Geetika Gupta

1. Introduction

The recent geopolitical climate arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, tensions in West Asia, rising trade protectionism, containers shortages and increasing geo-economic fragmentation is weighing on global trade, resulting in rising trade costs. Fuel prices have surged, with Brent crude oil crossing USD 100 per barrel in 2026¹ and shipping costs have risen sharply, particularly in routes affected by instability in the West Asia and the Strait of Hormuz. These developments have further contributed to higher logistics costs, disrupted international supply chains and persistent delays in cross-border movement of goods.² Research has shown that geopolitical risk directly raises the cost of international trade (Hou et al., 2024).

The implications for global trade are many and also complicated. According to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) baseline scenario, merchandise trade volume growth is projected to decline from 4.6 per cent in 2025 to 1.9 per cent in 2026, before recovering marginally to 2.6 per cent in 2027.³ Further, the World Bank estimates suggest that rising geopolitical risk can reduce trade flows by 30-40 per cent, with effects comparable to a global tariff increase of up to 14 per cent (Mulabdic & Yotov, 2025). These developments have amplified logistics and trade costs, thereby undermining export competitiveness particularly for emerging economies such as India. Despite successive liberalisation and export-promotion reforms, India's share in global merchandise exports has remained relatively modest, hovering around 1.8 per cent.⁴

In this evolving global trade environment, reducing trade costs has become a key policy priority for countries seeking to enhance trade resilience and competitiveness. For India, which aims to expand its export footprint, strengthen its integration into global value chains and achieve ambitious trade targets, these global disruptions underscore the urgency of reducing trade costs and improving supply chain resilience. At this particular time when the world trade is passing through turbulences, innovative trade facilitation measures, particularly paperless and digital trade systems, have emerged as an important policy tool to address the rising trade costs and border inefficiencies.⁵

¹ Brent crude oil - Price - Chart - Historical Data - News (Last accessed on May 21, 2026)

² Refer, for example, De et al. (2026)

³ Global Trade Outlook and Statistics March 2026 (Last accessed on May 12, 2026)

⁴ <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2219966®=20&lang=1> (Last accessed on May 21, 2026)

⁵ Trade facilitation | OECD (Last accessed on May 12, 2026)

Paperless trade refers to the digitalisation and electronic exchange of trade-related information and documents in cross-border transactions, replacing paper-based processes with electronic systems.

- United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE),
White Paper on Paperless Trade (Page 6)

By reducing reliance on physical documentation and streamlining customs and border procedures, paperless trade systems help lower transaction costs, reduce delays, improve supply chain efficiency and contribute to environmental sustainability. Importantly, implementing paperless trade, particularly across borders, can significantly improve trade efficiency and contribute to the integration of international supply chains (Ha & Lim, 2014).

Empirical evidence also demonstrates the trade cost reduction potential of such reforms. For example, Duval et al. (2018) found that a 10 per cent increase in paperless and cross-border paperless trade implementation reduces trade costs by 1.4 per cent, including a 0.9 per cent reduction from an economy's own reforms and a further 0.5 per cent reduction from improvements by trading partners. Similarly, an analysis by the APEC Policy Support Unit (APEC, 2026) found that post the COVID-19 pandemic, adoption of paperless trade platforms, including public and commercial platforms, reduced the time spent in transit for exported goods across eight economies and led to an average reduction in trade costs of 2.1 per cent.

While domestic digitalisation can reduce procedural inefficiencies within national borders, the full benefits of paperless trade can only be realised when trade documents and digital systems are interoperable across countries. This has increased the importance of global and regional frameworks that facilitate mutual recognition of electronic trade documents, harmonisation of standards and cross-border digital cooperation. Accordingly, the concept of paperless trade has increasingly been incorporated into global and plurilateral trade frameworks, including the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA), the WTO Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-commerce but the United Nation (UN) Framework Agreement on Facilitation of Cross-Border Paperless Trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA) has emerged as one of the most significant frameworks for cross-border paperless trade (De, Mukherjee, & Khan, 2025).

