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Donald Trump shakes up the global nuclear order

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Today, the global nuclear order offers a curious contradiction – since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, nuclear weapons have not been used during the last 80 years. The global nuclear arsenals have come down from a high of 65,000 bombs in late 1970s to less than 12,500 today. And, despite concerns in the 1960s that by 1980, there may be at least two dozen states with nuclear weapons, the total today remains nine – five (the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China) are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council who had tested before the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into being while four more developed their nuclear arsenals later (Israel, Pakistan, India and North Korea).

Looking back, these would seem to be impressive achievements but nobody is celebrating. In fact, the prevailing sentiment is that the global nuclear order is under strain and the recent announcements by U.S. President Donald Trump may weaken all three elements of the global nuclear order.

Resumption of 'nuclear tests'

On October 30, 2025, on his way to a meeting with China's President Xi Jinping in Busan, Mr. Trump announced on Truth Social, "Because of other countries testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis. That process will begin immediately." He added, "Russia is second, China is a distant third, but will be even within 5 years."

While it was clear that the message was directed at Russia and China, it was unclear whether Mr. Trump was referring to 'nuclear explosive testing' or the testing of nuclear weapon systems. Second, the nuclear labs (Los Alamos, Lawrence Livermore, and Sandia) and the Nevada testing facilities fall under the Department of Energy and not the Department of War.

It is no secret that China, Russia, and the U.S. are designing and developing new nuclear weapons. In late October, Russia tested a nuclear-powered cruise missile (Burevestnik) that travelled 14,000 kilometres, following a week later, with a test of an underwater nuclear-powered torpedo (Poseidon). China has been testing hypersonic missiles and, in 2021, tested a nuclear capable hypersonic glide vehicle carried on a rocket, capable of orbiting the earth before approaching its target from an unexpected direction that was passed off as a satellite launcher.

The U.S. is producing new warheads – a variable yield B61-13 gravity bomb, a low yield W76-2 warhead for the Trident II D-5 missile, while working on a new nuclear armed submarine launched cruise missile.

Yet, they have refrained from explosive testing. Russia's last explosive test was in 1990 while the U.S. declared a moratorium on tests in 1992. In 1993, the U.S. created a Stockpile Stewardship and Management Programme under the National Nuclear Security Administration to work on warhead modernisation, life extension and development of new safety protocols in warhead design. U.S. President Bill Clinton also took the lead in pushing negotiations in Geneva for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). China and France concluded their tests in 1996, six months before the negotiations ended.

Why the CTBT lacks a definition

Twenty-nine years later, the CTBT has not entered into force despite 187 countries signing it. Among the necessary ratifications, the U.S., China, Israel, Egypt, and Iran have not done so, Russia did and withdrew its ratification in 2023, and India, Pakistan and North Korea have neither signed nor ratified it. India and Pakistan tested in 1998 and have since observed a voluntary moratorium, and North Korea conducted six tests between 2006 and 2017. Given today's geopolitics, the prospects for the CTBT entering into force appear bleak.

Second, the CTBT obliges states "not to carry out any nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion". The U.S. was opposed to defining the terms, and instead, worked out private understandings with Russia and China on 'zero-yield-tests'; this permitted hydro-nuclear tests that do not produce a self-sustaining supercritical chain reaction.

The U.S. had conducted over a thousand nuclear tests and Russia 727 tests, giving them an adequate data base. China, with only 47 tests, also went along with this understanding. Thus, the CTBT delegitimised only nuclear-explosive testing, not nuclear weapons, the reason why India never joined it.

In 2019-20, the U.S. State Department assessed that Russia and China "may have conducted low yield nuclear tests in a manner inconsistent with the U.S. zero-yield standard" though this was negated by the CTBT organisation that declared that their monitoring network with over 300 monitoring stations spread over 89 countries had not detected any inconsistent activity.

In a TV interview on November 2, Mr. Trump doubled down on resuming nuclear testing, this time including Pakistan and North Korea among the countries testing. A clarification came the same day from U.S. Secretary of Energy Chris Wright on Fox News, calling the U.S. tests 'systems-tests'. "These are not nuclear explosions. These are what we call noncritical explosions," he said. However, Mr. Trump's intention remains unclear.

The United States has shaped the global nuclear order and it would be ironic if its President's actions now become the catalyst for its demise

The new low-yield warheads being designed make them more usable and the new systems (hypersonics, cruise and unmanned systems) are dual capable systems, leading to renewed research for missile defences such as the U.S. 'golden dome'. Meanwhile, doctrinal changes are being considered to cope with new technological developments in cyber and space domains. This raises doubts about the nuclear taboo in the coming decades.

The sole surviving U.S.-Russia arms control agreement, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) that limits the U.S. and Russian strategic forces to 700 launchers and 1,550 warheads is due to expire on February 4, 2026 with no prospects of any talks on the horizon. China is not a party to any arms control and its nuclear arsenal that had remained below 300, is undergoing a rapid expansion, estimated at 600 today, and likely to exceed 1,000 by 2030. An incipient nuclear arms race was already underway; a resumption of explosive testing will just take the lid off.

