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Politicians, officials must foster fraternity: SC

Top court takes note of statements that 'stigmatise' communities, legitimise 'discriminatory governance'

It emphasises need for restraint in public comments by constitutional functionaries

This is a more than 75-year-old mature democracy, we do not expect people to behave like this: CJ

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

Political leaders must foster fraternity and high public office-holders should live up to the ideals of the Constitution, the Supreme Court said on Tuesday. The court was hearing a petition highlighting instances of Chief Ministers, senior bureaucrats, and police officers making public statements that stigmatise entire communities, legitimise discriminatory governance, and erode public confidence in the state's commitment to equal citizenship.

"We would like to impress upon all political parties to follow the principles of constitutional morality, values, mutual respect,

and self-respect. This is a more than 75-year-old mature democracy; we do not expect people to behave like this," Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a three-judge Bench, observed orally. Justice B.V. Nagarathna advocated the need to "restrain" discriminatory and communally divisive public speeches "from all sides".

'Control of thought'
"Political leaders must ultimately foster fraternity in the country," Justice Nagarathna remarked. However, she pointed out that the origin of speech was thought. "How can we control thought?" the judge asked.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal and advocate Fuzail



Ahmad Ayyubi, appearing for petitioner-activist Roop Rekha Verma, said the court could certainly control the "consequences of thought" by laying down guidelines to govern public speech by constitutional functionaries, so as to ensure fidelity to constitutional morality, without imposing prior restraint or

censorship. "We have to do something now," Mr. Sibal urged the court.

The court said it was keen to lay down guidelines but noted that the petition seemed to name personalities only from a particular political party. The Bench indicated that the court did not want to enter the political thicket,

following which Mr. Sibal sought two weeks to modify the petition.

Chief Justice Kant said the petition has raised a "very serious issue" even as Mr. Sibal pointed out that public statements have become increasingly "toxic".

Mr. Sibal highlighted the "normalisation of constitutionally unbecoming speeches by holders of high public offices". He said these statements were not merely political rhetoric, but have weaved their way into administrative and law enforcement establishments.

Chief Justice Kant asked whether party constitutions did not have any clauses to control public conduct and speeches of their leaders.

Justice Joyimala Bagchi, the third judge on the Bench, said the public have an expectation that "democratic entities would live up to the constitutional ethos and values".

'Chilling effect'

The petition flagged statements of sitting Chief Ministers and holders of high public offices, which exemplify how constitutional and legal authority was used to legitimise discriminatory hostility. It drew attention to statements by senior bureaucrats and police officers that "reinforce exclusion, humiliation, or collective blame".

It underscored that holders of public office and senior executive authorities who indulge in a continuing pattern of derogatory

speech were not ordinary speakers.

"Their words carry the imprimatur of the State, influence administrative action, shape public perception, and can have a chilling or exclusionary effect on vulnerable communities, even in the absence of direct incitement or hate speech... No structured guidance or framework clarifying how constitutional morality applies to the public speech of constitutional functionaries. This vacuum has allowed discriminatory and derogatory speech," it pointed out.

"Let this not be a populist exercise. It should be a contemplative and constitutional exercise. We need to take an objective approach," Justice Bagchi addressed Mr. Sibal.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- The Supreme Court of India observed that political leaders and high public office-holders must uphold constitutional morality and foster fraternity.
- A petition alleged that certain Chief Ministers, bureaucrats and police officials made statements stigmatizing communities.
- The Court indicated willingness to frame guidelines on public speech of constitutional functionaries, without imposing prior censorship.
- Concern raised over increasing "toxic" public discourse affecting equality and democratic ethos.

Core Constitutional Dimensions

- Preamble – Justice, Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity ensuring dignity.
- Article 14 – Equality before law.
- Article 19(1)(a) & 19(2) – Freedom of speech with reasonable restrictions.
- Article 21 – Protection of dignity as part of life and liberty.
- Article 51A(e) – Fundamental duty to promote harmony.
- Basic Structure Doctrine – Constitutional morality linked with core constitutional values (Kesavananda Bharati, 1973).
- Navtej Singh Johar (2018) – Constitutional morality prevails over social morality.
- All India Services (Conduct) Rules, 1968 – Political neutrality of civil servants.
- Second ARC – Ethics in Governance – Public office as public trust.

Key Issues

- Can judiciary frame guidelines regulating speech of constitutional authorities?

- Balance between Free Speech (Art 19) and Equality & Dignity (Art 14, 21).
- Whether divisive speech by public officials violates constitutional morality.
- Role of judiciary in preserving democratic ethos vs. judicial overreach.
- Ethical leadership and public accountability.

Significance

- Reinforces supremacy of constitutional values over partisan politics.
- Protects vulnerable communities from indirect discrimination.
- Strengthens democratic accountability and public trust in institutions.
- Raises debate on limits of political speech in a constitutional democracy.

Challenges

- Defining "toxic" or "divisive" speech objectively.
- Avoiding judicial encroachment into political domain.
- Ensuring neutrality of bureaucracy and police.
- Preventing chilling effect on legitimate dissent.

Way Forward

- Judicially framed objective guidelines rooted in constitutional provisions.
- Strengthening enforcement of Conduct Rules.
- Ethical training for public officials.
- Political party internal disciplinary mechanisms.
- Civic awareness promoting fraternity and pluralism.

India-France partnership is a force for stability in the world, says PM

Yinaya Deshpande Pandit
MUMBAI

India and France elevated their relationship to a 'special global strategic partnership' on Tuesday when Prime Minister Narendra Modi met French President Emmanuel Macron.

The meeting also saw the amendment of the protocol on Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, establishment of an annual Foreign Ministers' Dialogue to review the Horizon 2047 Roadmap, and an agreement on reciprocal deployment of armed forces. At a time of global uncertainty, the India-French partnership is a force for stability, Mr. Modi said.

The bilateral talks between Mr. Modi and the French President in Mumbai resulted in a wide-ranging agreement covering health, critical minerals, defence, science and technology, renewable energy, and skilling.



French President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually inaugurate the assembly line of Airbus H125 helicopters at an event in Mumbai on Tuesday. AFP (REPORT: PAGE 12)

'Way against hegemony' With Mr. Macron by his side during a joint press conference at Lok Sabha here, the Prime Minister was expansive in his description of bilateral ties. "The India-France partnership knows no boundaries. It can reach from deep oceans to the tallest mountains," he said, adding that the relationship was "very special".

Mr. Macron also highlighted the unique nature of the relationship based on common principles such as a shared agreement on the rule of law and a world order without hegemony.

"We will find a new way which is against hegemony. We want to walk together. We want to give a model to the world about how to work together. AI should respect each other, should respect diversity. The algo-

gorithms should be transparent," he said. He emphasised the strategic partnership between the two countries in multiple sectors including defence, science and technology, nuclear power, and high speed rail networks.

During his first visit to Mumbai and fourth trip to India, Mr. Macron started the day with a jog along Marine Drive, south Mumbai's long coastal promenade, surprising residents. It sent a positive message about health for the youth, in a city which hosts marathons, the External Affairs Ministry said.

Mr. Macron paid tribute to the victims of the 26/11 terror attacks at Mumbai's Taj Mahal Palace hotel, reiterating his country's strong stance against ter-

ror. "In the face of terrorism, unity and determination," he said. Later, Mr. Modi hosted a dinner for the French President. This visit follows Mr. Modi's visit to France last year, and marked the 20th meeting between the two leaders over the last few years.

Star-studded lunch

Mr. Macron had a cinema-themed lunch with a few film personalities, including Anil Kapoor, Manoj Bajpayee, and Niraj Ghaywan. "Alongside the legends of Indian cinema, Culture brings us together," he posted on X. He is expected to meet investors in Mumbai on Wednesday before heading to Delhi.

The two leaders launched the India-France Year of Innovation and the

India-France Innovation Network, with a cultural programme at the iconic Gateway of India. In a first for the private sector, Mr. Modi and Mr. Macron virtually inaugurated the H125 Helicopter Final Assembly Line at Veangal, Karnataka, in the presence of the Defence Ministers from both the countries.

The Prime Minister also announced the launch of the Indo-French Centre for AI in Health, Indo-French Centre for Digital Science and Technology, and the National Centre of Excellence for Skilling in Aeronautics. "These are not just institutions, but future-building platforms," he said.

