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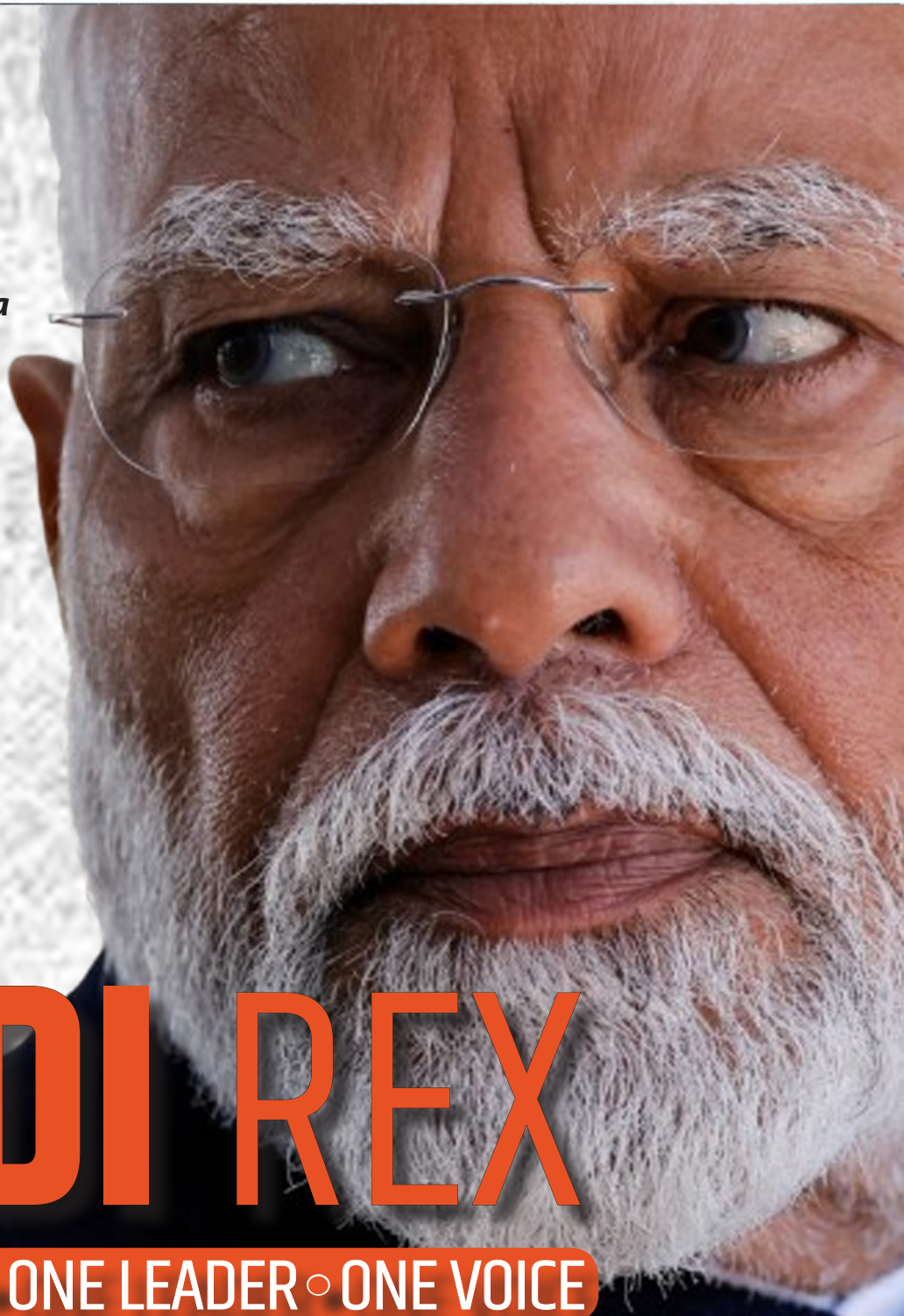
► **LIQUID ASSETS**  
WHY INDIA'S WATER  
CRISIS IS A GLOBAL RISK

# CULT CURRENT

Vol: 8 Issue: 8 August, 2025

WE MAKE VIEWS

*As India navigates the era of Amrit Kaal, one figure stands towering above the rest - Narendra Modi. From a humble tea-seller to the face of a rising global India, has he become an invincible political force? Is his leadership driven purely by emotion, or is there a deeper ideological design at play? This issue explores the phenomenon.*



# MODI REX

○ ONE NATION ○ ONE LEADER ○ ONE VOICE





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## # POSITIVE INDIA

### UNSUNG HERO

AN INSPIRING JOURNEY FROM  
TECHNOLOGY TO EMPATHY



**Hemesh Chadalavada**

**H**emesh Chadalavada, a teenage scientist from Hyderabad, witnessed his grandmother suffer from Alzheimer's firsthand. Moved by her struggle, he created a wearable smart device called the Alpha Monitor. This innovation alerts families in real-time if an elderly person falls, wanders, or shows signs of health deterioration. Awarded the prestigious Bal Puraskar, Hemesh's work is not just a technological breakthrough — it reflects deep human empathy. His invention has received praise from global giants like Samsung and Intel. Hemesh is a shining example of a young mind that doesn't shy away from problems but turns them into solutions. Today, he is more than just an inventor — he represents the inspiring future of India, where science walks hand in hand with compassion.



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

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## COVER STORY

# MODI REX

ONE NATION ONE LEADER ONE VOICE



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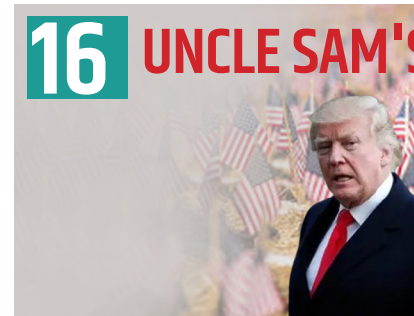
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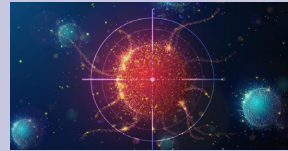
### DRAMA ERUPTS IN SO LONG VALLEY!

**B**ollywood Buzz Alert! Rising star Ruchi Gujar is making headlines—not for her acting, but for turning into a full-blown drama queen! At the premiere of her film *So Long Valley*, chaos erupted, and now it's a courtroom saga. Director-producer Maan Singh has slapped her with a ₹10 crore defamation suit, accusing her of sabotaging the film by allegedly bribing a crew member ₹20–30 lakh to remove key cast members. She even filed a petition to stall the release—which got dismissed. Then came the shocker: on July 25, she threw a slipper and a water bottle at Singh—FIR filed! This valley just got wild! ●

## The discoveries that will create a stir in 2025

### Cracking the Cold Code

Scientists at the University of Michigan have identified the complete nerve circuitry in the skin responsible for sensing cold — marking the first time this pathway has been clearly traced from skin to brain. The study reveals that the human body uses distinct biological systems to detect heat and cold, underscoring our complex sensitivity and adaptability to temperature. ●

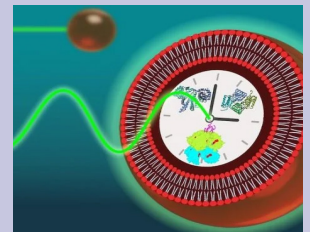


### Plant Virus vs. Cancer!

A virus found in chickpeas — Cowpea Mosaic Virus (CPMV)—is showing revolutionary promise in cancer immunotherapy! While harmless to human cells, CPMV supercharges the immune system, helping it attack and destroy tumors. Researchers found that it creates long-lasting anti-tumor memory in the body, offering defense even against spreading cancers. This breakthrough could open a bold new front in the fight against cancer. ●

### Tick-Tock Goes the Synthetic Clock!

Scientists have developed synthetic cells that can keep time—just like a real biological clock! By inserting clock-regulating proteins, these cells glowed rhythmically every 24 hours. The research reveals how our internal clocks maintain order despite chaotic molecular changes. This breakthrough could unlock new insights into sleep cycles and metabolism. ●



### FUNGUS BOOSTS WHEAT NUTRITION—NATURALLY!



A recent study reveals that wheat grown with the soil fungus *Rhizophagus irregularis* not only grows larger but is richer in micronutrients like zinc and phosphorus. Surprisingly, even with higher phosphorus levels, the grain doesn't show an increase in phytate—the compound that blocks nutrient absorption. This makes the wheat more bioavailable and beneficial for the human body. ●

### Kia's Electric Leap with Carens Clavis EV!

Kia India launched its all-new electric MPV, Carens Clavis EV, on July 15, with a starting ex-showroom price of ₹17.99 lakh. Designed for the mass market, this EV aims to offer an affordable yet premium experience for mid-segment buyers. Packed with modern features and an improved driving range, the Carens Clavis EV marks Kia's push to make electric mobility more accessible in India. ●





## APPOINTMENTS



**Parag Jain** *Secretary, R&AW*

Parag Jain was appointed as the new Secretary of India's external intelligence agency, Research and

Analysis Wing (R&AW). He succeeds Sameer Bhatia in the role. Known for his extensive experience in security and strategic affairs.

## Resignation

**Sanjay Nambiar**, *Group General Counsel, Yes Bank*

Sanjay Nambiar has stepped down from his role as Group General Counsel at Yes Bank, where he had been overseeing legal affairs for a significant period.



**Ursula von der Leyen**  
*EU Chief*

The European Union–United States trade agreement provides stability in current times, establishing a framework with a base tariff of 15%.

## THEY SAID IT...



**Xi Jinping**  
*President, China*

China–EU relations stand at a sensitive historical juncture. There is no fundamental clash of interests—we must move our cooperation towards greater openness and mutual understanding.

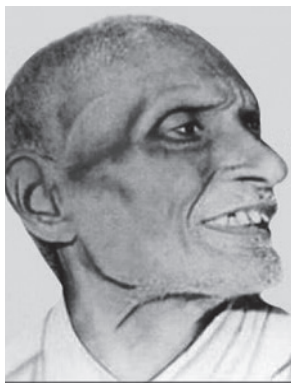
## THE TRIBUTE

Pingali Venkayya was a true soldier of India's freedom movement, whose name is forever etched in history with the Indian National Flag. Born on August 2, 1876, in Machilipatnam (then part of the Madras Presidency, now in Andhra Pradesh), Venkayya was a polymath—linguist, teacher, geologist, farmer, and a former British Army officer.

His patriotism sparked early in life and deepened during his service in the British Army, where he met Mahatma Gandhi in Africa—a life-changing

moment. Upon returning to India, he strongly felt the need for a national flag—a symbol that could unite all Indians under one identity.

In 1916, Venkayya presented a research paper on the "National Flag of India," featuring over 30 designs. For years, he tirelessly traveled across the

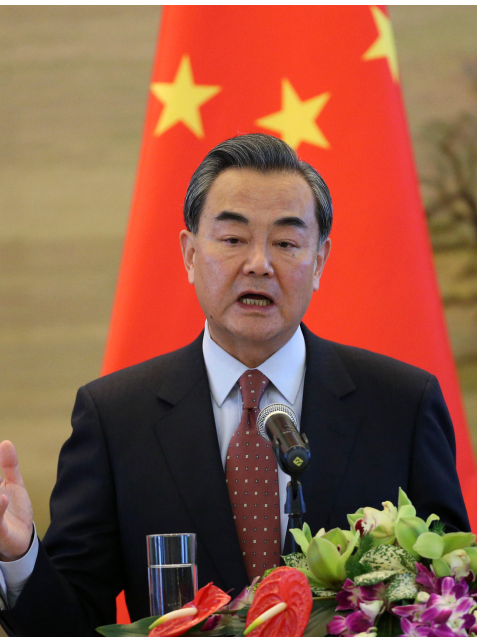


**PINGALI VENKAYYA**  
(02/08/1876-04/07/1963)

country, advocating the importance of a national flag. In 1921, during a Congress session in Vijayawada, he presented a flag design to Gandhi. It had two colors—red and green—along with a spinning wheel (charkha). Gandhi later added a white stripe and the Ashoka Chakra, forming the basis of the Indian tricolor as we know it today.

Despite his pivotal role, Venkayya received little recognition. He died in poverty and obscurity on July 4, 1963. It's a bitter irony that the man who gave India its most cherished symbol was largely forgotten by the very nation he served

Today, when we hoist the tricolor with pride, we must remember and salute Pingali Venkayya—whose vision, effort, and dedication gave us a flag that unites a nation. ●



## Wang Yi Urges End to US-China Confrontation

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has called for an end to tensions between the United States and China, emphasizing the need for deeper dialogue between the two global powers. Speaking during a meeting with representatives from major American companies—including Goldman Sachs, Boeing, and Apple—Wang warned that continued confrontation could undermine global stability. “China is willing to enhance dialogue with the United States, manage differences, and explore opportunities for cooperation,” Wang stated. His remarks come in the wake of recent trade discussions between Chinese and American negotiators in Stockholm, where both sides agreed to extend a 90-day tariff truce. ●

## IMF Warns of Rising Global Economic Risks



International Monetary Fund (IMF) has issued a warning over escalating global economic risks. In its recent report, the IMF highlighted that rising import tariffs imposed by the United States, coupled with financial instability in certain countries, could significantly disrupt global trade and capital flows. These developments, the IMF noted, may place increased pressure on developing economies, making them particularly vulnerable to external shocks. ●

## Rising Dollar Strength Impacts Global Markets

In recent weeks, the US dollar has shown a consistent surge in strength, signaling a potential shift in the global financial landscape. A stronger dollar often triggers capital outflows from emerging markets, as investors seek safer and more stable assets. This trend may also lead to higher import costs for several countries, intensifying inflationary pressures. Economists warn that the dollar’s current trajectory could significantly impact global trade, debt servicing, and investment decisions in the coming months. ●



## G7-EU Reach Consensus on AI Rules



The G7 nations and the European Union have reached a consensus on a common framework for regulating Artificial Intelligence (AI), aligning closely with the European Union’s landmark AI Act, set to take effect from August 2025. Experts believe this agreement will help shape global technological standards while promoting the safe, transparent, and accountable use of AI. The new framework emphasizes key issues such as data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and risk assessment. ●

## ICJ Issues Landmark Climate Ruling



In a historic move this week, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United Nations’ top judicial body, issued a landmark advisory opinion on climate change. The court emphasized that nations must cooperate to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and uphold their commitments under international climate agreements. ●



## Global AI Governance Framework Launched at BRICS Summit



In a landmark move at the BRICS Summit, China and the United States jointly endorsed the first-ever global framework for Artificial Intelligence (AI) governance. The initiative comes amid growing geopolitical tensions in the tech sector and is seen as a significant step toward international cooperation. The newly proposed guidelines emphasize ethical AI usage, transparency, and data privacy. Experts believe this framework will lay the foundation for global AI policymaking in the coming years. ●

## Trump's Tough Warning to Russia Rattles Oil Markets

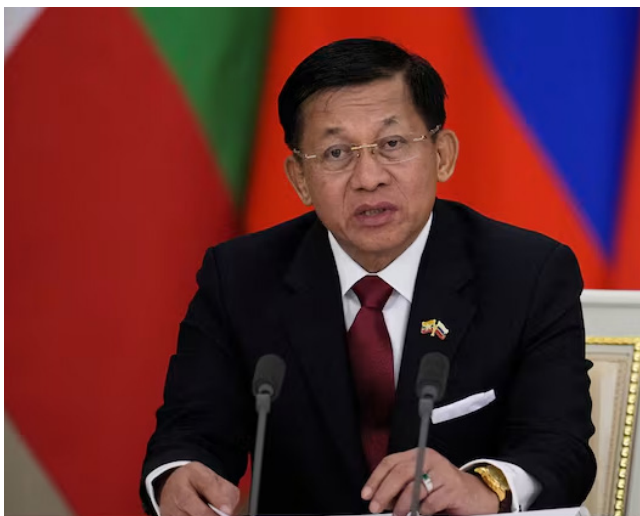


U.S. President Donald Trump has abruptly shortened the timeline for imposing strict oil export sanctions on Russia—from 50 days to just 10–12 days—sending shockwaves through global energy markets. During talks in Scotland with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Trump warned that if the war in Ukraine does not end soon, countries buying Russian oil—such as India and China—will face 100% tariffs. This move threatens to disrupt global oil supplies, as Russia exported 4.68 million barrels of crude per day in June. While markets have often shrugged off Trump's bold threats in the past, oil prices surged by 3% this time, signaling investor concern. Analysts warn that if these sanctions are enacted, U.S. inflation could rise—posing a political risk for Trump himself. ●

## Devastating 8.8-Magnitude Earthquake Strikes Russia's Far East



A powerful 8.8-magnitude earthquake struck Russia's remote Kamchatka Peninsula on Wednesday, triggering tsunami alerts as far as French Polynesia and Chile. The shallow quake caused significant structural damage and injured several people in the region. Adding to the crisis, Kamchatka's most active volcano erupted shortly after the tremor, intensifying concerns. Although initial tsunami warnings for Japan, Hawaii, and Russia. ●



## Myanmar Forms Interim Civilian Government Ahead of Elections

In a surprising political development, Myanmar's military has announced the formation of an interim civilian government ahead of the national elections scheduled for December 2025. However, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, who led the 2021 military coup, has assumed the presidency, thereby retaining a firm grip on power. According to a statement released through state media on Thursday, the military has officially ended its state of emergency and transferred power to a caretaker government. A special electoral commission has also been appointed to oversee the upcoming vote. ●



## Amit Shah: Fugitive Repatriation Must Be a National Security Priority

**A**t the National Security Strategies Conference in New Delhi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah issued a firm directive to expedite efforts to bring back fugitive criminals involved in terrorism and smuggling. Emphasizing the need for coordinated action, Shah urged central and state agencies to collaborate closely and adopt a joint strategy combining diplomacy, international cooperation, and advanced surveillance technologies. He also advocated for the establishment of a permanent agency to monitor encrypted communication channels and terror financing networks, while promoting the use of indigenous technology. "India must fight not only crime but the criminal mindset and networks that sustain it," Shah asserted. ●

## INS Udaygiri Commissioned into Indian Navy



**T**he Indian Navy marked a significant boost on July 1, 2025, with the official induction of frigate INS Udaygiri. Built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited, this warship is equipped with advanced weapon systems, sonar, and missile technology, capable of launching long-range strikes while evading enemy surveillance. The deployment of INS Udaygiri is expected to enhance India's maritime security and strategic presence in the Indian Ocean region. ●

## Court Flags Rising Rabies Risk from Pet Dogs

**W**ith a sharp rise in cases of pet dog bites and rabies infections in India, the Supreme Court has taken suo motu cognizance of the issue. The Court stated that this is not merely a law-and-order concern but a serious public health emergency. Incidents of bites by pet dogs have surged, especially in urban areas, with many cases revealing a lack of proper vaccination. The Health Ministry and Animal Husbandry Department have been directed to draft a new national policy. ●



## Water Crisis Grips North Bihar: Dry Handpumps, Protests on Streets



**A** severe water crisis has hit North Bihar, affecting districts like Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Madhubani, Samastipur, Muzaffarpur, Sheohar, and Champaran. In Sitamarhi alone, over 80% of handpumps have dried up, and piped water schemes have failed. From temples to farmlands, water scarcity is everywhere. Farmers report drying paddy fields and a lack of drinking water. Torch rallies have been held in several villages, with residents protesting outside government offices and warning of larger agitations. ●

## Rajasthan Launches 'Poverty-Free Village Scheme'



**T**he Rajasthan government has launched a new initiative aimed at eliminating poverty in rural areas through the 'Poverty-Free Village Scheme'. Under this program, 5,000 villages will be targeted, connecting Below Poverty Line (BPL) families with financial aid, skill training, and social security schemes. The goal is to boost household incomes, generate employment, and ensure access to essential services for these communities. ●



## Adani Green Crosses 15,000 MW Solar Power Milestone



**A**dani Green Energy Limited has surpassed 15,000 megawatts of solar power generation capacity, marking a historic achievement in India's renewable energy journey. This milestone is seen as a major step toward the Indian government's goal of 500 GW of non-fossil fuel energy. AGEL has established large-scale solar projects across multiple states, including Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Karnataka. The company claims to offset nearly 26 million tons of carbon emissions annually. ●

## Malegaon Blast Case: All Accused Acquitted After 17 Years



**A** special NIA court has acquitted all seven accused in the 2008 Malegaon bomb blast case due to lack of evidence. The blast had claimed six lives and injured over a hundred people. Among the accused were BJP MP Sadhvi Pragya Thakur and Lt. Col. Shrikant Purohit, who were charged under the UAPA and IPC sections. The court stated that the prosecution failed to prove whether the blast originated from a motorcycle or if the accused were involved in bomb-making. There was no credible evidence of conspiracy meetings or RDX supply. Investigations into phone records also did not follow due legal procedures. Out of 323 witnesses, 37 turned hostile. The court emphasized that while the crime was grave, conviction requires concrete and unequivocal proof. All accused were acquitted by granting them the benefit of doubt. ●

## Supreme Court Grants Constitutional Protection to Digital Privacy



**I**n a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court has declared digital privacy a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The ruling came in the *Righty vs. Union of India* case, where the petitioner challenged the scope of digital data collection and surveillance. The Court emphasized that in the digital age, safeguarding personal data is integral to individual liberty. This decision is expected to have far-reaching implications for data protection laws. ●



## Rising Student Suicides: A Deepening Crisis Among School Children

**O**n July 25, 2025, a tragic incident shocked Ahmedabad. A 16-year-old Class 10 student from a school in Navrangpura was seen laughing as she stepped out of class. Calmly twirling a bunch of keys in her hand, she walked to the fourth-floor corridor — and jumped. The CCTV footage of the incident quickly went viral on social media. Just a day later, in Lucknow's Ashiyana area, a 14-year-old Class 8 student died by suicide after being scolded by his mother for using a mobile phone instead of studying. These are not isolated cases. Across India - and globally- the suicide rate among school-going children has been steadily rising in recent years. ●



SRIRAJESH, Editor

## U.S. TARIFFS

### A RESPONSE OF REASON, NOT REBELLION

*In the face of Trump's tariff strike, India has chosen resilience over retreat. This isn't merely a trade war—it's a bold assertion of national sovereignty. From digital policy to agricultural safeguards and strategic autonomy, India has rejected global pressure in defense of its core interests. Is this confrontation—or calculated diplomacy?*

When U.S. President Donald Trump chants “Make America Great Again,” it is more than a slogan — it comes armed with the double-edged sword of tariff policy. His August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025 decision to impose 25% tariffs on steel, aluminum, and other goods imported from India is not merely an economic move — it is a geopolitical signal. India, however, neither bowed nor broke in response.