Russia and China have denied Mr. Trump's allegations regarding clandestine tests, but will follow if the U.S. resumes explosive testing. China will be the biggest beneficiary because with only 47 tests (compared to over 1,000 by the U.S.), resumed tests will help it to validate new designs and accumulate data.

India has been observing a voluntary moratorium. But if explosive testing resumes, India will certainly resume testing to validate its boosted fission and thermonuclear designs, tested only once in 1998. Undoubtedly, Pakistan will follow but given its growing strategic linkages with China witnessed during Operation Sindoor, this need hardly adds to India's concerns.

Though the CTBT is not in force, it did create a norm. But a resumption of explosive testing will lead to its demise. It will also tempt the nuclear wannabes to follow and mark the unravelling of the NPT led non-proliferation regime.

The taboo against use must remain intact

The U.S. has been the most significant player in shaping the global nuclear order. It would be ironic if Mr. Trump's actions now become the catalyst for its demise. The reality is that the present global nuclear order was shaped by the geopolitics of the 20th century. The challenge today is to craft a new nuclear order that reflects the fractured geopolitics of the 21st century while ensuring that the taboo against their use remains intact.

The United Nations Secretary General has cautioned that "current nuclear risks are already alarmingly high" and urged nations "to avoid all actions that could lead to miscalculation or escalation with catastrophic consequences." But is anyone listening?

- China's arsenal is expanding rapidly (600 now → 1,000+ by 2030).
- If testing resumes, India and Pakistan may be compelled to validate past designs.
- A breakdown of norms could weaken the NPT-based non-proliferation regime.

STATIC LINKAGES

- NPT (1968): Non-proliferation, disarmament, peaceful nuclear uses.
- CTBT (1996): Prohibits nuclear explosions; pending entry into force.
- India's Nuclear Doctrine (2003): NFU, Massive Retaliation, credible minimum deterrence.
- Deterrence Theory: Stability through MAD.
- CTBTO IMS: Global verification network.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

CONTEXT OF THE NEWS

- On October 30, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump indicated the U.S. may restart nuclear testing, citing Russian and Chinese activities.
- Later clarifications said the U.S. may conduct only non-critical systems tests, but ambiguity persists.
- This comes when global arsenals have reduced from 65,000 (1970s) to ~12,500, yet strategic tensions are rising.
- The CTBT remains unenforced due to pending ratifications, and New START expires in Feb 2026 with no talks underway.
- Renewed testing could trigger a fresh nuclear arms race, impacting India's deterrence equilibrium.

KEY POINTS

- Nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945, creating a global "nuclear taboo".
- Only nine nuclear-armed states exist today.
- U.S., Russia, and China are advancing new nuclear systems—hypersonics, cruise missiles, low-yield warheads.
- CTBT bans nuclear explosions but lacks a defined "zero-yield" limit, enabling subcritical tests.
- CTBTO's 300+ station network has detected no illegal tests.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Positives

- Revives debate on modernising global arms control.
- Opens space for including new nuclear powers.

Concerns

- Higher risk of explosive testing and escalation.
- Arms control architecture collapsing (ABM, INF gone; New START expiring).
- Low-yield warheads increase usability.
- India–Pakistan stability may be affected.

Stakeholder views

- U.S.: Wants technological advantage.
- China/Russia: Likely to mirror U.S. moves.
- India: Concerned about China's expansion.
- UN: Warns of high nuclear risks.

WAY FORWARD

- Restart U.S.–Russia dialogue before New START expiry.
- Strengthen and universalise CTBT with clearer definitions.
- Develop arms control norms for hypersonics, AI, cyber.
- Enhance CTBTO monitoring.
- India: maintain moratorium; strengthen simulation & subcritical capabilities.
- Promote global NFU and nuclear risk-reduction measures.

The Tamil Nadu model of sub-State climate action

Tamil Nadu's approach to climate action and biodiversity conservation is anchored in the belief that effective leadership begins on the ground, where policies are implemented, communities participate and results can be measured. To translate this principle into practice, the State created one of India's first dedicated agencies to coordinate and track all climate-related work, i.e., the Tamil Nadu Green Climate Company (TNGCC). Through its four key missions – the The Tamil Nadu Climate Change Mission (TNCCM), The Green Tamil Nadu Mission (GTNM), The Tamil Nadu Wetlands Mission (TNWM) and The Tamil Nadu Coastal Restoration Mission (TN SHORE) – the TNGCC drives emission reduction, ecosystem restoration and livelihood resilience.

A net zero pathway, pilot districts

With the aim to make Tamil Nadu Net Zero well before 2070, the State has released a detailed Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Inventory covering annual emissions across all sectors and sub-sectors, from 2005 to 2019, and developed a detailed Net Zero Pathway.

Findings from the State's GHG inventory reveal encouraging trends. Despite being one of India's most industrialised States, Tamil Nadu contributed only 7% of the country's total emissions in 2019. Moreover, between 2005 and 2019, it reduced its emission intensity to GDP by nearly 60%.