DEFENCE COOPERATION
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- France is a resident power in the Indian Ocean Region (Reunion Island).
- DTAA amendments aim to prevent tax evasion and double taxation (Section 90, Income Tax Act, 1961).
- Cooperation areas: Defence, Indo-Pacific, AI governance, critical minerals, renewable energy, nuclear energy, high-speed rail.

Static Linkages

- Article 51 – Promotion of international peace and security.
- Article 253 – Parliament's power to implement international agreements.
- Strategic Autonomy – Core principle of India's foreign policy.
- Indo-Pacific Vision & SAGAR doctrine.
- Make in India & Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence manufacturing.
- Responsible AI framework – NITI Aayog.

Mains Enrichment Points (GS-II & GS-III)

Strategic Dimension

- Supports India's multipolar world vision.
- Enhances maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.
- Deepens defence interoperability.

Economic & Technological Dimension

- Strengthens innovation ecosystems and R&D partnerships.
- Cooperation in AI aligns with digital public infrastructure push.
- Critical minerals collaboration supports supply-chain resilience.

Energy & Climate

- Joint leadership in solar energy (ISA).
- Cooperation in nuclear and renewable energy.

Challenges

- Technology transfer limitations in defence.
- Need for deeper trade integration (India-EU FTA context).
- Balancing ties with U.S., Russia, and EU.
- Ensuring AI governance aligns with ethical and regulatory norms.

Way Forward

- Shift from buyer-seller defence model to co-development.
- Expand collaboration in green hydrogen & offshore wind.
- Institutionalise Indo-Pacific maritime exercises.
- Deepen startup and university-level partnerships.
- Strengthen implementation monitoring under Horizon 2047 roadmap.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India and France elevated ties to a "Special Global Strategic Partnership."
- Amendment to the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA) protocol signed.
- Establishment of an annual Foreign Ministers' Dialogue under the Horizon 2047 Roadmap.
- Agreement on reciprocal deployment of armed forces.
- Launch of:
 - India-France Year of Innovation
 - India-France Innovation Network
 - Indo-French Centre for AI in Health
 - Indo-French Centre for Digital Science & Technology
 - National Centre of Excellence for Skilling in Aeronautics
- Virtual inauguration of H125 Helicopter Final Assembly Line in Karnataka.
- Reaffirmation of joint commitment against terrorism (26/11 tribute).

Key Points

- India-France Strategic Partnership established in 1998.
- France is a key defence partner (Rafale aircraft; Scorpene submarines under Project-75).
- Founding partners of the International Solar Alliance (2015, COP21 Paris).

Need global cooperation to tackle AI bias, risks; tech must remain human-centric: Modi

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said that artificial intelligence (AI) now stood at "a civilisational inflection point" of expanding human capability but would test social foundations if left unguided. He said the technology must be used to accelerate global development while remaining deeply human-centric.

The Prime Minister made this observation in a text interview to the news agency Asian News International (ANI) as the India AI Impact Summit gets under way in India, the first country of the Global South to host such an event.

Mr. Modi spoke on the Indian government's AI initiatives, saying that through the IndiaAI Mission, "we are ensuring a code that reflects our values, serves our people and positions India as a responsible AI leader for the world".

'Mindful leverage'
He referenced some of the initiatives taken by India for addressing its own issues. "Leveraging AI mindfully, with a strategic lens, helps address deep developmental challenges while creating entirely new economic opportunities, enabling inclusive growth, bridging the urban-rural divide and expanding access to opportunity. In healthcare, AI is already delivering impact," he said.

He mentioned the use of AI-based solutions in the field of education and health, and by organisations such as Amul leveraging the technology to reach 36 lakh women dairy workers by providing guidance



Curious crowd: Visitors throng the India AI Impact Summit 2026 at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi on Tuesday. #1

Minister apologises for summit troubles; Kharge slams 'chaos'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Tuesday apologised for the difficulties faced by attendees on the opening day of the India AI Impact Summit even as Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge criticised the Modi government for the "utter

chaos and rank mismanagement" of "a showpiece AI Summit". Mr. Vaishnaw assured participants that corrective steps had been taken to ensure a smoother experience in the event in the coming days.

FULL REPORT ON
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on cattle health and productivity.

He conceded that "concerns regarding bias and limitations in AI remain deeply relevant", especially related to gender and socio-economic background. He added that tackling the issue required global cooperation. "Our diversity - linguistic, cultural, regional - means that AI bias can manifest in ways that might not be obvious in Western contexts," he said, adding that India was beginning to address this more "systematically" with a focus on "creating diverse datasets that represent India's plurality, greater emphasis on AI development in regional

languages, and growing research on fairness and bias in Indian academic institutions and tech companies".

Staying prepared

Addressing concerns over the changing nature of employment due to AI, he said that the "fundamental shift is that AI isn't replacing the IT sector. It is transforming it." He said "preparation is the best antidote to fear", and his government had launched "one of the most ambitious skilling initiatives in the world".

"We're not approaching this as a future problem but we're treating it as a present imperative," he said.

- Major Concerns:
 - Algorithmic bias (gender, socio-economic, linguistic).
 - Data privacy and digital divide.
 - Job transformation due to AI adoption.

Static Linkages

- Article 14 – Equality before Law (AI bias implications).
- Article 21 – Right to Privacy (Puttaswamy Judgment, 2017).
- IT Act, 2000 – Digital governance framework.
- Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.
- National Digital Health Mission.
- Skill India Mission.
- Concept of Inclusive Growth (Economic Survey).
- Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) model (Aadhaar, UPI, ONDC).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Positions India as AI leader of Global South.
- Focus on indigenous AI models.
- Encourages inclusive and multilingual AI ecosystem.
- AI for agriculture, healthcare and education.

Challenges

- Algorithmic discrimination risks.
- Regulatory gaps in AI governance.
- Dependence on foreign AI hardware.
- Employment disruption without adequate skilling.
- Infrastructure and coordination gaps.

Way Forward

- Develop comprehensive AI regulatory framework.
- Mandatory AI audit and bias testing.
- Strengthen semiconductor ecosystem.
- Expand AI skilling under Skill India.
- Promote regional language AI through Bhashini.
- Integrate AI governance with Digital India vision.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi described Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a "civilisational inflection point" during the India AI Impact Summit.
- The Summit was held at Bharat Mandapam.
- India became the first Global South country to host such a large-scale AI summit.
- The event is anchored around the IndiaAI Mission (approved in 2024).
- Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw acknowledged logistical issues on Day 1.
- Opposition criticism was raised by Mallikarjun Kharge.

Key Points

- IndiaAI Mission
 - Outlay: ₹10,372 crore.
 - Focus on AI compute infrastructure.
 - Development of indigenous foundational AI models.
 - Creation of diverse Indian datasets.
 - Emphasis on AI in Indian languages.
- AI Applications Highlighted:
 - Healthcare diagnostics.
 - Personalized education.
 - Agriculture & dairy (e.g., AI advisory support by Amul to women dairy workers).

The new world disorder, from rules to might

A world that once imagined it had buried the demons of the 1930s now finds them prowling again – less dramatic, perhaps, but no less corrosive. The post-war order, born in San Francisco in 1945, was built on the conviction that law could restrain power, that institutions could discipline states, and that sovereignty was not a privilege granted by the strong but a right inherent in all nations. The speech by United States President Harry S. Truman at the founding of the United Nations (UN) radiated that belief. He spoke as a man who had seen the abyss and was determined that humanity would not return to it. The UN, he insisted, would be the instrument through which nations “settle their differences peacefully”, a bulwark against the old world of spheres of influence and predatory might.

His words, on June 26, 1945, might sound startling to many of his successors. “We all have to recognize – no matter how great our strength,” he declared, “that we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please. No one nation ... can or should expect any special privilege which harms any other nation ... Unless we are all willing to pay that price, no organization for world peace can accomplish its purpose. And what a reasonable price that is!”

The prevailing atmosphere
Contrast that with the contemporary mood, where the language of international law increasingly sounds like a polite fiction. Analysts often perceive U.S. President Donald Trump's foreign policy posture as one that treats international rules much as Italian drivers treat red traffic lights, less as binding commitments and more as optional tools – useful when they serve your interests, dispensable when they do not. It is not that the U.S. invented unilateralism; great powers have always been prone to exceptionalism, double-standards and bending rules just short of breaking them. But the open embrace of a “might is right” sensibility marks a shift from hypocrisy (which at least paid tribute to norms even while betraying them) to indifference (which does not give a damn about norms). When a major power signals that sovereignty is negotiable, others take note.

