

E-Magazine

₹
49/-

► **BALANCING THE DRAGON**
INDIA'S STRATEGIC TIGHTROPE

► **NO DICTATES**
INDIA HOLDS ITS GROUND

CULT CURRENT

Vol: 8 Issue: 10 October, 2025

WE MAKE VIEWS

YOUTHQUAKE

GEN-Z SHAKING THE THRONES OF SOUTH ASIA



Let's 360°

Media Consultancy

Web solution

Advertising

Publication

Languages Services

Survey & Research

Branding

AV Production

Campaign management

Event organizer

PR partner, PR associate

Content writer & provider

Media analyst

URJAS MEDIA VENTUE IS PERHAPS THE ONLY CONSULTING FIRM THAT CAN GIVE YOUR ORGANISATION A 360 DEGREE MEDIA BUSINESS GROWTH CONSULTING THROUGH IT'S 360 CAPABILITIES. FOR US, CONSULTING DOES NOT ONLY MEAN MECHANICAL COST REDUCTION THROUGH BETTER IT APPLICATIONS, WE FIND OUT WHAT YOUR ORGANISATION REALY NEEDS AND GIVE YOU AN INTELLECTUAL SOLUTION THAT HELP YOU REDUCE COST AS WELL AS HELPS YOURS BUSINESS GROW AND BEAT THE COMPETITION.

**NOW!!
OUR CONSULTANT
WILL GET BACK
TO YOU IN 24
HOURS AND PUT
YOU IN TO THE HIGH
GROWTH PATH**



URJAS MEDIA
VENTURE

SMS 'BUSINESS GROWTH'
TO +91-8826-24-5305 OR
E-MAIL info@urjasmedia.com

BEAT THE COMPETITION
www.urjasmedia.com

POSITIVE INDIA

UNSUNG HERO

THE JEWELER WHO FOUND FORTUNE IN FARMING



Santosh Jadhav

Santosh Vasant Jadhav from Sangli, Maharashtra, epitomizes the powerful saying: 'Farming is the best profession.' While many leave agriculture for city jobs, Santosh chose the opposite path, transitioning from his family's successful gold and silver business to modern farming. Driven by a keen interest and witnessing his father's meager profits from traditional methods, Santosh immersed himself in learning. He took training, observed successful farmers, and started with open-field capsicum cultivation using modern techniques. The results were immediate and profitable. He soon scaled up, building a polyhouse to grow colorful bell peppers. Today, Santosh cultivates 11 acres with a strategic financial formula: fast-growing vegetables are his Current Account, sugarcane is his Saving Account, and grape farming acts as his long-term Fixed Deposit (FD). This approach generates an impressive annual turnover of ₹30 lakh. After expenses, his net annual saving is a substantial ₹12-13 lakh.



Editorial

National Editor

Sanjay Shrivastava

Editor

Srirajesh

Managing Editor

Sachchidanand Pandey

Roaming Editor

Dr. Rajaram Tripathi

Political Editor

Anshuman Tripathi

Metro Editor

Shakti Prakash Shrivastava

Dr. Rudra Narayan

Foreign Editor

Shreesh Pathak

Corporate Editor

Gagan Batra

Digital Editor

Sunita Tripathi

Jalaj Srivastava

Assistant Editor

Sandip Kumar

Deputy Editor

Manoj Kumar

Santu Das

Literary Editor

Anwar Husain

Art Editor

Jaya Verma

Web and IT Expert

Anuj Kumar Singh

Photo Editor

Vivek Pandey

Special correspondent

Kamlesh Jha

Vikas Gupta

Correspondent

Sandeep Singh

Anirudh Yadav

Bureau Chief (International)

Akul Batra (USA)

C. Sheovaratan (Netherlands)

G. Verma (London)

Dr. Md. Fahim Akbar (Pakistan)

A. Asgharzadeh (Iran)

Dr. Nik Seri (Malaysia)

Bureau Chief (National)

R. Ranjan (New Delhi)

Sanjay Kumar Singh (Lucknow)

Captain Sudhir Sinha (Ranchi)

Nimesh Shukla (Patna)

Nagendra Singh (Kolkata)

Rakesh Ranjan (Guwahati)

Marketing

Satyajit Choudhury

General Manager

E-distribution

Srijit Dey

Vol: 8 Issue: 10 October, 2025

Follow us:



fb.com/cultcurrent



@Cult_Current



cultcurrent@gmail.com

URJAS MEDIA VENTURE**Head office:** Swastik Apartment, GF, Pirtala, Agarpara, Kolkata 700 109, INDIA, Tel: +91 6289-26-2363**Corporate Office:** 14601, Belaire Blvd, Houston, Texas 77083 USA Tel: +1 (832) 670-9074Web: <http://cultcurrent.com>

Cult Current is a monthly e-magazine published by Urjas Media Ventures from Swastik Apartment, GF, Pirtala, Agarpara, Kolkata 700 109.

Editor: Srirajesh**Disclaimer:** All editorial and non-editorial positions in the e-magazine are honorary. The publisher and editorial board are not obligated to agree with all the views expressed in the articles featured in this e-magazine. Cult Current upholds a commitment to supporting all religions, human rights, nationalist ideology, democracy, and moral values.

COVER STORY

26



YOUTHQUAKE

GEN-Z SHAKING THE THRONES OF SOUTH ASIA

YOUTHQUAKE WILL INDIA BE NEXT? 38

LADAKH'S Roaring Youth... 46

12

Water as the New

Geopolitical Pivot



16

Balancing the Dragon

INDIA'S STRATEGIC TIGHTROPE



PHANTOM WARS: US vs China? 20

THE KACHIN GAMBIT 24

BEYOND ILLUSIONS ONLY THE TWO-STATE... 50

AXIS OF ALARM: SAUDI-PAKISTAN PACT 54

INDIA'S MARITIME SURGE: NAVY DRIVE 2035 56

THE IRON BIRD RETIRES: MIG-21'S GLORY DAYS 60

NO DICTATES: INDIA HOLDS ITS GROUND 66

TRUMP'S H1B HAMMER:FOR INDIA 70

UN @ 80: REFORM OR IRRELEVANCE? 74

JOLLY LLB 3: JUSTICE WITH A PUNCHLINE 76

04

MAMA MIA IT'S KIARA!



Small talk



MAMA MIA, IT'S KIARA!

Bollywood's glam queen Kiara Advani has sparked a fresh wave of gossip! Spotted flaunting a dazzling gold 'Mama' necklace, the diva sent fans into a frenzy, confirming her new role as a mommy. Social media exploded with heart emojis and cheeky comments—some even calling her the 'hottest mom in B-town.' From red carpets to baby bottles, Kiara seems to be balancing it all with effortless charm. And while fans are still swooning over her dreamy pairing with Sidharth Malhotra, her latest mom-glow has clearly stolen the limelight. B-town's new favorite headline: 'Mama Mia, it's Kiara!'

The discoveries that will create a stir in 2025

New Discovery in Pest Biology

Scientists from Pusan National University and other Japanese institutions used 3D electron microscopy to study *Candidatus Profftella armatura*, a symbiotic bacterium living inside the Asian citrus psyllid. They discovered unprecedented, elongated tubular structures within the bacterium, which may be crucial to its function. ●

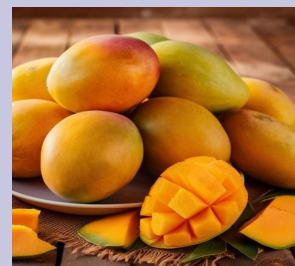


Mushroom's Dual Evolution!

Scientists discovered that mushrooms evolved the ability to produce the psychedelic compound psilocybin not once, but twice, through completely different biochemical pathways. This rare convergent evolution—where two unrelated groups (like *Psilocybe* and fiber cap mushrooms) independently arrive at the same molecule—is a major finding. ●

It's Not Just the Sugar!

The natural sugar content of a food doesn't automatically determine its health value, especially for people with prediabetes. While tropical fruits like mangoes contain high sugar (around 50 grams), clinical nutrition scientist Raedeh Basiri's research shows that mangoes may offer protective benefits for those at risk of diabetes. This finding highlights the 'overall food context.' ●



HIGH EMITTERS MUST PAY FOR HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY



New research from Utrecht University reveals a fundamental flaw in how global climate ambition has been assessed, arguing that previous calculations inadvertently 'rewarded' high emitters at the expense of the most vulnerable ones. The study, led by Yann Robiou du Pont, found that past assessments used 'constantly moving baselines' of rising emissions, which allowed historically high emitters to dodge their full responsibility and delay action. ●

VinFast VF6 & VF7 Unveiled

VinFast has launched its VF6 and VF7 electric SUVs in India, marking the brand's push into the competitive EV market. The VF6 comes with a 59.6 kWh battery offering up to 480 km range, while the larger VF7 packs a 70.8 kWh unit with FWD and AWD options, delivering 450–496 km range. Positioned in the mid-premium segment, both models blend sharp design, advanced features, and sustainable mobility. ●



APPOINTMENTS



Dr. Kanak Das *Director, Botanical Survey of India*

Dr. Kanad Das was appointed as the new Director of the Botanical Survey of India. He is the first mycologist to head the institute. Recognized for his research in fungal taxonomy and biodiversity.

Resignation

Kirti Pandey, *Chairman, UPESSC*

Kirti Pandey resigned as Chairman of the Uttar Pradesh Education Service Selection Commission, stepping down abruptly without citing any reason.



THEY SAID IT...

Benjamin Netanyahu
Prime Minister, Israel

Palestinian terrorism and rocket attacks pose a serious threat to Israel's security. The international community must take action to uphold Israel's rights & counter terrorism.



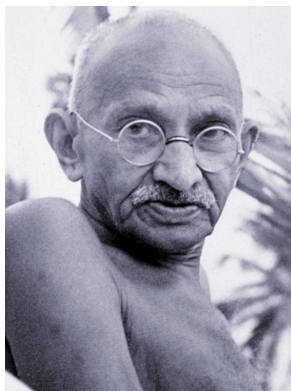
Mahmoud Abbas
President, Palestine

Israel's military actions and occupation are unbearable for the Palestinian people. The only path to lasting peace is the two-state solution.

THE TRIBUTE

Mahatma Gandhi, born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, India, remains one of the most influential figures in modern history. Revered as the 'Father of the Nation' in India, Gandhi dedicated his life to the principles of truth, non-violence, and justice. Educated in law in London, he began his career in South Africa, where he experienced racial discrimination firsthand. These experiences shaped his philosophy of Satyagraha—a method of non-violent resistance that would later become the cornerstone of India's struggle for independence.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and quickly emerged as a leader of the Indian National Congress. Through his leadership, movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Salt March, and Quit India Movement mobilized millions of Indians against British colonial rule, emphasizing peaceful protest over armed conflict. Gandhi's



M. K. GHANDHI
(02/10/1869-30/01/1948)

approach inspired countless leaders and movements worldwide, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, highlighting the global relevance of his ideas.

Beyond politics, Gandhi advocated for social reforms, promoting self-reliance, rural development, and the eradication of untouchability. His simple lifestyle, often wearing homespun khadi and practicing fasting as a form of protest, reflected his commitment to living his principles. Mahatma Gandhi's legacy continues

to resonate across generations. His teachings of tolerance, compassion, and non-violence offer timeless lessons, not only for political struggles but for everyday life. Every year, India observes Gandhi Jayanti on October 2, celebrating his birth and honoring his enduring contributions to peace, humanity, and the fight for justice. ●



Targeted Attack on Christians in Michigan

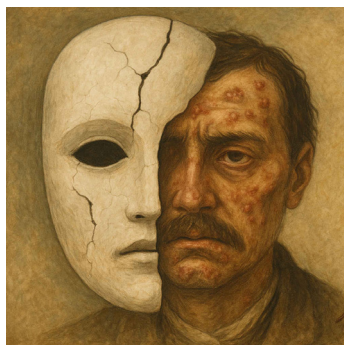
US President Donald Trump has strongly condemned a deadly shooting at Saints church in Grand Blanc, Michigan, labeling it a 'targeted attack on Christians.' The incident resulted in at least two deaths and several injuries. The attack occurred shortly after the service began when a 40-year-old male suspect drove his car through the front doors of the busy church, opened fire on the congregation with an assault rifle, and allegedly set a fire. Police officers swiftly responded, engaging and killing the shooter in a firefight. Ten gunshot victims were transported to local hospitals, with two later succumbing to their wounds. Following the event, Trump posted on Truth Social that the violence was part of an 'epidemic' in the US, demanding it 'MUST END, IMMEDIATELY!' ●

King Charles, UK Leaders Sway Trump



US President Donald Trump's recent shift in his Ukraine stance—dismissing Russia as a 'paper tiger' and backing a decisive Kiev victory—was reportedly influenced by his UK visit. Ukrainian official Andrey Yermak confirmed the trip's significance. During his visit, Trump met with Prime Minister Keir Starmer and was lavishly hosted by King Charles. Yermak specifically praised the King's efforts and the position of the people Trump met, suggesting their strong pro-Ukraine views played a key role in changing his outlook on the conflict. ●

RKI Reports Sharp Rise in Syphilis



According to the latest report from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the number of syphilis infections in Germany reached a new record high of 9,519 cases in 2024, a massive surge compared to 1,697 cases at the turn of the century. The sexually transmitted disease has seen a steady rise over the past two decades, with the latest data showing a 3.9% year-on-year increase from 2023. ●

School Board Leader Arrested by ICE

US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has arrested Ian Andre Roberts, the superintendent of Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS), alleging he is an 'illegal alien from Guyana' who lacked work authorization, had a prior weapons conviction, and was subject to a final removal order. Roberts, who earned over \$300,000 annually since 2023, was detained during a targeted operation after allegedly attempting to flee federal officers in a district-issued vehicle. ●



US Weighs Military Strikes Inside Venezuela



The US is 'preparing options' for potential military strikes, including drone attacks on drug laboratories and trafficking group leaders, inside Venezuela, according to a report by NBC citing unnamed American officials. The action could occur 'in a matter of weeks,' though President Donald Trump has not yet approved it. ●

UN Sanctions 'Snapback' Hits Iran



Iran is once again subject to comprehensive United Nations sanctions after the European signatories of the 2015 nuclear deal invoked the 'snapback' mechanism. These sanctions, which automatically reinstated on Sunday, include an arms embargo, asset freezes, and banking restrictions that are expected to severely impact the already struggling Iranian economy. The re-imposed international isolation, despite opposition from Russia and China, has triggered economic anxiety within Iran. ●

Poland Links Benefits for Ukrainian Refugees to Employment



Polish President Karol Nawrocki has signed a new bill tightening the rules for Ukrainian refugees receiving state benefits. While the law allows Ukrainians to stay in Poland until at least March 2026, it now links access to financial aid, including the monthly '800 plus' child support allowance, to employment for at least one parent and school enrollment for their children. To qualify for this and other benefits like healthcare, refugees must now prove they earn at least 50% of the minimum wage, with monthly compliance checks. The head of the president's office, Zbigniew Bogucki, stated this ends 'tourism from Ukraine at the expense of Polish taxpayers.' This measure follows Nawrocki's earlier veto of a less-stringent bill, emphasizing that only refugees contributing to Poland's economy should be eligible for state support. ●

Chinese Stock Market Becomes Attractive to Foreign Investors Again



Foreign investors, who withdrew from the Chinese stock market three years ago, are now being drawn back to it. This renewed interest is largely fueled by the market's prospects in the technology sector, with opportunities in Artificial Intelligence (AI), self-driving cars, and pharmaceutical innovation. The shift also reflects international investors seeking alternatives and success beyond American markets. ●



Namibia Deploys Over 500 Troops to Battle Massive Fire in Etosha National Park

Namibia has deployed more than 500 soldiers to combat a severe fire that has consumed approximately one-third of the Etosha National Park, one of Africa's largest wildlife reserves. Prime Minister Tjitunga Ngurare Manongo confirmed the deployment, stating the troops would assist firefighters, police, and volunteers already fighting the 'raging fire.' The blaze, which began on September 22, spread rapidly due to strong winds and dry vegetation, causing extensive ecological damage. Etosha is home to 114 mammal species, including the critically endangered black rhinoceros. ●



Adani in controversy again; Congress dubs him 'National Seth'

Industrialist Adani is mired in controversy over the proposed 2,400 MW thermal power plant on 1,050 acres in Pirpainti, Bihar. The land was leased for 33 years at a token price of ₹1 per year. The Congress has launched a fierce attack, with leader Pawan Khera calling Adani the 'Rashtra Seth' (Nation's Banker). Khera alleged that farmers were coerced into signing for land at throwaway prices. A major concern raised is the potential felling of around 10 lakh trees. Despite the controversy, PM Modi recently laid the virtual foundation stone for the ₹26,000 crore project, which the state government touts as the largest investment in Northeast India. The Adani Group claims the plant will generate 10,000-12,000 jobs and supply power to Bihar. ●

UP Government Bans Mention of Caste in Public Records



The Uttar Pradesh government has issued strict orders banning the mention of caste in public places, legal documents, and police records. This decision follows an Allahabad High Court ruling that deemed the inclusion of caste in police records to be against constitutional values. Under the new directive, the caste of the accused will not be mentioned in FIRs and other documents; only parents' names will be used. Furthermore, caste-based rallies and slogans on vehicles/signboards are now prohibited. ●

Indian Generic Drugs Spared from US Tariff Hike



Despite Trump's announcement of a 100% tariff on imported drugs, the impact on Indian pharmaceutical exports is expected to be minimal. According to Sudarshan Jain, Secretary-General of the Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA), the tariff will not affect India's main exports to the US, generic drugs and APIs. Trump's tariff targets only branded and patented medicines. tariff on generics would be impractical for the US, raising healthcare costs. ●

Opposition Protests Sonam Wangchuk's Arrest

Environmental activist and innovator Sonam Wangchuk was arrested on September 26 in Leh just before a planned press conference, following which internet services were also suspended there. Opposition parties strongly condemned the move. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh denounced the arrest under the NSA, stating the Modi government cannot suppress the issues. Arvind Kejriwal called it 'dictatorship'. ●



'I Love Mohammed' Banner Sparks Nationwide Protests



The 'I Love Mohammed' banner controversy, which began in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, has spread to states including Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, and Gujarat, with the Muslim community taking to the streets to express their love for the Prophet. The dispute arose on September 5 during the Barawafat procession (Eid Milad-un-Nabi) when some Hindu organizations objected to the banner, calling it a 'new tradition'. ●

Ambani's 'Vantara' under scrutiny



The discovery of 26 rare Spix's Macaws ('Blue Parrots'), declared extinct in the wild in 2019, in India has brought the Ambani family's animal sanctuary, Vantara (Jamnagar, Gujarat), under suspicion. Known for their brilliant blue colour and lifelong pairing behavior, these birds originally hailed from the Brazilian forests. Vantara, run by Anant Ambani, is accused of importing thousands of rare and exotic animals from 40 countries since 2022. The controversy now involves not just India, but also Germany and Brazil. ●

Is Nitish Kumar Relying on Women Voters Again?