This is not just an unusual trade impasse - it marks a decisive moment in the shaping of future global economic alignments. The core question is not why a U.S.-India trade deal failed, but rather: Why did this confrontation arise? Did India choose conflict, or did it make a mature and far-sighted diplomatic decision? What does this mean in the context of national interest and long-term strategy?

Since late 2024, India and the U.S. engaged in multiple rounds of dialogue. The U.S. wanted India to loosen its digital data localization norms, open up its dairy and agriculture markets fully, concede to American dominance in patents and biomedical innovation, and ease foreign ownership restrictions in e-commerce. In exchange, it hinted at restoring older trade benefits like the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which it had unilaterally withdrawn earlier.

India remained firm in its stand — digital sovereignty, it maintained, is not just a policy issue, but a matter of national soul. Agriculture and dairy are not just economic sectors but the livelihood of millions of rural families

The new 25% U.S. tariffs on Indian steel, aluminum, pharmaceuticals, and auto-parts directly impact about \$8.2 billion worth of trade. Yet, India did not retaliate or panic. It chose silence — measured, balanced, and strategic.

Trump's tariff wars have previously targeted China, Vietnam, Brazil, and others, but India interprets this differently — as a manifestation of policy imperialism by developed nations over developing ones.

India's refusal is not a reaction, but an assertion of sovereign policy-making. Behind this approach lie four strong pillars: First, **Building Alternatives**: India has accelerated free trade agreements with the EU, UAE, Africa, and ASEAN. The India-EU FTA was signed in July 2025, and work has begun on “Strategic Commodity Corridors” with UAE and African nations. Second,



**Redefining Self-Reliance:** India reduced export dependence in key sectors like pharma, steel, electronics, and agro-processing. Over ₹38,000 crore in new funds has been infused into PLI schemes. Third, **Message to U.S. Domestic Lobbies:** India recognizes that Trump's tariffs are unpopular even among American pharma, auto, and tech lobbies. India is preparing to challenge the U.S. at the WTO over its "opaque tariff regime." And fourth, **Preserving Policy Autonomy:** For India, giving in on digital data, agriculture, or patents would mean surrendering its future self-reliance. This would be not a compromise, but a policy capitulation.

India has not yet announced any retaliatory tariffs - this is not weakness, but strategic restraint. The Ministry of External Affairs has made it clear: "India's policy on national interest is firm, though not inflexible - but it will not bend."

India is now actively pursuing new markets in ASEAN, Latin America, and Africa. The goal is not to trade only with the U.S., but to reduce dependency on it.

In essence, India does not view U.S. tariffs as a mere economic blow, but as a strategic test. Its stance is clear — "There can be no trade at the cost of national interest."

India could have earned short-term benefits by compromising on digital policy, farmer protections, or sovereign decision-making. But that would have diminished its global image as a capable and independent nation.

Instead, India has reaffirmed that "a nation's policy must be built on self-reliance, not external pressure." Its measured defiance under pressure may now inspire a new model in global trade diplomacy — one built not on submission, but on sovereign strength.

**"Trade agreements enrich nations — surrender does not. India has understood this well."**

*Ajesh*



srirajesh.journalist



@srirajesh



editor@cultcurrent.com

# China's Power Play



Jalaj Srivastava





***The third decade of the 21st century is witnessing a dramatic transformation in the global geopolitical landscape. The balance of power, once centered around the Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union (later Russia), is now decisively tilting toward Asia. China, which initially expanded its influence through soft power and economic leverage, is now openly showcasing its military ambitions. Beijing's meticulous, calculated, and continuous military preparations have sparked growing global unease—not just in Asia, but across the world. For India, this concern is particularly acute. With a long, contested border and a legacy of deep-rooted mistrust, India finds itself at the epicenter of a shifting strategic order—where diplomacy must be as sharp as defense.***

**T**he People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is no longer confined to a solely defensive posture. Over the past decade, China has prioritized military modernization to an unprecedented degree. This transformation is not merely about acquiring advanced weaponry; it represents a fundamental shift in China's strategic thinking and its ambitions on the global stage. The PLA's overarching objectives can be clearly discerned:



technological dominance, strategic agility, and ideological preparedness. These elements combine to form a comprehensive strategy aimed at securing China's position as a leading global power.

### Technological Leap: Towards Intelligentized Warfare

China is rapidly moving beyond the boundaries of traditional warfare, embracing what it terms "intelligentized warfare." This approach places a heavy emphasis on the integration of cutting-edge technologies into all aspects of military operations. Artificial intelligence (AI) plays a central role, enabling autonomous systems, enhanced decision-making, and improved battlefield awareness. Cyber capabilities are also paramount, providing the means to conduct offensive and defensive operations in the digital realm. Space-based surveillance systems offer unparalleled situational awareness, while drone technology provides versatile platforms for reconnaissance, attack, and logistical support. China's investment in these technologies is staggering. The PLA is actively developing AI-powered weapons systems, autonomous vehicles, and advanced cyber warfare tools. It is also working to integrate these technologies seamlessly into its existing military infrastructure. This commitment to technological innovation is driven by the belief that future wars will be won by those who can effectively harness the power of information and automation. China aims to be at the forefront of this technological revolution, gaining a decisive advantage on the battlefields of tomorrow.

### Strategic Agility and Responsiveness

Beyond technological advancements, China has undertaken a significant restructuring of its military organization, making it more agile and responsive to emerging threats. The implementation of the Theater Command System has streamlined command and control structures, enabling the PLA to react swiftly to potential conflicts across a wide range of operational environments. This reorganization has improved coordination between different branches of the military and enhanced the PLA's ability to adapt to rapidly changing battlefield conditions.

The emphasis on agility also extends to the PLA's deployment capabilities. China has invested heavily in its airlift and sealift capacity, allowing it to rapidly deploy troops and equipment to distant locations.



It has also established a network of overseas bases and access agreements, further expanding its ability to project power globally. These developments underscore China's growing ambition to play a more active role in international security affairs.

### Mental and Ideological Fortitude

China recognizes that military strength is not solely determined by technology and organization. The PLA also places a strong emphasis on the mental and ideological preparedness of its soldiers. Training exercises are designed to simulate "real combat-like situations," preparing troops for the stresses and challenges of modern warfare. State-controlled media and official statements frequently invoke themes of "readiness" and "being prepared for struggle," reinforcing the sense of urgency and the need for vigilance.

This psychological campaign is not only intended to steel the resolve of the PLA, but also to prepare the domestic population for the possibility of conflict. By constantly emphasizing the importance of national security and the need to defend China's interests, the government seeks to cultivate a sense of unity and purpose. This ideological mobilization is a key component of China's overall strategy, ensuring that





Myanmar, has also raised concerns about its strategic intentions.

The Chinese government views Taiwan as a renegade province that must be brought back under its control, by force if necessary. China has consistently increased its military pressure on Taiwan, conducting frequent air and naval exercises near the island. These actions have heightened tensions in the region and raised the specter of a potential conflict.

### Implications for India: A Growing Security Challenge

China's military buildup poses a significant security challenge for India. The two countries share a long and disputed border, and relations have been strained in recent years. China's growing military capabilities and its assertive behavior in the region have raised concerns about its intentions towards India.

**Border Disputes and Tensions along the LAC:** The 3,488-kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China remains undemarcated, leading to frequent incursions and standoffs. The violent clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020, in which Indian soldiers lost their lives, underscored the sensitivity of the border. Since then, China has increased its troop deployments along the LAC, from Tawang to Depsang. It has also rapidly developed infrastructure and airbases in Tibet, significantly enhancing its military capabilities and reach in the border areas.

**China's Encirclement Strategy in the Indian Ocean:** India's maritime security is also under increasing pressure from China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean. China has developed ports in Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Pakistan (Gwadar), and Myanmar, which some analysts view as part of a "string of pearls" strategy to encircle India. This strategy could potentially threaten India's naval power and its vital trade routes.

**The China-Pakistan Axis:** The strategic alliance between China and Pakistan poses a dual threat to India. The two countries have deepened their military, economic, and strategic cooperation. China's investment in infrastructure in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a direct challenge to India's sovereignty. The exchange of strategic technology, intelligence, and joint military exercises further strengthens this alliance, presenting a significant challenge to India's security. ●

the country is prepared to face any challenge that may arise.

### Underlying Objectives: A Grand Geopolitical Vision

China's military modernization is not simply a defensive measure. It is an integral part of a broader geopolitical strategy aimed at transforming China into a leading global power, rivaling the United States. China envisions itself as the dominant force in Asia and a major player in shaping the international order.

The Chinese government believes that its security extends beyond its national borders. It asserts that it has the right to protect its interests wherever they may be threatened, including through the use of military force if necessary. China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea, its growing military presence in the Indian Ocean, and its increasingly assertive rhetoric towards Taiwan are all manifestations of this expansive worldview.

In the South China Sea, China has constructed artificial islands and built military installations, asserting its claim over vast swathes of international waters. These actions have alarmed neighboring countries and raised concerns about freedom of navigation. China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, including the development of ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and

# UNCLE SAM'S Solo Act



Anwar Hussain

***The United States, under the leadership of figures like Donald Trump, has arrived at a critical juncture, where its disillusionment with global leadership is becoming increasingly apparent. The "America First" policy, prioritizing national interests above all else, has replaced a tradition of collaboration with a focus on unilateral dominance. The question looms large: is the world beginning to withdraw from America before America withdraws from the world?***

The rise of figures like former U.S. President Donald Trump to power, and their continued political popularity, has been largely predicated on the perception that the United States has become a failing nation – tired, weakened, and heading towards decline. Contrary to this self-proclaimed failure, however, the foreign policy approach of such leaders often overestimates the power of the United States. Those believing in such approaches, along with their advisors, seem to believe that even if the country is internally troubled, Washington's unilateral actions can still compel the world to bend to its will and to accept American terms.

However, since World War II, the primary source of American strength has not been coercion, but cooperation. Such approaches ignore this historical truth, taking for granted all the benefits that a cooperative approach has provided. Those embracing these approaches seem incapable of imagining a future where other countries decide to opt out of the existing international order led by the United States, or to create a new order that is detrimental to American interests. Yet, this is precisely the scenario that recent U.S. administrations have been rapidly turning into a reality.

Political scientist Michael Beckley, in Foreign Affairs, argued that the United States is becoming a "rogue superpower" – neither internationalist nor

completely isolationist, but aggressive, powerful, and willing to go to any lengths to pursue its interests. This characterization is largely accurate, but it does not fully capture how American dominance can be limited or undermined by other countries.

During the tenure of leaders like Trump, the question has often been whether the United States is withdrawing from its role as a global leader. But a more pressing question is: has the rest of the world already begun to withdraw from America? Is the world now beginning to abandon the collaborative system that has been the foundation of American power for decades?

Some analysts believe that even if America's allies or neutral countries disagree with current approaches, they have no choice but to go along with the United States. In the long run, they will adapt to this system, trying to please the United States as much as possible, and adopt alternative strategies only when necessary. After all, even if they become angry and distrustful of the United States, America will still seem less dangerous to them than China, Russia, or other competitors.

According to this view, the United States, even under a leadership seen as difficult, is still the best among all possible global leaders. Moreover, even if other countries wanted to opt out of the U.S.-led order, they do not have the collective or individual capacity to do



so. They may recall the time when America was more internationalist, open, and collaborative, but now they will have to learn to live with a more nationalist, self-centered, and rigid America.

### Historical Perspective: America and Allied Nations

America's global dominance was not merely the product of its military power. After the devastation of World War II, the United States demonstrated foresight and strategic skill by building a global order based on shared ideological foundations, strong institutional structures, and mutual trust. Whether it was the reconstruction of war-torn Europe through the Marshall Plan, or the creation of military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States not only provided its allies with financial and security assistance, but also connected them to a sense of shared purpose, allowing them to feel equal to America, rather than subordinate to it. During the Cold War, the United States worked with its allies to build a strong front to defend democratic values and to block the spread of communism. In this period, America's leadership not only provided direction, but also ensured compliance with international rules and laws, increasing its credibility and acceptance on a global scale.

However, the current scenario indicates the demise of this golden age. In particular, during recent administrations, the 'America First' policy has severely eroded the cornerstone of international partnerships that had been established for decades. Such administrations have not only distanced themselves from important multilateral forums such as the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, NATO, and the Paris Climate Agreement, but have also questioned the effectiveness of these institutions on many occasions. This policy has sent a clear signal that America is now withdrawing from its traditional, collaborative

role of global leadership and is prioritizing its domestic priorities over international cooperation. This trend has not only disappointed America's traditional allies, but has also raised serious doubts about its credibility and leadership capacity on a global scale.

### Contemporary Challenges and America's Strategic Dilemma

The twenty-first century has given rise to many new and complex challenges in the geopolitical landscape, which are virtually impossible for any nation to face effectively alone. The rapid economic and military rise of China, Russia's growing aggression, global pandemics such as COVID-19, the threat of international terrorism, and issues such as climate change pose serious crises for peace, security, and prosperity on a global scale. The unilateral policies mentioned above are undermining the global capacity to deal with these complex and interrelated

problems collectively.

Although the current administration has made some efforts to re-establish a spirit of international cooperation and multilateralism compared to its predecessor, America's credibility is no longer what it used to be. There is lingering apprehension among NATO member states about whether America will revert to its previous policies in the future. Similarly, on important strategic platforms such as the Quad in Asia, allies such as India, Japan, and Australia are worried about whether America will maintain its commitment to the region in the long term, or whether it may make unexpected changes to its policies due to domestic political compulsions. This uncertainty is prompting these nations to consider their foreign and security policies more cautiously and independently.

### The Rise of China and American Isolation

China's extraordinary economic and military rise has undoubtedly emerged as the greatest strategic challenge to the United States. If America becomes estranged from its traditional allies, it will become a lone power to resist China's growing influence, which could prove strategically harmful.

China is not only attracting countless nations in Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America economically and politically through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, but is also rapidly transforming the global balance of power by strengthening its military presence in the South China Sea and making rapid progress in the technological sector. China is also expanding its role in international forums and increasing its influence in multilateral institutions. In such a scenario, standing united with its traditional allies may be America's greatest strength. If America makes its allies feel isolated or disregards their interests, it will not only lose its ability to effectively resist China's growing influence, but will also weaken its efforts to maintain global rules and norms.

### The Crisis of Democratic Values

America's 'going it alone' is not only a symbol of diplomatic failure or strategic weakness, but also indicates a decline in the prestige of democratic values globally. For a long time, America has been the champion of the principles of democracy, human rights, and individual freedom around the world. It



has not only supported these values, but has also intervened on many occasions to protect them. This moral authority of America has been an important basis for its global leadership.

However, some events that have taken place within America in the past decade have seriously challenged this moral superiority. Unpleasant events on Capitol Hill, nationwide protests over racial inequality, increasing allegations against the freedom and credibility of the media, and internal developments such as the politicization of the judiciary have undermined the democratic foundations of America and tarnished its



image globally. When democratic values themselves appear to be eroding in America, it becomes more difficult for it to preach democracy and lead the world. America's 'isolation' in this context not only weakens its foreign policy, but it is also a cause of disappointment for those democratic forces that are struggling for freedom and human rights around the world.

## The Role of Europe and Asia

If America withdraws from its role of global leadership or displays uncertainty regarding its commitments, important nations such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, and India may have more responsibility to face global challenges and to maintain the international order. However, it is important to question whether these nations are fully capable of discharging this increased responsibility.

With regard to Europe in particular, the European Union is striving to develop a more independent and autonomous strategic identity without America. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has compelled European nations to reconsider their security and defense policies. However, from an economic, military, and political point of view, it will be a major challenge for European nations to immediately replace America's long-term presence and support.

Asian nations such as India and Japan, which are America's natural allies from the perspective of democratic values and strategic interests, also expect that America will permanently maintain its partnership in this region, rather than adopt a merely opportunistic approach. Given China's growing influence, it is important for these nations to maintain strong relations with America for their security and regional stability. However, the domestic political instability of America and fears of unexpected changes in its foreign policy may prompt these nations to maintain their strategic autonomy and to strengthen their relations with other powers as well.

## Which Direction Should America Take?

The United States stands at a crossroads, where it must make the crucial choice of whether it truly wants



to remain detached from the global order like a 'lone warrior', or whether it should join its traditional allies to become an integral part of a more inclusive, balanced, and multilateral global order.

Pursuing unilateral decisions and a self-centered foreign policy may give America short-term political gains, but its far-reaching consequences will be far more serious and devastating. Taking into account the complexity of global challenges and the rise of other powers, it is essential for America to work with its allies not only for its own security and prosperity, but also to maintain global stability and order.

## Conclusion

If the world's most powerful democracy weakens its decades-old partnerships and chooses the path of isolation, not only will global stability and security be threatened, but also the values of freedom, human rights, and democracy that America has supported for so long will be in crisis. ●

*Anwar Hussain is a senior journalist and lecturer.*

# India's Gambit in Africa



Akansha Sharma

**A**frica, long marginalized in global power politics, is now the epicenter of a new geopolitical contest. From mineral-rich deserts to maritime chokepoints, the continent is emerging as a strategic chessboard where global powers—including the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and Gulf nations—are actively vying for influence. While this "New Great Game" intensifies, a silent yet significant player—India—is increasingly repositioning itself in Africa. For New Delhi, this contest is not merely about outpacing rivals; it's about securing national interests that are inextricably linked to the continent's economic promise, strategic geography, and demographic dynamism.

## India's Africa Footprint: Legacy, Leverage, and Limitations

India's engagement with Africa is not new, being grounded in a rich historical fabric woven through shared colonial experiences, South-South solidarity, and a robust

*Africa, once on the periphery of global geopolitics, has now emerged as the new arena of global competition. Amid the growing presence of China, the United States, and the Gulf nations, India is gradually asserting itself as a thoughtful and strategic player. In this special edition of Cult Current, we delve into India's Africa policy—exploring its opportunities, limitations, and long-term strategic vision.*

diaspora of over three million people, particularly in East and Southern Africa. These communities have been instrumental in sustaining cultural and commercial ties, providing India with soft power that few external players can match. Over the years, India has expanded its development diplomacy through concessional lines of credit, humanitarian aid, capacity-building programs, and a strong emphasis on digital public goods. Initiatives such as the Pan-African e-Network Project and ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) have enhanced India's profile as a development partner that focuses on empowerment rather than exploitation. Yet, despite these legacy strengths, India remains a marginal player compared to China's financial muscle and the West's military-industrial reach.

## Strategic Stakes: What Africa Means to India

Africa offers India a rare convergence of economic and strategic opportunities. First, there is energy security; several African nations, including Nigeria, Angola, and Mozambique, are vital sources of oil and gas that can diversify India's import basket. Second, Africa is home to substantial deposits of rare earth elements, cobalt, and lithium, which are critical for India's green energy transition and tech manufacturing. Third, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA)—the world's largest by number of participating countries—provides a springboard for Indian businesses





seeking new markets. India's pharmaceutical, fintech, and agricultural technology sectors can find fertile ground in Africa's burgeoning middle class and young population. Maritime security is another critical vector. With nearly 90% of India's trade by volume traversing the Indian Ocean, securing key maritime routes, especially those skirting the eastern coast of Africa, is crucial. Indian naval presence in places like Seychelles and Mauritius is a step in the right direction, but New Delhi must deepen security cooperation with littoral African states to protect its sea lines of communication.