If Washington can disregard Venezuela's sovereignty with minimal consequence, what stops Beijing from concluding that Taiwan's status is similarly malleable? Or Moscow from treating Ukraine as a historical correction rather than a sovereign state? Or even New Delhi from deciding that a smaller neighbour's objections are an inconvenience rather than a constraint? The question ceases to be whether international law prohibits aggression but whether the target is powerful enough to raise the costs of it. For



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decades, the fear of a third world war acted as a grim stabiliser; the horror of total conflict kept lesser conflicts in check. But if the guardrails weaken, the world risks not one great conflagration but a proliferation of smaller, grinding wars – each too limited to trigger global alarm, yet collectively capable of eroding the foundations of peace.

An unravelling of multilateralism
This erosion is compounded by the retreat from multilateralism. The Trump administration's declared withdrawal from dozens of international organisations and agreements – ranging from UNESCO to WHO to environmental and arms-control frameworks – signals a deeper scepticism about the very idea of shared governance. The problem is that the 21st century's most urgent challenges are precisely those that no nation can solve alone. Pandemics, climate change, cyber threats, financial contagion – these are “problems without passports” (in Kofi Annan's phrase), indifferent to borders and immune to unilateral solutions. When the world's most powerful state steps back from collective action, the vacuum does not remain empty. Others – most notably China – step in, shaping institutions, norms and standards in ways that reflect their own preferences. The result is not simply a shift in influence but a fragmentation of global governance itself.

We inhabit a world that has become profoundly fluid. It is increasingly difficult for any nation, not only India, to say with certainty where it stands in a shifting geopolitical order. Old certainties have frayed, alliances blur and ambiguity has become the defining condition of our time. History, that indefatigable saboteur of good intentions, continues to complicate the present. Grievances are inherited more reliably than wisdom. Old wars cast long shadows and unresolved injustices continue to poison relations between states. Leaders are asked to negotiate peace while being reminded never to forget past wounds.

Perhaps the most profound obstacle lies in the paradox of power itself. Those entrusted with maintaining global order also possess the greatest capacity to disrupt it. World order rested on their willingness not to do so; this willingness has faded in many cases. The institutions established after the Second World War were noble in conception but unequal in design. They reflected the hierarchies of power prevailing at the time of their creation. Authority was concentrated in the hands of a few, while responsibility was shared by all. This imbalance has consequences. When powerful states act as both guardians and exceptions to the rules, the legitimacy of the system suffers.

What makes this moment especially fraught is that the rule-based liberal international order was never a monolith; it was a patchwork of norms, institutions and habits of cooperation. Its ingredients included sovereign equality, non-aggression, collective security, open trade, human rights and multilateral problem-solving. Each of these has been violated repeatedly – by great powers and smaller states alike. Yet, the order endured because enough states believed that the alternative was worse. Today, that belief is wavering. Sovereignty is breached with increasing brazenness. Non-aggression is honoured in the breach. Collective security is paralysed by vetoes. Trade is weaponised. Human rights are dismissed as ideological. Multilateral institutions are starved of legitimacy and resources.

Institutions may possess statutes and mandates, yet, without political will, their authority remains largely aspirational. When powerful states ignore international law or apply it selectively, institutions lose credibility. Peace cannot be enforced by rules alone. It requires good faith, and good faith is increasingly in short supply.

The danger today
And yet, the order is not dead. It limps, it strains, it disappoints – but it persists. International courts still adjudicate disputes. Peacekeepers still deploy. Trade flows still depend on predictable rules. Middle powers, from Europe to India to South Africa to Canada to Brazil, still invest in multilateralism because they know that without it, they are at the mercy of ruthlessly self-interested hegemonies. They accept Dag Hammarskjöld's famous dictum that “the United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell”.

Sometimes the best the world order can do is to prevent things from getting worse. And yet the question is not whether the old order survives intact; it has already been hollowed out, its norms and institutions subverted. The question is what replaces it: a Sino-centric architecture, a world of competing blocs, a patchwork of issue-based coalitions, or a return to unmediated anarchy?

We are living in an interregnum – the old world fading, the new one unformed. The danger is not that the system collapses overnight, but that it decays slowly, leaving a vacuum filled by opportunism and coercion. The promise of 1945 was that law could tame power. The peril of today is that power may once again tame law. The task for this generation is not to resurrect the past but to prevent the future from sliding into a world where the only real rule is that there are no rules at all.

◦ Strategic competition replacing cooperative multilateralism.

- Global challenges (climate change, pandemics, cyber threats) require multilateral solutions.

Static Linkages

- Article 51 of Indian Constitution – Promotion of international peace and security.
- Panchsheel Principles (1954).
- Collective Security vs Balance of Power (International Relations theory).
- UN Charter – Articles 1, 2(4), 27.
- Concept of Sovereignty (Westphalian model).
- Realism vs Liberal Institutionalism in IR.

Critical Analysis

Strengths of Rules-Based Order

- Provides predictability in global trade and diplomacy.
- Protects sovereignty of small and middle powers.
- Enables collective response to global crises.

Weaknesses / Challenges

- UNSC veto undermines equality.
- Selective application of international law.
- Institutional design reflects 1945 power realities.
- Decline of political will among major powers.

Implications for India

- Strategic uncertainty in neighbourhood.
- Pressure to balance relations between U.S., Russia, China.
- Opportunity to emerge as voice of Global South.
- Push for UNSC reforms.

Way Forward

- Reform of UNSC (expansion of permanent membership).
- Strengthening multilateral institutions with equitable representation.
- Promote issue-based coalitions (e.g., climate, health).
- Uphold Article 51 in foreign policy.
- Enhance South-South cooperation.
- Invest in strategic autonomy with responsible diplomacy.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Increasing global concern over erosion of the post-1945 rules-based international order.
- Rise of unilateralism and weakening of multilateral institutions.
- Assertive geopolitical moves by major powers:
 - Russia-Ukraine conflict.
 - China-Taiwan tensions.
- Withdrawal or reduced engagement by the U.S. under Donald Trump from institutions like:
 - World Health Organization
 - UNESCO
- Paralysis of the United Nations Security Council due to veto politics.
- Growing fragmentation of global governance.

Key Points

- Post-WWII order institutionalised through the United Nations (1945).
- Foundational principles:
 - Sovereign equality of states (Article 2(1), UN Charter).
 - Prohibition of use of force (Article 2(4)).
 - Peaceful settlement of disputes (Chapter VI).
 - Collective security (Chapter VII).
- Current trends:
 - Weaponisation of trade and sanctions.
 - Decline of arms-control regimes.
 - Rise of unilateral groupings (Quad, AUKUS, BRICS expansion).

As the rules-based order erodes, raw power is beginning to reshape the global system

India's aviation is in need of data-driven oversight



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collecting data on actual prices paid, itinerary details such as route flown, and carrier information, the BTS creates a usable digital trail. For India, adopting a similar 10% sampling framework would signal a new era of transparency, expanding the DGCA's role from tracking volumes to monitoring market behaviour. Much like a speed camera on a highway, the objective is not necessarily to issue penalties, but to encourage long-term compliance and maintain market hygiene.

The effect of transparency on pricing
Greater transparency also pushes airlines to self-regulate their pricing algorithms. When fare data are open to the public or regulatory scrutiny, carriers are more likely to build ethical guardrails into their revenue management systems, preventing both opportunistic and algorithm-driven price spikes that can trigger public backlash and legal challenges, such as the ongoing Public Interest Litigation before the Supreme Court of India.

The availability of historical pricing data can also strengthen research and policy. For example, over 30 years of US airline data is publicly available through the DBIB database. Academic researchers have used these data to identify the "Southwest Effect" – a phenomenon in the U.S. where the entry of Southwest Airlines, a low-cost U.S. carrier, into a new route leads to a drop in average fares and a corresponding spike in average passenger traffic.

A similar dataset in India can allow regulators to observe competitive behaviour, or the lack of it, across routes, time periods and market structures.

First, comparing fares on different routes. If routes dominated by a single airline consistently show higher fares than those with multiple players, it may indicate market power.

Second, tracking fare changes when

competitors enter or exit a route. A sharp rise in fares after a competitor exits, or a drop when one enters, signals that the remaining carriers can exercise market power.

Third, assessing fare behaviour during demand spikes. If an airline raises prices more aggressively on routes where it has a larger market share during holidays or peak periods, it may be leveraging its dominance.

The usual resistance to data transparency stems from concerns over proprietary information, claims that data sharing creates a technical load, and fear of implicit coordination among competitors.

