



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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Uneasy truce in Beijing as Trump and Xi discuss trade, Taiwan

Ananth Krishnan
BEIJING

The United States and China appeared to come to an uneasy truce – at least for now – on trade, Taiwan, and the future of an increasingly contested relationship, as their leaders met for talks in Beijing on Thursday.

Chinese President Xi Jinping told visiting U.S. President Donald Trump that relations could descend to “clashes and conflicts” if the Taiwan question, which he described as “the most important issue in China-U.S. relations”, was not managed properly, according to the Chinese readout of the talks. “If it is handled properly, the bilateral relationship will enjoy overall sta-

bility. Otherwise, the two countries will have clashes and even conflicts, putting the entire relationship in great jeopardy,” he said. China also conveyed its opposition to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.

The U.S. readout, for its part, made no mention of Taiwan, though Secretary of State Marco Rubio later told presspersons the U.S. position remained unchanged. The readouts suggested both sides had merely underlined their respective positions on an issue that remains a flashpoint. The White House statement said both did agree on the need to keep the Strait of Hormuz open and to support the free flow of energy, and that Mr. Xi had “made clear China’s opposition to the militari-



Leaders' day out: Xi Jinping and Donald Trump at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing on Thursday. VIA REUTERS

zation of the strait”. However, there appeared no broader agreement on addressing the Iran crisis.

The ceremony in Beijing trumped the substance. Mr. Trump’s visit began with a grand welcome on Thursday morning, as he was greeted by marching PLA troops and cheering schoolchildren at the Great

Hall of the People. “It really was a magnificent welcome like none other,” Mr. Trump said. The two leaders spent several hours in each other’s company, with delegation talks followed by Mr. Xi taking the U.S. President on a tour of the Temple of Heaven.

A state banquet followed in the evening, with

further talks over tea set for Friday in the Chinese leadership’s Zhongnanhai compound.

At the formal talks, Mr. Xi called for “a new vision” for ties, which he labelled “a constructive relationship of strategic stability” for “the next three years and beyond”.

May meet more

The two leaders may meet three more times this year alone, officials said. Mr. Trump invited Mr. Xi to visit the U.S. on September 24, which he provisionally accepted. The two leaders could also meet at an APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit that China is set to host later this year, and at the G-20 meet in Miami.

The broader challenge

facing the two leaders as they navigate a fractious relationship is a changed dynamic. “The U.S. still thinks it is dealing with the China of 10 years ago, but the power dynamic has shifted”, said Cameron Johnson, formerly Professor at New York University Shanghai and senior partner at a supply chain consulting firm that advises U.S. and Chinese companies.

Both countries have traded blows in an ongoing trade and technology war. For U.S. businesses, restricted access to rare earths was a major worry, while for China, American export controls remain a concern, especially on semiconductors.

The visit could yield a temporary truce.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- United States President Donald Trump met Xi Jinping in Beijing amid tensions over:
 - Taiwan issue
 - Trade war
 - Semiconductor restrictions
 - Rare earth exports
 - Indo-Pacific security
- China warned that mishandling Taiwan could lead to “conflicts and clashes”.
- Both countries attempted to stabilise bilateral relations despite continuing strategic rivalry.

Key Points

- Taiwan remains the biggest flashpoint in U.S.-China relations.
- China opposes U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.
- U.S. continues its policy of “strategic ambiguity” on Taiwan.
- Ongoing U.S.-China competition includes:
 - Trade tariffs
 - Technology restrictions
 - Semiconductor export controls
 - Rare earth supply restrictions
- Both sides discussed:
 - Strait of Hormuz security
 - Free flow of energy supplies
 - Indo-Pacific stability
- Possible future meetings:
 - APEC Summit
 - G20 Summit

Important Static Points

- Taiwan Strait is a major global trade route.
- Taiwan is crucial in semiconductor manufacturing.
- China follows the “One China Principle”.
- U.S. follows “One China Policy” with strategic ambiguity.
- Rare earth minerals are essential for:

- Electronics
- Defence systems
- Renewable energy technologies
- Strait of Hormuz connects:
 - Persian Gulf → Gulf of Oman

Relevance for India

- India may benefit from “China+1” supply chain diversification.
- Taiwan crisis can affect global chip supply and Indian industries.
- Indo-Pacific tensions increase importance of:
 - QUAD
 - Maritime security
 - Strategic autonomy
- India must balance relations with both U.S. and China.

Value Addition

Key Terms

- Strategic Ambiguity
- Indo-Pacific
- Tech Decoupling
- Supply Chain Resilience
- Great Power Competition
- Thucydides Trap

Way Forward

- Maintain diplomatic engagement between major powers.
- Ensure freedom of navigation in Indo-Pacific.
- Diversify semiconductor and rare earth supply chains.
- Strengthen multilateral forums like G20 and APEC.
- India should accelerate:
 - Semiconductor mission
 - Critical minerals strategy
 - Maritime security partnerships

Efforts on to release Kuki, Naga people held hostage in Manipur: Ministers

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

A day after four persons were killed in separate incidents in Manipur, the State's Home Minister, Govindas Konhoujam, said on Thursday that at least 38 people from the Kuki and Naga communities are being held hostage by different groups.

While some organisations claimed that 43 people have been either detained or abducted by various groups, Deputy Chief Minister Losli Dikho said that at least 44 have been abducted with an infant and two Naga Catholic trainee priests among them.

Three of the four killed in Wednesday's separate ambushes by suspected extremists were Kuki church leaders. Two of them were key members of the Thadou Baptist Association of

India (TBAD). The attacks took place in the Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi district. The fourth, a Naga villager, was killed in the Naga-majority Noney district.

"We have reports that more than 38 people from both communities have been held hostage by different groups. We are working with civil society organisations and political leaders to secure their release," Mr. Konhoujam told journalists after visiting the family of Wilson Thanga, who was killed in Noney. He also went to the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences in the State's capital, Imphal, where Thanga's body had been kept for autopsy. Three Naga MLAs accompanied him.

Speaking with *The Hindu*, the Deputy Chief Minister, who is leading the negotiations on behalf of the



People block a road amid shutdowns called by the Kuki and Naga communities in Churachandpur, Manipur, on Thursday. PTI

State government to secure the release of those abducted, said that the killing of the church leaders was "unprecedented" as such attacks did not occur even at the height of previous conflicts.

He said talks were on with Kuki and Naga groups till late on Thursday and efforts were on to find an amicable solution.