## The Challenges: Giants in the Room

However, India's Africa aspirations face formidable headwinds. China's presence in Africa, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is both extensive and entrenched, manifested in massive infrastructure projects, debt-financed investments, and diplomatic blitzkriegs. From ports in Djibouti to rail lines in Kenya, China has embedded itself in Africa's economic and strategic architecture. Unlike India's cautious and need-based investments, China's approach is aggressive, often outbidding competitors and offering swift implementation. Simultaneously, the U.S. and its Western allies are intensifying their military footprint in Africa under the banner of counter-terrorism and security cooperation. The establishment of military bases and strategic outposts—such as Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti—has militarized diplomacy and added a hard power dimension to the contest. India, with its principle of non-intervention and emphasis on sovereignty, struggles to match this pace or appeal. Moreover, Gulf countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia are making strategic inroads, especially in the Horn of Africa, leveraging their financial clout and religious-cultural affiliations. India, lacking both the scale of investment and the ideological appeal, risks being overshadowed unless it recalibrates its strategy.

## The Way Forward: Policy Shifts and Diplomatic Agility

To remain relevant in this evolving African calculus, India needs to adopt a multidimensional strategy. This strategy involves scaling

up investment by transitioning from aid-based engagement to scalable investments in key sectors like digital infrastructure, healthcare, and renewable energy, leveraging public-private partnerships to project long-term commitment. It also necessitates forming strategic partnerships, joining hands with like-minded countries such as Japan, France, or the UAE for joint ventures and developmental collaborations to help pool resources and mitigate China's dominance. Furthermore, maritime and security diplomacy must be enhanced through increased naval diplomacy, more active participation in African peacekeeping missions, and offering maritime training programs to African nations, potentially instituting a coordinated Indo-African maritime security dialogue. Institutionalizing engagement is also vital, requiring platforms like the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) to be regularized and made more outcome-oriented, along with strengthening Indian missions in Africa with better staffing and local knowledge. Finally, digital public goods should be employed as a flagship initiative, sharing India's success with platforms like Aadhaar and UPI with African nations under a framework of digital sovereignty and inclusive development, thereby creating strategic dependencies that go beyond traditional aid.

## Conclusion: A Moment Not to Miss

The New Great Game in Africa is not just a replay of Cold War power politics; it is a redefinition of global order where developmental models, values, and influence are being tested. For India, the contest is not merely with China or the West, but with time itself. If New Delhi can proactively realign its policies, broaden its coalitions, and invest smartly in Africa's future, it will not only secure its national interests but also cement its role as a credible global actor rooted in equity and partnership. Africa's moment has arrived—and India must decide whether to be a spectator, a support player, or a strategic architect in this unfolding game. ●

*Akansha Sharma brings curiosity and conviction to her work at Cult Current.*

# NATO'S 5% TARGET

## A BOON FOR INDIA'S ARMS INDUSTRY

*NATO member countries have agreed to raise their defense spending to up to 5% of their respective GDPs. This development is causing concern for both China and Russia, as it signals a significant military buildup in the West. At the same time, some are calling it a golden opportunity for India to earn billions by exporting weapons and defense equipment. But how much truth is there in these claims?*



Sanjay Srivastava

Donald Trump, by wielding the threat of Russian aggression and dangling the possibility of a US withdrawal from NATO, has effectively strong-armed all but one (Spain) of the remaining 31 member states. As a result, they've agreed to strive to increase their defense budgets to 5% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2032. Trump's tactics, policy strategies, and maneuvers – while perhaps inconsequential for most smaller European nations involved – might not warrant particular concern or celebration on our part were geopolitical equations not so multifaceted. They rarely are as straightforward as they initially appear, laced as they are with indirect interdependencies.

Nevertheless, Indian analysts have filled newspapers with speculation that the acceptance of this American proposal (or, more accurately, threat) will double or triple the defense budgets of numerous NATO countries, leading to a surge in demand for our weapons, military systems, and equipment. They foresee India and its companies establishing themselves as major players in this burgeoning market.

### Will the Arms Market Flood?

Beyond France and the US, several developing





nations in Asia and Africa are exhibiting interest in Indian weaponry. The Philippines is purchasing BrahMos missiles, while Vietnam is considering naval equipment. Mauritius, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and others are looking at coast guard vessels. Some Latin American countries are showing interest in Indian radar systems and light arms. Besides Nepal, Myanmar, and Bhutan, we also plan to sell weapons to Indonesia, Brazil, and certain European nations. The expectation is that in addition to non-NATO countries, acquiring at least two dozen new NATO clients will translate into earnings of billions.

This abundance of anticipation-filled news has established the approval of NATO countries' new budgets during the meeting in The Hague, Netherlands, as a significant event for our own country. The question arises: is the analysts' assessment logical and accurate, or is it overly enthusiastic and merely wishful thinking? Undoubtedly, India now manufactures highly advanced and capable weapons and military equipment, and



its reputation is growing in the global market. It will certainly want to sell weapons. But is this truly such an easy and massive opportunity, primarily exploitable by India? Will this opportunity propel the country's arms market onto the global stage? Is this benefit really as

great as is being propagated?

### **More Like Building Castles in the Air**

The threat of the US, which contributes 66% of NATO's funds, to withdraw is prompting some member countries to try to increase their defense spending to 5% of GDP. Poland is already spending over 4% of its GDP, and Estonia and the US are spending over 3.5%. Latvia and Greece, which currently spend around 3%, may be able to do so. However, apart from Greece, none of these appear to be potential customers for India. For countries with figures of 2.5% or less, this will not be an easy task. These include Finland, the UK, Romania, and Denmark, among others. And for countries that spend 2% or less – those that spend just over 1% of their GDP on defense – this will be impossible. So, most NATO countries will not be able to meet the defense spending target of 3.5% of GDP on soldiers and weapons.

At best, they will meet the earmarked 1.5% of GDP for upgrading infrastructure, including roads, bridges, ports, airfields, military vehicles, cybersecurity, and the protection of energy pipelines, often through questionable practices. Some countries have political situations where their coalition partners oppose prioritizing defense over education and health. Most NATO countries spend less on defense than on health or education. If a 5% defense spending target is set, 21 countries that currently invest less than 5% in education would allocate more to the military, surpassing schooling. In such a situation, power dynamics, coalitions, and election-year popularity politics will restrain them, as will social forces. Countries like Spain, geographically far from the threat of Russia and China, will simply not pay attention to this issue. Canada, with a defense expenditure of slightly more than 1.25%, will hesitate for political reasons. To reach defense spending of 5% of GDP, nearly two dozen countries would have to spend hundreds of billions of dollars more each year than their current expenditures. Furthermore, NATO members will have to decide for themselves where they will get the extra cash to allocate to defense spending. Social upliftment is one thing, but obtaining loans for weapons is unlikely.

### **Demand for BrahMos is Increasing Globally**

India is not currently included among the preferred arms vendors of wealthy NATO members that spend more than 3% of their GDP on defense. Even if smaller

countries' defense budgets reach 3% of their GDP, this amount will be very low. Moreover, there will be pressure from group member countries and from the US and other major players in the market. The main suppliers of weapons and military equipment to NATO countries are still the US, France, Germany, and the UK. American companies such as Boeing, Airbus, and Lockheed Martin have already captured the NATO countries' arms market, and they will make more aggressive efforts to capitalize on this opportunity. In addition, South Korea is close to selling advanced missiles and naval systems to these countries, while Israel and Turkey are going to offer them cheap drones, cybersecurity, intelligence equipment, and Brazil is offering light military aircraft at low prices. In such a situation, it is difficult to say how much of their military purchases we will get. How correct will it be to claim that this opportunity will open the way for heavy exports for Indian defense manufacturers, giving a new direction to global defense procurement dynamics? India will become an attractive secondary supplier for NATO countries.

NATO countries are now looking for cheap and reliable alternative weapons sources. So, even if we get purchase proposals from some NATO countries, how much that will affect our defense business can be understood from the fact that even after exporting defense products to more than 85 countries today, India holds less than one percent share in the global defense export market.

The government's efforts in the past decade in the name of indigenous production and self-reliance in the defense sector are now beginning to show excellent results, and it has been decided that India is a major player in the defense market in the future. There are numerous excellent exportable products such as BrahMos missile, Tejas, Arjun Tank, indigenous radar, artillery gun, Dornier-228 aircraft, Akash air defense system, Pinaka rocket. Several companies like Data Patterns India, Paras Defence and Space Technologies, DRDO, Bharat Electronics, Bharat Dynamics, IdeaForge Technology, HAL, Tata Advance Systems, are known globally for their products and deliveries. We are also better in the MRO i.e. Maintenance, Repair, Overhaul Sector. If we keep our aspirations grounded in reality, we can take advantage of this opportunity as a Tier-2 supplier. The government's goal is to achieve Rs 50,000 crore in defense exports by FY29, and it can be achieved in the same way. It remains to be seen what will be the fate of this optimism. ●



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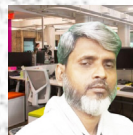


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# MODI REX

○ ONE NATION ○ ONE LEADER ○ ONE VOICE



Srirajesh

*Has 'Modi' become an unconquerable force in India's political theater? Has the foundation of democratic values eroded, leaving power concentrated in a single individual? Just as the disillusioned masses of the '70s found their hero on the silver screen in Amitabh Bachchan, is Modi, forged in the crucible of the RSS, playing a similar role in this 'Amrit Kaal' of independence? Is Modi's political journey—from 'tea seller' to 'world guru'—merely a ride on a wave of emotions, or is there a solid ideology driving it? With these questions, we delve into the 'Modi Era,' where the opposition is breathless, institutions are weakened, and questioning is a sin. Is this invincibility permanent, or will its demise be etched in the pages of history?*





**T**he 1970s and 80s: An era when the public simmered with resentment over the unfulfilled promises of India's independence. After Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the nation's first Prime Minister, who had pledged to rebuild India, power transitioned to his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who then imposed a state of emergency. The enraged populace now harbored a deep discontent with the system. While this anger manifested in Jayaprakash Narayan's call for a 'Sampoorna Kranti,' a young actor was mirroring the people's fury on the silver screen. Before anyone knew it, that actor had stepped out of the silver screen and into the hearts of the Indian masses, and thus emerged the superstar, Amitabh Bachchan.

Similar circumstances have unfolded in the

politics of the last two decades. A figure was being sculpted from within society. The duo crafting this figure wasn't Salim-Javed, but rather the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the hero they sought to plant in people's hearts was Narendra Modi. There was a difference between this hero and the silver screen's Amitabh Bachchan. Amitabh Bachchan only had to act, but this hero, Narendra Modi, had to not only act but also create the image of a charismatic leader, a provider of political solutions to all social problems, and an atmosphere against his opponents. And through his performance, he had to convey the message that only he could deliver them from this frightening environment. Behind this entire script, the Sangh Parivar was systematically playing its role. In





the role written for Narendra Modi, it was clear that he had to perform in such a way that the entire political system appeared paralyzed, and that he alone was the only option as a hero to save every mechanism.

To cultivate this hero's image, the Sangh Parivar made every effort, especially using technology extensively to establish him as a bold leader among young voters. Since 2012, the Sangh Parivar began writing a political script with the 2014 general election in mind, presenting Narendra Modi as its hero. Before long, this hero had turned all the failures of the UPA-2 era into keys to his success, and amidst the despair and disappointment of 1.25 billion Indians, he emerged as a beacon of hope. In the 2014 general election, the entire country united to form a government with a full

majority under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

And from there began the Modi Era. The old heroes of the BJP's struggles were confined to darkness alone... Murli Manohar Joshi was lost in waves of silence. Yashwant Sinha was constantly groping for a purpose to create a ruckus on a deserted road. MP Shatrughan Sinha was forced to openly reveal his villainy. The Congressmen or regional satraps did not have enough strength left to do anything other than struggle to regain power after losing it. Constitutional institutions were gradually shackled by the grip of the centralized governance system led by Narendra Modi. The extent of the changed circumstances became evident when four judges of the Supreme Court had to take to the streets to make their voices heard. The media slipped into the role of court musicians. Prime Minister Modi, who calls himself the prime servant, the nation's watchman, and the nation as his family, and claims to be a follower of Mahatma Gandhi, renamed Mahatma Gandhi's Gram Swaraj as Gram Suraj, but locked the intention of decentralization of power within seven locks. During Modi's rule, the situation became such that ministers and ministries were certainly visible, but power became centralized and confined to the PMO. It has become necessary to explore the reasons behind this happening.

In the 2019 elections, the country again placed Narendra Modi in power with even greater strength than before. Because no one else was visible on the horizon parallel to him. Then, in the 2024 elections, the BJP under Modi's leadership could not repeat its charisma and slipped below the majority mark, getting stuck at 240, but a government was formed again with the support of NDA allied parties.

In this third term, it is now essential to assess whether defeating the BJP, or in simpler terms, Modi, through democratic means, through elections, has become virtually impossible. There is no nationally recognized leader in the opposition apart from Rahul Gandhi, and even if Rahul were to achieve something noteworthy, Congress does not seem inclined to allow it. Thus, the opposition and its prominent faces who could become Prime Minister are absent. But who after Modi? This question might be asked somewhat prematurely, but it is more prudent to begin difficult tasks ahead of time. This cover story has many shades, in which we will discuss the invincible Modi, the continuous Modi.



## Achievements of the Modi Government

### First Term (2014–2019): The Foundation Decade

#### 1. Jan Dhan Yojana (2014):

Over 500 million bank accounts opened. The world's largest financial inclusion initiative.

#### 2. Swachh Bharat Mission (2014):

Over 100 million toilets constructed. Significant decline in open defecation rates.

#### 3. Ujjwala Yojana (2016):

Free LPG connections for poor women – over 90 million beneficiaries.

#### 4. Make in India (2014):

Initiative to boost manufacturing and investment, though with limited industrial transformation.

#### 5. GST (2017):

Implementation of a uniform tax system across the country, a historic tax reform.

#### 6. Aadhaar and Digital India:

Advanced e-governance, digital payments, and Aadhaar linking.

#### 7. Surgical Strikes (2016):

Targeted terrorist camps across the Line of Control after the Uri attack.

#### 8. Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter):

Social campaign focused on girl child education and safety.

#### 9. Saubhagya Yojana:

Ambitious initiative to provide electricity to rural households.

### Second Term (2019–2024): Era of Decisive Changes

#### 1. Abrogation of Article 370 (August 2019):

Revoked special status for Jammu and Kashmir, bifurcated the state into two Union Territories.

#### 2. Construction of the Ram Temple (2020–2024):

Construction of a grand Ram Temple following the Supreme Court verdict, inaugurated in 2024.

#### 3. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA):

Law to grant citizenship to non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries.

#### 4. Ban on Triple Talaq:

Significant step towards Muslim women's rights.



We will also assess the politics of the future in contrast to the current politics of the country, and the pace at which India, under Modi's leadership, is moving towards its vision of becoming a world guru on a global scale.

Recently, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat advised people to 'retire' after the age of 75. This statement was then seen as pressure on Narendra Modi to retire from politics after completing 75 years of age next month, i.e., on September 17, 2025, although Bhagwat clarified his statement, saying that it should not be linked to the speculations being made regarding Modi. However, in politics, speculations, hints, and actions are taken in the style of 'eyes somewhere else, target somewhere else,' and their hundred percent implication is politics. The dramatic manner in which Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar resigned from his post on the very first day of the Parliament's monsoon session is also being viewed somewhat through the same lens, as he also completed 75 years of age this year, and he cited health reasons for his resignation. Anyway, after all this, it has become clear that this matter of 75 years has remained only in political headlines and statements, but it is certainly something to be said a little prematurely, but it is more prudent to start difficult tasks ahead of time. The BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi will continue to win elections and form governments in the center and most of the states as long as he himself wishes to do so. In fact, in today's Indian politics, it has become almost impossible to defeat the BJP through democratic means—through elections. There is no face





in the opposition other than Rahul Gandhi who can become a real claimant for the post of Prime Minister at the national level. And even if Rahul has the ability to do something remarkable, the inactivity of the Congress does not seem to provide him with that opportunity.

So, the question is not just who will defeat the BJP—but also whether it can be defeated at all? Has the BJP's grip on the Election Commission, the media, the judiciary, and all the constitutional institutions become so strong that the mandate has now become not a natural democratic expression but a 'sponsored and managed' event?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's politics is not based on any permanent ideals, but it rides on constantly changing emotions—sometimes 'tea seller,' sometimes 'watchman,' sometimes 'world guru,' and sometimes 'development man.' And behind this constantly changing personality, the most disciplined mechanism that stands is his foreign policy. The biggest thing is that apart from politics, his personality is that of a Hindu nationalist leader, who has been meticulously crafted by the RSS in its laboratory. According to many senior political analysts, Narendra Modi is the ideal political face of the dreams of Hedgewar and Guru Golwalkar, cooked in the ideology of the Sangh, and perhaps it is the result of the penance of not 100 but at least 90 years of the Sangh Parivar's ideological journey. Notably, this year the Sangh will celebrate the 100th year of its establishment, i.e., the centenary year.

## Failures of the Modi Government First Term (2014–2019)

### 1. **Demonetization (2016):**

The sudden demonetization severely impacted the economy, led to the closure of millions of small businesses, increased unemployment, and failed to retrieve the expected black money.

### 2. **Employment Crisis:**

Contrary to promises, 20 million jobs per year were not created for youth; the highest unemployment rate in 45 years was recorded in 2017–18.

### 3. **Hastily Implemented GST:**

GST, implemented without full preparation, caused hardship for small businesses and complicated the tax system.

### 4. **Agricultural Crisis:**

Farmer suicides, lack of fair prices for produce, and repeated protests questioned the policies of the Modi government.

### 5. **Weakening of Institutions:**

Allegations of interference and lack of independence in institutions such as the CBI, Reserve Bank, and Election Commission.

## Second Term (2019–2024)

### 1. **Mismanagement of the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020–21):**

Shortage of oxygen, failure of healthcare infrastructure, millions of deaths, and the plight of migrant workers raised questions about the government's preparedness.

### 2. **Three Farm Laws (2020):**

Historic farmers' movement against farm laws enacted without consultation; the government eventually had to withdraw them.

### 3. **Border Dispute with China (2020):**

Failure to give a clear response to China even after the martyrdom of 20 Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley clash became a subject of criticism.

### 4. **Decline in Employment:**

The labor force participation rate remained historically low; massive cuts in permanent jobs due to privatization.

### 5. **Inflation and Economic Inequality:**

**5. National Education Policy (NEP):**

New education policy implemented after 34 years – emphasis on flexibility, mother tongue, and skill-based learning.

**6. PM-KISAN Yojana:**

Annual transfer of ₹6,000 directly to farmers' bank accounts.

**7. COVID-19 Management:**

Administered over 2.2 billion vaccine doses, the world's largest vaccination campaign.

**8. Vande Bharat Trains:**

Launch of semi-high-speed trains, ushering in modern rail travel.

**9. National Infrastructure Pipeline (NIP) and Gati Shakti Yojana:**

Integrated plan to boost investment in infrastructure.

**10. Media and Digital Laws:**

Amendments to IT rules, increased monitoring of social media platforms.

**Third Term (2024–Present): Initial Phase****1. Formation of the NDA Government (2024):**

Government formed with coalition partners after failing to secure an outright majority.

**2. Focus on Semiconductor, Chip Manufacturing:**

Investment in technological production under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative.

**3. 'Operation Sindoor':**

Strikes on terrorist camps located in Pakistan in response to Pahalgam terrorist attack, followed by a partial war.

**4. Chandrayaan-3 and Gaganyaan:**

India's emergence as a space power through ISRO initiatives.

**5. Use of the New Parliament Building:**

Symbol of the center's power and cultural nationalism.

The biggest contribution of the Modi government's foreign policy has been that it has made diplomacy television-friendly. Now foreign policy is no longer a dialogue process behind closed doors, but has become a live-streaming-worthy event. Every foreign tour of Modi is like a victory campaign of a hero—Narendra Modi walking hand in hand with Xi Jinping on the

Sabarmati Riverfront, Obama on a swing, Namaste with Trump in Motera, inauguration of the temple in Abu Dhabi—everything is presented in such a grand manner that the common citizen sitting in the country has also started seeing foreign policy as an 'event.'

But behind this glitz, has India's diplomatic stature really increased? From the border dispute with China to the lack of dialogue with Pakistan, India's ambiguity in the Russia-Ukraine war, or the instability of relations with the Gulf countries—the Modi government's foreign policy has faced serious questions on all fronts. India's participation in BRICS, G20, or Quad has been there, but has India's voice been decisively heard on these platforms? Or have we just remained a decoration of the stage?

