

# PERSPECTIVE

PSIR CURRENT AFFAIRS MAGAZINE

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*Going forward, it is imperative for India to anticipate the imponderables. Geopolitics today is transactional like never before.*

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*In reaching out to Russia, Trump has abandoned Europe. In it lies a reminder for India to not neglect core military capabilities.*





# THE REBOUNDING OF PAKISTAN'S AFGHAN STRATEGY

VINAY KAURA

On December 27, 2024, Pakistan's military claimed major counter-terrorism achievements, with 925 terrorists, including TTP operatives, eliminated in 60,000 operations. Despite showcasing generosity towards Afghanistan, Pakistan blamed the TTP – allegedly sheltered in Afghanistan – for attacks on its soil. This is ironic, given Pakistan's long-standing support to the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network in their insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government.

The visit of Pakistan's special envoy Muhammad Sadiq Khan to Kabul to de-escalate tensions failed, as Pakistan conducted air strikes in Paktika on December 24, killing 46, just days after a deadly TTP attack in South Waziristan. Afghanistan retaliated on December 28, highlighting the growing deadlock between the two countries. Kabul avoided acknowledging the Durand Line as Pakistan's territory, exposing Pakistan's inability to control its former proxies by force or diplomacy.

Pakistan's Afghan strategy, once deemed a strategic asset, has turned into a strategic ditch. The return of the Taliban, instead of delivering security depth, has brought crisis. Pakistan faces pressure to retaliate against TTP attacks, though its past support for Taliban militants has now backfired. A call from within Pakistan's government to seek U.S. drone assistance and proposals such as border closures and refugee returns further expose the desperation.

Gen. Asim Munir's harsh rhetoric against Afghanistan, later followed by conciliatory appeals, only underscores Pakistan's lack of a coherent approach. Islamabad's ruling elite has ignored Afghanistan's reputation as the 'graveyard of empires', and its overreach post-9/11 has left it entangled in an unwinnable quagmire. Misjudging the Taliban-TTP nexus has led to confusion and inaction.

**Pakistan's own Afghan policy, driven by hostility towards India, is to blame for the rise of jihadist extremism.** It supported violent groups to destabilise Kabul and threaten India, miscalculating the ideological rigidity of the Taliban. Even as the Taliban returned triumphantly, they have done little to curb Pashtun nationalism, worsening Pakistan's 'Pashtunistan' dilemma.

The Taliban's rejection of the Durand Line and refusal to treat Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as Pakistani territory suggests rising Afghan irredentism. Islamabad's earlier hopes that Islamist ideology would neutralise ethnic nationalism have collapsed. Now, Pakistan faces a militant threat with little recourse, and unlike in the 1990s, it is unwilling to unilaterally recognise the Taliban regime. The Afghan Taliban's refusal to act against the TTP has left Pakistan with dwindling options and rising fears of further instability.

# CHINA'S LONG GAME IN AFRICA

SAMIR BHATTACHARYA

In 2022, China established the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania as a tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to shape future African political leaders through Chinese principles of governance. The school targets countries with strong historical ties to China and enduring liberation party governments – South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania – aiming to deepen influence among ruling elites. This initiative reflects China's broader strategy of promoting its governance model centred on party control and political centralisation. It also exemplifies Beijing's intent to shape Africa's political landscape by fostering durable relationships with policymakers of these countries.

China is increasingly asserting its global influence by engaging in international mediation and **projecting itself as an alternative to the Western-led order.** Africa's 55-country bloc is vital in multilateral forums, and China is investing in its political future to shift the global balance. While China's political engagement in Africa has historical roots, its influence has intensified through study tours, investments, and institutional partnerships. **The CCP now has ties with over 100 political parties in 51 African nations.** Kenya's interest in replicating the CCP's Central Party School and the renovation of Zimbabwe's ideological institution further indicate Beijing's ambition to export its centralised governance model.

China's strategy is anchored in decades of patient diplomacy, with political schools being one element of a broader plan to embed itself into Africa's political systems. Aware of possible regime changes, China is also building ties with opposition parties to ensure continuity of influence. Through these subtle but sustained diplomatic efforts – educational, infrastructural, and ideological – China is working to secure a central role in Africa's governance and in shaping a Sino-centric world order. Its long game is about influence through diplomacy, not just economic or military strength.

# THE TRUMP CARD, GLOBAL POLITICS AND OUTCOMES FOR INDIA

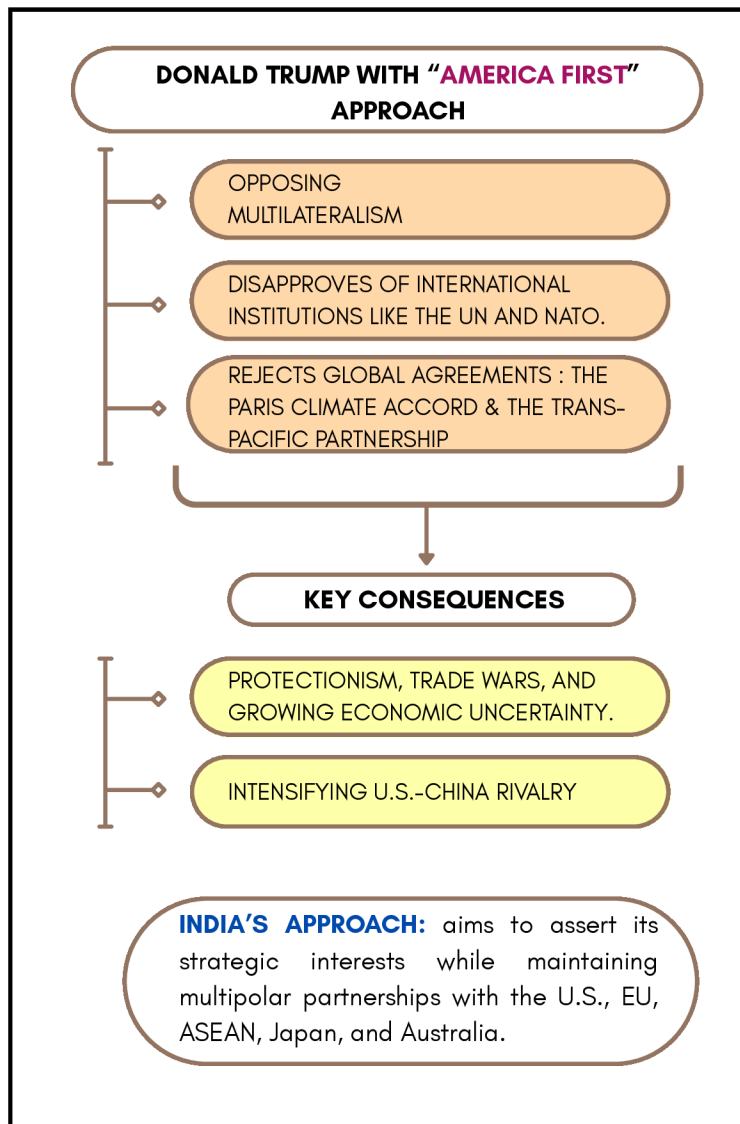
NIRUPAMA RAO

Donald Trump is a polarising, populist figure whose coercive leadership and deal-making ethos stem from his real estate background. His unorthodox, outspoken style and **“America First”** approach prioritise American sovereignty over global governance, opposing multilateralism and favouring bilateral deals. He disdains international institutions like the UN and NATO and rejects global agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Trump’s transactional, winner-take-all mindset emphasizes practical outcomes over global norms, and his MAGA vision signals protectionism, trade wars, and growing economic uncertainty. Intensifying U.S.-China rivalry will heighten instability in the Indo-Pacific, while Trump’s scepticism of international law emboldens nationalism and political adventurism, increasing polarisation worldwide. **A Trump return could downgrade climate action, destabilise markets, and disrupt the rules-based order, creating a turbulent, fragmented world order.**

Under a second Trump presidency, India-U.S. relations are expected to remain steady due to bipartisan support and the personal rapport between Modi and Trump. **Shared concerns over China’s assertiveness provide strategic momentum**, and defence ties and critical tech partnerships will likely deepen, barring pressure from export controls. However, trade friction may complicate ties. Trump’s stance on China suggests greater emphasis on the Quad, aligning with India’s Indo-Pacific vision centred on cooperation, multilateralism, and strategic autonomy.

India must assert its own strategic interests – border security, military modernisation, energy security, counterterrorism, Indo-Pacific stability, and balanced regional ties – while maintaining its multipolar partnerships with the U.S., EU, ASEAN, Japan, and Australia. India’s future also hinges on digital resilience, AI, cybersecurity, and soft power projection. **The Russia relationship remains vital for balancing the growing Sino-Russian axis.** A second Trump term could usher in a disruptive, G-Zero world order, where the law of the jungle prevails and historical norms no longer guide global politics.



# AN ALLIANCE OF DEMOCRACIES WITH INDIA AT ITS CORE

ANDERS FOGH RASMUSSEN

2025 must be the year democracies regroup, with Europe and India forming the cornerstone of a practical alliance. Their relationship has been heavy on strategy but light on outcomes, dominated for years by stalled Free Trade Agreement talks. Even if a sweeping trade deal remains elusive, there is a need for a politically anchored track focused on geostrategic collaboration — in economic security, defence, space, emerging technologies, and pharmaceuticals.

Though Europe was frustrated by India's ties with Russia during the Ukraine war, India's historic relationship with Moscow and its rivalry with Beijing shape its stance. Still, India is a democracy, and its closeness with autocracies is seen as unnatural. Simultaneously, India's criticisms of European double standards are valid, especially regarding Europe's dependence on China. **A common understanding must emerge that the Russia-China partnership threatens democracies globally,** and what happens in one region affects the other.

Based on this, practical steps should be taken to ease trade and investment and reduce dependency on China by strengthening supply chains with **India as a 'Trusted Partner'.** **In defence, Europe must support India's deeper integration into the security architecture, building on U.S.-India cooperation and the Quad.** The EU must elevate defence collaboration with India, send its Defence Commissioner promptly, and expand cooperation in defence and space.

The **EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC) must emulate the dynamism of India-U.S. partnerships like iCET.** As China leads in most emerging technologies, coordinated efforts between India, the U.S., and Europe are vital to leap ahead in innovation. Europe and India must forge a relationship rooted in tangible outcomes and deeper ties, recognising India's economic rise and the broader goal of anchoring India at the heart of an alliance of democracies. Differences should be addressed jointly — for together, India, Europe, and the U.S. can be a powerful force against united autocracies.

# A SURGE IN RADICAL GOVERNMENTS, THE HOPE OF DEMOCRACY

T.S. TIRUMURTI



T.S. Tirumurti argues that the global community appears willing to legitimise Islamic radical groups once they seize power, as seen with the Taliban in 2021 and the Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in Syria in 2024. **He highlights the irony of the international embrace of the Taliban after their violent takeover, despite past ties to terrorism and oppression of women, noting that even the UN appeared accommodating.** India, as UNSC President during the Taliban takeover, ensured anti-terror provisions were included in UNSC Resolution 2593, especially to guard against threats from Pakistani terror groups. However, the lack of global political will led to donor funds flowing to the Taliban and the erosion of women's rights.