The hill districts of the State remained tense on Thursday after the attacks. Mr. Konhoujam said the State government apprised Union Home Minister Amit Shah of the security situation and of efforts to secure the hostages' release. "We suspect that some people do not want peace to return to Manipur," he said. The 18 missing Nagas in-

clude 11 women, six men and an infant, the Deputy CM said adding that seven of them are yet to be traced. There are 28 Kuki hostages and two of them, including a minor girl and a person addicted to narcotics were released by the Naga groups, he said.

"We have been trying to find an amicable solution and while talks were on with Kuki and Naga groups till late on Thursday, we have not been able to reach a conclusion. At least 11 Nagas are present at the camp of a Kuki SoO (insurgent group in Suspension of Operations pact with the government) group but the whereabouts of seven others are not known yet. This has led to delay in the release of all hostages," said Mr. Dikho, who belongs to the Naga People's Front, an alliance partner of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Manipur's Congress MP Angomcha Bimol Ahoijam, however, doubted the government's seriousness in protecting the lives and property of the people of the State affected by an ethnic conflict since May 3, 2026. "We strongly condemn this violence and the Government of India's irresponsible abdication of duty, and demand immediate action against those responsible," he said.

In an ultimatum to the Chief Minister, the United Naga Council (UNC) said Kuki groups have held 20 Nagas hostage in Kangpokpi district. The UNC is the apex body of the Naga tribes of Manipur. The UNC said 18 of these hostages, including women and a two-year-old child, are at Leikon Vaiphei village, while two priests are at Sapermeina. The UNC set 6 p.m. of May 15 as the deadline for

the government to ensure the release of the abducted Nagas to avert "any consequences arising out of its inaction".

Family refuses body

The slain Thanga's family members have refused to claim his body until the government takes action against those responsible for the attack. He was travelling in a vehicle along with his wife from Imphal to his home in Noney district's Dokang village.

His wife and the driver of the vehicle were injured in the attack.

A community leader said the family wants the government to fulfil a list of demands before the body is claimed. The demands include the immediate arrest of the perpetrators, compensation for the family, and a suitable government job for a family member.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Fresh violence in Manipur resulted in the killing of four persons, including three Kuki church leaders and one Naga villager.
- Several people from Kuki and Naga communities were reportedly abducted/held hostage by armed groups.
- The incident reflects continuing ethnic tensions in Manipur since 2026.
- Negotiations are underway between the State government, civil society organisations, and insurgent groups for release of hostages.
- The issue highlights challenges of internal security, ethnic identity politics, and governance in Northeast India.

Key Points

- Manipur has a complex ethnic composition:
 - Meiteis dominate valley regions.
 - Kukis and Nagas inhabit hill districts.
- Ethnic conflicts are linked to:
 - Land rights
 - Political representation
 - Tribal identity
 - Demand for autonomy
- Suspension of Operations (SoO):
 - Ceasefire arrangement between Government and insurgent groups.
- Article 355:
 - Duty of Union to protect States against internal disturbance.
- AFSPA:
 - Applied in disturbed areas for maintaining security.
- Northeast insurgency involves:
 - Ethnic aspirations
 - Border issues
 - Illegal arms and narcotics networks
 - Weak governance in remote areas.

Important Static Areas

- Sixth Schedule and tribal administration.
- Difference between Sixth Schedule areas and Autonomous Councils.
- Internal security challenges in Northeast India.
- Role of civil society in peace-building.
- Centre-State relations in law and order.
- Human rights vs security debate.
- Constitutional provisions:
 - Article 21
 - Article 355
 - Fifth vs Sixth Schedule.

Critical Analysis

Challenges

- Weak trust between communities.
- Prolonged insurgency and militancy.
- Governance deficit in hill districts.
- Human rights concerns during security operations.
- Delayed peace-building mechanisms.

Government Concerns

- Preventing escalation into wider ethnic conflict.
- Maintaining law and order.
- Ensuring release of hostages.
- Balancing security with democratic rights.

Broader Implications

- Threat to national integration.
- Impact on development and investment.
- Social fragmentation and displacement.
- Increased vulnerability of women and children.

Way Forward

- Fast-track peace dialogue among communities.
- Strengthen intelligence and policing.
- Ensure accountability of armed groups.
- Promote inclusive governance in hill areas.
- Expand development and connectivity in Northeast.
- Community reconciliation and confidence-building.
- Effective implementation of peace accords.

Free and fair elections are dependent on a truly independent poll body: SC

Top court questions neutrality of Prime Minister-led selection panel for Election Commissioners, highlights absence of even one absolutely neutral person: Attorney-General says the court cannot become a second chamber of Parliament; Bench suggests referring petitions to Constitution Bench

Krishna Das Bhatnagar
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday judged the Union government to address concerns over its dominant role in the appointment of Chief Election Commissioners and Election Commissioners, observing that free and fair elections depend on a truly independent Election Commission.

The court highlighted the absence of even "one absolutely neutral person" on the Prime Minister-chaired selection committee. It questioned the presence of a Cabinet Minister on the panel, observing that such a Minister could not be expected to defy the Prime Minister. The court also asked whether the presence of the Leader of the Opposition on the committee was merely "ceremonial" as appointments could be made through a unanimous vote.



Justice Dipankar Datta

Judgments of this court from 1950 are eloquent on the point that the Executive cannot call the shots as far as elections are concerned. Free, fair elections are an important part of the Basic Structure.

Judgments of this court from 1950 are eloquent on the point that the Executive cannot call the shots as far as elections are concerned. Free, fair elections are an important part of the Basic Structure. It can only be accomplished by having an independent Election Commission of India. The Election Commission can only be independent if it has independent Commissioners, Justice Dipankar Datta, heading a Division Bench, told Attorney-General R. Venkataratnam, appearing for the Union government.

law officer which he thought occupied the "pride of place" immediately after the Constitution. "After the Constitution, which law occupies the prime place? There are thousands of legislations, which one would you place right next to the Constitution. I would say the election laws. Would I be wrong? Without democracy, there is nothing," Justice Datta said.

AG's argument Mr. Venkataratnam argued that the Supreme Court could not become a "second chamber of Parliament." The petitioners, he said, cannot expect Parliament to enact laws blindly in consonance with Supreme Court judgments.

