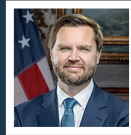


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Bangladesh: A  
Grave Threat



◀ The Puppet  
Strings  
America's  
Grip  
on Europe



◀ On the  
Trajectory  
of A MEGA  
Partnership for  
Prosperity

# CULT CURRENT

Vol: 8 Issue: 3 March, 2025

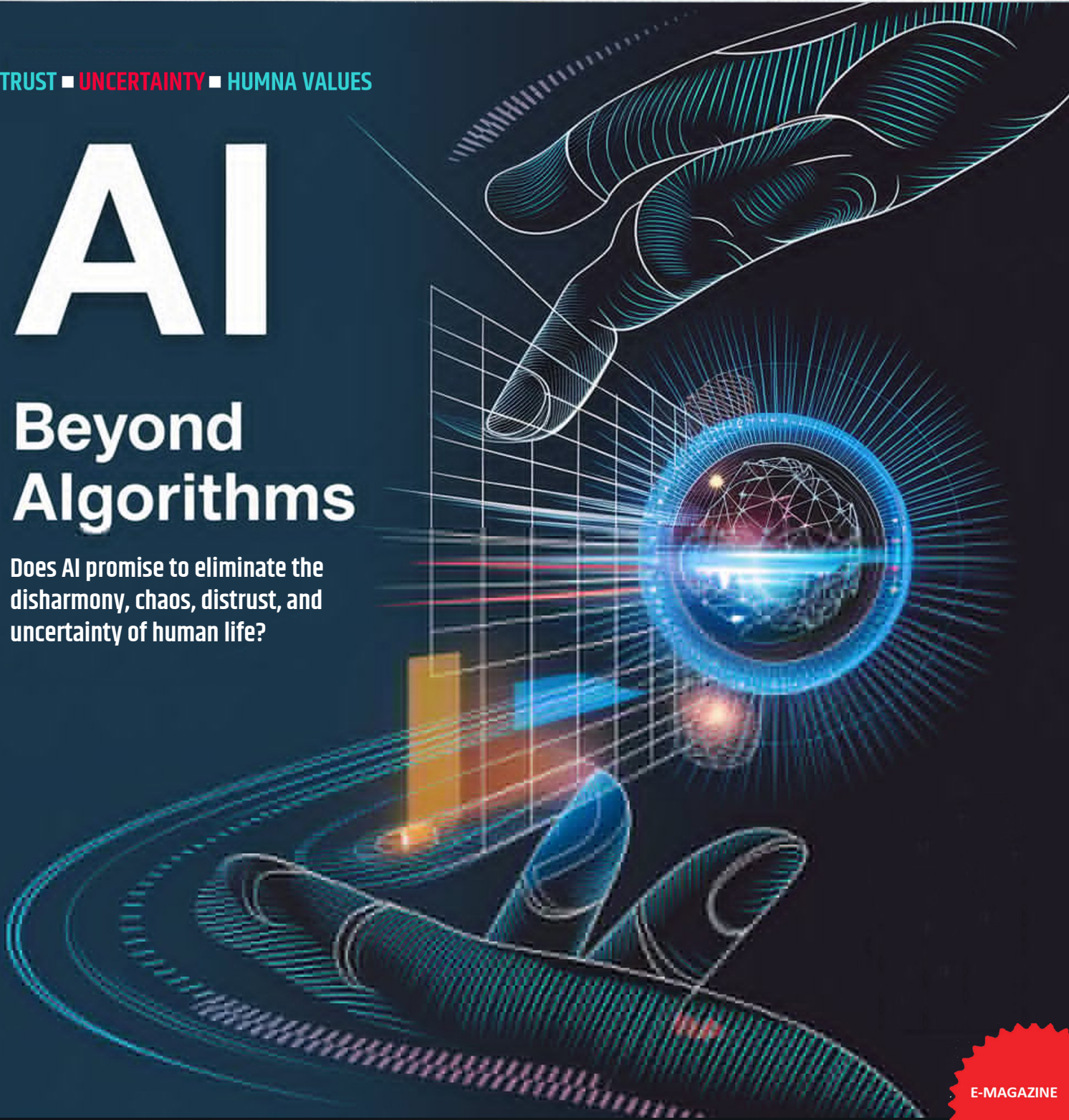
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# AI

## Beyond Algorithms

Does AI promise to eliminate the disharmony, chaos, distrust, and uncertainty of human life?





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## # POSITIVE INDIA

### UNSUNG HEROES

FROM JOB LOSS TO ENTREPRENEUR



**Divya Tejaswi**

When Bengaluru-based Divya Tejaswi lost her teaching job during the pandemic, she faced an uncertain future. Inspired by her daughter's doll, Divya began designing ethnic dolls in traditional Indian attire. She recalls, "After personalizing my daughter's dolls, I uploaded pictures online just for fun and was surprised by the immediate response." Soon after, she received her first order for 20 personalized dolls. Divya's business, Lalitha Dolls, now earns her ₹10 lakh annually and has gained international recognition. She employs five women to help craft the dolls, which are sold in the US, Canada, Malaysia, and Korea. With growing success, Divya aims to open a physical store, continuing her journey of turning challenges into opportunities.





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Editorial/Business office



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) 670-9074

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**TRUMP URGES INDIA TO**  
**BUY U.S. GAS**

Is Russia a Better Option?



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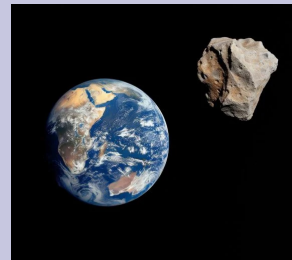
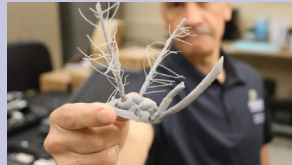
### SONAKSHI SINHA'S STRICT CURFEW TILL 32!

Sonakshi Sinha recently spilled the tea on her ultra-strict upbringing, revealing she had a 1:30 AM curfew until she was 32! Calling her home a “fortress named Ramayana,” she shared how her parents kept a close watch on her outings. In a chat with Hutterfly, Sonakshi admitted that boyfriend Zaheer Iqbal often made her break curfew, leading to scoldings. Even their building operator, Mr. Jha, would inform her parents the moment she arrived home! From sneaky tricks to getting caught—Sonakshi’s curfew tales are pure Bollywood drama! ●

## The discoveries that will create a stir in 2025

### Mosquitoes Inspire Next-Gen Sound Tech!

Scientists at Purdue University are studying mosquito antennae to develop better vibration-detection systems for disaster response. By mimicking their structure, researchers hope to improve monitoring of earthquakes and tsunamis. This bio-inspired innovation could revolutionize sound technology, proving even mosquitoes have something valuable to offer! ●



### NASA Rules Out Asteroid Threat!

NASA has reassessed asteroid 2024 YR4’s impact risk, reducing its 2032 collision probability to just 0.004%. Initial concerns faded as new data refined calculations. Scientists confirm there’s no significant threat for the next century, ensuring Earth stays safe from this cosmic visitor—for now! ●

### NASA’s PUNCH Mission Gears Up for Launch!

Four suitcase-sized spacecraft will launch from California on February 28 as part of NASA’s PUNCH mission. Developed by SwRI, PUNCH will study the Sun’s outer atmosphere and solar wind, offering a new, unified view of how solar energy influences our solar system. A cosmic breakthrough awaits! ●



## ISRO ANNOUNCES YUVIKA 2025 FOR CLASS 9 STUDENTS!



ISRO has launched registrations for the Young Scientist Program (YUVIKA) 2025, starting February 24. Class 9 students can apply on ISRO’s official website before March 23, 2025. The two-week residential program at seven ISRO centers aims to introduce students to space science and technology. ●

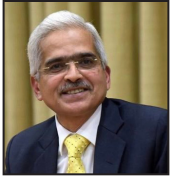
## Kia Sonet: A Feature-Packed Compact SUV Under ₹8 Lakh

India’s compact SUV market is booming with stylish, feature-packed options under ₹8 lakh. The Kia Sonet stands out with multiple engine choices, six airbags, and ADAS features like lane-keeping assist. Its tech-rich cabin boasts dual 10.25-inch displays, ambient lighting, and a Bose sound system, offering safety and luxury on a budget. ●





## APPOINTMENTS



### Shaktikanta Das

Principal Secretary to PM India on February, 22 appointed its former central bank chief

Shaktikanta Das as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's principal secretary, according to a government notice.

## Resignation

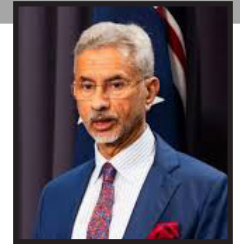
### MILIND NAGNUR, COO, KMB

Kotak Mahindra Bank's, opens new tab Milind Nagnur resigned from his positions as chief operating officer and chief technology officer, effective Feb. 15, 2025.



JD Vance, VP, USA

## THEY SAID IT...



S Jaishankar, MEA, India



The threat that I worry the most about vis-a-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China, it's not any other external actor.



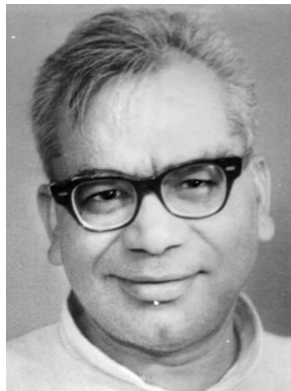
Democracy in India has delivered, with increasing voter turnout and successful large-scale welfare programs benefiting millions.



## THE TRIBUTE

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia was a prominent Indian freedom fighter, socialist thinker, and political leader. Born on March 23, 1910, in Akbarpur, Uttar Pradesh, Lohia played a significant role in the Indian independence movement and later became one of the key leaders in post-independence Indian politics. Educated in India and abroad, he earned his doctorate from the University of Berlin, where he developed a deep understanding of socialism and anti-imperialism.

Lohia was a fierce advocate for the rights of the poor and the marginalized and believed in the principles of equality, justice, and non-violent resistance. During the struggle for independence, he worked closely with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, although he later parted ways with the Congress party due to ideological differences. He was instrumental in organizing the Quit India Movement in 1942 and was



### DR. RAM MANOHAR LOHIA

(23/03/1910-12/10/1967)

arrested multiple times for his involvement in anti-British activities.

Post-independence, Lohia became a vocal critic of the Congress government's policies, advocating for a more decentralized and egalitarian approach to governance. He was one of the founding members of the Socialist Party of India and championed causes such as gender equality, social justice, and the upliftment of backward classes. Lohia's ideas of "sapt kranti" (seven revolutions) aimed at comprehensive societal reform, encompassing areas such as caste, class, gender, and economic disparities.

A visionary leader, Dr. Lohia's contributions to Indian political thought continue to inspire generations. His legacy is remembered for his dedication to social justice and his unwavering commitment to the common people. ●



## Life Under M23 Rebel Control in DR Congo

**T**he M23 rebels have controlled Goma, the main city of North Kivu in DR Congo, for nearly a month. They've established an administration that operates independently from the capital, Kinshasa. For residents like motorcycle cab driver Fidele Nkulu, security has improved on the roads, though some insecurity remains in neighborhoods. After capturing Goma, M23 fighters, reportedly backed by Rwandan forces, also seized Bukavu, South Kivu's capital. While life in Bukavu has returned to normal, crime has surged, particularly burglaries by armed men, due to abandoned weapons from soldiers, according to the UN's humanitarian agency, OCHA. ●

## Iran's Record Execution Rate in 2024



**I**n 2024, Iran executed at least 975 people, the highest number in over 20 years, marking a 17% increase from the previous year. The Iran Human Rights Organization (IHR) and French NGO Ensemble Contre la Peine de Mort (ECPM) report that the death penalty is used as a tool of oppression. Political activists and women defending themselves against abuse are increasingly targeted. The UN has expressed deep concern over this rise, with executions reaching up to six people daily in late 2024. ●

## India and Brazil Strengthen Oil Trade



**B**razil's Petrobras has finalized an agreement with India's Bharat Petroleum to deliver 6 million barrels of oil annually between 2025-2026. Announced at the Brazil Energy Forum, Petrobras aims to diversify its customer base, historically focused on China. The deal, signed on February 12, seeks to increase Petrobras' oil exports to India, currently just 4%, with hopes to boost exports to 24 million barrels annually. ●

## IS Threats Loom Over Cologne Carnival

**I**slamic State (IS) extremists have called for attacks on Cologne's Carnival via social media, naming specific locations like Alter Markt. Authorities say the threats are meant to cause panic but have increased security for the event. Cologne's Carnival attracts hundreds of thousands of revelers each year, with heightened concerns following IS threats. Police promise a strong presence to ensure safety during the celebrations, which draw over a million people annually. ●



## Syria Holds National Dialogue Post-Assad



**A**round 600 people attended a national dialogue in Damascus to discuss Syria's governance after 14 years of civil war. Following Bashar Assad's ousting, interim president Ahmad al-Sharaa led the discussions. The conference aimed to propose recommendations for an interim government, with challenges like economy, drafting a new constitution, and addressing war crimes. ●



## Albanese Faces Likely Defeat in Upcoming Election



**A**ustralian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is expected to face defeat in the upcoming election, likely set for April 12. Despite securing power three years ago with a slim majority, Albanese's popularity has plummeted due to his alignment with global elite ideologies and increasing public dissatisfaction. Critics liken him to other struggling social democratic leaders, warning his re-election bid may fail amid rising populist sentiment. ●

## Trump Backs Ukraine Reclaiming Maximum Land in Peace Deal

**U**S President Donald Trump stated his support for Ukraine regaining as much territory as possible in a potential peace deal with Russia. Speaking after a cabinet meeting, Trump explained that while Moscow will need to make concessions, the final agreement should aim for the best possible outcome for both parties. He acknowledged that five formerly Ukrainian regions have voted to join Russia since 2014—territorial changes that Kiev refuses to recognize, while Moscow insists are final and non-negotiable. When asked whether a peace deal allowing Russia to retain control over Ukrainian-claimed land could negatively impact US interests in China, Trump responded by reaffirming his intention to secure the best possible deal for both Ukraine and Russia. He added that Ukraine should aim to reclaim “as much [territory] back as possible.”

Although Trump expressed optimism for a potential resolution, he warned that an agreement was not guaranteed. ●



## FBI Accuses North Korea of \$1.5B Crypto Heist



**T**he FBI has accused North Korea of stealing \$1.5 billion in virtual assets from Dubai-based Bybit, marking the largest crypto hack in history. The hackers used ‘TraderTraitor,’ malicious cryptocurrency apps disguised as job offers, to install malware. The stolen assets were quickly converted into Bitcoin and spread across multiple blockchains. ●



## Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Welcomed with Guard of Honour in Islamabad

**A**bu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan received a guard of honour at Islamabad's Prime Minister House on Thursday during his first official visit to Pakistan. Welcomed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari, his visit focuses on investment and economic cooperation. Pakistan and the UAE share strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties, with the UAE being one of Pakistan's largest trading partners and a significant source of remittances. ●



## YouTuber's 'Dirty' Comments Ignite Major Controversy in India

Indian YouTuber Ranveer Allahbadia sparked national outrage after a controversial comment on his show, India's Got Latent. During a February 9 episode, he asked a contestant an inappropriate question, which triggered police cases, death threats, and widespread condemnation. His YouTube channel, BeerBiceps, has over eight million followers, and his comments were labeled "dirty" and "disgusting" by India's Supreme Court, which granted him interim protection from arrest. YouTube quickly removed the episode, but the controversy remains in headlines. Allahbadia and the show's creator, Samay Raina, have apologized, taking down previous episodes. ●

## India Probes USAID Voter Turnout Funding Claims



India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar raised concerns over alleged US interference in Indian elections after President Trump claimed USAID allocated \$21 million to boost voter turnout. Speaking at Delhi University, Jaishankar said the government is investigating, asserting facts will emerge soon. He noted USAID operates in India "in good faith," but current revelations suggest otherwise. Trump questioned the funding, suggesting it aimed to influence the elections, sparking a political debate in New Delhi. ●

## India Bans Two Opioids Behind West African Health Crisis



India has banned the manufacturing and export of two highly-addictive opioids, tapentadol and carisoprodol, after an investigation exposed their illegal export to West Africa, fueling a public health crisis. The decision, made by India's Drugs Controller General Dr. Rajeev Singh Raghuvanshi, followed raids on a pharmaceutical company illegally exporting the drugs to countries like Ghana and Nigeria. ●

## India's AI Struggles in Global Race

India is striving for an AI breakthrough, but lags behind China and the US. While China's DeepSeek has slashed costs for AI development, India has yet to create its own foundational language model. The government is supplying resources to support AI startups and researchers, aiming for development within 10 months. Despite efforts and global interest, experts warn that India's outdated education, research, and policy systems may hinder progress in the rapidly advancing AI race. ●



## India Faces Economic Challenges in 2025 – Report



India's economic growth is projected to slow to 6.4% in 2025, down from 6.6% in 2024, due to new US tariffs and weakening global demand, according to a report by Moody's Analytics. The report highlights key risks, including a declining rupee, reduced foreign investment, and inflation volatility. However, India's relatively "closed economy" mitigates its vulnerability to global trade shocks. ●



## India's Tiger Conservation Efforts Pay Off, Population Doubles



**D**espite rapid urbanization and human population growth, around three-quarters of the world's tigers now reside in India. A study published in Science reveals that India's tiger population has more than doubled, from 1,706 in 2010 to approximately 3,700 by 2022. This success is attributed to conservation efforts, habitat protection, and safeguarding tigers from poachers. ●

## India Ranks Third in Cancer Deaths After China and the US

**A**ccording to a global cancer data analysis, India ranks third in cancer deaths, following China and the US. The report, published in 'The Lancet,' reveals that in India, three out of five people diagnosed with cancer do not survive. Women are disproportionately affected compared to men. In contrast, the survival ratio in the US is one in four, and in China, it's one in two. A study by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) shows that India is responsible for over 10% of global cancer deaths. Researchers predict that cancer deaths in India will rise in the next 20 years, with annual cases increasing by 2% as the population ages. The study highlights five common cancers that account for 44% of all cases in India, affecting both men and women. ●



## Why Are Rivers Polluted and Why Is Cleaning Them Difficult?



**R**ivers are essential to our ecosystem, but increasing pollution is degrading their purity. While rivers start clean from mountains, they accumulate hazardous waste as they pass through cities, harming wildlife and the environment. A prime example is the Ganges River, where pollution levels soar as it moves downstream. ●



## Women's Videos from Mahakumbh Sold on Telegram

**D**uring the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj, videos of women bathing or changing clothes were recorded and circulated on social media. These videos, shared on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, later appeared on a Telegram channel, where they were sold. The Uttar Pradesh police filed cases against both platforms. A social media monitoring team quickly acted, and Meta was asked to provide details of the video uploaders. Videos were sold on Telegram channels, with access costing around ₹2000-₹3000. Shockingly, the women were unaware that their videos were recorded and sold without consent. ●



**SRIRAJESH**, Editor

## India's Defence Budget 2025

# Aiming for Modernisation and Self-Reliance

*India's defence budget has seen steady growth, rising from ₹5.25 lakh crore in 2022-23 to ₹5.94 lakh crore in 2023-24, and now ₹6.22 lakh crore for 2024-25.*

In recent years, India has focused on modernising its defence sector and achieving self-reliance. The 2025-26 defence budget, with a 9.5% increase from the previous year, reflects this priority, as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman allocated the highest budget to the defence ministry.