A 10% random sample is reasonable
Airlines might argue that their revenue management algorithms are their "secret sauce" and should be protected. A 10% random sample is a practical middle ground. By design, this framework collects a fraction of the data. This helps to protect the "how", i.e., the proprietary logic and code behind the algorithms while monitoring the "what", i.e., the price at which tickets were sold in the marketplace. And given the limited size of the sample, supplying this data should not pose a significant technical burden.

Critics may also fear that transparency allows airlines to track each other's prices. In the age of real-time data scraping, this is simply the status quo, as airlines already have a good sense of what their competitors are charging. By releasing the 10% sample on a quarterly delay, regulators can reduce the chance of immediate fare alignment while preserving the dataset's usefulness for long-term policy planning.

Thus, the DGCA must pivot from ad hoc fare caps and investigations to a data-first framework. It is time to let the algorithms compete but also let the regulator and the public keep score.

The views expressed are personal

In this case, regulators quickly stepped in to protect consumer interests. The Ministry of Civil Aviation imposed temporary price caps on domestic flights and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), prompted by the Competition Commission of India, requested average fare data from IndiGo, Air India, Spicejet and Akasa between December 145, 2025, to investigate potential abuse of market dominance.

While this reactive approach protects air passengers in the short term, it highlights a larger regulatory gap. Even with the requested data, regulators may still lack the visibility needed to act effectively. Without a consistent, analytical framework to study fares over time, it becomes difficult to distinguish between a legitimate, demand-driven spike and a surge that crosses into an abuse of market power.

Airline data in the U.S. creates a digital trail
These events are an opportunity to shift the DGCA's role from crisis response to steady oversight by learning from examples of the more mature airline market in the United States. Specifically, the way the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) collects and publishes airline data.

The BTS maintains the Airline Origin and Destination survey, more commonly known as the DBIB database. Unlike the DGCA, which primarily tracks passenger volumes and freight traffic, the DBIB database publishes ticket-level data, including fares, for a 10% random sample of all domestic tickets sold each quarter since 1995. This is not a mere academic exercise. By

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- In December 2025, IndiGo faced operational disruptions leading to a sharp rise in domestic airfares.
- The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) imposed temporary fare caps.
- The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) sought fare data from major airlines on directions linked to concerns raised before the Competition Commission of India (CCI).
- The incident exposed regulatory gaps in monitoring dynamic pricing in India's rapidly expanding aviation market.
- India is among the fastest-growing aviation markets globally, supported by airport expansion and UDAN scheme.

Key Points

- DGCA operates under the Aircraft Act, 1934.
- CCI functions under the Competition Act, 2002.
- Abuse of dominant position is covered under Section 4 of the Competition Act.
- India follows a deregulated airfare regime (except limited pandemic-period controls earlier).
- Current aviation data collection focuses mainly on:
 - Passenger volumes
 - Freight traffic
 - Safety compliance
- Lack of ticket-level fare database limits competition assessment.

Static Linkages

- Market structures: Monopoly, Oligopoly (NCERT Microeconomics).

- Role of independent regulatory bodies in a mixed economy.
- Competition policy as part of economic reforms (post-1991).
- Consumer protection and reasonable pricing principles.
- Digital governance and data-driven policymaking (Economic Survey).

Critical Analysis

Issues Highlighted

- Reactive regulation (fare caps) instead of structural oversight.
- Limited data visibility on route-wise pricing patterns.
- Potential abuse of dominant position in oligopolistic routes.
- Weak integration between sectoral regulator (DGCA) and competition regulator (CCI).

Arguments in Favour of Data-Based Oversight

- Enables detection of price discrimination.
- Supports competition enforcement.
- Encourages ethical pricing algorithms.
- Strengthens consumer trust.

Concerns

- Commercial confidentiality.
- Risk of tacit collusion if data released in real-time.
- Institutional capacity constraints.

Way Forward

- Introduce a sample-based ticket-level fare data collection system.
- Strengthen DGCA–CCI coordination.
- Release data with time lag to avoid collusion risks.
- Build regulatory data analytics capacity.
- Shift from price caps to competition-based structural regulation.

Front and centre

Front-of-package labelling helps consumers to choose health foods

In a further instalment of its continuing engagement with regulating processed food products, the Supreme Court of India has, once again, staked out for the right of citizens to health. In a recent judgment, a Bench directed the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to consider introducing mandatory front-of-package warning labels on packaged food products high in sugar, salt and saturated fat. Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K.V. Viswanathan directed the FSSAI to file its response to the proposal within four weeks. There is adequate evidence available to associate these sugar, salt and saturated fat additives in processed foods with non-communicable diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, all of which are inching up their way up to epidemic proportions in India. The petitioner, the NGO 3S and Our Health Society, informed the Court that such disclosures would enable consumers to make informed decisions and choices and could help with stemming the tide of rising deaths due to diabetes and heart ailments. Earlier, in 2025, the Court had directed an expert committee under the FSSAI to submit its recommendations on the amendments required to be made to the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020, to implement front-of-package labelling. On the count of holding consultations with all stakeholders across the country, an extension was sought and secured, but in February 2026, the Bench expressed unhappiness at the regulator's compliance report, noting that the exercise undertaken thus far had failed to yield any "positive or good result". One of the elements of contention between the FSSAI and the petitioner was the former's proposal to introduce an Indian Nutrition Rating model, an indigenous system of rating a product; the latter opposed it on the grounds that this was not in line with globally accepted standards.

The Court's persistent intervention on the issue of front-of-package labelling should lean on the massive ultra-processed food industry to implement these universally endorsed safeguards, to inform consumers of the content and additives in the packaged food, to guide choices, ultimately. Non-communicable diseases have already swept through vast swathes of the population in the country: the 2023 ICMR-INDIAB study found that 101 million people in India (11.4% of the population) have diabetes, with an additional 136 million suffering from prediabetes. Other concomitant factors including hypertension (35.5% national average), abdominal obesity (39.5%) and high cholesterol (24%) were also estimated to be high. Introducing front-of-package labelling is an essential part of establishing a continuum of care that begins with prevention.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- The Supreme Court of India directed the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) to examine the introduction of mandatory Front-of-Package (FOP) warning labels on packaged foods high in sugar, salt and saturated fats.
- The direction relates to amendments in the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020.
- The Court expressed dissatisfaction with delays in finalising an effective model.
- Debate exists between adoption of globally accepted warning labels and FSSAI's proposed Indian Nutrition Rating (INR) model.
- Issue linked to rising burden of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in India.

Key Facts

- FSSAI:
 - Statutory body under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006.
 - Under Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.
 - Frames food safety standards and labelling regulations.
- NCD Burden (ICMR-INDIAB Study 2023):
 - 101 million diabetics (11.4% population).

- 136 million prediabetics.
- Hypertension prevalence: 35.5%.
- Abdominal obesity: 39.5%.
- High cholesterol: 24%.
- NCDs account for more than 60% of total deaths in India (MoHFW data).
- WHO recommends interpretive front-of-pack warning labels as a cost-effective public health intervention.

Constitutional & Legal Dimensions

- Article 21 – Right to Life (Judicially expanded to include Right to Health).
- Article 47 – Duty of the State to improve public health and nutrition.
- Consumer Protection Act, 2019 – Right to be informed.
- Reasonable restrictions on trade under Article 19(6).

Governance & Policy Dimensions

- Preventive healthcare aligns with:
 - National Health Policy 2017 (focus on NCD prevention).
 - NPCDCS (National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke).
- Reflects judicial oversight over regulatory bodies.
- Raises debate on:
 - Regulatory efficiency.
 - Judicial activism vs. separation of powers.

Significance for Mains

Public Health Perspective

- Shift from curative to preventive healthcare.
- Behavioural change through "nudging" (Behavioural Economics concept).
- Reducing long-term healthcare expenditure burden.

Regulatory Governance

- Accountability of statutory bodies.
- Need for evidence-based policymaking.
- Balancing public health and industry interests.

Ethical Angle (GS IV)

- State's moral responsibility to protect citizens' health.
- Transparency vs. corporate profit motive.

Issues & Challenges

- Resistance from ultra-processed food industry.
- Debate over rating model vs. warning labels.
- Consumer awareness and literacy barriers.
- Impact on MSMEs in food processing.
- Harmonisation with international trade norms (WTO considerations).

Way Forward

- Adopt WHO-backed clear warning labels.
- Phase-wise implementation.
- Integrate with national NCD strategy.
- Public awareness campaigns.
- Fiscal disincentives on unhealthy ultra-processed foods.
- Strengthen institutional autonomy and capacity of FSSAI.