With assembly elections approaching, the Bihar government has taken steps to boost welfare and women's empowerment, raising honorariums for ASHA and Anganwadi workers and announcing financial support of up to ₹2 lakh for women's self-employment initiatives. These moves are part of a broader push to highlight development achievements and government schemes ahead of the polls. However, Leader of the Opposition, Tejashwi Yadav, has criticized these actions, including the recent inauguration of Purnia Airport, describing them as a 'hasty copy' of promises previously made by the Mahagathbandhan and questioning the need for a 'real CM.' The government claims these initiatives fulfill earlier pledges on infrastructure and development. ●

India Bags Massive ₹1.02 Lakh Cr Food Processing Deals



India's food processing sector received a major boost with ₹1.02 lakh crore in investment commitments from 26 domestic and global firms during the World Food India 2025 summit, the Ministry of Food Processing Industries announced. These MoUs are projected to generate over 64,000 direct and more than one million indirect jobs. Key investors include Reliance, Coca-Cola bottlers, Amul, Nestlé India, Tata Consumer Products, Patanjali, and Lulu Group. ●



Karur Crush: The Deadly Mix of Star Power and Mismanagement

The death toll is mounting in Karur, Tamil Nadu, following a stampede at the September 27 rally of actor and TVK President Vijay. The pattern of this tragedy is familiar in India. More than just the crowd, a specific trigger—such as people falling from a tree behind Vijay's van—creates panic, leading to a wider crush. Delays in rescue efforts further inflate the toll. In South India, the combination of film stars entering politics makes it challenging for authorities to manage crowd sizes effectively. Initial reports on the Karur incident suggest there was inadequate planning for the massive crowd, and delays in the event likely contributed to the deadly crush. ●



SRIRAJESH, Editor

UNCERTAIN WORLD RESILIENT INDIA

In 2025, global instability—from supply chain disruptions and energy crises to climate threats, cyberattacks, and Russia-NATO tensions—challenges India to strengthen self-reliance, energy security, and strategic diplomacy.

The current global landscape is marked by unprecedented uncertainties and complex risks, including disruptions in global supply chains, energy security challenges, the severe impacts of climate change, cyber warfare, and escalating Russia-NATO tensions. According to reports by S&P Global and BlackRock, these challenges threaten global stability and create strategic imperatives for rapidly growing economies like India. To navigate these risks, India must critically redefine its policies and strategies in line with principles of strategic autonomy and self-reliance.

In recent years, global supply chains based on the 'just-in-time' manufacturing model have been severely disrupted due to geopolitical tensions and the pandemic. The Russia-Ukraine war, in particular, disrupted raw material supplies, fueling global inflation. For India, this disruption is both a critical challenge and a catalyst for self-reliance. The government is emphasizing domestic manufacturing through the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' initiative and Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, while exploring 'friend-shoring' strategies to ensure reliable supply networks. These measures are crucial for both national security and economic resilience.

The volatility of global energy markets has elevated energy security to a matter of national importance. Post the Russia-Ukraine conflict, rising crude oil prices have exerted significant financial pressure on major importers like India. In response, India has introduced fundamental shifts in its energy policy, investing heavily in renewable energy sources, particularly solar and wind, alongside launching the Green Hydrogen Mission. Expanding strategic petroleum reserves and promoting energy efficiency are also key pillars. The objective is clear: reduce dependence on fossil fuels and move towards a sustainable, self-reliant energy future.

Climate change poses an immediate and destructive global threat, manifesting in India as irregular monsoons, floods, droughts, and heatwaves. These challenges threaten long-term stability and economic growth. The government has adopted climate-resilient policies, including initiatives under the National Action Plan on

Climate Change (NAPCC), focusing on disaster management, water conservation, and adaptation strategies. At the same time, India continues to appeal to developed nations for climate justice and financial-technical support to tackle these challenges effectively.

With rapid digitalization, cyberattacks have become an integral part of national security concerns. India's digital infrastructure faces increasing targeting by foreign actors. The government has prioritized cybersecurity, strengthening CERT-In and adopting a 'zero-trust' security model to protect critical digital assets. Ensuring a resilient cyber framework is vital for the continued success of Digital India initiatives.

The deepening tensions between Russia and NATO are reshaping the global power balance. In this complex geopolitical landscape, India has pursued a 'multi-alignment' policy. While maintaining historical defense and energy ties with Russia, India has simultaneously strengthened relations with Western nations. Active participation in groups like the Quad and leadership roles in multilateral forums such as the G20 provide India with a balanced and influential voice in global governance.

In conclusion, the emerging global risks of 2025 demand that India refocus its strategies on self-reliance, energy security, climate adaptation, digital protection, and balanced diplomacy. These challenges also present an opportunity for India to assert its role as a responsible, strategically resilient global power. By embracing these imperatives, India can navigate uncertainty while strengthening its position in the evolving international order.

Ajesh



srirajesh.journalist



@srirajesh



editor@cultcurrent.com

Water as the New Geopolitical Pivot



Anwar Hussain

The Kosh Tapa Canal is more than a local water project in Afghanistan—it has the potential to redefine regional cooperation, conflict, and the geopolitical future of Eurasia.

In discussions of global power, attention often centers on oil wells, gas pipelines, or trade corridors. Yet one resource surpasses all others in fundamental importance, life-sustaining power, and the ability to determine nations' futures: water. Across Eurasia, water is fast becoming the decisive factor in whether states pursue cooperation or slide into conflict.

At the heart of this emerging geopolitical shift lies Afghanistan's ambitious Kosh Tapa Canal Project, designed to divert critical flows from the Amu Darya River. While promising life and livelihood for millions of Afghans, the project has raised alarm across neighboring Central Asian countries. Despite its strategic significance, international attention remains limited—a silence that could presage a major regional crisis.

Kosh Tapa Canal: Lifeline for Afghanistan, Threat for Neighbors

According to climate researcher Kamila Faiziyeva, the Kosh Tapa Canal stretches 285 kilometers, with the capacity to irrigate vast areas of northern Afghanistan. After decades of war and sanctions, this project promises a revival of food security—a lifeline for millions of farmers struggling with drought and poverty.

Yet what appears as salvation for Afghanistan poses potential upheaval for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Both nations rely heavily on Amu Darya's waters for agriculture, livelihoods, and regional stability. Every cubic meter diverted by Afghanistan has profound consequences. Afghan authorities, naturally, assert a sovereign right to the waters flowing through their territory—a contention rooted in population needs and national survival.

The Growing Web of Water Conflicts

Water disputes are not unique to Afghanistan. Across Eurasia and beyond, transboundary rivers are fraught with tension. South Asia's Indus Water Treaty between India and Pakistan, for instance, has managed to prevent outright conflict despite historical animosities. Yet even there, floods, accusations of unilateral exploitation, and environmental stress reveal the fragility of water agreements.

Afghanistan faces an even more precarious situation. Unlike India and Pakistan, which at least have formal treaties in place, Kabul lacks comprehensive agreements with its northern neighbors regarding the Amu Darya basin. With the exception of a limited treaty with Iran on the Helmand River, Afghanistan operates in a legal vacuum—a paradox where the country most in need of water has the weakest institutional integration.

Geopolitical Stakes and External Influence

The Kosh Tepa Canal is not merely an environmental project—it is a geopolitical lever. Central Asia has long been a theatre of Russian, Chinese, Turkish, Iranian, and Western influence. A project of this scale could become another flashpoint, inviting external actors to capitalize on tensions. Instability in this region would ripple beyond local boundaries, affecting global energy markets, trade corridors, and European security.

Thus, while the canal appears to be a domestic Afghan initiative, its implications resonate across Eurasia's entire geopolitical landscape.

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.

Cooperation as a Path Forward: SCO and Multilateral Frameworks

Regional institutions may offer partial solutions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the most obvious candidate for mediating such disputes, bringing together Russia, China, Central Asian republics, and Iran—all key stakeholders in regional stability. Gradually integrating Afghanistan, currently an observer, into such mechanisms could foster a neutral, regionally owned water-sharing framework.

Complementary avenues exist: reviving the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), negotiating bilateral agreements, or pursuing multilateral dialogues through UN-backed channels. The OIC can play a symbolic role, while China's Belt and Road Initiative could fund water-efficient technologies. The CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union could integrate water security into their agendas, given agriculture and trade exposure.

The Peril of Unilateral Action

Without cooperation, unilateral water projects could trigger cascading crises. Countries may pursue 'hydro-sovereignty' aggressively, building dams or diversions

without regard for neighbors. Similar tensions have occurred globally: Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam has strained relations with Egypt and Sudan; Turkey's GAP project has impacted downstream Syria and Iraq. Unchecked, unilateral water exploitation inevitably escalates regional friction.

Taliban, Sovereignty, and Diplomatic Necessity

For the Taliban, seeking international legitimacy, the Kosh Tepa Canal is a symbol of sovereignty, governance, and food security. Ignoring Afghanistan's water needs is unsustainable; yet unconditioned acquiescence by neighbors is equally unacceptable. Dialogue is the only viable path forward. Engagement with Kabul is therefore both practical and strategic. Water disputes rarely remain local. Scarcity fuels migration, instability, and extremism. Syria's civil war, for instance, was exacerbated by prolonged drought—a reminder that climate and water issues amplify existing geopolitical and social crises.

Conclusion: Water Diplomacy or Water Conflict

In short, water politics has emerged as a central geopolitical factor. Afghanistan's canal illustrates how a resource often taken for granted can become a strategic pivot. Successfully transforming this potential flashpoint into a platform for cooperation could prevent a crisis while demonstrating Eurasia's capacity for self-reliant stability, independent of uncertain Western interventions.

The choice is stark: water diplomacy or water conflict. Regional actors must act decisively before the canal's operations render negotiation impossible. Preventive diplomacy remains far less costly than managing conflict after it erupts. Eurasia faces a defining moment. Will nations build a bridge to shared prosperity over this water issue, or will it deepen existing fissures? The future of regional stability and wealth hinges on the answer.

Anwar Hussain is a senior journalist and academic.

Crisis in Africa rarely begins with politics alone. They often start with water — too little, too dirty, or unfairly shared. Droughts push pastoralists off their land, floods wash away markets and schools, and in both cases, families are left more vulnerable to displacement, hunger and conflict. The Sahel has seen farmers and herders clash as rainfall patterns shift; in Southern Africa, dry taps in cities have fuelled unrest and forced rationing. Each example underscores a simple truth: when water fails, economies and social contracts fail, too.

This fragility is structural. Nearly 95 percent of Africa's agricultural land is still rain-fed, leaving harvests at the mercy of climate swings. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that water security is under mounting pressure from multiple directions. Adaptation will be impossible unless water is placed at the heart of planning, shaping what is built, how it is financed, and who makes the decisions. I have seen firsthand how communities become more resilient when water is stored, stewarded and shared fairly.

Yet despite this urgency, sub-Saharan Africa remains home to nearly half of the people worldwide who still lack at least basic drinking water services. That single fact ought to reorder our priorities. Water is not only a human right; it is the foundational infrastructure of development, influencing what is grown on the farm, what is made in the factory and what is taught in the classroom.

When fields dry out or taps run dry, it is families, especially women and girls, who absorb the shock. They do so not in abstract numbers, but in hours walked, classes missed and opportunities lost.

UNICEF estimates women and girls spend around 200 million hours every day collecting water, time that could be spent learning, earning or leading. The inequity extends well beyond water collection. Sanitation progress is limited: no country in Africa is on track to achieve universal access to safely managed sanitation by 2030; only three are on track for universal basic sanitation.

Pipes alone do not bring dignity; people do. Efficient, sustainable and enduring services come when communities help set priorities, when fees are clear, and when users have a real voice. Policy must reflect daily reality. That means standards that fit local water conditions, budgets set aside for long-term upkeep, and information that communities can access and trust.



Sareen Malik

HYDROPOLITICS

Rising in Africa?

Some models work. Global analyses suggest that every US\$1 invested in water and sanitation returns roughly US\$4 in social and economic benefits—through time saved, better health and higher productivity.

Innovation works best when it is rooted in context. Simple tools such as small-scale filtration, leak detection, solar pumping and water reuse can scale quickly when paired with training and local enterprises. Funding partners, philanthropies and prizes can also help proven solutions to scale.

One such platform is the Zayed Sustainability Prize, which recognises practical, scalable solutions while placing people at the centre. As a newly appointed member of its water category selection committee, I have seen how the prize elevates solutions that are both innovative and inclusive. In 2025, it honoured SkyJuice Foundation for a simple, power-free filtration system (gravity-fed ultrafiltration) that brings safe drinking water to remote and underserved communities often excluded from conventional infrastructure. And in 2023, the prize recognised Eau et Vie (Better with Water) for bringing household taps to underserved urban neighbourhoods and lowering bills for low-income residents.

These examples show that inclusive progress is possible — but only if decision-makers match words with action. So, what should they do now?

Put service, not symbolism, at the centre. Treat a rural hand pump breakdown with the same urgency as an urban pipe burst. Make every budget line traceable, every contract transparent, and every community able to see what was promised and delivered. Finance should be tied not only to infrastructure built, but to

hours saved for girls, diseases averted in clinics and crops secured in the field.

Civil society and local governments need a stronger seat at the table. Public forums should be convened in which utilities, users and regulators face the same scorecard, and those results guide investments. Procurement rules should reward technologies that can be repaired locally, by local technicians, with parts sourced within the country. In agriculture, shift from betting only on mega-dams to backing soil-moisture management, rainwater harvesting and small-scale irrigation that reach families faster.

When governments send these signals—backed by predictable finance and political will—companies can follow with co-funding for watershed protection, and citizens will trust that their voices count. The test of every project should be simple: does it free up girls' time, keep children healthy and build jobs where people live?

Make water governance and infrastructure the plan, not a footnote. This means storage in the right places, pipes that do not leak, treatment that keeps running, and operators who are trained and paid. When the system works, health improves and local communities thrive. When you put this infrastructure first, dignity and prosperity will follow.

Sareen Malik is Executive Secretary of the African Civil Society Network for Water and Sanitation, Vice Chair of Sanitation and Water for All, Co-President of the Centre of Entrepreneurship for Water and Sanitation, and Board Member of the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI). First featured in Al Jazeera, we are delighted to present this article in Cult Current with full attribution.



Balancing the Dragon

INDIA'S STRATEGIC TIGHTROPE



Santosh Kumar

India's relationship with China is at a complex crossroads. While border tensions and historic rivalries persist, economic interdependence and regional dynamics compel engagement. Against the backdrop of U.S. tariffs, shifting global alliances, and strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, India seeks a careful balance between cooperation and safeguarding its sovereignty and long-term interests.

In August 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi traveled to Tianjin to participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. This marked Modi's first visit to China since the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in fatalities and

a prolonged military standoff. The meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin attracted international attention, with some analysts suggesting that India had been nudged closer to China due to U.S. tariffs and diplomatic pressures.

However, this interpretation oversimplifies the situation. India's engagement with China is not a reactionary pivot; it is part of a sustained effort to stabilize relations while maintaining strategic autonomy. The thaw began during the 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, where Modi and Xi conducted substantive bilateral discussions for the first time since 2019. These talks led to a formal agreement on troop disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), easing tensions in disputed areas such as Depsang and Demchok.

Economic Interdependence Amid Political Rivalry

Trade between India and China remains substantial, with bilateral exchanges exceeding \$100 billion annually. Despite political tensions, economic interdependence continues to shape the relationship. China remains India's largest trading partner, yet the trade balance heavily favors China, prompting India to explore diversification and address structural imbalances.

Concurrently, India is facing challenges in trade with the United States. In August 2025, the Trump administration imposed a 50% tariff on Indian imports, citing India's continued procurement of Russian oil as a major concern. This move, perceived as coercive by Indian policymakers, has underscored the need for a recalibrated approach toward both Western and Asian powers.

India's economic strategy involves strengthening trade with China cautiously while simultaneously expanding partnerships elsewhere. For instance, India is increasingly engaging with ASEAN, the EU, Japan, and Australia to diversify supply chains and reduce overreliance on any single partner.

Strategic Autonomy as the Guiding Principle

India's foreign policy philosophy emphasizes strategic autonomy—the ability to make independent decisions in a multipolar world without becoming

overly dependent on any single global power. Engagement with China, in this context, is pragmatic rather than ideological.

While India seeks cooperation on economic and regional security issues, it remains vigilant about China's assertiveness in border regions, the South China Sea, and through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Participation in multilateral forums such as the Quad (India, the U.S., Japan, Australia) reflects India's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, balancing China's influence without direct confrontation.

Regional and Global Implications

The India-China dynamic is closely watched by other major powers. The U.S., for example, has historically supported India as a counterbalance to China's growing influence. However, inconsistent policies—such as punitive tariffs against India while adopting a softer stance toward China—have prompted New Delhi to reconsider its strategic calculations.

At the same time, China faces economic slowdowns, pressure from Western markets, and scrutiny over its support for Russia. These factors make Beijing more receptive to dialogue and confidence-building measures with India. The mutual interest lies in maintaining regional stability, avoiding military escalation, and fostering economic growth in a highly competitive environment.

Beyond Borders: Economic and Security Calculations

For India, managing its relationship with China goes beyond borders; it is about long-term economic security and global positioning. India continues to invest in infrastructure, technology, and military modernization to enhance its leverage. Programs such as domestic manufacturing initiatives, renewable energy development, and strategic port expansions help India reduce vulnerabilities to external pressures.

Simultaneously, India continues to seek regional partnerships in trade and security. Its agreements with ASEAN, participation in regional security dialogues, and strategic outreach in the Indian Ocean aim to create a buffer against unilateral influence from China or any other power.

Pragmatic Engagement, Not Dependence

India's engagement strategy underscores one principle: engagement does not equal dependence. While cooperation on trade, climate, and multilateral forums is beneficial, India avoids overreliance on China. This approach allows India to retain leverage in negotiations, protect its sovereignty, and mitigate potential coercive measures from global powers.

Moreover, India leverages multilateral platforms to balance China's influence. BRICS, SCO, and G20 forums enable India to pursue regional cooperation while advancing its economic and strategic goals. By fostering dialogue, India maintains communication channels that reduce the risk of unintended conflicts and enhance predictability in bilateral relations.

Conclusion: Walking the Tightrope

India's approach to China reflects a nuanced understanding of global geopolitics. The country balances engagement and deterrence, cooperation and competition. While economic ties and regional stability provide reasons for dialogue, national security and strategic autonomy remain non-negotiable.

In essence, India does not seek to become dependent on China. Instead, it pursues a pragmatic path of cautious engagement, leveraging diplomacy, trade, and multilateral forums to safeguard national interests while exploring mutually beneficial cooperation. As global dynamics continue to shift, India's measured approach exemplifies strategic foresight, ensuring that it remains a decisive actor in Asia without compromising its independence.



The U.S.'s recent trade policies have shaken global markets, leaving ASEAN at a crossroads. Amid rising tariffs and supply chain risks, India emerges as a potential strategic lifeline. This article explores how deeper India-ASEAN collaboration could turn challenges into opportunities, ensuring economic resilience, stability, and growth across the Indo-Pacific.

US Tariffs ASEAN Turns East

A new turbulence has hit the global economic landscape. The United States' 'Trumpian' trade policies have created a storm affecting numerous countries, with Southeast Asia's ASEAN nations squarely in the crosshairs. Burdened with heavy tariffs, these nations now face unprecedented challenges to their economic stability and export markets.

ASEAN stands at a crossroads. The region must not only manage the risk of losing one of its major trading partners but also safeguard its position in global supply chains. In this critical moment, India emerges as a potential strategic partner and reliable lifeline.