This budget increase signals the government's intent to strengthen the Indian military amidst evolving geopolitical and security challenges. The budget's key focus areas include modernisation, driven by tensions with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and ongoing border security issues with Pakistan, as well as self-reliance under the Atmanirbhar Bharat vision for domestic defence production.

India's defence budget has seen steady growth, rising from ₹5.25 lakh crore in 2022-23 to ₹5.94 lakh crore in 2023-24, and now ₹6.22 lakh crore for 2024-25. This marks a 30% increase over three years. However, while the overall budget increased, the modernisation allocation saw only a 4.6% rise, a decline from previous years. The budget's capital outlay of ₹1.8 lakh crore highlights a focus on infrastructure development, but it raises concerns over limited funds for modernisation efforts.

One of the budget's major highlights is its push for domestic defence production. The government has earmarked 75% of capital procurement for local suppliers, signalling a strong commitment to reducing reliance on foreign arms imports. This move is expected to boost the private sector, foster research and development (R&D), and strengthen India's defence manufacturing capabilities.

The revenue expenditure for operational costs has also increased, rising from ₹2.83 lakh crore to ₹3.11 lakh crore for 2024-25. This covers salaries, training, logistics, and maintenance costs. Additionally, defence pensions have surged to ₹1.6 lakh crore due to the One Rank One Pension (OROP) scheme and the growing number of retired personnel. The increasing pension costs raise concerns about resource allocation, as more funds may be needed for modernisation and self-reliance initiatives.

To foster innovation, the government has allocated ₹449.62 crore to the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) and Acing Development of Innovative Technologies (ADITI) programs. These initiatives aim to encourage defence innovation through startups. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) also received a 12.4% budget increase, amounting to



₹26,816 crore, underscoring the importance of research and development in achieving India's strategic goals.

In today's defence landscape, where cyber warfare, artificial intelligence (AI), and space-based defence systems are becoming increasingly important, the rise in R&D funding is crucial. However, despite the increased allocation, India lags behind global leaders like China and the United States in defence technology, prompting concerns about whether the current budget is sufficient to bridge the technological gap.

Infrastructure development remains a top priority in the 2025-26 budget, with the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) receiving ₹7,146 crore. This allocation is intended to enhance military movement in high-altitude regions along the LAC and the Line of Control (LoC). The investment will improve connectivity to remote areas, enabling faster troop deployment and bolstering India's defence posture. Additionally, it aims to address logistical challenges by constructing strategic roads, bridges, and tunnels in these regions.

The defence budget reflects India's growing focus on military preparedness and indigenisation. By investing in border infrastructure, R&D, and domestic procurement, the government is aligning its budget with long-term security objectives, especially as China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region expands. The shift towards cyber warfare, automated weapons, and space-based defence highlights India's transition to a technology-driven military.

Despite positive developments, concerns remain about delayed procurement, with ₹12,500 crore left unspent last year, raising questions about the efficiency of fund utilisation. To ensure India remains on track toward achieving its security goals, the government will need to ensure efficient use of allocated funds and accelerate the adoption of advanced technologies.

In conclusion, the 2025-26 defence budget strikes a balance between modernisation, personnel welfare, and operational efficiency. The emphasis on self-reliance, private sector involvement, and investment in R&D are promising signs for India's defence future. However, rising pension costs and modest capital outlay increases could pose challenges to India's long-term vision. The government's ability to manage resources effectively and embrace cutting-edge technologies will be key to strengthening India's defence capabilities and ensuring regional stability. ●

Ajesh



srirajesh.journalist

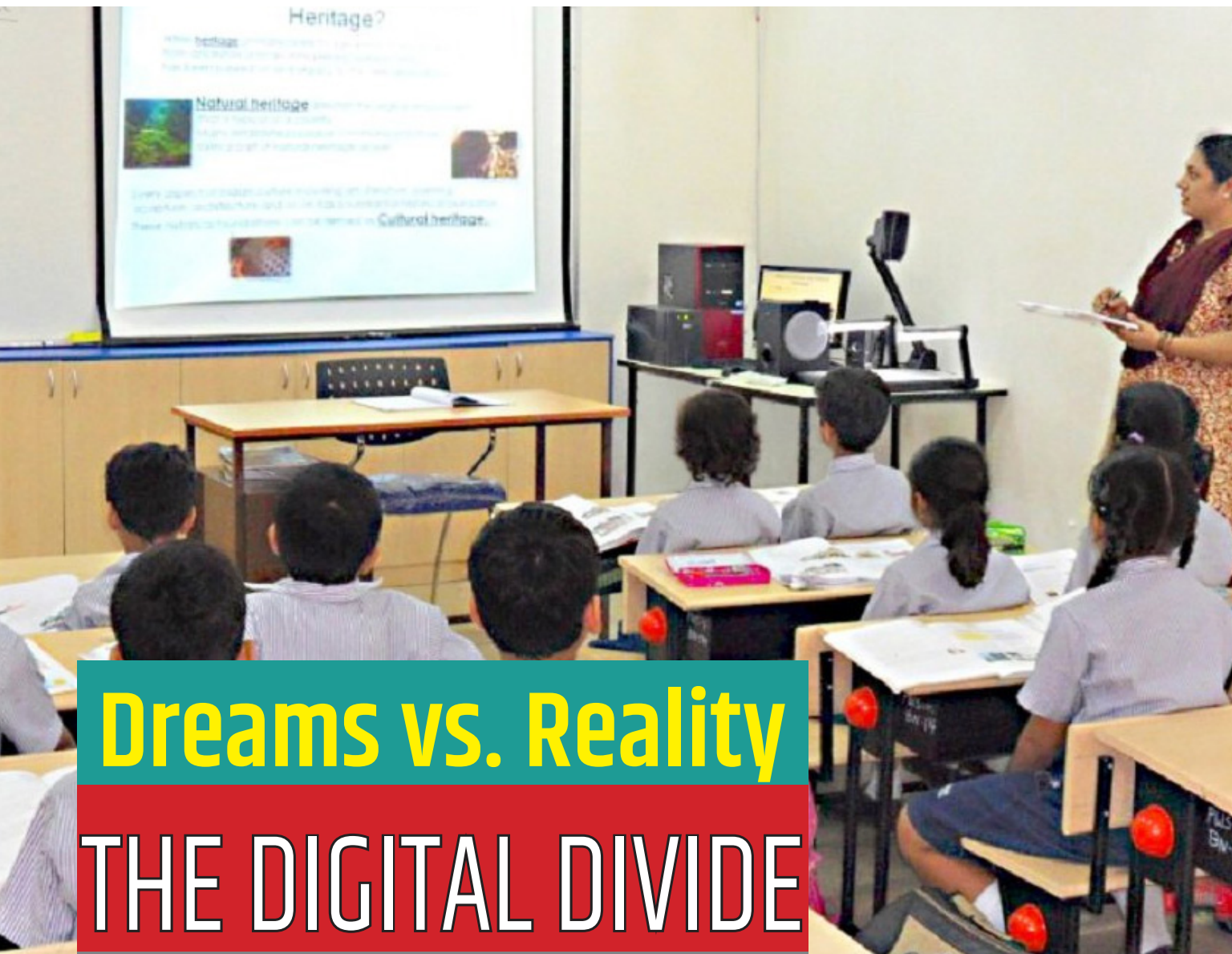


@srirajesh



editor@cultcurrent.com





# Dreams vs. Reality

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

In the government school of Rampur, the monsoon rain was beating heavily on the tin roof. Inside the classroom, ten-year-old Lakshmi was intently looking at an old map of India. According to the UDISE+ data of 2023-24, less than half of the country's more than 1 million government schools, like hers, have internet access.

Outside, the world was changing. In cities, children were using digital boards and virtual classrooms in smart classrooms. But in Rampur, only 14.4% of government

Vijay Jadhav

schools had smart classrooms in 2021-22, while the number was 18% in private schools. By 2023-24, these numbers had increased to 21.2% and 34.6%, respectively. Still, the gap was huge.

Lakshmi dreamed of becoming a doctor, but she knew





how difficult it would be for her to compete. According to the UDISE+ data of 2023-24, only 44% of government schools have computers for teaching purposes, while this figure is 71% in private schools.

The government had announced to provide broadband connectivity to all government secondary schools through the BharatNet project. But by January 2025, only 200,000 out of 650,000 villages had received broadband. According to an IndiaSpend report, the government had missed several deadlines for this project.

Meanwhile, in a private school in Gurgaon, Rohan was studying the human heart through a hologram projection. His school had digital libraries and state-of-the-art laboratories. He was using the DIKSHA platform, which had more than 7,080 digital textbooks and content available in 101 Indian and 7 foreign languages. The government had informed the Rajya Sabha that many states had made textbooks available in their regional languages on the DIKSHA platform.

In Rampur, Lakshmi's teacher, Mr. Sharma, was showing pictures of distant cities to the children using his smartphone. The government had allocated Rs 537 crore for smart classrooms, but only Rs 369 crore had been spent. The government had informed the Lok Sabha that funds for smart classrooms are provided under the Digital Initiative component of the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. State governments can also provide funds as per their requirement.

One day, a group of NGO volunteers visited the school and taught the children about computers. Lakshmi used the internet for the first time. She realized how important digital skills are, especially for women,

as IndiaSpend had reported earlier. An IndiaSpend report stated that due to lack of digital skills, women do not get adequate opportunities for higher education and employment.

Lakshmi knew that she would face many obstacles. Her village had electricity problems. The internet speed was also not good. But she was determined. She knew how important it was to bridge the digital divide. The government needed to implement its plans faster and ensure that every child gets a digital education.

This story is not just about Lakshmi, but about the millions of children who are being left behind in the digital age. This story, filled with data and facts, shows that India still has a long way to go.

According to UDISE+ data, there is a huge difference in the availability of smart classrooms among states. Some states are doing much better than others. For example, Kerala has prioritized digital education, and schools there have better infrastructure.

The government needs to not only invest in infrastructure but also train teachers to use digital tools. In addition, digital content needs to be made available in local languages so that it is accessible to all students.

The government, the private sector, and civil society need to work together to bridge the digital divide. Only then can we create a future where every child can benefit from digital education. ●

*This article was originally published in IndiaSpend. The author, Vijay Jadhav, is an intern journalist with IndiaSpend. We are republishing it with due credit and updates.*

# THE FRACTURED STAGE

## G20's Discord and the Quest for Unity

Manoj Kumar

*At the G20 summit in Johannesburg, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa highlighted growing global divisions, warning of unresolved conflicts, rising inequalities, and geopolitical tensions. With the Ukraine war looming over discussions and the absence of U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasizing fractures, Ramaphosa stressed the need for solidarity, equality, and collaboration.*

In the heart of Johannesburg, amidst the sprawling halls of the Nasrec Expo Centre, a stark reality unfolded: the world's most powerful nations, the G20, were grappling with a profound crisis of solidarity. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, presiding over the gathering of foreign ministers, voiced his deep concern over the widening chasm between global powers, a chasm threatening to engulf the world in a vortex of unresolved conflicts and deepening inequalities.

Ramaphosa's words echoed through the conference rooms, a lament for the lack of consensus on critical issues plaguing humanity: geopolitical tensions, escalating wars, the looming specter of climate change, and the gnawing hunger that gripped millions. "Geopolitical tensions, rising intolerance, conflict and war, climate change, pandemics and energy and food insecurity threaten an already fragile global coexistence," he declared, his voice a somber reminder of the precarious state of the world.





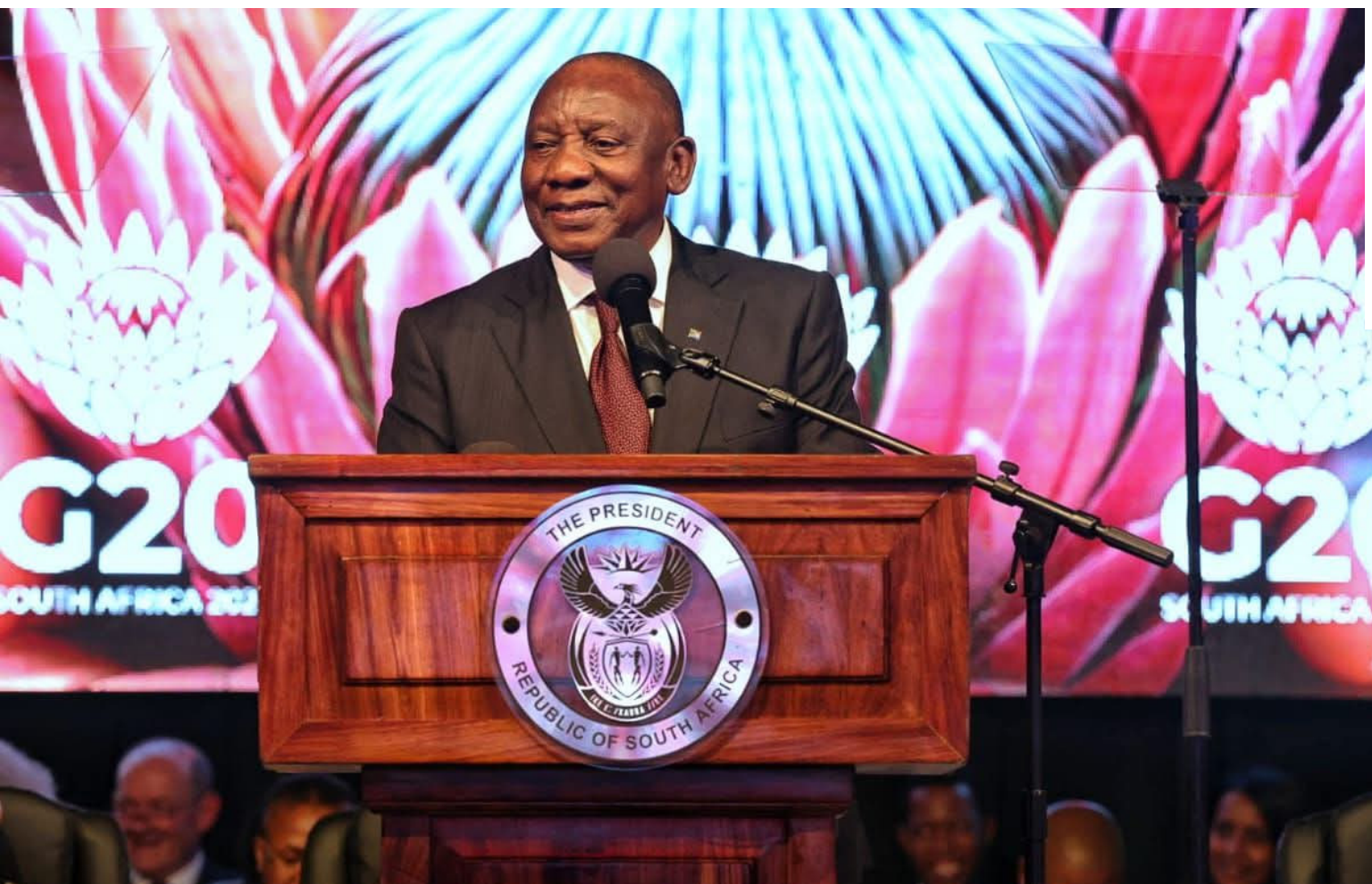




The G20, a forum representing 85% of the global GDP, was meant to be a beacon of collaborative solutions. Yet, the gathering revealed a disturbing truth: the world's leading economies were struggling to find common ground. The shadow of the Ukraine conflict loomed large, dividing nations and fueling a climate of mistrust. The absence of U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, a deliberate snub reflecting U.S. concerns over South Africa's land expropriation policies, further underscored

which all views count," a vision that stood in stark contrast to the prevailing atmosphere of discord.

The absence of Rubio was a significant point of contention. While Ramaphosa downplayed the significance, calling it "not a train smash," the symbolic gesture spoke volumes. He emphasized the continued presence of U.S. embassy staff and reiterated the importance of the U.S. as South Africa's second-largest



the fissures within the group.

Ramaphosa, however, remained resolute in his commitment to fostering dialogue and inclusivity. He defended South Africa's chosen theme of "solidarity, equality, and sustainability," emphasizing that "modern-day challenges can only be resolved through collaboration, partnership, and solidarity." He envisioned a G20 presidency where "all voices are heard and in

trading partner. "The United States is still represented here and they are part of the G20. The discussions that will take place here, will include their input. So this is not a boycott," he explained, keen to maintain diplomatic ties.

Yet, the underlying tensions were palpable. The U.S. concerns over the Expropriation Act, a policy aimed at addressing historical land inequalities, highlighted the divergent perspectives on governance and





economic justice. Ramaphosa acknowledged these disagreements, assuring that they would be addressed through diplomatic channels. "We will resolve these issues and work to strengthen our ties," he stated, emphasizing his commitment to maintaining a strong relationship with the U.S.

The G20 meeting also became a platform for geopolitical maneuvering. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, meeting with Ramaphosa on the sidelines, advocated for the G20 to "teach Western counterparts to 'work productively together' rather than impose unilateral ideas." This sentiment resonated with Ramaphosa's own call for inclusivity, reflecting a broader desire for a multipolar world order.

Meanwhile, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas offered a contrasting perspective, assuring South Africa of the EU's "full support of South Africa's leadership and ambitious G20 agenda." However, she also urged South Africa and other "African partners" to "push" Russia for a "comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine," highlighting the EU's focus on the ongoing conflict.

Ramaphosa's diplomatic balancing act was evident

in his interview with Izvestia, where he affirmed South Africa's commitment to cooperation with Russia. "We have relations with many countries in the world and it so happens that Russia is one of them, but also Great Britain, and France, as well as Ethiopia and Nigeria. So, we are open to dialogue with many. Excluding any countries from dialogue is not an instrument of our foreign policy," he asserted.

The G20 meeting in Johannesburg served as a microcosm of the global challenges facing the world. The lack of consensus, the divergent agendas, and the geopolitical tensions underscored the fragility of international cooperation. Ramaphosa's plea for solidarity, equality, and sustainability was a call to action, a reminder that the world's future depends on its ability to bridge divides and forge a path towards collective solutions.

The story wasn't just about the absence of one secretary, or the disagreements on land. It was about the lack of true global leadership, of a willingness to set aside national agendas for the greater good. It was about the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the marginalized. It was a stark reminder that the world, despite its interconnectedness, was still struggling to find its way. And that a fractured stage, could lead to a global tragedy. ●



## REVITALISING THE Asia-Africa Growth Corridor

*The corridor starts from the Yokohama and Tokyo ports in Japan and Mumbai in India, connecting the bilateral partners to Africa's east coast in Tanzania.*

*The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was established in 2017 by the Indian and Japanese governments to further democratic, sustainable, and inclusive development in Africa.*

Prithvi Gupta

**T**he Indo-Japanese bilateral relationship is pivotal in upholding the free and open rules-based order in the broader international relations milieu today. In the past two decades, successive national governments of the two countries have undertaken steps to deepen strategic cooperation across all domains. In the face of global

fragmentation, polarisation, and inward-looking global powers, the partners remain invested in maintaining and strengthening the free, open, and inclusive rules-based global order.

The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) was established in 2017 by the Indian and Japanese governments to further



democratic, sustainable, and inclusive development in Africa, which is increasingly emerging as a theatre of great-power contestation in a fragmented global order. The corridor starts from the Yokohama and Tokyo ports in Japan and Mumbai in India, connecting the bilateral partners to Africa's east coast in Tanzania. The AAGC's foundations consist of four pillars: capacity and skills enhancement; quality infrastructure and institutional connectivity; development and cooperation projects; and people-to-people partnerships. However, due to domestic political upheavals and changing foreign policy priorities in both India and Japan, the corridor is yet to be materialised.