Tirumurti draws parallels to Syria, where HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani—once affiliated with al-Qaeda—seized power, prompting the West to quickly ease sanctions, including the U.S. lifting a bounty on him. This, he argues, sends encouraging signals to Islamic extremist groups, especially in Africa. He warns of similar developments in Bangladesh, where the U.S. has backed a military-led interim government under Muhammad Yunus, which allegedly tolerates radical groups hostile to minorities and India..

The revival of groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami and Ansarullah Bangla Team threatens to undo the democratic progress since Sheikh Hasina's 2008 victory. Tirumurti stresses that though radical forces exploit religious divides, India must avoid being provoked or trapped in religious polarisation, and should maintain its strategic focus on preserving its hard-won bilateral gains. The military coup in Bangladesh, he concludes, must not turn into an Islamic one, and the democratic awakening of the Bangladeshi people may yet be the silver lining.

# TIME TO SEIZE THE PROMISE OF THE U.S.-INDIA NUCLEAR DEAL

RAYMOND E. VICKERY, JR.

Sixteen years after the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal was approved by Congress, its energy and commercial promises remain largely unfulfilled. While the agreement marked a watershed moment in U.S.-India relations—opening doors to deeper defence, technology, and intelligence cooperation—the vision of a vibrant civil nuclear partnership has stalled. Originally supported by a coalition of businesses, Indian-Americans, and academics, the deal was meant to fuel India's clean energy future, create jobs, and reduce dependence on fossil fuels. However, **despite President Obama's 2016 announcement that Westinghouse would build six nuclear plants in India, none have materialized.**

**Although U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently announced steps to remove regulatory barriers, real obstacles remain. Most Indian nuclear entities were removed from the U.S. Entity List post-deal, but concerns linger about dual-use technology falling into the wrong hands, including adversaries like Russia. The Biden administration seems to believe remaining Indian entities no longer pose serious risks, but whether future U.S. administrations, particularly under Trump, agree is uncertain.**

**The core issue lies in India's 2010 Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, which places liability for accidents on suppliers rather than operators—departing from global norms.** This liability framework, driven by anti-foreign sentiment and memories of the Bhopal tragedy, has deterred U.S. firms like GE and Westinghouse. While Russia accepted India's risk-mitigation measures due to state ownership and sovereign immunity, U.S. firms have not. Unless the Trump administration addresses this liability impasse, U.S. nuclear companies are unlikely to participate meaningfully.

Further barriers include rapidly evolving nuclear technology and cost. U.S. firms must provide cutting-edge reactors and equipment at prices acceptable to Indian consumers wary of cost overruns. Indian officials are cautious after observing failures in U.S. nuclear projects that burdened ratepayers without service improvements.

These challenges can't be tackled by U.S. firms alone. The Trump administration must work with both governments and industry on liability, regulation, technology, and pricing. The clock is ticking, but the **strategic, economic, and environmental rewards of realising the full promise of the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal are immense.**

# IS FRANCE'S INFLUENCE IN WEST AFRICA OVER?

Several West African nations — **Chad, Ivory Coast, Senegal** — have demanded the withdrawal of **French troops**, echoing earlier moves by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. This shift is driven by a sovereignty narrative, where long-standing colonial-era defence agreements under '*Françafrique*' are now seen as incompatible with national independence. Public dissatisfaction has grown due to France's failure to curb jihadist insurgencies, further fueling anti-French sentiments. Additionally, a new desire to diversify partnerships has prompted many nations to engage Russian mercenaries who are not constrained by democratic norms and are perceived as better security providers.

The French exit signals a historic decline of France's influence in Africa. Yet, its replacement by Russia has not improved stability — Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso remain among the worst-hit by terrorism, despite new military regimes and their Sahel alliance. **France, on the other hand, faces four consequences: the demise of 'Françafrique', a loss of political leverage affecting economic interests, diminished global military reputation, and loss of strategic influence to Russia in the region.** France's ability to maintain its values-based image is also compromised.

Europe, broadly, is experiencing waning influence in Africa amid rising Russian military and Chinese economic clout. **With internal challenges like the war in Ukraine and migration issues, EU priorities have shifted inward.** Development aid has declined, weakening European presence. As Europe's trade surplus in Africa drops, China maintains dominance, and Russia fills the military void. Europe's future approach is likely to be more security-driven and introspective, with limited engagement in Africa's growing geopolitical arena.



# FIVE VIBES — IN POLITICS, ECONOMICS AND CREATIVITY — THAT WILL SHAPE 2025

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

These are not predictions; it would be presumptuous to claim omniscience or even foresight. But here are five trends more in the realm of how the world might feel, rather than a prediction of actual events.

The current moment is often described in terms of **Gramsci's interregnum, a transition where an old order has dissolved but a new one has yet to emerge**. This comforting idea suggests history has direction, but defining the beginning of this interregnum is challenging. Was it the 2008 financial crisis? The advent of AI? The end of the liberal international order? Populism's rise? War's return? Or the end of the carbon economy? More importantly, is this a transition or permanent drift?

1. **The Age of Conspiracy:** In 2025, conspiracy will dominate the vibe in democracies like India and the US. **Political discourse will be fragile, accusatory,** and high-stakes, driven by fears of ruin caused by shadowy forces—deep states, cabals, ethnic groups. Scapegoating and targeting fictitious sources of power will intensify.

2. **The Age of Communalism:** Communalism in India is resurging after decades of decline since the 1990s. It has become the default ideology for powerful societal sections, legitimizing hate politics and communal wounds. Though large-scale violence is absent, foreboding builds as communal fault lines deepen.

3. **The Crisis of Social Self-Knowledge:** Since the 2008 financial crisis, Covid pandemic, and wars in Ukraine and Israel, societies have learned more about their vulnerabilities after the fact. Policymakers struggle with assumptions about inflation and economic resilience. **There is a widening gap between data representation and public perception, reflecting a crisis in authoritative knowledge and social sciences.**

4. **Price Discovery in International Relations:** Revisionist powers like Russia, China, and Turkey are testing boundaries to see “what they can get away with.” Trust deficits among great powers will prevent solutions to global problems like climate change or public health. While Trump may bring initial euphoria over stabilizing Ukraine or China-US relations, deeper issues will remain unresolved.

5. **The Age of Creativity:** Talent mobilization will drive technological and cultural creativity. AI developments will be received calmly after initial euphoria fades. Artistic creativity will thrive, though Bollywood won't make a comeback, and darker music trends may replace Taylor Swift's peak popularity.

# THE ‘GREAT ABANDONMENT’ OF AFGHANISTAN

SUHASINI HAIDAR

“The U.S. and Europe have washed their hands of the problem inside Afghanistan; India should worry about losing mind-space among Afghans.”

The U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan under Trump and Biden – seen in cutting funding, bypassing the elected government in talks, and signing the Doha Accords favouring the Taliban – has echoed deeply with Afghans worldwide, especially in exile. **The 2020 Doha deal, which excluded Ghani’s government and made no binding demands on the Taliban, paved the way for their takeover.** Today, Taliban 2.0 rules more brutally, especially toward women, reversing two decades of modest gains.

Despite not being formally recognised by any country, the Taliban are embraced by powers like Russia, China, Pakistan, and Central Asian states. The U.S. and Europe have walked away, while India has remained ambiguous – reopening a technical mission in Kabul, engaging Taliban ministers, and now reportedly considering expanding its presence, even allowing a Taliban-appointed ambassador in Delhi. This shift, marked by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri’s public meeting with Taliban FM Muttaqi, signals a move from quiet contact to open engagement.

Officials justify India’s overtures as pragmatic, arguing the Taliban are “here to stay” and that India risks losing strategic space. However, internal Taliban divisions, misgovernance, economic collapse, and friction with Pakistan suggest that their hold may not be permanent. Moreover, the claim that India must engage the Taliban to aid Afghans is refuted by India’s past ability to send aid through intermediaries. Expecting strategic returns from a regime ideologically opposed to India is also dangerous, as the Taliban has historically targeted Indian missions and allies.

Instead, India should be concerned about alienating ordinary Afghans, especially after denying visas to those fleeing in 2021, many of whom had once protected Indian interests. Past goodwill from Afghan refugees and students in India helped forge crucial ties with leaders like Karzai and Ghani. This legacy is now undermined by India’s warming to the Taliban, which has deeply hurt those still loyal to the Republic

New Delhi must reassess its trajectory. While engaging the Taliban may be necessary, it must not mean sidelining opposition voices. India must raise its voice on women’s rights, support Afghan women’s cricket, and provide platforms for exiled leaders. **If India wants lasting relevance in Afghanistan, it must maintain contact across the political spectrum and avoid being complicit in the Taliban’s consolidation.**

# CHINA TIES - BEWARE CONCILIATION WITHOUT DETERRENCE

ARZAN TARAPORE

**India appears to be adopting a more conciliatory tone towards China**, as seen in Prime Minister Modi's recent comments advocating dialogue for a stable, cooperative relationship. This comes amid gradual recovery in ties since the 2020 border crisis, where China's incursions into Ladakh killed 20 Indian soldiers. Though military talks have disengaged forces from many sites and trade has surged, it is uncertain whether Modi's remarks signal a tonal shift or a deeper policy change.

India may be revisiting its earlier approach under Modi, seeking mutually beneficial ties with China, while still engaging strategically with Quad partners. Given China's economic heft and India's development goals, defusing conflict makes strategic sense, as echoed by **External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's assertion that pursuing stability with China is "common sense"**.

However, Indian policy must also consider external dynamics – particularly shifts in Washington. The Trump administration's mixed signals – imposing tariffs on China while suggesting defence cuts – and its unpredictable grand bargains with rivals like Russia, raise concerns. **Trump's tendency to abandon long-standing policies, including cutting support to Ukraine to force concessions, could impact India's expectation of U.S. intelligence support against China.** With uncertainty about American commitment, India has further reason to stabilise ties with Beijing.

Still, this new conciliatory posture should not dilute India's military focus. Despite the Ladakh crisis, India's defence spending remains low. A stabilisation policy could justify delays in military investment and reform – to India's peril. Building credible military capabilities is essential for deterrence and takes years. In the meantime, India must continue joint exercises and coordination with partners to strengthen operational readiness, regardless of American reliability. History shows that China has acted aggressively even after diplomatic outreach; therefore, any push for stability must be paired with the ability to deter. Without this, conciliation could lead to submission.

Prime Minister Modi's advocating dialogue for a stable, cooperative relationship amid gradual recovery in ties since the 2020 border crisis

External Affairs Minister Jaishankar's assertion that pursuing stability with China is "common sense".

India must continue joint exercises with partners to strengthen operational readiness, regardless of U.S. reliability.

Uncertainty about American commitment, India has further reason to stabilise ties with Beijing.

# THE ASSAULT ON MULTILATERALISM AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

VARSHA SINGH

**The U.S.'s unilateral actions are a turning point and could invite global retaliation, but this is also a chance for non-western nations to take up leadership roles.**

The Trump administration's '**America First**' policy marks a pivotal shift away from multilateralism and international law, exemplified by actions such as withdrawing from institutions the U.S. once helped create, including WHO, UNHRC, and the Paris Agreement, and most recently through the DEFUND Act, which proposes a complete U.S. disengagement from the UN.

This act threatens the UN's legitimacy by repealing laws vital to U.S.-UN relations, halting financial contributions, ending participation in peacekeeping, and revoking UN officials' immunity, thereby undermining political cooperation fundamental to the rules-based order. Further, sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC), which builds on the Nuremberg legacy of accountability, reflect hostility to international justice, as the U.S. accused the court of baseless actions against it and its ally, Israel.

