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CULT CURRENT

Vol: 8 Issue: 11 November, 2025

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RISE OF THE REST

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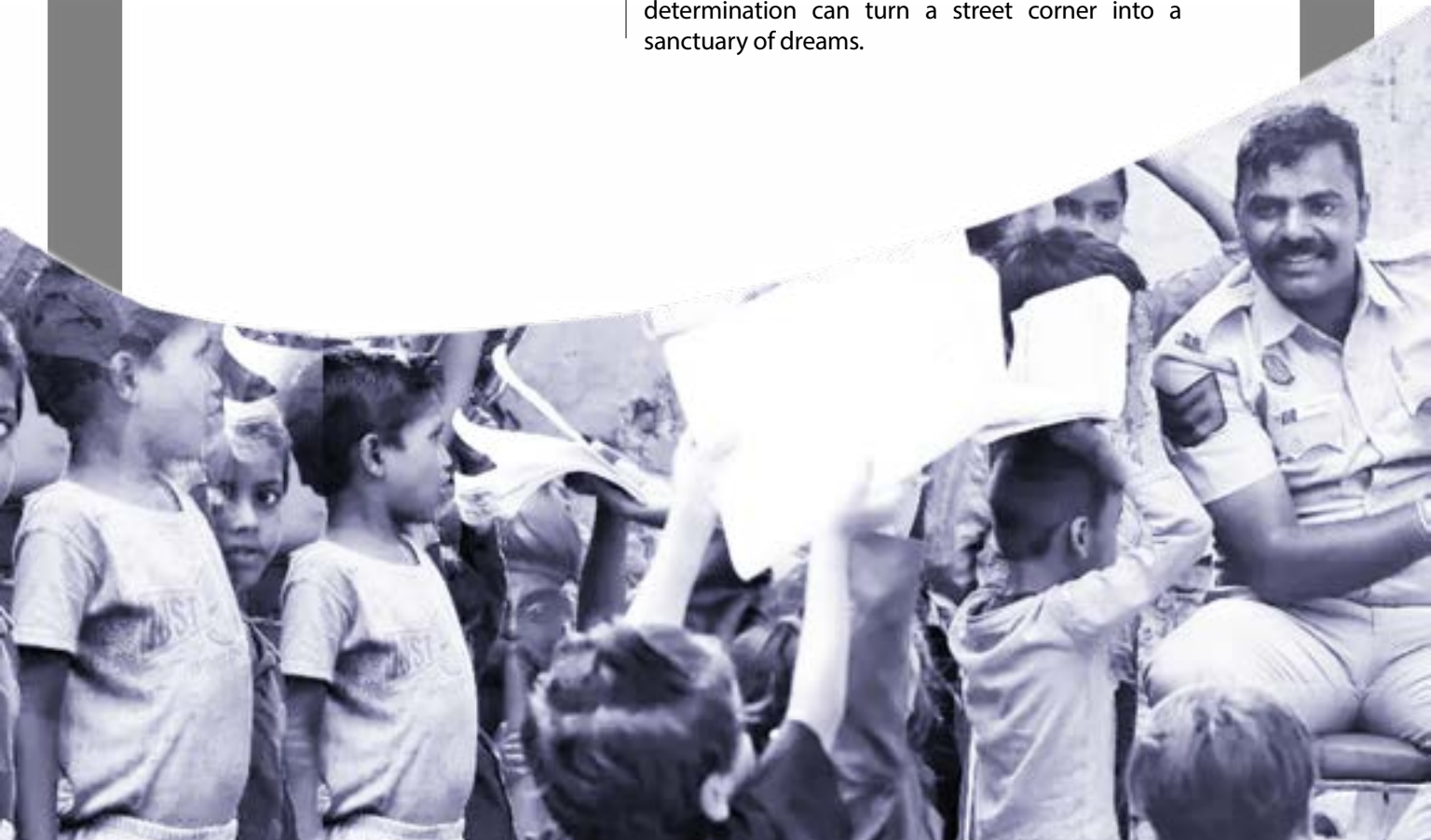
UNSUNG HERO

THE CONSTABLE OF HOPE



Than Singh

Just outside Delhi's Red Fort, head constable Than Singh is rewriting destinies. What began with five children in a parking lot has grown into ***Than Singh Ki Pathshala*** — a free, open-air school for over a hundred underprivileged kids. Many of these children once collected rags or sold trinkets. Today, they read, write, and dream of becoming doctors, teachers, even IPS officers. Singh faced resistance at first—parents feared losing daily wages—but his patience and conviction changed minds. Now, with help from volunteers and rickshaw drivers, the classes run daily, rain or shine. Some students have already topped their formal school exams, proving that opportunity can outshine circumstance. Powered by donations and compassion, this humble “pathshala” stands as a beacon of hope—showing that one man's determination can turn a street corner into a sanctuary of dreams.



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ANANYA'S GLAM GAME!



Small talk



BETTING BEAUTY!

Bollywood's glam queen Urvashi Rautela is back in headlines—and not for her red-carpet looks! The diva, with 70 million Insta followers, is under investigation for allegedly promoting illegal betting apps like FairPlay and 1xBet. Shocking? Totally! Sources say the apps were disguised as “skill games,” luring fans through QR codes and mirror sites. What's spicier? Urvashi's name tops a list that includes 25 South Indian stars. From Miss Diva crown to courtroom glare—Urvashi's glossy world has turned gritty! Fans are divided—some call it a setup, others say the glitz just got too risky. Stay tuned, the drama's just begun!

The discoveries that will create a stir in 2025

From waste to taste!

Rescuing food from waste and transforming it into new products can curb greenhouse gas emissions and boost nutrition. Chocolate maker Barry Callebaut now upcycles cacao pulp and peel—once discarded—into natural sweeteners and drinks. This growing “food upcycling” movement could significantly reduce global food waste and emissions. ●



Canada's Green Hydrogen Promise!

Canada could produce 2.66 million tonnes of green hydrogen yearly from biomass and waste—like forestry residue, crops, and animal byproducts—using gasification and incineration. A study says this renewable pathway could slash emissions compared to fossil fuels and position Canada as a global clean-energy leader. ●

Eni's Green Shift in Sicily!

Eni has launched the Environmental Impact Assessment process for a €2 billion project to convert its Priolo site in Sicily into a cutting-edge biorefinery and chemical recycling hub. The new facility will produce 500,000 t/year of HVO diesel and 32,000 t/year of pyrolysis oil from waste materials, reducing Versalis' CO₂ emissions by 40% and marking a major step in Eni's circular economy strategy by 2028. ●



SYNTHOMER AND YORK JOIN FORCES FOR GREENER POLYMERS



Synthomer and the University of York are collaborating to develop high-performance bio-based polymers under the UK's £2 million EPSRC Prosperity Partnerships programme. Using non-food biomass and CO₂ feedstocks, the project aims to create versatile bio-derived monomers with a lower carbon footprint. The goal: sustainable coatings and adhesives that match or exceed the durability and performance of fossil-based materials. ●

Style Meets Value: Aircross X Launches

Citroën Aircross X has made its official launch in India with a starting ex-showroom price of ₹8.29 lakh. The compact SUV delivers fresh styling, updated features and aligns with Citroën India's “2.0 – Shift Into The New” campaign. The model adds a compelling value option to the crowded Indian entry-SUV segment. ●



APPOINTMENTS



Akkai Padmashali

Member, NHRC

Transgender activist Akkai Padmashali was appointed as a Member of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in October 2025. A leading voice for gender justice and inclusivity, she is the first transgender person to hold this position in India.

Anant Goenka, *CEO, Indian Express Group*

Anant Goenka was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Indian Express Group, one of India's most respected media houses. As a seasoned media professional and journalist, Goenka has led digital transformation initiatives across the organization.



Vladimir Putin
President, Russia

This is, of course, an attempt to put pressure on Russia. But no self-respecting country and no self-respecting people ever decides anything under pressure.

THEY SAID IT...



Donald Trump
President, USA

They know we have a nuclear submarine, the greatest in the world, right off their shore... We're not playing games with them.

THE TRIBUTE

Birsa Munda, born on 15 November 1875 in Ulihatu village of present-day Jharkhand, remains one of the most revered tribal freedom fighters and social reformers of India. Belonging to the Munda tribe, Birsa grew up witnessing the exploitation of Adivasis under the British colonial rule and the feudal system. Deeply moved by the suffering of his people, he emerged as a visionary leader who combined spiritual awakening with political resistance.

In the late 19th century, Birsa led the famous Ulgulan (The Great Tumult), a powerful movement that challenged British authority and sought to protect tribal land rights and cultural identity. His call for "Abua Dishum, Abua Raj" (Our Land, Our Rule) became the rallying cry for thousands of tribal people across the Chotanagpur plateau.



BIRSA MUNDA

(15/11/1875-09/06/1900)

Birsa also worked to reform social practices, discouraging superstition and promoting education, unity, and self-respect among his people. His leadership transcended the boundaries of rebellion—it symbolized dignity and the right to self-determination.

Though Birsa died young in 1900 at the age of just 25, his legacy continues to inspire millions. He is remembered not only as a freedom fighter but also as a saint-like figure who ignited a socio-cultural renaissance among the tribal communities. Today, the state of Jharkhand celebrates his birth anniversary as Birsa Munda Jayanti and observes it as Tribal Pride Day, honoring his enduring spirit of courage, justice, and resistance.



Trump's Nuclear Tests: What They Mean

It has been 33 years since the United States conducted an explosive nuclear test. On Wednesday President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social that he had instructed the Department of War to “start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis,” citing Russian and Chinese programs. Experts say his statement could mean flight tests of missiles rather than underground detonations. The Department of Energy—not Defense—holds the technical mandate for explosive tests, and reviving full-scale nuclear detonations would require years of planning, shafts, and experienced personnel. Analysts expect possible missile or delivery-system trials, but actual nuclear explosive testing appears unlikely in the near term. Any explosion would probably occur in Nevada, echoing past test sites, and would mark a major policy reversal with global repercussions. ●

Why Iran Refuses to Abandon Its Nuclear Ambitions



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has once again rejected US President Donald Trump's call for renewed nuclear talks, dismissing it as coercion disguised as diplomacy. Despite Western accusations and recent Israeli-US attacks on its nuclear sites, Tehran insists its program is for peaceful purposes. Yet, the IAEA warns that Iran's uranium enrichment is nearing weapons-grade levels. Experts say Iran's defiance stems from a need to project strength amid waning regional influence — though this brinkmanship risks further isolation or even open conflict. ●

How Anti-Palestinian Disinformation Fuels Racism



Amid repeated ceasefire violations, anti-Palestinian propaganda continues to spread online, deepening racism and dehumanization. Experts warn that such disinformation is weaponized to justify atrocities in Gaza, where over 68,000 Palestinians have been killed since 2023. Rooted in colonial and Orientalist stereotypes, this racism equates all Palestinians with Hamas, legitimizing collective punishment. ●

Sudan: Fears of a New Genocide in Darfur

Mass killings in El-Fasher, North Darfur, have sparked fears of a new genocide. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) reportedly executed patients and medical staff at Al-Saudi Hospital after seizing the city. Satellite images show mass graves, with up to 2,000 civilians believed dead in three days. Communication has been cut, blocking reports from the ground. Since the RSF-SAF conflict began in 2023, over 140,000 people have been killed and 14 million displaced, making Sudan the world's largest humanitarian crisis. ●



Brazil: Over 100 Killed in Deadly Rio Drug Raid



Asweeping police operation in Rio de Janeiro targeting the Comando Vermelho crime syndicate left 132 suspects and four officers dead, with 81 arrests, authorities confirmed. Governor Claudio Castro defended the raid, calling it a fight against “narcoterrorism,” while residents displayed dozens of bodies on the streets in protest. ●

Myanmar Rebels Agree to Withdraw Under China-Brokered Truce



The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has agreed to a China-mediated truce with Myanmar's military government after months of heavy fighting in the north. The deal, reached in Kunming, requires the TNLA to withdraw from Mogoke and Momeik while both sides halt advances and air strikes. The TNLA, part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, has long fought for autonomy and recently gained control of large swaths in northern Myanmar. ●

German Women Demand Action After Chancellor Merz's Controversial Remarks



Chancellor Friedrich Merz faces growing backlash from women across Germany after remarks linking urban safety concerns to immigration. Sixty prominent women, including Hibba Kauser, a city councilor of Pakistani origin, signed an open letter titled "We Are the Daughters — 10 Demands to Friedrich Merz for Our Safety," urging concrete steps to protect women. Critics accused Merz of racism after he implied that immigration affected public safety, a claim unsupported by data. The controversy sparked protests in multiple cities, with Kauser delivering the first speech in Berlin. The letter calls for better lighting, surveillance, stronger prosecution of sexual violence, and inclusive access to shelters. Kauser emphasized that women—regardless of nationality or language—deserve equal protection. "We always have to prove we belong here," she said, voicing the frustration of Germany's younger, diverse generation. ●

Tanzania Rocked by Post-Election Unrest



Violent unrest has gripped Dar es Salaam and several Tanzanian cities following a disputed general election that barred key opposition figures. Police fired live rounds and tear gas to disperse protesters, with at least two reported deaths, according to Amnesty International. A nationwide internet blackout and curfew were imposed as authorities ordered civil servants to stay home. President Samia Suluhu Hassan, seeking her first full elected term. ●



Bangladesh's Exiled Leader Warns of Election Boycott

Fugitive former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now exiled in India, warned that banning her Awami League from Bangladesh's 2026 elections would "disenfranchise millions." Ousted in a 2024 uprising that left 1,400 dead, Hasina faces war crimes charges. The interim government of Muhammad Yunus has barred her party under anti-terrorism laws, citing security concerns. Hasina called the move "self-defeating," as her supporters plan to boycott the vote, raising fears of deepening political polarization and instability. ●



Karti Chidambaram Loses Appeal Over Attached Assets in PMLA Case

Congress leader and former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram's son, Karti P. Chidambaram, has suffered a setback after the Appellate Tribunal for Forfeited Property (ATFP) dismissed his appeal against the Enforcement Directorate (ED) order upholding the attachment of his Delhi Jor Bagh property and several bank accounts under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The ED had attached Karti's assets in 2018, including a Jor Bagh bungalow and over ₹6 crore across Chennai bank accounts. Karti argued that the attachment lapsed as the ED failed to file its case within the stipulated 365 days. However, the tribunal ruled that the COVID-19 lockdown constituted an "extraordinary circumstance," validating the ED's delayed prosecution. ●

India Reviews Impact of US Sanctions on Russian Oil Giants



India is assessing the impact of recent US sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said Thursday, adding decisions will depend on "global market dynamics." The EU's 19th sanctions package also targeted over 100 Russian oil tankers. Jaiswal emphasized India's priority of securing affordable energy for its 1.4 billion citizens. Despite US tariffs, India continues importing around 1.8 million barrels of Russian oil daily, with state-run IOC pledging compliance without halting purchases. ●

Voter List Revision Sparks Political Row



After Bihar, West Bengal is witnessing political unrest over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) has accused the Election Commission of deleting genuine voters' names and hinted at moving court. However, with the Supreme Court already affirming its trust in the EC, analysts say the TMC might be repeating Bihar's failed opposition strategy. All eyes are now on the November 4 Supreme Court hearing. ●

'Weak Governments Create Weak Nations,' Warns NSA Ajit Doval

At an event marking National Unity Day in Delhi, NSA Ajit Doval cautioned that no country can survive with weak or self-serving governments.



Citing Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, he said instability and poor governance, not constitutional transitions, have shaken these nations. Doval warned that money-driven politics and divisive democracy threaten India's unity, stressing that strong institutions and good governance alone can sustain. ●

India Moves to Reclaim Its Gold Reserves



Amid fears over Western asset freezes, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has repatriated about 64 tons of gold from foreign vaults between April and September, boosting domestic holdings to 575.82 tons. India's total gold reserves now stand at 880.18 tons. Analysts say the move reflects concerns after the G7 froze Russia's assets, with experts urging India to secure physical custody of its wealth. ●

Lack of Guidance Hindering India's Startup Dream, Reveals Study



A new study has revealed that 35% of Indian university students feel unable to launch their startups due to lack of proper mentorship and guidance in overcoming challenges. Despite this, three out of four students aspire to become entrepreneurs, reflecting a growing interest in startups as a preferred career. Titled "Youth Entrepreneurship and Startup Governance: Guiding the Next Generation of Leaders Toward Stability and Success," the report is based on a report. ●

From Complex History to Dynamic Partnership Jaishankar Strengthens India-UK Ties



External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar attended the UK National Day celebrations in New Delhi, charming the audience with his trademark warmth and wit. Beginning his speech with a smile and a respectful namaskar, he reflected on the transformation of India-UK relations—from a "complex historical connection to a dynamic, forward-looking partnership." Jaishankar highlighted Prime Minister Keir Starmer's visit to Mumbai with the UK's largest trade delegation and recalled Prime Minister Modi's visit to London, where the historic Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) and Vision 2035 were signed, focusing on growth, technology, defense, clean energy, and education. He also praised the 1.9 million-strong Indian diaspora in the UK as a "living bridge" strengthening bilateral ties and lauded the shared commitment to sustainability and environmental values. ●

Air Pollution Emerges as Delhi's Leading Cause of Death: Report



Air pollution has become the biggest health threat for Delhi residents, accounting for 15% of all deaths in 2023, according to the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study. The analysis by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) found that an estimated 17,188 deaths in Delhi were linked to polluted air — meaning one in every seven deaths was caused by air pollution. Researchers from the CREA noted that pollution-related deaths remain alarmingly high. ●



IMD Forecasts Cooler November Across Most of India

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted that maximum temperatures across northwest, central, and western India are likely to remain below normal through November. However, minimum temperatures are expected to stay above average in most parts, except a few regions in northwest India. IMD chief Mrutyunjay Mohapatra said that while the western Himalayan region, foothills of the Himalayas, northeast India, and parts of the southern peninsula may experience slightly higher maximum temperatures, most of the country will be cooler than usual. He added that a weak La Niña persists over the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean and is likely to continue until February 2026. ●



SRIRAJESH, Editor

THE SANCTION PARADOX

Western sanctions, meant to weaken adversaries, are instead redrawing global trade lines — empowering the very nations they sought to constrain and exposing the limits of America's coercive diplomacy.

In the theatre of global geopolitics, America's sanctions often masquerade as instruments of justice while functioning as tools of coercion. The recent sanctions on Russian oil giants Rosneft and Lukoil reveal a familiar pattern — an empire trying to discipline the world through economic duress, only to expose its own strategic fatigue. Washington's intent, ostensibly to “choke the Kremlin's war machine,” is in truth another act in a long-running drama of misplaced confidence.

For India, the suitor's analogy fits neatly. The United States, unable to persuade New Delhi to curtail Russian oil imports, has turned from diplomacy to diktat. But this time, India is not a pliant subject of Western paternalism. The exchange between India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and Britain's Trade Minister Chris Bryant in Berlin captures the shifting moral axis of world politics. When Goyal asked, “Why single out India?” he voiced not merely national indignation but a civilizational assertion — a reminder that sovereignty is not negotiable currency in the marketplace of global power.

The duplicity is glaring. Germany, a Western ally, receives quiet exemptions from sanctions for its Rosneft-owned refineries. India, the world's fastest-growing major economy, must “come and talk” for the same courtesy. Such transactional hypocrisy shatters the illusion of the so-called “rules-based international order.” The rules, it appears, are meant for others; the exemptions, for friends.