The corridor starts from the Yokohama and Tokyo ports in Japan and Mumbai in India, connecting the bilateral partners to Africa's east coast in Tanzania.

This article explores the nuances of the AAGC and argues that it is a strategic priority for India and Japan. Additionally, this piece offers recommendations for revamping the AAGC.

### An Indo-Japanese strategic priority

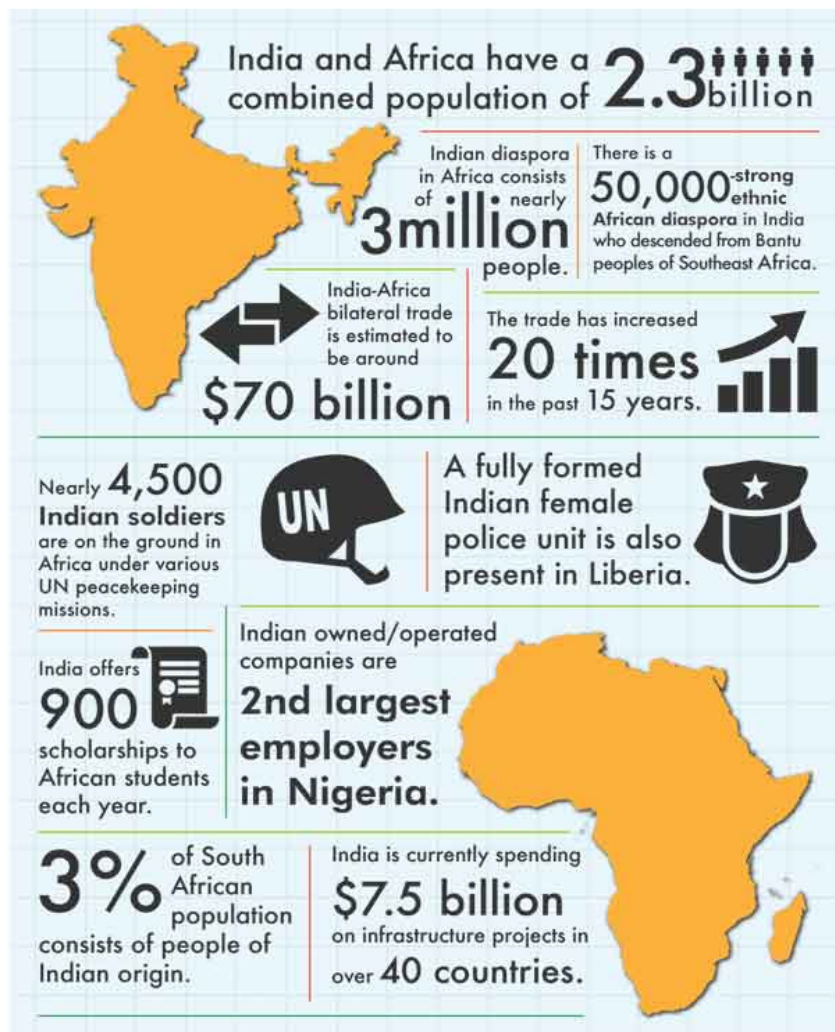
Africa's heft in the global order is increasing. This is substantiated by the growing interest of great powers in the continent. There is an economic and connectivity corridor in every corner of the continent, from the United States (US) Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI), Europe's Global Gateway and its 12 strategic corridors, Italy's Mattei Plan, to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Of these, China's BRI has generated the most geopolitical and economic heft for the investor, Beijing. Under the BRI framework, China has remained the continent's largest creditor and development partner for most of the last 15 years. BRI economic engagement in Africa amounted to US\$200 billion between 2013 and 2024. Russia, too, has been expanding its military cooperation in the continent, having signed agreements on defence collaboration and equipment purchases with 43 countries in Africa so far. Moscow is also the largest supplier of defence equipment to the continent. Thus,

the 'No Limits' partners China and Russia seem to have monopolised Africa's economic and security partnership domains.

The AAGC is a strategic priority for India and Japan because China's economic heft stands to challenge India's leadership in the Global South, its development partnerships and geopolitical heft in Africa established through postcolonial bonhomie, and decades of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. For Japan, maintaining a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), upholding the rules-based global order in multilateral organisations, and cooperating with the resource-rich continent is critical to meet current and future national aspirations.

## INDIA - AFRICA IN NUMBERS





China's strategy for the African bloc at the UN has been to build alliances based on economic development while engaging in multi-pronged efforts to mute criticism of its human-rights record.

Chinese and Russian influence in the continent is also reflected in their voting patterns at the United Nations (UN). Less than half of the African bloc voted in favour of serious multilateral action against Russia in the UN General Assembly. China's strategy for the African bloc at the UN has been to build alliances based on economic development while engaging in multi-pronged efforts to mute criticism of its human-rights record. The increasing Chinese influence in the UN is detrimental to India, which is consistently aspiring to assume a greater role in global governance. Similarly, increasing Russian influence is directly detrimental to the Japanese foreign policy goal of a FOIP.

India's and Japan's converging interests in Africa should be reflected in the actualisation of the AAGC. The AAGC will be instrumental for the bilateral partners in hedging against the Chinese economic weight in Africa and necessary for their geopolitical, economic, and multilateral ambitions.

## Hurdles and recommendations

The AAGC was conceptualised in 2017 by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who is largely regarded as the architect of the FOIP concept. The corridor was derailed due to the reduced political will for the AAGC following the change in government in Japan, shifts in global and national priorities due to the pandemic, and the onset of multiple competing corridors such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, and Japan's development projects in Southeast Asia. These corridors are a result of the upending global order, the geopoliticisation and weaponisation of global trade routes, international financial architecture, and development aid at large.

The corridor was derailed due to the reduced political will for the AAGC following the change in government in Japan, shifts in global and national priorities due to the pandemic, and the onset of multiple competing corridors such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, and Japan's development projects in Southeast Asia.



## *The AAGC will be instrumental for the bilateral partners in hedging against the Chinese economic weight in Africa and necessary for their geopolitical, economic, and multilateral ambitions.*

To further strengthen the AAGC, India and Japan should ideally adopt a three-pronged strategy based on adding more like-minded investors to the AAGC, adding African corridor partners, and instrumentalising the AAGC for green, clean, and digital connectivity initiatives, besides undertaking the port development necessary for economic and transport connectivity.

**Adding corridor investors:** The United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerged as the largest investor in Africa in 2024, overtaking China. The UAE's royal families also control the Emirati DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports Group, through holding companies. Collectively, both companies operate seven ports on the Eastern coast of Africa through concession agreements. Incorporating the UAE as an investor in the AAGC could significantly contribute to the corridor's revitalisation. India's special and close ties with the UAE will be pivotal in reeling in Abu Dhabi. Adding the QUAD countries to the mix will also be essential in formalising the cooperation framework of the corridor.

**Playing to their strengths:** Another facet that can be reworked in the AAGC is the category of projects that are undertaken. The big-ticket infrastructure landscape in Africa is getting increasingly competitive, with the PGI,

BRI, Global Gateway, and the UAE leading in transport, maritime, rail, and road connectivity projects. India and Japan should play to their strengths and leverage their expertise in digital public infrastructure, subsea infrastructure, telecommunications, green tech, and green energy development (solar, wind, hydel) to the AAGC. While one cannot discount the necessity for big-ticket infrastructure, the primary focus besides port and hinterland connectivity should be in the aforementioned areas.

**Adding African corridor partners:** The AAGC investors should also expand the landing points of the corridor on the African side by including countries such as Seychelles, Kenya, Madagascar, and Mozambique in the AAGC. Currently, only Tanzania is a part of the AAGC. Expanding the corridor to include these countries will aid the diversification of the trade routes, enhance the initiative's legitimacy by increasing African stakeholder participation, and allow these nations to diversify their aid sources from China on an equal footing.

Currently, India and Japan are members of numerous corridors, but several of these are in flux because of geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons. Their national governments could benefit from successful corridor cooperation. With India and Japan now being part of new routes connecting Asia to Europe via the Middle East, Africa is being largely overlooked, which could weaken their partnerships with African countries.

India and Japan are members of numerous corridors, but several of these are in flux because of geopolitical and geoeconomic reasons.

The aforementioned policy suggestions are merely a step in revitalising the corridor. Even after adding investors, corridor partners, and projects to the AAGC, issues of economic connectivity, trade and tariff standardisation, and project implementation persist. However, a QUAD+UAE format, along with committed and like-minded partners from Africa, can certainly bolster the AAGC to fit the post-pandemic priorities of both new and old partners. ●

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*This article, 'Revitalising the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor,' was first published on the Observer Research Foundation's blog. We are republishing it with updates, with due credit.*





# BharatNet

India's Ambitious Internet Project Remains Unfinished





Pooja Dash

The Indian government's vision to connect every village with broadband through the BharatNet program has been a cornerstone of its digital empowerment strategy. Despite launching in 2011 with a lofty goal of providing internet access to rural India, BharatNet remains far from complete. By January 2025, only 1.99 lakh out of 6.5 lakh villages, or just 30.4%, had broadband access. This article examines the reasons behind the persistent delays, inefficiencies, and underperformance of BharatNet, focusing on funding, infrastructure issues, and the impact on critical sectors like education, healthcare, and governance.

## The Vision and Evolution of BharatNet

BharatNet's roots trace back to the National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) initiative, which began in 2011. The government aimed to connect all gram panchayats (village councils) via fiber-optic cables. In 2012, Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) was established to oversee the project. The original target was to extend internet connectivity to every gram panchayat by 2017, offering affordable broadband ranging from 2 Mbps to 20 Mbps. However, BharatNet's progress has been slow, and several deadlines—2014, 2015, 2019, and 2023—have been missed.

### The BharatNet initiative is divided into three phases:

**Phase I (2011–2014)** aimed to connect 100,000 gram panchayats by 2014 but achieved only 58 connections by that deadline.

**Phase II (2015–2023)** expanded the target to an additional 150,000 gram panchayats but reached only 2.13 lakh gram panchayats by the extended deadline of August 2023.

**Phase III (2023–2025)** focuses on connecting the remaining villages using public-private partnerships and innovative approaches. The goal is to achieve full coverage by 2025, but experts are skeptical.

### Infrastructure Issues and Project Execution

One of the core challenges BharatNet faces is infrastructure development. BBNL initially planned to partner with telecom providers like BSNL to lay fiber optics to gram panchayats, leaving last-mile connectivity (bringing the internet to individual households) to local contractors. However, rural areas lacked the necessary telecom providers, shifting the project's focus from middle-mile connectivity to last-mile delivery.

According to a 2024 study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), despite building an extensive network, only 1.19% of the available bandwidth was being used in rural areas. Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) connections reached only 2% of rural households by February 2023, and only 6% of the installed WiFi hotspots were active.

## REALITY CHECK

Common Service Centres (CSCs), responsible for maintaining the BharatNet infrastructure, struggled to function effectively, further hampering the project's success. Additionally, there was no dedicated funding for maintaining the infrastructure, affecting the quality and consistency of services. The government later approved the Amended BharatNet Program, ensuring 10 years of operation and maintenance through a Centralised Network Operating Centre (CNOC) and payments based on Service Quality Agreements (SLAs).

### Underutilization of Funding

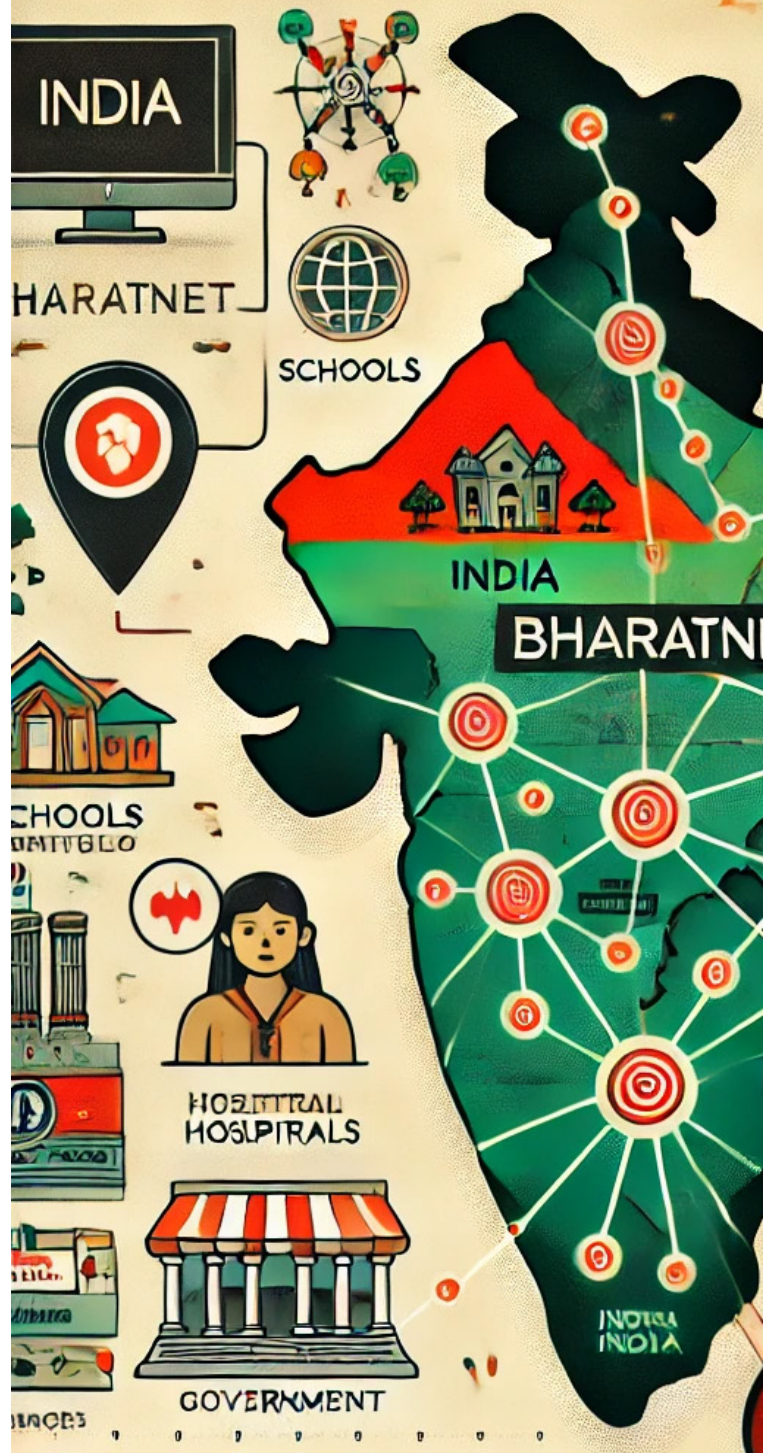
BharatNet's primary source of funding is the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF), now known as the Digital Bharat Nidhi. Despite accumulating a corpus of ₹171,588.7 crore, only about half had been spent by August 2023. This underutilization is attributed to the inability of states to efficiently absorb and execute the funds. Outsourcing to public sector units like BSNL and frequent project scope changes have further delayed progress.

Deepak Maheshwari, a Senior Policy Advisor at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), noted that the real challenge lies in the state's limited capacity to execute such a large-scale project. Issues like limited power supply in rural areas, right-of-way disputes, and contractor inefficiencies have further compounded the problem.

### Challenges in Critical Sectors: Education, Healthcare, and Governance

The delays in BharatNet's rollout have significantly impacted critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and e-governance. As per government data, only 24% of government schools had internet access by 2024. This lack of connectivity left rural students particularly disadvantaged during the Covid-19 pandemic when education shifted online.

In the healthcare sector, unreliable internet access has slowed the implementation of digital health initiatives like telemedicine and electronic medical records under the Ayushman Bharat scheme. In states like Haryana, health workers still rely on both paper-based and digital records due to inconsistent internet availability, leading to increased workloads and delays in delivering healthcare services.



E-governance has also suffered. Many marginalized communities struggle to access essential services due to inadequate Aadhaar centers and poor infrastructure. For example, in many tribal areas, non-institutional births make it difficult to obtain Aadhaar enrollment, which is required for accessing public services. The Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) also faces challenges as workers lose wages due to poor connectivity for





national average of 79%.

The lack of a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism has further delayed the project. Although BharatNet mentions third-party assessments, there are no publicly available audit reports to verify the project's effectiveness or track its progress.

### The Way Forward: What Needs to Change

For BharatNet to succeed, several key issues need to be addressed. First, better coordination between state governments, public sector units, and private contractors is essential. Second, more focus should be placed on ensuring last-mile connectivity, which is crucial for delivering internet access directly to homes in rural areas. This will require partnerships with village-level entrepreneurs and a public-private partnership (PPP) model that incentivizes local engagement.

Improved planning and execution mechanisms are critical. Instead of annual budget allocations, a more stable three-to-five-year funding model could provide the necessary stability for long-term infrastructure projects. Moreover, greater attention should be given to raising awareness and improving digital literacy among rural populations. The success of BharatNet depends not just on providing internet access but also on ensuring that rural communities can utilize digital services effectively.

### Conclusion

The BharatNet project, despite its ambitious vision, has been plagued by delays, funding issues, and inadequate infrastructure. As a result, critical sectors like education, healthcare, and e-governance have been adversely affected, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. However, with better planning, funding stability, and increased focus on last-mile connectivity, BharatNet can still achieve its goal of bringing digital empowerment to India's villages. The project remains a work in progress, but with concerted efforts and strategic reforms, the dream of a digitally connected rural India can become a reality. ●

*This article, 'Why BharatNet Remains An Unfinished Dream,' was first published on the IndiaSpend Portal. We are republishing it with updates, with due credit.*

attendance recording.

### Regional Inequality and Accountability

One of BharatNet's biggest hurdles is regional inequality. While some regions are making progress, others, particularly the northeastern states, lag far behind. As of 2023, less than 60% of gram panchayats in the northeast were service-ready, compared to the



# THE STRATEGIC DANCE

## How India and the US Are Shaping the Future of Global Trade



Sandeep Kumar

**T**he partnership between India and the United States has emerged as a pivotal factor in the evolving global landscape, driven largely by the need to counterbalance China's growing influence. Despite bipartisan support for strengthening U.S.-India ties, a more nuanced understanding of India's stance on critical issues like digital trade, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and industrial

policy is essential. This article unpacks India's complex trade position and the implications of the U.S.-India relationship on the future of global commerce.

### The Rise of U.S.-India Relations

Successive U.S. administrations, from George W. Bush to Joe Biden, have recognized China as a strategic challenge to the U.S.-dominated global order. This





realization has encouraged the U.S. to forge alliances beyond traditional partners, with India taking on a central role in this strategy.

India's strategic importance gained significant momentum during the Trump administration, which succeeded in deepening defense ties. In just four years, India signed three key defense agreements with the U.S., marking a shift in its traditionally cautious approach. Biden has built on this foundation, emphasizing India's role in the Indo-Pacific and his "friendshoring" initiative—an effort to diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on China.

Despite this strengthening bond, there remains a knowledge gap in the U.S.'s understanding of India's economic interests and its views on the liberal international trade order. Bridging this gap is crucial for leveraging India's full potential as a counterbalance to China, particularly in global trade.

### Trade Tensions Underneath the Defense Cooperation

While defense ties have flourished, U.S.-India trade relations remain strained. U.S. administrations have often criticized India's protectionist economic policies, which impose tariffs on imports and focus on boosting domestic industries. India, on the other hand, argues that the U.S. has failed to acknowledge its developing country status, leading to friction over trade deficits and tariffs.