This progress reflects targeted interventions across key sectors: rapid expansion of renewable energy, improved energy efficiency, industrial decarbonisation and an ambitious electric-mobility programme that aims to electrify all public transport. Today, renewable energy accounts for about 60% of Tamil Nadu's total installed power capacity and 30% of total electricity generated.

In order to meet its goal of being net zero well before 2070, the State has also embarked on a bottom-up climate action planning and implementation. The State has recently launched district-level decarbonisation plans and a real-time Climate Action Tracker developed in collaboration with the Vasudha Foundation, embedding climate action directly into local governance. The decarbonisation plans for four pilot districts – The Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Ramanathapuram and Virudhunagar – show that these districts can abate up to 92% of projected emissions (of the four districts) by 2050 through clean energy adoption, mobility transformation, industrial efficiency and nature-based solutions. They also have the potential to sequester nearly three million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2050.

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In the State's 'bottom-up' approach, district-level decarbonisation plans and a real-time tracker are helping shape climate actions at the local and sub-local levels

The Climate Action Plans and decarbonisation pathways for the four districts build on a detailed district-level greenhouse gas emissions inventories along with a detailed climate variability assessment based on historic and current climate data and projecting the assessments till end of the century. What came across consistently is that if greenhouse gases are left unabated not just in the four districts but across India and globally, the number of warm days would increase significantly by about 95% by 2100, with a substantial increase in precipitation levels, leading to a wetter monsoon, impacting the region, particularly the vulnerable Nilgiris district.

Responsible factors

Road transport is a major contributor to the GHG emissions in the Nilgiris and Coimbatore districts (close to 43% and 36% of the total emissions, respectively), followed closely by residential energy consumption (20% and 12%). Cement, road transport and industrial energy were the highest GHG contributors in Virudhunagar (37%, 20% and 16%, respectively). In Ramanathapuram, public electricity generation and rice cultivation (28% and 12%, respectively) were the contributors.

Building on the emissions trajectories and identifying the key driver of emissions, the action plans propose a shovel ready list of projects to be implemented each year, from 2025, covering electric mobility, waste management, forest restorations and industrial decarbonisation – all tailor-made for each district. When implemented, the Nilgiris district can become net zero by 2030 even in a moderate scenario. Ramanathapuram can become net zero by 2047 in an aggressive scenario which will mean lifestyle changes to some extent. However, due to a high level of industrialisation, Coimbatore and Virudhunagar can become net zero by about 2055.

The approach views climate change not as a constraint but as an opportunity to pursue growth that safeguards both nature and people. Similar plans will soon be developed for all the 38 districts in Tamil Nadu.

The Climate Action Tracker is designed around a simple premise: what gets measured, gets done. Together, they create a transparent, evidence-based system for planning and accountability, ensuring that every district can monitor its progress and refine its strategies. To support effective implementation, a dedicated Project Management Unit is being established in the four pilot districts. The action tracker and the action plans can be accessed at https://tnclimatetracker.tn.gov.in

Other schemes, community focus

Other key initiatives of Tamil Nadu include large-scale afforestation, mangroves, wetland restoration and biodiversity protection. The State now hosts 20 Ramsar-designated wetlands, and has ensured that 30% of its total land area is protected. Along Tamil Nadu's 1,068-kilometre coastline, massive efforts are being undertaken in restoring mangroves and seascapes while supporting coastal livelihoods.

By expanding the focus beyond energy and industry to include agriculture, livestock and waste, Tamil Nadu is broadening the scope of its low-carbon transition.

Communities are being placed at the centre of this transformation, turning climate action into a participatory process. The choices made today at the local and sub-local levels will shape the future of the State's economy, ecosystems, and communities. Tamil Nadu's experience underscores the point that climate leadership is no longer about setting ambitious targets but about building systems that make progress visible, verifiable and participatory.

As India advances toward its net-zero future, Tamil Nadu's model offers a valuable complement by showing how national intent can be deepened through local innovation and evidence-led governance.

Static Linkages

- Decentralised governance & local planning under PRIs.
- Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) aligned with UNFCCC/IPCC.
- Ramsar Convention on wetland protection.
- NAPCC linkages with solar, energy efficiency, and ecosystem missions.
- Carbon sinks: forests, mangroves, wetlands.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Tamil Nadu has launched district-level decarbonisation plans under the Tamil Nadu Green Climate Company (TNGCC).
- Four pilot districts — Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Ramanathapuram, Virudhunagar — now have detailed GHG inventories and Net Zero pathways.
- A real-time Climate Action Tracker embeds climate action into local governance.
- The State targets Net Zero well before 2070, with some districts potentially reaching much earlier (Nilgiris by 2030).