But beyond hypocrisy lies economic irony. Sanctions, by design, distort global markets rather than discipline them. In punishing Russia, the West inadvertently subsidizes those who trade with it. By excluding Russian barrels, compliant nations inflate global prices, while countries like India and China, purchasing discounted crude, secure a cost advantage. Thus, Western economies pay a hidden tax for their moral theatre, while emerging powers benefit from cheaper energy and diversified supply chains.

This is the sanction paradox — an effort to isolate Russia that instead accelerates the multipolar transition. The flow of oil may change routes, but it does not stop. It simply fuels new alignments: Moscow anchors the Eurasian energy web; Beijing and New Delhi become indispensable nodes in an alternative global order where trade increasingly

bypasses the dollar. What was meant to “choke” Russia instead breathes life into non-Western networks of commerce, currency, and confidence.

India’s calculus is pragmatic, not ideological. New Delhi is neither Moscow’s client nor Washington’s proxy. It is an autonomous pole seeking stability in an unstable world. The United States still underestimates this civilizational state that views strategic autonomy as dharma, not diplomacy. India will recalibrate, not capitulate — balancing its energy needs with its long-term geopolitical compass. The Western compulsion to weaponize interdependence is fast losing moral legitimacy and economic efficacy.

For Europe, the self-inflicted pain is profound. By severing ties with Russian energy, it has condemned itself to higher costs and industrial erosion, while the Global South gains a structural advantage. In trying to weaken its adversaries, the West weakens its own foundations.

The lesson, seen from New Delhi, is unmistakable: coercion no longer commands obedience. The age of enforced alignment is over. Sanctions are the relics of a waning order that mistakes power for persuasion. As energy, capital, and confidence flow toward Asia, the architecture of the global economy is being rebuilt — not by those who impose, but by those who endure.

In this emerging world, India’s restraint is not passivity but poise. While the West burns its bridges, India builds corridors. The future, it seems, belongs not to those who punish, but to those who persist.

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Ashes of Strategic Depth



Anwar Hussain

The Durand Line is once again stained with blood. This colonial scar between Pakistan and Afghanistan, a symbol of decades of mistrust and violence, has become the arena for a bloody conflict that is far more than just a border dispute. In October 2025, the roar of Pakistani fighter jets and the thunder of the Taliban's retaliatory artillery opened a new and dangerous chapter in South Asian geopolitics.

This conflict is redefining not only the borders between two nations but also the balance of power in South Asia.

This is not merely a fight between two neighbors; it is a complex tapestry woven from the unhealed wounds of history, the pressure of

The Afghan fire is now burning Pakistan. Gunpowder is speaking on the Durand Line, and the policy of 'strategic depth' is turning to ashes. The Taliban's retaliation, the terror of the TTP, and India's new move—the chessboard of South Asia is smoldering once again.

internal radicalism, and a new 'Great Game' in which players like Qatar, Turkey, China, Russia, and India are all making their moves.

This is the story of a fire that Pakistan nurtured for decades in Afghanistan under its policy of 'strategic depth'; and today, the flames of that same fire are poised to engulf its own home. In this entire episode, there are not only grave security concerns for India but also an unexpected opportunity to redefine its strategic role in Afghanistan after decades.

The crisis began when Pakistan launched airstrikes on Afghan soil, justifying them as an action against the hideouts of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In the past, weak governments in Kabul would have settled for mere diplomatic protests. But this time, the tables have turned. Kabul is now ruled by the Afghan Taliban—the very same Taliban that the Pakistani establishment considered its strategic asset.

The Taliban not only fiercely condemned these attacks but also launched an unprecedented retaliatory military action along the border. Reports of heavy casualties emerged from both sides, and crucial trade crossings like Torkham were sealed.

For Pakistan, it was a strategic nightmare come true. Its decades-old doctrine of distinguishing between a 'Good Taliban' and a 'Bad Taliban' was crumbling right before its eyes. The very Taliban it had nurtured for decades as a strategic weapon against India was now

Afghanistan faces a precarious water crisis. Unlike India and Pakistan, it lacks comprehensive treaties with northern neighbors over the Amu Darya basin. Except for a limited Helmand River treaty with Iran, Afghanistan operates in a legal vacuum, making the country most in need of water the least institutionally integrated.

challenging its own sovereignty.

As the violence peaked, Qatar and Turkey stepped in as mediators. Their efforts brokered a temporary ceasefire, but the peace is proving to be as fragile as a paper boat. A subsequent meeting in Istanbul, mediated by Turkey to establish a permanent peace, ended in failure. Pakistan issued a stark warning: any future TTP attack on its soil would result in targeting Kabul. Afghanistan's retort was equally sharp: if Kabul were targeted, Islamabad should be prepared to face attacks in return. This exchange has effectively shelved any initiative for a lasting peace for the foreseeable future.

Pakistan's primary condition is that the Taliban must rein in the TTP's activities from its soil, an accusation the Taliban consistently denies, claiming it provides no institutional support to the group. This deadlock lies at the very heart of the conflict. The Taliban and the TTP are ideologically intertwined, and for the Taliban, taking decisive action against these 'ideological brethren' is nearly impossible—especially when both share a consensus on the illegitimacy of the Durand Line.

Along with this external crisis, Pakistan is also grappling with a deep internal one. Radical organizations like the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have staged large-





scale violent protests against the government. The army had to use force to control them, further increasing social tensions within the country. The rise of the TLP is a symbol of the deep-rooted radicalism in Pakistani society. It is this same radicalism that puts political pressure on the army to take “harsh” action against Afghanistan, creating a vicious cycle where the government has to appear aggressive to satisfy its public, even if the consequences are disastrous.

This highlights Pakistan’s dual failure: it can neither control the non-state actors across its border nor the radical groups within it.

This conflict is no longer a bilateral issue between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Regional giants like China, Russia, and Iran have their own strategic priorities. They do not want instability in the region, as it threatens their connectivity projects (like the BRI) and security in Central Asia. Mediators like Qatar and Turkey want immediate peace, but their role is also influenced by their own

geopolitical interests.

On this complex chessboard, India has made a significant move. In recent weeks, India has upgraded its diplomatic mission in Kabul and increased consultations with the Taliban. This is a major shift in India’s Afghan policy. Since the Taliban’s takeover in 2021, India had been following a ‘wait and watch’ policy. But now, as Pakistan-Taliban relations sour, India has decided to play an active role.

This step is a major diplomatic blow to Pakistan, which has always wanted to keep India out of Afghanistan. This new dialogue from India is not just a diplomatic realignment but also an ideological shift—where New Delhi is no longer a ‘silent spectator’ but is emerging as a ‘potential decider.’ India’s engagement provides the Taliban with an alternative partner and sends a message that it is not solely dependent on Pakistan. For India, this is an opportunity to accelerate its developmental and humanitarian work in Afghanistan, gather intelligence, and ensure that Afghan soil is not used for anti-India terrorism again.

In the face of this complex geopolitical puzzle, three potential future scenarios emerge. The first is the most optimistic, where the ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Turkey holds. To make this successful, a four-party (Pakistan-Afghanistan-Qatar-Turkey) monitoring mechanism could be established to conduct impartial investigations of border incidents. The Taliban would be pressured to take concrete action against the TTP, and in



return, it would be given incentives like economic aid and the opening of trade borders. The second is the most realistic scenario. History is a witness that such ceasefires often break. Deep mistrust over the Durand Line and the unresolved issue of the TTP will periodically give rise to violent clashes. Pressure from groups like the TLP within Pakistan will continue to provoke the government into harsh actions. In this situation, borders will be repeatedly closed, trade will be affected, and both countries will remain entangled in a long-term, low-intensity conflict. And the third is the most dangerous scenario. If airstrikes and ground clashes escalate and both sides make it a matter of prestige, a full-scale war cannot be ruled out, as hinted by Pakistan's defense minister. The consequences would be devastating: the exodus of millions of refugees, thousands of deaths, and the collapse of the entire region's economy. In such a situation, external powers like China, Russia, and the US would be forced to intervene directly, turning this conflict into a global crisis. This situation would not be limited to South Asia; it would also impact energy, trade, and migration networks across the Global South, potentially destabilizing the entire Asia-Africa economic axis.

There is no easy or unilateral solution to this crisis. Military action alone can neither eliminate the TTP nor resolve the historical dispute over the Durand Line. A lasting solution requires a multi-dimensional strategy, such as establishing a neutral monitoring mechanism to strengthen the ceasefire, creating a

Afghanistan faces a precarious water crisis. Unlike India and Pakistan, it lacks comprehensive treaties with northern neighbors over the Amu Darya basin. Except for a limited Helmand River treaty with Iran, Afghanistan operates in a legal vacuum, making the country most in need of water the least institutionally integrated.

mixed mechanism of incentives (humanitarian aid, recognition) and punishments (international pressure) to resolve the TTP issue with the Taliban, and creating economic opportunities for the tribal populations living on both sides of the Durand Line. Cross-border trade should be facilitated, and local-level conflict resolution committees should be formed.

For India, this is a moment where it must demonstrate its diplomatic skill. By coordinating with China, Russia, and Iran, India can play an inclusive role in Afghanistan that is focused on development, security, and humanitarian aid. This will not only help stabilize Afghanistan but also send a message to Pakistan that its decades-old 'strategic depth' policy is now irrelevant.

Ultimately, this crisis is a test for the regional players. If political wisdom and restraint are shown, this conflict can be averted. The smoke has not yet cleared on the Afghan borders, but the real question hidden behind this smoke is—will South Asia learn from history, or will it repeat the same mistakes that have repeatedly turned it to ashes?



YUNUS'S DOUBLE GAME

Inside Bangladesh's Silent War on India

Behind the veneer of peace, Bangladesh faces a dangerous transformation. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus stands accused of playing a double game—aligning with foreign powers and Islamist forces to turn Dhaka into the new front of a silent war against India.



Santosh Kumar



The air in Dhaka today carries the scent of conspiracy — not merely of political instability but of a deeper, more sinister design unfolding along India's eastern frontier. Since Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus came to power, Bangladesh has ceased to be just a neighbour; it has turned into a pawn on the geopolitical chessboard of South Asia — a pawn that the U.S. "deep state" and Pakistan's ISI appear eager to move against India.

This is not merely the story of a regime change. It is the story of how the image of a "messiah of peace" is being weaponized to turn Bangladeshi soil into a laboratory for jihadist experiments. It is the story of how the toxic dream of a "Greater Bangladesh," which seeks to redraw maps to include India's northeastern states, is being revived. And above all, it is the story of an information war, where falsehoods and digital deception are being deployed to fuel hatred against India.

The Real Face of Yunus

When Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, the fearless

editor of Blitz Bangladesh, speaks, his words carry not just the edge of journalism but the anguish of a patriot. In a recent interview, he made revelations that should shake any Indian observer.

"Yunus dances to the tune of his foreign masters," Choudhury asserts. "While Sheikh Hasina's government was India's friend, Yunus's politics is founded on hostility toward India."

This is not an empty accusation — the sequence of events tells its own story. Recently, Pakistan's General Sahir Shamshad Mirza visited Dhaka and held a private meeting with Yunus. What appeared to be a routine diplomatic encounter carried a provocative twist: Yunus presented the general with a book whose cover depicted India's northeastern states as part of Bangladesh. It was no mistake — it was a deliberate, symbolic move to revive the Greater Bangladesh narrative long cherished by Pakistan's radical circles.

The New Network of Terror

The threat, however, is no longer symbolic. It is

NEIGHBORING PLOT

materializing on the ground. Choudhury warns that Bangladesh's border zones are increasingly becoming safe havens for networks linked to Hafiz Saeed. His associates — including his brother and several radical clerics — are spreading venom through madrassas and frontier districts. And to add fuel to the fire, the Yunus government has formally invited the controversial preacher Zakir Naik, currently living in Malaysia under the shadow of extremism charges.

This invitation is not a religious gesture but an ideological campaign. By promoting figures like Naik, the Yunus regime is institutionalizing anti-India sentiment and communal polarization. It aims to erode the syncretic Bengali identity that has, for centuries, harmonized Islamic faith with the cultural and spiritual traditions of the subcontinent.

The Digital Arsenal of Lies

The government's anti-India strategy extends far beyond religious or political manipulation — it is now waging an information war. Recently, a fabricated video went viral claiming that "India has kidnapped a Bangladeshi cleric." The fake story triggered protests and riots before the truth emerged.

"Had we not investigated in time," says Choudhury, "the lie could have pushed Bangladesh to the brink of civil war."

Subsequent police action revealed that the cleric and his sons had orchestrated the hoax themselves. The episode served as a chilling reminder of how digital hate speech is being weaponized to incite anti-India passions.

Assault on a Shared Heritage

Yunus and his Islamist allies forget that Bangladesh's soul was not born of religious exclusivity. As Choudhury reminds, Bengali identity is inherently plural — woven from Islamic belief, Hindu traditions, the Bengali language, and local folk customs.

"An ordinary Bangladeshi does not see India as an enemy," he says. "Our festivals, our rituals, our songs — from Diwali to Durga Puja — testify to a shared civilization."

Yunus's attempt to fracture this civilizational



continuity, Choudhury argues, poses the gravest threat to Bangladesh itself.

"Jihadists don't just change politics; they poison the very soul of society."

Yunus and the Search for a "Safe Exit"

At 86, Muhammad Yunus now seems to be seeking a "safe exit." His global image as a microcredit pioneer and Nobel laureate contrasts sharply with the growing domestic anger against him. Across Bangladesh, slogans of "Yunus Hatao" ("Remove Yunus") echo in the streets. The local media — once silenced by fear — now openly brands him as a "deceiver" and "a tool of American geopolitics."

The parliamentary elections scheduled for February threaten to mark his political endgame. To avoid that, Yunus's strategy appears clear: spread chaos, ignite anti-India sentiment, and delay elections to cling to power.

India's 'Chicken's Neck' and Strategic Restraint

India, for now, maintains public silence — but it



Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury
Editor, Blitz Bangladesh

is not complacent. The Siliguri Corridor, dubbed the “chicken’s neck” by global strategists, remains India’s most sensitive security zone. The projects India is pursuing in the area are defensive, not aggressive. India seeks stability, not confrontation, but it will not ignore a direct threat to its borders.

As Choudhury analogizes, “When a thief breaks into your neighbour’s house, you build your wall higher. That’s exactly what India is doing. Yunus must understand that the fire he’s playing with will burn him first.”

The Dimming Flame

The voices of journalists like Shoaib Choudhury offer a glimmer of hope — that the people of Bangladesh are beginning to see through the deception. Widespread unemployment, economic turmoil, and political unrest have shattered the credibility of the Yunus regime.

“Yunus has alienated not just India,” Choudhury observes, “but also the Bangladeshi army, the media,

and the people. This is the path of self-destruction. His time is over.”

As an old saying goes: “A dying flame flickers the most.” Yunus’s lust for power seems to be in that final flicker. But in the process, the social fabric of Bangladesh — and its historic bond with India — hangs in the balance.

For India, this moment is both a diplomatic challenge and an opportunity — to remain vigilant yet restrained, firm yet strategic. The stability of South Asia may well depend on whether Bangladesh preserves its secular, plural Bengali identity or succumbs to the fire of fanaticism.

The world must remember: India is no ordinary nation. It is an emerging global power — and those who conspire against it eventually find themselves erased from history. The chessboard in Dhaka is set, and the world watches to see who delivers the

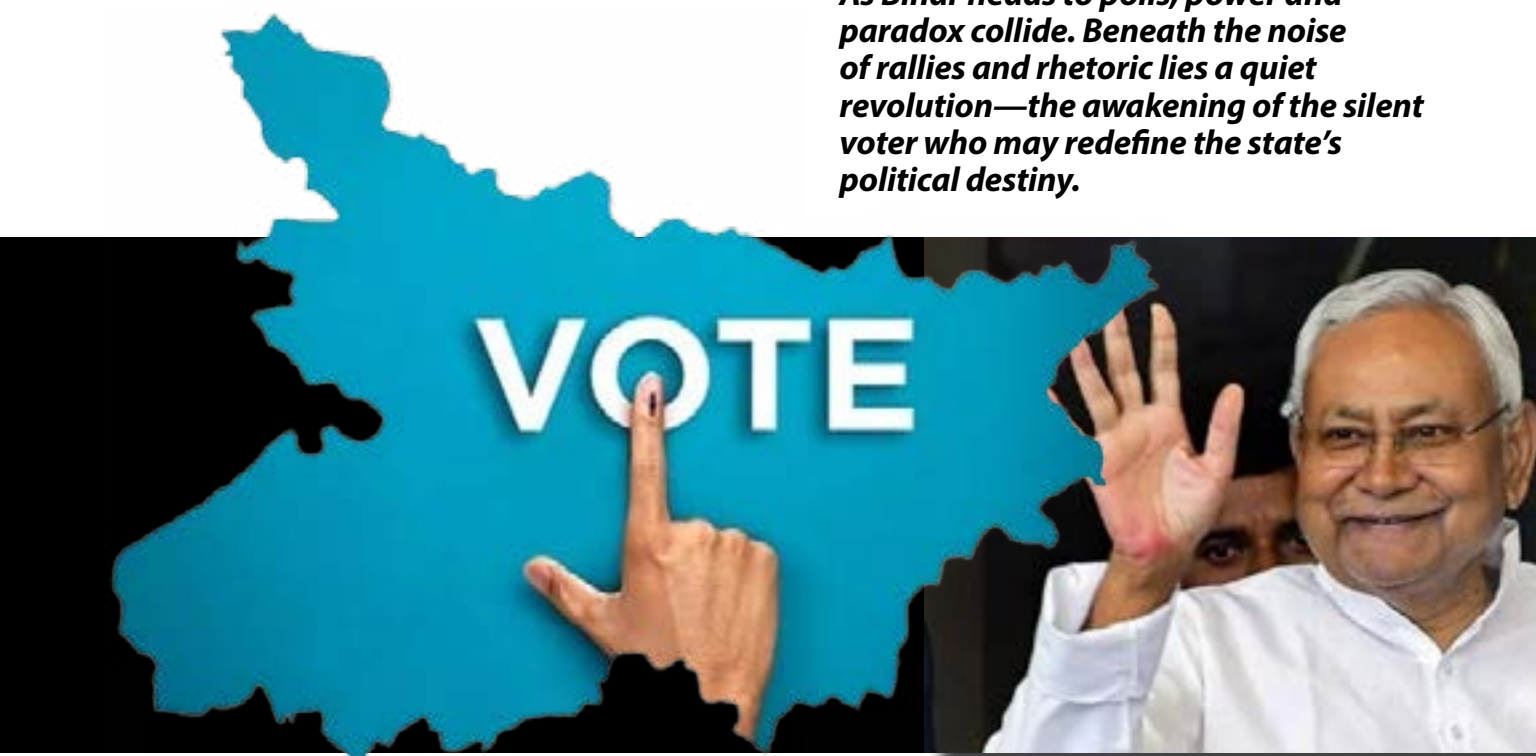
The Bihar Assembly Election

Power, Paradox & the Silent Voter



Jalaj Srivastava

As Bihar heads to polls, power and paradox collide. Beneath the noise of rallies and rhetoric lies a quiet revolution—the awakening of the silent voter who may redefine the state's political destiny.