These tensions were exacerbated under Trump's

While defense ties have flourished, U.S.-India trade relations remain strained. U.S. administrations have often criticized India's protectionist economic policies, which impose tariffs on imports and focus on boosting domestic industries. India, on the other hand, argues that the U.S. has failed to acknowledge its developing country status, leading to friction over trade deficits and tariffs.

"America First" agenda, which clashed with India's own trade policies. However, resolving these complexities is essential for a balanced relationship. The U.S. needs to develop a deeper understanding of India's trade positions, especially in areas like digital commerce and industrial policy, to ensure cooperation rather than confrontation.

### Digital Trade: A Contradiction in Policy

One of the more contentious issues in U.S.-India trade relations is digital trade. India's tech sector has grown exponentially in recent years, becoming one of the largest technology hubs in the world. However, its policies surrounding digital commerce are at odds with global trends.

India's stance on digital trade is protectionist, emphasizing data localization—requiring companies to store data within national borders—and restricting cross-border data flows. These measures, while aimed at protecting national interests and privacy, often conflict with the needs of its own information and communications technology (ICT) sector, creating a

paradox. Interestingly, the Biden administration's own tilt toward protectionism in digital trade has created a strange alignment between the two nations on these issues, despite the contradictions within India's policy framework. The Trump administration's position on this issue remains unclear, but the evolving U.S.-India dialogue on digital commerce could serve as a litmus test for broader trade cooperation in the tech-dominated future.

### India's Role in the WTO: Leader or Obstructionist?

India has increasingly positioned itself as a leader of the Global South within the WTO, an organization critical to the rules governing international trade. The U.S., under the Trump administration, stepped back from the WTO, criticizing its inefficiencies and questioning its role in global trade. This withdrawal has opened the door for India to play a larger role in shaping the global trade agenda.

However, India's approach has been far from constructive. Rather than facilitating progress on key issues like agricultural negotiations and fisheries subsidies, India has often adopted an obstructionist stance, slowing down the WTO's agenda. This obstructionism is part of India's broader strategy to protect its domestic industries and agricultural sector, but it has had the unintended effect of alienating some of the Global South countries it aims to represent.

This paradox poses a challenge for both the U.S. and the WTO itself. India's desire for a leadership role within the organization is at odds with its actions, which often hinder global trade negotiations. For the U.S., engaging India more effectively at the WTO is key to balancing the trade interests of both countries while preserving the integrity of the global trade system.

### Industrial Policy: Protectionism with a Purpose

India has long relied on industrial policies that favor domestic industries, particularly manufacturing. These measures, which include subsidies and tariffs, are designed to protect Indian manufacturers from foreign competition and foster the growth of local industries. However, they often lead to trade disputes, particularly with countries like the U.S. that view such policies as unfair trade practices.

Yet, industrial policy is not unique to India. The U.S., the European Union, and even China have implemented similar measures to safeguard their domestic industries, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The global trend toward protectionism has, in a way, legitimized India's approach. However, India's policies are often more stringent and have yet to produce the desired boost in its manufacturing sector.

The challenge for India is balancing its industrial policies with the need to integrate more deeply into global supply chains. For the U.S., understanding and respecting India's need for industrial growth will be crucial for avoiding unnecessary trade conflicts.

### The Path Forward: A Nuanced Approach to Trade Cooperation

To forge a truly effective partnership with India, the U.S. must engage in a more nuanced dialogue on trade. It is not enough to view India solely through the lens of defense cooperation or as a counterweight to China. The U.S. needs to address India's concerns about digital trade, its role in the WTO, and its industrial policies in a way that acknowledges India's developmental needs and its aspirations for leadership on the global stage.

A deeper understanding of India's perspectives on trade is key to unlocking the full potential of the U.S.-India relationship. By addressing the underlying tensions and working toward shared goals, the two countries can move beyond defense cooperation and build a more balanced and sustainable economic partnership.

### Conclusion: Shaping the Future of Global Trade

The U.S.-India relationship is more than just a strategic dance against the backdrop of China's rise. It is a multifaceted partnership that, if handled with care and mutual understanding, can reshape the global trade order. By addressing India's unique challenges and perspectives on trade, the U.S. can pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable global economy. The future of international commerce depends on the ability of these two democracies to navigate the complexities of trade, technology, and industrial growth in a rapidly changing world. ●







William H. Janeway



Sanjay Srivastava

# AI

## Beyond Algorithms

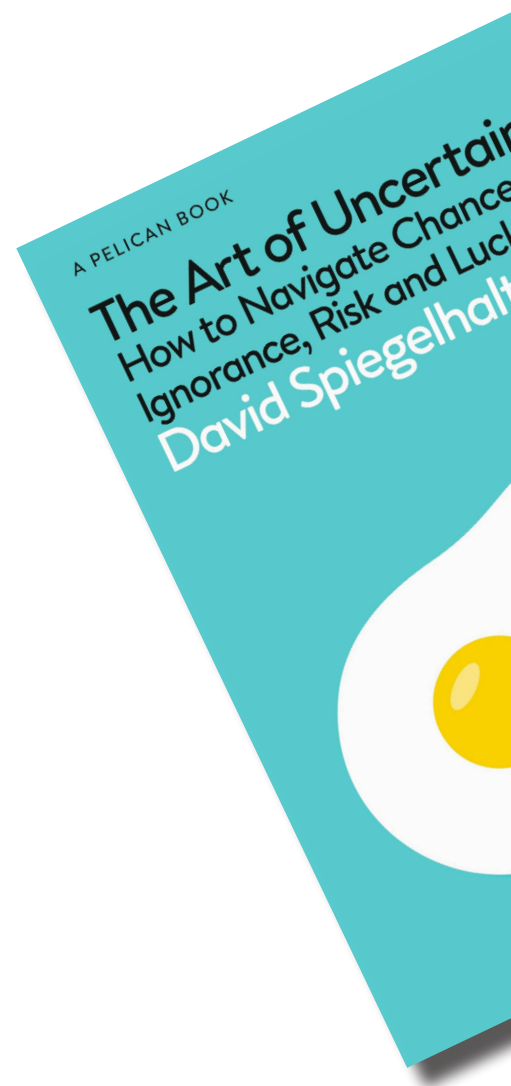




## Beyond Algorithms

THE FUTURE OF AI IS NOT JUST A MATTER OF SPEED AND SCALE, BUT OF ETHICS AND HUMANITY. AS WE MOVE TOWARD A WORLD WHERE AI IS EVERYWHERE, WE MUST ASK: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN IN A DIGITAL AGE?

*Uncertainty has always been an intrinsic part of human existence. No matter how advanced we become as a species, whether through our intellectual endeavors or the marvels of technology, the chaotic nature of life persists. The world, as much as we may wish to control it, often defies our attempts to bring order to it. While many today place their hopes in artificial intelligence (AI) to offer clarity in an increasingly complex world, two new books shed light on why this expectation may be misguided. Instead of hoping that AI will tame the chaos around us, they suggest that we might need to embrace the uncertainties that shape our lives.*



In their books, David Spiegelhalter and Neil D. Lawrence, both professors at the University of Cambridge, explore the fundamental nature of uncertainty and its persistent presence in our daily lives. Spiegelhalter, a renowned statistician, and Lawrence, a specialist in machine learning, draw on their diverse professional experiences to examine how humanity has historically sought to measure, manage, and cope with uncertainty. Their analyses provide a deep dive into how we perceive risk, how trust is built or eroded, and the role of AI in shaping the modern world.

### The Enduring Nature of Uncertainty

The English poet George Meredith encapsulated the frustration of





*Sir David John Spiegelhalter is a British statistician, Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, and former Winton Professor for Public Understanding of Risk. He chairs the Winton Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication. His recent book, *The Art of Uncertainty*, has garnered significant attention. He is also a non-executive director of the UK Statistics Authority, with a term extended to 2026.*

uncertainty more than 150 years ago when he wrote, "What a dusty answer gets the soul when hot for certainties in this our life!" This sentiment is at the heart of both Spiegelhalter and Lawrence's work. The two authors recognize that uncertainty is not just a byproduct of human ignorance or lack of control, but rather a fundamental aspect of existence. Despite our advances in science and technology, uncertainty remains an unavoidable constant.

In his book, Spiegelhalter discusses the historical approaches humanity has taken to measure uncertainty. He explores how different statistical methods, such as frequentist approaches and Bayesian analysis, have been developed to provide a sense of predictability in an unpredictable world. Frequentist methods are useful when risks can be physically defined, such as the likelihood of a coin flip. Bayesian analysis, on the other hand, incorporates subjective risk estimates and is often more adaptable to real-world scenarios, where uncertainty is less tangible.

Neil D. Lawrence brings a different perspective to the discussion, blending his background in machine learning and engineering to explore how uncertainty shapes technological progress. Before his academic career, Lawrence worked as a well-logging engineer on a North Sea drilling platform, where he witnessed firsthand how unpredictable events could disrupt even the most well-planned operations. His experiences in both the corporate and academic worlds give him a unique lens through which to analyze how modern systems, including AI, attempt to grapple with uncertainty.

### Trust in the Age of Uncertainty

A central theme that unites both Spiegelhalter and Lawrence's works is the idea of trust. In a world full of uncertainties, trust becomes a critical currency. Without trust, societies cannot function smoothly. Whether it's trust in governments, institutions, or individuals, this intangible but essential element holds societies together.







*Neil David Lawrence, DeepMind Professor of Machine Learning at the University of Cambridge, also serves as a senior AI fellow at the Alan Turing Institute and visiting professor at the University of Sheffield. His recent book, *The Atomic Human*, has sparked widespread discussion.*

Spiegelhalter draws on the work of philosopher Onora O'Neill, particularly her concept of "intelligent transparency." According to O'Neill, for policymakers to foster trust in the face of uncertainty, they must be transparent in a meaningful way. This means not just sharing information but presenting it in a way that allows the public to understand and engage with it. Spiegelhalter argues that this kind of transparency is essential for building trust, especially in an era where misinformation can spread rapidly.

Lawrence also touches on the importance of trust, particularly in the context of AI. Since the rise of generative AI models like ChatGPT, there has been much debate about whether these systems can be trusted. These models process vast amounts of human-generated data and produce responses that often appear thoughtful and accurate. But Lawrence questions whether this trust is warranted. He invokes O'Neill's argument that trust is not intrinsic to systems, but rather must be earned by the people who operate them. If AI models are divorced from human oversight, how can they be trusted to make decisions that affect our lives?

## The Rise of Generative AI

The launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 marked a turning point in public discourse around AI. Generative models like ChatGPT have become a focal point for debates about the future of technology and its role in society. These models generate text and visual responses based on massive amounts of data, leading many to believe that AI could bring order to the chaos of modern life.

However, both Spiegelhalter and Lawrence caution against placing too much faith in these systems. AI models, they argue, are tools created by humans, and like any tool, they have limitations. They are designed to produce plausible-sounding responses, but they do not have a true understanding of the world. This distinction is critical because it means that AI cannot offer the kind of certainty that many hope it will. If anything, relying too heavily on AI could lead to greater uncertainty, as these models are not infallible and are prone to producing misleading or incorrect outputs.

## Laplace's Demon and the Limits of Predictability

At the core of both books is a discussion of the famous thought experiment known as “Laplace’s demon.” In 1814, French philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace imagined a demon with perfect knowledge of the universe’s present state, including all forces of nature and the positions of every atom. With this knowledge, the demon could predict the future with absolute certainty, rendering the concept of chance obsolete.

Laplace’s demon represents a deterministic view of the universe, where everything follows a predictable path. However, both Spiegelhalter and Lawrence argue that our world is far from deterministic. Despite our best efforts to understand and control our environment, uncertainty persists. Lawrence refers to this reality as “Laplace’s gremlin,” a nod to the fact that unpredictability remains a defining feature of human life. No matter how sophisticated our tools become, there will always be factors beyond our control—whether it’s blind chance, luck, or ignorance—that shape the course of events.

### Embracing Uncertainty

Ultimately, both authors come to a similar conclusion: uncertainty is here to stay. While we can develop better tools to manage risk and navigate complexity, we cannot eliminate uncertainty entirely. This realization forces us to reconsider our relationship with uncertainty. Rather than trying to banish it, we must learn to live with it. Trust, transparency, and human oversight will remain crucial as we move forward into an increasingly unpredictable world.

In a time when many are looking to technology to bring clarity and control, Spiegelhalter and Lawrence offer a sobering reminder that uncertainty is not something we can ever fully escape. It is an inherent part of the human condition, and learning to navigate it—rather than conquer it—may be the key to thriving in the 21st century.

### Taming Uncertainty: Navigating the Unpredictable with Spiegelhalter's Insights

Uncertainty, an intrinsic aspect of human existence, has captivated scholars, scientists, and philosophers for centuries. It is not simply an abstract concept



but a real, tangible force that impacts our daily lives and decisions. In “The Art of Uncertainty,” David Spiegelhalter explores humanity’s ongoing struggle to understand, manage, and make sense of the unpredictable world around us. Through the lens of probability theory, he presents an engaging analysis of how we grapple with uncertainty, highlighting its profound effects on our perceptions, choices, and models of reality. Spiegelhalter’s work sheds light on how probabilities are intertwined with both randomness and our own ignorance, offering readers a deeper understanding of the complex forces that shape our futures.

### Personalizing Probability and the Nature of Uncertainty

One of Spiegelhalter’s core arguments is that probability is not an external, objective force that exists independently of human observation. Instead, it is highly personal and shaped by our experiences, knowledge, and biases. This perspective challenges the traditional view that probabilities are purely mathematical constructs waiting to be discovered. Rather, they represent our relationship with uncertainty, reflecting the degree to which we are conscious of our own ignorance.

To illustrate this point, Spiegelhalter introduces a





***One of Spiegelhalter's core arguments is that probability is not an external, objective force that exists independently of human observation.***

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useful abstraction that simplifies the world, but it can never capture all of its complexities. This insight is crucial when dealing with human behavior, which is often difficult to predict with accuracy.

For example, game theory has added rigor to our understanding of strategic decision-making, particularly in situations where individuals must respond not only to others' actions but also to their expectations of those actions. Yet, as financier George Soros demonstrated, reflexive behavior—where individuals' actions are influenced by their expectations of others' actions—creates a recursive loop that pushes the boundaries of our predictive capacity. This feedback loop adds an additional layer of complexity, making it even harder to model and predict human decisions.

Spiegelhalter reminds us that all models, no matter how sophisticated, are inherently limited. They are approximations of reality, not reality itself. This acknowledgment of the imperfection of models is a central theme in his work, highlighting the need for flexibility, skepticism, and continuous reassessment when dealing with uncertainty.

## **The Power of Bayesian Analysis**

One of the most powerful tools in probability theory, according to Spiegelhalter, is Bayes' Theorem. Formulated by the English minister Thomas Bayes in the 18th century, this theorem revolutionized the way we think about probabilities. At its core, Bayes' Theorem allows us to update our beliefs in light of new evidence. It relates the prior probability (our initial assessment of the likelihood of an outcome) to the posterior probability (the updated likelihood after considering new evidence).

Spiegelhalter demonstrates the practical applications of Bayes' Theorem through thought-provoking examples. For instance, why might

classic example: the simple act of flipping a coin. In this scenario, he explains that two types of uncertainty are at play. The first is aleatory uncertainty, which refers to the inherent randomness of an event like a coin toss. The second is epistemic uncertainty, which arises from a lack of knowledge about an event that has already occurred (such as whether the coin has landed on heads or tails). While we can model the probability of a coin landing on heads or tails (aleatory), we cannot know the outcome of a particular toss unless we directly observe it (epistemic).

Spiegelhalter uses this example as a gateway to understanding how we can use statistical analysis to reduce uncertainty in more complex scenarios. For instance, when rolling a six-sided die, we know that each side has an equal chance of landing face-up. This straightforward frequentist approach, based on past outcomes, allows us to narrow the range of possible future outcomes. However, the situation becomes significantly more challenging when the outcome cannot be clearly defined by physical constraints or when human behavior is involved.

## **The Limitations of Models and the Role of Game Theory**

Spiegelhalter emphasizes that while models can help us navigate uncertainty, they are not perfect representations of reality. A model, like a map, is a



more vaccinated individuals die of COVID-19 than unvaccinated individuals? At first glance, this might seem counterintuitive. But through Bayesian reasoning, we can account for the fact that, in a population where most people are vaccinated, there will be more vaccinated individuals overall, and hence, a greater absolute number of deaths in this group, even though the risk of death for vaccinated individuals is lower.

Another example involves police imaging software that flags potential threats. Using Bayesian analysis, we can assess the likelihood that a person flagged by the software is actually a threat, considering factors like the overall accuracy of the software and the prevalence of threats in the population.

These examples underscore a key point: probabilities are not always a function of physical properties, like those of a coin or a die. Often, they are shaped by subjective expectations and interpretations of evidence. Bayes' Theorem provides a framework for incorporating this subjectivity into our analysis,

allowing us to refine our understanding of uncertainty as new information becomes available.

## Cromwell's Rule: Embracing Uncertainty

Despite the power of probabilistic reasoning, Spiegelhalter acknowledges that our ability to tame uncertainty is inherently limited. He draws attention to Cromwell's Rule, which cautions against assigning probabilities of zero or one to any event unless it can be shown to be logically impossible or certain. Named after Oliver Cromwell's 1650 plea to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the rule serves as a reminder to remain open to the possibility of error and reassessment, especially in complex, real-world situations.

In practical terms, Cromwell's Rule warns us not to be overly confident in our predictions. Even when probabilities seem low, there is always a chance that the unexpected will occur. Spiegelhalter uses this rule to highlight the dangers of absolute certainty in an uncertain world. Outside the realm of formal logic, where outcomes can be clearly defined, there is always room for doubt, ambiguity, and surprise.

## Embracing the Uncertainty of Life

In "The Art of Uncertainty," David Spiegelhalter offers a compelling exploration of how we perceive, model, and navigate the unpredictability of life. By blending statistical analysis with philosophical insights, he invites readers to embrace uncertainty as an inescapable part of the human condition. Rather than seeking to eliminate uncertainty, we must learn to live with it, using tools like Bayesian analysis and game theory to make more informed decisions. At the same time, we must remain humble in the face of uncertainty, acknowledging the limitations of our models and our knowledge.

Ultimately, Spiegelhalter's work serves as a reminder that uncertainty is not something to be feared but understood. In a world where unpredictability is the norm, the art of uncertainty lies in our ability to adapt, reassess, and navigate the complexities of life with curiosity and openness.

## The Trusting Animal: Expanding the Concept of Human Intelligence in a World of AI



In his insightful exploration of human intelligence and artificial intelligence, Spiegelhalter's reflections in *The Art of Uncertainty* present a nuanced argument against radical uncertainty. While Frank Knight and John Maynard Keynes famously argued that there are circumstances where “we just don’t know,” Spiegelhalter offers a different perspective on this human relationship with unpredictability. He rejects the notion that we are entirely blind to the future, suggesting instead that uncertainty exists as something manageable, though not entirely controllable. By emphasizing a personal connection to uncertainty, Spiegelhalter reaffirms the limits of formal analysis but does not abandon it entirely. His argument is both philosophical and practical, revealing how humans approach the unknown and how subjective probabilities shape our understanding of events.

Spiegelhalter's “personal conclusion” illuminates the tension between analytical rigor and the need for adaptive thinking in the face of deeper, ontological uncertainty. This kind of uncertainty transcends the simple unknown and touches upon the inherent unpredictability of existence itself, which is governed by the laws of nature. The second law of thermodynamics, for instance, illustrates how order inevitably gives way to randomness in a closed system. Spiegelhalter accepts this entropy as a part of life and insists that rather than relying solely on formal models, humans must develop strategies that can adapt to both foreseeable and unforeseeable outcomes. In this way, uncertainty becomes not something to fear but a challenge that humanity has been dealing with throughout history.