As critical minerals become strategic assets, U.S. looks to realign supply chain

Trump administration's Project Vault aims to create a reserve of critical minerals to protect domestic industry from a disruption as witnessed when China restricted export of rare earth magnets to retaliate against U.S. tariffs, causing a near shutdown of car manufacturing operations in the U.S.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Harisundar Kumar

In the first week of February, the Trump administration unveiled Project Vault, an independently governed and operated public-private partnership aimed at establishing a strategic domestic reserve of critical minerals in the U.S. The partnership, backed by \$10 billion in financing by the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) and an additional \$2 billion in private funds, aims to store 60 critical minerals listed in the U.S. Geological Survey's 2025 Critical Minerals List to strengthen the resilience of civilian industries against supply chain disruptions. Under this development model, EXIM provides long-term loans to purchase and store critical minerals in the country. This stockpile build-up represents a whole-of-government transformative approach to reduce dependence on foreign-controlled supply chains through economic coercion, complementing other major policy efforts to build substantive domestic production and processing of critical minerals.

Reason for the move
The concept of strategic reserves in the U.S. goes back to 1975 when it established

its Strategic Petroleum Reserve to protect its economy from the energy shocks caused by the 1973 Arab oil embargo. In the 21st century, critical minerals are fundamental to modern economic and technological power, and China dominates different stages of mineral production such as mining, processing, and magnet manufacturing. In 2025, China retaliated against U.S. tariffs by restricting exports of rare earth magnets, causing a near shutdown of operations of car manufacturing in the United States and across the world. The unprecedented disruption forced production lines to rethink shifting some production to China, whose finished exports had minimum restrictions. Importantly, the disruption laid bare the vulnerabilities in the supply chain and caused a decisive blow to the Trump administration's plan to shore up manufacturing in the U.S. Therefore, the project to maintain critical mineral strategic reserves is underlined by the growing risks posed by the concentration of critical minerals and rare earth elements in the hands of one player, which directly affects access, affordability, and geopolitical leverage.

In this context, Project Vault is intended as a long-term insurance for domestic manufacturers, who could procure minerals



The public-private partnership aims to store 60 minerals listed in the U.S. Geological Survey's 2025 Critical Minerals List. GETTY IMAGES

without geographic restrictions, based on supply availability and commercial considerations, and store them. Moreover, withdrawal from the reserves and their replenishment are guided by clear and predefined conditions of market disruption. In short, Project Vault represents not another industrial policy but a new strategic doctrine, in which critical minerals and rare earth elements are not just commodities but strategic assets that underpin comprehensive national power.

U.S. first, allies second?
EXIM chairman John Jovanovic emphasised that Project Vault will initially focus on building and securing domestic manufacturing capacity in critical minerals, with a broader focus on allied engagement to strengthen shared supply chains through partnerships. However, analysts

point out that given the deep pockets of the U.S. and the exhaustive list of stockpiles, its intervention could directly help non-Chinese producers, who have struggled in competing against cheaper Chinese mining. Diversified purchases by the U.S. could directly contribute to the strengthening of alternative supply chains globally if partner countries also agree to trade minerals between each other at border-adjusted price floors (minimum price). In this regard, the U.S. administration has already signed 11 new bilateral agreements, with Japan, the EU, Mexico, and the United Kingdom, announcing action plans to develop border-adjusted price mechanisms.

On a multilateral level, the Trump administration's decision to host 54 countries at the Critical Minerals Ministerial signalled a welcome return to plurilateral initiatives to create a preferential trading bloc that would enforce similar rules. The multilateral initiative was named by Secretary of State Marco Rubio as the Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement (FORGE), whose broader objectives are to coordinate on critical minerals policy, pricing, and project development. For allies and partners, the FORGE initiative provides a platform to collaborate at the policy level on investments and access to critical minerals and set the price floor to build resilient supply chains.

Pax Silica
The Pax Silica initiative was launched by the United States in December 2025 to form a coalition of capable countries committed to building secure and resilient supply chains foundational to artificial intelligence (AI), which include energy, critical minerals, and semiconductors. Its members include Australia, Greece, Israel, Japan, Qatar, Singapore, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates, with India being invited to join as a full member and the European Union, Canada, the Netherlands, and Taiwan as guest contributors. The U.S., through Pax Silica and several bilateral agreements, intends to combine capital, energy,

mineral reserves, knowledge, and demand across allied jurisdictions to multiply capabilities in AI by coordinating investment and aligning regulatory standards.

However, even as Project Vault and Pax Silica complement each other and represent a holistic approach to critical minerals diplomacy, their implementation remains vulnerable to being dominated by 'America First' politics, which tends to treat partners hierarchically and prefer absolute alignment with American national security priorities. This behaviour is already evident in the asymmetrical nature of U.S. trade deal negotiations as partner countries had to not only assess the risks of long-term commitments to join U.S.-led supply chains but also hedge against the volatile and coercive behaviour of the Trump administration. Such an approach remains relevant here against the backdrop of the recently released U.S. National Security Strategy, which asserts that U.S. exports in technology and U.S. standards drive the world forward. In the end, coalitions on supply chains deliver best when there is predictability, trust, and less volatility, and ensuring these will remain the biggest challenge for the U.S.-led initiatives.

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- EXIM provides long-term loans for procurement and storage.
- Withdrawal governed by predefined market disruption conditions.
- 11 bilateral agreements signed with Japan, EU, UK, Mexico, etc.
- Pax Silica includes Australia, Japan, South Korea, UAE; India invited.

Static Linkages

- Rare earth elements are not geologically rare but rarely found in economically viable concentrations.
- "Critical mineral" classification depends on:
 - Economic importance.
 - Supply risk.
- Supply chain resilience linked to:
 - Energy security.
 - Industrial policy.
 - National security.
- Concept of economic coercion in international relations.
- Strategic reserves as counter-cyclical economic tools.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- In February 2026, the U.S. launched Project Vault, a public-private partnership to build a strategic domestic reserve of critical minerals.
- Financing:
 - \$10 billion from the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM).
 - \$2 billion from private investors.
- The reserve will include 60 minerals listed in the 2025 U.S. Geological Survey Critical Minerals List.
- Trigger: China's 2025 restrictions on rare earth magnet exports disrupted global automobile manufacturing.
- Complementary initiatives:
 - FORGE (Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement).
 - Pax Silica coalition for AI-related supply chains.

Key Points for Prelims

- Strategic reserves modelled on U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve (1975) post-1973 oil embargo.
- Critical minerals essential for:
 - Electric vehicles (lithium, cobalt, nickel).
 - Wind turbines (rare earth magnets).
 - Semiconductors (gallium, germanium).
 - Defence technologies.
- China dominates:
 - Rare earth processing.
 - Magnet manufacturing.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reduces overdependence on China-dominated supply chains.
- Protects manufacturing base from supply shocks.
- Encourages diversification of global mineral sourcing.
- Integrates minerals diplomacy with AI and semiconductor strategy.

Concerns

- Risk of protectionism under "America First" doctrine.
- Market distortion via price floors.
- Environmental costs of intensified mining.
- Trust deficit among allies due to volatile trade policies.

Implications for India

- Opportunity to integrate into trusted supply chains.
- Need to strengthen domestic critical mineral strategy.
- Align with Quad/IPEF mineral cooperation.
- Enhance refining and processing capacity domestically.

Way Forward

- Develop national strategic mineral reserve.
- Diversify import sources (Australia, Africa, Latin America).
- Strengthen domestic exploration (Geological Survey of India).
- Promote recycling of rare earths.
- Integrate ESG norms into mineral diplomacy.
- Ensure stable plurilateral supply-chain coalitions.

Iran briefly closes Strait of Hormuz as US, Tehran nuclear talks unfold

First announced closure of the strait carrying 20% of world's oil amid US threats

Reuters
Geneva, February 17

IRAN AND the United States reached an understanding on the main "guiding principles" in a second round of indirect talks over nuclear dispute on Tuesday, but it does not mean a deal is imminent, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi said. "Different ideas have been presented, these ideas have been seriously discussed, ultimately we've been able to reach a general agreement on some guiding principles, from now on we will move based on those principles and enter the text of a potential agreement," Aragchi told Iranian media after the talks concluded in Geneva.

After the exchange of documents the two sides will decide on a date for a third round of negotiations, he said. "The US has sent a battle



People carry pre-Iranian Revolution national flags as they protest near the United Nations office in Geneva on Tuesday. REUTERS

force to the Middle East to press Tehran to make concessions in the decades-long nuclear dispute and President Donald Trump has said "regime change" in Tehran may be the best thing that can happen.