The political heat is searing through the winter chill of Patna. Amidst a swirl of questions hanging in the air, the heartbeat of Bihar has quickened. From the humble pan shops to the bustling tea stalls, from the ghats of the Ganges to the villages of Mithila, there is only one conversation: on November 14, who will be crowned the king of Bihar? This is not merely an election; it is an epic struggle for the soul of Bihar, a battle cry whose echoes are resounding all the

way to the corridors of power in Delhi. This fight is not just a referendum on Nitish Kumar's decades-long rule, nor is it merely a trial by fire for Tejashwi Yadav's young leadership. It is a quest to read the mind of the 'silent voter' who is now finding their voice, and it is the story of the rise of a 'third player' who threatens to demolish all political calculations from Patna to Delhi.

The 2025 Bihar Assembly election stands at a thrilling crossroads where the margin between victory and

As the winter chill grips Patna, Bihar's politics is on fire. Between anger and allegiance, silence and strategy, the state stands at a crossroads. This election isn't just about power—it's about decoding the mind of the silent voter who may decide Bihar's future.

defeat could be as thin as a thread. It is a political war where every move, every promise, and every equation points towards an unpredictable outcome. Surveys like 'Vote Vibe' have described this electoral battle as a "nail-biting contest," with a mere 1.6% gap between the NDA and the INDIA bloc. For any political analyst, this statistic is a puzzle, but on the ground in Bihar, it is the living proof of an uncertainty that hangs in the air like gunpowder.



The Baffling Paradox of Power: Anger with Nitish, Compulsion for Modi

The most interesting and mysterious paradox of this election is that despite a "strong anti-incumbency wave" (48.6%) against the NDA government led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the BJP-JDU-HAM alliance is holding on to a slight lead with 41.3% of the vote share. This is a political enigma whose layers are hidden

within Bihar's complex social fabric and psychological voter behavior.

The first reason for this is the NDA's seemingly impenetrable social fortress, which the opposition finds as difficult to breach as a citadel. Despite personal resentment against Nitish Kumar, the face of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP's organized cadre, Nitish's decades-old influence over the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), and the support



of the Paswans create a 'protective shield' that can withstand even the sharpest shocks of anti-incumbency. The second reason is the fragmentation of opposition votes, a crack that could shatter the Mahagathbandhan's dreams. While the alliance led by Tejashwi Yadav is projected to get 39.7% support, Prashant Kishor's 'Jan Suraj' party is punching a significant hole in the opposition's boat by carving out nearly 9% of the vote. Players like Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM and Mayawati's BSP also possess the full capacity to be 'game-spoilers' in the Seemanchal and Dalit-dominated regions.

The third, and most crucial, reason is the ground reality of Bihar, where many voters, despite being unhappy with the government, feel compelled to vote for the NDA, bound by the invisible threads of caste and local equations. This is the complex psychology of 'Anger with Nitish, Compulsion for Modi' that could ultimately steer the NDA's ship to safety.



The Battle of Faces: A Declared General vs. an Uncrowned Emperor

Another great psychological game is being played on this electoral chessboard—the battle of faces. The Mahagathbandhan has made a bold and clear move here. After a long struggle, on October 23, in the presence of Congress leader Ashok Gehlot, they announced: Tejashwi Yadav will be the Chief Ministerial face, and Mukesh Sahni the potential Deputy Chief Minister. This declaration was not just an attempt to showcase coalition unity; it also presents voters with a clear choice—a young general ready to lead his army from the front.

In stark contrast, the NDA has kept its cards close to its chest, maintaining a mysterious silence. From Prime Minister Modi to Amit Shah, no one has proposed a name for the Chief Minister's post. Their official stance is that the MLAs will choose their leader after the election. This 'mystery of the name' is a calculated chess move with several



deep meanings. First, it prevents the anti-incumbency wave from consolidating against a single face. When there is no declared general, at whom will the voters direct their anger? Second, it keeps the internal ambitions and tug-of-war within the coalition under a veil of uncertainty. As long as no name is announced, the potential for schisms and rebellion among contenders can be kept from public view. And third, it creates psychological pressure on the opposition. Now that Tejashwi's name is declared, NDA leaders can build a narrative among the public, "Your leader is decided, but who our leader will be, our collective strength will decide." Thus, in the politics of Bihar, it's not just about the votes, but the visualization of faces that is playing a crucial role. The NDA's gambit is both a strategic masterstroke and a dangerous signal of potential internal conflict.

Youth vs. Experience, Women vs. Men: A Divided Electorate

This election is also a clash of



generations and genders. Surveys indicate that the NDA has a 6% lead among women, while the Mahagathbandhan is ahead by 2% among men. This reflects the deep impact of Nitish Kumar's prohibition policy and women-centric schemes, which still symbolize security and dignity for a large section of female voters.

Meanwhile, the youth of Bihar (18-34 years) appear to be standing with Tejashwi Yadav, hoping for a new dawn of change. This is the generation grappling with the fire of unemployment, migration, and the quest for a better future. In recent years, Tejashwi has managed to shed the image of 'the prince of the jungle raj era' and has established himself as a serious leader who talks about issues, and this is attracting the youth. In contrast, voters over the age of 35 are placing their trust in the NDA in the name of experience and stability.

Caste equations, which have been the soul of Bihar's politics, are



playing out with their full force this time as well. The Muslim-Yadav (MY) and Scheduled Caste voters are standing firmly with the Mahagathbandhan, while the upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs, and EBC voters remain the invincible fortress of the NDA. But the real battle is for the Dalit vote bank, 'excluding the Paswans', which seems unwilling to commit to any single camp this time. This is the decisive vote that will determine the throne of Patna.

Prashant Kishor: 'Kingmaker' or Just a 'Game-Spoiler'?

In this classic NDA vs. INDIA bloc fight, Prashant Kishor's 'Jan Suraj' is like a wild card entry, an 'X-factor' that can turn the tables at any moment. PK, who once helped both Modi and Nitish take power, is himself in the fray as a political alternative today. His claim is that this fight is "NDA vs. Jan Suraj" and that the Mahagathbandhan is in third place. This is a bold claim, but the 9% vote share in surveys indicates that underestimating him would be a grave mistake.

Prashant Kishor is providing a platform to those angry and disillusioned voters who are fed up with both alliances. He is speaking a new language of development, systemic change, and 'transforming Bihar'. Even if he cannot form the government in this election, he can certainly win enough seats to stop any single alliance from getting a majority and emerge in the role of a 'kingmaker'. His influence could be decisive in those seats where the margin of victory is just a few hundred votes.

The Bihar Assembly election is not merely a contest for power—it is a reflection of a society in transition. Beneath the fierce slogans and colourful rallies lies a deeper churn: the youth demanding jobs and dignity, women seeking safety and respect, and farmers longing for fair value for their labour. As alliances clash and caste equations realign, a quiet revolution brews within—the rise of the silent voter who could alter Bihar's political script. When the EVMs unlock their verdict on November 14, the result will not just decide 243 seats; it will reveal whether Bihar remains chained to its past or dares to imagine a new political dawn.

The Congress Crisis and the Mysterious Absence of Rahul Gandhi

When the electoral war drums are beating, when NDA stalwarts like Prime Minister Modi, Amit Shah, and Yogi Adityanath are storming the fields of Bihar, and when Tejashwi Yadav is setting records for holding rallies, one question is echoing from Patna to Delhi—



Where is Rahul Gandhi?

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, addressed the concluding rally of his 'Voter Adhikar Yatra' in Patna on September 1. That yatra had built momentum for the Mahagathbandhan. But since then, with the election at its peak, his absence is demoralizing both Congress workers and supporters. The atmosphere at Sadaqat Ashram (the Congress office in Patna) is one of gloom and anger. Workers ask, "When people ask us where Rahul Gandhi is, what should we tell them? Should we tell them our leader is making imartis?"

All is not well within the party either. An open rebellion has broken out over ticket distribution. Disgruntled leaders are protesting with slogans like 'Ticket chor, Bihar chhod' (ticket thief, leave Bihar) and are leveling serious allegations against the party's Bihar in-charge, accusing him of being a 'sleeper cell' of the RSS.

Some analysts believe this could be a calculated strategy by the Congress. When Rahul Gandhi becomes the face, the election takes the form of 'Modi vs. Rahul,' in which the polarization directly benefits Prime Minister Modi. Perhaps to avoid this, the Congress wants to fight this battle with Tejashwi Yadav at the forefront. But the ground reality is that the Congress campaign is nowhere to be seen, and the absence of its star campaigner is breaking the party's morale.

Conclusion: In Whose Hands Will the Fate of Bihar Lie?

When the EVMs are opened on November 14, they will not just decide the fate of 243 MLAs; they will also reveal the direction in which Bihar's politics is turning. Will Bihar once again remain trapped in the labyrinth of old caste and coalition equations, or will the aspirations for development, employment, and new leadership break this cycle?

For now, the contest is so tight and unpredictable that any prediction would be foolish. The NDA is relying on its organizational strength, its broad social coalition, and the mysterious strategy of an 'undeclared' face. The Mahagathbandhan is betting on Tejashwi Yadav's growing popularity, a declared leadership, and the anti-incumbency wave. And between these two, Prashant Kishor is the 'X-factor' who could rewrite the entire script of the game.

This election is not just a game of numbers; it is a complex story of hopes, aspirations, and resentment. It is the story of the youth who wants freedom from migration, the woman who wants security and dignity, and the farmer who wants the right price for his hard work. The crown of Patna will adorn the head of the one in whose promises—and in whose face—the voter of Bihar sees their future. But one thing is certain: whatever the outcome of this epic struggle, it will write a new and thrilling script for Bihar's political future.



Sanjay Srivastava

DECLINING WHITE SUPREMACY

RISE OF THE REST



The West's long twilight has begun — not with explosions, but with erosion. Declining White Supremacy: Rise of the Rest dismantles the illusion of eternal Western dominance, tracing the global shift from hierarchy to plurality. As the myths of “universal values” and unilateral power collapse, Asia and the Global South emerge as new architects of order. This cover story captures a world in transition — where India stands at the crossroads, mediating between fading empires and a fairer, multipolar future.

After the global financial crisis of 2008, much of the world convinced itself that the U.S.-led “liberal international order” was still alive — weary, perhaps, but resilient; shaken, yet fundamentally sound. Princeton University scholar John Ikenberry, one of its most steadfast defenders, continued to argue that this order would “endure and flourish,” because its roots lay not merely in military or economic power but in a network of shared institutions and supposedly universal values. In his view, even China — its greatest long-term challenger — would eventually be absorbed into this system.

That faith began to crumble with the rise of Donald Trump. His erratic decisions overturned the very premise of Ikenberry’s optimism and raised a stark question: Had America itself become the chief adversary of the order it once built and led?

The thunder of artillery across Ukraine, the blood-soaked alleys of Gaza, and the roar of “America First” from the White House are not isolated events. Together they signal a global upheaval decades in the making — a tectonic shift now reaching its decisive phase. Trump’s unorthodox policies accelerated that earthquake, not only by shaking the global economy through tariff wars but also by casting doubt on the future of NATO and on the very notion of Western solidarity. Fear — even panic — has crept across capitals: is the post-war world order on the verge of collapse?

As the Washington-based scholar Amitabh Acharya reminds us, “Trump did not create this crisis; he has merely amplified the forces that were already hollowing the old order from within.” The turmoil reflects a deeper rebellion against Western liberalism and its claim to universal legitimacy. Yet Acharya also cautions that whatever system emerges from this chaos will not arise from a vacuum; it will inherit portions of the old order’s institutions and ideas. A modest reassurance, perhaps, lies in the fact that no major state has yet imitated Trump’s protectionist “reciprocal tariffs” or embraced his contempt for multilateralism.

Still, the central question remains: are we truly witnessing the end of the world order — or the birth of a new and more intricate one? From policy circles to global think tanks, a shared unease prevails. What once appeared stable now seems to



be entering a turbulent interregnum. This is not the end of the world but, as the 14th-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldun would have said, the world’s rebirth — a cycle in which decay and renewal coexist, demanding that we recognize both disruption and continuity.

This Cult Current cover story explores that transformation: the apparent decline of Western hegemony, the rise of “the Rest,” and the slow formation of a multipolar or multilayered system where power is no longer concentrated in one or two axes but diffused among regional players and overlapping networks of cooperation. Within this shifting landscape, India emerges as a pivotal actor — a nation whose strategic autonomy, economic dynamism, and calibrated diplomacy enable it to help shape the contours of this new global architecture.

The Setting Sun of Western Dominance

The story of Western decline did not begin with Donald Trump; his presidency merely pressed the accelerator. The liberal international order that the United States constructed after World War II is now being undermined by Washington itself. “America First” meant that U.S. interests would outweigh every alliance, norm, or multilateral commitment. The most visible instrument of that doctrine was his policy of “reciprocal tariffs.”



administration treated international institutions with open disdain, eroding the credibility of U.S. leadership. He crippled the World Trade Organization's dispute-settlement mechanism by blocking appointments, effectively paralyzing the system that enforced global trade rules. He marginalized the United Nations and withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, declaring it "unfair to American interests." One by one, these decisions weakened the post-war architecture that the United States had once championed and safeguarded for generations.

America's recent actions have raised profound doubts about the very legitimacy of the international system supposedly grounded in law and rules. Trump's unwavering support for Israel's military operations in Gaza — even as global human-rights observers described them as genocidal — stripped Washington's advocacy of human rights and international law of all credibility. The U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear sites, carried out without international consensus or UN approval, and the exclusive Alaska talks between Washington and Moscow that sidelined smaller nations, violated the principles of the so-called "rules-based international order."

Meanwhile, an alarming rise in U.S. attacks on small vessels in international waters underscored a broader pattern: when the very power that authored the rules begins to flout them openly, the moral foundation for others to follow collapses.

For policymakers, journalists, and think tanks across the globe, the reflexive response to this crisis has been the word "multipolarity" — the redistribution of military and economic power among several leading states. Yet this framework fails to capture the parallel contest of ideas, norms, and leadership, some of which now originate beyond the traditional "great powers." Nor does the European model of multipolarity before World War II fit the 21st century. That older system was dominated by Western imperial powers colonizing much of the non-Western world. It lacked meaningful multilateral institutions, and nuclear deterrence had yet to emerge as a restraint on conflict.

The Weaponization of the U.S. Economy

Over the past decade, the United States has deployed its economy not merely as an engine of growth but as a sharp instrument of coercive diplomacy.

Its unilateral tariffs on China, India, and other

Under this banner, Trump not only targeted rivals such as China — imposing sweeping duties on Chinese goods — but also slapped tariffs on America's closest allies, including the European Union, Canada, and Mexico. The immediate outcome was a collapse of trust: decades-old frameworks of cooperation gave way to suspicion and trade friction. Measures proclaimed as protection for U.S. industry disrupted global supply chains and economically strained America's own partners.

Institutions of collective security fared no better. NATO, once the emblem of Western unity during the Cold War, became a source of anxiety within its own membership. Trump repeatedly questioned its utility and accused European nations of freeloading on U.S. defense expenditure. His blunt warning — that "America will no longer pay for the safety of others" — landed in Europe like a geopolitical shockwave, fracturing the alliance's sense of cohesion.

When European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen remarked, "The Western world, as we knew it, no longer exists," she captured the essence of that unraveling — a widening fracture born not of foreign assault but of internal doubt. The blow was not confined to the military or economic spheres; it struck at the psychological core of Western unity itself.

Nor did Trump's skepticism stop at alliances. His

emerging economies exemplify this weaponization. Yet the strategy has begun to boomerang. Sanctions and trade barriers have not only disrupted global commerce but have also eroded the credibility of the World Trade Organization and other multilateral institutions. America's self-absorbed policy — “America First” — is increasingly morphing into “America Alone.” True global leadership, after all, can endure only when it rests on justice and partnership. Withdrawing aid, launching trade wars, paralyzing institutions, and violating the very rules one created — these steps have steadily corroded the moral legitimacy of U.S. hegemony. When the supposed guardian of a rules-based order begins to dismantle it, the question reverberates across continents:

“If the rule-makers themselves break the rules, why should the rest of the world obey them?”

History teaches that when an empire becomes intoxicated with its own power, the seeds of decay are already sown within. Like the British Empire at its zenith, the United States now faces a dual strain — overextension abroad and fiscal exhaustion at home. That toxic equation has historically propelled great powers toward external wars and internal instability.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Trump's economic nationalism has thrust the world into a new era of transition — a liminal moment in which the old order crumbles and a new one struggles to be born.

The Rise of the Rest

As the grip of the U.S.-led order loosens, the world has entered a new geopolitical age — one in which the center of gravity is shifting from the “West” to the “Rest.”

Analysts often describe this transformation as the rise of multipolarity, yet the term remains inadequate. Today's world is not defined merely by the distribution of military or economic power but by a plurality of ideas, norms, and cultural influences. This is what distinguishes the 21st century from the multipolar Europe of the pre-war era, when imperial powers competed for colonies and no real multilateral institutions — or nuclear constraints — existed to temper their rivalries.

For this reason, leading international-relations theorist Amitav Acharya argues that the concept of “multi-layered order” more accurately describes the emerging reality — an order in which major powers share influence with middle and smaller states, regional



organizations, and even non-state actors.

This evolving world system, he notes, rests on three defining characteristics:

1. The End of Hegemony

No single nation or coalition of powers can dominate the entire globe. The era when America orchestrated global governance through its unmatched military, financial, and technological supremacy is over. China, while still trailing in monetary influence, has already become a frontrunner in development, trade, and infrastructure. Through the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing is redrawing the map of global connectivity, linking Asia, Africa, and Europe through ports, railways, and energy corridors. The European Union, meanwhile, has emerged as a “regulatory superpower” — shaping global standards on climate policy, digital data, and consumer protection.

Its laws increasingly set the benchmarks that even U.S. tech giants must follow. Across the Global South, a constellation of rising regional powers — India, Indonesia (the ASEAN heavyweight), South Africa (a key player in the African Union), Nigeria, and Turkey — are asserting strategic agency within their spheres. Their influence extends beyond BRICS membership to include countries like Mexico, which wields growing clout in the Western Hemisphere.

The cumulative result is a decentralized balance of power — a system with multiple autonomous poles of



influence, where no single hub can command authority across all domains.

2. Issue-Specific Alignments and Strategic Flexibility

In the new multilayered order, power relations will no longer be permanent or bloc-based; they will be issue-specific, guided by strategic flexibility. Nations are consciously avoiding rigid alliances reminiscent of the Cold War. Instead, they are pursuing what diplomats now call “strategic balancing”—choosing partners according to their interests on each specific question.

Thus, a country may seek infrastructure investment and development loans from China, yet turn to the United States, Japan, or Australia for security cooperation or advanced technology. This pattern is especially visible across Southeast Asia: nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam benefit from China’s Belt and Road projects while simultaneously deepening defense partnerships with the U.S. and its allies.

It is a new form of strategic autonomy—a declaration that states no longer wish to be clients of “great powers” but architects of their own destiny. The old notion of “spheres of influence” is, therefore, becoming obsolete. Loyalty will no longer be unipolar or bipolar; it will shift with national priorities and context.

3. The End of Universal Leadership

No single nation will lead on every front. The emerging model dismantles the myth of monopolar

leadership and replaces it with shared, domain-specific stewardship.

- The United States will continue to dominate in military innovation and high-technology defense, sustaining its security alliances.
- China will remain the primary axis of global trade and manufacturing, and a key development partner for the Global South.
- The European Union will lead in environmental governance, climate policy, and digital ethics, using its regulatory might to shape global standards.
- Meanwhile, the Global South—represented by India, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—will play decisive regional roles, drawing security, economic, and technological partnerships from multiple sources depending on the issue.