**Economic nationalism, seen in tariff impositions under the guise of national security, mirrors 1930s isolationism that contributed to global instability, undermining the post-war consensus that led to GATT and eventually the WTO.** The U.S. has blocked Appellate Body appointments and may withdraw from the WTO altogether, deepening the institutional crisis. Such unilateralism devalues institutions that maintain international law and collective action on global issues like climate change, human rights, and economic stability.

Retaliation from other states is likely, exposing the **hollowness of MAGA without multilateral cooperation**. However, this erosion of U.S. leadership presents an opportunity for non-western nations like India, which has consistently championed multilateralism and legal frameworks. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated at the 2025 G-20 in Johannesburg, this is a critical moment to push for UNSC reform and global leadership rooted in cooperation over coercion.

# NEW DELHI'S PERILOUS RECALIBRATION WITH THE TALIBAN

CHRIS FITZGERALD

India's growing proximity to the Taliban marks a perilous recalibration, with reports suggesting Prime Minister Modi may permit the regime to appoint a new envoy to its embassy in New Delhi. This follows the January meeting between India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Taliban 'Foreign Minister' Amir Khan Muttaqi in Dubai, where both sides discussed closer political and economic ties.

The trajectory began with India reopening its Kabul embassy in June 2022. However, accepting a Taliban diplomat **signals a near-recognition of a regime widely condemned for its "gender apartheid," denying 1.4 million girls access to education and erasing women from public life** through bans on work, beauty parlours, and national parks.

India views engagement as a strategic opportunity to assert influence in Afghanistan, especially as China has already recognized a Taliban envoy, launched infrastructure projects, and hinted at including Afghanistan in the Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistan, once a Taliban patron, has lost influence as the group distances itself and builds ties with China, Russia, and Central Asia.

Yet, this engagement carries serious dangers. Afghanistan under the Taliban has become a terror hotspot, with Islamic State (IS) launching deadly attacks on the regime and its allies – including the killing of Taliban Minister Khalil Haqqani and threats to Chinese and Russian interests. IS has also attacked the Indian consulate in Jalalabad, and a UN report noted its efforts to recruit for attacks in India.

Meanwhile, the Taliban's support for Tehrik-e Taliban has worsened Pakistan's security, prompting cross-border strikes and clashes. With the group claiming 147 attacks in one month alone, the threat is escalating. **India, with its tragic history of terrorism, must remain cautious. Before deepening ties, it should demand clear Taliban action against IS and an end to support for regional terror groups.** Afghanistan remains a risky investment, and India may find the cost of engagement too high.



# INDIA, MAURITIUS AND A VISIT TO DEEPEN LONG-STANDING TIES

SHYAM SARAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mauritius (March 11-12, 2025), where he will be the guest of honour at its Independence Day celebrations, is a reaffirmation of the deep and long-standing bilateral ties that enjoy political consensus in both countries. With a new government led by Navinchandra Ramgoolam in power, this visit is an opportunity for Mr. Modi to build personal rapport and reassure Mauritius of India's continued support for its security and prosperity.

**India-Mauritius ties grew significantly under Mr. Ramgoolam's earlier leadership, with him being particularly sensitive to India's security concerns.** His father, Sir Seewosagur Ramgoolam, had led the independence movement and had worked closely with Subhas Chandra Bose in London, even proof-reading *The Indian Struggle*. **These shared histories underpin the strong people-to-people ties – nearly 70% of Mauritius's population is of Indian origin,** including Bhojpuri-speaking communities and Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi speakers. Mauritius reflects a microcosm of India but is also a multi-ethnic society, with an influential French minority. India must maintain links with all segments of this diverse population while nurturing cultural ties, supported by institutions such as the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and the Indian Cultural Centre.

**Mauritius, a bilingual and financially robust African Union member with preferential trade access to Africa, is a valuable business gateway, especially for Francophone Africa.** Bilateral trade reached \$554 million in 2022-23, and the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) has made Mauritius a major channel for foreign investment into India. As a sentinel of the western Indian Ocean, Mauritius is crucial to India's maritime security.

Cooperation under the **Colombo Security Conclave**, India's redeveloped surveillance facility on Agaléga, coastal radar networks, and shared access to the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre in Gurugram have bolstered maritime domain awareness in Mauritius's vast 2.3 million sq. km EEZ. At a time when China's presence in the Indian Ocean is growing, this security partnership assumes strategic significance. Beyond ceremonial honours, Mr. Modi's visit is timely and substantive – reinforcing that India-Mauritius relations must remain a stable anchor in an increasingly uncertain world.

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

STANLY JOHNY

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began with President Putin's invasion on February 24, 2022, was initially expected by both Moscow and the West to end swiftly. However, Ukraine, bolstered by U.S. arms, thwarted Russia's early advances, prompting the U.S. under Biden to adopt a dual strategy – heavy sanctions on Russia and military support to Ukraine. This approach initially succeeded, forcing Russian withdrawals from Kharkiv and Kherson.

Yet, Putin responded with partial mobilisation, annexing four Ukrainian regions, and pivoting economically towards Asia to counter Western sanctions. **By 2023, Russia began regaining the upper hand, capturing strategic cities like Bakhmut and Avdiivka, while Ukraine's 2023 counteroffensive faltered.** In 2024, Russia expanded its territorial control further, while Ukraine, though launching drone strikes and capturing small parts of Russian territory, has largely been on the defensive.

In 2025, a major geopolitical shift occurred with President Trump radically altering U.S. policy. He halted military aid, ruled out NATO membership or security guarantees for Ukraine, and initiated direct talks with Russia. This represents a return to America's offshore balancing and Realist worldview, wherein China, not Russia, is seen as the primary threat.

Trump believes Ukraine cannot win the war and must settle on terms dictated by the new U.S.-Russia understanding. Europe, caught off guard, finds itself sidelined as Washington resets ties with Moscow. Previously reluctant on NATO membership for Ukraine, Europe bore massive economic costs from the war, including energy crises and rising far-right sentiments. **Now, without U.S. backing, Europe lacks both unity and capability to guarantee Ukraine's security.**

Ukraine, meanwhile, is devastated – having lost over 20% of its territory, suffered tens of thousands of troop deaths, mass emigration, and economic collapse. It faces an acute manpower shortage and relies heavily on external arms. **The U.S. now declares NATO membership off the table, leaving Ukraine with no viable path forward.** Whether it continues fighting or agrees to peace, Ukraine's choices are bleak – caught in a geopolitical chessboard where great powers negotiate over their interests while proxies like Ukraine pay the price.

# TRUMP 2.0 AND THE NEW MATRIX OF U.S.-INDIA DEFENCE TIES

HARSH V. PANT

Prime Minister Modi's February 2025 visit to the U.S. significantly advanced the bilateral defence partnership. Key outcomes included potential co-production of **Javelin Anti-Tank Guided Missiles and Stryker Infantry Combat Vehicles, which would enhance interoperability and deepen India's integration into U.S. defence supply chains.** India will also purchase six more P-8I maritime patrol aircraft, and a new 10-year defence framework was announced.

Cooperation in Unmanned Aerial Systems and autonomous technologies gained traction, with initiatives like the Autonomous Systems Industry Alliance (ASIA). Further possibilities were raised in undersea, space, and fifth-generation fighter systems. **Both sides also agreed to review regulatory frameworks, negotiate a Reciprocal Defence Procurement (RDP) agreement,** and streamline acquisition and maintenance procedures.

Yet, serious gaps remain. The joint statement omitted any commitment on urgent delivery of GE's F-404 engines for Tejas-Mark 1A or progress on the F-414 engine for Tejas-Mark II, critical for replacing India's retiring MiG-21 squadrons. Trump revived the F-35 offer, but integrating this jet into the IAF's already diverse fleet presents major logistical, financial, and operational challenges, with no co-production or transfer of technology (ToT) offered.

The high cost of maintaining the F-35 and potential U.S. usage restrictions also raise concerns. Meanwhile, efforts to revive the long-stalled MMRCA deal for 114 fighters remain uncertain, as past negotiations with France over Rafale faltered over cost and ToT commitments. While defence ties have gained a stable momentum, the path forward depends on addressing these critical hurdles.

# THE RIGHT'S RISE, EUROPE'S STATE OF DENIAL

T.S. TIRUMURTI

At the Munich Security Conference and the UN General Assembly vote on Ukraine, profound contradictions in Western discourse were exposed. The **U.S. and Russia held talks in Saudi Arabia on Ukraine without including Kyiv or Europe**, echoing how Russia was excluded at the Bürgenstock summit organized by the EU and U.S. Ironically, U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance accused Europe of stifling right-wing voices, even as the West previously tried to delegitimise them through elections.

The U.S., now critical of Europe's Ukraine strategy, forgets its own \$110 billion involvement, its role in sabotaging early peace talks in Türkiye, and the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage by Germany's allies. **The U.S. also urges Europe to fund its own defence** and tackle illegal migration and radical Islam, despite earlier downplaying such threats in global fora like the UN.

Europe, meanwhile, refuses to acknowledge how its liberal domestic policies have altered its demography and empowered radicals, terrorists, and separatists—from LTTE to Al-Qaeda—resulting in repeated attacks within European cities. Right-wing electoral gains are a direct consequence of public backlash to these missteps. Yet, Europe attacks its own far-right while ignoring America's own democratic lapses under Trump. As Europe clings to liberal ideals, it paradoxically enables their erosion by welcoming values in conflict with them.

Indian Minister **S. Jaishankar pointed out the West's hypocrisy in promoting democracy at home while enabling undemocratic takeovers abroad, such as in Afghanistan and Syria.** In a pivotal UNGA vote, the U.S. sided with Russia, highlighting the widening transatlantic rift. Though this may signal tactical repositioning rather than a strategic rupture, the trans-Atlantic partnership remains vital, especially in light of Russia and China's growing alliance.

## EXPOSING CONTRADICTIONS IN WESTERN DISCOURSES

U.S. and Russia held talks in Saudi Arabia on Ukraine without including Kyiv or Europe

U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance accused Europe of stifling right-wing voices

Indian Minister S. Jaishankar called out the West for backing coups abroad while preaching democracy at home.

UNGA vote : the U.S. sided with Russia, highlighting the widening transatlantic rift.

# A NEW AGE OF IMPERIALISM

PRIYANJALI MALIK

**The rhetoric from the White House signals a new world order that is nasty and brutish and in which might makes right**

The post-war rules-based international order—built on economic integration, collective security, and self-determination—has been critically undermined after Donald Trump’s return to the White House. Once tested by Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this system now faces a deeper blow as the U.S. itself abandons Charter principles, aligning with Russia and signalling a rejection of the UN-based global governance system.

This **marks a shift from a world order based on sovereign equality to one openly embracing great power spheres of influence.** Though the current international system emerged from wartime diplomacy between major powers, and though it always included contradictions—like implicit acceptance of Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe—it still managed to constrain power and promote predictability through norms and multilateral institutions.

**President Trump’s unilateralism has dismantled these norms: exiting global treaties, disrupting trade, and reviving nationalist, mercantilist foreign policy.** His dramatic rapprochement with Vladimir Putin—excluding Kyiv from peace talks and validating Russian demands on NATO—signals a betrayal of Ukraine and effectively cedes Europe to Russian influence.