Iranian state media reported earlier that Iran would temporarily shut part of the Strait of Hormuz, a vital global oil supply route, as it held talks over its nuclear programme while Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned on Tuesday that any US

attempts to depose his government would fail. It was the first time Iran has announced the closure of the key



It was the first time Iran has announced the closure of the key



The US President says their army is the world's strongest, but the strongest army in the world can sometimes be slapped so hard it cannot get up"

AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI, IRAN SUPREME LEADER

international waterway, through which 20% of the world's oil passes, since the US began threatening Iran and rushing military assets to the region

Speaking at a disarmament conference in Geneva after the talks, Aragchi said that a "new window of opportunity" had opened and that he hoped talks would lead to a "sustainable" solution that ensured the full

recognition of Iran's legitimate rights. US envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner took part in the Geneva talks, which were being mediated by Oman, a source briefed on the matter told Reuters. The White House did not respond to emailed questions about the meeting. Earlier, Trump said he himself would be involved "indirectly" in the Geneva talks and that he believed Tehran wanted to make a deal. "I don't think they want the consequences of not making a deal," Trump said.

Just after the talks started, Iranian media cited 86-year-old Khamenei as saying Washington could not force out his government. The republic has been ruled by clerics since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"The US President says their army is the world's strongest, but the strongest army in the world can sometimes be slapped so hard it cannot get up," he said, in comments published by Iranian media.

The US has sought to expand scope of talks to non-nuclear issues such as Iran's missile stockpile. Tehran says it is willing only to discuss curbs on its nuclear programme - in exchange for sanctions relief - and will not give up uranium enrichment.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Iran and the United States held a second round of indirect talks in Geneva regarding the nuclear dispute.
- Talks were mediated by Oman, which has historically facilitated backchannel diplomacy.
- Both sides agreed on certain "guiding principles," but no final agreement has been concluded.
- The US increased military presence in West Asia.
- Iran reportedly announced temporary closure measures affecting the Strait of Hormuz, a key global oil transit chokepoint.
- The US seeks inclusion of Iran's missile programme in negotiations; Iran insists talks remain limited to nuclear issues in exchange for sanctions relief.

Key Points

- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 2015:
 - Multilateral nuclear agreement between Iran and P5+1.
 - US withdrew in 2018 and reimposed sanctions.
 - IAEA responsible for monitoring compliance.
- Uranium Enrichment:
 - Low-enriched uranium (LEU) for civilian nuclear energy.
 - Higher enrichment levels raise proliferation concerns.
- Strait of Hormuz:
 - Connects Persian Gulf to Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea.

- Nearly 20% of global petroleum trade passes through it.
- Major exporters: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, UAE, Kuwait, Iran.
- Energy Security Implications:
 - India imports over 85% of its crude oil.
 - Oil price spikes impact inflation, CAD, and fiscal deficit.
 - Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) serve as buffer.

Static Linkages

- NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) framework.
- IAEA safeguards and inspection regime.
- UNCLOS – Transit Passage in international straits.
- Balance of Power and deterrence theory.
- India's Act West Policy.
- Strategic autonomy in foreign policy.

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Diplomatic engagement reduces war risk.
- Possibility of reviving multilateral nuclear governance.
- Stabilization of global crude prices.

Concerns

- Trust deficit due to US withdrawal from JCPOA.
- Expansion of talks beyond nuclear issue may stall negotiations.
- Closure of Strait of Hormuz violates freedom of navigation norms.
- Global oil shock may hurt developing economies.

Impact on India

- Energy price volatility.
- Indian diaspora safety in Gulf region.
- Need for balanced diplomacy between US and Iran.

Way Forward

- Phased sanctions relief linked to verified compliance.
- Strengthen IAEA monitoring.
- Separate missile issue from nuclear negotiations.
- Ensure freedom of navigation under UNCLOS.
- India to diversify energy imports and expand SPR capacity.

Delhi and Paris reach out across traditional divides, advocate third way



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

RESIDENT EMMANUEL Macron may not be riding high at home in France, but in Delhi, he draws immense political affection. Macron has carved out a distinctive place for Paris in Delhi's strategic calculus. His visit to Mumbai and Delhi this week — his fourth to India since assuming office in 2017 — consolidates the significant transformation in bilateral ties in technology and defence, as well as the Indo-Pacific, over the last decade.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's sustained engagement with Macron has been part of India's broader pivot to Europe in recent years. The visit of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in January, the presence of the European Union leadership at this year's Republic Day celebrations, and the signing of the long-negotiated free trade agreement underline the growing salience of Europe in India's strategic thinking.

This column has long been sceptical of "multipolarity" as an accurate description of the global balance of power. The US remains pre-eminent, and China has been steadily catching up. A number of other nations — including India and France — are some distance away in terms of economic scale, military weight, and technological depth.

If there is any doubt, one need only look at the AI Impact Summit in Delhi this week. The business of artificial intelligence con-

tinues to be dominated by American technology giants, and Washington is likely to exert considerable influence over the outcomes of the summit. China is the other AI superpower. Yet, the political and market conditions for substantive India-China cooperation in this domain are limited for now. There is, however, considerable scope for India to work with Europe and the middle powers in the non-Western world.

The popular phrase in Delhi — the "quest for a multipolar world" — has served as a shorthand for India's effort to maintain productive relations with all major powers. Since the end of the Cold War, that quest involved managing American primacy while sustaining cooperation with post-Soviet Russia and engaging a rising China. Today, that approach is being recalibrated. India's multipolar strategy now runs through Europe.

Macron's visit is not simply about deepening a robust bilateral partnership. It reflects India's exploration of what might be called a "multipolar West". Europe is no longer seen merely as an adjunct to Washington or a passive player in the arena of US-China rivalry. It is an important global actor in its own right, capable of contributing to India's economic and technological transformation while widening Delhi's *espace* — or the space for manoeuvre abroad.

It is worth recalling that France was among the earliest proponents of political activism in favour of a "multipolar world" — well before Russia and China made it a central theme of their diplomacy. Paris has also consistently advocated European "strategic autonomy". This shared vocabulary has created a measure of comfort between Delhi and Paris.

Beyond rhetorical convergence, though, is the deepening practical

cooperation under the Horizon 2047 framework that lends substance to the partnership. Horizon 2047, unveiled in 2023, is a long-term India-France roadmap committing both countries to collaboration in defence, technology, space, energy and the Indo-Pacific through 2047, when India marks a century of independence.

Recent agreements illustrate this trajectory. India's decision to expand its Rafale fleet with the Air Force and the Navy, the French readiness to produce some of them in India, along with the planned assembly of helicopters and joint jet-engine cooperation, point to a consequential defence industrial partnership between the two countries. The Indian private sector is expected to play an expanding role in the transformation of the domestic aerospace ecosystem in collaboration with France.

As global debates over AI governance intensify, India and France have presented themselves as advocates of a "third way". Between American corporate concentration and Chinese state-centric control, both seek regulatory frameworks that protect sovereignty while encouraging innovation. Whether this approach can shape global norms remains uncertain, given the US and China's lead in AI development.

It is important to note that Delhi and Paris are not constructing their partnership in opposition to the US. Washington, in any case, is increasingly focused on regaining its dominance of the Western Hemisphere.

Successive administrations in Washington have pressed their allies for more burden-sharing. Trump wants Europe and India to assume greater responsibility in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. This American emphasis on regional self-reliance creates space — and incentive — for Delhi and Paris,

along with Brussels, to do more together in their shared neighbourhood.

What does all of this compute into?

First, Delhi now recognises that the idea of a "collective West" is a misleading one. There is considerable variation in interests within the West. A strong partnership with France — and a more geopolitically self-aware Europe — allows Delhi to diversify its engagement within the Western world.

Second, it reduces overdependence on any single capital in the Global North. Engaging a Europe that is rediscovering agency widens India's strategic options. Cooperation among Delhi, Paris and Brussels can help mitigate shared economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities in a more complex global order.

The India-France strategic partnership has matured against considerable odds. That post-colonial India could build a stable and forward-looking partnership with a former imperial power embedded in the political West was once improbable. Over the last decade, France has deepened bilateral ties with India, played a key role in facilitating Delhi's wider engagement with Europe and created conditions for a self-assured Indian engagement with America.