This new ecology of power grants the Global South greater agency—the ability to select partners on the basis of needs rather than allegiance. Global governance, therefore, will not depend on the benevolence of a single superpower but on a cooperative equilibrium of shared capabilities.

The Eastern Turn of Globalization

For two centuries, globalization revolved around the West—anchored in New York, London, Paris, and Brussels. It was shaped by what might be called the

“Davos vision”—the belief that globalization was a Western achievement born of the 19th-century industrial revolution.

That axis is now steadily tilting eastward—to Beijing, New Delhi, Jakarta, and Riyadh. This “Eastern globalization” is not merely economic; it is also cultural and intellectual. It represents not just the movement of goods and capital but the exchange of ideas, innovation, and developmental models. Asian societies are asserting that global progress can no longer rest solely on Western liberal capitalism. It must be inclusive, plural, and human-centric.

This shift marks an ideological restructuring of the global narrative—where concepts such as “human-centered development” and “shared prosperity” challenge the West’s corporate-centric ethos. In truth, globalization was never an exclusively Western invention. It is, rather, the continuation of ancient civilizational dialogues. The Silk Routes across Eurasia, the vast Indian Ocean trade networks that pre-dated Chinese dominance, and the Arab-Indian-East African maritime circuits all testify that globalization began not in Europe but in Asia, centuries before European imperial powers arrived. These networks connected Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in patterns of exchange that modern capitalism merely rediscovered. Today’s era of “hyper-globalization”—once hailed as the guarantor of prosperity and peace—has reached exhaustion. The weaponization of trade, the overuse of sanctions, and the resurgence of protectionism have fractured its foundations.

As a result, the world is not moving toward de-globalization but toward “re-globalization”—a phase defined by self-reliance, regional cooperation, and Asian leadership at its core.

Re-Globalization: The New Architecture

The new phase of globalization will rest on locality, frugality, and sustainability. Future supply chains will be geographically closer, technologically automated, and environmentally accountable. This transformation is driven not merely by tariff wars but by deeper global forces — automation, the climate emergency, and rapid digitalization.

Nations such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Bangladesh have already built infrastructure and policy ecosystems that support growth and trade resilience. These frameworks remain valuable as countries adapt to the

realities of a reconfigured world economy.

China, meanwhile, is constructing alternative supply networks designed to reduce dependence on the United States. Through its Digital Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing is linking the Global South — across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia — into a web of physical and digital connectivity. These projects have turned China not only into an economic powerhouse but into a genuine “global connector.” Increasingly, Asia itself is viewed as both the engine and the nexus of global development.

Between 2015 and 2021, Asia accounted for 57 percent of global GDP growth and 42 percent of global output (in PPP terms). It now generates more than half of world trade, and its intra-regional commerce — 57 percent of its total trade in 2022 — ranks second only to that of the European Union. This is the emergence of a new economic geography, in which the Global South is becoming the architect of its own destiny.

A recent Economist Intelligence Unit survey reveals that countries pursuing non-aligned, flexible foreign policies — rather than choosing between Washington and Beijing — are becoming increasingly attractive to global investors.

States that maintain diversified partnerships and freedom from great-power axes are viewed as safer, more stable investment hubs in the emerging world economy. While U.S. tariffs may complicate this strategic flexibility, they are unlikely to halt it. In fact, America’s tariff aggression and unilateralism have accelerated the momentum toward South-South cooperation.

Across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, nations are trading more with one another, investing cross-regionally, and slowly emancipating themselves from Western dominance — thereby expanding their agency in global affairs.

BRICS and the Changing Face of Global Governance

The BRICS coalition — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — now expanded to include the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia — represents 55 percent of the world’s population and over one-quarter of global GDP. It stands as the primary geopolitical counterweight to the G7, seeking to amplify the collective voice of the Global South and reduce dependence on Western-dominated institutions. The creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) marks a



crucial step in that direction — a structural alternative to the IMF and World Bank, whose long-promised reforms have stalled.

The NDB provides financing on terms defined by the South itself. Following Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment network, BRICS members have also accelerated efforts to build alternative financial and payment infrastructures that reduce dollar dependence and enhance monetary sovereignty.

Yet the grouping faces serious internal asymmetries and strategic contradictions. Its ambitions are constrained by differences in capacity and intent.

China and, to some extent, Russia have used BRICS to soften their global isolation and promote an alternative governance model. Tensions between China and India, potential deviations by Indonesia and Egypt from Beijing's agenda, and questions over resource commitments from wealthy entrants like the UAE all complicate the bloc's cohesion.

Critics such as former Trump advisor Peter Navarro question BRICS' durability, arguing that its members share a history of mutual suspicion rather than natural alliance.

The most recent BRICS Summit (2024) laid these competing priorities bare. Russia and China championed BRICS as a vehicle for systemic transformation — an axis against Western dominance. Brazil and India, by contrast, favored a cautious, non-aligned approach.

Iran rejected the group's endorsement of a two-state solution for Israel–Palestine, calling it “unrealistic” and urging a single inclusive state instead. Debates during the summit exposed discomfort among some members over accommodating non-democratic regimes, underscoring the ideological fault lines between democratic and authoritarian participants.

President Xi Jinping cast BRICS as a bulwark against hegemonism, grounded in three pillars: multilateralism, open and inclusive globalization, and solidarity through cooperation in trade, finance, and technology. That framing positioned China unmistakably as the bloc's leading voice. Russia, meanwhile, called for deeper intra-BRICS trade and investment.

Yet the Kremlin's official summary conspicuously truncated President Vladimir Putin's remarks — fueling speculation that, under mounting Western pressure,

Moscow still seeks to retain a measure of autonomy even as it grows economically dependent on Beijing.

India's Perspective

In this rapidly transforming world order, India's role is both pivotal and profoundly complex. As an emerging economic and strategic power, India is performing a delicate act of geopolitical calibration—moving its pieces with measured precision across the global chessboard.

At the heart of its foreign policy lies the doctrine of “multi-alignment,” which rejects rigid blocs in favor of flexible partnerships based on national interest. This strategic autonomy enables India to operate on its own terms, positioning itself as a “bridge power” between competing poles.

The Rise of an Economic Powerhouse and the Strategy of “Prudent Trade”

India is on course to become the world's third-largest economy by 2029, with a projected GDP of \$6.3 trillion. This is not merely numerical growth but the outcome of deliberate structural transformation — strategic investments, a robust digital economy (contributing nearly 11% of GDP and expanding rapidly), global leadership in information technology services, and emerging capacities in artificial intelligence and advanced computing. India's startup ecosystem, the third largest globally with 117 unicorns as of January 2025, stands as testimony to its entrepreneurial dynamism and innovation-driven growth.

Massive infrastructure investments, industrial diversification, and “Made-in-South” solutions reflect India's ambition to build a self-reliant yet globally competitive economy. On the trade front, India follows a policy of “prudent engagement.” On one hand, it strengthens its commercial ties with Western markets — exemplified by the India-UK Trade Agreement — while on the other, it maintains pragmatic economic linkages with competitors like China.

The reopening of cross-border trade through Nathula Pass, and renewed cooperation in sectors such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, and automotive manufacturing, underline India's willingness to compartmentalize geopolitics and economics when necessary. This is not a momentary surge in commerce; it is a strategic imperative. To realize its ambition of becoming a global manufacturing hub, India

Asia — From Civilization to Power

The 21st century's most defining geopolitical truth is this: the center of global gravity has shifted eastward—to Asia. This is not merely an economic realignment but a profound civilizational resurgence. Between 2015 and 2021, Asia accounted for nearly 57% of global GDP growth and contributed around 42% of the world's total purchasing power. The continent is no longer just a manufacturing hub—it has evolved into a self-sustaining economic bloc driven by robust intra-regional trade and rising domestic consumption.

In 2022, intra-Asian trade constituted 57% of the region's total trade, signaling that Asia is no longer an appendage to Western markets but an autonomous global system in its own right. The tariff wars unleashed under the Trump administration momentarily disrupted this momentum, unsettling export-dependent economies like Vietnam, South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Yet, instead of retreating, Asia accelerated toward greater self-reliance.

Today, Asian economies are building supply-chain ecosystems less dependent on the United States and more integrated with one another. This marks the rise of a re-globalization process—one in which the flow of power no longer moves from East to West, but increasingly, from South to South.

recognizes that engagement with China — despite persistent border frictions — remains economically necessary.

This reflects a deep strategic realism: to be a credible global producer, India must also trade with its strongest rival.

Strategic Autonomy and the Diplomacy of Multi-Alignment

India's balancing act is remarkably deft, weaving together relationships across rival camps without compromising its independence.

• Relations with the United States:

India's ties with Washington have expanded from IT services to include manufacturing, energy, and defense collaboration.

Imports of crude oil and advanced military hardware have helped stabilize trade frictions.

The U.S. views India as an indispensable partner in countering China's growing influence across the Indo-Pacific, leading to enhanced defense interoperability and technology transfers.

- **Enduring Partnership with Russia:**

Despite Western sanctions, India continues strong cooperation with Russia in defense and energy.

Moscow remains a long-standing, trusted supplier of military equipment, while discounted Russian oil has played a crucial role in India's energy security.

This underscores New Delhi's strategic autonomy—prioritizing national interest over geopolitical pressure and refusing to abandon time-tested partnerships.

- **Pragmatic Engagement with China:**

Despite recurring border tensions, India demonstrates realism in its economic relations with Beijing.

Through platforms like BRICS+, New Delhi maintains active dialogue, even as it quietly resists China's dominance over rare-earth mineral exports and advocates for the creation of resilient, diversified supply chains free from geopolitical coercion.

This dual posture — engagement with vigilance — reflects India's broader aspiration for a balanced and multipolar supply ecosystem.

India in BRICS: Balancing China's Dominance

India's position within BRICS is inherently multidimensional. New Delhi has articulated its priorities around reliable supply chains, inclusive development, climate action, and reformed multilateralism. At the most recent summit, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar emphasized the need for fair, transparent, and rules-based economic practices.

The decision for India to be represented by its Foreign Minister rather than its Prime Minister underscored its cautious approach — valuing engagement without endorsement. While India continues to see BRICS as a vital platform, it avoids supporting aggressive de-dollarization proposals that could antagonize Washington or complicate its strategic relations with

the United States. This is emblematic of India's subtle diplomacy — balancing long-term strategic interests with short-term geopolitical prudence.

The alignment between Russia and India within BRICS acts as a critical counterweight to unchecked Chinese dominance. Despite Moscow's deepening economic dependence on Beijing, it maintains a degree of autonomy through multi-vector diplomacy. India, for its part, advances an agenda that transcends Chinese or Russian objectives, reflecting the broader aspirations of the Global South.

Climate Pragmatism and Leadership for the Developing World

Like many Global South nations, India approaches climate change through a lens of pragmatism — emphasizing balance between development and sustainability. Its vast forests and wetlands act as major carbon sinks, offering nature-based pathways for carbon sequestration. India consistently advocates for climate finance and technology transfer from developed nations, arguing that historical emitters must bear a greater share of responsibility.

For developing countries, a just transition to clean energy cannot be achieved without access to capital, innovation, and time. Through these policies, India has positioned itself not only as a leader of the Global South, but also as a stabilizing and constructive force in a world undergoing turbulent transformation. Its expanding economic clout and strategic independence grant it a unique and influential role in shaping the post-Western order.

Challenges, Opportunities, and the Road Ahead

This emerging multilayered world brings extraordinary promise, yet it also carries serious risks. Transitions are rarely smooth; they often produce instability, fragmentation, and a sense of global "anarchy" where norms lose their binding force and power becomes less restrained than at any point in the last eight decades. Even within the Global South, challenges abound — widening income inequality, limited access to development finance, political volatility, trade nationalism, and the looming threat posed by China's industrial overcapacity, which can flood developing markets with cheap imports.

To navigate these disruptions and seize emerging opportunities, governments across the Global South

must pursue a threefold strategy:

1. Building Trade Resilience

Nations must prepare for continual supply-chain reconfiguration. In an age of economic protectionism and near-shoring, participation in global production networks is both more accessible and more competitive. To sustain relevance, Global South economies must diversify exports, cut trade costs through customs and logistics reforms, and invest in branding and quality upgrades. Regional trade agreements and partnerships can facilitate talent exchange and technology transfer. In some cases, protective measures may be needed to shield domestic industries from sudden import surges as trade partners redirect excess capacity. Governments must also enhance trade-promotion capabilities, monitor geopolitical shifts, and establish export-stabilization funds to weather future shocks.

2. Deepening Engagement with the Global North

Many advanced economies are themselves seeking new avenues for growth amid stagnating markets and intensifying competition. For instance, as U.S. protectionism constrains Canadian trade, Canadian firms are turning toward emerging economies. This presents a historic opening for the Global South to position itself as a preferred trade and investment partner, integrating more deeply and strategically into global value chains.

3. Investing Early in Innovation and Skills

Without early and sustained investment in science, technology, and innovation, nations risk exclusion from high-value sectors such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and biotechnology. According to the World Bank, Global South economies spend, on average, barely one-fourth of the GDP share that advanced economies invest in R&D. Bridging this gap requires governments to cultivate a robust environment for venture capital, entrepreneurship, and start-up incubation. Supporting innovative SMEs, upgrading business ecosystems, and expanding digital infrastructure through public-private partnerships can accelerate progress. Equally vital is human-capital development — advancing science and technology education, attracting global talent, and incentivizing employers to continuously upgrade their workforce's skills.

Toward a Post-Western Synthesis



If the 20th century belonged to the West, the 21st is becoming the century of plural civilizations. The decline of white supremacy is not merely a geopolitical shift — it is the erosion of a myth: that modernity, progress, and power flow from one civilization alone.

The “Rest” — Asia, Africa, Latin America — are not rising as imitators, but as authors of their own narratives. Their ascent does not mark the collapse of the world order but its democratization — the emergence of a truly polycentric world in which justice, autonomy, and diversity replace hierarchy, dependency, and control. India’s measured yet assertive diplomacy embodies that evolution. In the words of an Indian strategist, “We are no longer rule-takers; we are co-authors of the rules.”

The age of Western dominance may be ending — but the age of shared destiny has just begun.

4. Reconciling Growth with Social and Environmental Justice

No growth can endure if it leaves inequality and the planet behind. Deepening social divides are already fueling polarization and anti-establishment waves across continents. Redistribution policies, regional development programs, and social safety nets are not merely welfare tools — they are instruments of stability, necessary to prevent unrest and ensure inclusive progress. Environmental security, likewise, has become a strategic imperative.

Sustainability is not just an ethical choice but a market necessity, as access to key trade networks increasingly depends on compliance with green standards. Effective



climate mitigation and adaptation demand clear national commitments, robust regulatory frameworks, and reliable financing. Some estimates suggest developing nations will require an additional USD 1.3 trillion annually in technological and infrastructure investments to combat and adapt to climate change — a figure that underscores the urgency of sustained international support.

Rethinking Global Cooperation

Traditional forms of global collaboration — such as exclusive clubs like the G7 — risk irrelevance unless they expand and adapt. Institutions like the United Nations, however, will continue to play a vital role through specialized agencies such as the IMF and UNESCO, managing financial crises and safeguarding cultural heritage. With the UN Security Council paralyzed by polarization, the General Assembly is poised for greater visibility and agency. Hybrid forms of cooperation — involving governments, corporations, foundations, and NGOs — are becoming increasingly important, as seen in the success of the Gates Foundation in global health and the Forest Stewardship Council in sustainable governance. Even as leaders like Donald Trump pressure allies into transactional bilateralism, smaller and regional compacts will continue to thrive — often complementing multilateral efforts rather than replacing them. The norms of multilateralism, reciprocity, humanitarianism, and environmental responsibility, though weakened, are far from dead. They are likely to revive and strengthen in the post-Trump order. Global cooperation may increasingly proceed in a “World Minus One” mode — moving forward without

American participation where necessary, but leaving the door open for Washington’s eventual return.

Ironically, Trumpism’s inward turn could push Western nations to seek deeper partnerships with the Global South, as exemplified by the UK–India trade pact — a glimpse of the pragmatic globalization to come.

A New Birth of the World: India and the Quest for a Balanced Future

Despite the prevailing anxiety about disorder and decline, the world is not ending — it is transforming. Unless a catastrophic nuclear event intervenes, a new international order will emerge atop the old, rectifying its failures while retaining fragments of continuity. We must resist the self-fulfilling prophecy that world order will collapse merely because America has lost its way.

Instead, we should recognize that forces of disruption and chaos coexist with those of continuity and consensus. In the words of Ibn Khaldun, we are witnessing “the world being brought into existence anew.” India, with its civilizational depth, economic dynamism, and diplomatic finesse, stands uniquely placed in this rebirth.

It is not merely an observer of the West’s decline but a participant in the making of a fairer, multipolar, and multilayered world. Its foreign policy of non-alignment reborn as multi-alignment gives it the agility to engage with multiple power centers while defending its national interests. India has become the voice and mirror of the Global South, symbolizing the aspirations of societies seeking greater agency, dignity, and voice in world affairs. India’s rise, therefore, is not just the ascent of a nation — it is the emergence of a new worldview, one that envisions cooperation over coercion, pluralism over polarity, and shared prosperity over domination.

As the old wall of “West versus the Rest” crumbles, a more inclusive and interconnected world is taking shape — fragile yet full of promise. Under India’s leadership and with the collective wisdom of the Global South, the 21st century may yet deliver a balanced global order, where international law, humanitarian values, and economic interdependence thrive together — ensuring peace, justice, and stability for generations to come.

BROKEN LINKS IN DIGITAL INDIA



Syed Sultan Kazi

As India races toward a digital future, its northeastern frontier remains trapped in buffering screens and broken networks. The digital divide here isn't just about weak signals—it's about a region left behind in the nation's technological march.



In a rapidly advancing digital era, as India takes long strides towards creating a digitally empowered society and a knowledge-based economy, the country's Northeastern Region (NER) presents a starkly contrasting picture. While the rest of the nation resonates with the slogan of 'Digital India', the eight strategically vital northeastern states are facing a digital divide that is becoming a new form of developmental lag—what can be termed as digital isolation. Despite numerous policies, schemes, and programs, the Northeast is not progressing at the pace required to keep up with the rest of the country. A variety of reasons, such as the region's difficult geographical terrain, limited connectivity with the rest of the country, and pre-existing institutional challenges, are responsible for this. Consequently, the states of Northeast India are unable to match the developmental pace of other states. Therefore, it is essential to understand the current state of digital connectivity in the Northeast and the impact of ongoing efforts, in order to provide policy recommendations to integrate this region with the country's revolutionary digital transformation.

If Northeast India lags behind the rest of the country in the digital sphere, the reason is not just slow internet; it is a reflection of the disparities in the availability, affordability, and quality of internet service. The rugged, hilly terrain of the Northeast is often prone to natural disasters, which complicates the expansion of infrastructure for digital services. The outcome of this is a grim reality. Many villages in the Northeast are completely cut off from mobile networks; for example, approximately 49.24 percent of villages in Arunachal Pradesh and 65.94 percent in Sikkim have no mobile connectivity. This lack of infrastructure is a major reason why the northeastern states are significantly behind the rest of the

country in terms of internet subscribers per hundred people.