Tariff Pressures and ASEAN's Dilemma

The trade ties between ASEAN and the U.S. have historically been strong. By 2024, trade surpassed \$571.7 billion. Yet, in its bid to reduce the U.S. trade deficit, the Trump administration imposed hefty tariffs—36% on Cambodia and Thailand, 20% on Vietnam, and 19% on Indonesia. This move has plunged ASEAN into a complex dilemma: collective resistance to the tariffs versus individual nations striking bilateral deals to protect their own interests.

China's Role: Opportunity or Risk?

At first glance, the U.S.-China trade war might appear to offer ASEAN an opportunity. Rising U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods could redirect buyers toward ASEAN markets. However, ASEAN's economies heavily rely on China for raw materials and intermediate products. Increased costs in China translate into higher production costs for ASEAN, making this a double-edged sword.

India: ASEAN's Strategic Bet

With traditional markets uncertain and overreliance on China risky, ASEAN seeks a stable, large, and trustworthy partner. India fits this role perfectly:

Expanding Market Potential: India's fast-growing economy and burgeoning middle class present immense demand, offering ASEAN a way to offset losses in U.S. markets.

Complementary Economies: India's needs for electronics, machinery, and auto parts align with ASEAN's manufacturing strengths, while its services, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products meet ASEAN demand.

Resilient Supply Chains: Lessons from COVID-19 and geopolitical tensions have shown the danger of dependence on a single country. Collaboration between India and ASEAN can build robust, diversified supply chains.

Existing Free Trade Agreement: The existing FTA provides a strong foundation that can be deepened in services, investment, and strategic collaboration.

Conclusion: Seizing the Moment

U.S. tariffs have reshaped global trade dynamics. To thrive in this evolving landscape, ASEAN must act boldly: strengthen internal markets, negotiate as a bloc, and actively explore new partners. While China remains important, overdependence is now a strategic risk. Deepening trade ties with India is not just an option—it's a necessity. This historic opportunity could bolster economic resilience and stability across the Indo-Pacific, and missing it may prove costly.

Phantom Wars

US vs China?



Jalaj Srivastava

The US has long framed China as an existential threat, a rising power ready to challenge global order. But a closer look reveals a status-quo nation, focused inward. Washington's fear-driven policies risk unnecessary confrontation, military escalation, and wasted resources—all while battling a phantom enemy of its own making.



In the policy-making corridors of Washington today, one idea is taken as gospel: China aims to replace the United States as the world's dominant superpower and is bent on aggressively expanding its territory. Both Democrats and Republicans are united on this, and this consensus has shaped America's China policy, which now focuses on war preparations, military deterrence, and economic 'decoupling'.

But what if this entire understanding is wrong? What if America is pouring all its energy into fighting an enemy that, in reality, doesn't exist?

If we look closely at what China says and what it wants, a completely different picture emerges. China is not an expansionist power seeking to redraw the world map; rather, it is a 'status quo' power with limited global objectives. China's leaders are far more focused on their internal challenges and the stability of their regime than on external expansion. Yes, it has foreign policy demands



and often bullies its neighbors, but it does not seek to invade or conquer them. It is extremely sensitive about its control over territories that the rest of the world has, at least diplomatically, recognized as Chinese—Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. But China's ambitions rarely extend beyond this.

If China is a status quo power with limited aims, and not a grave threat to American dominance, then the United States is taking the wrong approach to the world's most important bilateral relationship. Washington's emphasis on military deterrence and war preparations risks creating the very military confrontation that need not exist. Instead of viewing China as a dangerous threat, America needs to understand China's core interests so that it knows where China might be willing to compromise and where it will not.

What Does China Want? Listen to Its Own Voice

The best way to understand what China wants is to listen to what its leaders, journals, and media outlets say. Although many observers dismiss public statements as mere propaganda or cheap talk, there are good reasons to believe that China means what it says.

China has stated its core interests clearly and consistently. In September 2011, before Xi Jinping came to power, Beijing published its first official foreign policy white paper, which defined China's core interests. These included: internal political stability, national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the primacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and economic and social development. Under Xi's rule, the party's core interests have not changed.

What is largely absent from China's description of itself and its interests is any grandiose ambition to become a global or even a regional leader. In a major speech on the 100th anniversary of the CCP's founding in 2021, Xi did not call for Chinese hegemony or global leadership. The

only mention of foreign policy was to reiterate China's opposition to aggressive actions overseas.

Xi and other Chinese leaders often call for a larger role for China in global governance, but this does not mean that China seeks to replace the United States as the dominant global power. Xi's recent 'Global Governance Initiative' proposal is explicit in its aim to preserve the United Nations-based international system rather than overturn it. Nor does China want to be the sole power in charge of these institutions. Instead, China is clear—and has been since the beginning of the Cold War—that its goal is multilateralism.

China's global actions are aimed at promoting both economic growth and political influence, but these international efforts are internally targeted and stem from domestic issues. For example, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to alleviate excess capacity in industries related to infrastructure construction. Chinese leaders frame the BRI as a tool to build international support for China's development and governance models—but the goal is not to spread Chinese values or to encourage other countries to adopt China's political and economic systems.

The Testimony of History: Taiwan, Tibet, and Border Disputes

To understand China's territorial claims, it is essential to look at history. Its claim on Taiwan is not new. This issue dates back to the 19th century when the Qing dynasty lost Taiwan to Japan. Since then, every ruler of China has considered Taiwan a lost territory that must be regained. This claim predates Taiwan's semiconductor factories or its strategic location. Chinese leaders would want unification with Taiwan even if it held no military or economic value.

China's other territorial concerns are also at least a century old. Hong Kong and Macau, which were under

British and Portuguese colonial rule respectively, were returned to China in the late 1990s. China's rule over Tibet and Xinjiang dates back to the Qing dynasty.

In contrast, control over the East China and South China Seas has been less critical to China. Disputes over maritime claims are rooted in the chaos of the first half of the twentieth century rather than in enduring Chinese claims. The origin of the so-called 'nine-dash line,' which China uses to demarcate its claims in the South China Sea, is a map published in 1948. But China has also shown flexibility in resolving border disputes with its neighbors. For example, it removed parts of this line to improve relations with North Vietnam.

2000.

America's Misunderstanding and the Lessons for India

Because Washington has misunderstood what China wants, its policy towards China has been misdirected. Current policies aimed at diplomatically and economically isolating China are designed to combat an expansionist power that seeks to displace the US and aggressively expand its territory. But these policies will do little to engage a country that is far more focused on preserving the status quo and maintaining its internal stability.

This means the US military buildup in the Pacific is



China has often agreed to relinquish disputed territory to settle claims and establish firm borders when its core interests are not at stake. To settle disputes with North Korea, for example, in 1962 and 1964, China gave up the peak of Mount Baekdu and more than 500 square kilometers of nearby territory. China and Vietnam signed bilateral treaties codifying their borders in 1999 and

unnecessary and counterproductive. It wastes resources preparing for low-probability contingencies, which weakens US military strength in the long term. It also increases the possibility of escalating tensions with China rather than lowering them.

Trying to use force to shape the future status of Taiwan



is even more misguided. Since China's claims to Taiwan are ideological and historical, not purely strategic, attempting deterrence is more likely to provoke. The goal should be to preserve the status quo, which has worked for the past four decades.

There are deep lessons in this for India. Instead of mimicking US policy and viewing China as an existential threat, India must understand China on its own terms. China is a competitor for India, a neighbor with deep historical and economic ties, but also with tensions on the border. It should not be seen as an enemy that wants to swallow India whole.

India's China policy must be based on realism, not Western fears. This means:

Military Balance, but Avoiding Unnecessary Confrontation: India must remain militarily strong to protect its borders, but it should avoid getting drawn into an uncontrolled arms race with China. Diplomacy and dialogue must always be the priority.

Economic Engagement, but Guarding Against Dependency: China will remain India's largest trading partner. Attempting to sever this relationship would be impractical. Instead, India should focus on reducing the trade deficit, diversifying its supply chains, and establishing clear rules for Chinese investment.

Leveraging Multilateral Forums: India should use platforms like BRICS, the SCO, and the G20 to maintain

dialogue with China and cooperate in areas of mutual interest. This is an effective way to balance China's influence and advance India's own interests.

Maintaining India's Own 'Strategic Autonomy':

Most importantly, India must determine its foreign policy without succumbing to pressure from any external power. It should neither join a US-led anti-China bloc nor accept Chinese hegemony. India's path must be its own.

Conclusion: A Rational Competitor, Not an Existential Threat

Dealing effectively with China requires understanding China as it actually is, not the China that American policymakers have imagined and accepted as fact. To realize that China's objectives are far less expansionist, confrontational, or threatening to American (and Indian) interests than most policymakers believe is neither unrealistic nor unfairly sympathetic to China.

China is telling the world—and itself—what it wants. If Washington and New Delhi want to deal with China effectively, they would do well to listen carefully. Healthy competition in technology, trade, and even education can be beneficial for both sides without triggering fear-driven responses stemming from the view that the other side is an existential threat. India should view China as a rational competitor, not an unimaginable monster, and should base its policies on this realistic understanding.

THE KACHIN GAMBIT



Anirudha Yadav

Myanmar's Kachin state, rich in rare earths, has become a new fault line in the US-China rivalry. Washington sees a chance to use local insurgents as pawns to disrupt Beijing's supply chain, ignoring a history of failed interventions and risking a wider conflict in this forgotten war zone.

Most Americans would struggle to pinpoint Myanmar on a map, let alone its rugged, northernmost state of Kachin. Yet, this mountainous frontier, wedged precariously between the rising powers of China and India, has once again become a geopolitical flashpoint. For Washington's strategists, it glitters with opportunity—a volatile crossroads where old alliances, coveted minerals, and Chinese vulnerabilities converge. But for anyone with a sense of history, it is a chilling reminder of America's tendency to wade into other people's wars, misread complex local dynamics, and leave behind a legacy of wreckage more enduring than its promises.

This is not America's first dance in Kachin. During the Second World War, the Office of Strategic Services—the CIA's forerunner—forged a pragmatic alliance with Kachin fighters to harass Japanese forces in the dense Burmese jungles. These resolute, ragtag warriors, later immortalized as the 'Kachin Rangers,' became the eyes and ears for inexperienced American soldiers who could barely survive the terrain without their guidance. To this day, Kachin families recount tales of their grandfathers fighting alongside young Americans who knew more

about baseball than a machete. It was a bond forged in shared struggle, a sentiment so powerful that a surviving veteran could declare decades later, 'It is my duty to help because the Americans liberated us.'

Yet, this bond has been repeatedly exploited. From Cold War experiments arming Kuomintang remnants in Myanmar to the subtle flirtations with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) today, Washington has treated this historical affinity as a strategic lever to be pulled whenever convenient.

Fast forward to October 2024, when the KIA captured two key towns, Chipwi and Pangwa. Their strategic value lies not just in territory, but in what lies beneath it: rare earth elements. These minerals, the lifeblood of the 21st-century economy, are essential for everything from smartphones to F-35 fighter jets. Beijing, in its quest for technological supremacy, relies heavily on imports from Myanmar to supplement its own near-monopoly on global production. By February 2025, with the KIA in control, Chinese rare earth imports from Myanmar had plunged by nearly 90 percent.

For Washington, this was music to the ears. Long unnerved by its own dependence on Chinese rare earths, the prospect of China's backyard supply chain being throttled by an armed group with historical ties to the West seemed like a strategic masterstroke. But what appears as clever geopolitics risks becoming reckless overreach. Covertly encouraging armed movements to disrupt a rival's access to resources is a short-term gambit that historically produces long-term blowback. The CIA's backing of the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s helped expel the Soviets, only to empower extremists who later turned their guns on the United States. Myanmar's labyrinthine ethnic conflicts offer a similarly combustible mix.

China, for its part, is deeply unsettled. For years, Beijing treated Myanmar's military junta as a pliant partner, investing billions in pipelines and infrastructure to bypass the 'Malacca dilemma'—the vulnerability of its energy imports to sea lanes patrolled by the US Navy. But the junta's grip is failing. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), from the KIA in the north to others along the borders, now control vast swathes of territory. Beijing's client looks less like a stable partner and more like a sinking ship. The nightmare scenario for Beijing—a Christian-led, West-friendly militia controlling strategic minerals on its border—is fast becoming a reality.

This is precisely the kind of temptation Washington finds irresistible: a chance to weaken China without deploying Marines or spending trillions. The

symbolism was not lost when US envoy Susan Stevenson visited Kachin-held areas in August 2025. Officially, her visit was humanitarian. Unofficially, it was a signal—a calculated probe into China's soft underbelly.

Herein lies the perennial flaw of American foreign policy: hubris. Washington too often views complex foreign conflicts through a simplistic lens of opportunity. It sees the Kachin fighters as plucky underdogs in a grand morality play against authoritarianism, overlooking the messy reality that Myanmar's ethnic conflicts are not neat democratic struggles. They are a chaotic tapestry of overlapping feuds—ethnic, religious, tribal, and commercial—that have raged for seven decades.

The KIA is not a Jeffersonian militia yearning for liberal democracy. It is a battle-hardened force with its own hierarchy, revenue streams, and strategic interests. While its leadership is predominantly Christian, with roots tracing back to 19th-century American Baptist missionaries, this cultural affinity is a poor predictor of political alignment. Washington should have learned by now not to conflate religious familiarity with strategic reliability.

The American record on this front is abysmal. In Vietnam, the US mistook Catholic elites for natural allies, ignoring the powerful nationalist currents driving the conflict. In Iraq, it assumed Shiite exiles would build a democracy, only to unleash sectarian carnage. In Afghanistan, it treated Pashtun warlords as partners in governance, even as they hollowed out the very state America was trying to build. Why would Myanmar be any different? ●

YOUTHQUAKE

GEN-Z SHAKING THE THRONES OF SOUTH ASIA



Sanjay Srivastava

In recent years, South Asian politics has witnessed an unprecedented turn, its script penned not by old guard leaders, but by 'Gen Z.' From the bustling streets of Bangladesh to the sun-drenched beaches of Sri Lanka and the serene hills of Nepal—young hands, placards and mobiles in tow, have poured onto the streets. The result? Decades-old thrones have trembled, and the old fortresses of power have begun to crumble. While those in power and their supporters dismissed these as spontaneous movements, hinting at external conspiracies, others argued this narrative merely served as a smokescreen for governments to conceal their failures and corruption. This article attempts to unravel these complexities – uncovering the true causes of these movements, the pivotal role of social media and digital power, and the intricate global game of powers poised to shape South Asia's future.

For years, South Asia's political landscape has been scripting a new, unpredictable chapter. Accustomed to military coups or traditional electoral upheavals, a new force has emerged in the region: 'Gen Z.' This is the generation that, from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka and Nepal, has taken to the streets, challenging and, in many cases, overturning old power equations. This isn't merely a regional phenomenon; it echoes the 'Arab Spring,' its roots reaching back to the Iranian Revolution – a pervasive trend where public discontent, especially among youth, ignites unexpected political change. But are these movements solely the result of domestic discontent, or is a 'Global Deep State' fanning these fiery revolts from behind the scenes, pursuing its

own interests? This question transforms the entire sequence of events into a complex geopolitical puzzle, whose layers must be carefully peeled back.

The 'Spring' Awakens in South Asia

From Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya' to Bangladesh's 'Second Liberation' and Nepal's 'Gen Z Revolt,' these movements have clearly signaled the dawn of a new era of political instability in South Asia. Each country had its unique backdrop and immediate triggers, but all harbored a deep and shared dissatisfaction, anger against broken promises, rampant corruption, and the indifference of a political elite that had pushed the younger generation towards a bleak future.



Sri Lanka: When an Economic Tsunami Drowned a Dynasty

Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya' (Sinhala for 'struggle') movement in 2022 was not just a protest; it was a direct response to the economic tsunami that brought the once-prosperous island nation to its knees. Months of unprecedented inflation, endless queues for fuel and cooking gas, 12-hour power cuts, and severe shortages of essential goods turned daily life into hell. The Rajapaksa family, which had governed the country for 15 out of the preceding 18 years, bore the direct brunt of blame for this economic catastrophe. As the economy collapsed and daily life became unbearable, the movement intensified, forcing dynastic leaders like Gotabaya Rajapaksa to relinquish power.



From Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya' to Bangladesh's 'Second Liberation' and Nepal's 'Gen Z Revolt,' these movements have clearly signaled the dawn of a new era of political instability in South Asia.

Public outrage reached such a crescendo that protestors took control of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's lavish residence and 'Gota Go Gama,' a protest site in Colombo where a unique hub of dissent developed through art, music, and speeches. This movement, largely organized by young activists via social media, compelled Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country. It was not merely the downfall of a leader, but the end of a dynastic rule deeply entrenched in the nation's politics. The echoes of 'System Change' resonated through the streets of Colombo, signifying an aspiration for institutional and structural reforms far beyond just replacing leaders. Investigations into claims of foreign conspiracy behind the movement yielded no decisive evidence. Instead, human rights organizations attributed it squarely to domestic failures and popular outrage.

Bangladesh's 'Second Liberation'

Bangladesh's 2024 political upheaval began as a student-led campaign targeting a 'discriminatory' quota system in government jobs. This quota, reserving up to 30% of seats for descendants of 1971 Liberation War veterans, struck the younger generation as a blatant symbol of ingrained corruption and nepotism. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina scoffed at the demand, dismissing students as 'Razakars' (Pakistani collaborators) – an insult that only ignited the revolt further. Students proudly wore the term as a 'badge of honor,' with chants like 'Who are you? Who am I? Razakar. Who said it? The dictator!' echoing through the streets.

Police brutality, leading to hundreds of innocent protestors' deaths, fundamentally altered the movement's character. It was no longer just about quotas but a widespread uprising against Sheikh Hasina's long and authoritarian rule, which had spanned over fifteen years. For a generation that had known nothing but Hasina's regime, her leadership had



become synonymous with oppression and a dearth of opportunities. Social media provided the movement with a loose structure and broad reach, culminating in Sheikh Hasina fleeing the country to India on August 5, 2024. An interim government, led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, was established with the goal of steering the nation towards new and fair elections. While Bangladesh's ruling party floated rumors of Pakistani or American intervention among the student protestors, independent reports consistently confined the movement's roots to the nation's socio-economic inequalities and the unpopular policies of the ruling party.

Nepal's 'Gen Z Revolt'

Nepal's 2025 movement was sparked by an immediate trigger: a government ban on social media platforms, justified by claims of 'misuse' and non-registration. Yet, this ban was merely the fuse. Decades of festering inequality, pervasive corruption, nepotism, and power concentrated in the hands of a political elite had bred deep discontent among the youth. Social media trends like #NepoKid starkly exposed the lavish lifestyles and foreign education of politicians' children, while the nation's youth grappled with unemployment and mass migration. This was a 'moral outrage,' as

analysts described it, against a generation that had stolen their future.

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli initially scoffed at the protestors, but as the demonstrations turned violent, leaving over 70 dead and protestors occupying the parliament building and even his own home, Oli was forced to resign. Despite the violence, the youth's voice could not be suppressed. Former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was appointed interim Prime Minister, a decision notably influenced by youth-led online surveys—a potent symbol of a new form of 'digital democracy.' The key demands of Nepal's Gen Z movement were the eradication of corruption, transparent and accountable governance, and the lifting of the social media ban. While the government and some supporters attempted to frame it as a foreign conspiracy, the movement's leaders, human rights observers, and international analysts largely attributed it to local discontent and a failing governance system. Although rumors of misinformation and external influence did surface on social media in various places, there was no conclusive evidence that the movement was primarily a foreign plot.