The Modi government's foreign policy seems to be afflicted with a particular kind of self-obsession. It has taken the form of a one-sided dialogue in which it has been assumed that what India is saying is the final word. India's 'silent policy' on the Ukraine war is a glaring example of this. In order to maintain good relations with the West, Russia was neither openly supported nor opposed—and as a result, India has been viewed with suspicion from both sides."

China has dealt the biggest blow to India's diplomatic image. From Doklam to Galwan, and then the expansion of infrastructure in the regions of Arunachal—every time, China put India under strategic pressure, and the Modi government either remained silent or reacted in a very cautious language. Prime Minister Modi's statement that 'No one has entered, nor is anyone inside' has been recorded in the pages of history as an example of diplomatic self-deception.

The efforts made under the 'Neighborhood First' policy have mostly remained limited to appearances. India's relations with countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh have either been strained or distrustful. India's interference during the constitution-making of Nepal, silence on the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka, and the negative impact on issues like NRC with Bangladesh—all these have shown that 'Neighborhood First' was only a proclamation, not a policy.

Narendra Modi's foreign policy has become more person-centric than involving institutions. The role of the Ministry of External Affairs has been limited, and most decisions are made directly from the PMO. An expert institution like the Indian Foreign Service has



become limited to a 'logistics team,' whose job has been reduced to setting the stage and decorating flags for visits.

When we talk about Modi's alternative, it has to be understood whether Modi's alternative is to be seen only as a person, or also as a style, structure, and ideology? There is no doubt that there is no clear successor to Narendra Modi in the BJP. Names like Amit Shah, Yogi Adityanath, Khattar, Nadda are in the air, but none of them has been able to achieve the universal acceptance that Modi has received.

And perhaps this is also Modi's greatest strength—he completely eliminates the possibility of any successor within himself.

But is this invincibility permanent? No. History teaches that within every invincible leadership lies the seed of disintegration. Modi will be 75. Even if he remains for two more terms, it is certain that he will have to leave the post after that—either voluntarily or compulsorily. Then, will the BJP bring someone from within itself or will a 'Modi mask' be presented who speaks, smiles, and looks at the camera in the same way as the 'hero' wants, not the 'ministry'?

There was a time when the leadership of the BJP was decided by the blessings of the Sangh. But now the political dominance of the Sangh has become zero. It is limited only to symbolic statements. It has neither moral strength left nor organizational grip. In such a situation, it seems ridiculous in today's situation to believe that the Sangh will have a decisive role in the selection of Modi's successor.

If this selection happens in Modi's style, then one morning the party will find out that their new leader is Khattar or Narottam Mishra. But if it happens through a well-thought-out process, then some potential names will emerge—like Yogi Adityanath, Amit Shah, Dharmendra Pradhan, Manoj Sinha, or some other emerging face will be shaped.

But the question is who will the party prefer—someone who is quick at raising funds, who is obedient to the organization, who can emotionally bind the public, or who is only loyal to Modi? At this time, the party probably does not have the answer to 'Modi after Modi, who after that?', but this search is now necessary.

Today the BJP has become not a party but a 'system'—which has one face, one voice, and also one fear. This

Prices of petrol, gas, and food items continued to rise; the wealth of billionaires continued to increase, while the income of the common man decreased.

#### **6. Allegations of Attacks on Constitutional Values:**

CAA-NRC controversy, revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, and restrictions on freedom of expression were criticized.

#### **Third Term (2024–Present)**

#### **1. Dependence on Coalition Partners in NDA:**

Having lost a full majority, the government has had to depend on the support of coalition allies, limiting decision-making ability.

#### **2. Unemployment and Examination Scams:**

Paper leaks, delays in recruitment processes, and growing frustration among youth have emerged as major issues.

#### **3. Opposition to Anti-People Policies:**

Student and civil organizations continue to protest against issues such as the new education policy, privatization, and online surveillance.

#### **4. Declining Rankings of Democracy and Media:**

India's rank has fallen in international press freedom and democratic indices.

fear is not of any external force, but of internal silence. No one else in the party dares to raise their voice. And when this happens, 'democracy' remains limited only to the electoral machinery, and the country enters a long political fatigue.

No situation is permanent in politics. The absence of options is not an option. Political consciousness always creates options. The failure of the opposition is not permanent—if the public gets tired, breaks down, and gets bored with the monolithic form of power, then options will emerge. But this will only happen when the public can understand the difference between truth and propaganda in the crowd of information.

There are many questions regarding the Modi government's foreign policy, internal governance style, and succession planning—and their answers also have to come more from the public than from within the power. If a nation wants to protect its democracy, it has to move beyond individualism and rely on institutions and processes. Otherwise, the question will remain the same: 'Are we choosing a hero, or just a new mask?' ●

# THE MODI MODEL

## Distant Neighbors, Proximate Power

**A Third Term: Claims of Progress, a Deficit of Dialogue, and Democratic Fatigue**

*Elected in 2014, Modi pledged to make India a global power. His 11 years have seen economic growth, digitization, and infrastructure development. Yet, India grapples with unemployment, inequality, and environmental challenges. A 'multi-alignment' foreign policy has had successes, but relations with neighboring countries remain challenging.*



Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised to transform India from the top down. Yet, even at the end of his first term, his record was harshly assessed. According to *The Economist*, by 2019 he had failed in many of his reforms. Five more years have passed, and the Hindu nationalist Modi, now re-elected for a third term, is committed to making India the world's third-largest economy by 2030 and a developed country by 2047—the centenary of India's independence. After 11 years in power, his record reflects an economy still under construction and a democracy facing increasing fragility.

According to the International Monetary Fund, by 2022 India had surpassed the United Kingdom to become the world's fifth-largest economic power. By 2025, India had reached fourth place, and institutions like the World Bank, IMF, and S&P now estimate that



India will become the third-largest economy by 2027. In fiscal year 2023–24, India's real GDP growth rate was 7.8%. This growth is primarily driven by public investment, the service sector, infrastructure, and petroleum-mining activities.

However, this rapid growth rate is not creating enough jobs for the approximately 10 million new entrants into the labor force each year. Due to an underdeveloped industrial base, India faces a severe employment crisis, especially among young people—by 2024, 42% of young graduates are unemployed.

Per capita GDP continues to highlight India's inequality. At approximately \$2,730 (₹2.3 lakh) per year, this figure places India around 127th in the world rankings. Many of Modi's economic reforms—Digital India, tax reform, GST—have been inspired by the policy framework of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. However, Modi has implemented them in a more decisive and sometimes harsher manner, such as implementing GST in 2017, which was conceived in the 2000s and took 17 years to materialize.

## Expanding Infrastructure and Digital Payments

Digitization is arguably the most prominent achievement of the Modi government. Through UPI (Unified Payments Interface), India recorded more than 100 billion transactions in 2023, totaling ₹180 lakh crore (over €2,000 billion). India has now become the world's largest digital payments market.

Similarly, infrastructure development has been the backbone of Modi's growth strategy. The construction of roads, bridges, water projects, and solar power plants has stimulated service sectors. In 2014, India had 74 operating airports, which has now increased to over 148. A network of fast and modern Vande Bharat trains has also begun to emerge, although regular trains remain crowded and slow.

But this development also comes at a cost: according to the IMF, India's public debt is now 81.9% of GDP (2024). On the other hand, megacities like New Delhi still face severe shortages of drinking water. Waste management remains chaotic, and power grids cannot meet demand.

## Crony Capitalism and Economic Inequality

In today's India, crony capitalism has become linked to two names: Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani. One

***Despite impressive growth figures, India struggles to create sufficient jobs for the approximately 10 million people joining the workforce annually. An underdeveloped industrial sector is fueling a severe employment crisis, especially impacting young people, with a staggering 42% of young graduates unemployed by 2024.***

a successor to a business empire and the other a self-made billionaire, both have acquired unprecedented economic power in the Modi era. They are not alone—industrial groups such as Tata, Birla, and JSW have also become increasingly powerful.

According to a report published in 2024, India's 20 largest corporate groups now generate more than 81% of the country's corporate profits, almost double what it was in 2014.

The environment has been the biggest 'invisible casualty' of this economic ascent. A net-zero carbon target has been set for 2070, but in terms of air quality and temperature, India has already entered a 'climate risk zone.'

## India's Global Image and Diplomatic Dilemmas

India has made an impressive presence on the international stage in the Modi era. The success of Chandrayaan-3, the hosting of the G20, and India's participation in the Quad and BRICS—demonstrate that India has become a 'power to be reckoned with.'

However, there are two black spots in foreign policy:

1. China's continued incursions on the Himalayan borders (Doklam, Galwan, and Tawang), with India's silence becoming a cause for criticism.
2. And the killing of a Sikh activist in Canada in June 2023, with Indian intelligence agencies suspected of involvement. The United States has also expressed concern in this matter.

## Hindutva and the Erosion of Democracy

If the Modi era were to be encapsulated in a symbol, it would be: saffron color—symbol of Hindu identity and the BJP's ideological shadow. In Modi's 11 years, India's secular character has diminished, and the situation of Muslims has become akin to second-class citizenship. The Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which was grandly inaugurated in 2024, has become a clear symbol of India's religious reorganization.

Democracy, though, remains in name only. Elections do take place, but control over the media, judiciary, election commission, and opposition parties has now become commonplace.

## Personality Worship and Thoughtlessness

India's national politics has now become personality-based, not ideology-based. As historian Ramachandra Guha writes in *The Telegraph*, 'Over the past decade, the entire party machinery—and a large part of government institutions—has been busy crafting Modi as a great, supernatural, and semi-divine man. He cannot be questioned; he can only be worshipped.'

## Foreign Policy: A Strategy of Multi-Alignment

The foreign policy of the Modi era has been conducted under a strategy of 'multi-alignment,' in which India has sought to balance its traditional relationship with Russia, its strategic alliances with Western partners, and its geopolitical balancing with Asian neighbors. Some aspects of this policy have been successful, but relations with South Asian neighbors have remained consistently challenging.

## Bangladesh: Strategic Cooperation, but Cracks in Trust

In the early years of the Modi government, India-Bangladesh relations improved significantly. Implementing the land boundary agreement was a historic achievement. Both countries increased partnerships in the fields of security, energy, and trade.

However, steps like the NRC and CAA have increased Dhaka's concerns. Bangladesh fears that Bengali Muslims living in India may be deprived of citizenship and pushed towards their country. The Sheikh Hasina government has publicly supported India, but social discontent has now increased.

## Nepal: Tension Between Hindutva and Sovereignty



Relations with Nepal have remained tense since the 2015 India-Nepal border blockade. The Modi government's criticism of discrimination against the Madhesi community in Nepal's constitution and the blockade fueled anti-India sentiments.

In response, Nepal increased its closeness to China. Nepal included disputed areas like Kalapani and Lipulekh in its map, which India rejected. Modi's 'Ram Setu Diplomacy' (Janakpur and Ayodhya connection) has been an attempt at cultural harmony, but political distrust remains.

## Bhutan: Stable but Signs of Imbalance

Bhutan has been India's closest neighbor, and in the Doklam dispute (2017), India directly intervened militarily to try to stop China. This provided immediate security to Bhutan, but India's military presence and interference in decisions have increased unease among some sections there.

Bhutan has now started communicating with China, and if it establishes diplomatic relations, it would be a





strategic blow for India.

## Maldives: Changing Relations

Relations with the Maldives deteriorated in Modi's first term due to the pro-China government of Abdulla Yameen in the Maldives. But India-Maldives relations improved again after Ibrahim Solih came to power in 2018. India started numerous development projects.

However, relations have again become strained with the rise of Yameen supporter Mohammed Muizzu to power in 2023 and the promotion of the 'India Out' campaign. India had to remove its military presence, which was considered a diplomatic defeat, but then the diplomacy of the Modi government worked here, relations started as before and at the end of July when Narendra Modi went on a visit to Maldives, he was also awarded the summit honor there.

## Sri Lanka: India as Savior in Economic Crisis

In the 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis, India provided assistance of more than \$4 billion—in fuel, food, and medicines. But Chinese debt traps and projects like

the Hambantota Port keep Sri Lanka under China's influence.

However, under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe, India has found strategic cooperation, but in the long term, Sri Lanka's economic and diplomatic stability remains uncertain for India.

## Afghanistan: The Taliban Era and India's Dilemma

The US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power (2021) put India in a diplomatic crisis. India initially did not recognize the Taliban, but later established contacts under the guise of humanitarian assistance.

India's Afghan policy remains unclear. India's coordination with partners like Iran and Russia is limited, and China is now more active in Afghan geopolitics than India.

## Pakistan: Confrontation and 'Operation Sindoor'

Relations between India and Pakistan have remained continuously tense after the Uri attack in 2016 and the Pulwama attack in 2019. Actions such as the Balakot Air Strike, the abrogation of Article 370, and cross-border surgical strikes have permanently complicated relations.

After 'Operation Sindoor' in response to the Pahalgam terrorist attack this year, diplomatic dialogue with Pakistan is almost suspended, and trade, visas, cultural exchanges—all are stalled.

## Conclusion: Successes and Limitations

The Modi government's foreign policy has tried to establish India as an emerging power on the global stage—the active role on platforms such as QUAD, G20, I2U2, and ISA is evidence of this. Jaishankar's aggressive and outspoken strategy has been praised in some quarters.

But in the context of neighboring countries, India's policy has been mostly reactive, not strategic. While India's soft power and development assistance have brought some benefits, excessive militarization, incompetent dialogue, and nationalism-based diplomacy have eroded trust.

Modi's foreign policy is being seen as 'event-driven diplomacy'—platforms, grandeur, camera-ready foreign tours—but the long-term strategy, especially with neighbors, is still incomplete. ●

# INDIA AFTER MODI?

## HINDUTVA'S SELF-REFLECTION



Christophe Jaffrelot

*French political scientist, sociologist, and Indologist Christophe Jaffrelot has reviewed Ram Madhav's book, 'The New World: 21st Century Global Order and India.' He writes that the book not only globalizes Hindutva but also functions as a kind of self-reflective examination, where the gap between ideology, global diplomacy, and practical achievements is laid bare. This book perhaps lays the foundation stone for an era that will follow the 'Modi era'*

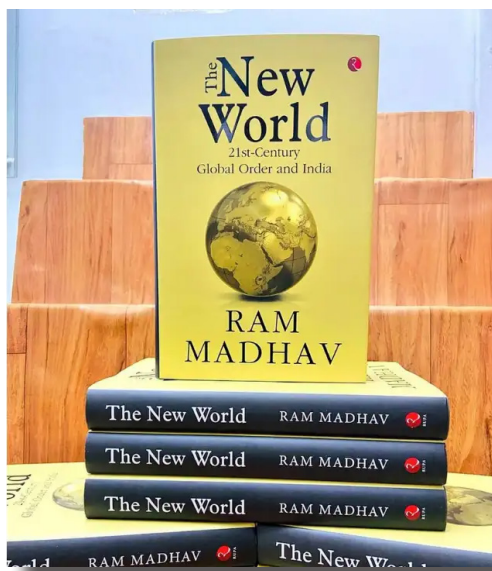
It's unprecedented when a prominent Hindutva leader critiques Narendra Modi's policies. However, the views expressed in Ram Madhav's new book can also be seen as self-criticism, considering his role.

Ram Madhav, a senior figure associated with both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has written a new book, "The New World: 21st Century Global Order and India," which can be read on three levels.

The first part offers a somewhat generic narrative of human history, descriptive in nature and therefore not explored further. However, the second part, where he discusses India, presents a quite interesting perspective. He expresses skepticism about India's potential to become a "superpower," offers veiled criticisms of government policies, and, notably, attempts to partially rehabilitate the legacy of the Congress party – a rare occurrence for an RSS leader.

**Hindutva and "National Conservatism":** Ram Madhav is currently seen as an "organic intellectual" of Hindu nationalism. Yet, the book contains no mention of Savarkar, nor the RSS or its affiliated organizations. Instead, he attempts to present Hindutva as a version of "National Conservatism" within a global context, an ideology gaining popularity worldwide.

He claims that "Hindu and Greek civilizations" laid the foundations for a moral order in the pre-Christian era. Simultaneously, "Hindus





established a superior social order through the Vedas, Upanishads, and Shastras." He portrays India as the world's largest economy in the first millennium, overlooking the fact that India's economic prosperity peaked during the Mughal era. For him, the decline is attributed to "800 years of exploitation, first by the Mughals and Central Asian invaders, and then by the British through colonialism."



### **Ideological Outrage Against Semitic Religions:**

According to Madhav, India's ancient prosperity was due to the "tolerance of Hinduism," while Islam and Christianity "pushed the world into a theocentric dictatorship," a system where "nothing could withstand opposition to religion." This statement highlights the paradox that while Hindutva speaks of "religion," it often views Hindus as an ethnic identity, descendants of "Aryan ancestors" and India as a "sacred land." This perspective can be compared to the Zionist identity of Jews.

### **India's Diplomatic Dreams and Contradictions:**

Ram Madhav advocates for presenting India as "Brand India" on the global stage, stating that "the era of soft power is over; now is the time for smart power." However, he also acknowledges that progress in this direction has been very limited. He defines India's potential partners based on "shared enemies" – such as "liberals," "cultural Marxists," "Islamists," "woke activists," and NGOs. George Soros is mentioned as a symbol of fear, linked to issues like the farmer protests and the Adani controversy.

### **The Idea of 'Dharmocracy' and Supporting Social Structure:**

According to Madhav, India should move towards "Dharmocracy" – "Democracy, the Bharat way." This implies that power would be accountable not to the people but to dharma, as interpreted by Brahmin Rajgurus. This essentially advocates for a form of Hindu theocracy. Furthermore, he legitimizes the caste system as part of India's "diversity": "India's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity makes it colorful and festive." Dismissing claims of discrimination against Muslims, he considers their population growth (7.81%) as proof of the minorities' "comfort," which is a superficial and misleading social analysis.

### **Skepticism about Progress and Self-Criticism**

The second part of the book, focusing on India's foreign policy, defense, and technological development, is surprisingly candid. In the context of the Modi government's achievements, Madhav only speaks of symbols – such as the Sengol's installation in Parliament, while listing serious shortcomings in the technical, economic and military fields.

He says that in India:

- 'There is no culture of research and innovation.'
- 'We need 'imagineers' instead of engineers.'
- 'Copying is not innovation, and imitation is not creativity.'

He offers harsh criticism of India's education, R&D, quantum technology, defense production (such as the Tejas fighter jet), and naval weaknesses.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Ram Madhav's book is the repeated praise for Congress leaders:

- Nehru's diplomacy in Nepal and Sri Lanka is praised.
- Indira Gandhi's contribution to the independence of Bangladesh is recognized.
- Narasimha Rao's Look East policy is commended.
- Manmohan Singh's Indian Ocean Naval Symposium initiative is acknowledged.

This partial acceptance suggests that the Modi government's foreign policy has achieved very limited results so far.