**A new age of imperialism is emerging, with the U.S. retreating from global leadership** and turning inward to dominate its own hemisphere. Trump’s interest in territorial expansion—including **Greenland, Canada, and Gaza**—further underscores the regression toward a brutal order where “might makes right.” Europe is left to defend itself, while China, emboldened by American withdrawal from East Asia, may now act on its claims to Taiwan. India, too, must take heed, as the unraveling order may bring renewed threats along its contested borders with China.

# INTERPRETING THE RECENT BANGLADESH-PAKISTAN THAW

AISHWARIA SONAVANE

The recent engagement between Bangladesh and Pakistan signals Dhaka's intent to diversify its foreign policy, especially following Sheikh Hasina's ouster and Muhammad Yunus's rise as Chief Adviser. Meetings between Mr. Yunus and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif — contrasted by his silence with India's Prime Minister — reflect this shift.

Ms. Hasina's India-leaning stance and historical grievances had long strained Dhaka-Islamabad ties. **Under Mr. Yunus, relations have visibly warmed:** a Pakistani military delegation visited Rangpur; Bangladesh's Army leadership visited Rawalpindi; direct flights to Islamabad resumed; and a Bangladeshi warship participated in Pakistan's Aman 2025 naval exercises.

Yet, whether these moves yield substantive outcomes remains uncertain. Mr. Yunus has softened Dhaka's stance on a 1971 apology, but public sentiment rooted in the liberation war endures. Pakistan's refusal to acknowledge the war as a Bengali-led response to West Pakistani repression, instead framing it as an Indian plot, continues to obstruct deeper ties. **Moreover, strategic and economic returns from a Pakistan partnership are limited for Bangladesh, and geographical separation through India creates logistical challenges.**

From India's perspective, these developments indicate Pakistan's attempt to regain influence in Dhaka. The timing overlaps with India's warming ties with the Taliban, adding a layer of regional complexity. **Despite potential shifts, Bangladesh's economic dependence and geographic proximity to India will constrain anti-India moves.**

India remains its largest trading partner, with vital exports supporting Bangladeshi industries. Still, **India must stay alert to a possible Pakistan-China-Bangladesh axis and safeguard its northeast.** By defining red lines and fostering cultural, economic, and developmental cooperation, India can reinforce ties and counter anti-India narratives in Bangladesh.

# A ROLE FOR INDIA IN SOUTH-SOUTH CLIMATE COOPERATION

GOPAL K. SARANGI  
& SHUBHI GOEL

COP29 in Baku focused on operationalising Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, highlighting its market mechanisms for climate cooperation. Article 6.2 enables Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes (ITMOs), fostering emissions reductions, technology exchange, capacity building, and finance from developed to developing countries.

India, though a major emitter in absolute terms, faces the dual challenge of development and climate action, complicated by limited finance and inadequate support from developed nations. **India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS), launched in 2023, strengthens institutional capacity and prepares the country for international carbon markets.** With a background in CDM, ESCerts, and RECs, India is well-placed to benefit from Article 6.2.

India has identified 14 areas for Article 6.2 collaboration, including RE, energy storage, and carbon capture, seeking partnerships with countries like South Korea and Japan. ITMO transactions can generate green jobs, reduce health risks, and help meet India's SDGs. Through South-South cooperation, **India can also generate ITMOs by investing in developing nations, especially in Africa, where renewable potential and climate vulnerability are high.** India's long-standing economic cooperation and developmental engagement with Africa strengthens this possibility. Under Modi's 10 principles, India's expertise in RE, digital tools, and sustainable agriculture positions it to support African countries' NDCs while accessing carbon markets.

The structure of ITMO-sharing agreements will reflect respective contributions under CBDR-RC principles. India could claim a higher share if it provides significant technical or financial input. This mirrors the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM), where contributions determine credit allocation.

However, challenges exist. Developed countries might use ITMOs to avoid domestic mitigation, pushing burdens onto India. Opportunity costs for India are real, as the same reductions could support its own targets. Transparency, governance, and safeguards are essential to ensure equity and alignment with national climate goals. **India can become a global climate leader through equitable, transparent partnerships that advance a low-carbon future.**

## ARTICLE 6.2 OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT

Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes (ITMOs)

### Benefits for INDIA

1. Green jobs
2. Help meet India's SDGs
3. South-South cooperation
4. Reduce health risks

### Challenges for INDIA

1. avoidance of domestic mitigation by developed countries
2. Opportunity costs
3. Transparency, governance and equity

# INDIA AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE GLOBAL NORTH AND SOUTH

POOJA RAMAMURTHI

**New Delhi's aspiration to be the 'voice' of the Global South can take shape if it also learns to listen**

Prime Minister Modi's remarks at recent forums, including the Voice of Global South Summit and the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, underscore India's aspiration to amplify the voice of developing countries and lead reforms for a more inclusive global governance structure. **This renewed commitment differs from the Non-Aligned Movement, as it does not stem from decolonial sentiments or anti-Western rhetoric;** rather, India is expanding ties with traditional Western allies while engaging the Global South.

Though some view India's engagement as a counter to China's growing presence—especially evident in overlapping investment regions in Africa and the Indo-Pacific—the bigger picture is India's pursuit of an autonomous identity as an emerging power, aiming to represent disillusioned developing countries seeking alternatives to existing economic paradigms.

India must, however, match its vision with tangible strategies. Its call for equal development partnerships must move beyond an India-first model. Initiatives like the **Global Development Compact should embrace reciprocal learning to avoid the perception of India acting as a donor.** Furthermore, India's emphasis on human-centric development—via **Mission LiFE or Skill India**—must evolve into sustained capacity building, helping partners create institutional frameworks.

Long-term engagement through digital, climate, and MSME cooperation will enhance India's credibility. Its push for inclusive global governance, evidenced in advocating African Union's G20 membership, must be backed by domestic capabilities for international cooperation. Partnering through existing multilateral frameworks can serve as a preparatory phase toward developing India-led initiatives. To truly become the 'voice' of the Global South, India must also be willing to listen.

**INDIA'S PURSUIT OF AN AUTONOMOUS IDENTITY AS AN EMERGING POWER, AIMING TO REPRESENT DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**



**EXPANDING TIES WITH TRADITIONAL WESTERN ALLIES WHILE ENGAGING THE GLOBAL SOUTH.**



**INCLUSIVE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE, EVIDENCED IN ADVOCATING AFRICAN UNION'S G20 MEMBERSHIP,**



**INITIATIVES LIKE THE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT, SKILL INDIA, MISSION LiFE**

# GAZA AND TRUMP'S 'EXPANDING THE CANVAS' STRATEGY

MAHESH SACHDEV

Donald Trump's audacious proposal on February 4, 2025, to depopulate Gaza and develop it into a global riviera, under U.S. stewardship, represents his signature **"expanding the canvas"** strategy. This maximalist overture, made alongside Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and laden with praise for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), appeared to many as colonial adventurism, while also functioning as a provocative gambit to force more moderate counteroffers.

Trump's boldness underscores two realities: **the region's readiness for profound geopolitical change post-October 7, 2023, and the pivotal role Saudi Arabia could play in reshaping West Asia.** Sixteen months of brutal conflict have destabilised old paradigms, dented Iran's strategic outreach, and exposed Israeli vulnerabilities, even as Israel claims a pyrrhic victory. The region faces political and economic upheaval—rife with revenge, distrust, unresolved issues like the Palestinian statehood, and the return of Trump's erratic diplomacy.

Economically, war-related destruction across Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria has created a reconstruction bill running into hundreds of billions, worsened by sanctions and structural reliance on oil—a commodity threatened by falling global demand. **Trump's interventions, such as abandoning the Paris Accord and advocating lower oil prices, further strain the region, risking a glut that could damage both U.S. shale and West Asian oil economies.**

His tariff-driven trade disruptions and strong dollar policy have hurt West Asian competitiveness. In this fraught context, Saudi Arabia—boasting economic strength, a visionary leader in MbS, and pragmatic foreign ties—emerges as a crucial stabilising force. With MbS insisting on a two-state solution as a condition for normalising ties with Israel, the road ahead is complex. Still, U.S.-Saudi re-engagement could channel Saudi influence and resources into reconstruction and diplomacy, offering hope of healing a ravaged region.

# KEEPING A WATCH ON THE GROWING ARC OF VIOLENCE

M.K. NARAYANAN

**While matters relating to new terror methods and terror attacks could still be evolving, the warnings should not be ignored**

The world is entering an unpredictable phase marked by escalating violence in Europe, West Asia, and other regions. The post-1945 world order has broken down irretrievably. The war in Ukraine and the Israeli onslaught in Gaza reveal the impotence or complicity of institutions like the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice. **The moral foundations of international relations, once upheld by thinkers like Hugo Grotius, lie in ruins, replaced by a moral wasteland.** Despite claims of peace, the situation in West Asia remains fragile, with a false sense of victory for actors such as Israel and the U.S. Subterranean tensions persist, and peace remains elusive.

Islamist terrorism, contrary to popular belief, has not been blunted. **A new phase, dubbed Islamist Terrorism 3.0, is alive and digitally empowered, decentralised, and radicalising online.** While al-Qaeda and IS may appear weakened, they are adapting, spreading extremist ideologies, and re-emerging in new forms. The origin of this wave traces back to 1979, when militant Islam arose in both Sunni and Shia forms, pushing for uprisings across the Muslim world. Though the call for global jihad is no longer dominant, Sunni radicalisation is resurging, reshaping regional politics.

Terrorism itself is reviving. Al-Qaeda is active in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and ISKP is expanding its footprint with attacks reaching beyond South Asia. There are signs of rising terror activity in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and even the West. A string of smaller but significant attacks, including two in the U.S. — one involving a Tesla cyber truck explosion and another a vehicle attack by a man flying the IS flag — has jolted security agencies. Both attackers were U.S. military veterans, raising concerns about new profiles of terror recruits and methods. These incidents echo earlier IS-style attacks in Europe and underscore a potential resurgence.

Warnings from counter-terrorism experts highlight the need for vigilance. **Modern tools, including AI, are being used by groups like IS and al-Qaeda for recruitment and indoctrination.** Though the next phase of terrorism may still be in its early stages, the world must act swiftly to prevent its escalation. The signs are clear — ignoring them would be a grave mistake.

# FOUR YEARS ON, MYANMAR AND ITS CONTINUING NIGHTMARE

RAJIV BHATIA

Four years after the **2021 coup, Myanmar remains mired in turmoil – divided, unstable, and collapsing economically** – with little international focus outside ASEAN and immediate neighbours like China and India. The country is engulfed in a brutal civil war between government troops and resistance forces, including EAOs and PDFs, coordinated loosely by the unrecognised NUG. The conflict has led to over 6,200 civilian deaths, 3.3 million displaced, and nearly 22,000 still in detention, revealing both the junta's cruelty and the toll on military morale. **The nation is now effectively split: the central region under junta control, the peripheries under resistance forces, and contested zones facing airstrikes and armed clashes.**

Despite the junta's aim to legitimise its rule via elections – a failed attempt in 2024 and an uncertain goal in 2025 – such polls cannot be credible while violence, repression, and territorial loss continue. UN experts warn elections under such conditions are delusional, yet **ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus remains ineffective, as warring sides reject compromise. ASEAN's recent advice to prioritise dialogue has also been ignored.**

Neighbouring states – **China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos** – have a stake in Myanmar's fate but are constrained by mistrust, internal tensions, and the control of border areas by non-state actors. China alone has expanded influence significantly since the coup and remains the most capable external player as Western engagement declines. Ultimately, **Myanmar's hope for peace cannot rest on external actors.** Without internal dialogue, the people will continue to bear the cost of prolonged conflict and leadership failures.