The Macron moment, therefore, is not merely about personal and bilateral warmth. It reflects a broader shift in Delhi's geopolitical imagination — towards a more differentiated understanding of the West. It is also about the emergence of a wider network of alliances and partnerships that cut across the traditional divides of East-West and North-South.

The writer is contributing editor on international affairs for the Indian Express. He is associated with the Motwani-Jadeja Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University and the Council on Strategic and Defence Studies, Delhi

Static Linkages

- Evolution from Non-Alignment → Strategic Autonomy → Multi-alignment.
- UNCLOS and freedom of navigation.
- Defence indigenisation under Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- Civil nuclear agreements post-2008 nuclear waiver.
- Role of executive in treaty-making (Article 73).
- Data sovereignty and digital governance frameworks.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Diversifies India's engagement within the West.
- Enhances defence manufacturing ecosystem.
- Strengthens maritime presence in Indo-Pacific.
- Reduces strategic overdependence on any single major power.
- Aligns with India's aspiration for greater global governance role.

Concerns

- Limited economic depth compared to India-US trade.
- AI governance influence constrained by US & China dominance.
- EU internal divisions may slow strategic autonomy.
- Technology transfer limitations in high-end defence systems.

Way Forward

- Fast-track India-EU Free Trade Agreement.
- Expand co-development beyond procurement (jet engines, cyber, space).
- Institutionalise India-France-EU trilateral frameworks.
- Enhance private sector participation in defence production.
- Coordinate Indo-Pacific strategies with like-minded middle powers.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- Visit of Emmanuel Macron to India (4th visit since 2017) consolidating bilateral strategic partnership.
- Implementation of Horizon 2047 Roadmap (announced 2023 during 25 years of India-France Strategic Partnership).
- Expansion of defence cooperation including additional Rafale aircraft from Dassault Aviation.
- Joint emphasis on Indo-Pacific cooperation and AI governance.
- Occurs amid evolving global order marked by US-China rivalry and Europe's push for strategic autonomy.

Key Points

- India-France Strategic Partnership established in 1998.
- Horizon 2047 covers:
 - Defence industrial cooperation
 - Space collaboration (ISRO-CNES)
 - Civil nuclear cooperation (Jaitapur project – EDF)
 - Indo-Pacific maritime security
 - Emerging technologies including AI
- France is a resident Indo-Pacific power (territories in Indian Ocean & Pacific).
- Growing defence co-production and technology transfer under Make in India.
- Advocacy of a "third way" in AI governance — balancing innovation and sovereignty.
- France supports India's role in global governance institutions.

A chance to rebuild an old neighbourliness



JAWHAR SIRCAR

AFTER THE recent elections in Bangladesh, it is good to see India reconsidering the stand it had taken during Muhammad Yunus's rule. We may now be on the way to regaining our only steadfast friend in the neighbourhood, as the Indian establishment has swung out of its fixation with Hasina and accepted the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as India's best bet. It took more than a year for our government to view the BNP with more kindness despite the party's anti-India track record.

As the polls were announced, backdoor channels opened up with the BNP and the Jamaat. The two parties' old alliance broke down, and circumstances forced the BNP to move to the centre-left and take Yunus and the extremists head-on. The Jamaat underwent an incredible metamorphosis from those who aided the Pakistan Army in its genocide in 1971 to arguably the cleanest alternative in Bangladesh's corrupt political quagmire. The Yunus regime helped in this transformation, and the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP) joined Jamaat's 11-party alliance.

To be fair to Yunus, one must appreciate that he undertook a Herculean task. He reformed the civil service, police, judiciary, the Election Commission and regulatory bodies, and started rebuilding national institutions. The peaceful conduct of the first fair elections in years is proof of his success, even as he floundered on law and order and went after India. His "July Charter", a package of 84 reform proposals, was endorsed by all parties except the banned Awami League. Seventy per cent of voters endorsed this charter in the constitutional referendum, even as most rejected Yunus, the NCP and the Jamaat.

After returning from London, Tarique Rahman had less than 6 weeks to take over the BNP, understand the turbulent times, select candidates and campaign for the 12th February election. But the very fact that the BNP and a few minor allies swept the polls, securing 50 per cent of the vote and winning 212 of 299 seats, reveals the

voters' maturity. This is what we had been arguing, but even sharp watchers were surprised at the electorate's almost complete rejection of the Gen Z leaders who had toppled Hasina. Jamaat-e-Islami's hopes of seizing power were dashed as it could secure only 68 seats, with the NCP managing just six.

Our postulate that the Hanafi Muslim Bangladeshis and secular voters would not be swayed by the lure of the more Wahabi Pakistan- and Arab-supported Islamic Right was proved correct. But the Jamaat's ascent to respectability is seen in how one out of three Bangladeshis voted for it. This could be a reaction to Hasina's authoritarian rule. The geography of voting behaviour, however, points to the Jamaat winning mainly in the western districts that face the Indian border, where many refugees settled and nursed grievances against India. More tangibly, the cross-border trade that sustains much of the economy of these areas has been shattered. The hardening of border checks and the closure of trading posts and markets hurt them badly. Under different circumstances, the Islamists may have won even fewer seats. The votes of women and Awami League supporters who gulped down their hatred of the BNP, may have helped keep the extremists out.

Whatever the case may be, Tarique Rahman has never held public office, and we have to be cautious. He needs India to normalise trade and find ways to draw more Indian investment. India needs to have patience and not be seen too prominently until the anger subsides. It would also help if the impasse over Hasina is resolved at the earliest. Visas have to be opened up immediately for Bangladeshis to come to India for medical treatment, education, and tourism. Border trade must return to normal levels, and the balance of trade must be made fairer. There are no permanent friends or enemies, and we cannot just lose Bangladesh to Pakistan.

The writer is a former Rajya Sabha MP

- Border haats.
- Counter-insurgency cooperation in Northeast.

Static Linkages

- Article 51 (DPSP): Promotion of international peace.
- Neighbourhood First Policy.
- 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.
- Federalism and role of border states in foreign policy.
- Internal security and cross-border insurgency.
- River water disputes and inter-state coordination.

Mains Focus Areas (GS 2 & GS 3)

Strategic Significance

- Gateway to Northeast India.
- Buffer against radicalisation and cross-border terrorism.
- Bay of Bengal maritime relevance.

Economic Dimension

- Trade integration.
- Supply chain diversification.
- Energy cooperation (power grid connectivity).

Security Concerns

- Islamist political mobilisation.
- Refugee/migration pressures.
- External influence (China & Pakistan).

Critical Issues

Positives

- Democratic transition through elections.
- Opportunity for India to diversify political engagement.
- Scope for restoring border trade and people-to-people ties.

Challenges

- Historical anti-India stance of BNP.
- Rising political Islam.
- Trade imbalance concerns.
- Teesta water-sharing deadlock.
- Border resentment in western districts.

Way Forward

- Maintain strategic neutrality in domestic politics of Bangladesh.
- Accelerate Teesta negotiations via Centre-State coordination.
- Expand border haats and local trade.
- Ease visa regime (medical, education).
- Enhance economic interdependence.
- Counter external strategic influence in Bay of Bengal.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context

- Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh led to victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).
- Leadership transition under Tarique Rahman.
- Earlier political phase influenced by Muhammad Yunus.
- India recalibrating engagement strategy beyond earlier perceived proximity to the Awami League.
- Rise of Jamaat-e-Islami as a significant opposition force.

Key Facts

- Longest land border: India–Bangladesh (≈ 4,096 km).
- Border states: West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram.
- Bangladesh is India's largest trade partner in South Asia.
- Major connectivity initiatives:
 - BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement.
 - Revival of pre-1965 rail links.
 - Inland Water Transit and Trade Protocol.
- Key bilateral issues:
 - Teesta river water-sharing.
 - Border management & illegal migration.
 - Trade imbalance.

Tarique Rahman has never held public office, and we have to be cautious. He needs India to normalise trade. India needs to have patience and not be seen too prominently until the anger subsides

Confusion can become costly in the trade pact



Soumya Bhowmick

THE COSTLIEST tariff right now is confusion. In the US-India Joint Statement, the two sides say they have reached a framework for an interim agreement, while reaffirming a pathway toward a broader bilateral trade agreement. The statement specifies a reciprocal tariff rate of 18 per cent on goods originating from India at this stage and notes that broader tariff reductions are tied to the successful conclusion of the interim agreement. This is an important distinction, suggesting a politically announced staging mechanism rather than a fully concluded, legally consolidated FTA with final schedules, binding annexes, and settled dispute disciplines.