### **The Dichotomy Between the Dream of "Brand India" and Reality:**

Ram Madhav ultimately admits that India's "demographic dividend" could become an illusion if decisive interventions are not made in the areas of skilling, innovation, and employment. He quotes Lal Bahadur Shastri: "We can only gain the respect of the world when we are internally strong and eradicate poverty and unemployment." This is perhaps a sign that the BJP should move beyond identity politics and towards socio-economic inclusion. ●

*This article is published on <https://www.harkaraonline.com>*



Shreya Gupta

# Silencing Dissent

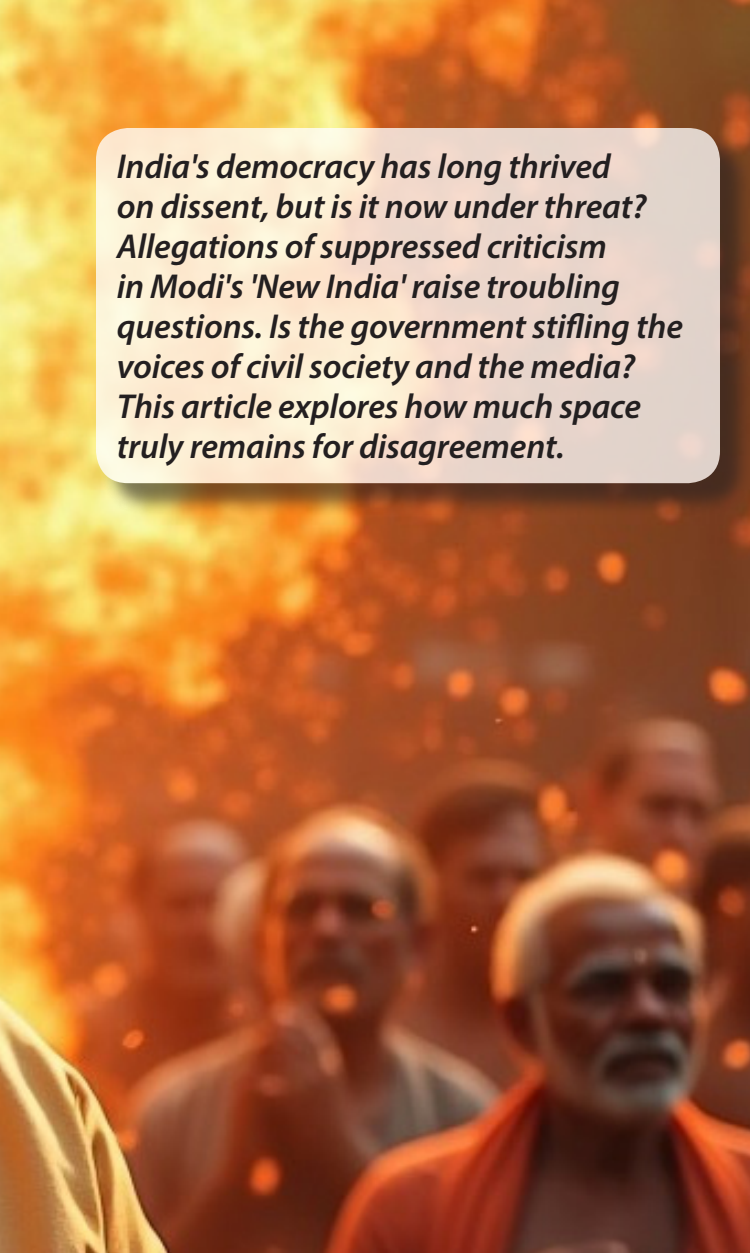
## The Erosion of Indian Democracy

India's democracy has always drawn its strength from its diversity, dissent, and vibrant debates. The Constitution upholds freedom of expression as a fundamental right so that every citizen can hold those in power accountable. But over the past decade, a pressing question has begun to echo across the country: Is dissent being suppressed in India? Is the government labelling criticism as anti-national to muzzle the voices of civil society? Today, when we speak of "New India" and dream of becoming a "Vishwaguru" (world leader), it is crucial to examine how much room truly remains for disagreement and critique in this journey of development.

Since the beginning of Prime Minister Modi's first term, civil society organizations, human rights

defenders, journalists, and sections of academia have faced new layers of legal and administrative pressure. One of the biggest tools has been the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act or FCRA. Amendments to this law have tightened the noose around foreign funding for NGOs. Iconic organizations like Amnesty International India, which spent decades holding governments accountable for human rights abuses, were forced to shut down operations in India in 2020 after their bank accounts were frozen. Greenpeace, Terre des Hommes, and several others faced similar crackdowns, accused of violating funding norms. The government's stand has been that these organizations misuse foreign funds and hamper India's developmental projects. But the real question is: since when did raising concerns about human rights or





***India's democracy has long thrived on dissent, but is it now under threat? Allegations of suppressed criticism in Modi's 'New India' raise troubling questions. Is the government stifling the voices of civil society and the media? This article explores how much space truly remains for disagreement.***

Bhasin, editor of the Kashmir Times, who persistently raised her voice against internet shutdowns and restrictions on media in Kashmir. The administration responded with bureaucratic harassment and eviction from her office premises. Independent outlets like NewsClick, The Wire, and Alt News that fact-check claims, question power, and report on uncomfortable truths have faced relentless raids and interrogations. NewsClick's founder was arrested under UAPA, India's stringent anti-terror law. The government insists that the law is applied equally, but critics argue that these actions are part of a deliberate strategy to silence dissenting narratives.

Human rights activists too have felt the noose tighten. In the infamous Bhima Koregaon case, well-known activists like Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, and Gautam Navlakha were accused under the UAPA of supporting Maoist ideology and fomenting unrest. Many retired judges and global human rights bodies have questioned the credibility of the evidence used to jail these elderly academics and lawyers. The Elgar Parishad event, which was primarily a cultural gathering to discuss Ambedkarite ideas, was projected as a conspiracy to overthrow the state. Is it fair, or even democratic, to brand social justice discussions as seditious plots?

If we look at India's legal architecture, we see that the colonial-era sedition law (IPC Section 124A) still serves as the easiest weapon to target dissenters. In 2022, the Supreme Court put the sedition law on hold for review, but on the ground, police and local administrations continue to slap it on students, young journalists, and grassroots activists. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, originally designed to combat terrorism, is now increasingly used to link dissent with anti-national activity, making bail nearly impossible. The result? Years of pre-trial imprisonment punishment even before conviction.

The digital space too is no longer the safe haven it once seemed. New IT Rules give the government sweeping powers to order the removal of social media content and force platforms to comply or face severe penalties. Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms have been compelled to take down posts that criticize the government, all under the banner of fighting hate speech or fake news. However, the same stringent measures rarely apply to pro-government troll armies that openly peddle disinformation and abuse. The

the environment become anti-development?

The story of Disha Ravi, a young climate activist from Karnataka, still resonates with India's youth. In 2021, she was arrested in the infamous 'toolkit' case for allegedly helping to share a document meant to support the farmers' protests on international platforms. She was charged with sedition, a colonial-era law meant to crush uprisings against the British Empire. Though she was later granted bail, the Delhi High Court pointed out that merely supporting a protest cannot be equated with sedition. Yet, her sudden arrest sent a chilling message: questioning authority can cost you dearly.

Journalism, often called the fourth pillar of democracy, is perhaps facing its harshest test today. Take Anuradha

fear this has instilled is palpable, many young Indians who once used social media fearlessly to question the establishment now think twice before posting a single tweet.

India's situation invites worrying parallels with other nations where democracy has become hollow in spirit, if not entirely by law. In Hungary, Viktor Orban branded NGOs as "foreign agents" to curb their independence. In Russia, opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny were jailed or poisoned; dissent was crushed systematically. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regime has used state-controlled media and harsh laws to muzzle free press and criticism. India hasn't reached these extremes yet but many rights observers argue that if the space for dissent keeps shrinking, India risks losing the soul of its democracy.

Of course, the government defends its position too. The ruling BJP claims that a "lobby" of urban intellectuals, foreign-funded NGOs, and fact-checkers malign India's image globally and slow down national development. There is some truth to the fact that certain NGOs misused foreign funds without transparency. But should the solution be a sweeping crackdown that drags thousands of sincere organizations into the same net of suspicion? Wouldn't it be better to increase transparency and accountability without stifling the very culture of healthy critique that keeps democracies alive?

Yet, despite this mounting pressure, civil society hasn't completely surrendered. India's historic farmers' protest proved that people power can still shape policy. Farmers from Punjab, Haryana, and Western Uttar Pradesh camped on Delhi's borders for over a year, protesting the three controversial farm laws. At first, they were branded as Khalistanis, anti-nationals, or foreign agents — but when public support refused to waver, the government finally withdrew the laws. This remains a powerful testament to the resilience of collective, peaceful dissent in India's democratic fabric.

When Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and India's Constitution makers envisioned the nation's future, they saw dissent not as a threat but as democracy's lifeline. Ambedkar famously said the Constitution is not just a legal document, but a living instrument that must reflect the voice of the people. If dissent is criminalized, it is not just individuals who suffer — it is the very soul of the Republic that stands betrayed.



Today, India must learn to separate disagreement from disloyalty. Governments that see every criticism as conspiracy end up weakening themselves in the long run. A healthy democracy is one where criticism is not seen as enmity but as a chance for course correction. Instead of dividing the media into "lapdog" or "anti-national," it is far better to empower journalists to report freely and fearlessly. Instead of treating NGOs as criminals, the government could view them as partners in development. Instead of branding opposing ideologies as treason, they can be engaged in democratic dialogue.

Within this larger picture, India's judiciary plays a crucial role as the final guardian of fundamental rights. The Supreme Court and various High Courts have, in several landmark cases, restrained executive overreach and protected civil liberties. But courts too must be mindful that delayed justice can be as devastating as no justice at all — by the time bail comes through, many voices have already been silenced.





The irony is stark: India's youth have more tools to speak up than ever before — smartphones, social media, independent media platforms. Yet the fear of harassment, arrest, or being labelled “anti-national” discourages them from using these tools fully. The danger here is not just to free speech, but to India's future as an ideas-driven democracy.

Globally, India's reputation is under scrutiny too. The World Press Freedom Index has seen India slip consistently in rankings, dropping to 161st in 2023. Reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch highlight India's growing intolerance towards civil liberties. The government dismisses these as Western propaganda — but closing one's eyes doesn't change the ground reality.

If India genuinely wants to lead the world as a “Vishwaguru,” it must demonstrate that it is a society where voices can disagree fearlessly, where questioning the government does not mean betraying the nation. The world looks up to countries that champion freedom of

expression, pluralism, and the courage to tolerate criticism. From the Vietnam War protests in the US to climate protests in the UK, healthy democracies have never equated dissent with sedition.

In conclusion, the rising squeeze on India's civil society is not merely a blow to activists, journalists or NGOs, it is a direct threat to the very roots of Indian democracy. A nation where people can question power without fear is the true mark of strength. History shows us that wherever dissent has been crushed, the seeds of bigger unrest were sown. India's leadership would do well to remember that dialogue, not suppression, is the path to genuine progress. Only then can slogans like “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas” move beyond catchy rhetoric and translate into ground reality where every citizen's voice truly matters. ●

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*Shreya Gupta is an emerging voice in journalism, currently reporting with Cult Current.*



# India Navigating the New World Order

## From Observer to Rule-Shaper?

*From Fragmentation to Foundation: India's Quest to Become a New Economic Anchor. This article analyzes India's strategic capacity to chart a new economic future amidst a turbulent global landscape.*



Riya Goyal

There was a time when the world seemed headed in one direction — toward open markets, shared production systems, and multilateral institutions designed to prevent economic isolation. Globalisation wasn't just a theory; it was the rhythm of the world economy, marked by free-flowing trade and interconnected supply chains. But that world is shifting — sometimes slowly, sometimes with tectonic force. Trade wars, energy nationalism, and the race to restructure supply chains are dismantling the frameworks that once held globalisation together.

India finds itself both a participant and an observer of this transition. The disruption is real — and so are the opportunities.

### The Fracture of Multilateralism

Trade wars did more than just disrupt the flow of goods; they exposed the vulnerability of global consensus. The U.S.–China standoff was only the beginning. Tariffs on hundreds of billions in goods, retaliatory sanctions, and the undermining of the WTO's dispute resolution mechanism signalled a fundamental departure from



collective arbitration toward transactional bargaining. What followed was a broader disillusionment with global trade bodies — not just in Washington or Beijing, but in capitals across the world.

India, traditionally cautious in its multilateral engagements, read this shift early. Its refusal to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was more than just domestic economic caution; it was a strategic assessment. If large trade blocs can be held hostage by dominant economies, then smaller players must preserve the ability to negotiate terms bilaterally. But is bilateralism sustainable in the long term? Or is it simply a holding strategy while new global norms are formed?

#### **Strategic Bilateralism: Calculated Compromise or Assertive Autonomy?**

India's turn toward bilateral trade agreements reveal a preference for controlled openness. Trade deals with Australia, the UAE, and the European Free Trade Association reflect not a rejection of global trade, but a recalibration — towards partnerships where economic gains align with strategic interests. Unlike multilateral pacts, bilateral deals offer New Delhi the advantage of negotiating from a position of political clarity and calibrated economic ambition. Yet these are not without risk. Bilateralism inherently favours stronger economies, and India's engagements with the United States underscore this imbalance. The U.S. is moving away from strategic altruism — even toward long-time partners like India — in favour of a more transactional stance. Tariff cuts and regulatory concessions are being sought not as goodwill gestures but as prerequisites for continued support. In this context, India's economic policymakers must walk a fine line — offering enough to satisfy strategic partners without ceding control over domestic priorities.

#### **Supply Chain Realignment: A Window or a Wall?**

The pandemic revealed what few had anticipated: the world's supply chains, praised for their efficiency, lacked resilience. As production lines halted and essential goods became inaccessible, it became clear that economic globalisation had built a house of cards. With China at the epicentre of many of these networks, alternative production hubs became a global priority. India saw the moment — and moved swiftly.

The government's Production Linked Incentive (PLI)

schemes, targeted at electronics, pharmaceuticals, and semiconductors, were part of a deliberate attempt to draw in global capital while building domestic capability. Companies like Apple and Micron announced plans to shift manufacturing into India. Friendshoring — the strategic relocation of production to aligned countries — seemed to be working in New Delhi's favour. But building trust in supply chains takes more than incentives. It requires predictability, policy stability, and infrastructure readiness — areas where India still faces hurdles. Bureaucratic delays, import restrictions, and policy reversals have at times created investor hesitancy. While India's labour pool and market size are attractive, its ease-of-doing-business narrative remains contested. Can India move from being a viable alternative to China to becoming the next indispensable hub of global production?

#### **Energy Nationalism: A New Race for Sovereignty**

If trade and supply chain shifts have eroded globalisation's foundations, the global energy order has nearly detonated them. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resulting sanctions not only disrupted oil and gas markets but revived an old instinct — national energy security above all else. Energy nationalism is no longer just about fossil fuels. It's about the entire ecosystem of the future — solar panels, wind turbines, and the critical minerals that power electric vehicles and energy storage. Nations are scrambling to lock down access, secure bilateral resource agreements, and reshore their energy dependencies.

India, which imports over 80% of its crude oil, has responded with characteristic pragmatism. Discounted oil from Russia continues to flow in, despite Western scrutiny. It's a calculated move — one that has raised eyebrows in Washington but helped cushion domestic inflation and economic strain. Parallely, India's commitment to green energy remains ambitious: 500 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030, large-scale green hydrogen projects, and plans for domestic solar and battery production. But these ambitions require inputs — lithium, cobalt, rare earths — that India doesn't yet produce in scale. So once again, strategic autonomy depends on carefully structured dependencies.

#### **The Protectionist Pullback: A Tactical Retreat?**

Protectionism has returned to global politics in the language of self-reliance. India's own version —

Atmanirbhar Bharat — gained momentum during the pandemic. The idea wasn't new, but the urgency was. Industrial policy shifted decisively toward import substitution, tariff hikes, and performance-linked incentives for domestic production. But results remain uneven. While some sectors — notably electronics — have seen investment inflows, others continue to struggle. Manufacturing as a share of GDP remains stagnant, and export competitiveness in high-value goods lags behind. Tariff barriers, although designed to protect, sometimes deter the very global players India seeks to attract. A pivot toward moderate liberalisation — particularly in areas aligned with U.S. and European interests — could unlock deeper investment and access to critical technologies. Can nationalism be rebranded as strategic reform?

#### India's Dual Alignment: Autonomy in a Polarising World

India's foreign policy has long emphasised "strategic autonomy," a doctrine rooted in non-alignment but evolved for a multipolar world. Today, that autonomy faces its hardest test. With the U.S.–China rivalry sharpening and the world splitting into competing blocs, the pressure to pick sides is mounting. India's answer has been to deepen partnerships without locking itself into alliances. The Quad — involving the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India — reflects this philosophy: cooperation without formal obligations. Energy deals with Russia coexist with defence collaborations with Washington. The approach is neither contradiction nor compromise — it is strategic calibration. But this balance comes at a cost. India's reluctance to fully integrate into U.S.-led technological or security frameworks limits its ability to access critical infrastructure or shape global standards. At the same time, China's aggressive posturing along the Line of Actual Control and its expanding regional footprint heightens India's vulnerability.

How long can India remain both indispensable and unaligned?

#### Regional Influence: Diminishing Returns?

India's natural leadership in South Asia is increasingly contested. China has made strategic inroads through infrastructure investments, arms deals, and regional partnerships — particularly in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan. The Belt and Road Initiative has succeeded where India's own neighbourhood policies often stall: in sustained financing and visible outcomes. New Delhi

has responded with currency swaps, military exercises, and development assistance. But these efforts are often undermined by restrictive trade policies and a lack of regional economic integration. South Asia remains one of the least economically cohesive regions in the world — a reality that weakens India's leverage. To reverse this, India must see its neighbourhood not just as a security sphere but as an economic opportunity.

#### India's Technological Ascent: Aspirations and Constraints

No conversation about India's global role is complete without examining its technological ambitions. From artificial intelligence to semiconductors, India seeks to move up the value chain. Its talent base is world-renowned; its innovation ecosystem, increasingly robust. But capability gaps persist. Unlike China or the U.S., India lacks the infrastructure to produce advanced chips or lead AI research at scale. Its defence manufacturing still relies heavily on foreign inputs, and its digital policies — especially those surrounding data localisation — often deter global investment.

The path forward lies in deeper collaboration. Co-production deals, technology transfers, and participation in global R&D frameworks are essential. But for that, India must balance its desire for digital sovereignty with openness to strategic partnerships. Can India protect its data without isolating its developers?

#### Conclusion: Towards a Multipolar, Strategic Future

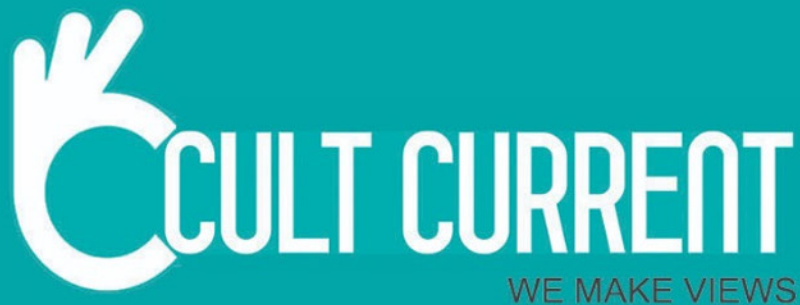
The decline of traditional globalisation isn't a retreat — it's a reordering. Nations are redrawing economic alliances, recalibrating priorities, and building security into their trade and energy decisions. In this world, flexibility is power. India's response so far has been measured and adaptive. Bilateralism over multilateralism. Autonomy over alignment. National security over blind openness. These aren't rejections of globalisation, but attempts to redefine it on Indian terms. Yet the moment demands more than caution. It demands strategic boldness — not only in policy, but in execution.

As the world moves toward a fragmented but interconnected future, India must ask: is it content to remain a reactive power, or ready to shape the rules of the game? •

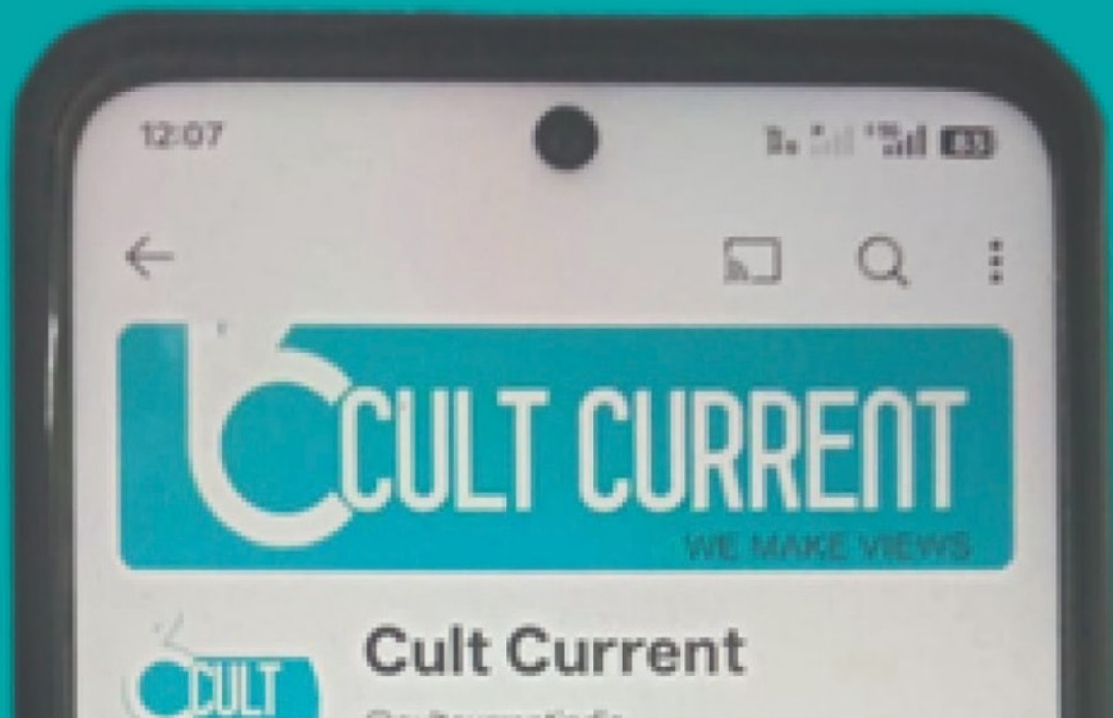
*Riya Goyal brings curiosity and conviction to her work at Cult Current.*



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# LIQUID ASSETS

## Why India's Water Crisis Is a Global Risk

*India's water crisis is deepening rapidly — no longer just an environmental issue, it has evolved into a complex economic, social, and strategic emergency. Driven by climate change, policy failures, and relentless overexploitation of resources, this crisis now stands as a multi-dimensional national catastrophe.*



Dhanishtha De



India is facing a mounting water crisis that poses to be a looming threat to its economic development and social stability. With 18 percent of the world's population but only 4 percent of its water resources, the country's per capita water availability has fallen from 5,177 cubic metres in 1951 to just 1,486 cubic metres in 2021, according to the Central Water Commission (CWC). The Ministry of Jal Shakti projects this number could fall below 1,400 by 2040, classifying India as a water-stressed nation. If the country goes further on the downward slope of the curve, India will officially become a water-scarce country by 2030.