Generational Divide and Shattered Hopes



A government ban on social media platforms, justified by claims of 'misuse' and non-registration. Yet, this ban was merely the fuse. Decades of festering inequality, pervasive corruption, nepotism, and power concentrated in the hands of a political elite had bred deep discontent among the youth. Social media trends like #NepoKid starkly exposed the elite of the Nepal.

COVID-19) in their lifetime. They feel their potential and aspirations have been crushed by the political system, exacerbating the 'brain drain' phenomenon, where millions of young people are migrating abroad in search of better opportunities. Nepal's economy, for instance, relies on remittances for a third of its GDP, underscoring the severity of this exodus. This is not merely about economic decisions; it is a silent referendum on governmental incompetence.

The Termite of Corruption and the Vine of Nepotism:

The level of corruption in these nations is so profound that it has hollowed out every aspect of public life. Their dismal rankings in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (all above 100) expose a grave institutional failure. Bribery in government offices, arbitrary practices in government contracts and tenders, and prioritizing 'their own people' for public jobs have become commonplace. The #NepoKid movement directly channeled youth anger at this pervasive nepotism. When the children of the political elite live lavish lives abroad while ordinary youth yearn for jobs, this moral outrage creates a combustible situation. Suman Pandey, a veteran of Nepal's tourism industry, described it as a 'mafia' rule, where 'for the last 30 years, it was a game of musical chairs between three people, and they never gave a chance to young politicians.'

Erosion of Power and Lack of Dialogue:

A poignant aspect of these movements is the vast age gap between the leaders and the young protestors. Oli of Nepal was 73, Hasina of Bangladesh 76, and Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka 74. Meenakshi Ganguly, Human Rights Watch's Deputy Asia Director, notes, 'Young people in South Asia found nothing to connect to with their political leaders. The mismatch

Beneath the surface of all these movements lie profound structural issues, painting a bleak future for South Asia's young population. Initially, ruling parties were quick to allege foreign conspiracies or opposition collusion. However, the consensus among established journalists, researchers, and human rights organizations points to corruption, economic failures, unemployment, and undemocratic tendencies as the true catalysts. Digital platforms provided a powerful new stage for youth dissatisfaction, and despite government claims, these movements stand as symbols of widespread domestic discontent.

The Quagmire of Opportunity and Economic Mismanagement:

South Asia is a young region, with nearly 50% of the population in these three countries under 28 years old. They boast literacy rates exceeding 70%, yet their per capita GDP lags significantly behind the global average. This vast chasm between educational attainment and economic opportunity is the very root of their anger. Youth unemployment rates – 22.3% in Sri Lanka, 16.8% in Bangladesh, and 20.8% in Nepal – create a combustible mix. This is a generation that has experienced at least two major economic recessions (2008-09 and

was too great.' This mismatch wasn't just about age, but about priorities, perspectives, and values. Older leaders often focused on their legacy and past struggles, while the youth centered on the future, opportunities, and justice. Traditional political parties, often personality-driven and plagued by factionalism, failed to understand the aspirations of the youth or meaningfully include them in the political process.

Digital Empowerment: The New Arena of Resistance:

Gen Z is a generation that grew up on the internet, and for them, digital platforms are not just tools of entertainment but powerful instruments for community, organization, and self-expression. Social media played a crucial role in organizing these movements, disseminating messages, and mobilizing broad support. Hashtag campaigns like #GoHomeGota and #NepoKid gave the protests a unified voice.

strategies.

Revolts Inspiring Each Other:

These movements have drawn inspiration from one another, developing a 'digital protest playbook.' Nepali youth closely observed and learned from the protests in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Rumela Sen of Columbia University states that the tactics employed in these movements, 'including social media hashtag campaigns and decentralized organization, represent an emerging playbook of digital protest.' This regional integration, though informal, is a powerful signal that the younger generation does not view their problems as isolated incidents but as part of a broader pattern.

The Shadow of a 'Global Deep State'?

As these widespread popular movements swelled,



Live streaming and online communication helped protestors connect in real-time and exposed government repressive efforts to the world. When governments attempted to block internet access or specific platforms, it often backfired, further fueling the youth's anger. Digital technology helped keep these movements 'leaderless' and decentralized, creating a new resilience against traditional oppressive

a controversial concept—the 'Global Deep State'—began to loom large, casting its shadow over the narratives. This hypothesis, often flirting with conspiracy theories, posits that powerful, opaque actors (state and non-state) operate on a global scale to orchestrate regime changes, serving their geopolitical and economic agendas through various organizations and channels. From the Arab Spring to

the earlier Iranian Revolution, this theory suggests these forces have been actively shaping political landscapes. In these youth-led South Asian revolts, accusations of external meddling are rife, especially when power shifts occur with such bewildering speed that even locals

operating within a country, independent of its elected government, often through intelligence agencies, military establishments, and powerful bureaucrats. The 'Global Deep State' extends this concept internationally, envisioning intelligence agencies of powerful nations,

multinational corporations, think tanks, international financial institutions, and global non-governmental organizations working behind the scenes. Their objectives might include fostering political instability, weakening governments, or facilitating regime changes beneficial to their strategic or economic interests. These interventions are often cloaked in the rhetoric of 'promoting democracy,' 'protecting human rights,' or 'establishing stability,' but critics view them as a façade for external powers to advance their geopolitical agendas.

Whispers of External Interference on South Asia's Frontlines: In these South Asian cases, accusations and counter-accusations regarding the role of external forces have been constant. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that external actors rarely conjure mass movements from a vacuum. Instead, they exploit existing domestic vulnerabilities, discontent, and institutional fractures.

• **India's Complex Equation with Nepal:** Nepal's instability has immediate and direct security implications for India. With an open border and deep historical-cultural ties, India desires a stable and reliable partner in Kathmandu. Nepali leftists and monarchists have frequently accused India of meddling in their politics. K.P. Sharma Oli's pro-



express disbelief.

Deconstructing the 'Deep State': The term 'Deep State' typically refers to a parallel, covert power structure

reliable partner in Kathmandu. Nepali leftists and monarchists have frequently accused India of meddling in their politics. K.P. Sharma Oli's pro-

China policies would have undoubtedly made India uneasy. Delhi's swift welcome of the interim government following Oli's downfall could signal that India viewed this shift as favorable to its interests.

- **China's Growing Strategic Inroads:** Nepal's northern border adjoins China's Tibet Autonomous Region, and Beijing has increased its diplomatic and economic footprint in Nepal in recent years. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seeks to integrate Nepal into a 'Trans-Himalayan Network,' which India often perceives as part of China's expansionist strategy. The lean of Nepal's leftist parties towards China is evident. Oli's participation in Beijing's military parade and his objection to the India-China agreement on the Lipulekh pass showcased his growing proximity to China. Geopolitical analysts like Chandra Bhatt term this 'unusual,' given Nepal's traditional alignment with India and the West.
- **The West's 'Democratic' Influence:** Western nations like the US and EU often support policy frameworks and civil society in Nepal through funding. The \$530 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant from the US for power grid and road infrastructure in Nepal, often seen as a counter to China's BRI, underscores Western strategic interests. During Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya,' some ultra-nationalists accused USAID of funding the protests, though no concrete evidence emerged. Western interests frequently operate under the guise of democratic values, human rights, and good governance—which 'Deep State' theorists consider a form of external intervention.
- **Pressure from International Financial Institutions:** The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) role in Sri Lanka's economic crisis was significant. Any bailout package from the IMF often comes with stringent conditions for implementing tough economic reforms and austerity measures, which can exacerbate public discontent in the short term. While the IMF doesn't directly promote regime change, its policies can indirectly influence political instability, creating opportunities for external powers to 'manage' outcomes.
- **The nuanced interplay of Geopolitical Powers:**



It is more realistic to argue that the primary drivers of these South Asian movements are deep-seated domestic grievances and institutional failures. External powers rarely conjure mass movements from a vacuum; instead, they stand ready to capitalize on existing discontent, economic crises, and weak governance. The Dalai Lama's congratulatory message to Nepal's interim government or Japan's swift welcome of Oli's downfall might be indicators of outcomes 'preferred' by external actors, rather than direct instigation. The Gen Z earthquake in South Asia, it seems, is fundamentally a homegrown tremor, though its aftershocks are certainly felt and subtly influenced by the complex global currents that shape our world.

Geopolitical powers often engage in 'information warfare' and 'narrative construction,' where social media becomes a primary battleground. They can employ



Western nations like the US and EU often support policy frameworks and civil society in Nepal through funding. The \$530 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant from the US for power grid and road infrastructure in Nepal, often seen as a counter to China's BRI, underscores Western strategic interests. During Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya,' some ultra-nationalists accused USAID of funding the protests, though no concrete evidence emerged.

targeted propaganda to amplify protests, sway public opinion towards a specific outcome, or establish a narrative favorable to their interests. This is the intricate game of 'soft power,' where influence is exerted through ideas and information.

The role of military institutions is also significant in this geopolitical equation. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, the military displayed a certain restraint during periods of government change. In Sri Lanka, the army refrained from direct force against protestors and facilitated Rajapaksa's safe exit. In Bangladesh and Nepal, the military, at times, played a 'kingmaker' role, ensuring a smoother (though uncertain) transition. This restraint might stem from internal evaluations, but it could also be a result of understanding or pressure from external powers who prefer regional stability over chaos, as complete anarchy would be far more detrimental to their investments and strategic interests.

In summary, it is more plausible that external actors

attempt to 'manage' or 'navigate' these movements rather than 'create' them. Their objective is often to ensure a favorable outcome aligned with their long-term interests, which are often tied to stability, economic access, and geopolitical balance. They might invest in exacerbating existing problems, but not in generating those problems, which are already inherent in domestic conditions.

Chaos or a New Dawn?

The outcomes of these youth-led movements are both immediate and long-term, fraught with considerable uncertainty and new challenges. While prime ministers have resigned and interim governments have been established, the real struggle now begins.

The Power Vacuum and the Knock of Opportunists: Despite their 'leaderless' nature, these movements often create a political vacuum that various political

While movements can bring about immediate regime change, implementing lasting institutional reforms is a far more difficult and prolonged struggle. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa dynasty was overthrown, but institutional corruption and accountability issues persist. The NPP government, which promised change, also faces tough decisions amidst IMF agreements and economic challenges, which may deviate from its electoral promises.

parties and opportunistic groups attempt to fill. In Sri Lanka, the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National Peoples Power (NPP) coalition successfully capitalized on the 'Aragalaya's energy, securing a significant victory in the 2024 elections. This demonstrates how a populist movement can pave the way for an established political party to seize power, even if that party was previously marginalized. In Bangladesh, the victories of Jamaat-e-Islami-backed organizations in university elections underscore a concerning trend, where radical ideologies can exploit political vacuums to emerge. In Nepal, while there is talk of forming new youth-based political parties, the old guard is also waiting to return with fresh faces.

The Enduring Challenge of Institutional Reforms:

While movements can bring about immediate regime change, implementing lasting institutional reforms is a far more difficult and prolonged struggle. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa dynasty was overthrown, but institutional corruption and accountability issues persist. The NPP government, which promised change, also faces tough decisions amidst IMF agreements and economic challenges, which may deviate from its electoral promises. In Bangladesh, the interim government must contend with long-standing authoritarian systems, deep political polarization, and the pervasive challenge of violence against minorities. In Nepal, too, the interim government faces the dual challenge of taking action against corrupt elements of the previous regime and holding free and fair elections.

The Gen Z earthquake in South Asia, it seems, is fundamentally a homegrown tremor, though its aftershocks are certainly felt and subtly influenced by the complex global currents that shape our world.

Youth's Impatient Hopes and Regional Stability:

Interim governments must now restore the trust of the populace, especially the youth, whose expectations run incredibly high. They are compelled to act decisively against corruption, deliver economic stability, and most crucially, create ample employment opportunities. Should they fail to meet these soaring hopes, a new cycle of disillusionment could ignite, increasing the likelihood of further protests.

Regionally, political instability in one nation can have a 'contagion' effect on others, fostering similar movements across the entire subcontinent. This could morph into a 'New Doctrine of Instability for South Asia,' where youth outrage spills from one country to the



next. Such a scenario would also compel external powers to reassess their geopolitical strategies. Nations like India, China, and the United States may shift their diplomatic and economic aid in a bid to safeguard their own interests.

South Asia at a Crossroads

The Gen Z-led movements for regime change in South Asia are a vivid illustration of the digital age's 'public sphere,' where social media has provided a unified platform for anti-establishment sentiments. These revolts are a direct consequence of deeply rooted domestic discontent, economic mismanagement,



rampant corruption, and the profound disillusionment of the youth with the political elite. They have unequivocally proven that the younger generation is no longer willing to surrender its future to outdated political equations.

Looking at the bigger picture, two distinct possibilities emerge. A positive trajectory involves these movements successfully ushering in lasting institutional reforms – encompassing transparency, accountability, and

inclusive governance – potentially leading South Asia into a new era of democracy and development. The victory of the NPP in Sri Lanka and the establishment of interim governments in Bangladesh and Nepal, if steered in the right direction, could herald a fresh start. Conversely, a negative path looms if this energy remains confined to mere 'regime change' without concrete institutional reforms. In such a scenario, the resulting political vacuum would be filled by new opportunists, radical elements, and undemocratic forces, plunging the region into an even deeper cycle of instability.

It is also clear that the 'Global Deep State' does not instigate these events but rather harnesses them for its own benefit. The objective of external powers is not to foster chaos but to manage it in a way that tilts the outcomes in their favor. They exploit existing domestic fissures, engage in information warfare, and strive to mold crises to align with their geopolitical goals. The 'restrained' behavior of military institutions is often part of this broader geopolitical management, aiming to prevent utter chaos and ensure regional stability. Therefore, arguments about foreign conspiracy largely appear to be attempts by governments to deflect attention from their own responsibilities and failures. What unequivocally emerged in these countries was that youth anger was ignited by local causes, with corruption, government failure, and the erosion of democratic values – not external plots – being the root motivations.

Ultimately, this sends a direct and unambiguous message to South Asian governments: mere elections and symbolic transfers of power are no longer sufficient. They must strengthen transparency and accountability, provide meaningful employment and economic opportunities for the youth, align educational systems with market needs, and implement economic reforms that are genuinely people-centric. Otherwise, the potent combination of educational knowledge, the sting of unemployment, and the power of digital platforms will relentlessly continue to spark new revolts. Gen Z has set the agenda. It is now up to the regional leadership to channel this vibrant energy into a sustainable and positive direction, or risk letting it dissipate into a vortex of renewed chaos. South Asia stands at a critical crossroads, where the path to its future will depend entirely on the choices it makes.

YOUTHQUAKE

WILL INDIA BE NEXT?



Srirajesh

South Asian politics stands at an unexpected juncture. In nations like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, 'Gen Z' has challenged and shaken the very foundations of traditional power. This rebellion is not merely against economic despair or corruption; it's a deep disillusionment with a political elite that has consistently ignored their aspirations. This regional upheaval has compelled India to ponder whether this wave could reach its shores, and to what extent India's own socio-political fabric might influence or be affected by such movements.



In India's neighboring countries—Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal—a new generation, 'Gen Z,' has directly challenged the destiny of their nations. These young people, taking to the streets, have not only shaken established powers but, in many instances, have overthrown them. Their fervor stems from economic despair, pervasive corruption, rampant nepotism, and a profound disillusionment with a political elite that has persistently overlooked their aspirations. These movements have positioned India as a kind of involved observer; both policymakers in Delhi and ordinary citizens are contemplating whether this regional wave could indeed reach India's shores. Understanding how India's pluralistic culture, robust institutional framework, and the intricate relationship between its ruling parties and its youth might influence the potential for such movements is imperative for today's geopolitical realities.

The Echoes of Outrage: India's Vulnerability

Nepal's simmering 'Gen Z Revolt,' Sri Lanka's 'Aragalaya,' and Bangladesh's 'Second Liberation' are not merely isolated local issues. They are a reflection of a widespread regional discontent,

where a young generation has raised its voice against unresponsive and corrupt governance. While the immediate triggers for these movements might vary, their roots run deep in economic mismanagement, a stark lack of opportunities, and a political system that has utterly eroded public trust.

Political turmoil in neighboring countries has a multifaceted and profound impact on India, extending far beyond mere border security to influence its economy and internal political discourse.

Firstly, border security and migrant influx pose a significant concern. During the protests in Nepal, there were widespread reports of large-scale jailbreaks and prisoner escapes. 'The Times of India' reported that approximately 13,500 prisoners escaped from jails during the Nepali protests, many of whom could potentially be criminals wanted in India. India's porous borders, in such volatile situations, become easy conduits for illegal migration, smuggling, and cross-border crimes, placing immense pressure on its internal security apparatus. This necessitates a serious re-evaluation of India's border management strategies.

Economic and Trade Disruptions:

Secondly, economic and trade disruptions also present a significant challenge. Major Indian FMCG players



like Hindustan Unilever, Britannia, Dabur, Marico, and Bikaji faced considerable hurdles in their operations in Nepal. Britannia was forced to halt operations at its Simara plant, while Dabur issued 'work from home' directives for its employees. Bikaji's joint venture with the Chaudhary Group also saw significant delays. While these companies assert that Nepal contributes a minor fraction to their total revenue, experts contend that instability at crucial trade arteries like Raxaul-Birgunj and Sonauli-Bhairahawa leads to severe backlogs in

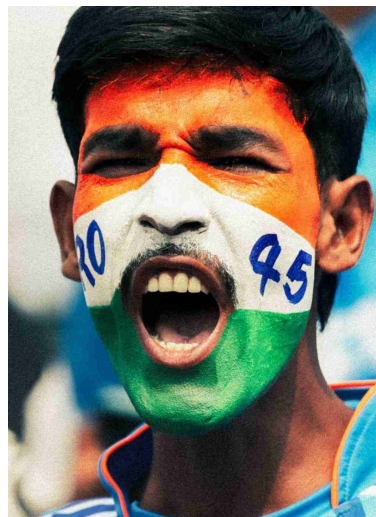
goods movement. Furthermore, India's planned energy and infrastructure projects in neighboring nations face an elevated risk of delays or outright cancellations due to this uncertainty, potentially undermining both regional connectivity and India's economic leverage.

The Contagion of Political Models:

Third, the contagion of political models and inspirational strategies exerts a subtle yet potent influence. The tactics deployed by 'Gen Z' in neighboring countries—such as decentralized organization leveraging novel platforms like Discord, targeted campaigns against 'Nepokids,' and the digital mobilization of anti-government sentiment—could readily become a wellspring of inspiration for Indian youth. Should Indian youth organizations adopt similar strategies, it could fundamentally alter the landscape of political discourse and significantly amplify the visibility of protests, thereby intensifying pressure on traditional political parties.

Media and Narrative Warfare:

Fourth, media and narrative warfare has evolved into a critical component of geopolitical competition. When Indian media outlets and political factions frame movements in neighboring countries through expedient lenses—such as 'external power intervention,' 'monarchical restoration,' or 'rural instability'—these narratives inevitably shape the psyche of the Indian populace,



particularly its youth. For instance, Indian media largely mischaracterized Nepal's Gen Z protests as primarily advocating for 'monarchy restoration,' even though the protestors' core grievances revolved around corruption and inequality. Such reporting often marginalizes the genuine issues and actively promotes nationalist or religious agendas, fostering a skewed perception and potentially breeding distrust



towards India's foreign policy among regional nations. Analysts like Dinesh Kafle, former editor of 'The Kathmandu Post,' suggest that Indian media, especially outlets closely aligned with the ruling party, tend to view neighboring countries through the Ministry of External Affairs' prism, frequently framing the story to 'appease the government.'