The CPTA is an UN treaty that aims to enable the electronic exchange and mutual recognition of trade-related data and documents across borders. Greater adoption of cross-border paperless trade in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region is expected to reduce trade costs by nearly 25 per cent (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2025), while also improving administrative efficiency and trade competitiveness among member countries. The CPTA principles are also covered under multi-country initiatives like the JSI under the WTO (Duval & Wang, 2024). The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) is working to get the CPTA principles inbuilt into plurilateral

and other trade agreements. As more and more countries embrace paperless trade, both within APAC and outside, the benefits will be exponential for the global value chains.

However, despite significant progress in domestic trade digitalisation and reforms going beyond several WTO TFA commitments, exporters from many economies, including India, suffer from high trade costs and delays due to the absence of cross-border interoperability and mutual legal recognition of electronic trade documents. In this context, frameworks such as the CPTA assume greater importance. As one of the largest trading economies in the region, India's participation in such frameworks could help reduce cross-border trade costs, improve supply chain integration and strengthen digital connectivity.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief aims to examine recent developments in India's paperless trade initiatives and suggests a way forward to reduce cross-border trade costs and time and position India as a leading player in cross-border paperless trade in the Asia-Pacific region.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the emerging global frameworks and evolving international discourse on paperless trade and cross-border digital interoperability. Section 3 examines India's recent developments in paperless trade facilitation, including customs digitalisation, interoperability initiatives and legal preparedness. Section 4 analyses the growing incorporation of digital trade and paperless trade provisions in India's recent free trade agreements (FTAs). Finally, Section 5 presents the way forward for strengthening India's participation in CPTA.

2. Emerging Global Frameworks in Paperless Trade and India

WTO's TFA, which entered into force in 2017, represents the first multilateral trade agreement concluded since the establishment of the WTO.⁶ The agreement encourages members to simplify and harmonise customs procedures, faster clearance of goods at borders, improved transparency and predictability in trade processes, greater adoption of electronic and paperless trade systems. India ratified the WTO TFA in 2016⁷ and has since undertaken several reforms to align its customs and trade facilitation procedures with the agreement's provisions. In practice, India's current trade facilitation regime has moved beyond basic compliance and can be characterised as TFA-plus. (De, Mukherjee, & Khan, 2025)

Building on this multilateral foundation, global trade governance is increasingly moving towards plurilateral initiatives, particularly in the domain of digital trade. JSI on e-commerce is one such plurilateral initiative at the WTO to develop common global rules for digital trade, including provisions on electronic transactions, paperless trading, e-signatures, e-authentication and cross-border data flows.⁸ As of March 2026, 66 WTO members have

⁶ WTO accession and the Trade Facilitation Agreement | UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

⁷ Trade Facilitation Agreement of WTO (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

⁸ E-Commerce Plurilateral - WTO Plurilaterals Info (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

agreed on interim steps to implement the E-commerce Agreement in the near term,⁹ while India has not yet joined the initiative, primarily because of a structural issue of whether JSI is a plurilateral agreement under the WTO framework or not.¹⁰ At the same time, the weakening of the multilateral track has further shifted focus towards alternative forums. One of the platforms to discuss digital trade rules in the WTO, the Work Programme on Electronic Commerce (WPEC) was terminated at 14th WTO Ministerial Conference in March 2026.¹¹

At the same time, in the changing digital trade landscape, cross-border paperless trade frameworks and interoperability mechanisms are gaining increasing relevance. India, as a core member of the APAC, played a leadership role in designing the CPTA. It has emerged as an important framework for promoting seamless digital trade integration. The agreement facilitates electronic exchange and mutual recognition of trade-related documents across borders through legal and technical interoperability among participating countries. Legal interoperability involves harmonisation of laws and regulations for electronic trade documents and digital transactions, while technical interoperability focuses on compatible digital standards and secure data exchange systems for seamless cross-border trade.¹²

As of 2026, 17 countries, including the latest signatory Thailand, have joined the agreement, reflecting growing regional interest in digital trade facilitation (Table 2.1)