# A NOTE FOR NEW DELHI ON DEALING WITH 'TRUMPERICA'

SUHASINI HAIDAR

With a flurry of executive actions reviving his MAGA agenda, President Trump's return marks a sharp shift in U.S. policy that will deeply affect India. Despite visible diplomatic warmth—seen in Minister Jaishankar's visit, Quad meetings, and a Trump-Modi call—India must not be misled by optics. **The immigration crackdown is severe: Trump's orders target illegal migration, toughen visa vetting, and remove birthright citizenship.** With over 7.25 lakh undocumented Indians and 18,000 on final deportation lists, India faces a triple blow—loss of remittances, reintegration burden, and economic penalties if it resists U.S. deportation demands. Blue-collar and white-collar migrants alike are affected, with **changes to H-1B policies and spousal work restrictions signalling a hostile climate**, demanding India urgently revisit its STEM education and employment strategies.

Trump's trade protectionism is equally concerning. "America First" policies mean weaponised tariffs and aggressive unilateralism. India quietly endured punitive actions during Trump's first term, such as losing GSP status and oil import bans. A repeat, or worse, could embolden China and undercut India's export ambitions. **Trump's mixed messaging on China—tariff threats, invitations to Xi, and soft-peddalling on Taiwan—suggests a possible U.S.-China détente**, which would undercut India's current economic positioning as a beneficiary of their rivalry. Moreover, Trump's **withdrawal from global frameworks like the Paris Accord, OECD tax deal, WHO, and USAID programs**, along with green funding reversals, will stall India's climate and development goals.

The most disruptive force, however, is Trump's AI push. **The Stargate AI Infrastructure project, launched at his inaugural, reveals a new technological nationalism—aimed at countering China** and reducing reliance on foreign tech workers. With AI already generating 25% of Google's code and companies like Meta planning layoffs of mid-level engineers, Indian IT professionals face obsolescence. Given that services account for 55% of India's GDP and 40% of its exports, the rise of AI threatens to overturn the very logic of India's trade and migration policy. As AI replaces engineers and curtails job markets abroad, India must grapple with the real costs of **"Trumperica"**—and integrate these concerns into its diplomatic calculus.

Warnings from counter-terrorism experts highlight the need for vigilance. Modern tools, including AI, are being used by groups like IS and al-Qaeda for recruitment and indoctrination. Though the next phase of terrorism may still be in its early stages, the world must act swiftly to prevent its escalation. The signs are clear — ignoring them would be a grave mistake.

# IN TRUMP'S WORLD, INDIA AND EUROPE NEED EACH OTHER

C RAJA MOHAN

European Commission **President Ursula von der Leyen's visit to India, alongside the entire European Cabinet, comes at a critical juncture following Donald Trump's return to the White House.** Her choice to begin her second term with India underscores the urgency of deepening EU-India ties amid Trump's disruptive global policies. While both India and Europe have traditionally relied on US partnerships, Trump's retreat from global alliances and reshaping of economic and security orders compel Delhi and Brussels to bolster their bilateral cooperation.

Trump's readiness to negotiate with rival powers like Russia and China raises concerns in Delhi, especially as India's balancing act with Moscow is complicated by Putin's possible outreach to Trump. The shifting dynamics among the US, Russia, and China highlight the need for India to widen strategic partnerships, with Europe as a critical, yet underutilised, player. India and the EU have made recent strides – restarting trade talks in 2022, establishing new councils, and announcing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

However, Trump's withdrawal of support for Ukraine, ideological attacks on European democracies, and US pressure for Europe to bear the security burden independently have shaken transatlantic ties. The rise of the European right, openly supported by Trump allies, marks a profound political shift. While India has maintained warm ties with Trump, fulfilling ambitious bilateral goals – including a \$500 billion trade target – will be challenging in the face of reciprocal tariffs. India's assumption of an irreversible globalised order is being dismantled, even as its trade deficit with China surges. At this pivotal moment, **India must push economic reforms and reinvigorate ties with Europe to navigate a turbulent world and reduce overdependence on China.**

# IS TRUMP BREAKING THE WESTERN ALLIANCE? MAYBE NOT

ANIL WADHWA

Donald Trump's supporters argue that pulling out of Ukraine, and thaw with Russia will allow Washington to focus on China. In an uncertain and transactional world, the transatlantic alliance also seems to be metamorphosing into a new version of itself.

In a dramatic shift in US foreign policy, the **Trump administration has twice voted with Russia at the UN, signalling a new stance on the Ukraine war.** While European leaders like Macron and Starmer attempt to sway Trump towards supporting Ukraine, the US appears to be disengaging, with abstentions and vetoes marking a distancing from traditional allies. European leaders perceive this as a rupture in the transatlantic alliance, yet the Trump administration believes it is responding to neglected populist concerns in Europe.

The return of Trump has emboldened far-right parties in Europe who resist EU oversight in various policy domains and now find a strong backer in Washington. The MAGA camp supports these movements, suggesting a future of transactional ties and pressure on EU regulatory frameworks.

**Trump's declared objective is to end the conflict in Ukraine, blaming its prolongation on Biden's mismanagement and warning of the risk of global war.** With the US stepping back, Europe is expected to bear the burden of continued support for Ukraine, even possibly deploying peacekeeping troops—an idea Trump claims Russia finds acceptable. Framing himself as a peacemaker, Trump's approach sidelines alliances and embraces a realist, transactional worldview. His supporters argue that engaging Russia could weaken its ties with China and Iran, thus serving US strategic interests.

Warnings from counter-terrorism experts highlight the need for vigilance. Modern tools, including AI, are being used by groups like IS and al-Qaeda for recruitment and indoctrination. Though the next phase of terrorism may still be in its early stages, the world must act swiftly to prevent its escalation. The signs are clear — ignoring them would be a grave mistake.

# THREE YEARS OF THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA CONFLICT & LESSONS FOR INDIA

D UDAY BHASKAR

**In reaching out to Russia, Trump has abandoned Europe. In it lies a reminder for India to not neglect core military capabilities**

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it shattered a key post-WWII European security belief that **national borders were inviolable and force would not alter them**. The US and Europe rallied around Ukraine, resisting Russian aggression as a defence of freedom and sovereignty. An ICC arrest warrant was issued against President Putin, Russia faced sanctions, and was globally shunned.

However, three years later, the **unexpected US-Russia rapprochement under President Trump, and preliminary talks in Riyadh, have muddied another foundational tenet: the permanence of the US-Europe transatlantic alliance**, built after WWII and formalised through NATO in 1949. Trump has casually diluted this alliance, with Europe and Ukraine seemingly sacrificed for a deal with Putin. Trump's campaign promise to end the war "quickly" is being acted upon, with Ukraine's NATO hopes abandoned and Russian territorial gains implicitly accepted—prompting accusations of appeasement and manipulation by Putin.

A Trump-Putin ceasefire meeting is expected, but its durability and fairness remain unclear. While Trump should be commended for seeking peace and critiquing military spending, his erratic statements obscure any coherent strategy beyond his MAGA slogan. His outreach to Putin effectively discards Biden's firm stance against Moscow, drawing dissent even within the Republican camp. Whether this is to correct past US actions—like NATO's eastward expansion that stoked Russian insecurity—remains uncertain.

If a lasting US-Russia understanding emerges, it could achieve what Reagan and Gorbachev couldn't, but major power contestation and Moscow's nuclear status make any true consensus unlikely. Europe, left without US backing, feels exposed; China and India will reassess their positions in light of a stable US-Russia equation. Beijing fears a US-Moscow axis could tighten pressure on China, though a fanciful Yalta 2.0 with Trump, Putin, and Xi is improbable. Ultimately, US policy could reverse again, and Europe's insecurity be temporarily calmed. **For India, the key takeaway is to focus on strengthening military capabilities and avoid strategic dependence—\*ekla chalo\* with sincerity and resolve.**

# COSY WITH RUSSIA TO ISOLATE CHINA? WHAT TRUMP'S UKRAINE PLAN MEANS FOR GLOBAL POLITICS

SAPTARSHI BASAK

In a striking echo of Kissinger's 1972 rapprochement with China, **Donald Trump's recent outreach to Vladimir Putin over Ukraine appears to be a modern realpolitik gambit** – aimed not at ideology but at reshaping global power equations. By pursuing peace in Ukraine through direct US-Russia talks in Riyadh, excluding both Ukraine and Europe, and **calling Zelenskyy a “dictator”, Trump has shocked traditional allies and disrupted the transatlantic alliance.** His actions resemble a geopolitical inversion of Kissinger's move: then it was about isolating the USSR by engaging China, now it's about containing China by courting Russia – the perceived weaker link in the power triangle.

Europe, alarmed by America's apparent retreat, fears a modern-day Munich moment. With US arms supplies potentially halting and no unified Western front, European leaders – led by Macron – are preparing for a future without US backing. Meanwhile, Beijing stands to benefit the most from a fractured West, with its official response welcoming resumed US-Russia dialogue.

Trump's underlying strategy seems to be isolating China by weakening its partnership with Russia – a move that aligns with India's interests, as Delhi sees Beijing as an adversary and Moscow as a dependable partner. However, **the deepening “no-limits” Sino-Russian relationship and their shared challenge to the US-led global order complicate this calculus.** Rather than forcing Xi Jinping into concessions, Trump's efforts risk giving China a wider opening, especially in post-war Ukraine's reconstruction, where Beijing could expand influence, having already supported Russia economically during sanctions.

Moreover, Washington's retreat from multilateral institutions like WHO and UNHRC, and Trump's plan for Palestinian displacement – opposed by China – create new diplomatic vacuums that Beijing is ready to fill. Ultimately, Trump may aim to realign global focus on China, but by undermining allies and pursuing a skewed peace deal, his approach could unintentionally strengthen Beijing – unlike Kissinger's success, which split the communist bloc and redefined Cold War dynamics.

# AS TRUMP UPENDS WORLD ORDER, INDIA MUST BE PRACTICAL, RESET DIPLOMATIC TIES

ANIL WADHWA

Going forward, it is imperative for India to anticipate the imponderables.  
Geopolitics today is transactional like never before

The weakening of the transatlantic alliance is now undeniable, with US officials like Vice President JD Vance and Defence Secretary Peter Hegseth making it clear that the US will no longer bear the burden of Europe's security. At Riyadh, high-level US-Russia talks – excluding Europe and Ukraine – **conceded NATO membership for Ukraine is off the table, hinted that territorial concessions to Russia are inevitable**, and suggested that sanctions on Russia may end post-peace deal. These shifts have prompted Europe, under Macron's leadership, to urgently contemplate building its own defence capacity and brace for the possibility of managing a fractured Eastern front if Ukraine yields under combined US-Russia pressure.

While NATO chief Mark Rutte talks of increased European defence spending, the US appears willing to abandon its eastern NATO flank and restrict European involvement in Ukraine. British PM Keir Starmer's call for a US-backed European security guarantee has not met with Trump's support. Meanwhile, the **Palestinian cause faces abandonment, as Trump and Netanyahu's Gaza "riviera" plan envisions permanent displacement of Palestinians**, with GCC states pressured to finance the reconstruction and produce an alternative plan.