"Can somebody come to the court and say Parliament disregarded your judgment when it was bound entirely to the word of the court? The court can declare the law while ex-

amining the legality of a legislation or a state action, but the court cannot decide what a law should look like and expect Parliament to follow suit by enacting a law faithfully mirroring the court's vision," the Attorney-General submitted.

Mr. Venkataratnam said the court did not declare any law under Article 141 in the Anoop Baranwal judgment. It had merely put in place a stop-gap arrangement for the CEC and EC appointments until Parliament enacted a law under Article 324(2).

Towards the end of the hearing, the Bench suggested referring the petitions to a Constitution Bench. The petitioners strongly opposed the move, arguing that the pleas involved a "constitutional challenge to the 2023 Act and not a 'substantial question of law' warranting reference to a larger Bench under Article 145(3).

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Supreme Court examined the constitutional validity of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023.
- Court raised concerns regarding executive dominance in the appointment process of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).
- Petitioners argued that the 2023 Act diluted the spirit of the Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India (2023) judgment.
- The Court emphasized that free and fair elections are part of the Basic Structure of the Constitution and require an independent Election Commission of India (ECI).

Key Points

- Article 324 provides for the Election Commission of India.
- Article 324(2):
 - CEC and ECs are appointed by the President subject to parliamentary law.
- 2023 Act Selection Committee:
 - Prime Minister
 - Leader of Opposition
 - Union Cabinet Minister nominated by PM
- Anoop Baranwal Case (2023):
 - Supreme Court prescribed interim committee:
 - Prime Minister
 - Leader of Opposition
 - Chief Justice of India
- Supreme Court observations:
 - Independence of ECI is essential for democracy.
 - Election laws occupy a central position after the Constitution.
 - Independence must both exist and appear to exist.

- Union Government's stand:
 - Parliament has legislative authority under Article 324(2).
 - Court cannot compel Parliament to replicate judicial suggestions in legislation.

Static Linkages

- Election Commission: Constitutional Body under Part XV.
- Articles 324–329 deal with elections.
- Basic Structure Doctrine:
 - Kesavananda Bharati Case (1973).
- Free and Fair Elections:
 - Recognized as Basic Structure in multiple judgments.
- Multi-member Election Commission upheld in:
 - T.N. Seshan v. Union of India (1995).
- Removal:
 - CEC removal similar to Supreme Court judge.
 - ECs removable on recommendation of CEC.
- Law Commission 255th Report:
 - Recommended collegium-based appointment system.
- Second ARC:
 - Recommended strengthening independence of constitutional bodies.

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- Executive may dominate appointment process.
- Removal of CJI reduces institutional neutrality.
- Perception of bias may affect electoral credibility.
- Weakens checks and balances.

Government's Arguments

- Parliament empowered under Article 324(2).
- Judicial overreach should be avoided.
- Presence of LoP ensures some consultation.

Constitutional Significance

- Independent ECI essential for:
 - Democracy
 - Rule of Law
 - Federalism
 - Electoral legitimacy

Way Forward

- Introduce independent collegium-based appointments.
- Increase transparency in selection process.
- Ensure bipartisan consultation.
- Strengthen institutional autonomy of ECI.
- Implement Law Commission and ARC recommendations.
- Protect both actual and perceived independence of ECI.

The Iran war, India's strategic autonomy challenges

United States President Donald Trump's tariff wars against friend and foe over the last year now pale in comparison to the upheaval created by the unprecedented Israeli-American attack on Iran and counterstrikes. For decades, India's stakes in a stable and friendly Tehran have been huge for energy security, geopolitical advantage, and space for strategic autonomy. If the Ukraine war tested India's foreign policy agility and independence, the Iran war is a generational challenge. The slow of economic and defence deals that India signed with European countries recently was popularly seen as a signal of major geo-economic and geopolitical shift in India's favour. In this new West Asian war scenario, it is already clear that deals with France and the European Union (EU) hardly give India a stronger hand.

Strategic autonomy is difficult

The 14 Rafale fighter jet purchase from France and the India EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) pointed to historic achievements. These surprisingly quick denouements (after 20 years of slow negotiations on the FTA and extended talks on the Rafales since 2016) were mostly rearguard actions against Mr. Trump's punishing tariffs. But New Delhi and some European countries such as France seemed to believe they were important steps toward a more distributed multipolar world order against American unilateralism. Washington's disregard for potentially catastrophic effects from the attack on Iran on global commerce and security are showing that U.S. unipolarity is holding fast.

Until Mr. Trump's coercive tariffs, New Delhi did not have to worry much about independence in economic policymaking. That is because unlike the post war American-led military order with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Asian formal treaty alliances, Washington's liberal economic order tended to be open and inclusive, driven largely by market forces. The double whammy of economic and military unilateralism will now make it more difficult for countries such as India to exercise strategic autonomy.

President Trump is changing the economic system in ways that mirror the exclusivist military system. The U.S. government is increasingly demanding a greater alignment of the economic policies of other countries with American strategic interests. This is a fundamental break from the earlier practice and it threatens the entire post-Second World War liberal economic order. New Delhi has been able to pick and choose close economic ties with the U.S.



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Despite the defence, commerce and trade deals, India needs to be aware of a possible European alignment with the United States

while, at the same time, keeping its distance from alliance politics. That had not stopped the U.S. from nurturing commercial ties with India in a big way since 2000. Indeed, the U.S. overtook China as India's largest trading partner in 2021-22. But note that China was at the top of India's economic partners even as U.S.-China relations were sharply declining. All this is to say that until very recently, economic and strategic relations could co-exist along competing trajectories.

For India and the U.S., a convergence of interests about a rising China had brought their relations to a level that appeared irreversible. Even at this meeting of the minds occurred, India's diversification of big power partnerships remained intact. India's ability to maintain good relations simultaneously with the U.S., Russia, China, Iran, Israel, Vietnam, and the major European powers – without taking strong sides, even under duress – is the clearest expression and exercise of strategic autonomy.

Mr. Trump's arbitrary demands to discontinue crude oil imports from Russia, forego the strategic partnership with Iran on Chabahar port, desist from even considering a de-dollarisation option in BRICS, and clearly align with American geo-economic and geopolitical interests, pose the biggest challenge to India's strategic autonomy in decades. America's 30-day waiver for Russian oil purchases owing to energy supply chain disruptions came as a brief reprieve for India, yet on terms set by Washington. It was more than just an embarrassment for India when a U.S. submarine sank an Iranian naval ship (IRIS Demeu) in the Indian Ocean that was returning from the Indian Navy's International Fleet Review 2026 naval exercise on March 4. India's image as the key regional naval power took a big hit.