Table 2.1: Members of the CPTA*

Sr. No.	Country	Signature / Ratification / Acceptance / Approval / Accession
1	Armenia**	2017
2	Azerbaijan	2018
3	Bangladesh	2020
4	Cambodia**	2017
5	China	2020
6	Iran	2020
7	Kyrgyzstan	2023
8	Mongolia	2022
9	Philippines	2019
10	Republic of Korea	2022
11	Russian Federation	2023
12	Tajikistan	2022
13	Thailand	2025
14	Timor-Leste	2022
15	Turkmenistan	2022
16	Tuvalu	2022
17	Uzbekistan	2024

Source: United Nation Treaty Collection, UNTC (Last accessed on May 18, 2026)

Notes: *As of March 2026 **Signed but not yet ratified.

⁹ MEMO: The E-Commerce Agreement - Trade and Economic Security (Last accessed on May 18, 2026)

¹⁰ The Investment Facilitation Agreement: Resisting plurilateralism in global investment law (Last accessed on May 21, 2026)

¹¹ Electronic Commerce at the World Trade Organization | International Institute for Sustainable Development (Last accessed on May 18, 2026)

¹² UNESCAP PowerPoint Presentation (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

As mentioned above, India has actively participated in the negotiation and development of the CPTA framework, but has not yet acceded to the agreement. Some of the concerns relating to non-participation include gaps in legal preparedness and technological interoperability. At the same time, India has been continuously implementing domestic reforms and increasingly incorporated digital trade facilitation elements in its bilateral and RTA, signalling a gradual shift towards cross-border digital integration in a calibrated manner. Other concerns may be the country's recent unwillingness to sign any plurilateral agreements. However, given its expanding digital infrastructure and ongoing reforms, India is well-positioned to benefit from deeper engagement with frameworks such as CPTA, particularly in reducing cross-border trade costs, enhancing supply chain efficiency and improving interoperability with key trading members. It is important to focus on reducing trade costs, which is very high, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

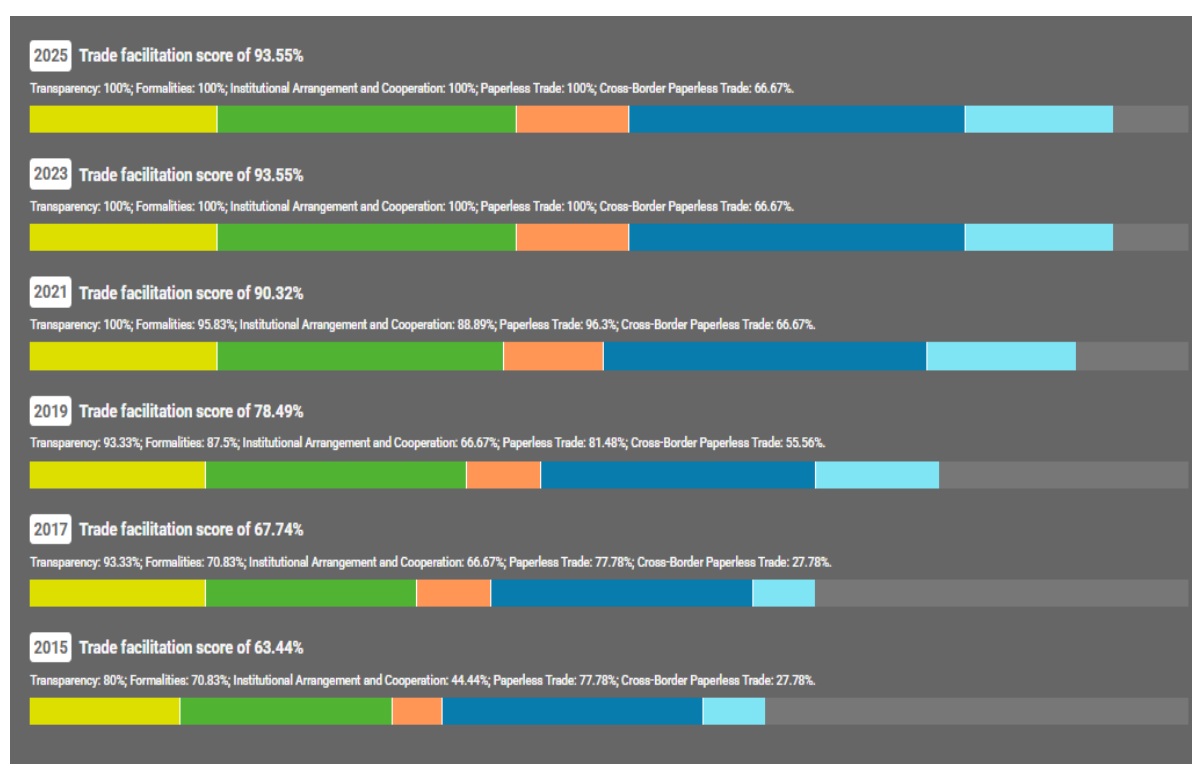
In this context, the effectiveness of India's future engagement with cross-border paperless trade frameworks will depend on the strength of its domestic digital infrastructure, legal preparedness, and interoperability capabilities. It is, therefore, important to examine recent policy and institutional developments undertaken by India to support paperless trade facilitation and digital integration.