This relationship between uncertainty and adaptability is central to Lawrence’s work in *The Atomic Human*, where he examines the human essence in the context of technological advancement, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). Lawrence draws a comparison between Spiegelhalter’s analysis of human intelligence and the adaptability required to thrive in an uncertain world. He introduces the

idea of the “atomic human,” a metaphorical concept highlighting human intelligence as something that emerges from our ability to adapt to unpredictable conditions. Lawrence’s analysis bridges the gap between AI and human cognition, raising a core question that permeates the history of technology: can machines ever truly replicate human intelligence?

## The Limits of Formal Analysis and the Power of Adaptability

One of the most compelling examples of this adaptability is seen in General Dwight Eisenhower’s decision-making process on the eve of D-Day during World War II. As the commander of Allied forces, Eisenhower had access to a vast amount of intelligence, including the critical decrypts of German ciphers cracked by Alan Turing and his team. However, even with all the available information, Eisenhower had to make a judgment call based on uncertainty. In making this decision, he embodied the “atomic human” by acknowledging the limits of formal analysis

and embracing the unknown with personal conviction. Eisenhower’s reflective act of writing a memorandum accepting full responsibility in the event of failure serves as a powerful testament to human intelligence’s capacity to navigate uncertainty through trust and decision-making, rather than cold calculation alone.

This episode resonates deeply with Lawrence’s broader thesis

about the role of intelligence in human history. He argues that human cognitive power evolved through natural selection to deal with the unpredictability inherent in the environment. Over time, humans developed the ability to communicate complex narratives, sharing knowledge and experiences to build trust and cooperation within societies. This capacity for communication and narrative construction is what sets humans apart from machines. It is an evolutionary trait that allows us to form “theories of mind,” meaning we are capable of modeling other people’s thoughts and intentions—something that artificial intelligence, at least in its current form, cannot replicate.

In 'The Art of Uncertainty,' David Spiegelhalter offers a compelling exploration of how we perceive, model, and navigate the unpredictability of life.

## AI and the Problem of Reflexive Intelligence

Lawrence contrasts this adaptability with the inherent limitations of artificial intelligence, particularly large language models (LLMs). Unlike human intelligence, which thrives on slow, deliberate communication and narrative-building, LLMs are fundamentally probabilistic prediction machines. They process vast amounts of data to generate outputs that mimic human language, but they lack true understanding or awareness of their own limitations. This creates what Lawrence refers to as “the great AI fallacy”—the erroneous belief that AI systems have achieved a form of intelligence that can rival human understanding.

The fallacy, as Lawrence explains, is rooted in a misunderstanding of what AI is actually doing. These systems do not engage in causal reasoning or reflect on the meaning of their outputs. Instead, they rely on statistical associations within the data they have been trained on, producing predictions that may seem accurate but lack the depth of human reasoning. Judea Pearl, a leading expert on causality, has highlighted this limitation by explaining that machine learning models excel at estimating probability distributions but fail to move beyond those estimates to understand cause-and-effect relationships. In other words, AI systems are excellent at pattern recognition but are far from achieving true intelligence as humans understand it.

### The Atomic Human and the Future of AI

In Lawrence’s view, the future of AI may involve hybrid systems that combine the strengths of both human and machine intelligence. He envisions a “human-analogue machine” (HAM) that could act as an extension of human cognitive abilities. Such a system would not replace human intelligence but would augment it, allowing people to navigate complex, uncertain environments more effectively. However, Lawrence is quick to caution against the temptation to view AI as a replacement for human intelligence. He argues that humanity’s unique strength lies in its vulnerabilities—our ability to second-guess ourselves, to build trust through communication, and to adapt to changing circumstances.

This caution is further emphasized in the context of technological history. As Lawrence traces the development of computing, from early cybernetic



systems to today’s neural networks and machine learning algorithms, he underscores the fact that each technological breakthrough has been driven by human ingenuity. Yet, despite these advances, the human essence remains irreplaceable. Machines may be powerful tools, but they are ultimately limited by their inability to adapt to the unknown in the way that humans can. As Spiegelhalter and Lawrence both acknowledge, uncertainty is an inescapable part of life, and our ability to cope with it depends on more than just formal analysis.

### Taming Uncertainty: A Broader Perspective

At the heart of both Spiegelhalter’s and Lawrence’s analyses is the recognition that uncertainty is not something that can be fully tamed. Instead, it must be embraced as a fundamental aspect of human existence. This perspective challenges the notion that AI will ever achieve true intelligence, as it cannot replicate the adaptability, trust, and self-awareness that define human cognition. While AI can process





# AI BEYOND ALGORITHMS

In this sense, the “atomic human” concept serves as a reminder of what makes human intelligence unique. It is not just our ability to calculate probabilities or analyze data that sets us apart from machines; it is our capacity for reflection, communication, and adaptability in the face of uncertainty.

vast amounts of data and make predictions based on that data, it lacks the ability to reflect on its own limitations or to build narratives that foster trust and cooperation.

In this sense, the “atomic human” concept serves as a reminder of what makes human intelligence unique. It is not just our ability to calculate probabilities or analyze data that sets us apart from machines; it is our capacity for reflection, communication, and adaptability in the face of uncertainty. As we continue to develop AI technologies, it is crucial that we remember these strengths and avoid falling into the trap of believing that machines can fully replace human intelligence.

## Embracing Uncertainty

Both Spiegelhalter’s *The Art of Uncertainty* and Lawrence’s *The Atomic Human* offer valuable insights into the nature of human intelligence and its relationship with uncertainty. While technological advancements in AI have created powerful tools for

analyzing data and making predictions, these systems are ultimately limited by their inability to replicate the unique qualities of human cognition. As we move forward in an increasingly uncertain world, it is essential to recognize that our greatest strength lies not in our ability to eliminate uncertainty, but in our capacity to adapt, communicate, and build trust in the face of the unknown.

### DATA OR DRIVEL? The Limits of Data, Uncertainty, and Human Decision-Making

In an era where data is often regarded as the ultimate tool for decision-making, there exists a growing tension between reliance on data and the inherent limitations of what data alone can achieve. Both Lawrence and Spiegelhalter celebrate the human capacity to process data in ways that allow us to make informed decisions. Yet, they acknowledge that data, devoid of context, is essentially meaningless. The crux of the matter lies in how we interpret and give meaning to data. In the absence of context and the inherent uncertainties of the world, data-driven decisions can falter, especially in unpredictable scenarios.

### AI and Bias in Criminal Justice

The increasing use of artificial intelligence in various sectors, particularly in the U.S. criminal justice system, offers a stark example of how data can mislead. AI systems are being used to recommend criminal sentences and evaluate parole applications. On the surface, this seems like a logical progression—using data to ensure fairness and consistency. However, these AI systems reflect the biases and prejudices embedded in the datasets they were trained on. As a result, rather than mitigating inequality, they can reinforce existing biases. For instance, data about previous sentencing trends in certain demographics can perpetuate unfair sentencing in the future, exacerbating social inequalities. Without a conscious effort to address these biases, data-driven AI systems risk being just as flawed as the human decision-makers they aim to replace.

The underlying issue is not merely technical but philosophical—can we trust the data we use? This question leads us to a deeper challenge: ontological uncertainty.

### The Problem of Ontological Uncertainty

Spiegelhalter introduces the concept of ontological uncertainty—the idea that we cannot always predict or even list all the possible future states of the world. This uncertainty is not merely statistical but fundamental to the nature of reality. Human intelligence has evolved over millions of years in response to a world filled with surprises, upheavals, and unpredictable changes. Yet, in today's data-driven society, we are increasingly relying on the assumption that the processes generating the data we observe will remain consistent over time. But what if they don't? Can we really trust data when the conditions that generated it may change unpredictably?

This concern is not new. Economist Paul Davidson, in his 2015 book *Post Keynesian Theory and Policy*, pointed out a critical flaw in mainstream economic thinking: the belief that past data can be used to make statistically sound forecasts about the future. Davidson questioned the assumption that economic systems are governed by stable, ergodic processes (i.e., processes that remain consistent over time). In reality, the economy is more like a chaotic system, where future outcomes cannot always be predicted based on past data.







To illustrate this, imagine a young financial analyst working in 1913 at a French bank. This analyst is tasked with forecasting Russian bond prices for the next five years. Given that France was a major source of capital for Czarist Russia, the analyst had access to plenty of historical data. The data might have reflected Russia's defeat in the 1905 war, a popular uprising, and gradual industrialization. But could this data have predicted the complete collapse of the Russian Empire by 1918? The Bolshevik Revolution led to the repudiation of all Czarist bonds, rendering them worthless. This example underscores how past data, no matter how rich or detailed, cannot always predict disruptive events.

### The Financial Crisis and the Illusion of Control

The 2008 global financial crisis serves as another example of how relying on past data can create a false sense of security. Before the crisis, economists and financial institutions believed that they had developed sophisticated models to manage risk. They assumed that uncertainty could be controlled through strategies like hedging and increasing capital reserves. However, when the housing bubble burst and the crisis unfolded, it became clear that these models were not prepared for the magnitude of the collapse. The assumption that financial markets behaved according to predictable patterns was shattered. In response, regulators introduced measures to address the failings exposed by the crisis, but these measures were backward-looking, designed to prevent a repeat of the 2008 crisis, not to foresee the next one.

As Spiegelhalter observes, "our imagination operates in tandem with the world around it and relies on that world to provide the consistency it needs." But the world does not remain consistent—it is constantly shaped by disruptions, regime changes, and revolutions. History, as Lawrence points out, is marked by unpredictability, and this unpredictability challenges the very foundation of data-driven decision-making.

### Risk, Uncertainty, and Ignorance: Zeckhauser's Model

Economist Richard Zeckhauser offers a framework for understanding different levels of knowledge about the state of the world, and how these correspond to different decision-making environments. Zeckhauser distinguishes between three domains: risk, uncertainty, and ignorance.



In situations of risk, both the possible outcomes and their probabilities are known. This is the domain where statistical models and data can be most effective. For example, an investor choosing between two stocks can use historical data to assess the likelihood of different returns.

In situations of uncertainty, the possible outcomes are known, but their probabilities are not. For example, an entrepreneur launching a new product might know that it could either succeed or fail but has no way of knowing the exact probabilities of each outcome.

Finally, ignorance refers to situations where even the possible outcomes are unknown. This is the most challenging domain because decision-makers must make choices without knowing all the potential risks. Ignorance often arises in scenarios involving





new technologies or unprecedented events. In these cases, decisions are based more on conjecture and deduction than on hard data.

Zeckhauser's model highlights a key limitation of data-driven decision-making. While data can help us navigate situations of risk, it is less useful in situations of uncertainty and ignorance. In these cases, we must rely on judgment, intuition, and imagination—qualities that AI systems, for all their power, still lack.

## The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Uncertainty

Spiegelhalter acknowledges that sometimes, "we cannot conceptualize all the possibilities" and "we may just have to admit we don't know." This admission is crucial because it recognizes that uncertainty is not just an external challenge but also a self-fulfilling one. In his famous "beauty contest" metaphor, John Maynard Keynes described how people's expectations

about the future are shaped by what they believe others will do. In such situations, uncertainty can create feedback loops, where everyone is trying to predict the behavior of everyone else, leading to herding behavior and market bubbles.

This dynamic is particularly evident in financial markets, where uncertainty about future prices can lead to speculative bubbles. Investors, unsure of the true value of an asset, may base their decisions on what they think others believe, rather than on objective data. As more investors pile into the market, prices rise, reinforcing the belief that the asset is valuable. But when the bubble bursts, the same feedback loop drives prices down, as everyone rushes to sell.

## Conclusion: The Limits of Data and the Need for Judgment

In the end, the message of Lawrence and Spiegelhalter is clear: data is a valuable tool, but it is not a panacea. The world is too complex, too uncertain, and too unpredictable to be fully captured by data alone. We must recognize the limits of our models and be humble in the face of uncertainty. In situations of risk, data can guide us. But in situations of uncertainty and ignorance, we must rely on human judgment, creativity, and adaptability.

This does not mean that we should abandon data-driven decision-making. On the contrary, data can provide valuable insights and help us navigate many of the challenges we face. But we must always be aware of its limitations and resist the temptation to over-rely on it. As Spiegelhalter reminds us, "sometimes we may just have to admit we don't know." In those moments, it is our human capacity for reflection, imagination, and collaboration that will guide us through the unknown. ●

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*This article draws on insights from William H. Janeway's piece, **In AI We Trust**, with additional input provided by senior journalist and editor Sanjay Srivastava to offer a broader understanding. With due respect, we are utilizing these insights as Janeway raises significant concerns about the potential impact of AI on human values. We share his concerns and aim to expand upon them further. William H. Janeway is a distinguished affiliated professor of economics at the University of Cambridge and the author of **Doing Capitalism in the Innovation Economy** (Cambridge University Press, 2018).*



# World's largest dam or Chinese trial balloon?

*Plans for a mega dam on the Tsangpo gave way to possibility of cascade of smaller dams years ago but there's no clarity on when - and if - these will be built*



Claude Arpi

**O**n December 25, 2024, China's Xinhua News Agency reported Beijing's approval for the construction of a hydropower project (HPP) in the lower reaches of River Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet. This is the river whose lower course is known as the Siang in Arunachal Pradesh and, after a confluence with two other major tributaries, as the Brahmaputra in Assam.

Since then, Indian and global media have produced hundreds of experts elaborating on the issue of a 'dam', though the Chinese report did not specify what type of hydropower plant (or plants) will be built or when construction will start.

It has generally been assumed that this will be a single dam, the largest in the world, which could produce three times more energy than the 22,500

MegaWatt Three Gorges Dam.

A study of the Chinese media over the years, however, indicates that the construction of a single mega dam was abandoned well before this announcement in favour of a more elaborate project: A series of smaller HPPs from Deyang, a remote location near Pai town in Nyingchi City, Southern Tibet, to an area close to the Indian border in Arunachal Pradesh.

For the mega project to materialise, many factors are involved.

First and foremost, it has to be a political decision, taking into account the reaction of neighbouring countries downstream, as well as the environmental and economic consequences for Tibet itself.

It is possible or even likely that Xinhua's press release



of December 25 was just a trial balloon to test India's reactions, including the official response from the Union Ministry of External Affairs. This would explain the vagueness of the communique.

In April 2004, The New York Times announced that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao "unexpectedly suspended plans for a massive dam system on the Nu (Salween) River in western China that scientists had warned could ruin one of the country's last unspoiled places."

The newspaper added: "Mr Wen's intervention signals that China's top leaders have not approved a plan that most dam opponents had considered a fait accompli. His personal involvement is a rare and surprising response in a non-democratic government that in the past has shown little concern about the environmental effect of major public works projects."

In a written instruction, Wen ordered officials to conduct a major review of many hydropower projects: "Environmentalists consider the Nu, which rises in Tibet and flows 1,750 miles through Yunnan Province between the Mekong and Yangtze, one of the last pristine rivers in Asia."

But in 2012, once Wen was no longer at the helm of the government, the projects were again back on the cards. Reuters noted: "The number of new hydropower projects in China could surge as the country's populist premier Wen Jiabao retires and a new leadership team races to meet ambitious 2020 energy goals," adding that "Dam building slowed considerably under Wen, who personally intervened to block hydropower projects and avoid the potential for protest from local populations. Projects such as the US\$59 billion Three Gorges Dam have been the focus of criticism over the social and environmental costs China is paying for development."

It is clear that a decision to build HPPs on the Yarlung Tsangpo will be taken at the highest level, and while the scientific lobby is usually not in favour of these unsustainable mega structures, the dam lobby (which is motivated by the potential financial gains from massive contracts), is pushing hard for Beijing to 'invest'.

Incidentally, when President Hu Jintao visited Delhi in 2006, he gave the Indian government the assurance that the 'dam' would not be built. Instead,

*The project has been in the pipeline for decades. Already in November 2020, Beijing had included the survey of the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25), for this purpose.*

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according to the joint communique: "The two sides will set up an expert-level mechanism to discuss interaction and cooperation on the provision of flood season hydrological data, emergency management, and other issues regarding trans-border rivers as agreed between them."

There are other factors to be taken into consideration, mainly technical issues.

Though it is true that the development of hydropower "has undergone several decades of in-depth research," as Mao Ning, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, put it, one can seriously doubt that the new development, if it happens, will have no implications for the areas downstream.

The project has been in the pipeline for decades. Already in November 2020, Beijing had included the survey of the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo in China's 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2021-25), for this purpose.

Four years ago, it was clear that the idea of a single dam had been abandoned in favour of a series of nine or 10 large run-of-the-river HPPs with minimum reservoirs.

An important factor is the opening in July 2021 of the Pai-Metok (Pai-Mo) Highway, linking Nyingchi to Metok, north of Upper Siang District in Arunachal Pradesh. After the completion of the highway, the length of the road from Nyingchi City to Metok County was shortened from 346 kilometres to 180 kilometres, and the driving time was reduced from 11 hours to 4.5 hours.





Technically, in strategic terms, a 67-kilometre highway and a tunnel under the Doshung-la mountain will be a game-changer. This could definitely help to pave the way for the hydroelectric power projects.

Another question is how to evacuate the electricity produced to the mainland.

An article from the People's Daily, dated January 26, partially answers the question. It informs us of a technological breakthrough: The commissioning of "one of China's 'power highways', the 800 kV ultra-high-voltage direct current (UHVDC) transmission project from the upper reaches of the Jinsha (Yangtze) River to central China's Hubei province, the highest UHVDC transmission project in the world."