Deals with Europe have not eliminated risks India's FTA with the EU and historic Rafale jet deal with France are two developments that many interpreted as India trying to manage the new autonomy dilemma created by Mr. Trump. New Delhi chose French fighter jets over Russian and American jets with the hope that it would finally get the technology transfer and domestic production it has long sought. India is growing, and so is its military; it will keep buying, and France is locking itself into a huge commercial deal.

For India, while the spending is extremely high, it will not get a better deal with the U.S.; and it will not get a better performing fighter jet from Russia. In this geopolitical climate, this deal helps both India and France as they want to diversify partners and protect their strategic autonomy.

But there is some doubt about just how much tech is being transferred and the fact that source codes and algorithms will be under French control. This means that India will be wedded to the French for upgrades. This also could undercut India's 'Make in India' aspirations.

As for the FTA, we could see this in the context of Mr. Trump's economic assaults and a rushed attempt to save the idea of a liberal economic world order. But there are domestic political hurdles in India to overcome, from farmers and industrial workers who are a big electoral chunk. Moreover, France and the EU might be using commerce and trade now as a way to gain leverage over India. De-risking from Mr. Trump's uncertainties through the FTA has obviously not eliminated political or economic risks.

America's long shadow

What seems the flimsiest basis for strengthening strategic autonomy is the novel idea of a common perception of a new world order. Geopolitically speaking, India is much more in favour of global multipolarity than western countries. Europe (less France) tends to fall into line with the U.S. under pressure. At this particular moment of Mr. Trump's high-handedness with Europe, it is not surprising that Europe is turning to countries such as India. But historically they have followed the American lead.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 made it clear that Europe and America belong together, casting it in common civilisational and identity terms which leaves the Global South out in the cold. He minced no words, openly whitewashing western colonial expansion and calling for a "western supply chain" to regain its position. This suggests that a new geo-economic alliance system of this sort would be hierarchical. The Global South seems to be less partners, more targets of competition. The standing ovation for Mr. Rubio from a supposedly critical European audience spoke volumes.

In this era of culture contests and tribalism, it is hard to see a natural affinity between Europe and India when the going gets tough. As the world remains shell shocked by the Iran war, it is clear that Europe is turning to countries such as India to facilitate American and Israeli interests despite the display of reservations by pronouncements such as "not our war" on the West Asian conflict. In any new regional order that emerges, it is also clear that New Delhi will hardly be able to count on the Europeans for Indian strategic autonomy purposes.

- Chabahar Port important for:
 - Access to Afghanistan
 - Central Asia connectivity
 - INSTC project
- Rafale deal aims at defence diversification.
- Concerns:
 - Limited technology transfer
 - Dependence on foreign defence systems
- India-EU FTA may face resistance from:
 - Farmers
 - Manufacturing sector
- Europe still strategically dependent on U.S. security umbrella.

Static Linkages

- Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)
- Panchsheel Principles
- Strategic Autonomy
- Chabahar Port
- International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)
- Energy Security
- Defence Indigenisation
- Make in India
- Multipolarity
- NATO
- BRICS
- Global South

Critical Analysis

Advantages

- Multi-alignment increases diplomatic flexibility.
- Defence diversification reduces overdependence on one country.
- India-EU engagement may improve trade and technology cooperation.

Challenges

- U.S. sanctions pressure affects independent policymaking.
- West Asia instability threatens oil supply and trade routes.
- Foreign defence dependence weakens self-reliance.
- Europe may ultimately support U.S. strategic interests.

Concerns for India

- Balancing U.S.-Russia relations
- Managing Iran ties under sanctions pressure
- Ensuring uninterrupted energy imports
- Protecting strategic autonomy in emerging global blocs

Way Forward

- Accelerate defence indigenisation.
- Diversify crude oil import sources.
- Strengthen strategic petroleum reserves.
- Expand Chabahar and INSTC connectivity.
- Promote issue-based multi-alignment.
- Increase indigenous R&D in defence technology.
- Strengthen engagement with Global South platforms.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

The ongoing Iran conflict and increasing U.S. unilateralism have raised concerns regarding India's strategic autonomy, energy security, and foreign policy balancing.

Context

- Israel-U.S. attacks on Iran and subsequent escalation increased instability in West Asia.
- India has major stakes in Iran regarding:
 - Energy security
 - Chabahar Port
 - Connectivity to Central Asia
- U.S. pressure on countries regarding:
 - Russian oil imports
 - Iran relations
 - BRICS de-dollarisation
- India recently concluded/advanced:
 - Rafale fighter jet deal with France
 - India-EU FTA negotiations
- Debate emerged regarding the future of India's strategic autonomy.

Key Points

- Strategic autonomy = India's ability to maintain independent foreign policy decisions.
- India traditionally balanced relations with:
 - U.S.
 - Russia
 - Iran
 - Israel
 - EU
 - China
- U.S. increasingly linking economic relations with geopolitical alignment.
- India dependent on West Asia for crude oil imports.

Building a preventive health culture in India

India has made remarkable strides in health care over the past four decades. It has built institutions of global repute, trained exceptional clinicians, and expanded access to advanced treatments. Yet, even as it celebrates these achievements, it must confront a deeper truth: it has built a system that responds to illness far more effectively than it preserves health. For too long, health has been viewed as something to recover after it is lost, rather than something to protect every day.

After four decades of building the institutions of modern medicine in India, I have come to understand that the greatest threat to our national health is not the disease we have failed to cure. It is the disease that we have failed to prevent.

We, as a civilisation, have confused the treatment of illness with the pursuit of health. These are not the same endeavour. One begins when something is already broken. The other is an act of continuous, deliberate care for oneself, for one's family, for the generations that will inherit the consequences of choices made today. India has built a world-class capacity to heal. It must now build the culture and the will to protect.

A civilisational reckoning
Non-communicable diseases – heart attack, strokes, cancer, diabetes, and infectious diseases – are now the leading cause of death in India, surpassing infectious illnesses. Approximately



Dr. Prathap C. Reddy

Founder Chairman, Apollo Hospitals

270 million Indians live with chronic disease today, the majority unaware of their condition until the body has already begun to fail. This is not a medical statistic. It is a measure of a society that must learn to listen to itself.