3. India's Performance in Paperless Trade

There has been an improvement in India's Logistics Performance Index (LPI) score stands at 3.4, with its global ranking improving from 44th in 2018 to 38th in 2023 among 139 countries.¹³ With continued reforms, this rank is expected to improve further. India's performance in the UNESCAP Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation (UNTF) has also witnessed significant improvement overtime. In cross-border paperless trade, India's score increased from 27.78 per cent in 2015 to 66.67 per cent in 2021, indicating substantial progress. However, this progress has stagnated during the period of 2021-2025. This needs policy intervention. In contrast, India has achieved 100 per cent implementation in paperless trade domestically, indicating strong progress in domestic digital trade facilitation systems. This is shown in Figure 3.1.

¹³ Logistics Performance Index by Country 2026 (Last accessed on May 14, 2026)

Figure 3.1: India's Performance in the UNTF: 2015 - 2025



Source: United Nations, www.untfsurvey.org/economy?id=IND, (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

While India has fully implemented a majority of trade facilitation measures under the UNTF framework, progress remains uneven across categories. Notably, several cross-border paperless trade measures such as electronic exchange of customs declarations and certificates of origin continue to remain at the planning or partial implementation stage, reflecting persistent gaps in cross-border interoperability. At the same time, emerging areas such as e-commerce and green trade facilitation have shown some forward movement. A detailed breakdown of these measures is provided in Appendix 1.

Despite these gaps at the cross-border level, India has made substantial progress in building domestic digital infrastructure for trade facilitation, which has laid a foundation for potential technical interoperability. Major initiatives include the Indian Customs Electronic Gateway (ICEGATE) for electronic filing and customs clearance,¹⁴ the Single Window Interface for Facilitating Trade (SWIFT) for integrated approvals from multiple regulatory agencies,¹⁵ e-Sanchit for paperless submission of supporting documents¹⁶ and faceless assessment for automated and contactless customs clearance. Several additional reforms and institutional initiatives undertaken by India towards cross-border paperless trade facilitation have also been highlighted in the RIS-ICRIER study (De, Mukherjee, & Khan, 2025).

¹⁴ www.icegate.gov.in/about-us/icegate (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

¹⁵ www.icegate.gov.in/advisory/swift/swift-booklet (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

¹⁶ www.icegate.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-09/eSANCHIT_Process_Guide_updated.pdf (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

More recently, India has accelerated its efforts towards paperless trade and cross-border digital integration. The National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (NTFAP) 3.0 reflects India's continued emphasis on digitised, technology driven and risk-based trade facilitation processes, with a focus on coordinated border management, automation and seamless clearances. The framework also aims to reduce cargo release time through the expansion of faceless, contactless and paperless customs systems.¹⁷

Customs modernisation in India has also evolved through operational reforms such as Customs TURANT Faceless Assessment, first introduced in 2020, facilitates anonymized, remote appraisal of import declarations by specialized officer clusters irrespective of port of operations.¹⁸ The TURANT framework now encompasses the full export-import spectrum, notably through the 2026 introduction of Auto Let Export Orders (Auto LEO), ensuring a truly port agnostic and contactless experience for all Indian traders¹⁹.