Trade under Donald Trump is used as a bargaining tool and a form of leverage. That approach rewards strong claims at the announcement stage, but it also raises the domestic cost of later recalibration, especially when early interpretations run ahead of what negotiators can lock in. India's best response, therefore, is disciplined sequencing: Defining stages with credible boundaries, specifying what is out of scope for stage 1, and signalling the domestic process and institutional steps that would govern stage 2.

Why does confusion become costly so quickly? Because it behaves like a shadow tariff. It shows up as deferred shipments, paused capex, cautious inventory behaviour, delayed hedging decisions, and a risk premium on compliance and regulatory exposure. In farm-linked chains, transmission is even faster.

The Russia angle adds another layer where clarity matters. Washington's public messaging has attempted to link trade concessions to India's energy choices. India's official position remains anchored in core macroeconomic stability: Energy security for 1.4 billion Indians, with diversification guided by market conditions and evolving international dynamics. Any credible exit from overreliance on a particular supplier ultimately hinges on supply assurances, pricing stability, shipping and insurance constraints, and long-term contracting options. The decisive terrain, however, lies beyond headline tariffs. Whether the deal becomes usable in practice will be determined by the "rules layer": Standards, conformity assessment, technical barriers to trade, digital trade provisions, and the compliance pathways that turn nominal market access into operational market access. The difference between a stabilising agreement and a politically brittle one often lies in whether compliance design is predictable, consultative, and phased in a way that matches administrative capacity.

In this context, "clarity" is best understood as reducing interpretive space without pre-empting negotiation. That requires a disciplined public articulation of scope that separates what the interim framework covers from what is explicitly excluded and deferred, paired with a sequencing roadmap. It also requires treating implementation capacity as a core part of the bargain, especially for smaller firms. Finally, both sides should resist using ambiguity as a bargaining device.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- India and the United States announced a framework for an interim trade agreement, with a reciprocal tariff rate of 18% on Indian-origin goods at the current stage.
- Broader tariff reductions are conditional upon the conclusion of a subsequent, more comprehensive agreement.
- The announcement reflects a staged negotiation approach, not a fully consolidated Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with final schedules and binding annexes.
- U.S. public messaging has attempted to link trade concessions with India's energy sourcing decisions.
- Concerns have emerged that ambiguity in trade commitments may increase economic costs through investment delays and compliance uncertainty.

Key Points

- Interim Agreement vs Full FTA
 - Interim framework: Political declaration with phased commitments.
 - FTA: Requires WTO consistency, defined tariff schedules, rules of origin, and dispute-settlement mechanism.
- Tariff Uncertainty as Economic Cost
 - Acts as a "shadow tariff."

- Leads to deferred exports, paused capex, and inventory risk.
- Higher compliance burden for MSMEs.
- Rules Layer Determines Real Market Access
 - Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT).
 - Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) standards.
 - Conformity assessment procedures.
 - Digital trade and data governance norms.
- Energy-Trade Linkage
 - Trade concessions being linked to India's energy diversification.
 - India maintains energy security based on market stability and macroeconomic considerations (Economic Survey emphasis).
- Strategic Significance
 - Reflects geopolitics influencing trade.
 - Balancing trade expansion with strategic autonomy.

Static Linkages

- Article 253 – Parliament's power to implement international agreements.
- WTO principles: Most Favoured Nation (MFN), National Treatment.
- Article XXIV of GATT – Conditions for FTAs.
- TBT and SPS Agreements under WTO.
- Balance of Payments and Current Account Deficit (NCERT Macroeconomics).
- Role of DGFT under Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992.
- Energy security and diversification (India Year Book; Economic Survey).

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Phased negotiation prevents collapse of talks.
- Signals political intent to deepen India-US trade ties.
- Allows gradual domestic adjustment in sensitive sectors.

Concerns

- Ambiguity increases compliance risk.
- Potential pressure on energy sovereignty.
- Risk of non-tariff barriers limiting actual access.
- MSMEs face higher standards-related costs.

Way Forward

- Clearly define scope and exclusions of interim agreement.
- Strengthen domestic standards ecosystem (testing labs, certification).
- Provide MSME export facilitation and compliance support.
- Separate trade negotiations from geopolitical energy pressure.
- Ensure WTO consistency and transparent dispute-resolution design.

A climate warning, to India from Europe

THE EU's top global warming advisory body, the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (ESABCC), has called on the bloc's members to find ways to deal with rising temperatures. The agency's advice to prepare for a temperature rise of about 2.8 degrees Celsius by 2100 is particularly sobering. For decades, Europe's climate policy has focused on emissions reduction commitments. The advisory, issued on Tuesday, acknowledges that mitigation must be accompanied by measures to build resilience against the worst effects of a warming world. It is also a tacit recognition that the Paris Pact's ambition of limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels is increasingly out of reach.

Most studies identify Europe as the fastest-warming continent. Floods, lethal heatwaves and devastating forest fires almost every year of this decade are warnings that EU policymakers have to find ways to save lives and protect livelihoods. Their counterparts in India face similar challenges. Extreme weather events tend to mirror across continents in terms of intensity and unpredictability. That's why ESABCC's recommendations to embed climate resilience in initiatives across policy domains ring true for planners across the world.

That said, the social and economic contexts within which meteorological phenomena unfold are vastly different. EU nations have effective early warning systems, and their social safety nets are stronger compared to those in countries of the Global South. Agriculture in EU countries contributes a far smaller share to GDP and employs a significantly lower proportion of the population compared to India. Planners in almost every part of the world must balance the needs of coping with the climate with the imperatives of creating jobs, infrastructure and public services. However, in developing countries, policymakers have to protect vulnerable populations while continuing to lay the foundations for economic prosperity. They may be better placed in one respect, though. Much of Europe's highways, buildings, rail tracks, water and energy supply systems were built for a stable climate. India's infrastructure development, in contrast, is still a work in progress. ESABCC's warning should, therefore, push planners to incorporate climate resilience into development projects at the outset.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Context of the News

- The European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change (ESABCC) has advised European Union member states to prepare for a temperature rise of around 2.8°C by 2100.
- The advisory indicates that limiting warming to 1.5°C under the Paris Agreement is increasingly difficult under current emission trajectories.
- Europe is identified as the fastest-warming continent according to World Meteorological Organization assessments.
- The focus is shifting from only mitigation (emission reduction) to strengthening adaptation and climate resilience.
- The development is significant for India and other developing countries facing increasing extreme weather events.

Key Points

- Temperature benchmarks
 - The 1.5°C and 2°C limits are measured relative to pre-industrial levels (1850–1900 baseline).
- Mitigation vs Adaptation
 - Mitigation: Reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
 - Adaptation: Adjusting systems to reduce vulnerability and climate-related damages.

- Europe's climate trends
 - Increased frequency of heatwaves, floods, and wildfires.
 - Infrastructure built for historically stable climate conditions now faces stress.
- India's climate commitments (Updated NDCs, 2022)
 - 45% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2030 (from 2005 levels).
 - 50% cumulative installed electric power capacity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030.
 - Net-zero emissions target by 2070.
- India's institutional framework
 - National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) – 8 missions.
 - State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC).
 - Disaster Management Act, 2005 and NDMA guidelines on heatwaves and floods.
 - National Infrastructure Pipeline incorporates resilience planning.
- Economic dimension
 - Agriculture employs around 45% of India's workforce (PLFS data).
 - Climate shocks affect livelihoods, food security, and rural income.

Static Linkages

- UNFCCC principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR-RC).
- Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities).
- Disaster management cycle: Prevention → Mitigation → Preparedness → Response → Recovery.
- Economic Survey emphasis on green growth and climate vulnerability.
- Climate-resilient infrastructure through zoning laws, risk mapping, and building codes.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Realistic acknowledgment of warming trajectory.
- Emphasizes mainstreaming resilience across sectors.
- Encourages climate-proofing infrastructure planning.

Challenges

- Risk of reduced mitigation ambition.
- Adaptation finance gap for developing countries.
- Climate justice concerns due to historical emissions of developed nations.
- Balancing growth, poverty reduction, and climate resilience in developing countries.

Way Forward

- Integrate climate risk assessment in infrastructure approvals.
- Strengthen early warning systems and forecasting capacity.
- Promote climate-resilient agriculture (millets, crop diversification).
- Improve urban planning with blue-green infrastructure.
- Enhance access to international climate finance and operationalise Loss and Damage mechanisms.
- Align development strategy with long-term net-zero pathway.