Why No Gen Z Revolution in India: An Impenetrable Wall?

Although a large-scale, integrated 'Gen-Z revolution' is not yet visible in India, the movement led by Sonam Wangchuk in Ladakh indicates how local discontent can become part of the national discourse. Here, youth and civil society protested

over environmental protection, the demand for the Sixth Schedule, and ecological security. This is an example of how India's diversity and decentralization, which hinder large-scale movements, simultaneously give rise to small regional agitations. This uprising in Ladakh suggests that discontent is constantly simmering beneath the surface in India, and if such movements are ignored, they could become 'model cases' and reverberate in other parts as well.

Despite the revolutionary tide sweeping its neighbors, India has so far remained untouched by a widespread, power-overthrowing 'Gen Z' movement. This resilience is rooted in India's distinctive socio-political fabric, which either balances or suppresses the potential for such uprisings.



structures, providing a channel for their voices to be expressed through party mechanisms. Consequently, protests largely remain focused on 'local issues,' hindering their growth into a powerful wave of national youth rebellion, as the party apparatus tends to absorb and 'control' the energy of dissent.

Multiple Safe Avenues for Political Expression:

India boasts robust institutional avenues such as elections, state assemblies, local self-governments (Panchayats), media, and courts, where youth can voice their aspirations. Freedom of the press, despite certain limitations, provides multiple platforms for expression. Student movements also occur regularly. These alternatives partially satisfy the youth's 'motivation to take to the streets,' diverting them from widespread chaotic protests, as they have various 'safe' channels available to register grievances and demand change.

The Ruling Party's 'Smart' Strategy and Youth



Pluralistic Society and Decentralized Discontent:

India's social structure is incredibly diverse, marked by profound variations based on language, culture, religion, and region. When youth discontent arises, it often organizes at the level of a specific region, community, or social group, making the formation of a unified and coherent national youth movement exceptionally difficult. This diversity decentralizes the energy of protest, preventing it from coalescing into a singular national force.

Deep Roots of Local Political Parties and Absorption of Energy: Political parties in India, including regional ones, possess deep roots at almost every state level. Young activists and student organizations frequently operate within these party

Engagement: India's current ruling party, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has invested significantly in engaging the youth demographic and leveraging digital media. Through youth-oriented schemes, digital outreach, and the effective use of cultural symbols, attempts have been made to manage youth expectations. Concurrently, efforts are made to suppress anti-government voices through 'troll armies' and narrative control on social media, which has, to some extent, diminished the perception that protest is the only viable option.

Inherent Mechanisms of Cultural Tolerance and Social Control: India possesses several inherent mechanisms of social control—family, caste, regional leadership, media influence, and administrative pressure. Youth often operate within the boundaries

of these implied mechanisms. When protests do occur, they are typically contained within local limits because the fear of 'chaos' or 'adverse social repercussions' is substantial, discouraging large-scale civil unrest. This fear plays a crucial role in maintaining the social fabric.

The Opposition's Challenge and the Youth's Silent Rebellion

Opposition parties' strategies often appear fragmented, but Sonam Wangchuk's movement demonstrates that independent leadership and mobilization based on social issues can also be effective. In Ladakh, neither was any major political party vocal, nor was there the pressure of electoral equations, yet the youth and local society united to raise their voice through democratic means. This silent rebellion reflects an Indian scenario where, despite a disorganized opposition, the public itself determines the issues and makes them part of the national debate. This indicates that the capacity to organize India's youth is not limited to political parties alone, but is also inherent in social and environmental movements.

Observing the Gen Z movements in neighboring countries, India's opposition parties have also sought to explore the potential for similar uprisings within India. They have attempted to capitalize on youth discontent over critical issues like unemployment, education, and economic inequality. However, they have not received the anticipated response from Indian Gen Z, for several key reasons:

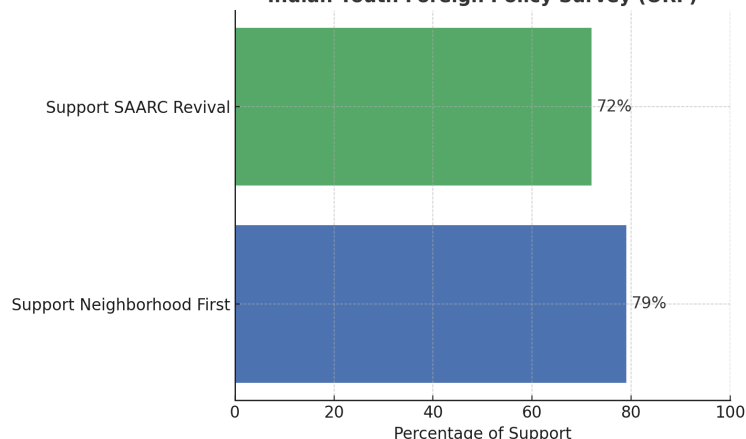
Lack of Coherent Strategy and a Crisis of Credibility for Opposition Parties: Opposition parties, particularly the Congress, often demonstrate a lack of robust strategy, especially when it comes to mobilizing youth and transforming their concerns into a powerful national movement. While young leaders like Rahul Gandhi position themselves as representing a new generation of leadership, their often traditional communication style, barriers to wider outreach, and the relentless pressure from media and enforcement agencies tend to limit the impact of their protests. Furthermore, a pervasive lack of unity among opposition parties and a deep crisis of credibility dissuade young people from aligning with them.

The Distracted Pattern of Youth Engagement and Digital Dissent: Indian youth are highly active and expressive on social media. However, this expression





Indian Youth Foreign Policy Survey (ORF)



often manifests as 'despair,' 'vote boycotts,' or 'NOTA' (None of the Above) options, rather than mobilizing the collective strength or resources required to take to the streets en masse and overturn the existing state system. The energy of their discontent frequently dissipates into online 'memes' and posts, failing to translate into tangible street action.

A Deep Sense of Fear and Personal Risk: The prospect of swift police action against protests, pervasive social media surveillance, the potential for both legal and extra-legal pressures, and fears of media censorship acutely sensitize young activists to the personal risks

involved in large-scale street demonstrations. This 'silencing effect' significantly hinders the formation of mass movements, as young people are understandably hesitant to jeopardize their futures and careers.

Survey Insights

An insightful foreign policy survey conducted by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), involving 5,000 Indian youth aged 18 to 35, reveals fascinating and multifaceted perceptions of their neighborhood:

South Asia's Strategic Importance and the Acceptance of 'Neighborhood First' Policy: For Indian youth, South Asia (36%) is the most strategically significant region, surpassing others like Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. A vast majority of Indian youth (79%) believe India's 'Neighborhood First' policy is adequately defined and largely sufficient across key areas: trade (86%), security (81%), public relations (79%), cultural ties (75%), infrastructure and connectivity (71%), and political engagement (68%). Moreover, 72% of respondents supported the revival of SAARC, indicating a strong interest in regional institutionalization.

Positive Perceptions and Media Influence: Most

Indian youth hold positive perceptions of smaller South Asian nations like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. However, perceptions towards Nepal were notably negative in the 2021 survey, largely attributed to K.P. Sharma Oli's anti-India policies and the negative coverage by Indian media during the Lipulekh standoff. Subsequent shifts in governance and improved bilateral relations have since turned this perception positive. This highlights the significant influence of media coverage, particularly in border states, on youth perceptions.

Immunity to Identity and Political Tensions: India's complex ethnic fabric, vast size, and federal structure offer it a certain immunity against the anti-India sentiments frequently leveraged in neighboring countries. While politicians and media in neighboring states often employ anti-India sentiments to stoke nationalist feelings, India's intricate diversity and democratic processes render such one-sided narratives less effective within its borders.

A Moment of Truth: What India Must Learn?

The Ladakh movement is a mirror for India – it reveals that discontent is brewing not just in neighboring countries, but within India itself. The demands raised under Sonam Wangchuk's leadership illustrate that today's youth are not merely disgruntled with the establishment, but seek guarantees of future security and sustainable development. This is the very energy that fuels Gen-Z revolutions: opportunity, transparency, and participation. If India fails to take such local signals seriously in a timely manner, this frustration could escalate into larger movements. India must learn that democracy is not merely an electoral process, but a continuous journey of listening to citizens' genuine aspirations and translating them into policy.

India currently stands at a critical juncture. Witnessing the 'Gen Z' revolutions across its neighborhood, India must engage in profound introspection. India's vastness and diversity, which have hitherto shielded it from unrest, could paradoxically amplify its decline if widespread discontent were to fester. This is not merely about maintaining stability but about renewing democracy and integrating youth aspirations into the mainstream.

Opportunities for Dialogue and Participation:



India must earnestly listen to the aspirations of its youth. This won't be achieved solely through policy formulation but by actively involving them in the political process, fostering greater dialogue, and expanding opportunities for participation. Their voices must be heard through youth forums, digital dialogues, and grassroots engagement.

Transparency and Accountability in Governance:

Corruption and nepotism, which fueled the outrage in neighboring countries, remain significant challenges in India as well. The government must strengthen transparency and accountability to maintain youth faith in the system. E-governance and swift justice systems could be among such measures.

Employment and Economic Opportunities:

High unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, can create an explosive situation. India must ensure inclusive economic growth that generates adequate and quality employment opportunities. Skill development, promoting entrepreneurship, and aligning education with market demands will be crucial steps in this direction.

Reforming the Role of Media: Instead of sensationalizing neighboring countries' affairs or bending them to fit political agendas, Indian media should focus on in-depth and impartial reporting. As



per Dinesh Kafle, former editor of 'The Kathmandu Post,' Indian media must cease functioning as an 'extension of the ministry' and instead reflect ground realities. This will not only foster better regional relations but also promote credible dialogue within India.

Continuous Renewal of Democracy: Indian politics is at a critical test. Will it merely maintain 'stability,' or will it genuinely integrate the aspirations of its new generation into its agenda? If choices are not made wisely and in due time, the protests unfolding in neighboring countries will not remain confined there, but could become a harsh reality for India as well. To strengthen democracy, the government must heed the voice of 'Gen Z' – the custodians of the nation's future. To ignore them would be akin to gambling with the very foundations of democracy.

Conclusion

The Gen Z-led movements across South Asia have made it unequivocally clear: the younger generation is no longer willing to surrender its future to the old political elite. This sends a potent message that power will henceforth be measured not merely by might or elections, but by public sentiment, opportunities, transparency, and the hopes of its youth. India must learn from the experiences of its neighbors. Both India's leadership and its opposition parties



must grasp that within this apparent threat lies a profound opportunity. If India better embraces youth aspirations and expands avenues for their dialogue and participation, it will not only foster greater social satisfaction but also strengthen its democracy. Gen Z has set the agenda. It now rests with regional leadership to channel this vibrant energy into a sustainable and positive direction, or risk letting it dissipate into a vortex of chaos, which is bound to have serious repercussions for India. For India, this is a moment of profound self-awareness, where it must strike a balance between its internal challenges and regional dynamics to future-proof its democracy.



LADAKH'S ROARING YOUTH

In the high-altitude deserts of Ladakh, centuries-old monasteries witness a new force: the defiant youth. Frustrated by political neglect, economic despair, and cultural fears, Gen Z rises, demanding statehood, representation, and autonomy. Their roar echoes beyond mountains, challenging the status quo and signaling a generation unwilling to be silenced.

In the high-altitude desert of Ladakh, where serene monasteries cling to stark mountainsides and the air is thin with prayer, a different kind of sound has broken the peace. It is the sound of shattering glass, of tear gas canisters hissing, and of a generation's anguish boiling over into tragedy. The long-simmering agitation for statehood has erupted, leaving four protesters dead, dozens injured, and the ancient towns of Leh and Kargil under a strict, suffocating curfew. This is not just another protest; it is a reckoning, a moment where the digitally savvy, globally aware youth of Gen Z have risen to challenge the status quo, drawing unnerving parallels to youth-led uprisings that have reshaped nations.

As the smoke clears, it reveals a confrontation between a generation demanding its future and a state grappling



with strategic anxieties. For New Delhi, the crisis in Ladakh is more than a regional disturbance; it is a test of its democratic promise and a stark reminder that in the age of social media, the voices from the most remote corners of the nation can echo with thunderous force, demanding to be heard.

The Genesis of Grievance: A Promise Undone

The roots of this turmoil trace back to August 2019, when the Indian government abrogated Article 370, dismantling the state of Jammu and Kashmir and carving out Ladakh as a separate Union Territory. It was a move hailed by many in Leh as liberation from Kashmiri dominance, a promise of direct development from the Centre. Yet, this liberation came at a cost: the loss of a state legislature, stripping Ladakh of its power to govern itself. The initial euphoria soon gave way to a gnawing sense of disempowerment.

From this sentiment, a unified movement, spearheaded by the Leh Apex Body and the Kargil

Democratic Alliance, crystallized around four core demands. First and foremost is the call for full statehood, a desperate bid to regain legislative autonomy and control over their own destiny. Second is the demand for inclusion in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. This is not a mere bureaucratic request; it is an existential plea. The Sixth Schedule grants autonomous councils to tribal areas, empowering them to protect their land, resources, customs, and unique cultural identity from outside encroachment—a fear that haunts this sparsely populated region.

The third demand is for a second seat in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament. With a population of just over 274,000 spread across a vast, challenging terrain, Ladakhis feel their single voice is lost in the national discourse. Finally, they seek a dedicated Ladakh Public Service Commission to ensure fair and local recruitment, ending a perceived favouritism that has long benefited candidates from the former J&K cadre.

Beyond Politics: The Anatomy of Despair

Beneath these structural demands lies a deeper, more personal malaise: the erosion of cultural identity and the sting of economic despair. Post-2019, new domicile rules have fueled fears of a demographic shift that could dilute the local Bhoti and Purgi languages, now sharing official status with English, Hindi, and Urdu. The rules themselves create a precarious sense of belonging, making it a steep climb for newer residents to gain eligibility.

But it is the crippling job scarcity that hits the youth hardest. In this high-altitude frontier, where tourism and horticulture offer limited and seasonal employment, the unemployment rate hovers above a staggering 20 percent. Promises of an 85 percent reservation for indigenous people in government jobs—a policy that has successfully protected local employment in other states like Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh—remain entangled in bureaucratic delays. Young graduates from local colleges, filled with aspirations, find themselves sidelined, their dreams turning to dust in the thin mountain air. The revamped Hill Development Councils, while lauded for reserving seats for women, are seen as little more than token gestures, toothless bodies unable to effect real change. For

five years, this frustration has built, culminating in the fury witnessed this week.

The Spark that Ignited the Fire

The immediate flashpoint was a moment of profound empathy and desperation. When two elderly hunger strikers, including 72-year-old Tsering Angchuk, were hospitalized after joining activist Sonam Wangchuk's indefinite fast, a raw nerve was struck. It was a symbol of the establishment's

Party office—a visceral expression of betrayal over electoral promises that now felt hollow.

The situation escalated horrifically when reports emerged of armed fringe elements firing into the air. This prompted a lethal response from paramilitary forces, who opened fire in what they claimed was self-defense. The bullets found their mark, claiming four lives, including two teenagers. The streets were left stained with blood, the air thick with the cries of



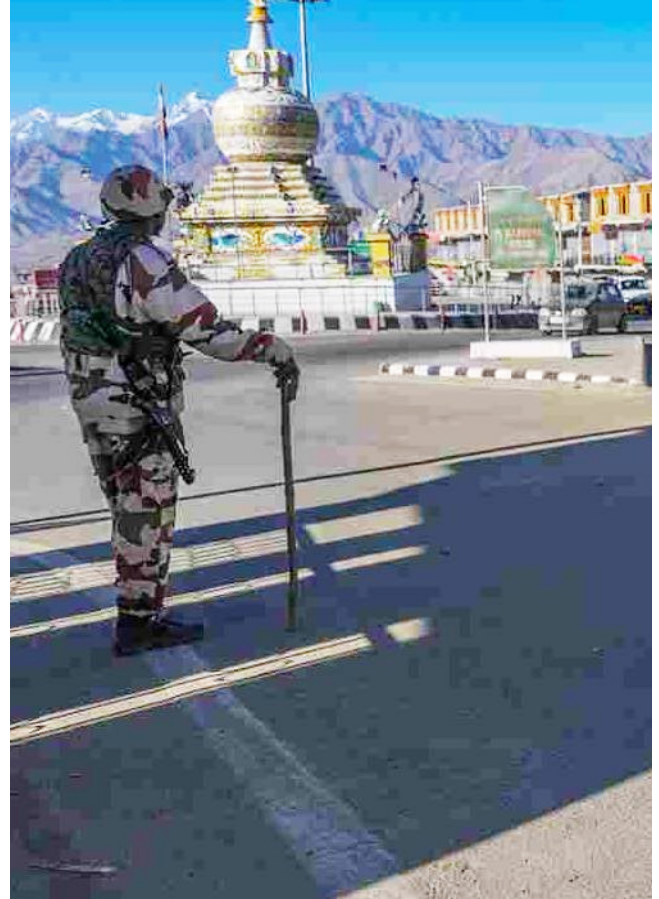
indifference to their peaceful pleas.

By dawn on Wednesday, that collective pain transformed into a wave of defiance. Thousands converged on Leh's Polo Ground, their black flags a stark contrast against the clear sky, their chants for autonomy echoing through the valley. The protest, initially disciplined, spiraled into chaos when marchers heading toward the administration complex were met with unyielding police barricades. Eyewitnesses describe a tense standoff that broke when security forces resorted to tear gas and lathi charges. In the ensuing melee, youths hurled stones, and in a potent act of symbolism, torched a local Bharatiya Janata

the wounded and the acrid smell of tear gas. With an internet blackout and Section 144 imposed, a quest for dialogue had morphed into a tragic, silent standoff.

The Path Not Taken: A Crossroads of Conscience

In a land that is the cradle of Tibetan Buddhism, where the Dalai Lama's teachings of compassion resonate from every monastery, this bloodshed is a deep wound. The valleys of Ladakh, etched by the footsteps of non-violent sages, demand a higher path. Violence is a dead end; it only hardens positions, invites repression, and buries the very hopes it claims to fight for.



A far more powerful weapon lies in the arsenal of peaceful satyagraha, amplified by the smart mobilization that this Gen Z cohort knows so well. History proves its efficacy. The massive, peaceful marches in Ladakh during 2020-21 drew global attention to their cause without a single casualty, pressuring the Centre into making promises of safeguards. A calibrated strategy—combining legal challenges in the Supreme Court, forging alliances with sympathetic parliamentarians, and leveraging economic pressure—can be far more potent than a volley of stones.

This generation, armed with smartphones and startup dreams, is the very engine meant to propel India toward its goal of a developed nation by 2047. Their innovation in renewables and eco-tourism could transform this frontier. But violent outbursts risk derailing this progress, creating cracks in border harmony that mischievous foreign hands are all too eager to exploit.

The Geopolitical Tightrope and the Way Forward

For the Narendra Modi-led Central government, the situation is a delicate tightrope walk. The grievances are real and must be addressed with sincerity in transparent, tripartite forums. Whether it is expediting

Sixth Schedule rules, fast-tracking the public service commission, or revisiting domicile timelines, the assurances of 2019 must be honored.