Despite continued rivalry with China, **Trump is open to a trade deal with Xi Jinping and views engaging Russia as a means to divide it from China**. However, this could embolden China in Europe and Taiwan, revealing a transactional world with no permanent allies. In this volatile environment, India must reset its diplomacy and anticipate emerging shifts. Europe is turning inward, likely to retaliate on tariffs, while new manufacturing opportunities may arise for India, China, and Vietnam. Post-war recovery in Ukraine and Gaza could open reconstruction avenues and lower commodity prices for the Global South.

India will face Europe's CBAM duties but can benefit by greening its industries. New opportunities also lie in digital cooperation with Europe and the US, particularly in AI and data governance. India must push forward FTAs with the UK, EU, GCC, Africa, Latin America, and pursue a full CECA with Australia. These steps will help India integrate into reliable supply chains, expand exports, and shape favourable global trade conditions.

# HAS TRUMPISM BROKEN THE COLLECTIVE WEST?

C RAJA MOHAN

Trump's dramatic return to power — marked by initiating peace talks with Russia and **Vice President JD Vance's fierce criticism of European democracies — has deeply unsettled America's European allies and disrupted the idea of a unified "Collective West"**. While Russia had popularised this term to rally its people against the West, it has simultaneously sought to divide Europe and America — a goal now seemingly within reach as Trump pushes for a redefinition of transatlantic ties. He questions the costs of American leadership, initiating direct negotiations with Moscow and expressing a desire to reintegrate Russia into Western platforms like the G7. This undermines both Kyiv and Brussels, and benefits adversaries like Russia and China, who dream of an American retrenchment from its post-war commitments in Europe and Asia.

Mohan reminds us that while the West has historically shared liberal values — capitalism, democracy, and individual rights — it has rarely enjoyed sustained unity. The last 80 years of post-war cohesion, backed by American leadership and institutional frameworks like NATO, the UN, and Bretton Woods systems, masked deep historical divisions. In fact, internal contestations within the West drove key intellectual and political transformations — from the Renaissance to the Reformation. The present crisis, he argues, signals not an unprecedented collapse, but a reversion to the historical norm of Western divergence.

**Trumpism challenges three key pillars: military alliances, the global trading order, and liberal ideological dominance.** He demands that America reduce its security commitments, argues that globalisation has failed American workers, and rejects liberal norms around open borders, climate policy, and social identity. Vance extends this challenge into Europe, accusing centrist parties of marginalising electoral right-wing forces under the pretext of hate speech, while allies like Elon Musk actively campaign for European right-wing groups. This suggests the rise of a "conservative international" — or "Con-intern" — echoing earlier transnational movements like the Comintern or liberal internationalism.

**C Raja Mohan stresses that the current rift isn't just about trade or defence policy; it reflects a deeper ideological contest over what kind of West will prevail.** Even as Moscow and Beijing deride the "Collective West", they are eager to strike their own deals with Washington. India, once receptive to anti-Western rhetoric, now sees through this strategic posturing. Delhi, like Moscow and Beijing, seeks its own grand bargain — engaging with Western contradictions to serve its national interests in a multipolar world. Whether the West is heading towards permanent fragmentation or a renegotiation of its foundations remains uncertain — but the liberal-ordered order faces its most serious internal reckoning in decades.

# WHAT INDIA NEEDS TO DO IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

RAM MADHAV

Discourse on the “Indo-Pacific” dominates the world today. But the “Indo-Pacific” is a geo-strategic construct, where big power competition is omnipresent

India is hosting the **Eighth Indian Ocean Conference in partnership with Oman**, underscoring ancient maritime linkages and shared civilisational heritage. Unlike the “Indo-Pacific” — a geo-strategic construct dominated by big power competition — the “Indian Ocean” is a naturally connected, largely peaceful region shaped by shared culture and history.

For millennia, India played a central role in this ocean, economically and culturally influencing the region through maritime trade, as documented in ancient texts and accounts by travellers like Fa-Hien. **However, India’s maritime decline began with the rise of European naval powers and was further compounded by colonial neglect of India’s maritime capacity**, a neglect that unfortunately continued post-Independence, leaving India lagging in shipbuilding and naval strength.

K M Panikkar had presciently warned that India’s peninsular character and maritime trade dependence make the ocean crucial to its destiny — a warning ignored by leaders with a continental mindset. Today, the Indian Ocean is vital: **70% of global container traffic and 80-90% of India’s external and energy trade pass through it**. Global power centres have shifted here, with the US, UK, France, and now China asserting influence.

In response, India under Modi launched the **SAGAR Initiative in 2015**, aiming for maritime security and development. The Indian Ocean today is crowded with global naval and commercial presence and faces diverse threats — piracy, terrorism, climate impacts, trafficking, unregulated fishing, and submarine cable control, increasingly dominated by companies like Huawei. Quoting **Alfred Mahan, the article argues the region’s nations must ensure that maritime supremacy remains in their own hands and that they, not outside powers, manage the Indian Ocean — a “region of peace”**.

# WHAT MODI-TRUMP MEETING AUGURS

KANTI BAJPAI



The Pannun case emerged as another friction point. A White House comment on Trump's prioritisation of American safety hinted at the issue being raised. The joint statement responded indirectly, affirming both countries' resolve to act against threats to sovereignty and diplomatic safety, addressing both US concerns and India's worries over anti-India activities in America. **Beyond managing frictions, three agreements stood out.**

The Modi-Trump meeting went as well as expected, with friction points like trade and immigration managed without public discord. **Joint statements, carefully crafted, listed six focus areas – defence, trade and investment, energy, technology and innovation, multilateral cooperation, and people-to-people ties – with the first three being key.** Notably, multilateral cooperation was last in both the statement and the Foreign Secretary's briefing, reflecting Trump's preference for transactional bilateralism over multilateralism.

On trade, despite concerns over India's large surplus and high tariffs, the US avoided public criticism, and both sides committed to negotiating a multisectoral trade agreement by fall 2025. On **immigration, there was an agreement to "aggressively" combat illegal migration** – a word likely pushed by the US – while preserving legal migration channels like student and professional visas. Although India may have raised concerns about the treatment of deportees, it received no public acknowledgment.

First, a 10-year defence deal, which will include Javelin missiles, Stryker vehicles, maritime patrol aircraft, and co-production of AI-enabled unmanned systems – with the F-35 sales possibility mentioned by Trump. Second, to reduce the trade surplus, India will increase oil and gas imports from the US and refine its civil nuclear liability regime to enable US participation in building modular reactors. Third, in the technology section, a Strategic Mineral Recovery initiative was agreed upon, targeting key minerals essential for economic and military purposes – an area where China dominates.

The visit was symbolically and substantively successful. Modi met friendly figures like Musk and Ramaswamy, and Trump avoided publicly criticising India on tariffs, though higher tariffs may still come. The areas identified for cooperation – defence, trade, energy, and technology – offer a solid base for deepening ties. India can count the visit as a diplomatic success.

# RATHER THAN WITHDRAW FROM WTO, INDIA SHOULD STRENGTHEN TRADE MULTILATERALISM

PRABHASH RANJAN

**This will ensure that multilateral checks and balances continue to function and help curb rising protectionism**

A recurring demand by some Indian farmers to exit the WTO stems from the belief that its rules, especially under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), obstruct the legal guarantee of Minimum Support Prices (MSP) by classifying them as trade-distorting subsidies. This arises due to the outdated external reference price (ERP) based on 1986-88 figures, which magnifies the subsidy gap due to inflation. Although India has long pushed for a revision of the ERP, progress has been elusive.

However, quitting the WTO, though legally possible via Article XV with a six-month notice, would not be a prudent solution. Within the existing framework, India has some leeway, such as the peace clause that protects MSP for essential crops like rice and wheat from legal challenge. India can also pivot to non-trade-distorting instruments like direct income support, such as the **Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi**, which could have been bolstered in the 2025 Budget but was overlooked.

Critically, WTO's role stretches well beyond agriculture. It ensures **foundational principles like national treatment and most-favoured-nation status, safeguarding Indian exports from discrimination**. Exiting would strip Indian goods and services of this protection, forcing India to negotiate multiple Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), a costly and complex process, often with harsher terms than WTO provisions – especially when developing nations deal with developed countries. The WTO also offers a relatively robust dispute resolution mechanism, superior to the limited diplomatic options available in FTAs. Despite the current paralysis in the appellate body, India has effectively used this mechanism to defend its trade interests over the past three decades.

Moreover, in the context of rising global protectionism and a retreating US, weakening the WTO allows powerful countries to act unilaterally, undermining rules-based trade. For a country like India, with limited FTA memberships and heavy reliance on global markets, a functioning multilateral system is essential. **Rather than exiting, India should lead efforts to reform and reinforce the WTO to preserve multilateral checks and balances**. This includes engaging with farmers transparently, recognising them as central stakeholders in a broader trade strategy. Trade multilateralism remains India's best bet in navigating a complex global economic order.

# INDIA AND CHINA NEED EACH OTHER. BUT WILL THE DÉTENTE LAST?

KANTI BAJPAI

Three drivers of India–China détente are economic, military, and political. These will likely be even stronger triggers now that Trump is at the helm in Washington.

India and China have resumed meaningful diplomatic engagement, possibly returning to the “normal” relationship sustained from 1988 to the Galwan clash. This earlier normalcy rested on **four key pillars: summit-level diplomacy, sustained border negotiations, confidence-building measures (CBMs) between militaries, and people-to-people ties** such as education, culture, and trade.

Even after Galwan, the basic architecture of these relations has shown resilience. Thousands of Indian students still study in China, building societal-level familiarity. The current thaw is driven by three structural factors: economic interdependence, military stalemate, and political anxieties about the US, especially with Donald Trump back in office. Economically, India’s growth path depends on access to Chinese products in key sectors, while Chinese businesses see India as a crucial market amid Western protectionism.

Militarily, the two nations are entrenched in an expensive, unwinnable border stalemate, worsened by difficult terrain and climate. Both also face other military fronts: India with Pakistan, and China with East Asian disputes that could draw in the US. Politically, Delhi and Beijing remain wary of Washington despite cordial ties. India faces US criticism on democracy, immigration, trade, and alleged plots, while China confronts American censure on Tibet, Xinjiang, and tech-related sanctions. The US factor compels both to hedge by showing alternative strategic options.

However, the future of the détente remains uncertain due to unresolved territorial disputes and deep nationalist sensitivities. Past confrontations — from Depsang (2013) to Yangtse (2022) — show that normalization can quickly unravel. As scholars like **Manjari Chatterjee Miller** note, **both countries have long-standing senses of historical victimhood, making compromise difficult**. Still, because the current drivers of peace are structural and enduring, a measured return to stable diplomacy remains more likely than a rapid re-escalation — even if a full strategic settlement is distant and slow.

## CURRENT THAW IS DRIVEN BY:



### ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE

India’s growth path depends on access to Chinese products & Chinese businesses see India as a crucial market



### MILITARY STALEMATE

two nations are entrenched in an expensive, unwinnable border stalemate



### POLITICAL ANXIETIES ABOUT THE U.S.

Delhi and Beijing remain wary of Washington despite cordial ties. India faces US criticism on democracy, immigration, trade, and alleged plots, while China confronts American censure on Tibet.