Key Points

- TNGCC works through four missions: TNCCM, GTNM, TNWM, TN SHORE.
- Tamil Nadu contributed 7% of India's emissions (2019); emission intensity reduced ~60% (2005–2019).
- Renewables: ~60% of installed capacity, ~30% electricity generation.
- Emission contributors by district:
  - Nilgiris & Coimbatore: Road transport dominant
  - Virudhunagar: Cement & industrial energy
  - Ramanathapuram: Electricity generation & rice cultivation
- Four districts can reduce emissions up to 92% by 2050 + sequester ~3 million tonnes CO_2e.
- State has 20 Ramsar sites; 30% land is protected.
- Key actions: EVs, waste management, afforestation, mangroves, industrial decarbonisation.

Critical Analysis

Strengths

- First State with district-level climate planning.
- Strong data-driven approach: GHG inventory + climate projections.
- Integrates people, nature, and industry.
- Enhances transparency through real-time tracking.

Challenges

- Industrialised districts face tougher decarbonisation.
- Need sustained finance & capacity-building.
- Lifestyle changes required in transport & energy consumption.
- Greater industry coordination needed for decarbonisation.

Stakeholder Views

- State: Balanced growth + ecology.
- Local bodies: Need skills & funds.
- Communities: Crucial for waste, forests, mobility.
- Industry: Requires tech + incentives.

Way Forward

- Scale plans to all 38 districts.
- Strengthen climate financing (Green Bonds, CSR).
- Rapid EV transition & green public transport.
- Introduce local climate budgets.
- Expand mangrove & seascape restoration.
- Deploy GIS/AI tools for real-time monitoring.
- Promote agroforestry & carbon farming.

Urgent update

India needs to revise its Consumer Price Index urgently

The retail inflation data for October once again underscore the fact that the update of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) cannot happen fast enough. The data show that the rate of overall inflation fell to just 0.25%, the lowest it has been since at least January 2012. On the face of it, this would be cause for celebration, but a deeper look reveals this drastic fall to be a statistical anomaly rather than an actual fall in price levels. The food and beverages category saw prices falling 3.7% in October, the largest in the history of the CPI's current series. However, the main reason for this contraction was not so much that food prices have fallen, but because food inflation in October last year was a blistering 9.7%. This high base ensured that food inflation in October 2025 was negative, even though vegetable prices in markets have been on the rise recently. With the food and beverages category enjoying a weightage of nearly 46% in the overall CPI basket, this statistical anomaly in food inflation was responsible for pulling the entire index down. Indeed, inflation in nearly every other major subgroup – fuel and light, housing, tobacco, and the miscellaneous category – was higher this October than last. The impact of the GST rate cuts has, so far, been seen only in the clothing and footwear category – the only one apart from food to see inflation lower than last year. All of this shows just how skewed the inflation measure is. Not only is it outdated, with the base year set as 2012, but the weightages are no longer accurate and more often obscure rather than clarify. The disconnect between the CPI and reality can perhaps best be shown by the fact that people the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had surveyed in September had said that their perceived inflation rate was 7.4% – a far cry from what the CPI reported.

The urgency behind the update is not just because of the vast gap between measured and perceived inflation. It is also because the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee uses the CPI as its benchmark when deciding what to do with interest rates. Its next meeting is in December and it will have to decide whether to keep rates unchanged or to cut them. It will have to contend with growth data clouded by the temporary impact of the GST rate cut-related demand boost. Having to also parse through inflation data beset by statistical anomalies will only make accurate policymaking that much harder. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation has said that the new series of the CPI will be ready by the first quarter of the next financial year. The sooner it happens, the better.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- October CPI inflation fell to 0.25%, lowest since 2012.
- A –3.7% fall in food & beverages driven largely by a high base effect (9.7% in Oct 2024).
- Most other categories recorded higher inflation than last year.
- Households reported 7.4% perceived inflation, revealing a sharp CPI–reality gap.
- MoSPI plans new CPI series in Q1 of next FY.

Key Points

- CPI uses 2012 base year, now outdated.
- Food weight of 46% skews the index.
- October's fall is a statistical distortion, not a real price decline.
- GST rate-cut effect visible only in clothing & footwear.
- MPC relies on CPI for inflation targeting (4% ±2%); anomalies create policy risks.

Static Linkages

- CPI compiled by MoSPI; WPI by DPIIT.
- Inflation targeting legalised via RBI Act amendment, 2016.
- CPI weights depend on NSS Consumption Survey.
- Base effect influences YoY inflation trends.
- CPI used for DA revisions, poverty lines, welfare evaluation.

Critical Analysis

Pros of CPI Update

- Reflects modern consumption patterns and rising service share.
- Reduces food-driven volatility.
- Strengthens inflation targeting credibility.

Concerns

- HCES delays slowed revision.
- Distorted inflation may misguide MPC rate decisions.
- Public expectations diverge from official numbers.
- Persistent food volatility weakens CPI reliability.

Stakeholder Views

- RBI: Needs cleaner data.
- Consumers: CPI feels unrealistic.
- Government: Risk of misaligned monetary–fiscal signals.
- Businesses: Inflation misreading affects planning.

Way Forward

- Release updated CPI quickly.
- Rebalance weights toward services and urban consumption.
- Use digital high-frequency price data.
- Improve RBI communication on inflation.
- Prioritise core inflation in analysis.