The Communist newspaper explains: "With a total length of 1,901 kilometres, the transmission project passes through northwest China's Xizang (Tibet)

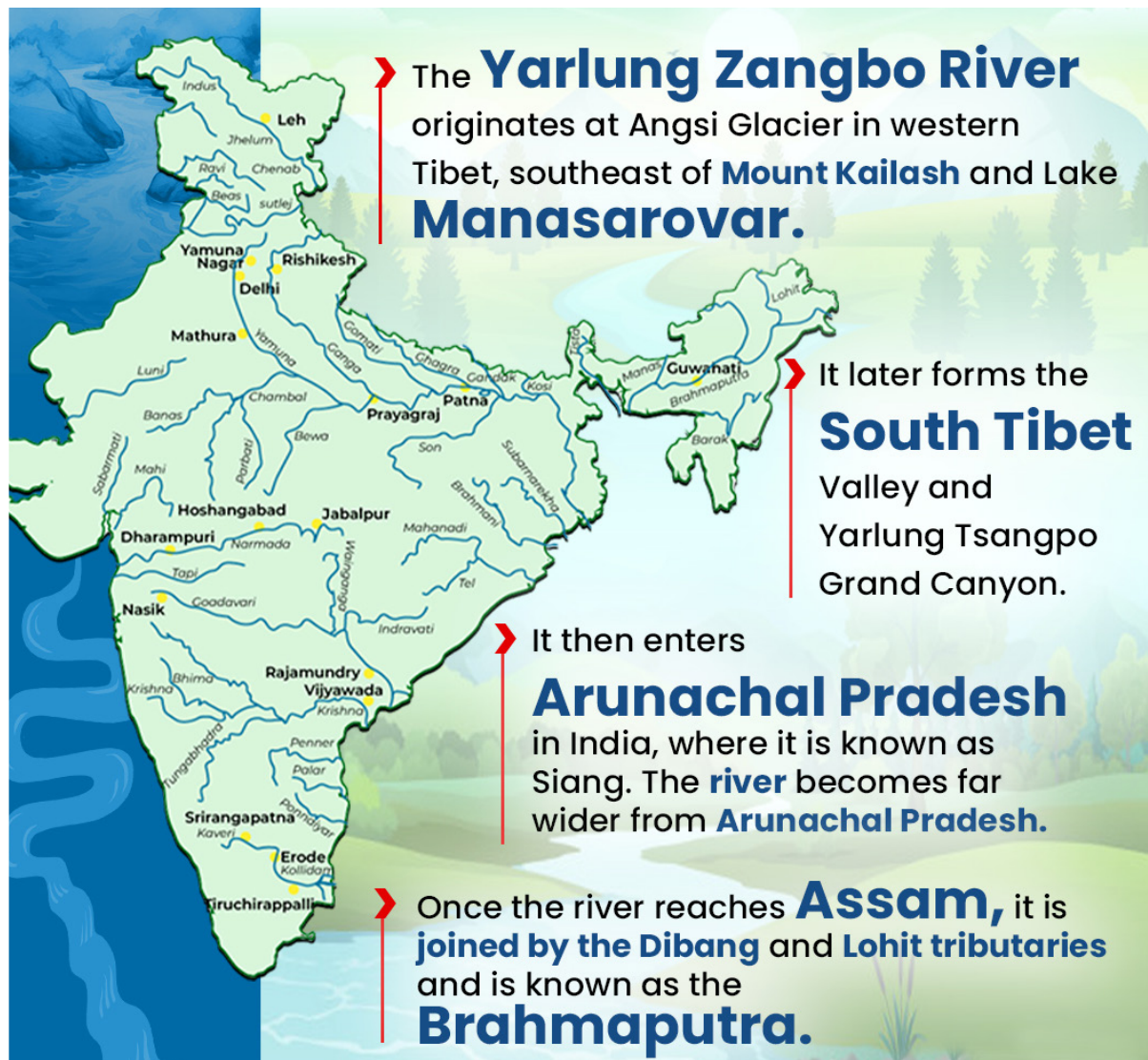
Autonomous Region, southwest China's Sichuan Province, southwest China's Chongqing Municipality, and Hubei."

Something that has been an issue for decades seems to have been solved on the Yangtze River. Similar technology could be used on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

The seismicity of the Great Bend of the Yarlung Tsangpo and the Himalayas in general has been one of the main objections to any mega or even large projects in the area. This is indeed a serious issue.

On August 15, 1950, the Assam-Tibet Earthquake, measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale, took place in what is today's Lohit and Anjaw districts of Arunachal Pradesh. The Dalai Lama, who was 15 at the time, noted in his memoirs: "It was like an artillery barrage — which is what we assumed to be the cause of both the tremors and the noise: a test of some sort being





carried out by the Tibetan army... Some people reported seeing a strange red glow in the skies in the direction from which the noise came..."

The 1950 quake happened not far from the Great Bend (and Upper Siang); it changed the course of the rivers in the area. Such an earthquake is a real danger even for a cascade of HPPs.

All these factors will have to be taken into consideration by Beijing before it undertakes such a

hazardous project.

Finally, does Beijing want a water war with India? This is another question that only the future can answer. ●

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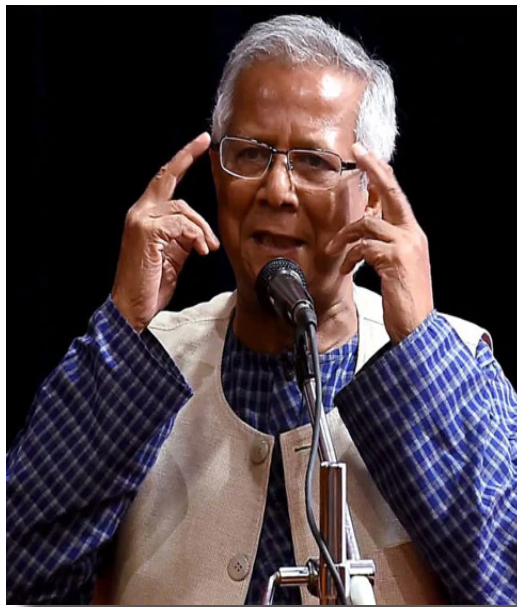
# RADICALIZED BANGLADESH A GRAVE THREAT

*This article presents an in-depth analysis of the current political instability in Bangladesh, examining the underlying causes, potential consequences, and implications for India.*



Santu Das





**B**angladesh, a nation forged in the crucible of a hard-fought independence war and marked by a complex political history, currently stands at a critical juncture. The country's political system, long defined by the duopolistic competition between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), faces a deep-seated crisis stemming from the convergence of various internal and external factors. This crisis, fueled by political polarization, economic challenges, the rising threat of radicalization, and the potential for external interference, not only jeopardizes Bangladesh's stability but also poses significant security implications for neighboring countries like India.

This article presents an in-depth analysis of the current political instability in Bangladesh, examining the underlying causes, potential consequences, and implications for India. The analysis focuses on key aspects such as the increasing radicalization within the country, the expansion of the Bangladesh Army, the economic crisis, and the growing threat of external intervention.

Bangladeshi politics has long been plagued by intense polarization between the two dominant

parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, represents the legacy of Bangladesh's independence struggle and emphasizes secular values and economic development. On the other hand, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, led by Khaleda Zia, promotes Bangladeshi nationalism and Islamic values, often opposing the policies of the Awami League.

This competition between the two parties has been a cause of political violence, corruption, and the politicization of institutions. In recent years, the potential emergence of a new political force in Bangladesh has been visible, with the name of Nobel laureate Mohammad Yunus prominently mentioned in support. It has been alleged that Yunus promised the previous US administration that he would form a new party that would be loyal to the US. However, this effort has not been successful so far, and critics believe that this is the result of unfamiliarity with the political realities of Bangladesh and excessive dependence on external support.

The influence of radical forces is rapidly increasing in Bangladesh, posing a serious threat to the country's

secular foundations. These elements maintain constant contact with the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI, and they are quietly procuring weapons. Rohingya refugees are also being used, further exacerbating the situation.

Violence has increased in areas such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which are prone to ethnic and religious tensions. There are concerns that the Bangladesh Army may also be working in concert with radical elements, further complicating the situation. The main objective of radical groups is to spread unrest on the border of Bangladesh and threaten India's security.

Bangladesh is also expanding its military capability at this time. The question arises as to why Bangladesh needs to increase military power? Given the current situation in Bangladesh, it does not seem that it is likely to be at war with Myanmar or any other country. Therefore, it can be assumed that Bangladesh fears potential action from India on its border. Due to this fear, Bangladesh has demanded things like drones, tanks and assault weapons.

Another possible reason for the expansion of the army may be to face internal security challenges. Due to the increasing influence of radical forces and political instability in Bangladesh, the government may feel the need to strengthen the army to maintain law and order.

The economic situation in Bangladesh has also deteriorated sharply. The global economic crisis, rising energy prices, and corruption have put severe pressure on the country's economy. Along with this, the government of Sheikh Hasina is also under pressure. Tensions are increasing between the Awami League and the BNP in the politics of Bangladesh. Yunus and his supporting student leaders are further increasing this tension.

Social discontent is increasing in Bangladesh due to economic crisis and political instability. People are disappointed with the government due to rising inflation, unemployment, and corruption. As a result, a situation of protests and movements is gradually

arising in Bangladesh. It is feared that the internal situation inside Bangladesh may worsen, which may lead to the situation going out of control there.

The situation in Bangladesh has become a matter of concern internationally. The US, China, Pakistan and other countries are showing signs of playing their respective roles in Bangladesh. Especially Pakistan's role becomes very important in this. Pakistan, which is infamous for promoting terrorism itself, is trying to adopt the same strategy in Bangladesh as well. This situation is very worrying for India, as increasing Pakistani influence in Bangladesh will have a direct impact on India's security.

China is also increasing its economic and political presence in Bangladesh. China is investing heavily in infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and selling weapons to the Bangladesh Army. The US claims to promote democratic values and human rights in Bangladesh, but some critics believe that the US's main objective is to reduce China's influence in Bangladesh.

India and Bangladesh share a long border, and any kind of instability in Bangladesh has a direct impact on India. Whenever there is a major crisis in Bangladesh, people start migrating towards India's border. Millions of Bangladeshi refugees have migrated to India before, and their number is now around 20 million. Due to this, India has to face social, economic, and security-related problems.

The establishment of a radical regime in Bangladesh may lead to a large influx of refugees into the northeastern states of India, which may affect the social and political stability there. In addition, the increasing influence of radical elements in Bangladesh may also increase the threat of terrorist activities in India.

It has become necessary for India to keep a close eye on the situation in Bangladesh. If the influence of radical elements increases further in Bangladesh, India will have to further increase the security of its border. That is why senior officials like Ajit Doval are

*The economic situation in Bangladesh has also deteriorated sharply. The global economic crisis, rising energy prices, and corruption have put severe pressure on the country's economy.*



visiting the Bangladesh border. The main objective of this visit is to assess the situation in Bangladesh and prepare the Indian security forces for potential threats.

It is also necessary for India not to interfere directly in the internal situation of Bangladesh, but to ensure its security. If the situation in Bangladesh goes out of control, India will have to keep a close watch on its borders. Along with this, it is also important for India to maintain strong diplomatic relations with Bangladesh.

It has been alleged that Mohammad Yunus and his supporters are trying to establish a system of governance like a new Taliban. In this effort, Yunus has released a radicalized mob and from jail and these radicals are being included in the proposed new party, whose aim is to demolish the democratic system of the country and establish a mobocracy (violent rule in the name of the public).

It is being said that Yunus wants to establish a system where he himself will rule like Iran's Supreme Leader Khomeini and under him there will be some special student protesters, who will work as ministers and prime ministers. Along with this, his supporters will form a radicalized mob, who will be ready to spread violence and chaos in the country. This whole plan points towards destroying the democratic system and ruling through power.

It is also alleged that attempts are being made to silence Yunus's opponents through violence, houses are being set on fire, and political leaders are being forced to flee the country. Critics believe that Yunus's plan is to create a 'New Afghanistan' and a 'New Taliban'. Like the Taliban, these people also want to end the democratic system and establish a radical governance system.

'Operation Devil Hunt' aims to target activists and supporters of the former Prime Minister's party in Bangladesh. Under this operation, the party's supporters are being suppressed violently and attempts are being made to eliminate them. Although

the Bangladesh government is trying to make the situation peaceful and is claiming that there is no serious problem in the country, the ground reality is quite the opposite.

The growing influence of religious fanaticism in Bangladesh can be seen in the demand to declare the Ahmadiyya community as 'non-Muslim', which, like the situation in Pakistan, is increasing communal tension in Bangladesh as well. Religious group 'Hifazat' has given an ultimatum to the government to accept its 13 demands, one important demand being to declare the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslim. This indicates that Bangladesh is gradually moving towards communalism and religious fanaticism, which can be a threat to its society.

The current situation in Bangladesh is very serious and can have deep impacts on India. The increasing influence of radical elements, Pakistani intervention, and economic crisis in Bangladesh have weakened the political stability there. India will have to remain vigilant to ensure the security of its borders and keep a close eye on this entire scenario.

It is clear that a serious crisis is being created in Bangladesh at present, in which radicalized

groups are trying to demolish the democratic system and promote communal fanaticism. In addition, this situation can also become a big threat for India, which can increase the threat of refugee crisis and instability on the borders.

India should make diplomatic efforts to promote democratic values and human rights in Bangladesh. Also, India should strengthen economic cooperation with Bangladesh so that the country's economy can be brought back on track. Finally, India should strengthen its border security so that the instability in Bangladesh does not have any negative impact on India. The situation in Bangladesh is complex and multidimensional, and India will have to adopt a balanced and strategic approach to contribute to the stability of Bangladesh while protecting its interests. ●

*The growing influence of religious fanaticism in Bangladesh can be seen in the demand to declare the Ahmadiyya community as 'non-Muslim', which, like the situation in Pakistan.*

# THE HIDDEN FAULTLINE

## UNRAVELLING THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

Maha Yahya

*Gaza, Syria, and the Region's Next Crisis*

Over the last 15 years, the Middle East has been racked by war, destruction, and displacement. Hundreds of thousands of people have died as fighting raged in Gaza, Lebanon, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Millions more have fled. The violence has rolled back gains in education, health, and income while laying waste to homes, schools, hospitals, roads, railways, and power grids. The war in Gaza has proved especially devastating, setting back the territory's socioeconomic indicators to 1955 levels. The World Bank and UN organizations have estimated that rebuilding the Middle East and providing enough





humanitarian aid will cost between \$350 and \$650 billion. The UN Development Program has estimated that at least \$40 to \$50 billion is needed to rebuild Gaza alone.

Offering these shattered societies humanitarian and monetary assistance is critical for the survival of millions, especially in the near term. It is thus deeply concerning that multiple Western governments, including Washington, are curtailing foreign aid and humanitarian assistance. But ultimately, the main obstacle to the Arab world's reconstruction will not be the lack of funds. It will be political disputes and grievances. The region is filled with failing states. It features competing powers that work to leverage this chaos to their geopolitical advantage. Together, these problems make permanent peace impossible.

The region's most powerful actors know this. Iran, Israel, the United States, and the Arab Gulf countries

have all spent decades trying to shape the region to their liking without addressing the root causes of conflict, and they have repeatedly failed. They have sought security over peace and ended up with neither. And yet their current plans are strikingly similar, at least in spirit, to past efforts. All these countries are committing again to visions of a new regional order in which reconstruction takes place without political settlements. They have put forth lofty proposals—Israeli-Saudi normalization, an economic pact between Iran and the Gulf states—without considering political realities, local dynamics, or other, broader consequences. As a result, their plans will not put an end to cyclical violence. If anything, they will fuel it.

To achieve stability, the war-torn Middle East must shift course. Its powers must stop papering over regional and local divisions and instead do the hard work of addressing





them. They need to help fractured societies come together. They must create accountable political institutions and promote systems of transitional justice. They need to support a reconstruction that is part of a broader peace-building agenda. They must create a political framework that actually recognizes the right of Palestinians to self-determination. And they need to figure out how to resolve, or at least

on Washington to dedicate itself to rebuilding the continent. Following the advice of U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, Congress began passing massive aid packages for Europe's peoples and communities, spending \$13.3 billion (over \$170 billion in today's dollars) on the region. But this money came with conditions. Recipients had to remove most barriers to trade with other European



better manage, their own differences. Otherwise, it doesn't matter how much the world spends on reconstruction. The region will remain broken.

In 1945, Europe lay in ruins. Tens of millions of people had been killed in six years of war. Millions more had been driven from their homes. Many of the continent's most prosperous cities had been demolished by bombs or shattered by artillery. Regional currencies had collapsed, reducing people to begging and bartering.

In response, the Truman administration called

states. They had to adopt policies that increased their exports to the United States and made them take in more American goods. The goal was not merely to reconstruct Europe's homes, roads, and bridges. It was to bring the continent into the emerging U.S.-led liberal order.

The strategy worked. The recipients of Marshall Plan funds joined the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization, committing to collective defense. They enmeshed their economies, paving the way for the European Union. Thanks to these decisions, Europe not only economically recovered from the



destruction of World War II but, after centuries of fighting, became one of the world's most peaceful and prosperous regions.

The scale of devastation across the Middle East today resembles that of Europe in 1945. The death tolls are staggering, if not quite as high. Entire economies have been wiped out. National currencies have lost most of their value: the Yemeni rial has lost 80 percent of its value since 2014. The damage is most visible in Gaza, where, as of late January, the official death toll is over 47,000—likely an underestimate—and where Israeli bombardment reduced around 70 percent of its buildings to rubble in a little over a year. (The UN has projected that it will take more than a decade just to remove the wreckage.) But other countries have suffered similar losses. The 14-year Syrian civil war displaced 12 million people and killed over 600,000; over 90 percent of the country's residents now live below the international poverty line. In Yemen, more than half the population is now impoverished. Nearly 20 million people there need direct humanitarian assistance. Economic mismanagement and predatory practices have further contributed to economic decline, especially in Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon.

The Middle East needs a Marshall Plan. But unlike in post-World War II Europe, no country is stepping up. There is no single champion for the region, and there is no consensus on how to bring the area out of its quagmire. On the contrary, the Middle East is plagued by disunity and rivalry. The only thing the various American, Iranian, Israeli, Turkish, and Gulf proposals have in common is that they neglect fundamental challenges.

Consider, first, the American approach. Washington believes the foundations of a better Middle East involve weakening Iran, the United States' primary regional rival, and normalizing relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia in the hope of unlocking new investments. Washington does want to contribute to the rebuilding of Gaza, although it believes the funds should largely come from Arab countries. But the American plan calls for reconstruction to take place without any horizon for a political solution for the Palestinians. Today, Washington's imaginary Gaza is either a space ethnically cleansed

of Palestinians or an ungoverned political vacuum that would somehow remain stable.

The Israelis share this fantasy. But some of them want to be even more belligerent when it comes to Tehran and the Palestinians. Israelis are broadly supportive of the war in Gaza, and even after the January cease-fire, many want to return to bombing. The bellicosity of Israeli leaders has been boosted by their success in weakening Iran and Hezbollah—the Lebanese militia Tehran backs. Israel wants to reconstruct Gaza only after Palestinians have been, in the words of former Israeli security officials Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, “deradicalized” and have demonstrated they are capable of “effective governance.” Some Israeli officials don't want to reconstruct it at all.

The Israeli vision is ethically wrong: the Palestinians have an unequivocal right to self-determination. It is also unworkable. Try as they might, Israel and the United States cannot bring about peace by sidestepping the Palestinians. In fact, attempting to do so is what got them here. During Donald Trump's first term as president, the United States coaxed Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) into normalizing relations with Israel as part of the Abraham Accords, creating what Trump hoped would be an Israeli-led security, trade, and investment compact. Israel, meanwhile, ramped up settlement construction, increased repression, and expanded its authority over the Palestinian territories. In response, Hamas launched its horrific October 7, 2023, attack. “All the normalization and recognition processes, all the agreements that have been signed [with Israel], can never put an end to this battle,” said the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, in explaining the assault.

The attack sparked a furious Israeli response, which halted progress toward an Israeli-Saudi agreement and prompted Iran and its nonstate partners to jump into the fray. Israel had prevented this “axis of resistance” from causing substantial damage, and the Israel Defense Forces weakened Iran itself. But the Islamic Republic has responded with a peace proposal designed to undermine its nemesis, offering to join with its Arab neighbors in

a nonaggression and economic pact aimed, in part, at isolating Israel.

It is true that many in the Arab world view the Islamic Republic as a regional force they need to engage with. And following the Israeli bombing campaigns in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, the region's people now see Israel as the Middle East's most radical and destructive actor. But this does not make Iran's vision any more realistic. It papers over Iran's disruptive behavior across the region, including its sponsoring of violent nonstate actors and the resulting lawlessness and state failure. Iran's scheme does recognize the right to Palestinian self-determination. But Arab countries want an end to regional anarchy, not just an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Then there is a vision put forward by the Arab Gulf states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—through the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is perhaps the most aspirational. The council's proposals involve the Gulf countries deepening their own economic integration, establishing joint defense mechanisms, and then somehow resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a now practically impossible two-state solution. The proposal, like the Iranian one, at least acknowledges that an end to that conflict is the key to achieving regional security. But it lays out no plausible mechanism for reaching a deal. The Gulf state plan also says very little about the other conflicts in the region or how to address them.