The economic consequences for a young democracy can be severe and compounding. Preventable illness diminishes the contribution of individuals who might otherwise have given their best years not to illness but to their work, their children, and their country. A nation cannot reach its highest potential while its people are quietly losing ground to conditions that need not have taken hold.

The window for action

Insights from large-scale health assessments, including Apollo Hospitals Health of the Nation Report 2026, point to a critical window in early adulthood. The decade between 30 years and 40 years of age is emerging as a turning point. It is during these years when individuals are most engaged in building careers and supporting families that early metabolic and cardiovascular risks begin to take hold.

By the age of 40, a significant proportion of individuals are no longer disease-free. The concern is not only the presence of disease but also the absence of awareness. Most people do not seek care because they do not feel unwell. By the time symptoms appear, the opportunity for early reversal is often lost.

And yet, there is reason for optimism. The

human body is remarkably resilient when intervention is timely. Early detection, lifestyle correction, and sustained monitoring can prevent, delay, or even reverse many of these conditions. The window exists – but it does not remain open indefinitely.

This is why India must now embrace a new paradigm: one of self stewardship.

Push for transformation

Prevention is not a programme. It is not a policy intervention or a campaign to be launched and forgotten. It is a philosophy – one that asks each of us to understand that the stewardship of our own health is among the most consequential duties we carry. Not only for ourselves, but for everyone who depends upon us, and for a nation whose extraordinary promise rests entirely upon the vitality of its people.

India has the knowledge and the infrastructure. What remains is the transformation of habit – a culture of early action, of routine checks, of health understood not as the absence of disease but as the active, daily commitment to life.

The legacy a nation leaves is measured in the health and the hope it passes forward. The ambitions we hold for India – economic, social, and global – rest on the strength, vitality, and longevity of its citizens.

That reckoning can begin not in a hospital but in the choices that homes and families make before one is ever needed.

• Preventive healthcare is essential for:

- Demographic dividend
- Human capital formation
- Sustainable development

Static Linkages

- Article 21:
 - Right to life includes right to health.
- Article 47:
 - Duty of the State to improve public health and nutrition.
- Health:
 - State Subject under Seventh Schedule.
- WHO definition:
 - Health includes physical, mental and social well-being.
- Epidemiological Transition:
 - Shift from communicable diseases to lifestyle diseases with development.
- Universal Health Coverage (UHC):
 - Affordable and accessible healthcare for all.
- National Health Policy 2017:
 - Focus on preventive and promotive healthcare.
- SDG 3:
 - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being.

Critical Analysis

Significance of Preventive Healthcare

- Reduces long-term disease burden.
- Lowers healthcare expenditure.
- Improves productivity and workforce participation.
- Reduces pressure on tertiary healthcare institutions.
- Enhances quality of life.

Challenges

- Low public awareness.
- Inadequate primary healthcare infrastructure.
- Urban-rural healthcare disparity.
- Poor screening culture.
- Shortage of healthcare professionals.
- Rising processed food consumption and sedentary lifestyle.

Government Initiatives

- Ayushman Bharat
 - Health & Wellness Centres
 - PM-JAY
- National Programme for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke (NPCDCS)
- Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission
- Fit India Movement

Way Forward

- Strengthen primary healthcare infrastructure.
- Promote routine preventive health screening.
- Increase public health expenditure.
- Integrate health awareness in school curriculum.
- Encourage healthy lifestyle through public campaigns.
- Expand digital health ecosystem.
- Improve nutrition and fitness awareness.
- Strengthen urban planning for active lifestyles.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- India is witnessing a rapid rise in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as:
 - Diabetes
 - Cardiovascular diseases
 - Cancer
 - Stroke
- Preventive healthcare has emerged as a major public policy concern due to:
 - Increasing lifestyle-related diseases
 - High out-of-pocket expenditure
 - Loss of productivity among working-age population
- Health assessments and recent reports highlight that individuals in the 30–40 age group are increasingly vulnerable to metabolic and cardiovascular disorders.
- The issue reinforces the need to shift India's healthcare focus:
 - From curative healthcare → preventive healthcare.

Key Points

- NCDs are the leading cause of death in India.
- Major causes:
 - Sedentary lifestyle
 - Unhealthy food habits
 - Tobacco and alcohol use
 - Stress
 - Pollution
- Large number of cases remain undiagnosed due to lack of routine screening.
- Preventive healthcare includes:
 - Early diagnosis
 - Regular health screening
 - Lifestyle modification
 - Nutrition awareness
 - Physical activity
- Economic implications:
 - Reduced workforce productivity
 - Increased healthcare burden
 - Pressure on public health systems

Bursting at the seams

The current rise in inflation is not transient, but systemic

India's April retail inflation, at a 13-month high of 3.48%, is only marginally higher than its March print of 3.4%, and continues to remain deceptively benign. Wholesale inflation has more than doubled to 8.3% in April from 3.88% in March – a 42-month high – signalling that substantial upstream price pressures are still working their way through the economy. Unsurprisingly, the spike in the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) has been led by soaring fuel and power prices, which rose 24.71%, while petroleum and natural gas prices surged 67.2%. This clearly indicates that the full impact of rising energy costs has not yet been passed on to end-consumers. However, such a pass-through now appears imminent. Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri recently indicated that the Centre may have little choice but to raise retail petrol and diesel prices, with public sector oil marketing companies reportedly absorbing "under-recoveries" of nearly ₹30,000 crore a month since the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran began. Any increase in retail fuel prices will have economy-wide implications.