Amoral embrace

The U.S. appears to have given a free pass to Sharaa in Syria

For Ahmed al-Sharaa, the founder of al-Qaeda's Syria branch, and now the President of Syria, his recent visit to the White House has marked a remarkable turnaround in his career. From commanding an outfit responsible for suicide bombings and targeted killings, and carrying a $10 million bounty on his head, Mr. Sharaa, who until recently was known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, is now a very close partner of Washington. After their meeting, U.S. President Donald Trump said that he "gets along with him". In December, only weeks after Mr. Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) toppled the secular Ba'athist regime of President Bashar al-Assad and seized Damascus, the U.S. lifted the bounty on the former jihadist commander. Earlier this week, Mr. Trump granted Syria wide exemptions on sanctions, and pressed Congress to repeal a 2019 law that imposed harsh penalties on the country, while Syria promised to join the war against the Islamic State. Mr. Sharaa has also signalled his desire to improve ties with Israel, America's closest ally in West Asia, even as Israel grabbed more Syrian territories in the Golan region after Mr. Assad's fall. Reports suggest the U.S. is preparing its presence at an airbase in Damascus as it brokers a Syria-Israel security pact. The message is clear: Syria, under Mr. Sharaa, seeks entry into the U.S.-led regional order, and Washington is reciprocating enthusiastically.

While allowing a country of 25 million people battered by western sanctions, foreign interventions and civil war, to join the regional economic mainstream is welcome, what troubles many is Mr. Sharaa's not-so-distant past. He was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's choice to open al-Qaeda's Syria branch. He split with Baghdadi when the latter founded the Islamic State in the early 2010s, and remained loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri's al-Qaeda. Mr. Sharaa began to distance himself from al-Qaeda only after his forces captured Idlib, which became the hub of anti-Assad factions. As the ruler of Idlib, he maintained close ties with Türkiye. In November 2024, his HTS launched a rapid offensive against the Syrian army, which was badly hurt by Israeli bombings, and captured Damascus. Soon after, he was embraced by regional and western governments alike. While Mr. Sharaa has promised to build an inclusive Syria, the country has witnessed at least two massacres against minorities – against Alawites and the Druze. His attempts to centralise power through sham elections have deepened sectarian divides. Transnational jihadists within the HTS continue to operate freely. But the U.S., once vocally concerned about the human rights situation in Syria under Mr. Assad, appears to have given a free pass to Mr. Sharaa. If he is rehabilitated without accountability for his past and scrutiny of his present rule, Syria's wounds will remain unhealed, keeping it on the brink for years to come.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- A former jihadist commander captures power in a civil-war-hit state after regime collapse.
- Major powers rapidly normalise ties for strategic access and counter-terrorism goals.
- The new leadership faces allegations of past atrocities and ongoing sectarian abuses.
- Regional geopolitics shifts as neighbouring states reassess security alignments.

Key Points

- Rise of a militant-origin leader raises legitimacy and accountability concerns.
- Global realpolitik favours strategic cooperation over human rights.
- Persistent militant networks weaken the new state's institutional capacity.
- Minority groups face vulnerability amid sectarian tensions and weak governance.

Static Linkages

- Principles of statehood (Montevideo Convention).
- UN Charter's sovereignty and non-interference norms.
- Post-conflict reconstruction frameworks (DDR, peacebuilding).
- Concepts of legitimacy and authority in political theory.
- India's foreign policy pillars: autonomy, stability, territorial integrity.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- May stabilise the region and reduce refugee flows.
- Facilitates counter-terror cooperation.
- Supports economic reintegration and humanitarian relief.

Cons

- Weakens global norms on accountability for war crimes.
- Risks deepening sectarian divides.
- Allows armed factions to retain influence.
- Regional tensions may intensify due to shifting alliances.

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Major Powers: Strategic bases, counter-terror coordination.
- Neighbours: Security concerns, spillover risks.
- Minorities: Fear reprisals, lack of justice.
- Civil Society: Demands inclusivity and rights protection.
- International Organisations: Monitoring and peacebuilding.

Challenges

- Delivering justice while maintaining stability.
- Disarming transnational militants.
- Building inclusive governance in a polarised society.
- Managing regional rivalries and external interference.

Way Forward

- UN-backed transitional justice mechanisms.
- Robust DDR program for armed groups.
- Institutional and constitutional safeguards for minorities.
- Human rights monitoring tied to aid.
- Regional security dialogue to prevent spillover.
- Gradual political reforms with international oversight.

On air pollution, mood is shifting, people's anger is in search of political voice

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

TOXIC AIR is a product of toxic politics. The toxicity comes in many forms. Denial, across the political spectrum, of how grave the problem is. Distraction, where the circus of politics keeps us from confronting serious issues. Division, where identity and vested interests block any coalition for change. And when all else fails, Destiny: Pollution becomes the inevitable price of modernisation, a sacrifice this generation must make for some future "powerhouse" glory.