# WHAT PAKISTAN THINKS OF INDIA-CHINA THAW

SAPTARSHI BASAK

**View from Pakistan: Progress in India-China and Pakistan-Bangladesh bilateral relations has garnered significant attention in the Pakistani press, as has the launch of an LLM by Chinese lab DeepSeek**

The recent thaw in India-China relations and renewed Pakistan-Bangladesh diplomacy have captured attention in the Pakistani press. An editorial in *The Nation* views improved India-China ties as mutually beneficial if border disputes are resolved peacefully, but **warns India that hostility with China is “fuelled” by the United States, which uses Delhi as a “counterweight” and, like with Pakistan, may abandon alliances when strategic utility fades.**

Regarding Pakistan-Bangladesh ties, *The Daily Times* sees the current moment as a **“decisive opportunity” to overcome historical grievances through economic and cultural collaboration** that can generate jobs, foster stability, and deepen people-to-people connections rooted in shared traditions. Meanwhile, concerns over Afghanistan persist, with *Dawn* urging a sharper counterterrorism policy and diplomatic pressure on the Afghan Taliban, as 2024 marked the worst year for civilian and military casualties in a decade.

The Taliban’s display of American weaponry, and its use in attacks in Balochistan, underscores the threat. On a different front, the **release of the Chinese-developed AI model DeepSeek is hailed by *Dawn*’s Rafia Zakaria as a win for the Global South, and a potential tool for Pakistani developers — if internet access remains stable.** Scholars writing in *The Express Tribune* call on Pakistan’s higher education system to embrace AI, aligning with the “Uraan” economic transformation plan which sees AI as key to innovation and growth.

# INDIA'S DELUSION OF RELEVANCE

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

**Absolute numbers, framed by a propaganda machine, do not present an accurate picture of India's place in the world**

**India's global relevance is often overstated, driven by propaganda and self-mythologizing.** Despite being a large country, its actual significance in global politics is diminishing. Services exports, touted as a success story, account for only 4.6% of global trade; merchandise exports are less than 2%. **India's share in global FDI is 2.5% and declining, with consumption growing at under 3%, making it less attractive for global exporters.** The opportunity from investment moving out of China has been limited, with India capturing only 10-15% of it.

Tourism contributes just 1.5% to international arrivals, and India's entertainment sector represents only 5% of the world market, failing to establish significant soft power. **India's defence budget remains stagnant at under 2% of GDP,** and claims about its purchasing capacity are exaggerated. While Indian talent and science have improved, the country remains peripheral in discussions on critical technologies like AI and green energy.

DeepSeek has triggered efforts for Indian AI models, but India lags in global competition. **Great powers are defined by indispensability across sectors—services trade, manufacturing, technology innovation, defence, green energy transitions**—not by cumulative numbers or isolated success stories. India's dispensability is striking.

Historically, **India's political importance was tied to its democratic moral example rather than raw power.** Today, it exaggerates its significance through diplomatic events like G-20 summits or Quad meetings, but the world largely remains indifferent. India's relative authority in the Global South has diminished. While it maintains good relations with diverse countries like Russia and the US or Israel and Iran, this flexibility highlights its lack of critical influence.

India's sense of significance stems from propaganda and framing—targets defined by impressive whole numbers like \$1 trillion FDI or a \$5 trillion economy—rather than relative power or indispensability. In contrast, China sets aspirational goals tied to global dominance in exports and critical technologies.

The visibility of Indians abroad often underscores insecurity rather than relevance. Examples include exaggerated pride in figures like Tulsi Gabbard or genetic links with Indonesia's president while ignoring China's trade dominance with Indonesia. India's existence alone does not equate to relevance.

India has immense potential but risks irrelevance unless it confronts the gap between self-importance and real global significance. Honest patriots should be shocked by how little India matters globally.

# UNDER TRUMP, AMERICA TEETERS ON THE EDGE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

*His playbook has an Orwellian penchant for the inversion of language and policy and rides on normalising fear and compliance*

America risks descending into authoritarian nihilism, following a familiar playbook. **A regime gains power with popular support, critiques the liberal order using kernels of truth, and subverts democracy while maintaining its formal structures.** It clamps down on free expression, targets universities and NGOs, amasses executive power, and governs by decree. Claiming victimhood, it intimidates opponents and delegitimizes checks and balances as elite conspiracies. Judges face threats, loyalty replaces professional norms, and Orwellian inversions of language dominate—free speech curbs speech, elitism critiques serve oligarchy, and foreign policy toughness avoids confronting major powers.

The regime erases distinctions between public and private sectors, with institutions existing at its mercy. Cruelty, such as immigration enforcement, fosters fear by creating legal uncertainty. **Despite maintaining democratic forms like courts and executive orders, institutional realities shift: executive actions advance the regime's goals, while due process becomes a punishment.** Independent institutions adapt to avoid resistance, and opposition struggles against a regime with more strategic options.

Normalization of the regime's actions is reinforced by denial—there is no overt mass repression, but exemplary targeting generates compliance. The regime exploits charges of hypocrisy to distract from present dangers and taps into antipathies to excuse its actions. Collective action is difficult; adaptive self-restraint becomes the norm.

**Leo Strauss** described nihilism as a desire to destroy the present without a clear vision for the future. This revolution feels similar—focused on personal power and dismantling potentialities rather than building something new. While America retains a strong love for liberty, its current political trajectory appears deeply dispiriting.

# AFTER UKRAINE, IMPERIALISM IS NOW THE NORM

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

The fact that the invasion of Ukraine happened at all was a profound failure, not of Ukraine as Trump suggests, but of the international community, which failed to uphold its security guarantees to a country that had willingly given up its nuclear arsenal.

The Ukraine fiasco is momentous but not captured by debates over Zelenskyy's actions or Trump's theatrics. The **U.S. appeared as a bully, sucking up to powerful leaders like Putin and Xi while kicking down at Ukraine.** The invasion of Ukraine marked a profound transformation of the international order—it was not about territorial disputes or regime change but erasing a country. Russia's failure to achieve this objective does not diminish the significance of its imperialist intent. Viewing Ukraine through U.S.-Russian hegemonic ambitions has rendered its plight invisible, reducing it to a pawn in their rivalry.

Trump was correct that Ukraine would eventually need a negotiated settlement, but his retelling of events highlights deeper implications. **Ukraine gave up its nuclear arsenal in 1994 based on international security guarantees, which were ultimately betrayed.** This failure by the global community has sent a dangerous signal: small and midsize countries with security challenges should not abandon nuclear ambitions if they seek respect.

**Imperialism is being reestablished as a norm in international relations.** The post-1945 order had largely eliminated wars for full territorial conquest, but Russia's invasion legitimizes such actions, with serious consequences for global stability. The delicate nuclear equilibrium that underpinned the global order—limited nuclear states, deterrence among major powers, and norms against territorial imperialism—is now under threat. **The message from Ukraine is clear: nuclear proliferation may increase as nations seek security through armament.**

The spectacle surrounding Ukraine is not just about Zelenskyy or Russia but the legitimization of imperialism and nuclear proliferation. Gaza's reduction to real estate further underscores this trend. The joke is not on Trump but on the international community, which has failed to uphold its principles and protect vulnerable nations.

# THE MANY CONUNDRUMS OF FEDERALISM

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

**The question of the dominance of parties threatens to obscure issues of federalism, including on delimitation**

Federalism in India faces several challenges, with storms brewing over issues like **delimitation, Kashmir's statehood, and Tamil Nadu-Centre disputes on language and education**. Tamil Nadu accuses the Centre of withholding funds and imposing Hindi, while the Centre counters by accusing Tamil Nadu of politicizing the National Education Policy. Development imbalances among states persist, and the division of powers between State, Central, and Concurrent lists needs reevaluation. **Growing authoritarianism threatens federalism, compounded by cultural stereotypes** and dominance of political parties overshadowing federal issues.

Historically, centralization was co-produced by the Centre and states. **Centrally sponsored schemes in health and education arose due to state failures** but may now warrant greater autonomy for states as capacities have improved. However, states have often failed to utilize revenue-generating powers or decentralize authority to urban bodies and panchayats.

The complexity of federalism stems from its multifaceted nature—political, cultural, administrative, and economic—each governed by different logics. Political parties have superseded constitutional checks and balances; party loyalty undermines legislative oversight of the executive. National parties knit regions together but can also override federal demands. Chief ministers often prioritize party hierarchy over state governance.

**Indian federalism involves three actors: the Centre, individual states, and states collectively.**

Mechanisms like GST exemplify collective decision-making among states but remain underutilized in areas like water or airshed management. States rarely act independently due to party control.

The intertwining of party structures with federalism complicates issues like Tamil Nadu's spat with the BJP. The difficulty in distinguishing party politics from federal concerns highlights how these wires cross each other.

# DOING THE RIGHT THING

SY QURAISHI

**Embracing a bipartisan and neutral collegium-based appointment system, drawing from global best practices would fortify the autonomy of the Election Commission of India**

S Y Quraishi critiques the current appointment process of the Election Commissioners in India, arguing it compromises the autonomy and perceived neutrality of the Election Commission of India (ECI), which is central to upholding free and fair elections. Though India is the world's largest democracy, the opaque and executive-dominated system of appointing ECs has raised concerns. Civil society groups like ADR, Internet Freedom Foundation, and others, along with leaders such as L K Advani, have consistently demanded a bipartisan and transparent process. **ADR first challenged the process in 2015, citing that exclusive executive control violates the spirit of Article 324(2) of the Constitution.** Despite the case being referred to a Constitution Bench in 2018, the Supreme Court delayed hearings, allowing partisan appointments to persist.

In 2023, the Supreme Court, in **Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India**, ruled that **until Parliament enacts a law, appointments should be made by a committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition, and the Chief Justice of India.** Parliament later passed the 2023 Act excluding the CJI and replacing him with a Union cabinet minister, thereby giving the executive two out of three seats in the selection committee, effectively nullifying the spirit of the Court's ruling. ADR and others challenged this law, but the SC refused to stay it, allowing appointments to proceed.

Quraishi, while acknowledging the appointees' merit, insists this is beside the point—optics matter. He underscores that perception of fairness is as critical as fairness itself. He notes that major democracies—including the US, UK, France, South Africa, Brazil, and even Nepal—use bipartisan and transparent mechanisms involving parliaments, judiciaries, or independent committees.

In contrast, India, despite having one of the world's most powerful Election Commissions, continues to follow one of the weakest appointment processes. **He asserts that simply reinstating the CJI in the collegium would align the law with democratic norms and potentially render the ongoing litigation moot.** Ultimately, the question is whether the executive has the will to respect democratic institutions and do the right thing.

# THE PANCHAYATI RAJ MOVEMENT IS IN DISTRESS

SUVOJIT CHATTOPADHYAY

The **73rd amendment of 1992** institutionalised decentralised governance in rural India through the panchayati raj system, creating a three-tier structure with reserved representation and regular elections. Despite initial momentum and the success of women's participation in leadership, the movement has entered a state of distress. **The decline stems from low public engagement, political interference, overreliance on centrally sponsored schemes, and a mismatch with today's development paradigm.**

Administrative decentralisation has stagnated, with most States not devolving all 29 subjects mandated by the Constitution. Fiscal autonomy is also undercut as untied grants have sharply reduced, with the Centre exerting more control through tied grants and bypassing States.

A reimagined welfare state, marked by direct cash transfers via the **JAM platform, sidelines gram panchayats by reducing their role in service delivery and grievance redress.** Urbanisation has further shifted policy focus away from rural governance, prioritising municipal reform. Panchayats are increasingly seen merely as last-mile delivery agents. Yet, with 94 crore people still in villages and over 45% in agriculture, rural governance remains vital.