However, layered over these domestic concerns is the unavoidable reality of geography. Ladakh shares a volatile border with an assertive China. The ongoing tensions necessitate that the Centre has full, unrestricted access to the region for troop movements and infrastructure development to counter Beijing's incursions. Granting statehood could, in their view, complicate this security imperative, particularly if an election brings a non-aligned or adversarial party to power.

This complexity does not, however, justify inaction or repression. It demands a creative and empathetic solution. The government must find a way to balance national security with regional aspirations. For Ladakh's youth, the challenge is to think strategically, to trade placards for blueprints, and to weave their dreams into the vibrant, complex mosaic of the Indian republic.

In a land where lamas chant for universal peace, dialogue remains the only bridge across these troubled passes. It is time for both sides to walk it.

BEYOND ILLUSIONS

ONLY THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Why Israel's security, Palestine's aspirations, and the future of global peace converge on the two-state path.



Sandeep Kumar

Few conflicts have shaped the modern world's conscience like the decades-old confrontation between Israel and Palestine. Since the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, the international community has repeatedly returned to one formula: UN Security Council Resolution 242 and the principle of ‘land for peace.’ Israel was expected to withdraw from occupied territories in exchange for recognition and security guarantees. Yet more than half a century later, that promise remains unfulfilled.

Today, the conflict stands at a critical juncture. Military dominance, fleeting truces, and great-power backing have given Israel a sense of invincibility. But this security is an illusion. Beneath the surface lies a gathering storm: rising international criticism, generational shifts in global opinion, and an expanding humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.

For India, the conflict has never been distant. New Delhi's foreign policy reflects a rare balance—unwavering support for Palestinian self-determination alongside an ever-deepening strategic partnership with Israel. India's dual stance underlines the urgency of peace. And at the center of any peace lies one undeniable truth: without a Palestinian state, there can be no lasting security for Israel, no dignity for Palestinians, and no stability for the wider world.

Israel's Mirage of Security

On the surface, Israel is stronger than ever. Its military is unmatched in the region, its intelligence capabilities are legendary, and its Iron Dome air defense system has become a global benchmark. The Abraham Accords opened diplomatic doors with several Arab states, while the United States remains its staunch ally. After the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, global sympathy initially flowed toward Israel, reinforcing its narrative of existential vulnerability.

But strength is deceptive. Over time, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, marked by civilian deaths and destruction, eroded much of that sympathy. Younger generations across Europe and North America increasingly view Israel not as a democracy under siege, but as an occupier denying another people's rights. In universities, civil society movements, and digital activism, the discourse is shifting. Israel's security built solely on force is unsustainable—it risks losing the very international legitimacy that ensures its survival.

The Missed Chances of Peace

The history of negotiations is littered with near misses. The Oslo Accords of the 1990s promised mutual recognition and gradual steps toward Palestinian statehood. The 2000 Camp David summit and subsequent talks addressed the thorniest issues—Jerusalem, borders, refugees—yet collapsed under mutual mistrust.

Palestinian leadership failed to unify its ranks; divisions between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas weakened its hand. Extremist violence sabotaged public support. Meanwhile, Israeli politics moved rightward, with successive governments expanding settlements and resisting concessions.

Each failure deepened despair, feeding the belief that peace was a mirage. But as decades of bloodshed show, no alternative path has ever succeeded.

Settlements: The Fatal Obstacle

If there is one issue that most starkly threatens the two-state solution, it is the relentless growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

More than 500,000 Israelis now live in over 140 officially recognized settlements and 200 'outposts.' These communities, scattered deep within Palestinian territory, fragment the West Bank into isolated enclaves, making a contiguous Palestinian state increasingly unviable. Roads, checkpoints, and military zones further entrench this geography of control.

For many Palestinians, the very possibility of statehood seems to be slipping away. For the international community, settlement expansion represents not only a legal violation but a political

The Israel–Palestine conflict stands at a decisive moment. Despite Israel's military strength and international backing, its security remains fragile without a Palestinian state. Settlement expansion, failed negotiations, and Netanyahu's hardline politics erode peace prospects. Yet, two states remain the only viable path—ensuring Israel's security, Palestinian dignity, and regional stability. India's balanced diplomacy highlights lessons for the world: without justice and dialogue, illusions of security cannot sustain lasting peace.

death knell for peace. Unless this tide is reversed, the two-state horizon will vanish entirely.

Netanyahu's Politics and the Post-October 7 Landscape

The Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, was Israel's darkest day in decades, shattering its sense of invulnerability. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it also provided political cover. Dependent on ultranationalist coalition partners, Netanyahu has leaned further toward hardline policies, openly rejecting Palestinian statehood.

This shift may win him short-term political survival, but at enormous long-term cost. The more Israel entrenches occupation, the greater the risk of perpetual war, demographic challenges, and global isolation. The irony is sharp: in seeking absolute security, Israel may be undermining its very future.

Why a Palestinian State is in Israel's Own Interest

The case for two states is not charity toward Palestinians; it is rational self-interest for Israel itself.

Security Responsibility: A sovereign Palestinian government would be internationally accountable for preventing terrorism, unlike non-state actors such as Hamas.



The iconic 1993 Oslo Accord signing: Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin, and Bill Clinton symbolizing a fleeting moment of hope for lasting peace in the Middle East

Regional Acceptance: Arab states—including Saudi Arabia—have made clear that normalization hinges on progress toward Palestinian statehood. Peace with the broader Arab world requires peace with the Palestinians.

Democratic Identity: Israel cannot remain both Jewish and democratic while ruling over millions of disenfranchised Palestinians. A one-state reality either strips Palestinians of rights—an apartheid-like outcome—or erodes Israel's Jewish majority.

Exit from Gaza: Only a credible political horizon can undercut Hamas's influence and provide a path out of the Gaza quagmire.

Global Legitimacy: By embracing two states, Israel regains moral standing and international support.

The 'Less is More' Strategy

Given today's hard realities, a comprehensive peace agreement may be out of reach. But the choice is not between everything or nothing. Incremental steps can keep hope alive:

Stop Rewarding Extremes: Unilateral recognition of Palestine outside negotiations risks strengthening groups like Hamas. The path to statehood must run through diplomacy.

Freeze Settlements: The U.S. and EU must pressure Israel to halt settlement expansion, preserving the territorial possibility of two states.

International Framework: A coalition of global powers should provide security guarantees to Israel alongside economic and institutional support for a future Palestinian state.

Strengthen Leadership: Political and financial backing should flow to Palestinian leaders committed to negotiation, not armed struggle.

This 'less is more' approach



recognizes that while final peace may not be imminent, keeping the door open is itself a strategic victory.

India's Balancing Act: Lessons for the World

Amid polarized global alignments, India offers a striking example of balance. Rooted in its anti-colonial legacy, India was one of the earliest champions of Palestinian statehood, consistent with its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement. Yet since normalizing relations with Israel in 1992, India has cultivated a robust partnership in defense, technology, and agriculture.

What makes India unique is its ability to hold both commitments without contradiction. By voting in favor of Palestinian recognition at the UN while simultaneously deepening strategic cooperation with Israel, India demonstrates that moral principles and pragmatic interests can coexist.

This dual-track diplomacy could serve as a model for other states navigating the Middle East's complexities.

A Glimpse of Hope Amid the Gloom

Despite despair, glimmers of possibility remain. The Abraham Accords revealed that Arab states are increasingly willing to normalize with Israel—provided Palestinians are not permanently sidelined.

In Israel itself, voices of conscience continue to rise. Civil society groups, former security officials, and democratic activists argue that perpetual war is unsustainable.

History reminds us that the darkest moments often precede breakthrough. The question is whether Israel and its allies will seize the opportunity or let it slip away once more.

Conclusion: The 'Now or Never' Moment

The two-state solution is imperfect, fragile, and riddled with obstacles. Yet it remains the only path that balances justice, security, and international legitimacy. Every other alternative leads to dead ends: endless conflict, global isolation, or the loss of Israel's dual identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

This is why the current moment must be recognized for what it is: a closing window. Military might cannot erase a people's demand for dignity. Humanitarian crises cannot remain indefinitely hidden. And illusions of security cannot replace genuine peace.

As former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban once quipped about the Arabs—'They never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity'—today the same warning applies to Israel. With unmatched military power, peace treaties with neighbors, and unconditional U.S. support, Israel has never been better positioned to make a courageous choice.

To miss this chance is to condemn both peoples, and perhaps the wider world, to another generation of bloodshed. To seize it is to finally transform illusions into reality.

Beyond illusions, there is only one solution: two states.



Axis of Alarm

Saudi-Pakistan Pact



Kabir Taneja

India faces a fresh geopolitical jolt. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's Strategic Defence Pact, declaring 'an attack on one is an attack on both,' raises alarms across New Delhi. Far from just a win for Islamabad, it poses a direct challenge to India's security, influence, and strategic calculations in a rapidly shifting West Asian order.

The announcement by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia of the conclusion of a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement has, expectedly, rankled nerves in New Delhi. In the statement's text, the part which says 'any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both' has raised concerns and questions alike, specifically over the trajectory of the India-Saudi dynamic.

India has mobilised a global diplomatic effort to isolate Pakistan following the April 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, which led to the largest military exchange between the two countries since 1971. However, an aim to internationally quarantine Pakistan has fallen short. The Saudi-Pakistan deal is another feather in Islamabad's cap since then.

In May, as Operation Sindoor was launched to militarily target terrorist camps inside Pakistan, diplomats from Saudi Arabia and Iran were in New Delhi as missiles began to fly across the border. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was in Riyadh on an official visit during this period and had rushed back to India due to the terror strike. Saudi Minister of State for



Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir arrived soon after to meet External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar. But Mr. Adel al-Jubeir's meeting at the Prime Minister's Office turned heads, and while both sides remained tight-lipped, Riyadh, in all likelihood, tried to diffuse an escalating situation.

Linked to geopolitical changes

Beyond South Asia, the events above are also a window into the geopolitical fracas unravelling on multiple fronts in West Asia ever since the terror attack by Hamas against Israel, in October 2023, which has pushed a reorienting of strategic calculation across the wider region. Fast forward to September, and the Riyadh-Islamabad agreement is being downplayed but has wider geopolitical reverberations.

Indian interests are peripheral for Riyadh, but for Pakistan, this deal kill two birds with one stone. It rekindles lost sheen with the Kingdom and challenges New Delhi's security concerns simultaneously.

The pact is also a return to normal for what was a strained time between the Kingdom and Pakistan, the Islamic world's only nuclear weapons power. In 2015, the then Nawaz Sharif government had refused to send troops to join Saudi's campaign against the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. For decades, the Saudis have seen the Pakistani military, with its extensive real-world experience in warfare — most of which has come against India — as the best force to strengthen its own domestic and regional security. Moreover, with the United States increasingly being viewed as an unreliable military partner in West Asia, Riyadh is back shopping in its traditional stomping grounds. For Islamabad, the nuclear file is once again delivering dividends, albeit more as a matter of chance than design. Nonetheless, its effectiveness has been on display from Washington to Riyadh.

Reports in the western press have suggested that this deal had been in the making for around three years. In a statement, India's Ministry of External Affairs said that it had been aware that such an agreement was under consideration between the two countries. For long, Pakistan, the only Islamic country in the world with nuclear weapons, has been touted as a supermarket for Riyadh's potential nuclear requirements. The '12-day war' between Israel and Iran, and both taking turns to launch weapons at Qatar, has further raised the stakes.

The fundamentals are solid

Beyond the surface, however, the Saudi-Pakistan pact is representative of multiple changes taking place in the international order. First and foremost, there is a false understanding of India's bulging outreach to West Asia that an institutional wedge can be installed between Islamabad and the Arab states. These bilaterals are based on Islam, ideology, and theological principles. In Saudi and Pakistan's case, it is a further strengthening around Sunnism. The fundamentals of this relationship are unbreakable. Second, Riyadh is now chasing strategic autonomy, multipolarity, and multialignment, all stated foreign policy aims and theories India wishes to implement as its core tenets to become a major power. This blueprint is aspirational to many others, and often, will put major partner states on the opposite end of Indian strategic interests.

The message for India

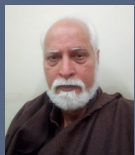
The challenge raised by the Saudi-Pakistan formalisation for the centrality of the 'Islamic bomb', a term coined by the Pakistani press in the early 1980s, may not be immense, but is a trailer of how the geopolitical chessboard is being stacked. It also represents a core challenge for India, that its culturally risk-averse strategic thought and the slow pace at which this is changing, are increasingly detached from prevailing realities. The Indian leadership needs to onboard risks that come with both the embrace and mobilisation of power. Else, India risks losing traction if fence-sitting remains the chosen path and there is an adoption of an idealistic view of playing the role of 'chief pacifist' chokeholds strategic choices.

The world is being re-shaped and will not wait for what India believes is going to be 'its time'. The Saudi-Pakistan pact is Islamabad — and more specifically the Pakistan Army — using disruptions and crevasses in the global and Western order, to its merit. Another opportunity to reshape how the world functions may not return this century. It is now when Indian calculations need to be right and it needs to act with resolve.

Kabir Taneja is the Associate Director and Fellow at the Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation. This article is First featured in The Hindu, we are delighted to present this article in Cult Current with full attribution.

India's Maritime Surge

Navy Drive 2035



Sachchidanand

India is charting an ambitious course to become a dominant maritime power in the 21st century. The Indian Navy has embarked on its largest-ever shipbuilding initiative, a program that not only signals New Delhi's strategic intent but also underscores its commitment to self-reliance under the government's 'Make in India' vision. With 54 vessels currently under construction across shipyards in Mumbai, Kolkata, Goa, and Visakhapatnam, this expansion is unprecedented in Indian naval history. By 2035, India's fleet is projected to exceed 200 ships, potentially reaching 230 by 2037, marking one of the most significant naval buildups in the world.

The decision to undertake such a massive shipbuilding drive comes against the backdrop of increasing maritime

India is embarking on its largest-ever naval expansion, aiming to build over 200 warships by 2035. This ambitious initiative combines indigenous shipbuilding, advanced weaponry, and strategic partnerships, positioning India as a formidable maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. The program reflects New Delhi's commitment to security, self-reliance, and regional influence in a contested oceanic landscape.



competition in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly China's growing blue-water navy. China's rapid expansion of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, and overseas bases has elevated the strategic stakes for India. The Indian Navy's modernization is thus not merely aspirational; it is essential for safeguarding critical sea lanes, securing the Indian Ocean Region, and projecting power across a rapidly evolving maritime landscape.

Currently, India maintains around 140 warships, including aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes, and submarines. The planned expansion would nearly double this strength over the next decade. Ten of the new vessels are expected to be commissioned by December 2025, with the remainder entering service by 2030. The fleet's modernization also emphasizes the integration of advanced weaponry, such as the supersonic BrahMos missile system, which equips India's newly commissioned stealth frigates with cutting-edge offensive and defensive

capabilities. The BrahMos, co-developed with Russia, is among the fastest cruise missiles in operation worldwide, capable of striking both sea and land targets with exceptional precision.

At the heart of this initiative is India's drive for indigenization. Reducing dependence on foreign arms imports and strengthening domestic defense manufacturing are central to the 'Make in India' strategy. Shipbuilding has become a flagship sector, creating high-skilled employment opportunities across steel, electronics, propulsion systems, and advanced materials. By 2030, the ongoing projects are expected to generate tens of thousands of jobs, while simultaneously reducing reliance on international suppliers.

International collaboration remains an important component of India's naval buildup. Russia, a long-standing defense partner, continues to play a vital role in technology transfer and ship production. The delivery of Tamal, the eighth Krivak-class frigate from the Yantar Shipyard in Kaliningrad, marked a significant milestone, incorporating 26 percent Indian components. Similarly, Project 11356 stealth frigates, including INS Tushil, showcase advanced long-range strike capabilities combined with sophisticated stealth technology. These collaborations allow India to absorb advanced expertise while simultaneously fostering domestic production.

The strategic significance of the naval expansion extends beyond defense preparedness. With a fleet surpassing 200 vessels, India will be better positioned to secure vital sea lanes, participate in multinational exercises such as the Quad, and counterbalance regional adversaries. A strong navy enables India to assert influence in areas ranging from East Africa and the Bay of Bengal to the broader Indo-Pacific, ensuring not only national security but also contributing to regional stability.



Challenges, however, remain. Indian shipyards have historically struggled with delays, cost overruns, and bureaucratic hurdles. Coordinating the construction of 54 warships, training personnel, and establishing robust maintenance and logistical frameworks will test the efficiency of India's defense-industrial complex. Yet, the stakes are high. By combining indigenous production capabilities with selective international partnerships, India is working to ensure timely delivery of advanced vessels while maintaining technological autonomy.

The expansion also reflects a broader strategic vision. India recognizes that maritime dominance in the 21st century requires not just numbers, but capabilities. Submarines, stealth frigates, aircraft carriers, and missile-equipped surface ships collectively form a deterrent against potential adversaries. The combination of quantity and technological sophistication positions India as a credible maritime actor, capable of both defensive operations and power projection.

This initiative also carries economic and industrial benefits. The shipbuilding program stimulates ancillary industries, encourages innovation in defense technologies, and strengthens supply

chains. By fostering domestic production of complex naval platforms, India is creating a multiplier effect across sectors, enhancing its overall industrial base while ensuring strategic independence.

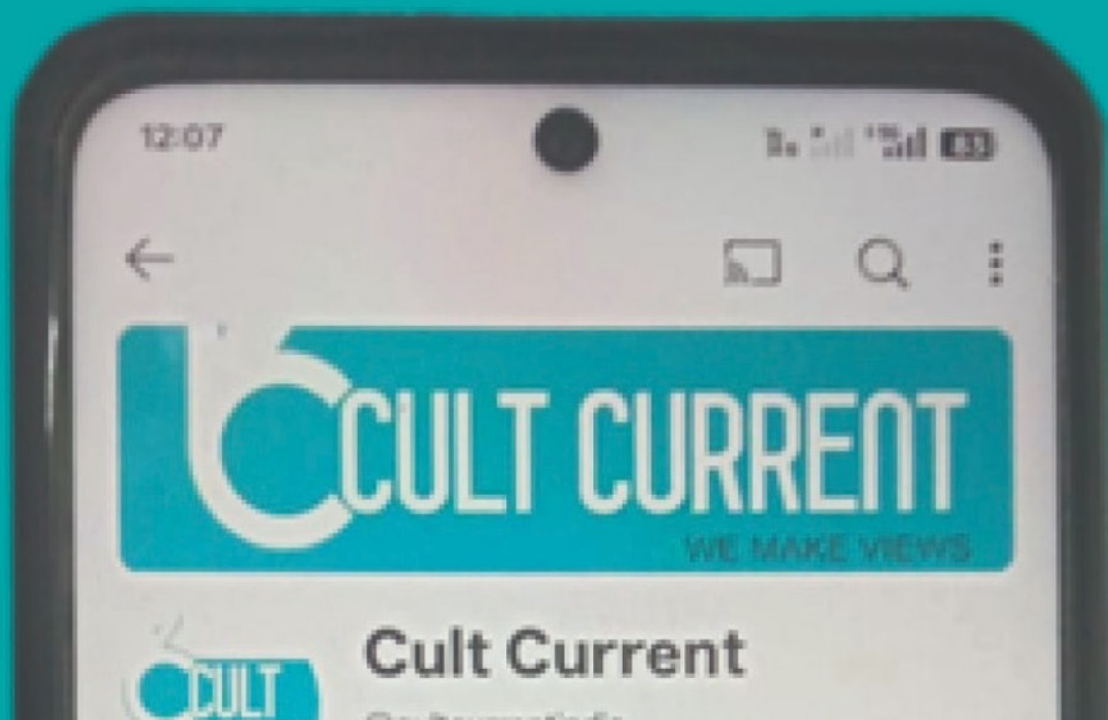
India's naval drive is emblematic of its evolving role on the global stage. As the Indo-Pacific becomes a theater of intense geopolitical competition, India is signaling that it is prepared to safeguard its maritime interests, assert its regional influence, and protect its trade routes. By 2035, a 200-plus ship navy will reflect India's ambitions to become a decisive force not only in the Indian Ocean but across wider oceans, combining strength, technological edge, and operational readiness.