At best, these various visions will accomplish little. At worst, they will generate even more conflict, as did the Abraham Accords. By focusing so much on security, they have turned peace into a matter of economic development and force. The Middle East's powers seem to think that war-torn peoples will be satisfied with new construction—no need for justice, accountability, or good leadership. If people are not satisfied, they can be dealt with through violence: Israel, for example, can arrest and kill Palestinians who demand equal rights. Such assumptions are both dangerous and wrong.

## CHAOS REIGNS



At the heart of the region's troubles are questions of governance. Many countries have fractured or collapsed, with competing centers of power often dominated by particular ethnic or political groups. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in Syria, where years of war have weakened relations between the country's center and its periphery and given rise to a variety of local rulers. Some places are controlled by Kurds. The places where Assad maintained the highest levels of backing were those populated by his community of Alawites. The south is controlled by the so-called Southern Operations Room, a coalition of rebel factions that emerged in 2011 and tend to be less Islamist than other groups. The organization that ultimately drove Assad from power, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), is composed of Sunni former jihadists that include non-Syrian combatants. They claim that they will not discriminate against other groups. But since





they took Damascus, the country has seen an uptick in revenge killings and mob violence targeting Alawites. Without an inclusive political process, Syria will remain riven by all kinds of divisions.

International involvement has hardened, and will continue to harden, such rifts. The Middle East's main powers perpetually compete for more regional influence, so when wars occur, those powers often back different groups. In Syria, for instance, Turkey supports HTS and other factions in the north. The United States is helping the Kurds. Jordan and the United Arab Emirates have considerable sway over Syria's Southern Operations Room. Israel is trying to bolster its ties with Syria's Druze community and has used the power vacuum to occupy some 155 square miles of Syrian land.

For now, Syria's factions are keeping the peace. Indeed, in a January 29 meeting, key groups involved

in the overthrow of Assad came together to appoint the HTS leader Ahmad al-Shara as the country's new president. But although Ahmed al-Awda, the leading figure in the Southern Operations Room, sent a representative to this meeting, Awda did not attend. The Kurd and Druze factions boycotted it altogether. With their shared enemy gone, Syrian militias could turn on each other. If they do, Syria's future might look like Somalia's present, with different factions controlling various patches of territory. Or it might look like nearby Libya. Syria and Libya are very different countries, but Libya, too, experienced an Arab Spring revolution that pitted multiple armed groups against a long time dictator. These groups succeeded in toppling Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011. But once Qaddafi was gone, they began fighting each other for dominance with the support of external actors, including Turkey, the UAE, and a number of European states. Today, rival authorities in eastern and western parts of the country are each backed by different patrons.

### **Reconstruction cannot fix broken institutions.**

After more than ten years of civil war, Yemen, much like Libya, is politically divided between two main rival authorities: the Houthis in the north and the Presidential Leadership Council. (The Houthis control a third of the country's area and two-thirds of the population.) Here, too, competition between outsiders has furthered conflict. Iran supports the Houthis. Saudi Arabia hosts the Presidential Leadership Council. But the Presidential Leadership Council is itself factious, and external competition leads to contention within it. The UAE, for instance, backs a group that, although part of the council, wants the southern part of Yemen to secede. Emirati-Saudi tensions over the oil-rich Yemeni province of Hadramawt have created further schisms, with Saudi Arabia generally controlling the province's interior and the UAE dominating the coast. Proxies affiliated with both powers have clashed, and the conflict between them could turn more violent in the months ahead. This chaos has, in turn, enabled al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other terrorist groups to expand their operations in Yemen's east and south.



Foreign meddling in the Middle East's conflicts is clearly bad for peace. But there is a silver lining to all the external involvement. Because the warring parties rely on international patrons, outside actors can push for resolutions. As a result, rapprochement between regional powers—such as the 2023 normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia—might help tamp down conflict.

But to be effective mediators, regional actors must more thoroughly settle their own differences. The escalating rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over which of them will be the Middle East's main Arab political and economic hub is one point of tension, especially when it comes to conflicts in Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Qatar and Turkey's support for Islamist actors is creating problems with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. And although the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement has softened sectarian divisions, it has not curtailed Iran's support for repressive nonstate actors. As a result, it can do

little to promote regional tranquility.

Even if these countries could fully sort out their rivalries, they could not ensure peace. They would still need to get local powers to implement settlements that rebuild states, ensure the safe return of displaced peoples, and mend torn social fabrics. And there is no guarantee that these actors, hardened by years of war, would comply. The issue of transitional justice, in particular, will be tricky. After fighting, some degree of forgiveness is required for societies to heal. Yet there cannot be broad amnesty, particularly for those responsible for human rights atrocities. At the end of its civil war, Lebanon opted to issue a blanket pardon for all atrocities committed during the 15-year conflict. Doing so, leaders thought, would quickly secure peace and allow the country to rebuild. They also hoped to protect themselves from prosecution. Instead, Lebanon has experienced periodic civil unrest as grievances from the war continue to fester, sometimes at the behest





of the conflict's old leaders. To avoid the same fate, Syria's new leaders will have to hold key Assad officials accountable for the horrors committed over 54 years of autocratic rule. Failing to do so will only further encourage individual acts of vengeance—which will, in turn, make it hard to secure a durable, peaceful resolution.

### NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE

In the Middle East, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ending conflicts or rebuilding what was lost. The wars plaguing the region share many characteristics, but because they have been going on for years, they have developed their own dynamics. In Lebanon, for

example, the challenge is not just rebuilding what was destroyed by the conflict with Israel. It is also about rebuilding a broken political system, trying to get Hezbollah to finally disarm, and strengthening weakened national institutions. Syria, totally ravaged by war, needs an entirely new political settlement. But Syria must not recentralize power, as it did during the Assad era. Whatever resolution emerges has to be supported across the country. It needs to account for local dynamics that materialized during the conflict.

For Gaza, the challenges are even more profound. There may be historical precedent for the scale and scope of the territory's destruction. Yet unlike other places reduced to ruin, Gaza is not a country. It does not control its borders. It is under siege, cut off from external markets. It lacks all kinds of basic resources, including water, food, and land for agricultural or industrial production. Under such conditions, it

cannot be made habitable, let alone economically viable. And there is no clear plan for who will take the lead in rebuilding and then governing it. In the near term, Gaza may need to be administered by a transitional authority established by the UN Security Council: a mechanism that was used to help rebuild parts of the Balkans and Cambodia in the 1990s, when local governance capacity was destroyed. Eventually, it will need to be governed by Palestinians who command democratic support. But right now, no short- or long-term solutions are on offer.

Without political settlements, even doling out reconstruction funds will be difficult. In fact, the provision of assistance could create tension. Domestic and regional actors often manipulate aid deliveries, creating a skewed economy that leaves some people embittered and others emboldened. Political groups could also use aid to empower themselves at the expense of governments.

None of these challenges mean that humanitarian aid groups shouldn't flood the Middle East's many shattered places—particularly Gaza—with support. The region has millions of people who are homeless. It has millions more who are starving or require medical care. They need whatever help they can get, and they need it fast.

There is certainly a new Middle East in the making. Yet without a political solution, reconstruction will do little over the long term. It cannot fix the power imbalances, ethnic tensions, or broken institutions that cause ongoing bloodshed. It will not get foreign powers to work together, instead of at cross-purposes. It may help people literally rebuild their homes, stores, and schools. But until there's a durable peace, those buildings might just come crashing back down when conflict inevitably returns. ●

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*This article, *The Fatal Flaw of the New Middle East*, was first published in *Foreign Affairs*. We are republishing it with updates, with due credit.*



# THE PUPPET STRINGS

## America's Grip on Europe



Timofey Bordachev

***The recent Munich Security Conference highlighted the ongoing transatlantic tensions between Europe and the U.S. European leaders, despite public displays of anxiety over potential American disengagement, secretly rely on U.S. power more than fearing Russian aggression. While some EU states push for military independence, they remain bound by American influence, fearing the consequences of challenging Washington.***





The recent Munich Security Conference laid bare a simmering tension, a transatlantic rift that has sparked a flurry of commentary and speculation. Yet, beneath the surface of impassioned speeches and editorial pronouncements, a more profound reality persists: European leaders harbor a deeper apprehension of American power than they do of any perceived Russian threat.

The narrative of a potential American abandonment of Europe, so frequently invoked by European politicians, serves as a convenient smokescreen, a theatrical performance designed to mask their enduring reliance on Washington. Europe's strategic significance stems not from its inherent strength, but rather from its position at the epicenter of the US-Russia geopolitical contest. The enduring presence of American nuclear weapons, the thousands of US troops stationed across the continent, and the continued relevance of NATO all underscore a fundamental truth: the United States has no intention of relinquishing its hold on its European allies.

The behavior of European leaders mirrors the classic American folk tale of Brother Rabbit, who, when cornered by Brother Fox, implores, "Do anything,

but don't throw me into the thorn bush!" knowing full well that the thorn bush is his safest refuge. Similarly, European leaders engage in a public display of anxiety over potential American disengagement, while secretly acknowledging that Washington will never truly abandon them.

This calculated performance, a strategy built on fear, is evident across Western Europe. From Berlin to Paris, Rome to Madrid, leaders publicly decry the risks of American disengagement. However, their genuine fear lies not in Russian aggression, but in the possibility that Washington might actually heed their complaints and grant them the autonomy they ostensibly seek.

The reality is that major EU states, including Germany, France, and Italy, have no desire for a military confrontation with Russia. Their citizens exhibit no appetite for such a conflict, and unlike the tumultuous periods of the early 20th century, there is no widespread public mobilization for war. Even Poland, despite its hawkish rhetoric, understands that its electorate is averse to prolonged military entanglements. The deployment of a few thousand mercenaries to Ukraine does not alter this



fundamental truth.

The exceptions to this pragmatic approach are the smaller, more vocal anti-Russian states, such as the Baltic republics, the Czech Republic, and certain Scandinavian nations. However, should Germany and France decide to pursue genuine diplomacy with Moscow, the concerns of these minor players would be rendered inconsequential. The historical precedent of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, constructed despite deteriorating Russia-EU relations due to Berlin's economic interests, demonstrates this dynamic.

The greatest fear among staunch Atlanticists in Europe, particularly in the Baltic states and Kiev, is not Russia, but the potential for a separate Franco-German rapprochement with Moscow. Such a scenario would diminish their strategic importance, a prospect that instills greater terror than any perceived Russian threat.

Western Europe's capacity for independent action remains constrained by American influence. The United States maintains its dominance through military presence, economic penetration, and intelligence operations in key European countries. Germany and Italy, remnants of World War II defeat, continue to operate under a form of American oversight. This enduring reality ensures Europe's continued geopolitical captivity.

Rather than signaling a strategic retreat, representatives of a prior administration have openly mocked EU leaders for their dependence. Yet, these same European politicians persist in adhering to the American line, repeating well worn arguments about the need to counter a perceived threat, and the imperative to defend various regions. They do this, because they genuinely have fear for actions of the U.S.

For nearly eight decades, a stark reality





*The EU's compliance with Washington-led sanctions against Russia, while economically detrimental to European industries, demonstrates this dynamic. European leaders, fearing American reprisal, offered minimal resistance.*

has shaped Western European political behavior: challenging Washington's authority carries significant consequences. Historical precedent underscores this lesson. The vehement opposition of Germany and France to the 2003 Iraq War was met with swift and severe American backlash, a vivid reminder etched in the minds of European leaders. Any perceived threat to American dominance is met with punitive action.

This pattern has repeated itself in recent years. The EU's compliance with Washington-led sanctions against Russia, while economically detrimental to European industries, demonstrates this dynamic. European leaders, fearing American reprisal, offered minimal resistance.

Beyond fear, Western Europe's paralysis stems from a dearth of visionary political leadership. The current European elite, comprised largely of career bureaucrats, lacks the strategic foresight of their predecessors. The era of statesmen like De Gaulle, Adenauer, or Mitterrand has given way to administrators prioritizing

personal advancement, often within American corporate or institutional spheres.

This trend is particularly pronounced in smaller states like Finland and the Baltic republics, where politicians actively court Washington's favor. These nations act as internal disruptors within the EU, hindering any substantive efforts by Germany or France to normalize relations with Moscow.

In a scenario devoid of American influence, Germany and France would likely pursue a more pragmatic course: establishing a working relationship with Russia, addressing Polish regional ambitions, and prioritizing economic cooperation over ideological conflicts. However, the enduring American control renders this prospect distant.

Despite decades of anti-Russian rhetoric, a genuine fear of Russia

is largely absent among EU policymakers. Western European elites possess a deep understanding of Russia's strengths and weaknesses, and they trust in Moscow's pragmatic diplomatic approach. Their primary apprehension lies not with the Kremlin, but with the unpredictable and coercive power of Washington.

Currently, there is no discernible movement toward severing ties with American influence. The concept of a sovereign Western European strategic doctrine remains largely theoretical. While the "America First" policy continues to strain transatlantic relations, the fundamental structures of American control over Europe remain firmly entrenched. ●

*This article was first published in 'Vzglyad' newspaper with the title 'EU leaders fear the US more than Russia'; Author Timofey Bordachev is Programme Director of the Valdai Club and was translated and edited by Cult Current Desk.*

# TRUMP URGES INDIA TO BUY U.S. GAS

## Is Russia a Better Option?

*As New Delhi seeks to diversify its LNG supply, both Moscow and Washington are courting the country to secure major deals*

Manish Vaid



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Washington marked a significant development in India's energy sector, as India and the U.S. reaffirmed their resolve to deepen energy cooperation. The U.S. has positioned itself as a key supplier of crude oil, petroleum products, and liquefied natural gas (LNG) to India, underscoring the strength of the India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.

In 2016, Modi unveiled his vision for a gas-based economy to reduce pollution, diversify energy sources, and secure long-term energy stability. As of 2025, India is navigating a complex global energy landscape. The U.S. is ramping up its natural gas exports under President Donald Trump's leadership, while Russia, an established supplier of oil to India, continues to face U.S.-led sanctions that complicate the energy trade.

India's energy strategy includes increasing the share of natural gas in its energy mix from the current 6.2% to 15% by 2030. This ambitious target is driven by the need to reduce carbon emissions and diversify primary energy sources. According to the International Energy Agency, India's natural gas consumption is expected to rise by nearly 60%, reaching 103 billion cubic meters (bcm) annually by 2030.

Currently, India imports around 50% of its gas demand through LNG, which presents a vulnerability in its energy security. Projections suggest India's LNG imports

will double by 2030 to 65 bcm, making it the world's fourth-largest LNG importer. This heavy reliance on LNG imports exposes India to price fluctuations, supply disruptions, and geopolitical risks.

Modi's visit to the U.S. could open new avenues for India to secure long-term LNG contracts, strengthen technology collaborations, and attract investments in oil and gas infrastructure. The evolving energy partnership between the U.S. and India not only enhances India's energy security but also aligns with its goal of transitioning toward a gas-based economy while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Meanwhile, Russia continues to pitch LNG to India despite facing Western pressure. Russian officials have promoted LNG from the Arctic LNG 2 project, though Indian companies remain cautious due to the geopolitical risks linked to U.S. sanctions. Discussions between Indian and Russian firms are ongoing, with India exploring all available options to secure competitive LNG deals.

As India navigates the complexities of global energy markets, both the U.S. and Russia present compelling, yet challenging, LNG supply options. U.S. LNG offers stability but comes at a premium. For example, shipping LNG from the U.S. Gulf Coast to India incurs freight costs of approximately \$1.61 per million British thermal units (MMBtu) as of early 2024. Moreover, U.S. LNG contracts often feature rigid terms, limiting India's flexibility in





responding to market fluctuations.

On the other hand, Russian LNG is geographically closer and more cost-effective. However, geopolitical uncertainties, including sanctions related to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, complicate financial transactions and logistical operations. As Europe reduces its dependence on Russian energy, India may have an opportunity to negotiate lower prices from Russia, but risks remain high.

Over-reliance on either U.S. or Russian LNG poses risks. U.S. LNG could be affected by policy changes, while Russian LNG faces ongoing sanction-related uncertainties. To mitigate these risks, India aims to diversify its LNG suppliers by incorporating sources from the Middle East, Australia, and Africa, thereby building a more resilient energy portfolio.

Following Modi's discussions with Trump on oil and gas supplies, India is keen to secure competitive LNG pricing in long-term contracts. For India's gas-fired power plants to remain economically viable, LNG prices need to range between \$8 and \$10 per MMBtu—much lower than North Asia's spot LNG prices, which are currently around \$16 per MMBtu.

In a bid to secure more affordable LNG, GAIL India is exploring the acquisition of a stake in a U.S. LNG plant. This move aligns with the recent U.S. decision to lift restrictions on LNG export facility approvals, enabling India to lock in long-term contracts at competitive rates. Additionally, India is investing in domestic gas

infrastructure and technology to boost energy capacity.

Despite sanctions, India is also exploring alternative financial mechanisms to sustain energy cooperation with Russia. These mechanisms include trading using national currencies, a strategy that has been historically successful between India and Russia. Recent talks indicate a renewed interest in bypassing U.S. dollar-based transactions to continue energy imports from Russia.

The Trump administration, however, may tighten sanctions on Russian energy exports, which would complicate India's LNG procurement strategy. If U.S. policies intensify, India will need to proactively diversify its energy sources and refine its payment strategies to ensure stable imports.

India's energy cooperation with Russia extends beyond LNG to oil, coal, and nuclear energy. Russian companies are involved in India's oil and gas exploration, and talks continue on expanding LNG shipments. At the same time, India is strengthening ties with Middle Eastern LNG producers and exploring new suppliers in Africa and Australia. By adopting a multi-pronged approach, India is reducing its dependence on any single energy supplier, ensuring long-term energy security and economic competitiveness. ●

*Manish Vaid is junior fellow, Observer Research Foundation, with research interests in strategic energy insights and green transitions, This article has been further updated with additional content by the Cult Current desk, and we are republishing it with due credit*

# PM MODI'S USA VISIT

## On the Trajectory of A MEGA Partnership for Prosperity



Ashok Sajjanhar

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Washington DC at the invitation of US President Donald Trump on 12-13 February, 2025. The visit took place within four weeks of the assumption of Office by President Trump in his Second Term. The first few months after the Inauguration of a US President are normally reserved for visits by USA's close, strategic allies from Europe, NATO and others. The fact that PM Modi was invited to be one of the first few Heads of State/Government to visit Washington DC (he was preceded by the Israeli and Japanese PMs and the King of Jordan) is testimony to the fact that both countries and their leaders attach huge importance to the India-US ties.

India-US relations have been in a sweet spot since the last twenty-five years from the visit of US President Bill Clinton to India in March, 2000. There has been a bipartisan consensus in both countries regarding stronger ties between the two nations.

There was considerable anxiety in most countries at the election of Donald Trump in early November, 2024 as the 47th President of the United States. The reason is because Trump is known to be unpredictable as well as transactional. In his First Term, Trump was seen to be unsure primarily because his election in 2016 came as a

shock, not only to the world but also to himself.

Obstacles Trump faced in his First Term are not present today. He won decisively in garnering a majority of the Electoral College votes. He also swept all the seven swing states and registered a convincing win in the popular votes too.

All this imbued Trump with greater confidence to carry through his Agenda to "Make America Great Again". He has installed his loyalists to all significant positions in his Cabinet.

Under these circumstances, the world watched Trump's ascent to authority on 20th January, 2025 with dismay. India however felt more reassured because of the underlying structural factors binding the two countries and the warm relations between PM Modi and President Trump.