Further, the Union Budget 2025-26 announced the establishment of BharatTradeNet²⁰ as a unified digital public infrastructure for international trade documentation and financing solutions. This platform will integrate all stakeholders including exporters, importers, customs authorities, banks, logistics providers and regulatory agencies through an interoperable digital ecosystem. Complementing this, SWIFT 2.0 has been proposed to deepen integration among customs systems, Partner Government Agencies (PGAs), ports and logistics stakeholders through enhanced digital connectivity and real time data exchange.²¹

Despite technological progress, studies such as De, Mukherjee, & Khan (2025), have identified gaps for legal interoperability in India's paperless trade ecosystem, some of them can be addressed through a legal framework. The proposed Draft Trade Facilitation Bill²² represents a critical step towards strengthening the legal framework in India's paperless trade ecosystem.

The Bill also aims to ensure that electronic trade documents are admissible as primary evidence in courts, thereby enhancing legal certainty, reducing reliance on physical paperwork and increasing trust in digital trade systems. It also proposes to harmonise existing legislation, including the Information Technology Act 2000, the Negotiable Instruments Act 1881 and the Indian Stamp Act 1899, to support electronic documentation and digital trade processes.

The Bill grants legal equivalence to digital trade records. While digitalisation is ongoing, paper document established legal rights, ownership and authority to transfer goods. In case of disputes, courts and regulators ask for physical documents. It aims to change this. The

¹⁷ National Trade Facilitation Action Plan 3.0 (2024-2027) Cbic Content Msts (Last accessed on May 14, 2026)

¹⁸ [Press Release Page | Press Information Bureau](#) (Last accessed on May 25, 2026)

¹⁹ https://pdicai.org/Docs/Circular-No-06-2026-Customs_32202615320598.pdf (Last accessed on May 25, 2026)

²⁰ Press Release: Press Information Bureau (Last accessed on May 13, 2026)

²¹ pdicai.org/Docs/Circular-No-29-2025_24112025165653517.pdf (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

²² DGFT Trade Notice No. 24 /2025-26 February 09, 2026 (Last accessed on May 18, 2026)

documents that will have legal equivalence includes electronics bill of lading, warehouse receipts, and bill of exchange and promissory notes.

The Bill is designed with technology neutrality focusing on cross-border recognition. If enacted, an electronic trade document cannot be rejected by an Indian court or custom authority simply because it was issued out of India. It paves way for India to sign equivalence/ recognition agreements.

The Bill also aligns India with emerging international legal standards, including principles reflected in frameworks such as UNCITRAL's Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records (MLETR),²³ which underpins global efforts to enable cross-border paperless trade. The Bill has been under public consultation and is expected to be taken to the Parliament in the Monsoon Session 2026.

Overall, India's recent reforms indicate that while substantial progress has already been made in technical interoperability, the emerging legal framework is now gradually addressing gaps in legal interoperability as well. Hence, timely enactment of the Draft Trade Facilitation Bill will be important for strengthening India's readiness for deeper cross-border paperless trade integration.

4. India's Evolving Paperless Trade in RTAs

As discussed in the previous section, India has been making substantial progress in domestic paperless trade measures both from technical interoperability while legal interoperability is also evolving. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital trade and highlighted the growing importance of digital economy agreements and digital governance frameworks (Rahman & Rahman, 2022).

Reflecting this broader shift towards cross-border digital integration, India and the Republic of Korea operationalised the Electronic Origin Data Exchange System (EODES) in 2023²⁴ to facilitate the smooth implementation of the India-Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2010, through the electronic exchange of Certificate of Origin (CoO) information between the customs administrations (De, Mukherjee, & Khan, 2025).