Air pollution has never been a voting issue. Even those who care about it don't cast their ballots on it. That is partly because there's little to choose between political parties. The rewards of good policy lie well beyond the next election cycle. And the problem itself is tangled in institutional knots — fragmented powers, uncoordinated regulators, entrenched lobbies and citizens divided by contradictory interests.

Yet what's most striking is elite indifference. India's elites could, without much cost to themselves, push for cleaner air. But they don't. Indeed, solving air pollution is not just a scientific problem. But listening to discussions amongst the well-heeled in Delhi, you realise how ascientific they are, not unscientific, but wedded to the ideology of science rather than its method. They revere science as a symbol, not as a habit of mind. Public debate has long lacked sober, plainspoken scientific voices. So politicians get away with performative gimmicks — odd-even schemes, vacuum trucks, purifiers on traffic islands, with the confidence that no one with influence will call them out.

Control over the media, suppression of protest, and branding of environmental activism as "foreign-funded" will make mobilisation even harder. The media, for the most part, are willing accomplices. But the mood is shifting. The charade — "Who do you believe, my doctored data or your dying lungs?" — is wearing thin.

We may be nearing a tipping point. The question is no longer whether people will be angry, but how that anger will find a political voice. Social movements need a focal point. They also need politics and the media to be willing to amplify their concerns. The disillusionment with civil society-led movements is deep in the aftermath of the anti-corruption movement, though ironically, our terrible environmental story is in large part a corruption story. Even governments can respond, if the issue can be addressed through a discrete, time-bound act: Passing a law, replacing a fleet of buses, announcing a mission. But tackling air pollution across north India means confronting everything at once — urban design, transport, agriculture, industry, informal sector, construction, and dust. The scale itself becomes the perfect alibi. It's all too complex, we are told. If not, there's always the weather, or winds from Pakistan, to blame.

Of course, this complexity argument belies the fact that most countries in the world have a better record on air pollution than India. Solving this is complex, but it is not rocket science. India produces wonderful organisations from the Centre of Science and Environment to the Sustainable Futures Collaborative that can guide you through the science and regulatory measures. In the short run, the task is to resist this complexity gambit.

> Unless each actor in the chain of responsibility is named and shamed, 'state incapacity' will continue to mask political choice. Toxic air is sustained by toxic politics

We need to focus, instead, on the agency that produces the current system, specific leaders and officials doing specific things. Yes, India is a poor country with limited state capacity and a tangled political economy. But those truths have become ideological cover. "Complexity" and "political economy" now function as excuses for inaction. Much of what we call lack of capacity is itself politically induced — a symptom, not a cause. Fragmented jurisdictions, weak local governments, understaffed regulators: These are deliberate political choices, not natural constraints. They can be reversed.

Even granting a degree of complexity, there is still enormous agency within the system. Particular actors are choosing not to use it. Let us cut through the pretence. No institutional barrier prevents the Prime Minister and relevant chief ministers from coordinating a mission-mode response to seasonal crop burning. That could be a real test of "cooperative federalism". Nothing stops cities like Gurgaon from implementing efficient, centralised waste management systems. If the city lacks legal empowerment, the state government can step in. Why are television channels not asking why pollution norms for thermal plants were relaxed? Why are unpaved roads not being sealed? What stops the upgrading of brick kilns?

It is said that elites will not give up their cars or accept a shift to public transport. There is some truth to this. But India's urban and transport architecture is now dictated not even by elites, but by contractors. If every pollution-related agency is criminally understaffed, name the ministries responsible. Nothing prevents senior politicians from giving this issue salience. It is hard to exaggerate the stakes: The shape of India's growth story — and the health of its citizens — depends on how we tackle air pollution. Even in purely instrumental terms, it has become a growth inhibitor. Yet have we heard a single credible, substantive speech from the Prime Minister or the environment minister on the subject? Has any journalist asked them serious questions that hold their feet to the fire?

The Commission on Air Quality Management's annual report offers a telling example. On paper, there is action. But the emphasis remains on instruments, not outcomes. The Commission's experts, co-opted in the hope that having a seat at the table means influence, seem unwilling to act as a public conscience. Why not turn the Commission into a genuine bully pulpit — demanding accountability, holding open hearings, compelling ministers to answer pointed questions?

Unless each actor in this chain of responsibility is named and shamed, "state incapacity" will continue to mask political choice. Toxic air is sustained by toxic politics. And if that politics continues unchallenged, it will soon turn into something more dangerous still, a toxic distemper. Ignore it at your peril.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- North India continues to record Severe AQI, exposing chronic failures in environmental governance.
- Governments rely on symbolic measures (odd–even, smog towers) instead of structural reforms.
- Experts highlight political denial, elite indifference, weak regulators, and fragmented governance as key drivers.
- Pollution now reflects not just environmental failure but a deep political economy problem.

Key Points

- Air pollution remains a non-electoral issue; political incentives for reform are minimal.
- Regulatory landscape is fragmented—SPCBs, CPCB, municipalities, and CAQM operate with overlapping roles.
- Elite discourse shows symbolic respect for science but little support for evidence-based policy.
- Major contributors: crop burning, thermal plants with relaxed norms, unregulated construction, transport emissions, waste mismanagement.
- "Complexity" is used as a cover for political inaction; institutional capacity gaps are often deliberately created.