April retail inflation has already been driven chiefly by food, with the Consumer Food Price Index rising to 4.2% from 3.87% in March. Predictably, restaurants and accommodation services witnessed among the sharper increases, reflecting the cascading effect of rising commercial LPG prices. The price of the widely used 19.2 kg commercial LPG cylinder has risen by roughly ₹850-₹1,000 over revisions since the conflict began, while the 5 kg canister has reportedly seen increases of over ₹200 in several markets. The canister is extensively used by migrant wage labour across the country, directly feeding into food basket costs and potentially dampening consumption demand. This comes even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed to people to refrain from "extravagant spending on weddings and travel abroad" and to cut back on buying precious metals for a year. Consequently, the Centre doubled import duties on gold and silver in an attempt to discourage safe-haven investments and ease pressure on the rupee, which has depreciated by nearly 8.5% against the U.S. dollar in the past two-and-a-half months since the conflict began. For context, the rupee had depreciated by roughly 2%-3% annually on average over the previous five fiscal years. The current slide is therefore exceptionally sharp. It is increasingly evident that retail inflation is bursting at the seams and will likely find fuller expression in the months ahead. The sharp divergence between the Consumer Price Index and WPI suggests that producers are still absorbing a significant share of rising costs, a situation that is unlikely to remain sustainable. This leaves the Reserve Bank of India with limited room but to eventually tighten monetary policy in order to keep inflation within its tolerance band of 2%-6%. What is unfolding is not merely transient inflation driven by commodity volatility, but also broader systemic inflationary pressure, with limited manoeuvring space for both the government and the central bank.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India's CPI-based retail inflation stood at 3.48% in April, remaining within RBI's tolerance band.
- WPI inflation surged to 8.3%, indicating strong upstream inflationary pressures.
- Fuel and power inflation rose sharply due to the ongoing West Asia conflict and crude oil price escalation.
- Rising LPG, petrol, diesel, and imported commodity prices are likely to increase future retail inflation.
- Rupee depreciation and higher gold import duties indicate external sector stress.

Key Points

- CPI Inflation: Measures retail-level inflation; RBI's primary inflation benchmark.
- WPI Inflation: Measures producer-level inflation; reflects input cost pressures.
- Large CPI-WPI divergence indicates:
 - Producers absorbing costs temporarily
 - Possible future retail inflation surge
- Fuel price rise leads to:
 - Cost-push inflation
 - Imported inflation
 - Transport and logistics inflation

- Rupee depreciation increases import costs, especially crude oil imports.
- RBI may adopt tighter monetary policy if inflation persists.
- Higher commercial LPG prices affect:
 - Restaurants
 - Informal workers
 - Urban poor
- Gold import duty hike aims to:
 - Reduce non-essential imports
 - Control Current Account Deficit (CAD)
 - Support rupee stability

Static Linkages

- Inflation Types:
 - Demand-pull inflation
 - Cost-push inflation
 - Core inflation
 - Imported inflation
- Monetary Policy Committee:
 - Established under RBI Act, 1934 (amended in 2016)
 - Inflation target: $4\% \pm 2\%$
- CPI compiled by:
 - National Statistical Office (NSO)
- WPI compiled by:
 - Office of Economic Adviser, Ministry of Commerce
- Crude oil imports significantly impact:
 - CAD
 - Forex reserves
 - Inflation
- Repo rate is RBI's primary monetary policy tool.

Critical Analysis

Concerns

- Rising fuel prices may trigger broad-based inflation.
- High WPI indicates future retail inflation risks.
- Imported inflation due to rupee depreciation may worsen macroeconomic stability.
- Inflation reduces:
 - Real income
 - Household consumption
 - Savings
- RBI faces policy dilemma between:
 - Controlling inflation
 - Supporting growth

Government Challenges

- Fiscal burden due to fuel subsidies and under-recoveries
- Managing CAD and rupee depreciation
- Balancing welfare spending with fiscal discipline

Economic Implications

- Higher interest rates may:
 - Reduce investment demand
 - Slow economic growth
 - Increase borrowing costs

Way Forward

- Diversify crude oil import sources.
- Promote renewable energy and ethanol blending.
- Strengthen strategic petroleum reserves.
- Improve supply-chain efficiency to reduce logistics costs.
- Maintain calibrated monetary tightening.
- Enhance targeted support for vulnerable households.
- Encourage domestic manufacturing to reduce import dependence.
- Rationalize fuel taxation during global shocks.

Cooling doctrine

Access to safe indoor temperatures must be a public-health entitlement

Over the past decade, India's response to extreme heat has settled into a familiar choreography. Summer comes and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) regurgitates its tally of rising preparedness. The 16th Finance Commission has gone further, recommending that heatwaves be notified as a national disaster – a designation that would unbolt the door to dedicated central funding. But the heat action plan, as currently conceived, has reached the limits of what it can do. Even the NDMA concedes that the quality of these plans is uneven – several are imitations of plans drafted elsewhere. Where implementation happens at all, it leans heavily on short-term palliatives such as water kiosks, public advisories, and shaded waiting areas at bus stops. While these measures save lives at the margins, they do not alter the underlying exposure of the tens of millions of Indians who work, commute and sleep in conditions that are becoming, in the most clinical sense of the word, biologically untenable.

What India needs is something larger and more ambitious – a national cooling doctrine; a scalable framework that treats sustained access to safe indoor temperatures as a public-health entitlement to be guaranteed. The doctrine must begin where the harm is most acute: mandatory minimum cooling standards for indoor workplaces – factories, warehouses, commercial kitchens, call centres, delivery hubs – backed by an honest and fair inspection regime. Technology will have to do the heavy lifting by deploying passive cooling materials, reflective roofing deployed at scale, district cooling systems for dense urban zones, and cheaper, more efficient air conditioning calibrated for the peculiarities of Indian grids. But the problem cannot be solved by importing solutions designed for the temperate, wealthy economies of the global North. India's heat is wetter, longer and more humid than the dry European summers that produced much of the existing cooling literature. Most Indians cannot afford the energy bills that western-style mechanical cooling implicitly assumes, as the grid in India, even on its best days, can supply at most 60% of its installed capacity. There is no quick fix on offer but to keep printing heat action plans while indoor temperatures climb is no longer a serious answer – it is theatre.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India is facing frequent and intense heatwaves due to climate change, urban heat island effect, and rising humidity.
- NDMA-backed Heat Action Plans (HAPs) are being implemented across States/cities.
- 16th Finance Commission reportedly recommended inclusion of heatwaves as a notified disaster for dedicated funding.
- Existing HAPs mainly focus on:
 - Water kiosks
 - Public advisories
 - Cooling shelters
 - Emergency response
- Debate has emerged on the need for a long-term “National Cooling Doctrine” ensuring safe indoor temperatures as a public-health necessity.