Groundwater depletion is one of the most acute contributors to the crisis. India extracts approximately 251 billion cubic metres of groundwater annually, making it the largest user of groundwater in the world, accounting for nearly 25% of global extraction. A 2023 report by the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) classifies 17% of India's 6,965 groundwater assessment blocks as over-exploited. In states like Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and parts of Karnataka, groundwater levels are declining at a rate exceeding 1 metre per year.

In India, groundwater depletion is directly incentivised through input subsidies on electricity, fertiliser, and crop procurement. The Minimum Support Price (MSP) regime disproportionately benefits paddy and wheat cultivation, even in ecologically unsuitable regions.

The role of sand mining in exacerbating water insecurity is rarely addressed. Illegal and unregulated sand extraction from riverbeds alters river morphology, reduces base flow, and damages aquifers and floodplains. In states such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, unchecked mining has deepened riverbeds by several metres, impairing their natural recharge capacity and increasing evaporation losses.

The agricultural sector consumes nearly 78 percent of India's freshwater resources. Government procurement policies and electricity subsidies have led to the

widespread cultivation of water-intensive crops such as paddy and sugarcane in ecologically unsuitable regions. The lack of crop diversification and the absence of widespread adoption of water-efficient irrigation techniques have intensified pressure on limited water resources.

Rapid population growth in urban areas, combined with industrial expansion, has created demand that often outpaces supply. Infrastructure development has not kept pace with urban growth, resulting in unreliable water supply, overburdened sewage systems, and high levels of non-revenue water due to leakages and illegal structures.

India's water infrastructure suffers not only from underinvestment but also from poor climate resilience. Large dams and canal networks, many constructed in the mid-20th century, were not designed for the hydrological volatility now observed due to climate change. During

the monsoon months, many reservoirs overflow due to the lack of flood-buffering capacity and contingents, while prolonged dry periods shed light on the design flaws in water replenishment management. The Dam Safety Act of 2021 is a step towards modernising oversight, but over 70 percent of India's dams are more than 25 years old and require retrofitting or structural audits.

While the country advocates for climate justice and equity in carbon

budgeting, its water vulnerability is rarely foregrounded in UNFCCC submissions or climate diplomacy. This leaves critical opportunities untapped, such as climate-linked infrastructure finance, water-smart agriculture funding, or transboundary river climate risk. International donors and climate funds continue to direct limited resources towards India's water sector compared to energy or transportation.

The Indian Meteorological Department has recorded a 10 percent decline in overall monsoon precipitation between 1950 and 2020, but more concerning is the sharp increase in inter and intra seasonal variability.



Rainfall now arrives in fewer, more intense episodes, leading to both floods and ineffective aquifer recharge. This shift has diminished the efficacy of traditional water harvesting systems, particularly in semi-arid areas such as Telangana, Vidarbha, and central Madhya Pradesh. Moreover, the incidence of “dry spells within wet spells”, where short periods of extreme rain are followed by rainless days has risen by nearly 50 percent, disrupting planting cycles and agricultural water demand planning.

In parallel, water quality deterioration is compounding the scarcity issue. Pollution from untreated sewage, chemical runoff, and industrial effluents has rendered large portions of rivers and lakes unfit for human or agricultural use. According to recent estimates, more than 70% of surface water in India is contaminated.

As water resources are strained, their competing uses are becoming flashpoints. Agriculture demands priority in volume, but cities, expanding rapidly, cannot survive without large amounts of water. Urban centres have seen increasing reliance on groundwater and water imported from distant basins and foreign countries. This overreach, however, is unsustainable. Many cities suffer from high levels of non-revenue water, inadequate treatment capacity, and growing dependence on private tankers and borewells

India's growing reliance on bottled water and private water markets reflects institutional failure. As of 2024, the packaged drinking water market is valued at over ₹24,000 crore and growing at 20 percent annually. In urban and peri-urban zones, informal water vendors operate fleets of tankers that extract from unregulated borewells and sell water at variable prices, up to ₹20 per litre in peak summer. This commodification of water creates deep inequities. While the wealthy can buy their way out of scarcity, the urban poor are left with unreliable public taps or handpumps, many of which are contaminated or dry.

The consequences are already visible. Water scarcity



affects food production, causes regional economic disparity, and fuels rural distress. Healthcare is deteriorating in water-insecure areas. Access to safe drinking water remains inconsistent, especially in rural and peri-urban populations. Untreated sewage and industrial effluents continue to pollute rivers, lakes, and even groundwater.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 163 million Indians lack access to clean drinking water, and 210 million lack basic sanitation. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) reports that over 70 percent of surface water in India is contaminated with faecal and chemical pollutants. Every year, around 38 million people in India are affected by waterborne diseases. Diarrhoea alone accounts for over 10 percent of child mortality. Additionally, arsenic contamination in groundwater, particularly in parts of Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam cause long-term risks such as cancer and developmental issues.

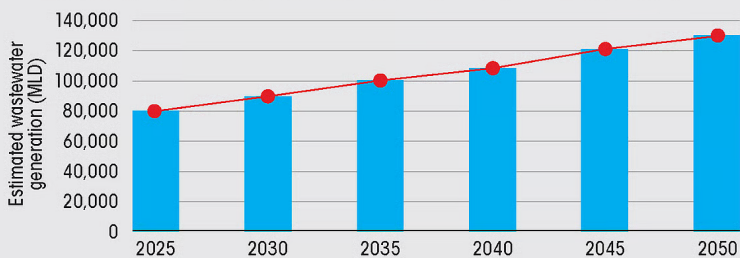
The emerging challenge of microplastic contamination in water systems is largely ignored. Recent studies by the Indian Institute of Technology have found alarming levels of microplastic particles in river systems such as the Yamuna and Mithi, and even in groundwater samples near urban landfills.

Climate change is intensifying the crisis. India's average temperature has increased by about 0.7°C between 1901 and 2018, and is projected to rise by 2.4-4.4°C by the end of the century under the IPCC's high-emission scenarios. The India Meteorological Department reported a



## Wastewater projections

The total wastewater generation in India will rise by 75-80 per cent in 25 years, reaching an estimated 0.13 million MLD by 2050



MLD: Million litres a day; Source: NITI Aayog

6 percent deficit in the 2023 southwest monsoon. Uneven rainfall has contributed to both droughts and urban flooding. The glacial retreat in the Himalayas, the source of major Indian rivers is accelerating, potentially threatening the long-term flow of the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra river basins, which support over 700 million people.

To address this complex crisis, India must adopt a multidimensional, long-term strategy rooted in sustainability and inclusivity. First, agricultural practices need urgent reform. Policymakers must shift incentives away from water-intensive crops and towards millets, pulses, and oilseeds that are more suited to local agro-climatic conditions. The success of SRI (System of Rice Intensification) in Tamil Nadu and direct seeding of rice in Punjab has shown that innovative techniques can significantly reduce water use without sacrificing yields. Agricultural extension services should be revitalised to educate farmers on water-efficient methods like drip and sprinkler irrigation.

Second, urban water governance needs a complete overhaul. Smart metering, leakage control, and decentralised wastewater treatment systems can reduce wastage and promote recycling. Urban planning must integrate water-sensitive design principles to reduce runoff and increase recharge through green infrastructure.

India still lacks a legally binding national water policy. Water remains a state subject under the Constitution, leading to fragmented and often contradictory approaches. The Draft National Water Policy 2020 proposed a framework for integrated water resource

management, sustainable groundwater use, and wastewater recycling, but it remains under review. Meanwhile, state-level policies continue to subsidise water-intensive practices, especially in agriculture, with limited incentive for conservation.

Insurance and financial risk mechanisms around water scarcity remain underdeveloped. Unlike agricultural crop insurance, which has partial state support, there are virtually no instruments to insure against industrial water-related losses. The World Economic Forum has warned that water crises rank among the top five risks to global business continuity, yet India's financial sector remains underprepared to quantify or price water-related risk at either rural or national level.

The Jal Jeevan Mission, launched in 2019, seeks to provide functional household tap connections (FHTCs) to all rural households by 2024. As of July 2025, 72% of rural households reportedly have access to piped water, up from 16% in 2019, according to the Ministry of Jal Shakti. However, several states, particularly in eastern and central India are lagging behind. Desalination has come up as a last-resort solution. Chennai currently operates two desalination plants with a combined capacity of 200 MLD, and an additional 400 MLD is planned. However, desalination is energy-intensive, costly (₹70–₹90 per kilolitre), and has ecological consequences due to saline brine discharge into marine ecosystems.

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, supported by the World Bank, focuses on participatory groundwater management in 7 states covering over 8300 gram panchayats. The scheme has encouraged community water budgeting and aquifer mapping, with early signs of improvement in groundwater levels.

India's water crisis is no longer an environmental issue alone. It has evolved into a multi-layered risk architecture that intersects fiscal planning, public health, national security, trade policy, and international relations. Addressing it requires far more than infrastructure. It demands governance reform, scientific innovation, legal enforceability, fiscal reallocation, and systemic accountability. ●

*Dhanishtha De is a dedicated and inquisitive journalist contributing to Cult Current.*

# Strategic Autonomy on the Line

## India's Energy Balancing Act

*America's threat to impose steep tariffs on India over its continued reliance on Russian oil has placed New Delhi at a difficult crossroads. Will India bow to U.S. pressure in the name of energy security, or will it uphold its strategic autonomy? This crisis not only challenges India's economic policy but also raises deeper questions about the nature of its relationship with Washington. Does the U.S. see India as a true partner — or merely a pawn? At this critical juncture, India must rely on diplomacy, diversification, and strategic foresight to safeguard its national interests.*



Manish Vaidhya





India stands at a challenging crossroads. Repeated threats of sanctions from the U.S. and EU over its oil imports from Russia have materialized with the EU's imposition of restrictions on India's second-largest oil refinery. Simultaneously, a proposed trade deal between the U.S. and India failed to materialize by the July 30th deadline, and a bill introduced in the U.S. Senate, proposing a 500% tariff on countries importing Russian oil, casts a long shadow over India's energy security. With nearly half of its oil now sourced from Russia, India may be forced to choose between economic pragmatism and geopolitical alignment.

But is this truly a binary choice? Or does India still have room to maneuver through diplomacy, diversification, and deeper strategic thinking?

India's oil imports from Russia have been driven by cost and continuity. Since early 2022, Russian oil trading at a \$7-8 discount compared to Middle Eastern crude has helped India shield its economy from energy-driven inflation. According to an ICRA report covering the period from April 2024 to February 2025, India saved approximately \$7.9 billion on its oil import bill by purchasing discounted Russian crude, a notable increase from \$5.1 billion in the previous fiscal year.

Yet in Washington, this pragmatic calculation is viewed through a geopolitical lens. The draft 'Sanctioning Russia Act of 2025,' sponsored by Senator Lindsey Graham, seeks to globalize America's war priorities by penalizing countries that do not align with its sanctions regime. For India, however, strategic autonomy has never meant passive neutrality. It signifies independent policy calibration guided by long-term national interests rather than transient external pressure.

While New Delhi has publicly avoided direct confrontation, Indian officials have quietly engaged with U.S. lawmakers to explain the rationale behind continuing Russian oil imports. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's comment that India will 'cross the bridge when it comes' has drawn varied interpretations, with some viewing it as calculated ambiguity, others as a strategic placeholder. Either way, it reflects a diplomatic posture designed to maintain flexibility amidst intense external

***These proposed tariffs are not just about energy—they are a strategic trade weapon. India's \$80–90 billion export market to the U.S., spanning sectors like pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, and auto parts, now stands at risk. If India is penalized for securing affordable energy, it could strain cooperation in crucial areas like defense and technology. The pressing question is: Can a true strategic partnership survive under the weight of economic coercion?***

pressure.

India has often purchased Russian oil below the G7-imposed price cap of \$60 per barrel, enabling continued access to Western shipping and insurance services. Yet, New Delhi maintains that it is not formally bound by the cap and that its energy trading decisions are guided by national interest, not alignment with unilateral Western sanctions.

However, with growing support for the bill in the U.S. Senate, India's diplomatic space may shrink, with mounting pressure to demonstrate explicit support for Ukraine or face the threat of severe economic consequences. To prevent escalation, India may need to fortify its position with a blend of strategic messaging, confidence-building signals, and readiness for adaptation, without appearing coerced. It's a fine diplomatic line, but one that India is uniquely equipped to walk.

#### A Tariff That Spreads Beyond Oil

The proposed tariff isn't just an energy tool; it's a trade weapon. India's annual exports to the U.S. total \$80-90 billion. Imposing a 500% levy would cripple key sectors like pharmaceuticals, engineering goods, auto components, and textiles,

many of which are indirectly linked to oil-derived inputs.

Analysts believe a significant portion of India's exports to the U.S., particularly in energy-intensive sectors such as chemicals, metals, electronics, and auto components, could face disproportionate damage under such a tariff regime.

This raises a critical question: can strategic partnerships coexist with economic coercion? If India is penalized for securing affordable energy, the credibility of broader U.S.-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, defense, semiconductors, and technology sectors will be undermined. The risk is that strategic pressure today could erode structural trust tomorrow.

### Strengthening Energy Defenses

Therefore, India must prepare on multiple fronts. While diplomatic engagement in Washington continues, it must also strengthen internal safeguards to manage potential shocks. This includes accelerating the diversification of oil sources, particularly from Gulf producers and Africa, and expanding strategic petroleum reserves (SPR), which is already under government consideration. Equally important is fast-tracking the clean energy transition to reduce the economy's overall oil intensity and long-term vulnerability.

Legal instruments could also be brought into play. India has invoked the WTO mechanism, seeking consultations on U.S. auto tariffs and proposing retaliatory duties on steel and aluminum—steps it has clarified won't disrupt ongoing trade talks. Yet, any legal response must be tempered to avoid escalation. Past experience cautions restraint: the 2016 U.S.-India solar panel dispute brought eventual compliance but only limited short-term relief, with India terminating the contested policies years after the initial ruling. WTO adjudications, while principled, often yield results too slowly to alleviate immediate economic pressure.

### The Balancing Act

India's choices today will resonate not only in Washington but also in Moscow. Russia has long viewed India as a reliable strategic partner in



defense, energy, and space. If India appears to reduce Russian oil imports under U.S. pressure, it could invite repercussions: more expensive contracts, tighter financing, and reduced leverage in bilateral negotiations. More fundamentally, it could potentially erode the political goodwill that has long underpinned their steady relationship.

Yet, both India and Russia are well aware of the shifting political winds in Washington. With the 2026 U.S. midterm elections looming, and uncertainty surrounding the durability of Trump's congressional support, both countries may prefer to buy time rather than rush into irreversible decisions. A potential electoral upset could undermine the legislative momentum behind the 'Sanctioning Russia Act,' forcing Washington to recalculate its strategy.

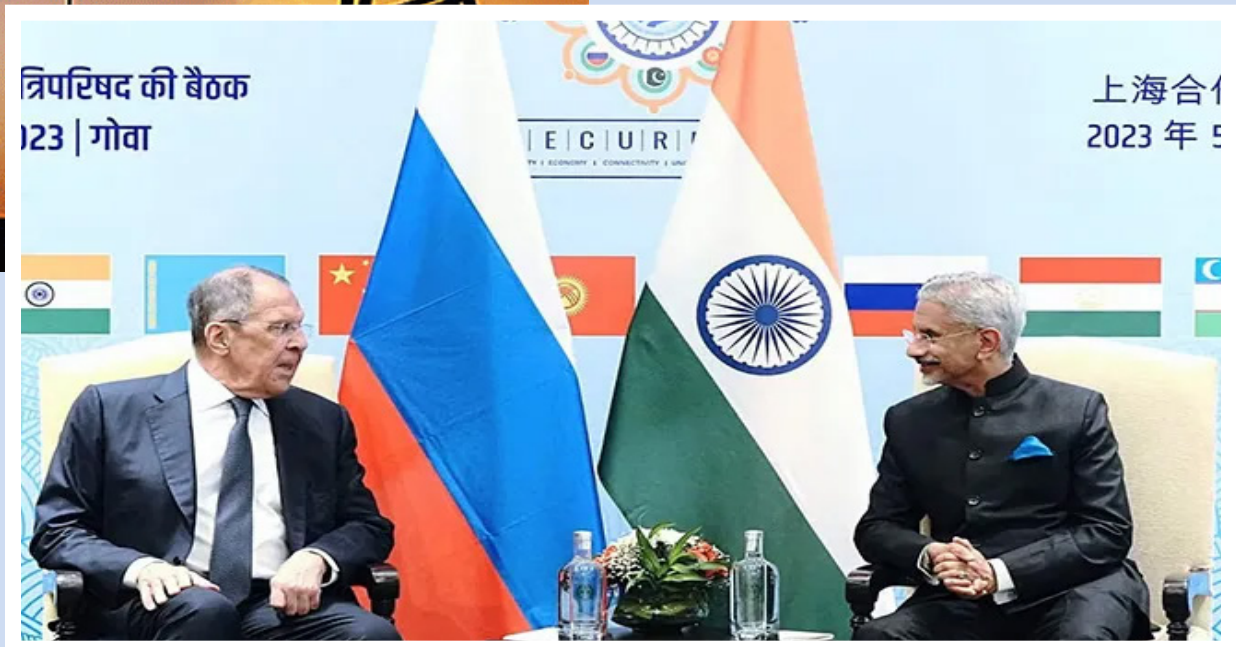
Reflecting Russia's own caution, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated in a TASS interview, 'The Trump administration is very contradictory in its actions and statements. This does not make the work easier.' For India, this moment may be less about confrontation and more about strategic patience, balancing engagement with both powers while safeguarding long-term autonomy.





layered diplomacy, structural reforms, and a clear articulation of development-driven rationale. In this context, India isn't choosing sides; it's choosing its ground. It seeks to maintain credible ties with both Washington and Moscow without being drawn into binary alignment. Strategic autonomy in this sense isn't about isolation; it's about balance, resilience, and outcome-sensitive positioning.

If Washington hopes to sustain India as an enduring democratic partner, it must recognize that coercive tactics could prove counterproductive,



Yet, continuing to purchase Russian oil in defiance of U.S. law carries risks for India, especially for the delicate but deep U.S.-India partnership. Washington is heavily invested in India's rise through technology transfers, nearshoring, and strategic frameworks like the Quad. The concern is less about immediate sanctions and more about the potential loss of momentum in broader bilateral cooperation.

#### Strategic Autonomy as the Litmus Test

The 500% tariff threat is more than just a policy lever; it's a litmus test of India's economic sovereignty, diplomatic agility, and global posture. India must defend its energy decisions not with defiance, but with deliberate design: through

potentially pushing India toward alternative suppliers and geopolitical alignments, including, if necessary, China, in an effort to insulate itself from future risks.