Static Linkages

- Art. 48A & 51A(g): Environmental protection duties.
- Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 – regulatory powers of CPCB/SPCBs.
- 42nd Constitutional Amendment – expanded environmental responsibilities under the Concurrent List.
- NCAP – 40% PM reduction target by 2026.
- Polluter Pays & Precautionary Principles (SC jurisprudence).
- 74th Amendment – municipal responsibilities for waste, public health, urban planning.

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Strong civil society expertise (CSE, SFC).
- Proven technological options: CEMS, cleaner kilns, EVs, waste processing.
- Federal platforms exist for mission-mode coordination.

Challenges

- Political apathy due to low electoral salience.
- Understaffed SPCBs and weak municipal powers.
- Media capture reduces public pressure.
- Contractors and vested interests drive urban design.

Ethical & Constitutional Dimensions

- Art. 21: Right to clean air.
- Equity concerns: poorest face highest exposure.
- Ethical deficit: policy delay despite avoidable health costs.

Way Forward

- Activate Centre–State mission mode for crop burning reduction.
- Implement 74th Amendment to empower municipalities.
- Reinstate strict emission norms for thermal plants.
- Shift focus to measurable outcomes with real-time public dashboards.
- Make CAQM a transparent accountability forum with open hearings.
- Strengthen pollution regulators: staffing, labs, enforcement tech.
- Expand clean public transport; adopt congestion pricing.
- Integrate health-focused urban planning (TOD, walkability).
- Ensure policy coherence via pollution-impact assessments.

Women and migrants together will shape Bihar's future

ASHWANI KUMAR

THE BIHAR assembly election is a defining moment. More than a usual regional contest, it represents the tensions between welfare and aspiration, migration and belonging, survival and mobility. Bihar's politics has long been viewed through the prisms of caste, crime and corruption. But its democratic aspirations have manifested in historic peasant movements, the uprising against the Emergency and the post-Mandal consolidation.

The convergence of two powerful shifts makes this election significant. First, the unprecedented turnout of women voters and the rise of women as the dominant electoral bloc in what has increasingly become a "maternal welfare state". Second, the crystallisation of employment and migration as the new axes of debate. Together, they signal a transformation toward "migrant democracy" — a political order sustained by the circulatory lives of migrants and the civic labour of women who anchor the village economy in their absence.

At the centre of these shifts stands Nitish Kumar. By unleashing social multiplier effects of the post-Mandal transformation, his governance model has redefined state capacity. The feminised welfare infrastructure also paved the way for collective entrepreneurship through dairy cooperatives and local enterprise. Still, there is a long way to go. On the other hand, with millions of youths migrating, *palayan* remains an open wound. Migration, once normalised both as a livelihood strategy and an escape from the ravages of caste order, is now viewed as an opportunity gap.

The imperatives of empowering mothers and migrants have created conditions for a new developmental paradigm — one that can translate welfare gains into the next generation of advanced economy and local employment. Bihar has already experienced remittance-driven consumption and urbanisation – a massive boom in real estate, smartphones, swanky cars, shopping malls, and upmarket eateries with multinational brands across the state's cities. The youths are both excited and anxious about the next stages of aspirational modernity.

In this sense, the "maternal welfare state" has unleashed both empowerment and expectation. Women's civic agency and the youth's aspirations now converge, compelling the state to evolve from one that delivers benefits to one that creates possibilities — a "maternal economy" seeking to employ and retain its people.

So, this election is a contest between two moral economies of governance. The incumbents, who consolidated Bihar's welfare and civic infrastructure, embody continuity, equity and stability. The challengers, who mobilise the language of aspiration, reform, and opportunity. But women and migrants — one rooted, the other mobile — together define Bihar's new democratic frontier.

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Women's civic agency and the youth's aspirations now converge, compelling the state to evolve from one that delivers benefits to one that creates possibilities — a 'maternal economy' seeking to employ and retain its people

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Bihar's election is shaped by two pivotal shifts:
  - Rising dominance of women voters.
  - Employment and migration emerging as core political themes.
- Politics is moving beyond caste–crime narratives toward welfare, mobility, and aspiration.
- Long-term drivers: post-Mandal politics, feminised welfare, and large-scale inter-state migration.

Key Points

- Women have outvoted men since 2015; in some seats, the gap is 8–10%.
- Expansion of a "maternal welfare state": nutrition, education, SHGs, bicycles, Ujjwala, DBTs.
- 2–3 million Biharis migrate seasonally (MoLE).
- Remittances fuel real estate, retail, smartphones, and town-level urbanisation.
- Nitish Kumar's model expanded state capacity, PRIs participation, and women-led cooperatives.
- Youth face job scarcity despite rising aspirations.
- Migration, once a coping strategy, is now seen as an opportunity gap.