Key Points

- Heatwaves increasingly affecting:
 - Labour productivity
 - Public health
 - Urban infrastructure
 - Energy demand
- Major concerns:
 - Unsafe indoor working conditions
 - Lack of cooling access for poor households
 - Weak workplace heat regulations
 - Uneven implementation of HAPs

- India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP), 2019 aims to:
 - Reduce cooling demand by 20–25% by 2037-38
 - Promote sustainable cooling technologies
 - Reduce refrigerant demand
- Passive cooling methods:
 - Reflective roofs
 - Ventilation systems
 - Urban green cover
 - Climate-sensitive building design
- India's cooling challenge differs from Western countries due to:
 - High humidity
 - Large informal workforce
 - Limited affordability
 - Grid constraints

Static Linkages

- Article 21 → Right to life includes health and dignified living.
- Disaster Management Act, 2005 → Institutional framework for disaster mitigation.
- Urban Heat Island Effect → Higher temperatures in densely urbanized regions.
- Wet-bulb temperature → Indicator of human survivability under heat stress.
- Climate adaptation → Reducing vulnerability to climate impacts.
- Energy efficiency → Reduces emissions and electricity demand.
- Sustainable urban planning includes:
 - Green spaces
 - Heat-resilient infrastructure
 - Ventilation-friendly architecture

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reduces heat-related mortality.
- Protects vulnerable workers.
- Improves labour productivity.
- Strengthens climate resilience.

Challenges

- Weak implementation of Heat Action Plans.
- High cost of cooling infrastructure.
- Increased electricity demand.
- Lack of affordable cooling technologies.
- Poor urban planning and declining green cover.
- Informal workers lack legal protection.

Concerns

- Conventional AC use may increase:
 - Carbon emissions
 - Power shortages
 - Refrigerant pollution
- Cooling inequality between rich and poor households.

Way Forward

- Develop a comprehensive National Cooling Doctrine.
- Make workplace heat safety standards mandatory.
- Promote passive cooling infrastructure at scale.
- Expand cool roof programmes in urban slums.
- Integrate heat resilience into Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT.
- Strengthen renewable energy-based cooling systems.
- Improve city-level heat-risk mapping.
- Ensure climate-sensitive urban planning.
- Expand public awareness and early warning systems.

India needs to win back foreign investors. Three things to do

THE OPTIMISM that has long surrounded India's economic story is now being clouded by conflict—whether in the form of tariff wars or tensions spilling over from West Asia. For decades, India enjoyed a balance of payments surplus, which was offset by strong remittances, steady foreign capital inflows, and exports. But the tide seems to have turned. Foreign equity portfolio investors have pulled out over Rs 2 lakh crore so far in 2024, even as oil prices threaten to double the current account deficit to 2 per cent of GDP and the comfort of BoP surplus has given way to the rare situation of the third consecutive year of deficit.

This may become more than a statistical blip as the US–Iran war continues to defy expectations of an early resolution, warranting a closer look at the changing global environment and the policy roadmap ahead. Global capital is no longer the neutral force it once was, nor is it just about efficiency or returns. It is increasingly a tool of strategic competition, more fragmented and increasingly politicised. We are in a two-speed world. Developed economies are seeing bigger dollops of flows, while developing countries are struggling. According to UNCTAD, in 2023, global FDI rose 14 per cent to \$1.6 trillion. Flows to developed economies jumped 13 per cent to \$725 billion, driven by Europe and financial hubs shaped by industrial policy and geopolitics. In contrast, FDI to developing economies fell 2 per cent to \$877 billion.

With the global environment steadily deteriorating and capital becoming more discerning, the way forward for policymakers would be a sequenced, time-bound set of firm actions. First, ensuring stabilisation through bold



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measures to curb imports of oil and gas in line with the Prime Minister's appeal. Do-estic fuel prices must be raised to allow demand-side adjustments, followed by the intent to reform subsidies, especially those of fertilisers. FDI ownership caps could be revisited, including allowing 100 per cent automatic foreign investment into remaining sectors. Note, for India, the FDI story is not one of despair and gross FDI remains resilient. Today, 90 per cent of sectors are on the automatic route. Even Press Note 3, which governs investments from land-border countries, has been eased. Ownership below 20 per cent is automatic, and proposals in electronics and polysilicon are fast-tracked within 60 days. Even these (FPI) rules could be refined by lowering the threshold for scrutiny and adopting a screening system similar to America's Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS). Risks of geopolitical exposure should be managed through careful monitoring. Together, the above changes would make India far more attractive to global capital in the world of 2026.

Second, boosting competitiveness. This should focus on measures at the grassroots, alongside which India must first lead infrastructure delivery. Closing infrastructure gaps and delivering on budgeted capex will keep India in good standing and underwrite growth. Labour reform would be a critical measure, with the Centre having notified rules for all four labour codes. States are expected to finalise rules by the second half of 2026, and compliance could be encouraged through incentives. Raising labour force participation to 65 per cent, via a push to labour-intensive sectors as well as agro-processing, would create

jobs and strengthen India's position in global value chains. Judicial reform is yet another grassroots pillar. By introducing AI-enabled case management and fast-track commercial courts, India could aim to resolve disputes within months rather than years. A new version of the national single-window system would simply approach further importantly. Judicial improvements would simplify the impact of all other reforms. They are politically less contentious but carry high leverage, much like Poland's judicial efficiency reforms that unlocked economic dynamism. Third, for the transformation of the economy over the long term, India must push decisively for trade liberalisation and integration into global value chains. This may also entail tariff cuts with ASEAN and the E11 alongside extending FDI incentives to labour-intensive sectors. This would make exports more sustainable, but only if the institutional foundations of tier two are in place. Broader policy reforms that target energy security, distribution reforms, and the inclusion of the energy sector, specifically electricity and petroleum products, under GST will also have to be acted upon. Financial deepening would provide resilience against volatile foreign portfolio flows. Working to deepen and engage the corporate bond market could also help build domestic pools of capital. India stands at a crossroad and the policy imperative is clear: Big-bang reforms can draw stays and even grow the pie. The world is watching whether India can match ambition with execution.

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- FDI: Long-term investment involving ownership and control.
- FCNR Deposits: Foreign Currency Non-Resident deposits by NRIs.

Static Linkages

- India imports nearly 85% of crude oil requirements.
- RBI manages India's foreign exchange reserves.
- Press Note 3 (2020):
 - Government approval mandatory for investments from neighbouring countries sharing land borders with India.
- GST Council:
 - Constitutional body under Article 279A.
- Labour Codes:
 - Aim to simplify labour laws and improve Ease of Doing Business.
- Corporate bond market:
 - Important for long-term infrastructure financing.
- Global Value Chains (GVCs):
 - Critical for export-led manufacturing growth.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Large forex reserves provide macroeconomic stability.
- FDI reforms can improve investor confidence.
- Labour and judicial reforms improve Ease of Doing Business.
- Trade liberalisation may boost exports.