If America sees India as a true strategic partner, not just a convenient counterweight, it must acknowledge these complexities and demonstrate flexibility. Likewise, if India aspires to rise without external dependence, it must further sharpen its capacity to absorb, deflect, and recalculate in the face of mounting pressure." ●

*(Article by the author at the Observer Research Foundation, with research interest in strategic energy insights and green transitions. Article courtesy of RT News.)*

# Taiwan Tensions

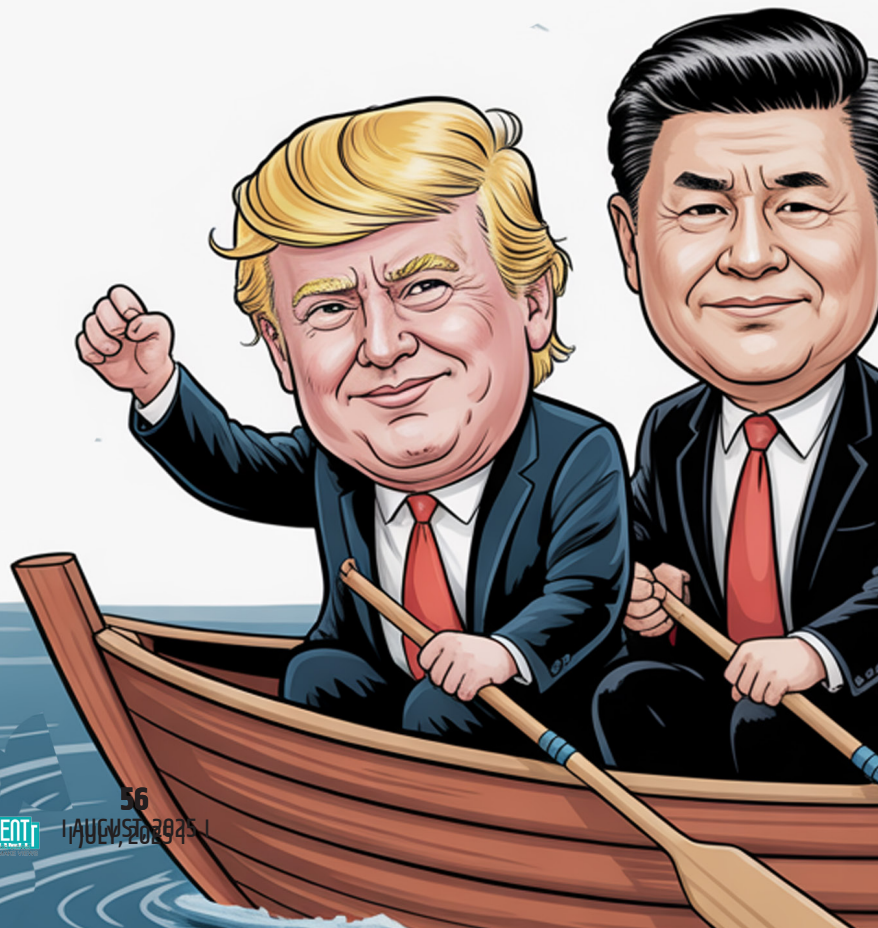
## A Rift in the Relationship?



Don McLain Gill

On July 13, 2025, the Financial Times published a report concerning the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and China over Taiwan. According to the report, U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Elbridge Colby, has spoken with officials from Washington's key Indo-Pacific allies, particularly Australia and Japan. Colby sought to clarify their

*Amid rising tensions over Taiwan, the Trump administration has questioned the role of allies. Yet, its transactional approach risks undermining the strategic trust needed for a reliable contingency plan in the Indo-Pacific. Political cohesion, once the backbone of U.S. strategy, now appears increasingly fragile.*





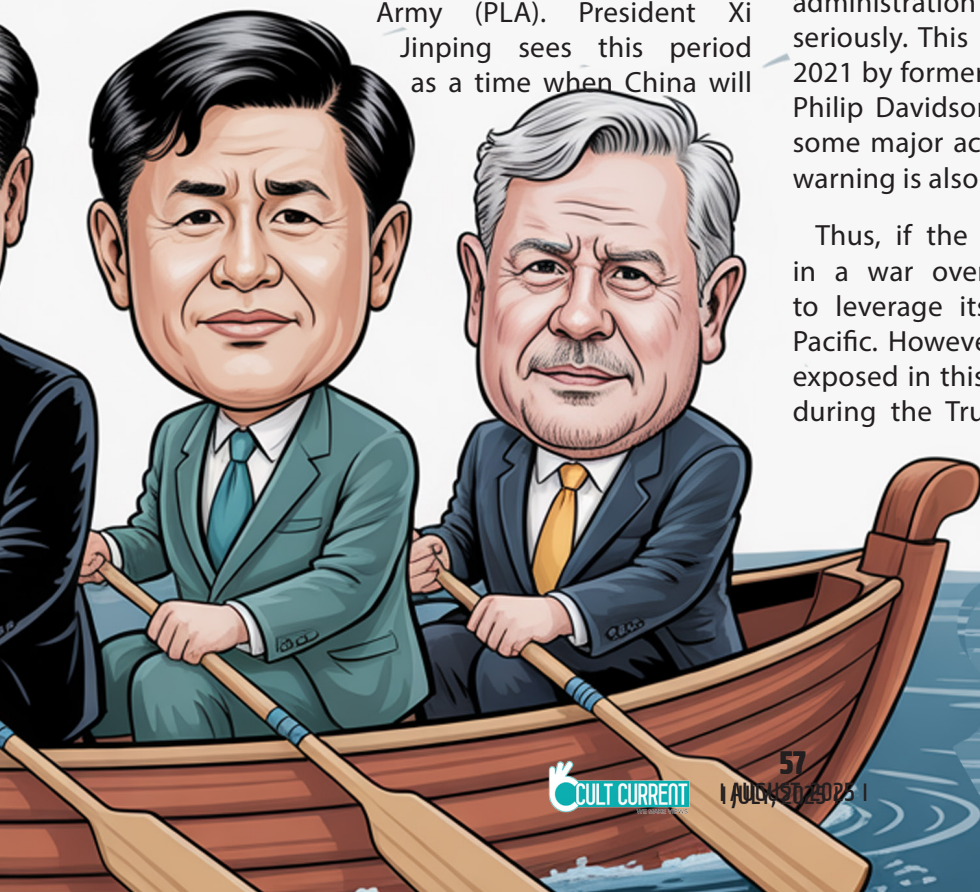
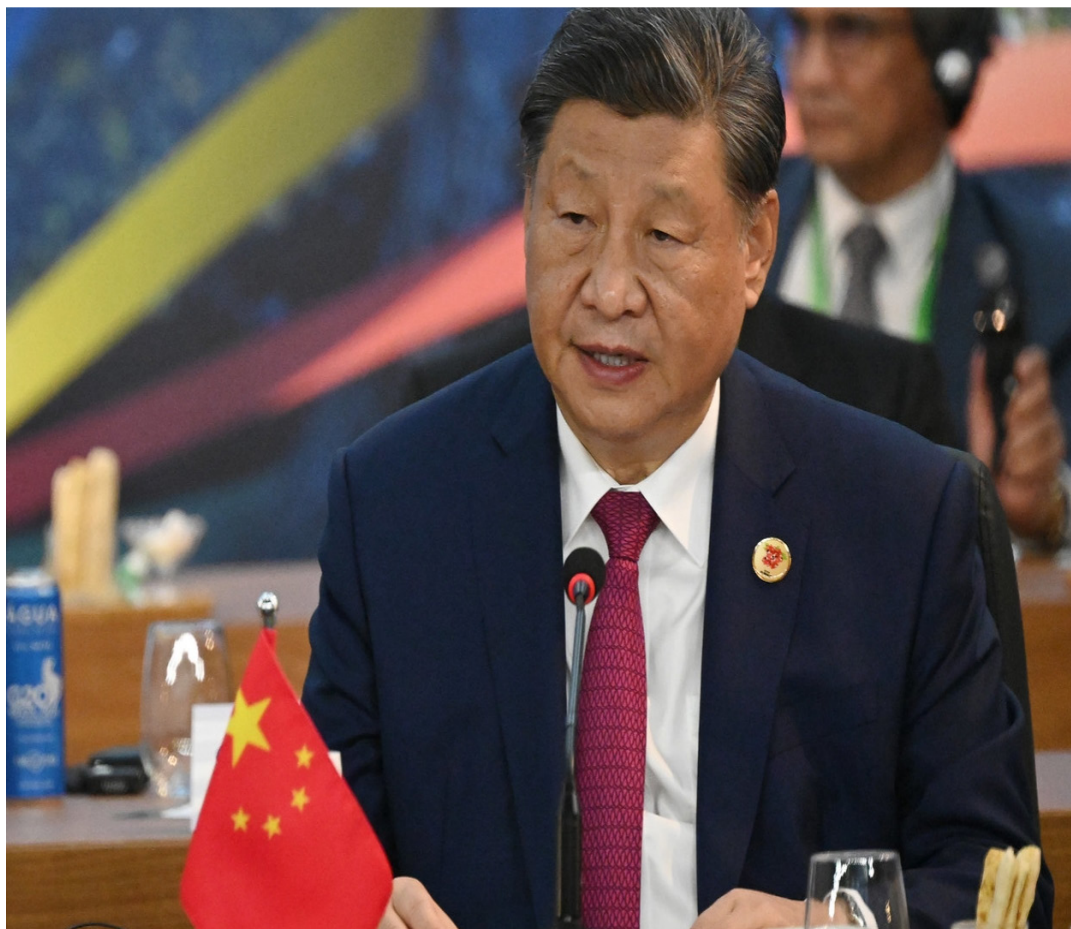
positions and persuade them to support the U.S. in the event of a U.S.-China armed conflict over Taiwan. Apparently, both allied countries have so far avoided giving a direct answer. Handling such contingencies requires strong political commitment and trust-building among allies. However, the Trump administration is not sending the right signals to its Indo-Pacific partners.

### When Might China Attack Taiwan?

The question of whether China intends to attack Taiwan, and if so, when, is a subject of intense speculation. However, one frequently cited 'timeline' is 2027. This year coincides with the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). President Xi Jinping sees this period as a time when China will

have made significant improvements in its 'strategic capabilities to safeguard its national sovereignty, security, and development interests.' The Trump administration also appears to take this timeline seriously. This is signaled by the warning given in 2021 by former U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Philip Davidson. He stated that China would take some major action regarding Taiwan by 2027. This warning is also known as the 'Davidson Window'.

Thus, if the U.S. and China become embroiled in a war over Taiwan, Washington would seek to leverage its alliance network in the Western Pacific. However, in recent weeks, flaws have been exposed in this hub-and-spoke network, especially during the Trump administration. It is important to first note that, although the U.S. has bilateral treaty alliances with Japan and Australia, these treaties also contain ambiguities.





Neither ally's security treaty with Washington legally and explicitly commits them to a military role in a conflict that does not involve a direct attack on territory under their administration. However, there are nuances within the treaties that must be understood. For example, Article VI of the U.S.-Japan defense treaty states that Tokyo will accept and support the deployment of U.S. forces on Japanese soil to contribute to regional stability. However, it does not explicitly mention the active participation of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) beyond the defense of Japan. Similarly, Australia's treaty with the U.S. in 1951 revolves around mutual consultation in the context of 'common danger'.

### Which U.S. Policies Disappoint Australia and Japan?

Still, the lack of a clear legal obligation in the treaties does not mean that potential allies cannot act in a contingency. In such a situation, political leadership, inter-state coordination, and trust-building play a key role in filling these gaps. Japan has made new efforts to enhance its national security capabilities in recent years. Despite this, defense experts there also concede that an attack on Taiwan would have a direct impact on Japan, especially if China's military attempts to target U.S. bases in Japan. In 2022, then-Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe called on the U.S.

to abandon its 'strategic ambiguity' regarding Taiwan. On the other hand, Australia's stance has been more restrained. This is due to Australia's extensive trade relations with China. However, Australia also realizes that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan may not be limited to that geographic area. China has, in any case, increased its provocative and aggressive actions against Australia over the past four years.

Although contingency planning between the U.S., Japan, and Australia is crucial, Washington has not been able to create the right conditions to advance such an agenda with its allies. In fact, the Trump administration is currently focusing more on trade and tariffs. The U.S. has openly demonstrated its strength by renegotiating the terms of unfair patron-client relationships with its allies. This became





even clearer when the Trump administration demanded that Indo-Pacific allies increase their defense spending to five percent of gross domestic product (GDP). This commanding advice from the U.S. is disliked by Australia, South Korea, and especially

Japan. The Trump administration is also likely to move forward with a review of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement. This would further increase uncertainty among Australian policymakers. On the economic front, a trade war broke out following the U.S. administration's decision to impose 'reciprocal tariffs' at the start of Trump's second term. Japan was unable to reach a just trade agreement with the U.S. In view of this, Trump imposed a 25 percent tariff on Japan, the U.S.'s most important ally in the Indo-Pacific region. What's more, the Trump administration called it 'bad' for not presenting its terms for a trade agreement.

### Will the Trump Administration Change its Stance?

Although the U.S. has significant military and economic power in the Indo-Pacific region, the

Trump administration must work together with its key regional allies. If the U.S. fails to understand the need to work with them on equal terms, challenges will arise in mounting a united response to any serious conflict in the region. The lack of integrated planning between Trump's defense expectations and economic demands hinders coordination. Although both Japan and Australia are well aware of the consequences of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the U.S.'s attitude is also disappointing them. Besides, it is also a fact that the U.S.'s stance regarding the defense of Taiwan is not clear. Given the uncertainties of the Indo-Pacific's regional dynamics, it becomes even more challenging for key allies to clearly commit to defending Taiwan. All member countries of the hub-and-spoke network understand the need for contingency planning for any conflict in the Taiwan Strait. However, the U.S. must also reconsider its diplomatic approach. The Trump administration must accept that the basis of any successful allied response is collective political will rather than written treaty obligations. If the U.S. wants to implement a collective action plan in the region, it must re-examine its relations with its allies in the Indo-Pacific region." •

*(Author is a geopolitical analyst and writer in the Philippines. He is also a lecturer in the International Studies Department at De La Salle University.)*

# The BMD Dilemma

## Shield or Showdown?



Karthik Bommakanti

*India urgently needs to make serious and concrete efforts to develop its Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system. As China rapidly advances its BMD capabilities and strengthens its nuclear shield, the shifting strategic landscape demands that India keep pace. In the event of a future conflict, maintaining a credible deterrent and strategic balance would hinge significantly on India's ability to deploy a robust missile defense architecture.*

India faces a challenging security environment, surrounded by two nuclear-armed neighbors with whom it does not have ideal relations. In these circumstances, possessing an advanced Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system is extremely important for India. Furthermore, China's continuous development of advanced BMD capabilities makes it even more crucial for India to acquire its own ballistic missile defense capacity. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has made tremendous strides in its defense capabilities, developing a new ballistic missile defense system called the HQ-29, and is rapidly moving towards formally inducting it into its military. It is believed that China's HQ-29 BMD system is more advanced than its HQ-19





BMD system and is quite similar to the U.S. Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system. Clearly, among the multi-layered missile defense systems currently available to China, the HQ-29 BMD system is the most advanced and has a very high kill capability. This ballistic missile defense system is designed to be capable of detecting and eliminating high-end ballistic missiles, as well as intercepting and destroying ballistic missiles outside the Earth's atmosphere in mid-course. China's HQ-29 interceptor is clearly designed for defensive purposes, i.e., its main objective is to prevent satellite warfare and hypersonic attacks. China already has the HQ-19 BMD system, which has been developed and deployed to destroy medium-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) like India's Agni-V in mid-course. China has already deployed its HQ-19 BMD system in Jilantai, Mongolia. Now, with the development of the HQ-29 BMD system, China's defense capability will increase significantly, enabling the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to protect its critical infrastructure and the territories under its control.

Some of India's top nuclear experts believe that India needs to develop and deploy its own Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system. They say that a ballistic missile defense system needs to be deployed on a priority basis to protect the country's air bases, nuclear facilities, submarine bases, and military command, control, and communication centers from enemy nuclear missile attacks. However, they also say that there is currently no specific need to deploy this system to protect cities and towns from such attacks. Clearly, deploying such a defense system to protect large cities in the country would be very costly. Broadly speaking, there are three main reasons why the need for enhanced ballistic missile defense capabilities in India is being emphasized. Especially given the way China is continuously increasing its defense capabilities and growing its power in terms of both conventional and nuclear attacks, concrete efforts should be made to bring as

much of the population as possible under missile defense coverage.

## Reasons for Enhancing Ballistic Missile Defense Capabilities

The first reason for India to enhance its own ballistic missile defense capabilities is India's strategy of Assured Destruction (AD) or Assured Retaliation (AR). This strategy of India is not sufficient to deter the threat of nuclear attacks, especially potential nuclear threats from China. In view of India's No First Use (NFU) policy, it is imperative for India to have an advanced ballistic missile defense system. This is because, under the NFU policy, India will retaliate only when it is attacked by a nuclear weapon by an enemy country. In other words, a missile defense system developed to prevent enemy nuclear attacks is essential. Clearly, when an enemy country launches a first nuclear strike, it could be a decapitation strike, i.e., an attack that could cause considerable military damage to India. As far as China is concerned, its own NFU policy is not at all clear. It is also noteworthy that some in-depth analyses of China's NFU policy have revealed that China does not appear as committed to its No First Use policy regarding the use of nuclear weapons in practice as it is in principle. In particular, if an enemy country attacks China's nuclear bases with conventional weapons, China will definitely not adhere to this policy. Furthermore, the likelihood of China's first use of nuclear weapons increases because of the way China is cleverly integrating its nuclear and conventional military capabilities. This strategy of China will make it impossible for an opposing country to know whether China is targeting its conventional military bases or its nuclear capabilities.





addition, China seems to believe that it may carry out at least a limited nuclear strike in situations where it is likely to lose a conventionally fought war. Clearly, this limited nuclear attack by China could prove devastating for India. This is because India has far fewer nuclear weapons than China. India has about 180 nuclear weapons, while India's other enemy neighbor, Pakistan, has a stockpile of 170 nuclear weapons. Whereas, if we talk about China, it has a stockpile of about 600 nuclear weapons. Furthermore, China is rapidly increasing its nuclear arsenal. In other words, its pace of acquiring nuclear weapons is the fastest among any country in the world. In war situations, if a nuclear attack is launched by China in response to retaliatory ground attacks by India, it will be fatal not only for the army fighting on the ground but also equally devastating for densely populated

areas located near India's air bases, nuclear facilities, and military headquarters and military control centers. If we talk about China, its ballistic missile defense systems, such as the HQ-19 and the new HQ-29 defense systems, are capable of preventing attacks by nuclear-armed missiles and act as a strong defense shield against them. This is why India's commitment to following the policy of Assured Destruction (AD) in any case is strategically and morally very dangerous.

The late Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State, former National

Security

Advisor, and renowned nuclear strategist, expressed a different view from his fellow nuclear strategists regarding the adoption of a strategy based on Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), saying that the then-Soviet Union and the United States (US) were able to properly manage their nuclear rivalry through an agreement based on AD. Clearly, it was during Henry Kissinger's tenure that the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States was signed. Despite this, he strongly opposed this type of treaty in the post-Cold War era, because the number of nations possessing nuclear power was increasing, and the possibilities and reasons for them to use nuclear weapons were also increasing significantly. In other words, the use of nuclear weapons by nuclear-armed nations could be done deliberately, or it

could be done without authorization and suddenly. Therefore, Henry Kissinger clearly emphasized the need for ballistic missile defense capabilities to prevent any such nuclear attack.

Besides, let's say if India's nuclear power is not completely destroyed in a Chinese nuclear attack, and in particular, if the nuclear weapons launched from Indian Navy submarines survive, China's ballistic missile defense system can easily stop these remaining submarine nuclear missiles fired by India. This is why the strategy based on MAD or mutual assured destruction is not only useless and





objectionable, but strategically unwise. Especially, given the way India is currently following a No First Use (NFU) policy and going through a period of strained relations with nuclear-armed neighbors like China and Pakistan, it is in no way appropriate for New Delhi to adopt such a strategy. In fact, India needs advanced deterrence capabilities like the BMD system the most, so that it can protect its large cities from attacks through air defense in adverse situations.

The second major reason for India to enhance its BMD capabilities is that China is constantly developing ballistic missile defense systems in its country. This will give China an advantage in attacking first. In addition, if China lags behind and is at a disadvantage in a conventional war against India, its developed defensive capabilities will encourage it to launch a first nuclear strike, because it will be in a position to benefit in every way. Overall, China benefits greatly from its advanced domestic BMD capabilities, giving it the power to minimize its losses in a war situation. However, India is not currently in a position to match China's missile defense system. But if India focuses on the development of its BMD systems and takes concrete steps for this, then it can definitely thwart any intention of China to launch a first nuclear strike and thus avert potential dangers.