Static Linkages

- Directive Principles: Articles 38, 41, 46.
- 73rd Amendment → women's PRI representation.
- Migration: push–pull theory.
- Social capital and local cooperatives.
- Demographic dividend and employment elasticity.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Women's political agency strengthens accountability.
- Human capital gains from health, education, SHGs.
- Remittances enhance consumption and local markets.
- Reduced caste centrality in politics.

Cons / Challenges

- Low industrial base, weak job creation.
- High dependence on migrant earnings.
- Welfare gains not fully translating into economic autonomy.
- Persistent caste-linked inequalities in mobility.

Stakeholder Perspectives

- Women: Want continuity + opportunities.
- Youth: Seek jobs and modernisation.
- Migrants: Demand recognition and social security.
- Government: Balancing welfare with growth.

Way Forward

- Build local job ecosystems: MSMEs, agro-processing, dairy chains.
- Skill development aligned with actual market demand.
- A comprehensive migration policy ensuring portability of benefits.
- Women's economic integration beyond welfare: credit, micro-enterprise.
- Strengthen small-town urbanisation and industrial clusters.
- Improve digital governance and last-mile delivery.

Nithari case collapse points to systemic gaps

IN 2006, the discovery of human remains in a drain behind a bungalow in Noida's Nithari village exposed a horrific series of crimes — there were at least 16 missing children and young women, and many broken families. The police named two men: Businessman Moninder Singh Pandher, and his domestic help, Surendra Koli, with the latter accused of being the main perpetrator. Both were convicted and sentenced to death by the lower court in one of India's most sensational cases. Nineteen years later, and two years after the Allahabad High Court acquitted Pandher citing lack of evidence, the Supreme Court's acquittal of Koli has again upended the narrative. What was once portrayed as conclusive justice for a "rarest of rare" case now stands as an instance of "manifest miscarriage of justice", aided and abetted by procedural collapse. On Wednesday, Koli walked out of Kasna jail nearly two decades after his arrest. The verdict exposes a criminal justice machinery that mistakes speed and spectacle for due process.

The apex court's judgment rests on the prosecution's failure to prove guilt beyond reasonable doubt — a collapse built on shoddy investigation amid public frenzy. Koli was in prolonged custody without counsel and there were allegations of torture, inconsistent recovery records, and lack of forensic evidence. The similarities with the 2008 Aarushi Talwar-Hemraj murders point to a dismal pattern — where haste supplants diligence, media glare overshadows method, and police, under pressure and prejudice, chase narratives rather than evidence. In Nithari, for an entire year before the crimes were uncovered, families, mostly from low-income backgrounds, had pleaded for help to trace their missing children, only to be dismissed by an indifferent force.

Who, then, killed the victims in Nithari? For their families, Koli's acquittal forces them to confront the fact that the truth may never be known. Unless the police are trained to privilege rigour over bias, evidence over assumption, unless accountability is woven into the system, there will continue to be such capitulations to the performative demands of media trials, eroding trust in the processes of justice.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- In 2006, discovery of human remains in Nithari exposed multiple disappearances of children and women.
- Moninder Singh Pandher and Surendra Koli were convicted and sentenced to death by lower courts.
- Allahabad HC (2023) acquitted Pandher for lack of evidence.
- Supreme Court (2025) has now acquitted Koli, calling the case a "manifest miscarriage of justice."
- Judgment highlights custodial violations, weak forensics, and media-driven pressure.

Key Points

- Guilt not proven beyond reasonable doubt; investigation suffered serious lapses.
- Custodial irregularities: denial of counsel, torture allegations.
- Poor forensics: inconsistent recovery memos, no credible chain-of-custody.
- Media pressure distorted investigation quality.
- Ignored victims: low-income families' complaints dismissed for nearly a year.
- Reflects recurring pattern seen in Aarushi–Hemraj case.

Static Linkages

- Art. 21 & 22: Right to fair procedure, legal aid.
- Evidence Act Sec. 25 & 27: Police confessions inadmissible unless discovery is proven.
- CrPC 41, 167: Arrest and remand safeguards.
- DK Basu Guidelines: Mandatory custodial protections.
- Prakash Singh Reforms: Structural police reform.
- 2nd ARC – Public Order: Scientific investigation, forensic strengthening.

Critical Analysis

Pros

- Reinforces fair-trial jurisprudence.
- Promotes scrutiny of investigative standards.
- Reignites push for forensic modernization.

Cons / Challenges

- True perpetrators remain unidentified.
- Public trust eroded.
- Structural biases against poor victims persist.
- Weak evidence-handling and poor training continue.

Stakeholders

- Victims: left without closure.
- Police: face pressure, lack resources.
- Judiciary: limited role in investigation quality.
- Civil society: demands accountability.

Way Forward

- Implement Prakash Singh reforms.
- Strengthen DNA forensics and chain-of-custody norms.
- Ensure access to timely legal aid.
- Mandate recorded interrogations.
- Create independent oversight for major crimes.
- Regulate media conduct in ongoing investigations.
- Upgrade police training in scientific methods.