Technology can enhance citizen engagement in local planning and accountability. Panchayats can also drive water conservation, renewable energy generation, and disaster risk management by leveraging local knowledge and public finance. To revive panchayati raj, a new vision that recognises India's evolving rural needs and empowers local institutions is essential.

# HOW DOES A PRESIDENT'S RULE FUNCTION?

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President's rule was imposed in Manipur following CM Biren Singh's resignation amid a political crisis and ongoing ethnic violence between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, which has led to over 250 deaths and 60,000 displacements. Invoked **under Article 356, this "constitutional emergency" is declared when a State's government fails to function according to constitutional norms.**

It allows the President, satisfied of such a breakdown, to **assume State executive functions, and Parliament to take over legislative powers, though the High Court remains unaffected.** It must be approved by Parliament within two months and can be extended up to three years under specific conditions, including a national emergency and a certification by the Election Commission. Unlike a national emergency under Article 352, which deals with war, external aggression or armed rebellion and affects fundamental rights, **President's rule does not suspend rights under Article 19.**

The Manipur Assembly has been placed in "suspended animation," preserving the possibility of revival. The Supreme Court, especially in **S.R. Bommai v. Union of India** (1994), **laid down that the President's satisfaction is not absolute, and judicial review is permitted.** It stressed that Article 356 should be used only for a breakdown in constitutional machinery, not for political convenience. President's rule, despite Ambedkar's hope of it being a "dead letter," has been invoked 134 times since 1950 – including 11 times in Manipur, indicating its dual nature as a crisis-response and politically contentious tool.

# WHAT IS THE 'RAREST OF RARE' DOCTRINE?

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On January 22, two murder cases underscored how Indian courts differently apply the death penalty under the 'rarest of rare' doctrine. In Kolkata, Sanjay Roy was sentenced to life imprisonment for raping and murdering a woman doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College, with the judge stating it did not fall under the 'rarest of rare' category. In contrast, Greeshma received the death penalty for poisoning her partner Sharon Raj in Kerala, with the court declaring it among the "rarest of rare" cases. The doctrine traces back to **Jagmohan Singh vs State of U.P. (1972)**, where the Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of the death penalty under Article 21, rejecting arguments that it violated Articles 14 and 19.

The 'rarest of rare' doctrine was formally established in **Bachan Singh vs State of Punjab (1980)**, emphasizing that capital punishment be reserved for exceptional cases, though no specific definition was provided. This ambiguity was addressed in **Machhi Singh vs State of Punjab (1983)**, which outlined five criteria:

1. brutality of the act
2. depravity of motive
3. socially abhorrent nature
4. scale of the crime
5. the victim's vulnerability.

In **Mithu vs State of Punjab\* (1983)**, the mandatory death penalty under IPC Section 303 was struck down for violating Articles 14 and 21. Although a framework exists, lack of a clear definition continues to allow significant judicial discretion. In 2022, the Supreme Court referred to a Constitution Bench the question of ensuring a "meaningful" hearing on mitigating circumstances during the trial stage, potentially standardising how courts apply the 'rarest of rare' principle.

# WHY ARE ELECTORAL REFORMS NECESSARY?

The Election Commission has initiated dialogue with political parties to strengthen the election process amidst allegations of electoral roll manipulation and duplicate EPIC numbers. Under **Article 324 of the Constitution, the EC is empowered to oversee electoral rolls and conduct elections, guided by the Representation of the People Act, 1950.** Voting has evolved significantly, with EVMs used since 2004 and backed by 100% VVPAT since 2019. However, several issues persist.

A PIL seeking a return to paper ballots and 100% VVPAT-EVM match was dismissed by the Supreme Court, which instead permitted verification of 5% of EVMs by engineers on request by second or third-placed candidates. **Allegations of fake voters and duplicate EPICs across States like West Bengal and Gujarat have raised concerns.** The EC attributed duplication to the earlier decentralised EPIC system before the ERONET centralised platform. It clarified that voting is only allowed at the designated polling station despite EPIC duplications.

Campaign-related problems are equally troubling. **Star Campaigners often violate the Model Code of Conduct by using abusive language, invoking caste or religion, and making unverified claims.** Election expenditure exceeds legal limits, with no ceiling on political party spending – the 2024 elections alone saw ₹1,00,000 crore in spending. This promotes a corruption cycle. Criminalisation of politics has worsened, with 46% of Lok Sabha MPs facing criminal charges, 31% involving serious crimes.

Electoral reforms are crucial. **EVM-VVPAT sample sizes must be regionally calibrated;** a single error should trigger full VVPAT count for that region. **Totaliser machines should be introduced to anonymise booth-level data.** Aadhaar-EPIC linking, after privacy safeguards, can tackle fake voters and duplications. On campaigning, the EC should be empowered to revoke Star Campaigner status for MCC violations and take strict action under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols Order. Expenditure laws should be amended to cap both candidate and party spending. Criminal antecedent declarations must be enforced thrice before polls in local media. A robust dialogue between EC and political parties is essential to restore voter confidence.

## CURRENT ISSUES

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## ELECTORAL REFORMS

Totaliser machines should be introduced to anonymise booth-level data.	Expenditure laws should be amended to cap both candidate and party spending.
Aadhaar-EPIC linking, after privacy safeguards, can tackle fake voters and duplications.	EVM-VVPAT sample sizes must be regionally calibrated

# THE SORRY STATE OF INDIA'S PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

SHASHI THAROOR

Shashi Tharoor laments the degradation of India's parliamentary proceedings, highlighting that the **Winter Session was marred by disruptions from both the Opposition and the Treasury benches, turning it into a travesty with more adjournments than actual work.** An alarming low was reached when MPs clashed physically on the House steps. Tharoor attributes this decline to several factors. **Firstly**, the entrenched precedent of disruption as a legitimate Opposition tool has eroded decorum. Former Speaker Somnath Chatterjee once explained that enforcing rules strictly was politically untenable, a sentiment echoed by Meira Kumar, despite facing BJP belligerence. While recent Speakers like Sumitra Mahajan and Om Birla have suspended members, they too prefer adjournment to expulsion, further normalising disorder.

**Secondly**, Tharoor points to the collapse of civility between the government and the Opposition. Where earlier leaders like Nehru, Gandhi, and Rao maintained respectful relationships with rivals such as Vajpayee, today's politics is marked by mutual vilification. The ruling party brands the Opposition "anti-national," while the Opposition views itself as heroic Pandavas confronting the tyrannical Kauravas. Democracy, Tharoor insists, depends on mutual good faith, now sorely absent. Ironically, the BJP once justified disruptions in the name of accountability, but now decries the same tactics when used against them, revealing hypocrisy and deepening animosity.

**Thirdly**, Tharoor observes that public expectations from MPs have declined. Once celebrated orators such as Lohia or Fernandes are now rare, and parliamentary performance no longer determines electability. Instead, MPs are evaluated on local influence or visibility on television rather than legislative skill. Debates have given way to sloganeering, and parliamentary talent has migrated to media studios. The electorate no longer values performance in Parliament, and even great debaters would struggle to win elections today.

Lastly, **Tharoor accuses the current government of undermining Parliament itself.** Many MPs have little interest in legislation and choose disruption over debate. The BJP government disregards the Opposition and treats Parliament as a mere formality. Prime Minister Modi's rare appearances underscore this disdain, contrasting starkly with Nehru's regular attendance. Parliament is reduced to a noticeboard for decisions already made. **Tharoor concludes with a dire warning: as Parliament loses relevance, democracy itself is imperiled — and by the time the public realizes its loss, it may be too late.**

# THE NATURE OF DISSENT IN THE INDIAN JUDICIARY

SHIVANI VIJ

While U.S. judicial dissents are often aligned with the political inclinations of the judges – who are presidential appointees confirmed by the Senate – Indian judicial dissents reflect a broader range, including political, social, and intellectual disagreements. **U.S. examples include Justice Breyer’s liberal stance on issues like abortion and capital punishment, and Justice Alito’s conservative opposition to gay rights and abortion.** By contrast, Indian judges are appointed through a collegium, making their dissents less politically tinted.

Political dissents in India often emerge independently of the ruling party's ideology. **In ADM Jabalpur (1976), Justice H.R. Khanna famously dissented against the majority that suspended fundamental rights during an emergency.** His stand, though politically inconvenient, upheld individual liberty and was later validated by constitutional amendment. Similarly, in P.V. Narasimha Rao (1998), Justices Agarwal and Anand dissented from the majority which extended parliamentary immunity to MPs accepting bribes. Though aligned with the then ruling Congress, the majority was later overturned in Sita Soren (2023), vindicating the dissent.

Social dissents reflect diverging views on religion and societal norms. In **Shayara Bano (2017), Justices Khehar and Nazeer dissented from the majority that struck down triple talaq, arguing it was integral to Sunni personal law and beyond judicial review.** In Aishat Shifa (2022), although not a formal dissent, differing opinions arose on the hijab ban in schools. Justice Gupta upheld the State's authority citing secularism as separation from religion, while Justice Dhulia emphasized constitutional values of diversity and tolerance – revealing differing interpretations of secularism.

**Intellectual dissents, like Justice B.V. Nagarathna’s in Lalta Prasad Vaish\* (2024), stem from pure legal reasoning.** In this case, eight judges held that States could tax industrial alcohol under the term “intoxicating liquor” in the Constitution. Justice Nagarathna disagreed, interpreting the term strictly as referring only to liquor for human consumption. Her dissent was rooted in a different reading of constitutional text, showing that Indian judicial dissents can arise from nuanced interpretive differences rather than ideological divisions. Thus, Indian judicial dissents span political courage, social reasoning, and intellectual rigour, and are not dictated by party-based affiliations as often seen in the U.S.

# IS INDIA OPEN TO THE IDEA OF DUAL CITIZENSHIP?

VIVEK KATJU AND  
PRO AMITABH MATTOO

At an event in December, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar remarked that challenges remain in providing dual citizenship to Indians abroad, though the debate is “still alive.” **Vivek Katju distinguishes between NRIs—Indian passport holders with full rights except voting abroad—and PIOs, who are not Indian citizens and lack political rights.** The conversion of PIO cards into OCI cards, he argues, added no real rights and confuses the term “citizen,” which should be reserved for those with political participation.

**Amitabh Mattoo believes dual citizenship is not a serious option in India today,** as it would mean granting political rights to people with divided loyalties. **Citizenship, as defined in the Constitution, involves political identity, and India must safeguard that by ensuring only those with complete political loyalty can vote or participate in governance.** He warns of the dangers of allowing individuals who are citizens of another country to influence Indian politics, even if they are of Indian origin.

Both Mattoo and Katju reject the idea of divided loyalties. Citing examples of Indian-origin politicians in the U.S., Katju notes that acquiring foreign nationality entails forfeiting Indian political rights. Mattoo supports this, arguing that for the sake of investment or populism, creating a comprador class would risk recolonization. He highlights that individuals like Mother Teresa and Jean Drèze gave up other citizenships to fully commit to India. Even in the U.S., strict rules apply—e.g., only those born in the country can be President. Mattoo warns that while the diaspora can strengthen bilateral ties and attract investments, giving them political rights risks empowering them to influence domestic politics dangerously. He maintains that only full citizens with no other national loyalties should shape India’s political future.

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