In conclusion, India's unprecedented shipbuilding initiative is a turning point in its defense and industrial trajectory. By seamlessly integrating indigenous production, international cooperation, and strategic foresight, India is constructing a navy capable of meeting the demands of modern maritime warfare. While challenges in execution remain, the vision is clear: India is determined to secure its place among the world's leading naval powers, ensuring both national security and regional stability for decades to come.

**A platform dedicated to
geopolitical and global affairs,
as well as analysis related to
India and Indianness**



Join the YouTube channel >



The Iron Bird Retires

MiG-21's Glory Days



**Air Marshal
Anil Chopra (Retired)**

The MiG-21, the legendary 'Iron Bird' of the Indian Air Force, is set to retire after more than six decades of unmatched service. From achieving supersonic flight to shaping India's air combat legacy, this iconic fighter has defended the nation, trained generations of pilots, and earned a permanent place in aviation history.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is finally set to retire its MiG-21 fleet after over 60 years of glorious service. India was among the three major operators after the Soviet Union and China (licensed variant Chengdu J-7).

The MiG-21 has been the workhorse of the IAF. It was inducted in 1963 and has continued in service ever since. In August 2019, the IAF made headlines when its jets launched airstrikes on a Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist facility in Pakistan, known as the Balakot strikes. IAF Wing Commander Abhinandan



Varthaman shot down a Pakistani F-16 while flying a MiG-21 Bison, during a showdown between the IAF and Pakistan Air Force (PAF).

The iconic MiG-21 protected the Indian skies through major conflicts. Its retirement is an emotional time for several generations of Indian fighter pilots. Indian media is replete with nostalgic reminiscences of great aviators and air veterans.

This author himself honed his combat flying skills in this aircraft starting in 1974, and was Team Leader of the MiG 21 Upgrade project in Russia during 1996-2000.

Legend in the making

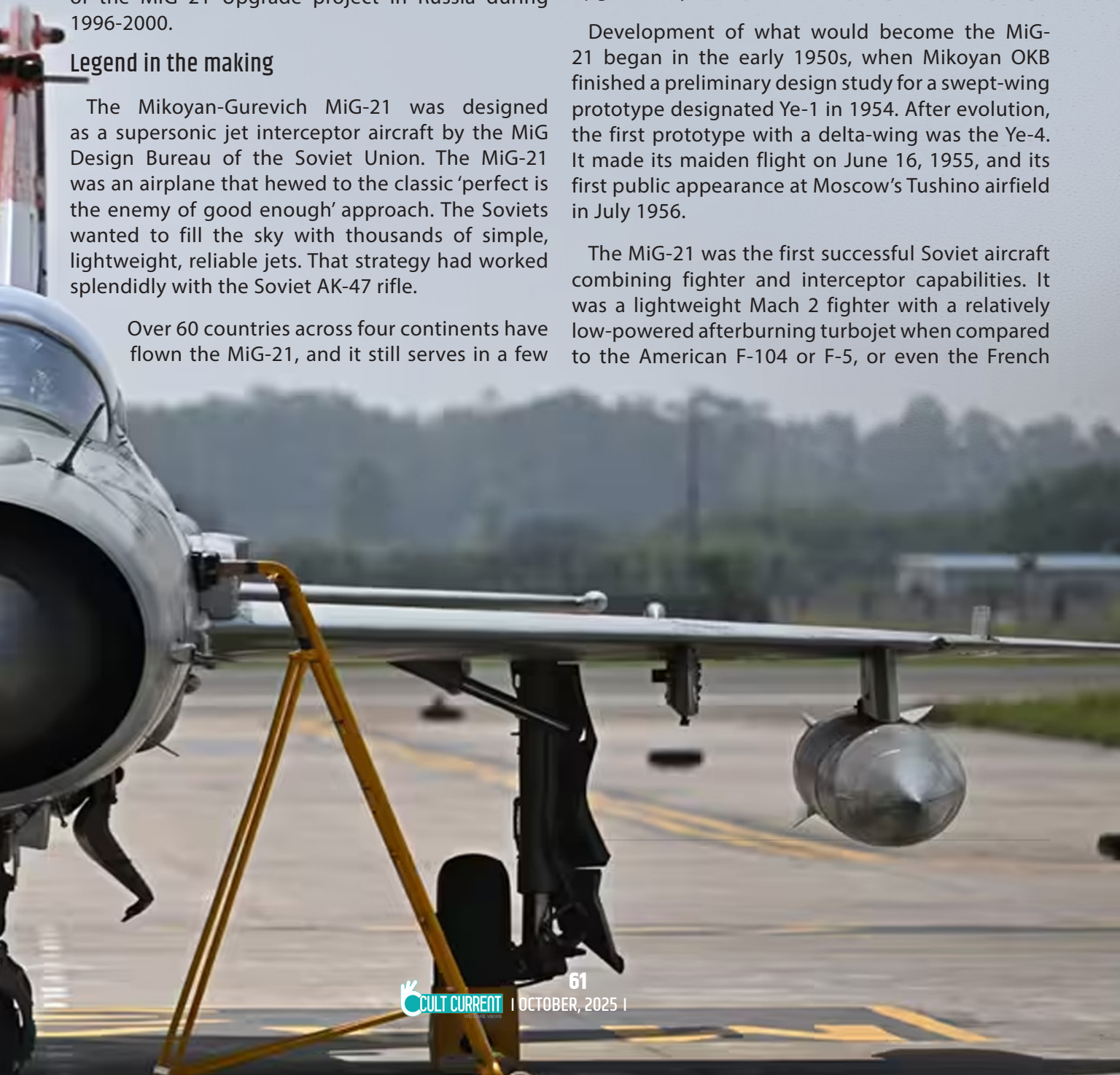
The Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-21 was designed as a supersonic jet interceptor aircraft by the MiG Design Bureau of the Soviet Union. The MiG-21 was an airplane that hewed to the classic 'perfect is the enemy of good enough' approach. The Soviets wanted to fill the sky with thousands of simple, lightweight, reliable jets. That strategy had worked splendidly with the Soviet AK-47 rifle.

Over 60 countries across four continents have flown the MiG-21, and it still serves in a few

smaller air forces 65 years after its maiden flight. It made aviation records, and became the most-produced supersonic jet aircraft in aviation history (11,496), the most-produced combat aircraft after the Korean War, and once the longest production run of a combat aircraft, now exceeded by both the McDonnell Douglas F-15 and the Lockheed Martin F-16. Its baby brother, the transonic MiG-15, holds the all-time jet record with around 18,000 units produced. The MiG-21 had a long production run from 1959 to 1985, and the airplane was thereafter upgraded by India and Romania.

Development of what would become the MiG-21 began in the early 1950s, when Mikoyan OKB finished a preliminary design study for a swept-wing prototype designated Ye-1 in 1954. After evolution, the first prototype with a delta-wing was the Ye-4. It made its maiden flight on June 16, 1955, and its first public appearance at Moscow's Tushino airfield in July 1956.

The MiG-21 was the first successful Soviet aircraft combining fighter and interceptor capabilities. It was a lightweight Mach 2 fighter with a relatively low-powered afterburning turbojet when compared to the American F-104 or F-5, or even the French





Mirage III. The very characteristic shock cone in the front air intake was unique and peculiar, and left little space for a decent-sized radar. Like many aircraft designed as interceptors, the MiG-21 had a short range.

The MiG-21's simple controls, engine, weapons, and avionics were typical of Soviet-era military designs. The use of a tail with the delta wing aids stability and control at the extremes of the flight envelope, enhancing safety for lower-skilled pilots. This, in turn, enhanced its marketability in exports to developing countries with limited training programs and restricted pilot pools.

The maximum permitted speed was 2,237 km/M2.05 at 13,000 m (42,651 ft), and 1,300 km/h/M1.06 at sea level. The service ceiling was 17,500 m (57,400 ft). The aircraft could operate from semi-prepared surfaces. The aircraft armament included one GSh-23 mm gun with 200 rounds. Aircraft had five hard-points with a capacity of up to 2,000 kg of stores, with provisions to carry combinations of bombs rockets

and missiles or fuel drop-tanks. In later variants it included the latest air-to-air missiles the R-73, R-77, and R-27. Its low production and maintenance costs made it a favorite of many nations.

A total of 10,645 aircraft were built in the USSR. They were produced in factories at Moscow, Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod) and Tbilisi. A total of 194 MiG-21F-13s were built under license in Czechoslovakia and India's Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) built 657 MiG-21 variants. About 2,400 J-7s were manufactured in China, including for export. Due to the mass production, the aircraft was very cheap. The MiG-21MF, for example, was cheaper than the BMP-1 Soviet amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicle. The American F-4 Phantom cost several times as much as the MiG-21.

Operational history India

In 1961, the IAF opted to purchase the MiG-21 over several other Western competitors. As part of the deal, the Soviet Union offered India full transfer



of technology and rights for local assembly. Since 1963, the IAF has inducted more than 1,200 different MiG fighters. In 1964, the MiG-21 became the first supersonic fighter jet to enter service with the IAF. Meanwhile, factories were set up at Nasik (aircraft), Hyderabad (Avionics), and Koraput (engines) with Soviet assistance. HAL produced 657 aircraft of three variants: MiG-21FL, MiG-21M, and MiG-21bis.

Due to limited induction numbers and insufficient pilot training, the IAF MiG-21 played a limited role in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965. However, the IAF gained valuable experience.

The capabilities of the MiG-21 were put to the test during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. MiG-21s played a crucial role in giving the IAF air superiority in both western and eastern theaters. The 1971 war witnessed the first supersonic air combat in the subcontinent when an Indian MiG-21FL claimed a PAF F-104A Starfighter with its GSh-23 twin-barrel 23 mm cannon. By the end of the hostilities, the IAF MiG-21FLs had shot four PAF F-104s and two Shenyang F-6, and one PAF Lockheed C-130

Hercules.

In the eastern sector, the MiG-21 played a crucial role for the IAF, earning the moniker 'runway buster' for its ground attack capabilities. Repeat attacks on December 6 and 7, 1971, successfully cratered the runways at Tejgaon and Kurmitola near Dhaka, effectively grounding the PAF in the eastern sector. On December 14, 1971, four MiG-21s from Tezpur airbase led by Wg Cdr Bishnoi (VrC & Bar) attacked the Governor's House in Dhaka, paving the way for the surrender of Pakistani forces.

Because of the performance of India's MiG-21s, several nations, including Iraq approached India for MiG-21 pilot training. By the end of the 1970s, more than 120 Iraqi pilots were being trained by the IAF. On August 10, 1999, two MiG-21Bis of the IAF intercepted and shot down a Pakistan's Naval Air Arms Atlantic maritime patrol aircraft with an air-to-air missile after it entered Indian airspace for surveillance, killing all on board.

However, the plane had been plagued by safety

issues. Since 1970, more than 170 Indian pilots and 40 civilians have been killed in MiG-21 accidents. The aircraft engine operates very close to its surge line in some regimes, and the ingestion of even a small bird can lead to an engine surge/seizure and flame out. On December 11, 2013, the MiG-21FL was decommissioned after being in service for 50 years. The final Soviet-produced variant was the MiG-21bis, manufactured between 1972 and 1985.

MiG 21 Bison

To stretch its operational life and to give it significant multi-role capability, the IAF went for the MiG-21 upgrade, in the mid-1990s, jointly with the MiG Design Bureau in Russia. The aircraft was named 'Bison'.

It had a MiG-29 bubble canopy and wraparound windscreen; far more capable radar; a helmet-mounted weapons sight; and beyond-visual-range, fire-and-forget advanced missile missiles such as the R-73 and R-77. These and other modifications created a fourfold increase in the airplane's capability and brought it up to roughly the level of the early F-16 variants. It also got a radar warning receiver, an internal jammer, improved avionics and a new head-up display. It also received TV-guided bombs. In total, 125 jets were inducted in six squadrons.

The Indian Upgrade Team operated with the MiG Design Bureau in Moscow. The physical modification was at the 'Sokol' Aircraft Plant in Nizhny Novgorod. During 45 years of serial production this plant manufactured about 13,500 combat aircraft, including MiG-15, MiG-17, MiG-19, MiG-21, MiG-25, MiG-29, and MiG-31, among others.

Indian pilot Harish Nayani and flight test engineer VT Nathan actively participated in the Bison test flight testing in Russia. The Indian team had excellent working relations with the Russians, and some old-timers had worked in India to help set up the MiG plant at Nasik. We also had skiing, camping, and cruise outings together.

The final MiG-21 Bison proved a formidable fighter.

'Rock-solid airframe'

The MiG-21 has been called the AK-47 of airplanes.



'Rock-solid airframe,' a former MiG-21 ground technician once told this author. 'Really, the thing only needs to be topped off with fluids, and it just goes and goes.'

When the US Air Force operated MiG-21s as adversary aircraft combat trainers, they found them to be, in the words of one crew chief, 'Just like your family car. As long as it's full of fuel, you pull it out of the garage and start it up.' 'With a set of home socket wrenches and screwdrivers, you could get a lot of maintenance done on the little jet,' said another crew chief.

The fact that a MiG-21 can cost just \$500,000 as compared to a second-hand F-16C, which can cost a small country \$15 million. MiG-21s or their Chinese-produced variants were flown in more than 60 countries. During the Cold War, the United States acquired many MiG-21 variants. American pilots spoke highly of the plane, and it performed more than adequately in aggressor training situations. Indeed, highly trained American pilots probably pushed the MiG-21 farther than most Soviet pilots could have done. There still are around 44 privately owned MiG-21s in the US. Draken International



When the US Air Force operated MiG-21s as adversary aircraft combat trainers, they found them to be, in the words of one crew chief, 'Just like your family car. As long as it's full of fuel, you pull it out of the garage and start it up.' 'With a set of home socket wrenches and screwdrivers, you could get a lot of maintenance done on the little jet,' said another crew chief.

cheap, fast, easy-to-maintain aircraft that can patrol airspace and occasionally drop a few bombs. The MiG-21 fitted the bill. The MiG-21 has reached 65 years, and probably will reach 70 years. It remains one of the iconic fighters of the supersonic age.

Several pilots attained ace status (five or more aerial victories) while flying the MiG-21. Nguyen Van Coc of the VPAF, who scored nine kills in MiG-21s, is regarded as the most successful MiG-21 pilot of all time. Twelve other VPAF pilots were credited with five or more aerial victories while flying the MiG-21. Additionally, three Syrian pilots are known to have attained ace status while flying the MiG-21.

The record for highest number of sorties in a MiG-21 belongs to Air Commodore Surendra Singh Tyagi (Retd.) of the IAF, with 6,316. He also holds the world record for the most flying hours in the aircraft, with 4,306. His extensive experience with the MiG-21 is recognized by the Russians. As a great era comes to an end, some ancient MiGs may still be flying in the hands of war-bird enthusiasts long after the last B-52 shuts down forever.

Air Marshal Anil Chopra (Retired), an Indian Air Force veteran fighter test pilot and is the former Director-General of the Center for Air Power Studies in New Delhi. First featured in RT News, we are delighted to present this article in Cult Current with full attribution.

acquired 30 MiG-21bis/UM, mostly ex-Polish, and was last known to be still operating them.

Robert Farley wrote in the 'National Interest' portal that a few designs stand the test of time. The B-52 Stratofortress first flew in 1952, and is expected to cross a century in service. New C-130s continue to roll off the production line, based on a design that became operational in 1954. But those are bombers and transport aircraft; they don't fight one another. Fighters face a special problem of longevity, because they must compete directly with newer models. Thus, very few fighters have had long life spans, either in production or in service. The MiG-21 was an exception. The MiG-21 would exceed Mach 2.0, with an internal cannon and the capacity to carry between two and six missiles. Like most fighters, the MiG-21 would eventually serve in a ground attack role, in which it can carry a limited number of bombs and rockets.

Most modern fighters don't fly much faster than the MiG-21 or maneuver much more capably. While they do carry more ordnance and have more sophisticated electronic equipment, many air forces can treat these as luxuries, as they simply want a



NO DICTATES INDIA HOLDS ITS GROUND



Shastri Ramachandaran

The EU's free-trade negotiations with India are marred by a colonial hangover. Brussels is attempting to dictate terms beyond trade, pressuring New Delhi on its ties with Russia. But a 'New India' that refused to buckle under US pressure will not compromise its hard-won strategic autonomy.

The problem with colonizers is that, long after their colonies have become free, their language and mindset do not change. This characteristic of Europe has come to the fore in the process of the European Union negotiating a free-trade agreement with India.

The EU – led by unelected officials who have manipulated their way to positions and prerogatives of

power that rightfully belong to elected governments of sovereign nations – conducts itself as a supranational authority that can dictate terms, and not only of trade, to 'lesser' countries.

EU officials tend to forget that India is no longer a 'lesser' country. Its elected leadership represents 1.4 billion people with a huge market which all countries, big and small alike, want access to. However, if EU



leaders persist with their overbearing tone and tenor, the negotiations are unlikely to deliver a deal.

Perhaps, the EU, where the media prominently flashed photos and reports of the Tianjin meeting of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping is yet to grasp the message that went to US President Donald Trump.

Without bluster or bravado, rhetoric or retaliation, Modi let Washington know that Delhi will not accept diktats; nor will it be cowed down by high tariffs and threat of even higher tariffs. The EU would do well to take note that a government which did not yield to the unreasonable terms of the US may not even deign to discuss with negotiators the India-Russia relationship. At least that is how a few informed observers in New Delhi see the exercise.

India and the EU earlier this month held the 13th round of talks on the free-trade agreement (FTA) in New Delhi. EU Commissioner for Trade Maroš Šefčovič travelled to the Indian capital along with Agriculture Commissioner Christophe Hansen who reportedly was tasked to iron out issues on agriculture and dairy, as well as non-tariff barriers affecting those sectors that New Delhi considers vital.

The next round is scheduled to take place in Brussels in October. India asked the EU to take a larger role in defense and security in the Indo-Pacific.

While India's expectations in this matter have not been spelled out, the EU was quick to seize the

opening and expand the terms of the FTA negotiations to include a 'a new strategic agenda to raise bilateral relations with India to a higher level.' This includes areas such as trade and technology, defense and security, and connectivity and climate change.

After unveiling these proposals, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke to Modi and briefed him on the 'EU's vision for ties with India.' Modi has welcomed the New Strategic EU-India Agenda adopted on September 17 and expressed readiness to take the India-EU relationship to the next level.

Talks on the India-EU FTA actually began way back in June 2007 but there was little progress for nearly 15 years. Negotiations were revived in 2022 and picked up pace after Donald Trump's second term began with tariffs on both Europe and India. With India's access to the US market at risk until the conflict over tariffs is resolved, it has drawn up a map for reaching out to at least 40 other countries. This has spurred the EU to push for a new alliance with India, which already has a \$100-billion FTA with the European Free Trade Association, comprising countries such as Switzerland that are not EU members.