A deeper examination of this infrastructure issue reveals that the real problem lies in the quality of service. Even in villages where mobile connectivity is available, its speed and reliability are considerably worse compared to the rest of the country. Independent internet speed tests conducted by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in states like Assam and Meghalaya paint a challenging picture. For instance, some parts of Meghalaya have BSNL's 2G network, where the call drop rate is 8.75 percent. In areas with 3G network facilities, the call drop rate is 10.60 percent, which is four to five times higher than the 2 percent call drop benchmark for quality of service. Similarly, in some parts of Assam, the call set-up success rate for this state-owned company's 2G network is only 76.02 percent, which is below the benchmark of 98 percent. Data service, considered the backbone of any digital economy, also presents an unsatisfactory picture in the northeastern states. In Meghalaya, the average download speed of BSNL's 3G network is a mere 0.315 Mbps. This is not just a matter of inconvenience; such issues create fundamental barriers to accessing facilities like e-governance, online education, telemedicine, and digital commerce, depriving a large segment of the population of these services. The problem is further compounded by the



lack of a robust system for real-time data collection on internet and mobile network quality across the Northeast. This data deficit leaves policymakers without the necessary insights to bridge this digital divide and create targeted policies for specific populations.

It is not that the central government is unaware of these challenges. The government has taken steps such as the 'Digital North East Vision 2022' and the ambitious BharatNet project, with the declared aim of bridging

this gap. The 'Digital North East' initiative focuses on implementing digital solutions specifically tailored for the northeastern states to empower citizens in areas like agriculture, education for the disabled, and traditional skills. More recently, the 'Samriddh Gram' (Prosperous Village) scheme was launched. Its pilot project aims to provide integrated 'Phygital Services' using BharatNet's infrastructure to develop a vibrant digital village ecosystem. These are visions that inspire new hope for the country and the entire Northeast region.

However, on the ground, the implementation of these schemes has been plagued by delays and inefficiencies. The progress of BharatNet in Northeast India has been very slow due to the region's geographical terrain and logistical challenges. The national vision of a digitally empowered 'Samriddh Gram' in Northeast India, which would provide various facilities through high-speed internet, will remain difficult to realize as long as the infrastructure to make it a reality remains incomplete and unreliable. This raises a crucial question: how are these programs and schemes aimed at enhancing digital connectivity reviewed, evaluated, and audited? There is a pressing need for a more professional, prioritized, and honest



approach to auditing these schemes. A concrete, independent, and transparent evaluation of the promises made and the actual achievements of these well-intentioned schemes is essential. Otherwise, all these schemes will be reduced to grand announcements, and the government funds spent on them

will go into a digital abyss with no tangible results, nor will the quality of service improve for users in every panchayat or village of this remote region.

To reduce digital disparities, we must shift our focus from merely enhancing 'connectivity' to achieving 'meaningful connectivity'. This concept encompasses the quality of the connection and includes 'adequate



speed, sufficient data, and appropriate devices. According to records from January 2023, with the exception of Assam (22.55 Mbps), the average wireless download speed in urban centers of every northeastern state is less than 20 Mbps, which is the minimum recommended speed to avoid issues like buffering.

Furthermore, the cost of internet service remains a significant barrier. According to the United Nations Broadband Commission's definition, the internet is affordable for everyone only when the cost of an entry-level data plan is less than 2 percent of the average monthly income. By this standard, people in Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura have to spend a much larger amount for basic internet

plans. The gender gap further complicates this matter; in Assam and Meghalaya, less than forty percent of women have ever used the internet in their lives. Another important dimension is the lack of relevant local content on the internet. Northeast India is the most linguistically diverse region of India, with 63 non-scheduled languages spoken by a significant number of people. This tremendous diversity poses a barrier to creating a digital ecosystem with content that is relevant and accessible to all, which is a crucial aspect of digital inclusion.

Discussions on digital development in Northeast India now focus on the next frontiers of digital transformation: Artificial Intelligence (AI), Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), and skill transformation; in



Infrastructure that includes identity and payments. However, the failure rate of digital payments in Northeast India is one and a half to two times higher than the national average, due to network downtime and halved internet speeds. This instability erodes public trust in the digital infrastructure and discourages people from adopting digital services. To be prepared for a future led by emerging technologies, the immediate and foremost priority in this diverse and landlocked region is to build a resilient, high-quality, and reliable network infrastructure.

Bridging the digital divide between Northeast India and the rest of the country is not just a numbers game; failing to do so could result in a massive loss of human potential. It would mean that many generations in the Northeast are still deprived of the benefits of a digital society and economy, and many more generations will be condemned to it. A major shift is needed to avoid such a bleak future of low digital development. The urgency to enhance connectivity must be coupled



all these cases, basic connectivity is the key to success. The future of work will be heavily influenced by AI and automation. However, a strong AI ecosystem cannot be built in this region on a weak internet foundation. These capacity gaps are clearly visible in the education sector. For instance, only 16.27 percent of schools in Assam have functional computers, and only 11.71 percent have internet access. This is far below a state like Gujarat, where these figures are 97.8 and 92 percent, respectively.

Initiatives by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) for capacity building are steps in the right direction, but they need to be expanded on a much larger scale. The backbone of any modern digital state is a robust Digital Public

with the provision of good connectivity. This requires a multi-stakeholder approach that goes beyond policy announcements and provision by Internet Service Providers (ISPs). It requires timely implementation of schemes, professional auditing of program progress, and real-time monitoring of service quality. Along with this, there must be an emphasis on creating a future-ready ecosystem that promotes relevant skill development, opportunities, and local content to foster the growth of local digital communities and economies. Tackling the problem of the digital divide is a challenging but necessary journey that requires strong commitment. These efforts are essential to realize the immense potential of Northeast India, known as the 'Gateway to Southeast Asia', in today's digital age.

FUELING INDIA'S GREEN FUTURE

India's green energy journey now runs through the global mineral map. With lithium and copper as lifelines, Latin America is emerging as the new bridge powering India's sustainable future.



Vivek Mishra



Prakreeti Chaudhary

The global transition to clean energy is creating new dependencies on minerals that serve as the backbone of renewable power and electric mobility. Lithium and copper, in particular, have emerged as indispensable resources for sustaining low-carbon growth. Yet, despite the growing body of research on mineral wealth spread across the world, much of the focus remains on China's vast investments or the sustainability-oriented frameworks of Western nations. Latin America, an emerging geography in the global reorientation and focus on critical minerals, remains relatively less well-known. As India reorients in its quest for critical minerals and other supply chains connected to its import and export, engagements with Latin America are likely to become a key conduit.

India's aspiration to reach a US\$5 trillion economy and cut its reliance on fossil fuels hinges on securing resources. Without access to the critical minerals, India's energy transition and its broader development agenda would struggle to advance rapidly. Perhaps the most important security guarantee in this regard would be a steady flow of minerals that are not available in required quantities at home. Amid the global flux caused by policy upheavals in the United States (US), establishing new supply chain connectivity with Latin America—not just in critical minerals but other export and import items—could power India's own ambitions in this sector and provide much-desired predictability.

At the heart of this concept is the famous Lithium Triangle, which spans Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, containing over 60 percent of the world's lithium reserves located beneath its salt flats and deserts. In the mountains of Chile and Peru, large copper deposits form another hub for a potential global energy transformation. These resources, hidden in distant landscapes, could become lifelines for India's economic and environmental goals. The trajectory of India's engagement with Latin America in critical minerals could shape its economy.

Goeconomics of Minerals

Critical minerals such as Lithium, Cobalt, and Copper represent more than mere commodities and are central to the new era goeconomics driven by their linkages to clean energy, sustainability, and cutting-edge revolution in technologies. For instance, lithium-powered batteries are transforming not just electric vehicles but also how countries are recalibrating against their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Other critical minerals, such as Cobalt and Copper, are important for their essential roles in modern technologies and for defence and renewable sectors, as well as serve as the industrial backbone of modern power systems from solar grids to wind turbines.

India's shift to Latin America has accelerated steadily over the past few years. In the area of critical minerals, Latin America's own integration with the global supply and value chains has met a scramble in India to secure sufficiency in this sector. A new ground was broken in January 2024 when Khanij Bidesh India Ltd (KABIL) signed an agreement with Argentina's state-owned company CAMYEN SE. This marked India's first direct mining partnership in Latin America, giving India rights to explore and develop over 15,000 hectares of lithium-rich brine blocks. In February 2025, both sides signed another Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for deeper collaboration in exploration and resource development of critical minerals, building upon the previous year's mining agreement. In parallel, negotiations with Chile opened doors for cooperation across copper and lithium, while private Indian enterprises began exploring opportunities in Peru and Bolivia. What once seemed like a limited trade now appears as the early stages of a broader strategic partnership between India and Latin America.

Competing in the Global Arena

The global scene for critical minerals is crowding rapidly, leading to potential competition in the near future. Latin America is positioned as the next continent where the critical minerals kerfuffle, especially for Lithium, could lead to great power competition. China's presence in Latin America is far greater than India's. China is investing in Argentina's lithium and nuclear power projects. Since 2018, Chinese companies have invested over US\$16 billion in mining and processing operations, reinforced by infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. A portion of these investments has been directed at securing a vertically integrated system that stretches from mining to refining and to battery production. China also controls a significant portion of Peru's mining sector. Chile is another country in the region with large Lithium





deposits, where China has risen to be the biggest buyer.

India's current approach looks modest in comparison. Government-to-government agreements provide an entry point, but the involvement of private companies and the integration of the supply chain remain limited. Effectively securing its place in Latin America requires India to pursue innovative, environmentally conscious mining practices and cultivate partnerships that prioritise both growth and ethical standards.

India's engagement with Latin America's mineral wealth presents both opportunities and challenges. To establish itself as a trusted and innovative partner, India must follow an approach that extends beyond conventional extractive investment strategies. It should position itself not only as a buyer of critical minerals but also as a knowledge partner, capable of engaging in a give-and-take approach regarding the technologies and expertise associated with mining these vital resources. As environmental pressures are significant, lithium extraction in Chile's Atacama

Desert and copper mining in Peru consume large amounts of water and harm fragile ecosystems. India can learn from and contribute to new extraction technologies as a strong votary of renewable-energy-powered extraction technologies, such as solar-driven evaporation ponds for lithium and wind-assisted ore processing for copper. These low-impact methods, coupled with rehabilitation programmes for mined areas, could allow India to demonstrate environmental stewardship while ensuring long-term resource sustainability. Furthermore, India can pioneer the integration of circular economy principles into its mineral strategy. Instead of relying solely on extraction, India could implement systems to recycle batteries and copper, transforming waste streams into valuable resources.

India's growing relationship with Latin America, particularly in technology cooperation for minerals extraction, could strengthen its ties. However, the broader global context warrants caution. Mineral prices swing with global demand, and geopolitical tensions can disrupt supply chains at a moment's



notice. To safeguard its energy ambitions, India must diversify its sourcing across multiple countries, maintain strategic reserves of lithium and copper, and leverage technology to monitor operations in real-time. What truly sets India apart is the possible integration of digital governance and predictive analytics into mining partnerships, a largely unexplored frontier. Blockchain and Internet of Things (IoT) systems can provide transparency across every stage, ensuring ethical practices and traceable, accountable supply chains.

India also has the chance to go beyond mere extraction. Establishing battery manufacturing units or mineral processing facilities within host countries would enable India to capture more value downstream, generate employment, and strengthen its diplomatic relations. Coupled with innovative financing models, such as green mineral bonds or blended public-private investment schemes, can attract long-term capital while signalling India's commitment to sustainable and responsible development. Through this, India can also address the skills and capacity gaps in Latin America. Training programmes, joint research projects, and scholarships can build a pipeline of skilled professionals, boosting operational efficiency and

embedding knowledge locally.

Yet, even with strong community ties, the path is not without uncertainty. The political and regulatory landscapes in Latin America can shift rapidly, with changing mining laws, royalty structures, or even moves toward nationalisation. India can navigate these complexities through carefully structured multi-year agreements that provide legal stability while aligning incentives between governments, local companies, and Indian partners. By building these layered relationships, India can create a network resilient enough to withstand policy fluctuations and economic shocks.

As the global reliance on semiconductors increases, ensuring stability in the critical minerals sector requires a delicate balancing between creating domestic centres under its National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) and external reliance on predictable geographies. Latin America could be one such geography.

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INDIA'S BIO-AI LEAP



Lakshmy Ramakrishnan

The convergence of biotechnology and AI is rewriting the rules of medicine. From predictive drug design to personalized therapies, India's vast data ecosystem, skilled scientists, and progressive biotech policies can position it as a global leader in ethical, AI-driven pharmaceutical innovation—if regulation and infrastructure keep pace with ambition.

The global pharmaceutical landscape is at a critical juncture. Traditional approaches to drug discovery face constraints due to lengthy timelines, high costs, and uncertain outcomes. Estimates indicate that drug development takes 10-15 years, with research and development (R&D) for a new product requiring at least US\$2.5 billion. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in drug development has been identified as a way to accelerate the process—predicting drug properties, optimising clinical trials, and formulating personalised medicines. As China makes rapid advances in this sector and the United States (US) undergoes structural transitions, the landscape presents both a challenge and an opportunity for India to leverage its talent pool, patient datasets, and biotechnology policies to drive AI-assisted drug discovery



The process of developing new medicines is complex and labour-intensive, often taking decades and relying heavily on trial-and-error experimentation. AI-based techniques hold considerable potential to transform this landscape by enabling accurate and efficient analysis of large datasets, predicting the properties and functions of novel drug candidates, and enhancing the efficacy of clinical trials through improved trial design.

The breakthrough in AI-life sciences occurred when DeepMind's AlphaFold predicted protein structures from amino acid sequences in 2018. This was followed by the use of AI in mRNA vaccine research during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the development of personalised medicine by integrating AI with multi-omics data in 2023. This catalysed a new phase in life science innovation with drug companies partnering with tech firms to leverage AI healthcare solutions. For instance, Eli Lilly and Novartis have partnered with Isomorphic Labs to advance Google Deep Mind's AlphaFold technology; EvolutionaryScale – an AI startup that focuses on life biology – raised US\$142 million in funding in 2024 and is partnering with Amazon Web Services and NVIDIA for drug discovery research; and Sanofi will implement BenchSci's generative AI platform – Ascend – that is specialised for disease biology across Sanofi's global sites.

and transition from the 'pharmacy of the world' to an innovation-based pharmaceutical system.

AI as a Catalyst in Drug Discovery

Drug discovery is essential as emerging diseases and drug resistance challenge existing treatments, understanding of disease mechanisms and healthcare needs deepens, and the demand for affordable therapies increases. For any research organisation or company, advancing a drug candidate to Phase I clinical trials is a tremendous feat; however, 90 percent of drug candidates fail during Phase I, II, or III of the clinical trials. Most of these failures occur during Phase I trials owing to issues in toxicity and efficacy, indicating that rigorous optimisation is needed to identify ideal drug candidates.

With global spending on medicines likely to exceed US\$1.9 trillion by 2027 due to ageing demographics and an increased burden of diseases, the need for innovation in drug discovery has never been greater.

The world's first completely generative AI-discovered drug, rentosertib, was developed by Insilico Medicine. The company applies a completely AI-driven drug discovery platform for screening drug candidates. AstraZeneca was able to reduce its drug discovery timeline using BenevolentAI. Furthermore, Roche has leveraged the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Modernisation Act 2.0 for non-animal model-based testing by applying organoid-on-chip and AI for understanding drug toxicity. In 2024, India's Aurigene introduced an AI/ Machine Learning (ML)-enabled drug discovery platform to reduce the drug development timeline by 35 percent, marking a significant advancement.

Most large language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, have been aiding researchers with literature surveys, bioinformatics, statistics, and, oftentimes, as a lab assistant, while Chan Zuckerberg's rBio is an LLM that enables users to pose complex challenges. This AI-based cellular model provides digital

representations of cell behaviour, potentially offering insights into how drugs affect cellular activities. Most recently, Google's C2S-Scale 27B foundation model – based on Gemma and developed with Yale University- offers critical information on cancer cell behaviour, potentially enabling the development of new pathways for cancer drug therapies.

Global Race: China, USA, India

China increasingly exemplifies a 'DeepSeek moment' in life sciences as it emerges as a global competitor. Presently, China is the frontrunner in AI-driven drug discovery patents. Multibillion-dollar deals between global pharmaceutical giants—Sanofi, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and Eli Lilly—and Chinese AI biotech firms have boosted China's drug discovery capabilities, signalling a shift from generic manufacturing to innovative drug development. China's ascent is fueled by considerable state and private investments in life science R&D, dedicated policies to expand the country's manufacturing capacity, prioritisation of AI in the 2025 Five-Year Plan, access to vast patient datasets for AI training, and a multidisciplinary talent pool reinforced by brain gain policies such as the 'K visa.' A vibrant start-up ecosystem coupled with a dedicated national venture capital guidance fund for disruptive technologies has positioned China as a formidable player in AI-assisted drug discovery.

On the other hand, the US—the global leader in life sciences—is undergoing structural changes that threaten to hamper the AI-drug innovation nexus. Funding cuts to the National Institutes of Health and National Science Foundation, stricter visa regulations, and looming revenue losses from expiring drug patents for pharmaceutical companies are only a few examples of innovation slowing down.

India's AI Opportunity

For India, these developments highlight both a challenge and an opportunity: as China strengthens its AI-driven drug discovery capabilities, and global tech firms and pharma companies seek investment opportunities, India must strategically leverage its own talent pool, patient datasets, and life science policies – such as BioE3 – to remain competitive in the AI-assisted drug discovery landscape.

India recognised the potential of integrating AI with life sciences with the launch of the first AI-biology

India stands at the threshold of a biotech revolution where artificial intelligence is redefining drug discovery. As China surges and the US recalibrates, India's fusion of biology and algorithms could transform it from the "pharmacy of the world" to a powerhouse of pharmaceutical innovation.

symposium during the Genomics India Conference in August 2025 at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), while AI featured prominently at the world's leading life sciences event – Bio Asia 2025 – in Telangana. The Department of Biotechnology and BIRAC led a workshop on Bio-AI to further India's BioE3 policy. Global Capability Centres (GCCs) in India will adopt AI for drug development, while Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and biotechnology parks will provide infrastructural support. Furthermore, Karnataka and Telangana are poised to serve as hubs for life science GCCs, with state governments supporting the set-up of Centres of Excellence for R&D. Notably, Hyderabad's Novartis Biome has focused on integrating AI into pharma R&D. In addition, Bristol Myers Squibb has invested US\$100 million to launch a GCC for AI in drug discovery. Most recently, Google's parent company, Alphabet, announced a US\$15 billion investment in an AI hub in Visakhapatnam to drive AI innovation across India. Furthermore, with India possessing the second-largest GenAI startup hub, the application of AI in life sciences will likely expand. As India prepares to host the AI Impact Summit in February 2026, these steps indicate that India is well-positioned to enhance AI applications, including drug discovery, strengthening its global standing.

Challenges and Governance Imperatives

Several challenges and limitations to AI in drug discovery need consideration. Large volumes of high-quality and consistent data are necessary for training purposes and to ensure the accuracy and reliability of experimental outcomes. Biases in datasets can exacerbate healthcare disparities if certain demographic groups are underrepresented, potentially leading to poor drug efficacy or safety issues in these groups. Siloed data can hinder sharing and collaboration, leading to 'hallucinations' or misleading outcomes from inconsistent data. Machine learning's 'blackbox problem' – the inability to understand how deep learning carries out its decision-making – raises



questions over the fairness and reliability of AI-driven decisions.

Furthermore, the risk of adversarial attacks – where deceptive data is introduced into training sets to manipulate AI models – poses a significant threat to health and safety. Finally, the convergence of AI in healthcare presents unique ethical, legal, and social considerations. Collectively, these challenges demonstrate that AI-driven drug discovery requires regulatory and accountability frameworks to ensure that its application is comprehensive, robust, and achieves the wider goal of improving patient outcomes in a safe, ethical, and efficient manner.