This sentiment was evident in conversations between Modi and Trump after the latter's election and







inauguration, especially on 27th January, 2025. Referring to his friendly conversation, PM Modi in his message on X stated that the two countries “are committed to a mutually beneficial and trusted partnership. We will work together for the welfare of our people and towards global peace, prosperity, and security.” This was also the message that EAM Dr S Jaishankar gave while addressing a Press Conference in Washington DC on 22nd January. Jaishankar said that his interactions with the incoming Trump Administration had led him to believe that there was “an agreement, a consensus.... that we need to be bolder, we need to be bigger, we need to be more ambitious.”

It is however pertinent to state that 2025 is not 2017. The world has changed and so also has Trump. Trump in his second tenure is more confident, self-assured, unencumbered and impulsive than he was eight years ago.

### Preparing for the Visit

PM Modi’s visit took place under the shadow of several comments by Trump during his election campaign and even after his election, characterising India as the “Tariff King/Tariff Abuser.” He also threatened to impose reciprocal tariffs on countries who imposed higher custom duties than the US imposed on them. India had

faced such an onslaught during Trump's first term also. India took some pre-emptive measures by reducing import duties on several items of export interest to the US like high capacity motorbikes, super luxury automobiles, EV batteries, bourbon whiskey etc. in its budget on February 1, 2025.

The other unsettling factor just before PM Modi embarked on his visit was the unseemly sight of more than 100 Indian illegal migrants transported back to India in a US military aircraft for over 40 hours chained in shackles and handcuffs and without adequate supply of water and food. This infuriated the Indian public as well as the Opposition political class at the humiliation meted out to them.

Preparations for the meeting between PM Modi and President Trump were hit by a third whammy when it was revealed that Trump would be making the announcement to impose reciprocal tariffs just a few hours before the meeting between the two leaders.

PM Modi took the formidable challenges in his stride and delivered an outcome that compelled the CNN to comment that the meeting between Modi and Trump was "a masterclass for other leaders around the world."

Relations between India and the US are consequential for India, not only on account of the bilateral partnership in trade, technology, defence and security, but also on account of the geo-political threats from the aggressive rise of China. Similarly, the bilateral relationship is critical for the US considering India's potency as a major trade, technology and defence as also a geo-political partner to counter the growing challenge from China.

### The Outcomes:

#### Some major takeaways were as follows:

**Trade and Tariffs:** It was decided to finalise the first tranche of a comprehensive Bilateral Trade Deal by September/October 2025. This effectively removed the threat of immediate imposition of some penalty tariffs on Indian exports. It was agreed to increase the bilateral trade from the current level of US\$190 billion to US\$500 billion by 2030.

**Defence:** It was decided to extend the Framework Defence Agreement by another ten years till 2035. It was agreed to import "Javelin" Anti-Tank Guided Missiles, "Stryker" Infantry Combat Vehicles and six additional



P-8I Maritime Patrol aircraft to enhance India's defense capabilities. It was also agreed to co-design and co-produce the sophisticated defence equipment in India. Trump offered the 5th generation stealth fighter F-35 but a final decision will have to be taken by India based on a host of criteria after detailed examination.

**Energy:** India already imports oil and LNG from USA worth US\$15 billion per annum. This is likely to go up to US\$ 25 billion. This will help India meet its energy needs and also to reduce its trade surplus with the US which currently stands at US\$46 billion. The two sides will explore possibilities of cooperation in civil nuclear sector including Advanced and Small Modular Reactors. India proposed amendments to its civil nuclear law in the recent Budget.

**Extradition of 26/11 accused Tahawwur Rana:** Trump announced the extradition of Tahawwur Rana to India, stating that he "will face justice." This is a huge political and diplomatic victory for India although it is uncertain if Rana would be able to provide any real time information of value, as he has been behind bars for the last 15 years.

**The MEGA Partnership for Prosperity:** Speaking at the press conference with Trump, Modi noted that while America's motto is "MAGA," India's aspiration of "Viksit Bharat 2047" translates to "Make India Great Again (MIGA)". A combination of MAGA and MIGA will result in a "MEGA Partnership for Prosperity" of the two





navigation, overflight and other lawful uses of the seas; and advocacy for peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law. Holding of first meeting of Quad foreign ministers a day after Trump's inauguration is testimony that the Quad will continue to strengthen in coming years. Pressure on China against its aggressive policies in South and East China Seas and elsewhere is likely to continue unabated. Notwithstanding the initial conflicting signals on China by Trump, China can be expected to remain the principal "strategic competitor" for the US.

**Counter-terrorism:** In addition to the extradition of Tahawwur Rana, the two sides agreed to push back against cross-border terrorism that India faces from Pakistan and act against activities of JeM, LeT, ISIS, Al Qaida to prevent heinous acts like the attacks in Mumbai on 26/11 and the Abbey Gate bombing in Afghanistan on August 26, 2021.

**Conclusion:** As explained above, PM Modi's visit to the US took place under difficult and highly volatile circumstances. It was essential to re-establish confidence between the two sides so that relations develop strongly during Trump's current term. PM Modi was successful in achieving a positive outcome.

Convergence on bilateral, regional and global issues is much greater than divergences on some aspects. India demonstrated its commitment to have intense negotiations on trade, tariffs, immigration, defence procurement and other matters to arrive at mutually beneficial win-win solutions.

India-US relations are poised to advance rapidly in the foreseeable future, and be a force for bilateral and global peace, security and prosperity. The visit by PM Modi helped to skilfully navigate the bilateral ties to touch fresh heights of cooperation and partnership in the coming years. ●

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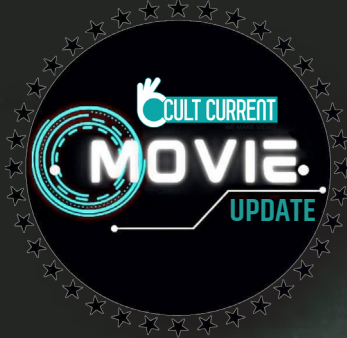
*Ashok Sajjanhar was the Ambassador of India to Kazakhstan, Sweden and Latvia, and has worked in diplomatic positions in Washington DC, Brussels, Moscow, Geneva, Tehran, Dhaka and Bangkok. He has worked as the head of National Foundation for Communal Harmony, Government of India. He is currently the President of Institute of Global Studies in New Delhi and Executive Council Member, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.*

countries.

**U.S.-India COMPACT** (Catalysing Opportunities for Military Partnership, Accelerated Commerce & Technology) for the 21st Century: Trump and Modi launched COMPACT to drive transformative change across key pillars of cooperation. Under this initiative, they committed to a results-driven agenda with initial outcomes this year.

**U.S.-India TRUST** ("Transforming the Relationship Utilizing Strategic Technology") Initiative: This will catalyse government-to-government, academia and private sector collaboration to promote application of critical and emerging technologies in areas like defence, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum, biotechnology, energy and space. This is continuation of the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology launched during Biden Administration. A U.S.-India Roadmap on Accelerating AI Infrastructure will be produced by the end of the year. India and the United States will accelerate collaboration in research and development and promote investment across the entire critical mineral value chain, as well as through the Mineral Security Partnership.

**Indo-Pacific and the Quad:** Modi and Trump reaffirmed that a close bilateral partnership is central to a free, open, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific. As Quad partners, the leaders reiterated their commitment to international law and good governance; freedom of



## Govinda & Sunita's Marriage in **Trouble?** Manager Blames 'Too Much Talk'!

**B**ollywood's beloved star Govinda and his wife Sunita Ahuja have been hit with divorce rumors, leaving fans shocked! After 37 years of marriage, whispers of trouble in paradise started when reports suggested a split. But what's really going on?

When asked about the buzz, Govinda brushed it off, saying, "These are just business talks. Legal proceedings? Not involved as of now." He urged fans to wait for a few days before jumping to conclusions. However, his manager Shashi Sinha spilled some tea, pointing fingers at Sunita. "She said too much in interviews... This is the result," he revealed, admitting

there's some friction between the couple. Govinda's nephew, Vinay Anand, also weighed in but played it safe. "I don't think anything like this is happening," he stated, hinting that the situation may not be as serious as it seems. Meanwhile, Govinda's manager confirmed that family members' comments had caused tension. But here's the twist—Govinda is busy launching a new film, and the drama might just be a storm in a teacup!

So, is this a temporary rift or a major split? Only time will tell! ●



# Shreya Ghoshal Cringes at 'Chikni Chameli'! Says It's 'Embarrassing' for Little Girls

**Q**ueen of melodies, Shreya Ghoshal, just dropped a truth bomb about her hit song Chikni Chameli! While the 2012 chartbuster featuring Katrina Kaif set dance floors on fire, Shreya now admits she's embarrassed by it.

In a candid interview, the singer confessed, "There's a fine line between sexy and objectification. Seeing little girls sing this song makes me uncomfortable." She recalled moments when young fans, barely 5 or 6, proudly performed Chikni Chameli for her. "They don't even know what it means! It doesn't feel right," she admitted. Shreya didn't stop there—she also called out Bollywood's male-dominated songwriting, saying, "If a woman had written it, the lyrics would have been more graceful." She stressed that while feeling sexy isn't wrong, the messaging needs to change. ●



## Alia's Fiery Clapback

# Ranbir Kapoor is a 'Green Flag', Haters Stay Pressed!

**A**lia Bhatt and Ranbir Kapoor are one of Bollywood's favourite celebrity couples. But then there are times when fans have labelled Ranbir Kapoor as a "toxic" man. Now, Alia Bhatt has reacted to the alleged claims. The actress recently reacted to a fan post that lauded Ranbir Kapoor for his dedication towards his family. The fan mentioned how Ranbir was so thoughtful to include his wife and daughter's initials in his lifestyle brand, ARKS. The post read, "Funny how jealous people always call him a red flag, womaniser, mumma's boy etc. But Ranbir Kapoor literally included his wife and daughter's initials in his brand's name. If this is a red flag then I guess it's better than every so-called green flag on the internet." Alia showed her support by liking the post. This isn't the first time Alia Bhatt has supported her husband, actor Ranbir Kapoor. On Koffee With Karan Season 8, the actress addressed the chatter about Ranbir's so-called toxic influence on her life. ●



# Back to basics

## Are paper textbooks the way forward?

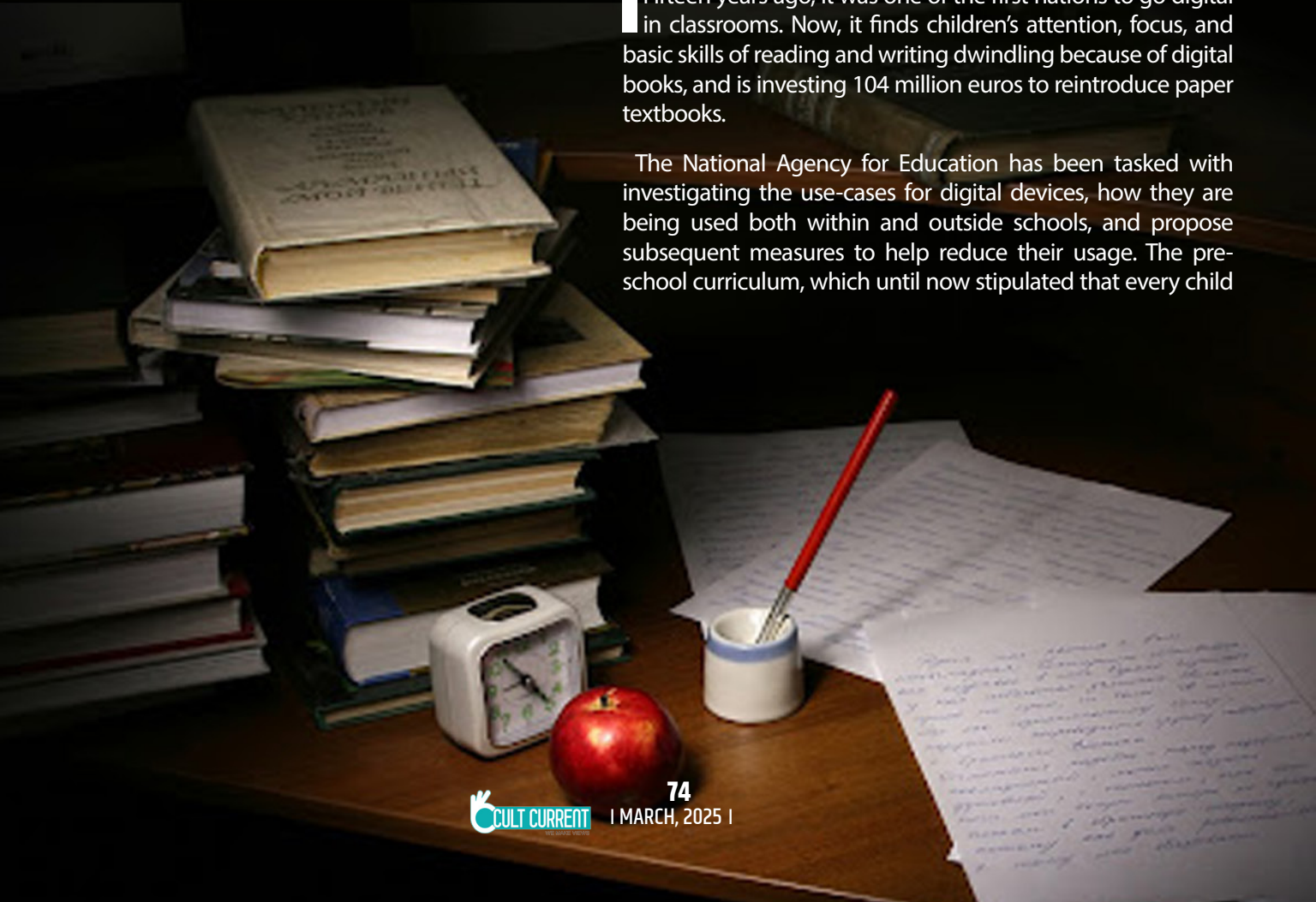


Arpan Tulsyan

In a surprising move, Sweden is shifting from digital textbooks back to traditional paper books after 15 years of digital-first education. This decision stems from concerns over declining attention, focus, and basic reading and writing skills in students.

In an interesting turn of events, Sweden has decided to move away from digital textbooks and bring back paper books. Fifteen years ago, it was one of the first nations to go digital in classrooms. Now, it finds children's attention, focus, and basic skills of reading and writing dwindling because of digital books, and is investing 104 million euros to reintroduce paper textbooks.

The National Agency for Education has been tasked with investigating the use-cases for digital devices, how they are being used both within and outside schools, and propose subsequent measures to help reduce their usage. The pre-school curriculum, which until now stipulated that every child





should have access to digital tools, has been revised to 'selective' use of digital learning aids based on clear scientific value and recognised educational support.

The trend is also visible across some Finnish schools, where digital-centric learning is being dropped to enhance focus and reduce distractions and screen time among younger children. Similarly, educational authorities in Australia have expressed concerns over declining reading abilities among students, attributing this, at least in part, to increased exposure to screens. Experts are now encouraging reading from printed books and writing by hand as measures to combat these perils.

The Heritage School in Cambridge, United Kingdom, regarded as the only 'screen-free school' in the country, does not use laptops, mobile phones, internet, or interactive whiteboards for teaching and has recorded top results. It credits its superior academic outcomes to book-based learning, handwriting, and memorisation of poetry, nature walks, and greater emphasis on fine arts. The school considers its tech-free educational method to be 'innovative', and an article by Sunday Times highlights it as "a pioneer of the type of education many parents are desperately seeking for their children."

Studies have documented a mutually reinforcing relationship between reading skills and recreational reading among children. Large-scale international surveys with children (10-11-year-olds; Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and teenagers (15-year-olds; Programme for International Student Assessment) have found a significant drop in the number of children who report that they enjoy reading for pleasure—an indicator that reflects a decline in reading skills. Further, while the reading of physical books—with their long, linear texts—is on a decline, short, decontextualised snippets of multimedia content, such as social media, is increasing. This signals a need to reassess the role of e-textbooks in supporting effective learning within school education.

#### Cognitive focus and comprehension

Studies have shown that the physicality of a paper book offers whole, tangible experiences, such as holding the book, feeling the paper, and even turning the pages. This results in a deeper cognitive engagement, allowing readers to process information more thoroughly. E-books,

which are ordinarily embedded with hyperlinks, have a scrolling format, and include multimedia features, are often engaging. However, they result in a loss of focus and comprehension due to digital distractions, particularly among younger readers. Online reading also impacts the behaviour and preferences of readers, negatively affecting their motivation to engage in slower, more contemplative, and effortful reading.

A comprehensive meta-analysis of 54 studies on comparative efficacy between paper versus screen reading, published between the years 2000 and 2017, confirms the inferiority of screen over paper reading. The results remained consistent despite differences in the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the reviewed articles and did not vary by factors like age group, educational level, text length, and type of comprehension assessed. The advantages of paper-based reading were particularly pronounced in time-constrained situations and in the context of informational (conceptual) texts.

#### Sensory engagement and interactivity

A review of 39 other studies highlights that the multimedia features of digital books, such as music and sound effects, animated pictures, and embedded dictionary, strengthen student engagement and motivation. However, the educational effectiveness of these features largely depends on their design and to what extent they are relevant. E-textbooks can also be adapted to different learning styles, making personalised learning in a diverse classroom easier to implement.

The review concluded that only if e-books are well designed and implemented, with adult mediation, can they possibly outweigh the advantages of paper. However, if paper and digital books are mostly similar, with few add-ons like voiceovers or popups in e-books, then printed books lead to better outcomes. Moreover, even though digital texts, with their interactive features, are better at engaging students, they often create only superficial engagement. This is because the attention span of students becomes fragmented due to multitasking reading, as opposed to a more distraction-free, focused, and absorbed reading of traditional texts.

#### Health considerations

Health-related studies on screen use in children have primarily focused on internet and social media addiction. Only a few could clearly delineate the potential health problems related to digital textbook usage. One such study found more than negligible physical and psychological health impediments in research students who have been using e-textbooks for at least a year. Physical concerns included visual (eye strain, drowsiness), musculoskeletal (pain in neck, wrist, or back), and dermatological (dry skin and eyes) issues. Psychological effects included increased stress, nervousness, anxiety, or frustration due to reduced interaction with educators, and technical errors or difficulties in navigating e-books. These resulted in a decreased ability to concentrate, something the students struggled to cope with by themselves. Given this, physical books—devoid of screen glare and backlighting, with a better scope for human interaction and simpler handling—offered a more relaxed reading experience for young bodies and minds.

### Policy implications

While e-books certainly offer some benefits, including enhanced accessibility, more avenues for engagement, and a less resource-intensive framework, abandoning

**The National Agency for Education is investigating digital device usage in schools and suggesting measures to reduce it. Finland and Australia are also rethinking digital learning to improve focus and reduce screen time. Studies show that paper books enhance comprehension and cognitive engagement, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to education.**

printed textbooks too quickly, without full empirical scrutiny of its long-term impacts, could be a misstep.

However, this does not mean eliminating digital textbooks completely. Instead, policies must aim to optimise learning outcomes by utilising a judicious mix, where technology complements fundamental learning from textbooks rather than overriding them. As screen-based reading is unavoidable, especially in higher education and workplaces, students also need to develop cognitive abilities and become 'biliterate', i.e., read, understand, and engage deeply with both paper and digital texts. This flexibility to move beyond paper and digital modalities will allow students to benefit from both formats. Therefore, instead of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, public policy should invest in understanding how learners relate to different kinds of pedagogy and teaching learning materials and how reading helps them find a sense of belonging in a rapidly evolving world. The future of education lies in using a dynamic mix of learning resources in both paper and digital mediums, aligned with the needs of the students, their contextual realities, and curriculum goals. ●

*Arpan Tulsyan is Senior Fellow with the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy at the Observer Research Foundation.*



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