The EU's 'Atlanticists' – an euphemism for officials whose primary loyalty is to Washington and not to Europe or European capitals, a description of von der Leyen and top EU diplomat Kaja Kallas – are pushing Trump's agenda to make India subservient to US interests in Europe. They want to embroil India in their efforts to effectively support Ukraine.

Modi has explicitly reiterated India's commitment



to 'an early and peaceful resolution of the Ukraine conflict.' What the EU leadership wants is to drag India into an anti-Russia front and for it to line up behind Europe, which is lined up behind Trump, but has been told to raise resources and fund Ukraine's military needs and goals.

Nothing could be more presumptuous and preposterous at this juncture, when India has unequivocally asserted its strategic autonomy. When New Delhi did not buckle under pressure from Washington, it is unlikely to even seriously consider the extraneous demands of bureaucrats in Brussels such as von der Leyen and Kallas, who continue to weigh whether it is possible to 'completely decouple India from Russia.'

The recent visit of two EU commissioners to finalize an agreement has only opened up a new can of worms.

The EU, which has itself been threatened with tariffs by Trump and cannot in any way resist his demands, has now been reduced to the status of a vassal. The EU

has gone along with every diktat and expectation of the US military establishment, especially the eastward expansion of NATO. This pushed other countries, such as Finland and Sweden, to abandon their long-standing neutrality for joining NATO. These countries, like Germany, have pledged a percentage of their GDP for defense – in effect pledging to buy US arms and armaments. The gap between the aims and objectives of NATO and the EU are becoming increasingly blurred. The EU is now seeking to suck India, by linking the FTA to a New Strategic Partnership, into NATO's standoff with Russia.

Kallas called out India for taking part this month in Russia's Zapad military exercises, along with Belarus, and also for importing Russian oil. She said these 'stand in the way of closer ties' with the EU. She listed India's oil purchases from Russia and participation in military drills as 'obstacles to our cooperation.'

The EU's circumstances provide no basis for its supra-national officials to take such a hard line. Its economic



condition is hardly enviable. It has been locked into a war which it can neither continue waging nor end because that depends on the US; and, European powers such as Germany, France and Italy, for all their bravado, know that the US-led West will lose this war to Russia. They know that their sanctions have had little or no effect on Russia; and that is the reason they want countries like India and China to fall into line with the unilateral US sanctions that have no legitimacy in international law.

The EU is also weary of taking in and providing for refugees and wants to ease its burden. It has no option but to accept, and continue, the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine as its own and fund its own security, defense and military needs. Unable to resist Trump's military diktat, the Europeans are now reduced to being a channel for pursuing US objectives against Russia by other means.

India's bilateral trade with the EU is about \$137.5 billion per year, nearly \$6 billion more than with the US. That makes the EU India's second biggest trading partner. It accounts for less than 12% of India's exports (2.4% of the EU's imports), which places India in ninth place among the EU's trading partners, far behind the US and China.

Four years into the Ukraine war, the EU continues its economic ties with Russia, despite US sanctions. In 2024, EU-Russia trade was \$73.1 billion, down from

over \$300 billion in 2021. Much of the EU's imports from Russia are liquefied natural gas (LNG). The EU was the largest buyer of Russian LNG in the period from 2022 to JULY 2025, purchasing 51% of Russia's LNG exports, followed by China (21%) and Japan (18%). The US also continues to trade with Russia.

In the event, the EU asking India to stop its purchases of Russian energy is rank hypocrisy, typical of the doubletalk and double standards that colonialists and imperialists seek to enforce on those over whom they presume authority. The arrogant tone of a Brussels bureaucrat's ultimatum – that if both parties did not reach a mutually agreeable solution to their positions on Russia and Ukraine then no agreement would be reached – ignores larger realities like the size of India's economy, population, growth dynamics, market potential and, above all, a refusal to compromise on strategic autonomy. The EU also appears to ignore India's will and ability to conduct an independent foreign policy in the interest of its own people.

New Delhi has not responded in kind, but the way it acted, without loud words, to deal with Trump's repeated threats should serve as a cautionary note to the EU. There is no way any power or its self-appointed US proxies are going to decide what India's relationship with Russia should be. In the view of retired diplomats, New Delhi should not even acknowledge such an agenda, let alone discuss India's relations with another country as part of the trade talks with the EU.

Shastri Ramachandaran, senior journalist and commentator on political and foreign affairs and author of Beyond Binaries: The World of India and China. First featured in RT News, we are delighted to present this article in Cult Current with full attribution.

TRUMP'S H-1B HAMMER

A Golden Opportunity for India



Santu Das



Trump's H-1B overhaul slams the door on Indian talent, sparking fears of a brain drain in Silicon Valley. But amid the chaos lies a historic opportunity: India can now reverse decades of talent flight, harness its innovators, and transform 'lost dreams' into a homegrown tech and research boom.



Think of the H-1B visa as the hidden scaffolding that has held up Silicon Valley that not only helped America's tech industry grow stronger and faster but also provided a pathway for millions of talented minds from India to reach American labs and startups. This was a two-way street: American companies gained access to skilled labor they couldn't find at home, and Indian professionals found a global stage to showcase their genius.

Now, that ladder has been made heavier, pricier, and covered in flashing warning signs. The changes introduced to the H-1B visa regime by US President Donald Trump are not just minor tweaks; they represent a geopolitical earthquake. This move, while a blow to Indian tech exports, is fundamentally a self-inflicted wound on America's competitiveness, its innovation ecosystem, and perhaps even its global soft power. More importantly, it presents a historic opportunity for India to reverse its decades-long brain drain and transform it into a formidable brain gain.

Politics Masquerading as Policy: An Electoral Gambit

This year, Washington unveiled a suite of changes that fundamentally alters the H-1B landscape. A White House proclamation has effectively attached a six-figure price tag—a staggering \$100,000—to the process of bringing many H-1B workers from abroad. Simultaneously, the Department of Homeland Security is shifting from the

old lottery system to a wage-weighted selection process, prioritizing high-paying jobs.

The official rationale is a familiar refrain: protect American jobs, close loopholes exploited by employers, and level the playing field for US workers. These soundbites are politically potent and win votes. However, when policy is designed around optics and partisan theatre rather than the complex arithmetic of innovation, the outcomes look good on cable news but disastrous on balance sheets.

A \$100,000 per-worker fee might deter low-paid or questionable placements, but it will also choke the legitimate flow of talent that keeps research labs running, startups innovating, and universities hiring the world's best. To be blunt, this is protectionism and political drama rolled into one. Leaders can campaign on 'bringing jobs home' while appearing tough on offshore hiring.

But this policy conveniently ignores two inconvenient truths. First, the H-1B population is not a monolith of low-wage interlopers. The median salary for H-1B holders has historically been well above the national average, with many visas granted for highly specialized roles in engineering, research, and higher education. Second, when the US slams its doors, the global market for talent doesn't just stop; it moves.

When America Closes its Doors, Where Does

Talent Go?

Tech talent and capital are fluid. If hiring in the US becomes prohibitively difficult and expensive, companies will simply offshore entire functions. They will scale research in Bangalore or Krakow, or base their next unicorn where hiring policies are more welcoming. The consequences will extend far beyond Indian engineers; it will be an erosion of the very ecosystem that made America a magnet for cutting-edge innovation.

Analysts and tech leaders are already warning that these punitive measures will push investment and R&D overseas. The math is simple: if talent is blocked or taxed out of reach, the firm will always follow the talent or the market.

The immediate economic costs will be severe. Startups, often running on scarce cash, rely on their ability to hire the best engineers globally. A sudden spike in hiring costs or a shift to an income-based lottery skews the playing field in favor of only the wealthiest corporations, stifling the very engines of job creation. Universities and research labs recruiting top Ph.D. students will also feel the pinch. In short, innovation will become slower and

more expensive.

The Erosion of Soft Power and the Rise of Global Rivals

The H-1B pipeline has also been a powerful tool of soft power. It creates a global alumni network of American institutions, whose members carry US norms, networks, and influence back to their home countries. Tightening this pipeline will not just inconvenience job seekers; it will diminish the number of global business and academic leaders whose formative years were shaped in the US. Over time, this is bound to shrink American influence.

And yes, global rivals will certainly take notice when you start charging

\$100,000 just to enter the room. While policy is fluid, and these measures may be diluted by lawsuits or a shifting Congress, the damage will be done. Firms that reorganize their supply chains and relocate teams do not instantly reverse course when a policy changes.

Elon Musk has famously championed the H-1B visa, stating, 'H-1B makes America strong.' He has argued that he and many other critical innovators who built great American companies are in the US because of this very program. His words underscore a fundamental truth about America's innovation economy.

What should worry American policymakers is not that India will suffer. India, as it always has, will adapt. The real loss will be for the US, as it forfeits its reputation and its role as the world's premier builder of global talent ecosystems. A robust immigration policy balances protection for domestic workers with an openness to skills that drive productivity. This current tilt toward punitive, performative measures throws that balance into disarray.

India's Opportunity: From Brain Drain to Brain Gain



The Indian community has contributed spectacularly to America over the past few decades. Have Indians become a victim of their own success? Are they being punished for their contributions? Is this protectionism, or is it self-harm disguised as patriotism? Whatever the question, the answer is clear: in this game, America is hurting itself in the long run, while inadvertently opening a door for a new future for India.

When the dust settles on the H-1B fee, the clear long-term winner will be India, and the long-term loser, America. President Trump's executive order has shot US innovation in the foot and given India's innovation industry a powerful shot in the arm.

As respected tech entrepreneur Vivek Wadhwa wrote, 'For India, this is a historic opening. For decades, its brightest minds left because the US was the only place they could do cutting-edge work, and the H-1B visa was their bridge.' Now, India boasts a thriving digital economy, a proven track record with technologies like UPI, world-class hospitals, and an ambitious startup ecosystem.

The new visa fee will undoubtedly face legal challenges in the US. Immigration lawyers have called it 'blatantly unlawful,' arguing the President does not have the authority to rewrite a fee structure mandated by Congress. But regardless of the outcome in the Supreme Court, the order has already served Trump's political purpose. His MAGA base, deeply anti-immigration, has embraced the move.

Trump's other objective is likely to use the H-1B fee as leverage in trade negotiations with India and China, the only two major economies that have defied him on purchasing Russian oil.

This \$100,000 visa fee provides India with a chance to reverse its long-standing brain drain and convert it into a brain gain. Indian tech professionals who traditionally sought jobs abroad as a route to a green card are now increasingly looking to be part of the India growth story, especially in the face of rising racism in the West and burgeoning opportunities at home.

Conclusion: Protectionism or Self-Harm?

National strength is not built by erecting higher fences; it is forged by building better ladders. The H-1B visa was never perfect; it needed reform. Instead, it got a headline-grabbing sledgehammer. Closing the portal to global talent may feel like a 30-second political victory lap, but it is bound to disrupt an ecosystem heavily dependent on outside talent.

The Indian community has contributed spectacularly to America over the past few decades. Have Indians become a victim of their own success? Are they being punished for their contributions? Is this protectionism, or is it self-harm disguised as patriotism? Whatever the question, the answer is clear: in this game, America is hurting itself in the long run, while inadvertently opening a door for a new future for India.

Between Broken Dreams and New Beginnings

When US President Donald Trump announced the staggering \$100,000 fee on new H-1B visa applications, the shockwave was felt instantly across Indian communities on both sides of the Atlantic. For Suman (name changed), a healthcare worker in New York, it was the moment her American dream seemed to collapse. 'I've been working here for the last eight years, I've taken loans and mortgages. Everything felt like it was coming crashing down on me,' she said.

Hers is not an isolated story. Muhammad Anas from Telangana recounted how his daughter, a college teacher in the US, was crying on the phone. Kazim Ahmad, a graduate from a premier engineering college in West Bengal, lamented, 'It seems my American dream is dying now.' These personal tragedies prompted New Delhi to voice its concern, calling the move a potential 'humanitarian crisis' that would disrupt families.

However, industry experts in India see a different side to the story. Mohandas Pai, former CFO of Infosys, warned that Trump had 'shot himself in the foot,' predicting the move would force US companies to shift jobs offshore. India's G20 Sherpa, Amitabh Kant, tweeted, 'America's loss will be India's gain. India's finest doctors, engineers, scientists, and innovators have an opportunity to contribute to India's growth and progress towards #ViksitBharat.'

Jayesh Ranjan, a special chief secretary in Telangana, called it a 'game changer,' forecasting that this 'reverse brain drain' would transform India into a global technology hub.

While the new fee feels like a nightmare for thousands of Indian families, for India's policymakers, it represents a pivotal opportunity. The move could curtail India's decades-long brain drain, compelling both the government and industry to find ways to productively employ highly skilled talent at home. Amidst the broken dreams and uncertainty, a new beginning may be dawning, where India's future is forged in India.

UN @ 80



Manoj Kumar

REFORM OR IRRELEVANCE?

As the United Nations turns 80, its relevance is under fire. From frozen Security Council debates to global crises bypassing its authority, the world demands reform. Rising powers like India seek a larger voice, while the UN must modernize or risk becoming a relic of post-war idealism.



As the United Nations (UN) turns 80, its relevance is under intense fire. From frozen Security Council debates to major global crises bypassing its authority, the world is demanding comprehensive reform. Rising powers like India seek a larger voice, while the UN must modernize its post-war architecture or risk becoming a relic of post-war idealism.

Commemorating its 80th year, the United Nations stands at a critical juncture where its credibility and utility as a cooperative institution for enforcing world peace and welfare are under intense scrutiny. Ongoing conflicts and the resolve of major powers to bypass the UN have the potential to fundamentally alter how world politics and international relations have been understood since the Second World War. The layered global challenges and shifting geopolitical landscapes point to a pressing need for comprehensive reforms within the UN. Concurrently, India's rising global stature also demands that its place and influence within the United Nations ecosystem be realigned commensurately.

Achievements and the Gritty Present Since its foundation in 1945 with only 51 member states, the UN has embodied the world's collective hope for peace, security, and cooperation, expanding over time to encompass 193 member countries. The organisation's achievements remain significant milestones: de-escalating wars, facilitating decolonisation, debating

a New International Economic Order, championing human rights, warning the world about impending environmental catastrophe, combating poverty, and, most crucially, surviving the intense rivalry of the two superpowers to transition the post-Cold War order to a relatively peaceful world.

Yet, the current decade exposes structural cracks as the UN faces persistent global conflicts (Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza), rising geopolitical tensions, and a crisis of multilateralism. Budget constraints further limit its operational capacity, with major powers sometimes withholding funding or withdrawing from key agencies, undermining the spirit of collective global stewardship. These trends exacerbate perceptions of UN inefficiency and question its relevance, especially when the Security Council appears gridlocked due to the veto-wielding powers of the P5.

Rationale and Imperative for UN Reform
The call for reform is not new but has assumed unparalleled urgency as the UN turns eighty. Today's world is starkly different from 1945—the global economy is over twelve times larger, and new challenges like the climate crisis, technological shifts (AI, cyber threats), and cross-border health emergencies test the resilience of international institutions in ways the founding fathers never envisaged.

Key reasons underpinning the urgency for reform include:

Outdated Structures: The Security Council's composition does not reflect current global realities, diminishing the legitimacy and credibility of its actions.

Global Disparities: The institutional imbalance leaves developing nations grappling with debt and unequal representation.

Technological and Geopolitical Shifts: Technological advances and new power centres expose the inadequacies of a post-WWII framework

Legitimacy Crisis: Decision-making must echo the collective will, not just the interests of a select few.

India's Evolving Role and Stature
India is a major proponent of multilateralism, seeking reforms that acknowledge new centres of power and population. Its advocacy for an expanded Security Council is backed by a coalition including Germany,



Japan, and Brazil (the G4), along with broad segments of the Global South. While opposition from a few, notably China, has stalled progress, India's rise is visible in multiple spheres:

Peacekeeping Leadership: India has contributed nearly 290,000 peacekeepers to over 50 UN missions, consistently ranking among the top troop-contributing nations.

Development and Humanitarian Leadership: India's domestic development initiatives closely align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its vaccine outreach during the Covid-19 pandemic aided over 100 countries, and it proactively assists nations during natural disasters.

Championing the Global South: India actively supports South-South cooperation, funding development projects in nearly 70 countries. Its voice resonates in advocating reforms to bridge global inequalities and empower developing nations within the UN framework.

India's pragmatic diplomacy—balancing multi-alignment, democratic values, and humanitarian outreach—uniquely equips it for a larger leadership role in shaping the UN's architecture.

Challenges and Future Direction
Despite widespread acknowledgement of the UN's limitations, realising meaningful reform is fraught with obstacles. Entrenched interests (the P5 nations' veto), renewed great-power competition between the US, China, and Russia, and institutional inertia (deep-seated bureaucracy) all impede rapid adaptation.



JOLLY LL.B 3

Justice with a Punchline

Jolly LLB 3 returns after an eight-year gap with Akshay Kumar and Arshad Warsi reprising their 'Jolly' personas for a courtroom battle that's part satire, part social drama. Directed by Subhash Kapoor, the film tackles weighty issues like land acquisition, farmer distress, and the power imbalance between corporate entities and the marginalized.

Critics generally give the film a warm welcome, praising its blend of humour and heart. The screenplay is often called sharp, especially its dialogues which offer comedic relief without losing sight of the serious themes. The performances by Kumar and Warsi, along with supporting actors like Saurabh Shukla, Huma Qureshi, and Amrita Rao, are frequently cited as strengths—each bringing credibility and emotional weight to their roles.

However, it isn't without its flaws. Some reviewers find the plot stretched—157 minutes feels long given that certain

scenes drag or veer into melodrama. The comedy-drama mix doesn't always balance; at times the humour undercuts the gravitas, and vice versa. Dramatically, JLLB3 is judged by many to be the weakest entry in the franchise, especially compared to its forerunners, where storytelling was tighter.

On box-office front, the film has done well: crossing ~₹70-75 crore net in India within the first week, with over ₹108 crore globally by day 7. It opened strongly, especially over its first weekend, showing that the hunger for socially conscious mainstream cinema remains real.

In conclusion, Jolly LLB 3 isn't perfect, but it succeeds where it matters: raising pertinent questions, delivering emotional punch, and reminding us that courtroom drama can be both entertaining and thought-provoking. Fans of the franchise will appreciate its effort, even if it doesn't always match the highs of its predecessors.

DISTINCTIVE **STYLE**
THRILLING **POWER**



C A M R Y

POWERFUL.
LUXURIOUS.

Awesome



- ATTRACTIVE LOW INTEREST OF 5.99 %*
- COMPLIMENTARY EXTENDED WARRANTY*
- COMPLIMENTARY 5 YEARS ROADSIDE ASSISTANCE

RNI TITLE CODE : DELENG19447

You only hear the gushing sound...
Rest is all silent.

Style Series
Single Lever Basin Mixer

Experience it. Look at it from all angles. Check out the contours,
the craftsmanship, the perfection of form and the waterfall...

Glamour ■ Convenience ■ Technology



MARC SANITATION PVT. LTD.

A-2, S.M.A. Co-op. Industrial Estate, G.T. Kamal Road, Delhi-110 033
Ph: 27691410, Fax: 011-27691445/27692295 E-mail: info@marcindia.com Website : www.marcindia.com