Gao (2018) has highlighted that the United States' approach towards digital trade agreements has gradually evolved from treating e-commerce as a traditional trade issue to recognising its distinct digital nature through more specialised and comprehensive digital trade rules. A similar transition can increasingly be observed in India's RTAs. While India's earlier RTAs largely focused on trade in goods and services, for the first time, a detailed chapter on digital

²³ UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Transferable Records (2017) | United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (Last accessed on May 14, 2026)

²⁴ Press Release: Press Information Bureau (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

trade was negotiated under the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)²⁵ (Mukherjee et al., 2025).

After the India-UAE CEPA, India's digital trade commitments became progressively broader and more structured. The India-UAE CEPA, the India-European Union (EU) Free Trade Agreement (FTA)²⁶ and the India-United Kingdom (UK) Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)²⁷, all contain dedicated digital trade chapters. Other recent trade agreements also include provisions relating to trade facilitation.

A comparison of the digital trade chapters in the India-UAE CEPA, the India-EU FTA and the India-UK CETA demonstrates a gradual progression from relatively soft and cooperative obligations towards more structured and operational commitments. In particular, the language used in provisions relating to domestic electronic transaction frameworks, electronic authentication, paperless trading and electronic invoicing reflects increasing emphasis on interoperability, international standards and legal recognition of electronic trade processes. This trend is consistent with broader developments in regional trade agreements globally. Duval & Kong (2017) observed that most recent RTAs contain more and deeper provisions than those featured in the WTO TFA.

Table 4.1: Comparison of Paperless Trade in India's Recent RTAs

Provision	India-UAE CEPA	India-EU FTA	India-UK CETA
Domestic Electronic Transactions Framework	○		✓
E-signature	○	○	✓
E-authentication	✓	✓	✓
E-trust Services		✓	✓
Paperless Trading	○	○	✓
E-invoicing	○	○	✓
Cross-border Information Flow	○		
Online Consumer Protection		✓	✓
Cooperation on Emerging Technologies	○		○

Source: Collated by Authors from texts of selected RTAs

Note: The columns show different RTAs by select jurisdictions and the rows show the key provisions in the digital trade chapter. The symbol ✓ stands for "hard obligation/mandatory requirement", i.e., 'shall' based obligation or commitments to undertake, and o stands for "Soft obligation" (endeavour-based obligation/agreement to co-operate/engage in dialogue). A blank show that the provision has not been covered in the agreement.

²⁵ For more details: www.commerce.gov.in/#/international-trade/trade-agreements/comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-india-and-the-government-of-the-united-arab-emirates-uae (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

²⁶ For more details: www.commerce.gov.in/#/international-trade/trade-agreements/india_eu_fta (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

²⁷ For more details: www.commerce.gov.in/#/international-trade/trade-agreements/india-united-kingdom-comprehensive-economic-and-trade-agreement (Last accessed on May 20, 2026)

As shown in Table 4.1, the India–UAE CEPA largely adopts flexible formulations such as “shall endeavour”, reflecting a best effort and cooperation-oriented approach towards digital trade facilitation. For instance, under Domestic Electronic Transactions Framework, the agreement says that each Party “shall endeavour to maintain” a legal framework governing electronic transactions consistent with the UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Commerce. Similarly, provisions relating to paperless trading, digital identities, electronic invoicing and cross-border information flows are framed largely in similar ways encouraging cooperation rather than commitments.

In contrast, the India–UK CETA adopts relatively stronger obligations where the two sides are required to “shall maintain” legal frameworks governing electronic transactions consistent with UNCITRAL principles. The agreement also provides stronger legal recognition to electronic signatures, electronic authentication and electronic trust services, reflecting India’s growing alignment with international digital trade standards and the objectives of the proposed Draft Trade Facilitation Bill, while promoting interoperability and regulatory cooperation between the Parties.

The progression is also visible in provisions relating to paperless trading and electronic invoicing. While the India–UAE CEPA encourages parties to make trade administration documents available electronically, the India–UK CETA incorporates relatively stronger and more operational obligations by requiring Parties to accept electronic trade administration documents as legal equivalents of paper documents, subject to domestic legal requirements. These commitments complement India’s domestic initiatives relating to ICEGATE, SWIFT and e-Sanchit. The agreement also encourages bilateral cooperation and participation in international fora on matters relating to paperless trading and promotion of electronic trade administration documents, reflecting growing alignment with broader frameworks such as the CPTA. Further, the India–UK CETA strengthens commitments relating to electronic invoicing by supporting cross-border exchange of relevant information and alignment with international frameworks.