India's Regulatory Gap

As regulatory frameworks for AI are being developed globally, comprehensive frameworks for the convergence of AI and life sciences remain limited. While the European Union and Japan have legislation governing AI development and deployment, the US FDA has released guidelines on AI-powered medical devices and on leveraging AI for biological products, including drugs.

India has made progress through the National Strategy for AI for All, the Digital Personal Data

Protection Act, 2023, and the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission. Yet, there is still a need to formulate frameworks for AI-life science convergence. Establishing these frameworks is imperative to align India with growing global benchmarks, ensuring AI-driven drug discovery initiatives remain competitive, innovative, and ethically robust.

Conclusion

The convergence of AI and drug discovery presents India with a unique opportunity to redefine its pharmaceutical sector. While China advances rapidly with state and private-backed investments and focused policies, and as the US navigates structural constraints, India's strengths lie with its growing talent ecosystem, biotech policies, and international partnerships. India must establish robust regulatory frameworks aligned with growing global standards to ensure transparent, safe, and fair application of AI. By combining innovation with governance, India can accelerate drug discovery, foster equitable healthcare solutions, and secure a competitive position in the global life sciences landscape.

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BETWEEN SANCTIONS AND STRATEGY

Between U.S. pressure and Russian oil, India treads a fine line to protect its strategic and energy interests.



Shastri Ramachandaran

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to skip the Kuala Lumpur summit reflects more than a scheduling choice—it's a strategic dodge from Donald Trump's mounting pressure on India to cut Russian oil imports. Beneath the diplomatic pleasantries lies a tense power play shaping India's energy sovereignty.

It is just as well that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to skip going to the two-day East Asian leaders' summit in Kuala Lumpur from October 26 to 28. Modi settling for virtual attendance at the ASEAN summit is being seen as his way of averting a face-to-face bilateral meeting with US President Donald Trump.

As speculated, had an in-person meeting between the two happened, Trump's two-faced pressure on India to halt import of Russian oil would have become three-faced.

In his current tactics of harm-and-charm, on the one hand, Trump publicly warns India against importing oil from Russia and threatens even higher tariffs; on the other hand, he tweets flattering messages to Modi saying he's a good friend and great leader and telephones to greet him on occasions such as his birthday and the Diwali festival.

Modi plays along when it comes to Trump's messages and calls to charm him. Modi's verbal response may be effusive, but his actions show that he does not expect these pleasantries to make the US retreat from inflicting harm on India by way of tariffs. The only way the latter can happen is if Modi refuses to buckle under Trump's pressure as he appears to be doing, by not meeting Trump in-person.

The official reason advanced for Modi staying away from this important forum is Deepavali (or Diwali) festivities. However, there are few takers for this explanation. Observers point out that Modi had also kept away from the summit on Gaza in Egypt, evidently to avoid being cornered by Trump. He has deputed External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to represent India at the East Asia Summit whereas he sent a junior minister to Egypt.

Modi is said to be miffed with Trump for claiming more than 50 times in recent months that he had mediated the ceasefire between India and Pakistan after a short but fierce military standoff between the two Asian neighbors in May this year. This has been repeatedly denied by New Delhi. Worse, Trump has claimed at least five times that Modi assured him of stopping oil purchases from Russia.

Trump's assertions of Modi's promise on this move, under threat of raising tariffs further, has been followed by sanctions on Russian oil firms Rosneft and Lukoil. This year, at least 34% of India's crude requirement has been imported from Moscow and these two Russian oil giants account for 60% of the supplies. In addition to the reciprocal tariff of 25% already in place since July 30, the US slapped another 25% secondary tariff on India for buying Russian oil.



The sanctions will force Reliance Industries, India's biggest buyer of Russian oil, to reduce imports; and public sector oil companies such as Indian Oil may be 'advised' to follow suit though they have no direct arrangements with Rosneft and Lukoil. For now, they may continue buying from intermediaries. Another company to suffer a body blow from the US sanctions is Nayara Energy, one of India's largest refineries, in which Rosneft holds a 49.13% ownership share.

As Washington tightens sanctions on Russian oil, India's economic balance is on edge. The United States' dual policy of charm and coercion tests New Delhi's resolve to defend its energy interests without compromising its strategic autonomy.

The sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil mean that any entity, US or foreign, dealing with these companies runs the risk of massive penalties. Reports are that Reliance Industries, which is estimated to have purchased \$35 million worth of oil since the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine in 2022, will have to start reducing imports gradually and possibly stop all



imports from Russia by November 21. In its statement on Friday, the company said it is reviewing the impact of Western sanctions on its Russian suppliers and will adjust operations accordingly while maintaining domestic energy security.

Reliance will be hit very hard although a large proportion of the crude, imported at discounted prices and refined by it (into petrol, diesel and aviation turbine



fuel) was exported to the US and Europe at good profit. The company, which has a 25-year agreement with Rosneft to buy 25 million tons of crude per year, is reported to have imported nearly 50% of the 1.8 million barrels supplied daily to India. The absence of discounted crude from Russia could mean a loss of \$5 to \$6 billion per year, according to a former foreign secretary. Trump had described the move as a “gradual process” and said India would bring Russian oil imports “down to almost nothing” by year-end.

Reports are that in the wake of US-imposed sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, China’s big state-owned oil companies are suspending purchases of “seaborne Russian oil”.

Trump’s attempts to squeeze India and China in a big way to gradually reduce and end oil imports from Russia is to beat Moscow into submission and make it comply with his diktat for a deal with Ukraine. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to yield any ground under mounting pressure from the US, and Europe. Putin made it clear this week that “no self-respecting country and no self-respecting people ever decide anything under pressure.”

Such a position should hold good for India as well. However, New Delhi does not have the economic and military heft of China and Russia to withstand US pressures beyond a certain point. Putin slammed sanctions on the big two Russian oil companies as an “unfriendly act” and admitted that it “will have some consequences.” But, he said, “they won’t greatly affect our economic stability.” The same cannot be said about the impact of sanctions on the Indian economy.

New Delhi has pointed out more than once that energy security is critical and India’s imports from Russia are dictated by its national interest in ensuring stable prices and secure energy supplies. The government called Trump’s tariffs as “unfair, unjustified and unreasonable.” The friction caused by tariffs has stalled progress on a trade agreement between India and the US although talks continue at various levels.

Some of these conversations seem to be pulling India deeper into a situation where New Delhi may find it hard to push back against the tremendous pressure being exerted by the US. This is evident, first and foremost, in India agreeing to cut Russian oil imports, although there is no official word of this being done to comply with Trump’s demand; and asking

public sector oil companies to source more crude from the US. Second, India has reportedly agreed to open its agriculture sector to US produce, which the government had been unwilling to do as higher farm imports could hurt India's farmers.

These developments relating to the two critical sectors of energy and agriculture are being attributed to the recent visit of Trump's new special envoy Sergio Gor to India. Gor's visit appears to have melted New Delhi's resistance to stay the course with Russian oil imports and not open the agriculture sector to US produce. Gor was in India for five days from October 10 to 15. On October 11, he met with Modi, Jaishankar, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, and Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri. Rare is the diplomat who has

Gor is not a career diplomat. He served as Trump's campaign strategist. His appointment, the royal reception he received in New Delhi and the upbeat mood with gung-ho remarks by both sides show that Trump means business when he wants India to abide by his terms whether on energy or agriculture. It might be a case of diplomacy leveraging transactional deals for an India-US geopolitical alignment with implications for regional security. Gor's meeting with India's commerce secretary suggests that, after scoring on energy and agriculture, his next target may be to wrap up a bilateral trade deal in November.

Washington is gradually and inexorably lowering the boom on Russia, India, and China. This could have unforeseen effects on India's foreign policy, its



scored such high-level intensive discussions with four top figures in government in a single day. In fact, ambassadors have to wait weeks, if not months at times, to present their credentials after being posted to Delhi.

Whereas Gor, as of now, is ambassador-designate to India and scheduled to assume office only in the New Year. He has a larger role as Trump's Special Envoy for South and Central Asia and that mandates him to engage with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian states.

relationship with Washington, Moscow, and Beijing, and its role in multilateral forums such as SCO and BRICS besides a troubled neighborhood where the US is a major player. That is, if Trump continues to call the shots.

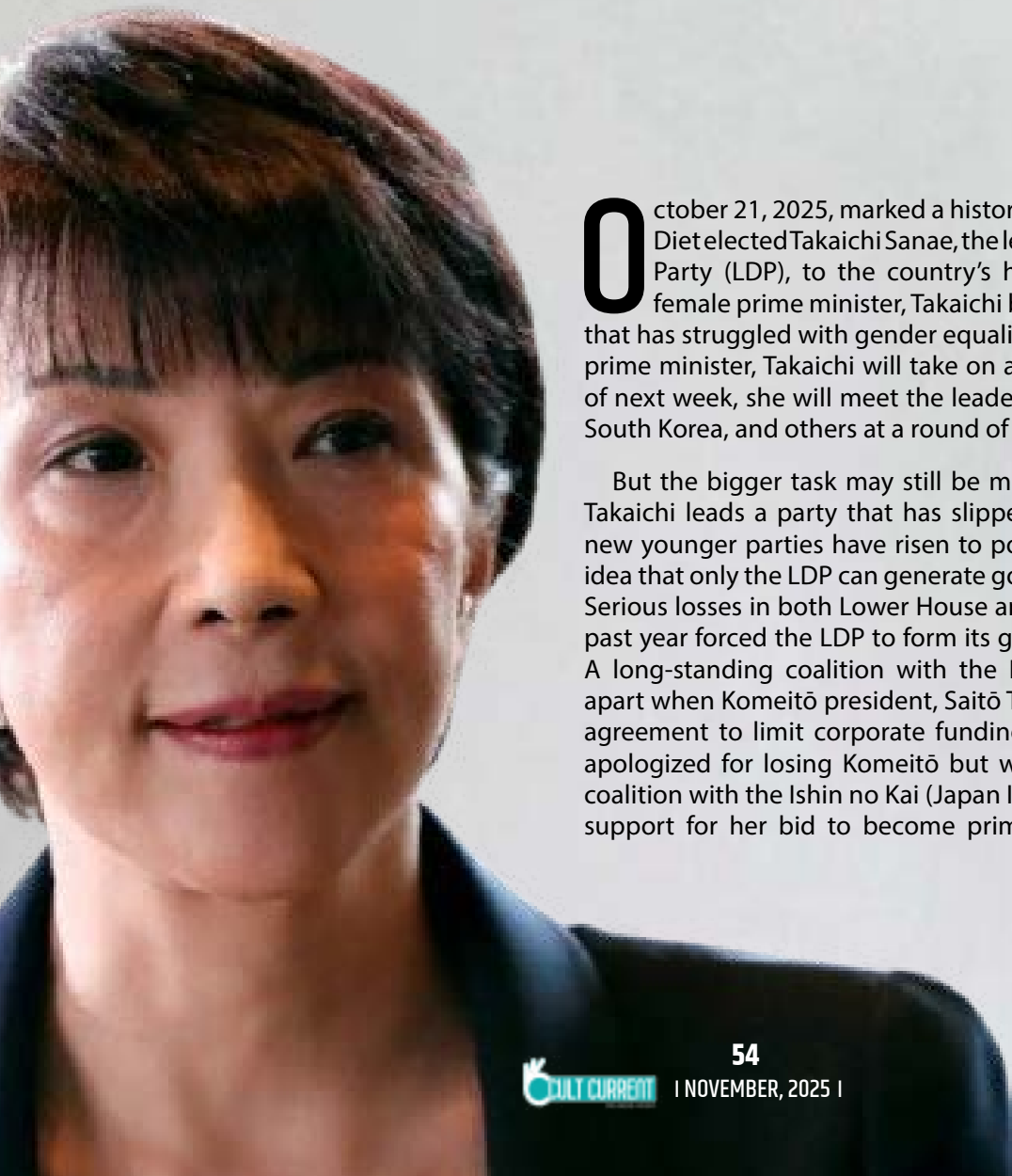
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Breaking Japan's Iron Ceiling



Sheila A. Smith

Japan turns a new page in history as Takaichi Sanae becomes its first female prime minister—tasked with stabilizing a fragile coalition, reviving a weary economy, and redefining Japan's role amid shifting Asian power dynamics.



October 21, 2025, marked a historic first for Japan. The Japanese Diet elected Takaichi Sanae, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), to the country's highest office. As Japan's first female prime minister, Takaichi brings a fresh face to a country that has struggled with gender equality, especially in politics. But as prime minister, Takaichi will take on a complex agenda. By the end of next week, she will meet the leaders of the United States, China, South Korea, and others at a round of Asian multilateral gatherings.

But the bigger task may still be managing the politics at home. Takaichi leads a party that has slipped severely in popularity, and new younger parties have risen to pose a serious challenge to the idea that only the LDP can generate good ideas for governing Japan. Serious losses in both Lower House and Upper House elections this past year forced the LDP to form its government from the minority. A long-standing coalition with the Komeitō helped, but this fell apart when Komeitō president, Saitō Tetsuo, failed to gain Takaichi's agreement to limit corporate funding of political parties. Takaichi apologized for losing Komeitō but worked quickly to craft a new coalition with the Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party). This secured support for her bid to become prime minister, but the coalition

document released on Monday suggests that work still needs to be done to clarify shared goals. Ishin's leaders, Fujita Fumitake and Osaka Governor Yoshimura Hirofumi, told their members on Sunday that they will wait and see how the LDP fulfills its promises. Takaichi will need to manage this new relationship carefully to keep this new partner on side.

Within her party, Japan's new prime minister also has some bridges to build. Three out of four competitors for the LDP leadership are included in her new cabinet. The fourth, Kobayashi Takayuki, became head of the influential LDP policy research council. But the larger issue of the party's identity may take time to resolve. A series of money-in-politics (*seiji to kane*) scandals, growing differences over policy priorities, and lingering personal rivalries still plague the conservatives. The demand for new fundraising rules for political parties comes from opposition parties but also from within her own party. Economic challenges will undoubtedly be at the top of her priority list, given cost-of-living concerns expressed by Japanese voters, but there is no consensus within the LDP on how to fund short-term aid to households while crafting a longer-term growth strategy. When the LDP ruled from the legislative majority, either on its own or in coalition with Komeitō, these differences could be managed in-house. But now Takaichi will need to craft agreements with opposition parties to pass the government budget and legislate new policy initiatives while keeping her own party and her new coalition partner aligned.

Japan's new prime minister will also have a full foreign policy plate. She is expected to welcome President Donald J. Trump to Tokyo over the weekend, a comfortable setting at home for a new prime minister. But it is her own policy preferences that will likely ensure a positive meeting. Takaichi has been dedicated to improving Japan's defenses and is the author of the LDP party document that advocated for Japan's decision to raise security spending to 2 percent of GDP. She is bullish on the U.S.-Japan alliance and emphasized after her party leadership win her intention to build on the trilateral security cooperation arrangements developed with South Korea, Australia and the Philippines. Takaichi and Trump are likely to find common cause in their hawkish stance towards China.

Takaichi's diplomatic skill will be tested in Seoul as she is expected to meet with leaders of two important regional neighbors, China and South Korea. The

Takaichi Sanae's rise marks a breakthrough for Japan—and a test of leadership. She inherits a divided party, strained alliances, and a nation seeking renewed confidence at home and abroad.

Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson stated that China hopes "that Japan honors its political commitments on major issues such as history and the Taiwan question." Takaichi has been a long-standing advocate of the Japan-Taiwan relationship. President Lai Ching-te of Taiwan also congratulated Takaichi on her nomination as prime minister.

President Lee Jae-myung, host of the APEC meeting, has congratulated Takaichi on her win and expressed his hope that she will continue the shuttle diplomacy that has been effective of late in bringing Japan and South Korea closer. In the past, Takaichi has been critical of South Korean claims against Japan for unresolved wartime legacies.

Takaichi Sanae has spent over thirty years in elected office to emerge as Japan's leader. She has repeatedly served in the Japanese cabinet, most notably as the Minister of State for Economic Security. She is known for her policy savvy, her straightforward style, and her sturdy adherence to traditional conservative values. She was not born into politics; she made her own way through the labyrinth of male-dominated conservative party rivalries. She claims Margaret Thatcher as her role model, and Abe Shinzō as her mentor.

As Japan's prime minister, she faces a set of political and strategic challenges that few would envy. She will have to rule from the minority, consolidate a new coalition, and prepare for her party to make a comeback in the next election. Takaichi will need to help Japanese citizens feel more economically secure while restructuring national finances. Abroad, Takaichi will need to partner with Trump to keep Japan's crucial alliance intact even as the regional and global order falters. And, she will need to confront a new global axis of challenge to Japan's interests: the strategic alignment of China, Russia and North Korea.

Not a job for the faint of heart, regardless of gender.

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RAFALE-M

Enhances India's naval dominance



Sumant Kumar

The induction of Rafale-M marks a transformative step in India's naval aviation, enhancing carrier-based strike capabilities and maritime dominance. With unmatched versatility and interoperability, Rafale-M strengthens India's strategic reach across the Indo-Pacific

The Rafale fighter jets, developed by Dassault Aviation of France, are 4.5th-generation multirole aircraft with three main variants: the Rafale C, a single-seat land-based version; the Rafale B, a two-seat land-based variant used for training purposes and task-sharing during missions; and the Rafale M, a single-seat carrier-based variant designed to operate from aircraft carriers.

Rafale jets can carry advanced weapons such as Meteor air-to-air missiles, SCALP cruise missiles, and anti-ship missiles. They are equipped with superior sensors, including AESA radar, front-sector optronics, and SPECTRA for long-range detection and survivability, along with electronic warfare systems.

Missile compatibility, survivability, and stand-off capabilities make the Rafale a highly versatile platform capable of



performing precision strikes, reconnaissance, nuclear deterrence, and anti-ship missions within the same sortie. The naval Rafale-M variant incorporates additional features for maritime warfare, including a strengthened airframe, a tailhook for arrested landings, and folding wings for carrier operations.

Recent agreement between India and France

India recently signed a government-to-government deal to procure 26 Rafale-M jets worth ₹63,000 crore, which includes 22 single-seat and four twin-seat aircraft, along with training simulators, weapons, and five years of logistical support. Deliveries are expected to begin in 2028 and conclude by 2030. India is also considering a direct deal for 114 jets, bypassing the MRFA tender, with an aim of achieving 60% indigenous content.

This procurement strengthens India's maritime strike capabilities, particularly in response to China's expanding geostrategic influence in the Indian Ocean Region. The agreement also covers performance-based logistical support, crew training programs, and the acquisition of advanced missiles like Meteor and Exocet. Dassault Aviation is reportedly considering setting up a final assembly line in India to accommodate upcoming orders and support the Make in India initiative. This action reflects the growing strategic partnership between France and India, which has been strengthened by prior defense cooperation, including the 2016 contract to supply the Indian Air Force with 36 Rafale fighters. The delivery of the Rafale-M aircraft is anticipated to commence by May 2028, with the first jet expected within 37 months after contract signing.

Why only Rafale?