## Why Should India Enhance Its BMD Capabilities?

The third reason is the idea of the renowned American nuclear strategist Herman Kahn. He has said that missile defense research and development (R&D) is extremely important. If concrete progress is made in this direction, then along with technical benefits, it can also provide numerous opportunities that will continue to motivate defense science and engineering institutions and their scientists and engineers to find solutions to challenging technical and scientific threats. Clearly, if research and development is done in this area, then detailed information about various advanced technologies can be available, and detailed data about how they work can be collected. In other words, if attention is paid to missile defense-related research and development, as well as increasing investment in it, the reliability of interceptor systems will increase in

***India urgently needs a robust Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system due to its challenging neighborhood and China's rapidly advancing capabilities, including the new HQ-29.***

***An effective BMD enhances deterrence, especially given India's No First Use policy. It mitigates risks from a potential decapitation strike and addresses China's ambiguous NFU stance. Investment in BMD R&D fosters technological advancement, counters China's BMD advantage, and promotes strategic stability in the region, protecting critical assets and population centers.***

all important stages of the missile defense system, i.e., the boost, mid-course, and terminal phases. In addition, it will help in developing new technologies for sensor technologies, radar systems, directed-energy weapons, detecting and destroying missiles outside and inside the atmosphere, as well as eliminating fragmentation warheads. Clearly, ballistic missile defense systems can be easily deployed on mobile ground launchers, sea platforms, air interceptors, and bases located in space. The most important and noteworthy thing is that if India takes missile defense research and development forward and then strategically deploys its developed BMD systems, it will help in deterring and, to some extent, gaining an edge over a rival country, especially China. It will lead to success in critical defense technologies, which will help India stay ahead of China in the technology sector. Let's say even if that doesn't happen, investing in and promoting research in the development of ballistic missile defense systems in India will at least help India stand in parity with China in terms of BMD technology. In view of all these reasons, it is extremely important that India show seriousness in enhancing its ballistic missile defense capabilities and strengthening them without wasting time, and take steps in this direction with full force." ●

*(Author is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation's Strategic Studies Program.)*



# Middle East: Beyond the 'New' - Instability & Shifting Fates



Kabir Taneja

*The Middle East once again stands at a turning point in global politics—where peace initiatives, military equations, and economic stakes are colliding. The United States, China, Russia, and the Gulf nations are all vying to shape the future of this strategically vital region.*

The recent surge in violence and instability in Syria was not entirely unexpected. Today's geopolitical environment suffers from a kind of attention deficit disorder, where superficial agreements, ceasefires, and headline-grabbing conflict resolutions are prioritized over addressing long-standing and deep-seated political fissures. The terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023 and the ongoing war in Gaza have derailed the region's forward-looking plans. The debate on a 'new Middle East' has dramatically shifted, from initial optimism to present uncertainty.



# INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR



rapprochement with Israel to the recognition of a Palestinian state.

The last few months are more reminiscent of the old Middle East than anything new. Beneath the veneer of Dubai's shimmering towers, the grand ideas driving NEOM in Saudi Arabia, and the ambitions to turn the region into a global hub for AI, high-tech products, semiconductors, and the future of innovation—are fundamental geopolitical questions that were once swept under the rug for another day, but are now rearing their ugly heads. A concept fast gaining popularity in the West today is that regional powers will take ownership for policy-making in finding collective solutions to crisis points. Foreign presence in the Middle East, mostly American and European, is expected to reduce and reorient to address emerging threat perceptions, particularly China's rise as a superpower and Russia's re-establishment of itself as the key strategic challenge to continental Europe.

Since 2023, the Gaza war, a domestically preoccupied and wary Israel, a surviving Hamas, disruptions to vital waterways like the Red Sea, an Israel and US-led strike against Iran's nuclear program, and an Iranian missile retaliatory strike targeting US military facilities in Qatar have unleashed a Pandora's Box of troubles in a geography seeking a new era of development, economic growth, prosperity, and trade. From the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and now Riyadh aspiring for centrality in global financial and diplomatic highways, today's predictions on what a 'new Middle East' will look like have perhaps gone off track. Many Arab states are now seeking to seat themselves on a throne of neutrality. Concurrently, they are also realizing that doing so is only set to get harder. A prime example of this is Saudi Arabia, which was initially slow to take a strong political stand on Israel's actions in Gaza, but has now clarified its policy, linking any

In some ways, Syria is becoming a litmus test. After the near collapse of Bashar al-Assad's nearly three-decade-long rule and the end of a half-century hold of the Baathist regime in Damascus, the self-declared revanchist jihadist and head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—which was only delisted as a terrorist group in Washington in July 2025—Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), now faces the task of walking a tightrope and aligning more with Arab states backed by the US and Europe than Iran, Russia, and China, who are

now the Assad family's sidelined patrons. However, the West's enthusiastic normalization of al-Sharaa's swift power grab understated and ignored difficult ethnic and political challenges suppressed under Assad's iron fist, who came from an Alawi minority ethno-religious sect in a Sunni-majority state.

The massacre of Alawites in the country's coastal areas in and around the Latakia Governorate in March 2025 – despite Alawi elders theoretically agreeing to support al-Sharaa's rise – illustrated the further difficult task ahead for intra-Syrian integration. Tensions flared up a few months later, this time in Suweida, southern Syria, where clashes between the Bedouin tribe (mostly Sunni) and groups affiliated with the Druze community – such as those led by Sheikh Wahid al-Balous and Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri – have led to over 1,000 deaths. The violence was sparked by the kidnapping of a Druze merchant on a highway. In response, Israel bombed al-Sharaa's military headquarters in Damascus. Adding a







further layer of complexity, Druze are considered a key minority in Israel, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has vowed to protect their interests in Syria. The attacks on al-Sharaa occurred despite recent contact established between the new Syrian leadership and Israel.

Syria is not alone in this boat. Lebanon is another state undergoing a delicate transformation as President Joseph Aoun seeks to stitch the country back together in the wake of a weakened Hezbollah. Geopolitical diplomacy can only metaphorically take the horse to water – but for it to drink, it has to be willing, thirsty, and find itself in a secure location. Ideological and political fault lines, in addition to the challenge of building inter-ethnic frameworks, present a difficult task under the ongoing geopolitical competition in the Middle East. However, at the end of the day, they are as critical as solving Syria's economic devastation. One cannot be solved without addressing the other. To sweep under the rug conflicts pertaining to ideology and ethnicity and assume that money alone can solve the quandaries of a complex state structure is ideologically flawed. Saudi Arabia has announced investment for Syria worth US 614 billion, while the UAE has already inked

an 800 million deal to take the critical port Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. Moreover, the US has also de-designated al-Sharaa and his immediate circle from terrorist designations, despite concerns raised by security agencies.

In conclusion, the idea of a 'new Middle East' is neither theoretical nor too ambitious to achieve. Indeed, the Abraham Accords, I2U2, and IMEC are tangible realities pushing the region toward transformation. Ultimately, security enables economic prosperity, and the core concern for the Middle East today is the future trajectory of its security landscape. While post-2023, Israel is playing a large and often overstated role, other regional actors and stakeholders will need to step into this morass to ensure an equitable geoeconomic level playing field for the future. Equity in shaping a 'new Middle East' must come from within the region, and it is now time for regional actors to openly embrace this responsibility." ●

*(Kabir Taneja is the Associate Director and Fellow at the Strategic Studies Programme at the Observer Research Foundation. This article is published by ORF.)*

# Beijing's New World Order

## Iran's SCO Blueprint



Sandeep Kumar

*The recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Beijing signaled the rise of a new global power center, away from traditional Western strongholds. Iran's active participation and an emerging "anti-NATO" strategy have added weight to this shift. In this evolving landscape, the Russia-China axis is gaining strength, while India continues to play its role in supporting multipolarity. The key question remains: can the SCO truly challenge Western dominance?*

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting recently concluded in Beijing has signaled a new geopolitical landscape. For a long time, the global security order was determined by Western centers like Washington or Brussels, but a new diplomatic framework is now taking shape, spearheaded by nations

like Iran, Russia, and China in Beijing. With Iran's participation and its new security approach, an 'anti-NATO' or 'alternative global security framework' is emerging, based on the principles of multipolarity, sovereignty, and collective resistance. This is not just a tactical shift; it signals a restructuring of the global power structure and





the rise of a new international order.

This transformation is significant in historical context. After the Cold War, the American-led Western alliance became the center of political, economic, and military power around the world. However, in recent years, the rise of powers like Russia and China has challenged Western hegemony and voiced support for a multipolar world. The SCO provides a platform where these powers can advance their interests and develop an alternative global security framework. Iran's inclusion in the SCO is a crucial part of this trend, reflecting a growing shift towards a multipolar world.

## Iran's Strategic Restructuring: Seeking an 'Alternative Axis'

Tehran now views the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation not just as a symbolic platform, but as a concrete, functional, and far-reaching organization capable of balancing NATO's influence. The clarity and legal grounding with which Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi criticized U.S.-Israeli policies in his speech in Beijing was not merely an expression of discontent but a proclamation of an alternative world order. Araqchi argued that attacks on Iranian nuclear sites and Western sanctions, by violating international laws, are illegal. He explicitly stated that 'the control

of the narrative is no longer in the hands of Western powers.' This statement reflects Iran's deep rejection of the existing global power structure and demonstrates its commitment to establishing a new, more just international order.

Iran's approach is not only theoretical. It is pursuing a practical strategy designed to strengthen its influence in the region and counter Western pressure. By using the SCO as an effective platform, Iran can deepen its relations with its regional allies and form a united front. This will help Iran protect its security and economic interests and pursue an independent foreign policy.

## The Iranian Roadmap for Making the SCO a Functional Security Platform

Abbas Araqchi's proposals were not merely theoretical; they presented a systematic institutional blueprint for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, aimed at making it a functional security platform. His proposed measures include:

- **Collective Security Body:** This body would be created to respond to external attacks, terrorism, and sabotage, providing member states with a collective guarantee of security.









- **Permanent Coordination Mechanism:** This mechanism would record covert activities against member states and create counter-strategies, ensuring a rapid and coordinated response to combat security threats.
- **Sanctions Resistance Center:** This center would be created to collectively withstand the impact of Western sanctions, helping member states cope with economic pressure.
- **Shanghai Security Forum:** This forum would be created to discuss defense and intelligence coordination, increasing security cooperation among member states.
- **Cultural and Media Cooperation:** This cooperation would be carried out to combat information warfare and ideological attacks, helping member states protect their values and interests.

These proposals make it clear that Iran is not only opposing the West, but is also drafting a blueprint for the future. It sees the SCO as an organization that can balance Western dominance and promote a more multipolar world.

## The Russia-China-Iran Triad: The New Cornerstone of Multipolarity

The presence of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at this meeting and his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping indicate that the Moscow-Beijing axis has now taken the form of not only an economic but

also a strategic alliance. Iran's role is to give this alliance a new geopolitical balance. Russia is currently acting as a bridge connecting Central Asia and South Asia. Its dialogue with India, China, Pakistan, and Iran reflects that the SCO is moving towards becoming a flexible but influential organization that can accommodate diverse interests on one platform - without any central dominance. Russia's growing influence reflects its desire to strengthen its strategic position in Central Asia and South Asia, while its alliance with China allows it to compete with Western countries and promote a multipolar world.

The growing cooperation between Russia and China is increasing the challenges for the United States and its allies. This alliance could change the balance of power around the world and reduce the United States' influence.

## India's Role: Contrary to Western Expectations

The prediction of Western analysts that India's presence would create divisions in the SCO has proven to be completely wrong. India has not only actively participated but has also reiterated its commitment to the platform. This stance of India indicates that it is aware of its role in multipolarity and does not want to be fully integrated into the rigid axis of the West. This is an important aspect of India's independent foreign policy, which allows it to act in accordance with its national interests.

For India, the SCO provides a platform where it can strengthen its relations with Central Asia and Russia.



It also helps India gain access to energy resources, combat terrorism, and promote regional security. India's active participation in the SCO demonstrates its desire to strengthen its role as a responsible and constructive power in the region.

However, balancing its role in the SCO is a challenge for India, as it also has strong relations with the United States and other Western countries. India must ensure that its participation in the SCO does not harm its relations with Western countries.

### Challenging the West by Citing UN Laws

Araqchi cited Article 2, Section 4 of the UN Charter and Security Council Resolution 487 to point out that attacks and sanctions on Iranian nuclear bases are completely illegal. This stance symbolizes 'legal resistance' - challenging the moral legitimacy of the West in international forums. This legal argument not only strengthens Iran's position but also questions the legitimacy of the West's actions based on international law.

This approach emphasizes the importance of international law and encourages Western powers to abide by international rules. Iran's legal resistance can set a precedent for other developing countries that

want to use international law to protect their interests.

### The West's Response: Predictable Pressure

Within days of Iran's proposals, the European Union imposed new sanctions on eight Iranian individuals and one entity. The reason - 'serious human rights violations.' But this was a strategic signal. The West wants platforms like the SCO not to become effective and for the voices of nations like Iran to remain outside the global discourse. But this very reaction justifies Iran's point: 'The current global order has become 'power-based' rather than 'rule-based'.

Western pressure may prompt Iran to be more assertive in its foreign policy and further worsen its relations with Western countries. However, it may also prompt Iran to strengthen its relations with the SCO and other non-Western powers.

### NATO vs. SCO: Structural Differences

NATO is a centralized, U.S.-dominated security alliance, in which member countries have to act according to a central command. In contrast, the SCO's structure is more egalitarian and sovereignty-respecting. It does not have the dominance of any one power. NATO's foundation is monolithic operation in the name of collective resistance, while the SCO's



foundation is coexistence and dialogue in diversities.

This structural difference makes the SCO an attractive alternative for countries that are uncomfortable with Western hegemony. The SCO allows member countries to maintain their sovereignty and pursue their foreign policy independently. This makes the SCO more flexible and adaptable than NATO.

## Envisioning the Future: Can It Truly Become an 'Anti-NATO'?

Iran's long-term strategy rests on the idea that NATO will not be the only security mechanism in the 21st century. If the SCO accepts Iran's proposals and changes the organization's structure, it can truly become an option that balances Western dominance. It's not just about Iran - there are numerous countries, such as Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Central Asian nations, that are uncomfortable with Western dominance and are looking for alternatives.

The possibility of the SCO becoming an 'anti-NATO' poses a serious challenge to Western powers. It could change the global balance of power and reduce the influence of the United States.

## Conclusion: A New Worldview is Taking Shape in Beijing

This move by Iran from the platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is not merely a strategic restructuring but a blueprint for the future international order. It is an attempt that suggests that global politics will no longer be decided only in Washington or Brussels - but its script will also be written in cities like Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow. Iran is now emerging not only as a 'troublemaker' but also as an institutional planner. And if its proposals are supported, we can truly see a new global security framework being formed in the

21st century - where multipolarity, sovereignty, and cooperation will outweigh dominance and hegemony.

The SCO meeting in Beijing signals the beginning of a new era where the global power structure will be more decentralized and multipolar. It is an era where developing countries will play a more active role in international affairs and help shape global rules and norms. It is an era where cooperation and dialogue will replace conflict and confrontation.

Although this transformation will not be easy. Resistance from Western powers can be expected, and there may be conflicts of interest among member countries within the SCO. But still, the rise of a multipolar world is an inevitable trend. As the global balance of power shifts, it becomes essential for developing countries to raise their voices and help shape the future international order.

In this context, India has an important role to play. India is a large and influential country with strong relations with both Western and non-Western powers. India can become a bridge that brings together different perspectives and promotes global consensus.

India must ensure that the multipolar world is a more just and inclusive world. India must also ensure that the multipolar world is peaceful and stable. India can use its diplomatic skills and its economic strength to help achieve these goals. Ultimately, the SCO meeting in Beijing was an important moment in global

politics. It signaled the rise of a multipolar world, and it provided an opportunity for developing countries to help shape the future international order. This opportunity is especially important for India, as it can play a leadership role in this region and around the world. India must seize this opportunity and help build a more just, inclusive, peaceful, and stable world." ●



***Western pressure may prompt Iran to adopt a more assertive stance in its foreign policy, further straining its ties with Western nations. However, it could also encourage Tehran to deepen its engagement with the SCO and strengthen alliances with other non-Western powers.***



# Pakistan-India-China Heading for a Water War?



Santu Das

**O**n July 19th, Chinese Premier Li Qiang defended the construction of a dam on the Brahmaputra River in the ecologically fragile and sensitive Tibetan region, attempting to allay concerns in middle and lower riparian countries like India and Bangladesh about its potential impact. China states that the dam project, with an estimated cost of \$167 billion, will ensure ecological conservation and enhance local prosperity.

However, concerns are growing in India. Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu has described the Chinese dam project on the river as a 'ticking water bomb' and a matter of grave concern. India's concerns are justified, as the Brahmaputra River is a crucial source of water for states

like Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The construction of the dam could reduce water flow, negatively impacting agriculture, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

China has repeatedly assured that the dam project will not affect water availability downstream. However, countries like India and Bangladesh are skeptical of these assurances, as China is not a signatory to international water treaties.

## Indus Water Dispute: Another Potential Conflict Zone

More than 3,000 kilometers away from Arunachal Pradesh, people in the Kashmir Valley are quietly speculating that the next war between India and Pakistan could be fought over Kashmir's water. Water resources are becoming another explosive issue in a region that is already tense. Following the terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir, on April 22nd, New Delhi suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). In response, Islamabad suspended the 1972 Simla Agreement and termed India's action an 'act of war'. The IWT, mediated by the World Bank, is a water-sharing agreement between India and Pakistan, which has endured for the past 65 years,



but it has been suspended by India for the first time.

According to the IWT, both countries can use the water available in the Indus River and its tributaries. Pakistan has been granted rights to the western rivers of the Indus basin - the Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab - for irrigation, drinking, and non-consumptive use (hydropower). India has unrestricted usage rights to the eastern rivers - the Ravi, Beas, and Sutlej. According to the treaty, India is permitted to use the western rivers for limited purposes (power generation and irrigation) without large-scale storage or diversion.

But now New Delhi is reportedly working on a mega inter-basin water transfer scheme to divert additional flows from Jammu and Kashmir's waters to the northern Indian states of Punjab and Haryana and even to Rajasthan. Media reports indicate that New Delhi aims to maximize the benefits of the Indus River's water. A feasibility study is being conducted to explore the possibility of constructing a 113-kilometer-long canal that would redirect additional flows from Kashmir to other states.

This proposal has not been welcomed by Islamabad or Kashmir-based political groups. Besides sparking a war of words between key unionist political organizations in Kashmir and Punjab, the project is likely to ignite new interstate water disputes.

## Warnings of War

Former Indian Army officer, leading strategic and defense expert, and author Pravin Sawhney told RT that any violation of the IWT would be an act of war from Pakistan's perspective. He stated, 'Stopping the flow of water to Pakistan or diverting Kashmir's water to other states by violating the IWT will be considered an act of war. A war that India cannot win due to China and Pakistan being inseparable friends.' Indian Home Minister Amit Shah said last month during a visit to the state of Madhya Pradesh that, 'The water of the Indus will be taken through canals to Sri Ganganagar in Rajasthan within three years.' He also claimed that Pakistan 'will yearn for every drop of water.' Similar statements

have also been made by other Indian politicians.

How does Pakistan view this threat? In a recent interview with The Wire, Pakistan's former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari supported comprehensive talks between the two countries on all outstanding issues, including the Kashmir dispute and 'water terrorism.' He said, 'India is threatening to starve the Indus Valley Civilization, which is a shared culture, history, and heritage, by cutting off the water supply to 240 million Pakistanis. This is against everything that Indians once stood for. This is against the philosophy of [Mohandas Karamchand] Gandhi. This is against everything we were taught about India as a secular country.'

In earlier interviews, Bhutto had warned that if the flow of water to Pakistan were stopped, there would be serious consequences. During the National Assembly's budget session in Pakistan, he accused the current Indian government of violating international law by unilaterally suspending the IWT.

## International Intervention

The Hague-based Permanent Court of Arbitration recently ruled that New Delhi's decision to suspend the IWT did not deprive the court of its ability to rule on Pakistan's grievances against India. New Delhi has opposed the Court of Arbitration's proceedings since its constitution by the World Bank in October 2022. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs called the move 'the latest spectacle at Pakistan's behest' in a statement on June 27th. It is essential for all stakeholders to exercise restraint and negotiate on the equitable and sustainable utilization of water resources. A trilateral agreement could benefit China, India, and Pakistan, involving the demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier - the vital 'blue crystal' that nourishes the Indus. It is clear that water conflict is a major threat to regional security." ●

# Saiyaara

## Box Office Hit or Emotional Hoax?

**Y**ash Raj Films' romantic drama 'Saiyaara' stormed the box office in July 2025 – proving to be the biggest hit of the year in terms of earnings. But behind the gleam of this success lies a controversy-ridden chapter, keeping the film firmly in the headlines.

First, a viral claim surfaced on social media, alleging that the filmmakers paid audience members ₹500 per person to cry emotionally in theaters, supposedly to showcase the film's effectiveness. This 'paid crying' accusation called into question the film's credibility. Thousands of memes and trolls flooded social media, branding the film's marketing strategy as an 'emotional trap.'

However, the film's actress, Tanisha Mukherjee, dismissed these allegations as 'Bollywood bashing.' She clarified that 'Saiyaara's emotional impact is real, not the result of a PR stunt.' She defended the film's team in a lengthy social media post, arguing that 'the feelings of the audience should not be insulted.'

Meanwhile, another video went viral showing the film's lead actor, Ahaan Pandey, lip-syncing to an old 2005 song, 'Agar Tum Mil Jao.' The video created the impression that Ahaan's acting and connection to Bollywood went back years, making him an instant favorite with audiences.

'Saiyaara's' story weaves together the success of new talent, the rise of social media, a wave of controversy, and the emotional reactions of audiences. The film is not only a romantic tale, but also a testament to the collision of popularity, criticism, and reality in cinema in today's digital age. ●





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