Another notable development in the India–UK CETA is the inclusion of dedicated provisions relating to cooperation on emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, distributed ledger technologies, quantum technologies and the Internet of Things. Such provisions reflect the growing integration of digital governance considerations within India’s RTAs.

The India–EU FTA, adopts an intermediate and relatively balanced approach by combining digital trade facilitation provisions with strong emphasis on regulatory autonomy and the “right to regulate”. The Digital Trade Chapter contains provisions relating to electronic authentication, electronic trust services, paperless trading and online consumer protection, while preserving policy space in areas such as data protection and digital governance.

Overall, India’s recent RTAs show increasing engagement with paperless trade mechanisms, interoperability frameworks and cooperation in international fora relating to digital trade and

emerging technologies. In this context, participation in plurilateral frameworks such as the CPTA would represent a natural extension of India's evolving digital trade architecture. As also noted by Duval & Kong (2017), regional frameworks such as the CPTA can support harmonised implementation of paperless trade provisions contained in RTAs and improve cross-border interoperability.

5. Way Forward

India's future engagement with cross-border paperless trade frameworks, particularly the CPTA, should be viewed as the next stage in its broader trade facilitation strategy. Despite sustained policy reforms and export promotion efforts, India's share in global merchandise exports remains relatively modest. At the same time, rising logistics costs driven by higher fuel prices, increasing container freight rates and geopolitical disruptions, particularly in West Asia continue to affect India's export competitiveness. These developments underscore the growing importance of reducing trade costs and strengthening integration into efficient and resilient cross-border trade systems.

Amid this geopolitical climate, India has been taking significant domestic reforms in trade facilitation and digital governance. Initiatives such as the National Trade Facilitation Action Plan 3.0, the development of digital customs infrastructure through ICEGATE and SWIFT, the introduction of faceless assessment and the proposed BharatTradeNet platform reflect a sustained policy focus on creating a paperless and technology driven trade ecosystem. In parallel, the proposed Draft Trade Facilitation Bill seeks to establish legal recognition for electronic trade documents and align India's framework with international standards. Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate that India's domestic trade facilitation architecture is increasingly aligning with the objectives of cross-border paperless trade.

Importantly, India's existing legal, institutional and technological framework is already comparable to and in several areas more advanced than the minimum standards envisaged under the CPTA. Additionally, India's recent trade agreements and bilateral arrangements, including the operationalisation of systems such as the EODES with the Republic of Korea, demonstrate practical experience in implementing cross-border digital trade mechanisms. These developments indicate that CPTA accession would build upon existing systems and reforms, rather than requiring fundamental restructuring of India's trade governance framework.

Beyond its economic rationale, accession to CPTA holds significant geo-strategic importance for India. The agreement is gradually emerging as an important platform for shaping digital trade governance in the Asia-Pacific region, with participation from economies including China, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea and Thailand, among others. India's engagement with CPTA would therefore strengthen its role within evolving plurilateral frameworks, including its broader positioning within BRICS and APAC economic cooperation. It would also deepen India's trade and digital connectivity with ASEAN countries while

complementing its wider regional connectivity and digital cooperation initiatives with neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. In addition, active participation would enable India to contribute to standard-setting processes and reinforce its leadership in digital public infrastructure and IT-enabled trade facilitation.

In this context, CPTA should not be viewed merely as a trade facilitation agreement, but as a broader platform for enhancing economic integration, strengthening regional cooperation and advancing India's role in digital trade governance. Accession would support reductions in trade costs, improve supply chain efficiency and enhance market access, particularly for MSMEs through simplified and paperless procedures. At the same time, it would enable India to leverage its existing digital infrastructure and institutional capacity to contribute to regional capacity building and knowledge sharing (De, Mukherjee, & Khan, 2025).