A common question following the Rafale-M deal is why India chose Rafale over other fighter jets. The decision was based not only on acquiring a capable aircraft but also on performance, operational uniformity, and long-term strategic benefits. Rafale jets have been successfully commissioned by several primary users, including the French Air and Space Force, the French Navy, the Egyptian Air Force, and the Indian Air Force. They have been combat-proven in operations over Afghanistan, Libya, Mali, Iraq, Syria, and along India's border with Pakistan, including

missions like Operation Chesapeake and the recent Operation Sindoor. The jets have consistently performed at a high level, demonstrating their capabilities and attracting multiple nations to induct them into their squadrons.

Having fewer aircraft types simplifies maintenance, spare parts, pilot training, supply chains, and administrative overhead. Expanding the Rafale fleet leverages existing infrastructure and India-specific enhancements, making procurement faster and more cost-effective. Government-to-government deals, such as the Rafale contract, are quicker than long, competitive tenders, which can drag on for years. A uniform, high-end fleet also serves as a stronger deterrent than a mix of older or less capable aircraft. Despite the high initial cost per unit, fewer platforms reduce lifecycle costs by lowering training, maintenance, and spare parts inventory expenses. Increasing the order also spreads the research and development costs for India-specific enhancements over more units, reducing the cost per aircraft.

Alternative fighter jets such as Boeing F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, Boeing F-15EX Eagle, Eurofighter Typhoon, Lockheed Martin F-21, Mikoyan MiG-35, Saab JAS-39 Gripen, and Sukhoi Su-35 were considered but found less suitable for the Indian Air Force and Navy due to limitations in maintenance, capabilities, technology transfer, logistical support, compatibility with Make in India initiatives, and adaptation to Indian geography. Programs like AMCA, TEDBF, Tejas Mk1 and Mk2, and upgraded Su-30MKI are still in development and will take time to be fully operational, further supporting the choice of Rafale as the immediate solution.

Advantage for the Indian Navy

Rafale's performance continues to attract global attention. In August 2025, during a multinational military exercise in Finland involving France, the U.K., and the U.S., a French Rafale successfully locked onto a U.S. F-35A and twice on an F/A-18 Hornet during war games, demonstrating its superior capabilities.

The Rafale-M deal significantly strengthens the Indian Navy's carrier-based aviation capability. Currently operating MiG-29K and MiG-29UB aircraft, the induction of Rafale-M will enhance the Navy's



ability to operate effectively from aircraft carriers such as INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya, which use a STOBAR system. Rafale-M has been successfully tested on this platform and can launch and land without catapults. In contrast, the American F/A-18 requires modifications and is not as optimized for STOBAR operations.

Choosing Rafale-M ensures commonality of training, spares, and maintenance with the Indian Air Force, reducing costs and enabling faster interoperability in future operations. Competing jets, including the F-15EX Eagle, Eurofighter Typhoon, F-21, MiG-35, Gripen Maritime, and Su-35, either lacked carrier capability or were primarily designed for land-based operations, making them less suitable for Indian Navy requirements. The MiG-29K fleet faces issues such as low availability, airframe and engine problems, avionics failures, and heavy reliance on Russian maintenance, diminishing its reliability as a carrier-based fighter.

Rafale-M's compatibility with the STOBAR system, synergy with IAF Rafales, and shared logistics have made it the preferred choice for the Indian Navy. Its future upgradeability to F4 and F5 standards will provide superior radar, AI-assisted combat systems, and network-centric warfare capabilities, ensuring that the platform remains combat-ready for at least two decades or until the Twin-Engine Deck-Based Fighter (TEDBF) becomes operational.

France has traditionally been a reliable defense partner, supplying Mirage-2000s and Rafales without sanctions or political restrictions. This reliability ensures uninterrupted supply lines and upgrades during emergencies.

Additional Rafale orders for the IAF and Navy also pave the way for licensed manufacture and local assembly, strengthening India's aerospace ecosystem and enhancing long-term self-reliance in defense manufacturing.

The MiG-29K, originally introduced as a temporary solution for India's carrier-based attack capability, has become increasingly unreliable due to low serviceability, high accident rates, and dependence on Russia for maintenance. India's growing maritime interests in the Indo-Pacific necessitate modern, multirole fighters that combine carrier compatibility, advanced technology, and operational reliability.

For the Indian Navy, the decision to induct Rafale-M is not merely about acquiring another fighter aircraft; it is about building a cohesive, future-ready combat ecosystem. Rafale-M offers carrier compatibility, seamless interoperability with the Indian Air Force, superior multirole capabilities, and the reliability of France as a strategic partner. Its induction represents a symbol of sea-sky synergy and enduring partnership, strengthening naval aviation and advancing India's objectives of regional dominance, deterrence, and self-reliance.

The Rafale-M is more than an aircraft—it is a force multiplier that unites the sky and the seas while fostering domestic industrial growth. Its induction ensures that India's power projection across the Indian Ocean and beyond remains decisive, cohesive, and future-proof.

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Rival Skylines

India and China's City Race



Ramnath Jha

India and China began their post-independence journeys with similar levels of urbanisation—but diverged dramatically in vision and execution. While China unleashed state-driven urban growth, India's hesitant and fragmented approach continues to constrain its cities' potential and economic promise.



Soon after independence (1950), India's urbanisation (17 percent) was ahead of China's (13 percent). Whereas India adopted a largely hands-off approach concerning its cities for several decades after 1950, China was more aggressively anti-urban till about 1980, preventing rural-urban migration through its hukou system that categorised the Chinese population into urban or rural residents and placed locational and service-

access restrictions on them.

India's rural mindset lingered on well into the early years of the 21st century. In 2005, India acknowledged urbanisation as a critical pillar of national economic development. Since then, the Government of India's (GoI) thrust towards urban engagement has been two-dimensional. Firstly, GoI has recommended reform-driven statutes for

adoption by the states. Sadly, these have generally been ignored. Secondly, it has offered large central grants for states and cities to participate and partner in Gol-sponsored infrastructure initiatives.

China's more pronounced anti-urban policy, as cited above, was seriously questioned and reviewed by the Chinese leadership. It realised that its ambition to become a great economic power was restrained by its unfortunate aversion to urbanisation. If it wanted to accelerate its economic rise, it must dismantle the hukou system and allow larger rural populations into cities to participate in

India's urban future depends on structural reform. Without cohesive governance and empowered city institutions, even massive investments may fall short of transforming Indian cities into engines of growth and sustainable living.



manufacturing and industries. The revised urban policy postulated the construction of more cities, a larger urban working population, and enhanced urban participation in building up the national economy. This fundamental alteration in the Chinese Weltanschauung marked a significant departure from the past with stunning results.

Post 1980, the urban trajectories of the two countries diverged sharply. While India was still

hesitant about urbanisation, the Chinese leadership launched the country on the road to urbanisation at full throttle. World Bank estimates put India's urban population in 2024 at 534.91 million or 37 percent, and China's at 923.49 million (2024) or 66 percent. Thus, while India urbanised at an average growth rate of 2.70 percent per decade, China logged an average growth rate of 7.29 percent—nearly the fastest urbanisation the world has seen. As a result, China today has 160 cities with over a million people and 360 cities with populations between 100,000 and 1 million. In contrast, the number of Indian million-plus cities is estimated to be 40.

A major hurdle in the path of urbanisation in India has been the subject allocation in the Indian Constitution, according to which urban development falls in the domain of the states. Such a distribution appears, in hindsight, problematic. It limits the role of the Gol in cities. Since cities have the capacity to grow into massive units and become vitally significant to the national economy, it would have made greater sense if the Indian Constitution had bisected cities based on their demographic size and allowed all megacities beyond five million to fall in the domain of the Gol. The national significance of large cities to the national economy, however, does not appear to have been envisaged by the constitution framers.

In governance, China has followed a highly centralised, top-down planning model. There are strong national mandates in terms of direction and physical targets that cities are tasked to achieve. The local governments are given freedom



of implementation, but the local officials' performance is centrally monitored, accompanied by a system of rewards and punishments. Several parastatals (entities created by the state to take over and run a municipal function), generally referred to in China as state-owned enterprises (SOEs), play a vital role in urban governance, infrastructure, and economic development. SOEs are charged with the functions of water supply, power, public transport, waste management, and infrastructure construction. However, in many instances, the city governments oversee the functioning of the

China's urban revolution reshaped its economy and global standing, while India's cautious, state-fragmented model slowed progress. The contrast reveals how governance, planning, and political will can decisively shape a nation's urban destiny.



parastatals in their territory.

On the other hand, Urban governance in India has a democratic, bottom-up structure with the aim of making cities self-empowered institutions. However, this is actually merely in form. In substance, cities are tightly controlled by the states. The principal functionary of the city, the municipal commissioner, is appointed by the state, and the state approves the city's development plan. Many parastatals, such as in China, operate in cities, but their functioning, unlike China's, is not integrated with the municipal bodies and mostly work in isolation.



In urban planning, China has strategised to posit it as a calculated tool for national development. The government uses Five-Year Plans to guide city growth, infrastructure, and industrialisation. India's urban planning is again state-controlled. This prevents a cohesive national vision. The larger cities in many states do initiate the planning process. However, all final approvals lie with the state governments. This fractured mandate has always injected difficult problems into city planning.

China's investment in urban infrastructure has been unprecedented. In the area of water services, most Chinese cities enjoy a 24/7 water supply of good quality. Its major cities have centralised sewerage systems with extensive underground networks and treatment plants. Its urban public transport is extensive. Today, China has 54 cities with metro systems extending over 11,000 km. It has bus services in over 600 cities with a total fleet size of about 680,000 buses. In terms of public open space, China's per capita provision is substantially

higher than in Indian cities.

Comparatively, a 24/7 water supply in Indian cities is a rarity. Only its largest cities have centralised sewerage systems, and most are not equipped to treat all their sewage. Furthermore, India's urban public transport is also sketchy. Its urban metro systems are modest—23 cities with a total metro network of 1,000 km. Only 127 cities provide limited bus service with a total fleet size of about 46,000 city buses.

Despite Gol's substantial attention to urban infrastructure in the past two decades, the investment road is hugely steep (US\$2.4 trillion). Additionally, roadblocks in terms of fractured urban governance and city planning stand in the way. The sector awaits radical reforms so that Indian cities can offer a better quality of life than what is currently being provided.

Ramanath Jha is a Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation

THE BLUE ECONOMY FROM SUSTAINABILITY TO PROSPERITY

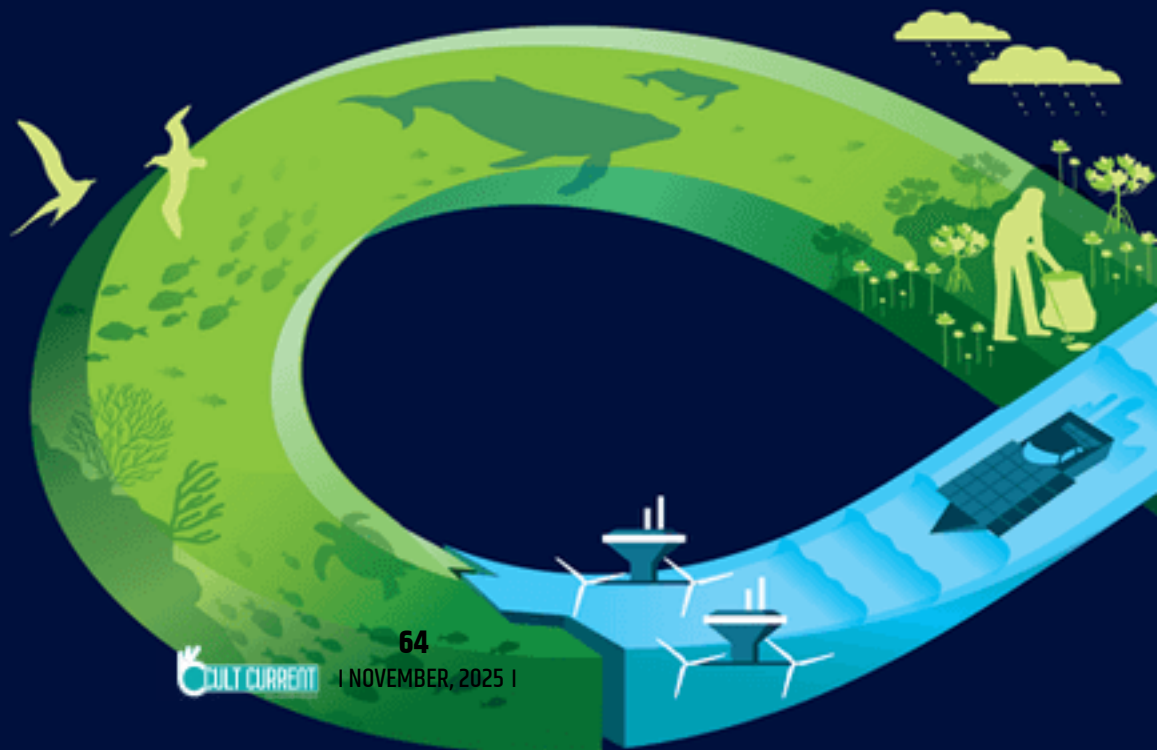


Pierangelo Campodonico

A new current of development is flowing through India's coastal regions. The blue economy, based on marine resources, is not just an economic opportunity but also a balanced step towards environmental sustainability and community prosperity.

The sea is not merely a vast expanse of water but a source of life, culture, and economy. The stories of coastal communities, their knowledge, and traditional practices teach us how the sea and humanity can evolve together. The Blue Economy, from this perspective, opens a new path towards empowering local communities while sustainably using marine resources. Maritime museums serve as a bridge in this journey—from the memories of the past to the foundations of the future.

A sustainable blue economy must place the well-being of coastal communities at its core. Involving and empowering



the citizens of coastal areas at every stage of the development process is essential for both political stability and economic strength. The Blue Economy signifies the sustainable use of marine resources, encompassing a wide range of economic activities such as fisheries, marine tourism, renewable energy, shipping, and marine biotechnology. However, to build this future, we must look to the past. The history of maritime trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, between coastal villages and global power centers, reminds us that the seas have always been spaces of connection, dialogue, and shared existence.

Archaeological discoveries bear witness to this long maritime history. In 1938, a statue was unearthed during excavations in the Italian town of Pompeii, which many believed to be a representation of the goddess Lakshmi, while some identified it as a Yakshi. Archaeologists agree that it is an Indian artifact from the first century AD. A year earlier, about 400 Roman amphorae were discovered in Arikamedu, Tamil Nadu. These containers were used for transporting wine, oil, and garum (a fermented fish sauce). These containers had traveled across the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. These food products were not just for local Indian consumption but for the Greek and Roman traders living there, who, despite being far from home, wished to maintain their preferences and traditions.

The blue economy envisions the ocean as both a source of livelihood and sustainability. By empowering coastal communities and valuing maritime heritage, it charts a path where prosperity and environmental balance coexist.

Such discoveries tell us that maritime history is best understood as a 'horizontal' history. Ports, their surrounding areas, fishing communities, and naval shipyards were not separate entities. They were part of a vast, consensual system of exchange. Sailors, traders, and artisans disseminated not just goods but also techniques, technologies, and cultural practices. They created communities where diversity of language, religion, and customs coexisted and adapted to one another. This history is millennia-old, and it holds a powerful lesson for the present.

A Sustainable Maritime Economy

Today, as we work towards a sustainable blue economy, we must draw inspiration from these traditions of coexistence and exchange. Various community-led initiatives are already showing us the way. From coral reef restoration projects run by fishermen's cooperatives to traditional fish farming management practices, successful projects are encouraging. Whether it is protecting fish breeding grounds or conserving local biodiversity, coastal communities are demonstrating how these tasks can be done better. In the Persian Gulf, shipyards still build wooden dhows (a type of boat). These shipyards often carry forward techniques cherished by Indian many generations.



OPPORTUNITY

These practices are not just heritage; they are vibrant, adaptable solutions for a changing world.

Maritime museums also have a significant role to play in this. Historically, many naval museums have focused only on navies, wars, and victories. However, a new generation of maritime museums is trying to tell a different story—one that focuses on people, trade, migration, and cultural memory. These institutions democratize access to knowledge, protect heritage, and promote respect for diversity. These museums also address immediate contemporary issues. Concerns like climate change, overfishing, microplastics, and rising sea levels are included. By linking these challenges to contemporary issues, these museums can inspire local communities to act as guardians of the sea.

This approach to museums fits well with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. By protecting and ensuring access to cultural diversity, these museums contribute to fighting poverty (SDG 1). They strengthen education by promoting lifelong learning and respect for diversity (SDG 4). These museums reduce inequalities by creating shared platforms across countries and cultures (SDG 10). They stabilize communities (SDG 11), making cities more inclusive and economically robust. Most importantly, maritime museums have a unique responsibility under SDG 14 to protect life below water. They are the custodians of ocean literacy, tasked with educating citizens about the health of the seas and the threats of climate change,

overfishing, and pollution.

This people-centric and heritage-based approach is equally important for policies related to the sea. A blue economy that only exploits resources, excludes local people, or operates in a top-down manner will fail. On the other hand, if a blue economy invests in local leadership, empowers coastal communities, and connects them across regions, it can be sustainable and transformative. Partnerships, whether between coastal villages, among regions of the Global South, or through networks of maritime museums, can foster solidarity and exchange. They can transform heritage into a living resource for a sustainable future.

From Maritime Narratives to Maritime Possibilities

Maritime museums play a crucial role in this regard, as they have the wonderful ability to preserve memory and shape narratives. They remind us that maritime history is not just about power and conflict but also about coexistence, innovation, and shared resilience.

The future of the blue economy depends on reconnecting with this long, meaningful story of the seas. By valuing local knowledge, investing in communities, and building global partnerships, we can shape a maritime future that is inclusive, sustainable, and just. From this perspective, maritime heritage is not just a relic of the past but also a strong foundation for the future.

Pierangelo Campodonico is the Director of the National Museum of Italian Emigration in Italy.





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RARE EARTH POWER

GEOECONOMIC GRIP



Michael Froman

China's dominance over critical minerals gives it unmatched geo-economic leverage. From smartphones to fighter jets, global industries depend on Beijing's control of rare earths—turning supply chains into instruments of power and strategic influence.

With near total control of the world's critical minerals production, China maintains significant economic leverage over access to inputs that are necessary for everything from everyday products like smartphones to

advanced weapons systems like the F-35. A typical gas-powered passenger vehicle can use as many as forty rare earth magnets for its seats, brakes, and other systems; electric vehicles require more. Under the export control regime Beijing rolled out last



week, China could restrict global access to critical mineral products, including rare earth magnets, and bring much economic activity to a screeching halt.

China is willing and able to exploit this strategic vulnerability. It has already proven its willingness to use export controls as a tool of economic coercion. Some fifteen years ago, China curtailed rare earths—a subset of critical minerals—to Japan over a dispute in the East China Sea. More recently, China has restricted its exports of critical minerals in response to the United States' tariffs and export controls.

While China maintains that it's not a ban, China announced new measures last week that build upon its earlier semiconductor-focused restrictions, extending to products made outside China that have as little as 0.1 percent of Chinese rare earths in them or use mining, separation, or magnet-making technology developed by Chinese firms. That is similar to the United States' Foreign Direct Product Rule. Moreover, China has insisted that applicants for an export license submit schematics for products that use Chinese-produced minerals, a powerful tool for accessing proprietary intellectual property.

China did not become the dominant player in critical minerals overnight; it was a long march to get there. During his famous 1992 Southern Tour, while visiting Inner Mongolia's Baotou rare-earth basin, Deng Xiaoping said, "The Middle East has oil; China has rare earths." Rare earths are actually

not rare, and certainly not present in China alone, but ever since Deng noted the importance of such minerals, China has developed a dominant position through decades of concerted industrial policy. For years, the Chinese government invested heavily to support firms at every step of the rare earth refining and production value chain, bolstering its domestic mining, refining, production, and recycling facilities, as well as expanding its network of foreign mines around the world.