Accordingly, India should move towards a calibrated and strategic engagement with CPTA, beginning with active participation in its institutional processes and gradually aligning domestic systems with its interoperability frameworks. More importantly, India should not merely seek accession, but actively contribute to shaping the evolution of CPTA's implementation architecture and standards. Given India's existing preparedness, evolving policy framework and strategic priorities, CPTA membership represents not only an economically prudent step but also a geopolitically significant opportunity to transition from a cautious participant to a leadership-oriented actor in global digital trade governance.

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Appendix 1

According to the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, India has made significant progress in implementing trade facilitation and paperless trade measures over the years. Out of 62 indicators covered under the survey framework, India has fully implemented 39 measures by 2025.

Table A1: India's Status of Implementation of Trade Facilitation and Paperless Trade Measures under the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation (2023–2025)

Measure	Status in 2023	Status in 2025
Transparency		
Fully implemented across all 5 measures		
Formalities		
Fully implemented across all 8 measures		
Institutional Arrangement and Cooperation		
Fully implemented for 3 out of 5 measures		
Alignment of working days/hours with neighbouring economies at borders	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Alignment of formalities/procedures with neighbouring economies at borders	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Paperless Trade		
Fully implemented across all 10 measures		
Cross-Border Paperless Trade		
Fully implemented for 2 out of 6 measures		
Electronic exchange of Customs Declaration	Planning stage	Planning stage
Electronic exchange of Certificate of Origin	Planning stage	Planning stage
Electronic exchange of Sanitary & Phyto-Sanitary Certificate	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Paperless collection of payment from letters of credit	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Transit Facilitation		
Fully implemented for 2 out of 4 measures		
Pre-arrival processing for transit facilitation	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Cooperation between agencies of economies involved in transit	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Trade Facilitation for SMEs		
Fully implemented for 4 out of 5 measures		
SMEs access Single Window	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Agricultural Trade Facilitation		
Fully implemented for 3 out of 4 measures		
E-Application/issuance of SPS certificates	Partially implemented	Partially implemented

Women in Trade Facilitation		
Fully implemented for 1 out of 3 measures		
Trade Facilitation policy/strategy for women's participation	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Women membership in national committee(s) on trade facilitation	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Trade Finance Facilitation		
Fully implemented for 1 out of 3 measures		
Single window facilitates traders access to finance	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Authorities engaged in emerging tech project(s) covering trade finance	Partially implemented	Partially implemented
Trade Facilitation for E-Commerce		
Legal framework to facilitate cross-border e-commerce	Not available	Planning stage
Customs duties waived on small value shipments	Not available	Planning stage
Immediate release procedures for e-commerce goods	Not available	Do not know
AEO program for cross-border e-commerce	Not available	Planning stage
E-submission of Customs declarations by postal operators/express carriers	Not available	Planning stage
Green Trade Facilitation		
Facilitation of sustainability reporting for traded goods	Not available	Planning stage
Trade facilitation of green and climate-smart goods	Not available	Planning stage
eCITES application/issuance/exchange	Not implemented	Not implemented
Facilitation of legitimate trade in waste	Not available	Partially implemented

Source: UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2025
www.untfsurvey.org/economy?id=IND (Last accessed on May 15, 2026)

Between 2023 and 2025, India recorded progress mainly in emerging areas of trade facilitation, particularly e-commerce and green trade facilitation measures. Several measures that were categorised as Not available in 2023 moved to the Planning stage by 2025 (as shown in the table).

However, several measures relating to cross-border interoperability and regional coordination continued to remain either at the planning stage or partially implemented between 2023 and 2025. These include electronic exchange of customs declarations, electronic exchange of certificates of origin, and transit cooperation mechanisms. Nevertheless, recent policy developments indicate gradual progress towards addressing these gaps. India has expanded the electronic filing and issuance of Certificates of Origin (e-CoO) through the launch of the revamped e-CoO 2.0 platform²⁸.

²⁸ DGFT Launches Enhanced eCoO 2.0 System with Provisions for Back-to-Back Certificates of Origin



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