Today, the biggest chokepoints in the supply chain for critical minerals are refining and processing (both in terms of capacity and intellectual property), not mining. China controls up to 90 percent of the world's processing capacity, including more than 99 percent for three kinds of rare earths necessary for heat-resistant magnets. This has been achieved in part by subsidizing, producing, and engaging in pricing practices that made it economically unviable for competitors in the United States and other countries. Chinese firms also innovated in their own right—that's why they possess the industry's most valuable intellectual property and capacity to boot. And they also took advantage of the fact that the United States and other developed countries didn't want to expand domestic mining and refining activity as a result of environmental consequences and other factors.

So where do we go from here? The two biggest impediments to the United States lessening its dependence on China are time and money. As many

economic experts have noted, including the likes of Peter Harrell and Daleep Singh, we need to invest for the long term by boosting U.S. supply through price floors, offtake agreements, tax breaks, and regulatory relief. But we don't need to do this alone. Rather, we should work with our allies and partners to undertake similar efforts, in parallel, to create a scaled, global ecosystem of trusted critical mineral producers that can match Chinese production and innovation.

These mines and production facilities take years to come online. By S&P Global's estimate, the average mine in the United States takes almost twenty-nine years to come online, due to time-consuming exploration, permitting, and construction needs. And these facilities cost billions of dollars upfront. Without offtake agreements and government price floors to dampen volatile swings of global rare earth prices and demand shocks, it is unclear whether they would garner the necessary private investment.

The Biden administration focused on this issue, pursued a strategy of grants and loans, and engaged with allies and partners to build support for collective action. The Trump administration has gone further. In July, the Department of Defense took a 15 percent stake in the U.S.-based rare earth producer MP Materials for \$400 million, set a price floor, and provided an offtake agreement. On Wednesday, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent made clear that the United States would continue this approach, suggesting that it was looking beyond rare earths: "We're going to set price floors and the forward buying to make sure that this doesn't happen again and we're going to do it across a range of industries."

While it might be important for the United States to develop some production capacity here at home, it doesn't have to play catch up entirely on its own. It should work with allies and partners to bring mining and production facilities online more quickly. This is something Bessent acknowledged this week, calling for a coalition of countries to come together to work on a collective response (consistent with a recent article arguing in favor of the U.S. convening "coalitions of the ambitious" to

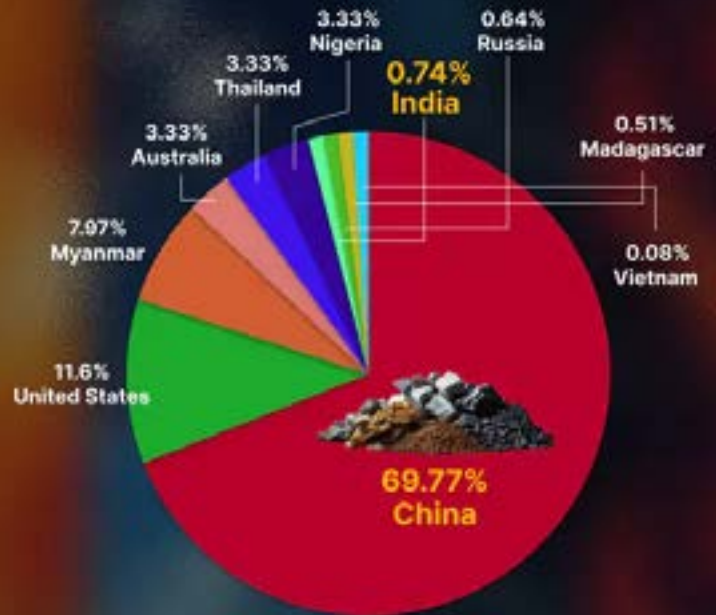


address this issue). Or as he put it, "we're going to have a fulsome, group response to this, because bureaucrats in China cannot manage the supply chain or the manufacturing process for the rest of the world," adding that he would be speaking with the United States' allies.

Many of the partners we need are still smarting from the Trump administration's tariff policies. One way for the United States to catalyze their participation would be to leverage the balance sheets of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Export-Import Bank for these partnerships. For example, take the Lobito Corridor project—a train corridor connecting Angola's Lobito port on the Atlantic coast to Zambia through the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) financed by the DFC in partnership with the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Africa Finance Corporation (AFC), the European Commission, and the host governments of Angola, the DRC, and Zambia. Once completed, this railway will make it easier to not only export these minerals (and other products) but also incentivize further



CHINA DOMINATES THE PRODUCTION OF RARE EARTH ELEMENTS



U.S. private investment.

I was somewhat surprised by the timing of China's announcement. Perhaps it was to gain leverage in the run up to the potential summit in South Korea. Bessent is set to speak with his Chinese counterpart, Vice Premier He Lifeng shortly.

But the timing might illustrate a larger factor at work. China has worked assiduously over the last several years to position itself as the responsible party defending the status quo and upholding the multilateral trading system and painting the United States as a unilateral, revisionist, and disruptive actor. But, to borrow a phrase from another context and another region of the world, China never seems to miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. While China has had the opportunity to significantly undermine the position of the United States as the global leader, it seems to have difficulty exercising soft power. The loan-to-own character of the Belt and Road Initiative ended up limiting the goodwill China generated among publics all over the hundreds

of billions of dollars it disbursed. And this export control announcement, which threatens to upend global supply chains, now positions China as at least as disruptive to the global economy as the United States.

Now, it's up to the United States to capitalize on this moment to work more closely with our allies and partners to reduce our dependence on China and to reassert our role as a collaborative partner. It could take years, maybe decades, but you know what they say: A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Michael Froman, President of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), shares his perspective on the United States' reliance on China for critical minerals—and how America can begin to compete. We are publishing this article with due acknowledgment.

The Deoband Detour

Taliban's Search for Legitimacy



Soumya Awasthi

Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi's visit to India—and his stop at Darul Uloom Deoband—revives a complex historical link between Kabul and Deoband. Beyond faith, the visit symbolizes Afghanistan's attempt to reshape its ideological identity and engage India through religious diplomacy.

On October 9, 2025, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, arrived in India for a visit. During his trip, he held discussions with Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on issues including security and trade. In addition to his official talks with the Indian government, Afghan Foreign Minister Muttaqi also visited Darul Uloom Deoband, located in the Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Darul Uloom Deoband is one of the most significant historical madrasas in South Asia, ranked second only to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt.

Muttaqi's visit also marks the beginning of a revival of the historical, religious, and strategic relationship that connects Afghanistan and India through one of the most influential sects of Islamic ideology in South Asia. The Taliban's attempt to connect with the intellectual and spiritual dominance of Deoband signifies two things. First, through this, the Taliban seeks to gain legitimacy for itself. Second, it also proves how crucial India's place is in the lineage of Islamic scholars who have shaped Afghanistan's religious identity.

The Historical Connection Between Deoband and Afghanistan

Darul Uloom Deoband and Afghanistan share a deep and long-standing relationship. Established in 1866 in

the town of Deoband in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, this madrasa emerged as a center of Islamic learning that promoted moral reform as well as resistance to colonial modernity. Its founders, Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, envisioned a religious revivalist movement based on Hanafi



jurisprudence and spiritual discipline. Their aim was to preserve Islamic scholarship rather than politicize it, despite cultural erosion.

From the latter half of the nineteenth century, this madrasa attracted students not only from all over India but also from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the frontier regions of present-day Pakistan. Afghan scholars were among the first foreign disciples to study at Deoband, and upon returning to Kabul, Kandahar, and Khost, they began establishing madrasas based on its curriculum and teaching style. These institutions sought to implement the Deobandi tradition—characterized by scholarship, simplicity, and strict adherence to the lifestyle described in Islamic texts—in their own country's religious life.

Even before the partition, Deobandi scholars played an active role in the political and religious affairs of Afghanistan. During the famous Silk Letter Movement (1913-1920), Deobandi clerics attempted to form an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, Afghanistan, and the German Empire to challenge British rule in India. These connections left an indelible mark on the Indo-Afghan religious and political consciousness, weaving both societies together through shared intellectual engagement.

Afghan Students at Deoband

Afghan students continued to come to Darul Uloom

Deoband until the mid-twentieth century. After India's independence and the creation of Pakistan, the enrollment of Afghan students decreased but did not completely cease. From the 1950s to the late 1970s, young Afghan students continued to study at Deoband, often under the patronage of religious institutions or merchants, thereby maintaining cultural ties with India.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 abruptly closed this intellectual corridor. As Kabul became embroiled in conflict, Pakistan became a refuge for millions of displaced Afghans. Consequently, Deobandi madrasas on Pakistani soil, especially Darul Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak, emerged as alternatives to Indian madrasas. It was in these Pakistani institutions that the ideological foundations of the Taliban were laid. Thus, the form of Deobandi theology that spread westward from India was transformed in Pakistan. In India, the Deobandi ideology was known for its scholarly and reformist spirit, whereas in Pakistan, it became intertwined with its strategic needs. During the Cold War, financial aid from the United States and Saudi Arabia made this ideology even more radical. Ultimately, it merged with the militant character born out of the Afghan jihad.

By the 1990s, the original Indian Deobandi tradition—curriculum, academics, and internal reform—had been transformed into a political tool for Islamabad's regional strategy. The Taliban movement, which emerged in 1994, adopted the symbols and terminology of Deobandism but not its intellectual discipline or pluralistic restraint. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, some Afghan citizens resumed their religious studies in India, although most did so in private or informal settings rather than at Deoband. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, there has been no official Afghan acknowledgment of Deoband. Despite this, the symbolic identity between the Taliban and Deoband has strengthened rather than faded.

The Taliban and the Deobandi Tradition

Amir Khan Muttaqi's planned visit to Darul Uloom Deoband is symbolically significant. This is the first time a senior Taliban minister, albeit indirectly, has engaged with the Indian source of the group's ideological lineage. The Taliban has changed its form many times, from its leaders to its ideas. Despite all this, the Afghan Taliban continues to trace its roots to the Indian Deobandi tradition. However, the Taliban's ideology is now also mixed, as it combines Deobandi ideology



with Pashtunwali and Wahhabi influences through its association with the Haqqani network. Therefore, it can be said that Muttaqi's visit to Deoband is not motivated by religious curiosity but represents a calculated act of religious diplomacy.

For the Taliban, this visit is an attempt to break its umbilical cord—its original ideological ties—with the Deobandi network of Pakistan and establish its own ideological authenticity. By publicly engaging with Darul Uloom Deoband, the Taliban wants to re-establish itself as the heir to a scholarly Islamic reform movement rather than a militant regime. This move also has geopolitical implications. By doing so, the Taliban will try to claim independence from Pakistan's ideological patronage. Muttaqi's visit to Darul Uloom Deoband gives Kabul an opportunity, at least symbolically, to distance itself from the influence of the Haqqani and Pakistani clerics who have long been seen as intermediaries of Islamabad's interests.

Additionally, this visit helps the Taliban to present a softer image internationally. In India, Deoband is known for its moral conservatism as well as its rejectionist approach. Connecting with Deoband also gives the Taliban an opportunity to change its image as a radical Islamic group, signaling an openness to reinterpretation and reform. Engaging with Deoband signals the Taliban's continuity with a broader South Asian Islamic heritage, a tradition that is older than Pakistan and transcends political boundaries. It also asserts autonomy and religious authenticity.

An Opportunity for India

For India, the Taliban's initiative to visit Deoband presents an opportunity to re-engage through the same faith that once divided them. India has long believed that the stability of Afghanistan is crucial for its regional interests. However, while India's engagement with previous Afghan governments was mainly focused on infrastructure, development aid, and humanitarian assistance, the current context requires the addition of a fourth, more subtle and complex dimension: religious diplomacy.

India's historical leadership in the Deobandi tradition empowers it intellectually. By re-establishing the traditional Deobandi emphasis on knowledge, moral integrity, and peaceful co-existence, India can quietly influence the religious orientation of Afghan clerics. Such engagement does not require political and diplomatic recognition of the Taliban regime. Instead, it can take the form of cultural, academic, and cleric-to-cleric exchanges. This includes online educational programs that promote critical thinking, comparative jurisprudence, and moderation within religious pedagogy.

The "4D" framework—Diplomacy, Development, Dialogue, and Deoband—offers a blueprint for such non-political, non-diplomatic engagement. India can communicate its values not as a Western democracy encouraging an Islamic government, but as a co-heir to an Islamic scholarship that values balance and moral restraint. If Deobandi scholars can convince the Taliban that there is no place for violence in Islamic teachings, it would be beneficial for India. This would allow India to reclaim the narrative that Pakistan had distorted. After all, the original Deoband movement stood for spiritual reform, education, and national co-existence—values that were absent in the militant Deobandism propagated in Pakistan.





Why Does the Taliban Want to Stay Connected with Deoband?

The Taliban's continuous reference to Darul Uloom Deoband is an attempt at self-legitimization. Despite its institutional ties with Pakistan's Haqqani network, the Taliban wants to maintain its independent identity. The Haqqani network shaped the political form of the Taliban, but Deoband provides the Taliban with an intellectual lineage that Pakistan cannot. The Haqqani network, though influential, is internationally seen as a madrasa of extremism, shaped by state patronage and jihadi training. On the other hand, Deoband represents authenticity and conservatism, with a lineage that traces back to the classical centers of Hanafi learning.

By claiming Deoband as its spiritual origin, the Taliban wants to cloak its rule with the mantle of religious legitimacy and differentiate itself from Salafi and Wahhabi movements like ISIS-Khorasan. This identity helps the Taliban to present itself as traditionalists rather than radicals, as protectors of an indigenous South Asian Islamic heritage rather than agents of international jihad. This also serves the Taliban's diplomatic interests. It signals to India and the wider Muslim world that the Taliban recognizes the moral authority of the Indian madrasa and thus invites engagement on cultural and religious grounds.

Religious Heritage vs. Geopolitics

The evolving relationship between the Taliban and

Darul Uloom Deoband symbolizes a broader struggle over the legacy of South Asian Islam. While Pakistani madrasas transformed Deobandism into a tool of geopolitical influence, India has maintained its religious purity and intellectual depth while leaving room for political differences. This has created an opportunity for India to play a more influential role.

Dialogue through Deoband provides India a platform to influence the Taliban's ideological direction without the constraints of formal diplomacy. It offers India an opportunity to display its liberal but effective power, embedded in history, culture, and faith. By emphasizing its moderate and scholarly Deobandi tradition, India can not only counter Pakistan's narrative but also steer Afghanistan's religious discourse towards harmony and introspection.

Therefore, Muttaqi's visit to Deoband is more than just a symbolic tour. It presents an opportunity that can either deepen old differences or open doors to new possibilities. If India seizes this opportunity with foresight and determination, it can transform a shared spiritual heritage into an instrument of regional stability. In the broader perspective of South Asian history, the struggle over the meaning of Deoband may prove to be more significant than the struggle over the map of Afghanistan.

Soumya Awasthi is a Fellow at the Centre for Security, Strategy, and Technology at the Observer Research Foundation.

Ananya's Glam Game!

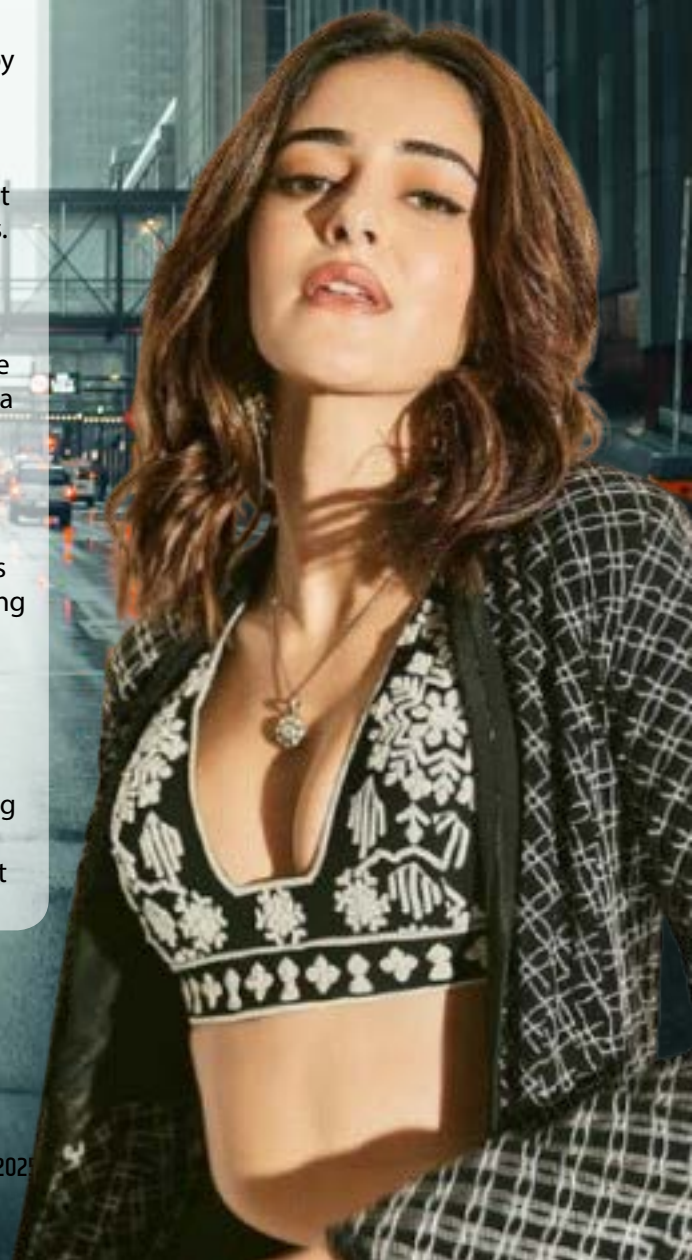
Bollywood's Gen-Z diva Ananya Panday is once again the talk of the town—but this time, not for her acting chops or upcoming film. The buzz is all about her jaw-dropping lifestyle! At just 26, Ananya has managed to build an empire worth a whopping ₹74 crore, and the numbers are only soaring higher.

Let's start with her dream home—an ultra-chic Mumbai apartment that screams luxury at every corner. Designed by none other than Gauri Khan, the interiors perfectly match Ananya's sparkling persona: a mix of classy whites, pastel aesthetics, and a dash of glam. Her Instagram fans often get teasing glimpses of the space—plush sofas, modern art pieces, and sunlight streaming in through French windows. Truly, a set fit for a Netflix home tour!

But that's not all. The actress is also revving up the roads with her enviable car collection—featuring sleek beasts like Range Rover Sport and Audi Q7. Whether she's heading to a film shoot or a Sunday brunch with BFFs Suhana Khan and Shanaya Kapoor, Ananya knows how to make an entrance.

From star-studded parties to her effortless airport looks, everything about her lifestyle oozes sophistication. Insiders say Ananya has become one of the top-earning faces among the new Bollywood brigade, with big-ticket endorsements and OTT projects lining up.

The best part? She does it all with that easy-breezy charm, balancing the glamour with a girl-next-door relatability. Looks like Ananya isn't just building a career—she's curating an entire brand of style, success, and unapologetic sparkle. One thing's clear: in the glitzy race of Bollywood, this starlet isn't just running—she's cruising in luxury!



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