Concerns

- Excessive dependence on foreign capital increases vulnerability.
- Oil price shocks can worsen inflation and CAD.
- Trade liberalisation may hurt MSMEs.
- Tax concessions may reduce government revenue.

Challenges

- Global geopolitical instability.
- Rising protectionism globally.
- Delays in labour reforms by states.
- Weak domestic manufacturing competitiveness.

Way Forward

- Diversify energy imports and promote renewable energy.
- Deepen domestic financial markets.
- Improve export competitiveness.
- Fast-track infrastructure projects.
- Strengthen judicial efficiency and contract enforcement.
- Promote labour-intensive manufacturing.
- Ensure calibrated trade liberalisation.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India is facing pressure on its external sector due to:
 - Rising crude oil prices.
 - Global geopolitical tensions.
 - Foreign Portfolio Investor (FPI) outflows.
- Current Account Deficit (CAD) may rise to nearly 2% of GDP.
- Global capital flows are increasingly influenced by geopolitics and strategic interests.
- India is considering reforms related to:
 - FDI liberalisation.
 - Tax reforms.
 - Labour reforms.
 - Trade liberalisation.
 - Infrastructure push.

Key Points

External Sector Concerns

- Persistent FPI outflows weaken capital inflows.
- Rising crude oil imports increase CAD.
- Gold imports add pressure on BoP.
- Global uncertainty affects emerging economies disproportionately.

Suggested Reform Measures

- Rationalisation of capital gains taxation for foreign investors.
- Expansion of sectors under automatic FDI route.
- Labour code implementation.
- Judicial and contract enforcement reforms.
- Trade agreements with ASEAN and EU.
- Inclusion of petroleum products under GST.
- Strengthening corporate bond markets.

Important Economic Terms

- Balance of Payments (BoP): Record of all economic transactions with rest of world.
- Current Account Deficit (CAD): Excess of imports over exports in goods/services.
- FPI: Short-term portfolio investment in stocks/bonds.

No country can erect walls high enough to keep disease out



GAUTAM I MENON

THE MV *Hondius*, a Dutch-flagged ship, left the southern Argentinian port of Ushuala on April 1 to return to Europe. It had passengers and crew members from over 20 countries. The passengers included an elderly Dutch couple who had travelled in Chile and Argentina before boarding. The man, 70 years old, was the first to die on the ship on April 11. He'd complained initially of a fever, headache, and diarrhoea, which soon morphed into acute respiratory distress. His wife fell ill shortly after leaving the ship, collapsing at an airport in Johannesburg, and died shortly after in a local health facility. Meanwhile, on the ship, a British national had similar difficulties in breathing as the Dutchman. He was evacuated to an ICU in South Africa. On May 2, a German woman died on board the ship. She had been unwell for only five days. On the same day, tests conducted in South Africa confirmed a viral infection, from a virus called the hantavirus, in the British man. On May 4, tests confirmed such an infection in the German woman.

This virus, which causes fever, fatigue, nausea, and breathing difficulty, is typically contracted through contact with rodent droppings and urine. Although infections are rare, the fatality rate ranges between 30 and 50 per cent. The hantavirus strain involved in this outbreak, the Andes strain, is the only version of the virus known to be transmissible between humans. There is no known cure or vaccine. On May 3, the MV *Hondius* reached the vicinity of Cape Verde. Three passengers presented with high fever and/or gastrointestinal symptoms, including the doctor who had treated the first patient. On May 5, the Spanish Ministry of Health announced that it had agreed to allow the ship to travel to Spain's Canary Islands. The cruise ship is currently anchored in Tenerife in the Canary Islands, where its passengers are being evacuated and flown home.

What epidemiological lessons can we draw from the MV *Hondius*? First, international collaborations, communication, and coordination remain crucial to global health, even as international health agencies come under increasing pressure. The US officially withdrew from the WHO

in January 2026, terminating all funding and related in-kind support.

Technical cooperation and information sharing between US agencies such as the CDC and the WHO continue for the moment. But the US response also takes place amid severe cuts in American public health research infrastructure. Many grants focused on infectious diseases and pandemic preparedness have been cut. Reinstating these, even if the government wanted to, will take time. And it deprives the world, at least at the official level, of the substantial experience that could be contributed by the US.

The strain of the hantavirus has been sequenced. It is known to vary from a sequenced strain from an outbreak dating to about a decade ago, where spread required prolonged in-person contact. These changes are a cause for worry, but it's too early to speculate. It is generally assumed that patients infected by the hantavirus will become infectious only once they begin to exhibit symptoms, but this might itself be incorrect. The WHO recommends strict isolation and quarantine of those who were travelling on the ship, and tracking of those they may have contacted. The quarantine time indicated is six weeks. Not everyone will disembark in Tenerife: Some 30 crew members will stay on board to take the cruise ship back to the Netherlands. Whether the two Indians from the crew will be part of this group is unknown, but it is likely that they will be quarantined for the mandated period. There are no risks to India directly, an offshoot of the fact that outbreaks on ships are most easily prevented from spreading if handled correctly.

Outbreaks of infectious disease, such as the hantavirus, remind us that in an interconnected world, we cannot erect walls high enough to keep every such disease out. The way out lies in global cooperation, in transparency, and indeed in governments funding global health agencies at the level they require to perform their essential roles. The US should not be our exemplar in this regard.

The writer is professor of Physics and Biology at Ashoka University. Views expressed are his own and do not represent those of his institution

International collaborations, communication and coordination remain crucial to global health, even as international health agencies come under increasing pressure

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Outbreak of Andes strain hantavirus reported on cruise ship mV *Hondius* travelling from South America to Europe.
- Multiple passengers developed severe respiratory illness; deaths reported among Dutch and German passengers.
- South African tests confirmed hantavirus infection.
- WHO advised quarantine, contact tracing, and strict isolation.
- Incident highlighted importance of global health cooperation and pandemic preparedness.

Key Points

Hantavirus

- Zoonotic viral disease spread mainly through:
 - Rodent urine
 - Saliva
 - Droppings
- Symptoms:
 - Fever
 - Fatigue
 - Headache
 - Respiratory distress
- Fatality rate: around 30–50% in severe cases.

Andes Strain

- Found mainly in South America.
- Only hantavirus strain known for human-to-human transmission.

Public Health Concerns

- Cruise ships are vulnerable due to:
 - High population density
 - Shared spaces
 - International mobility
- Highlights risks from emerging zoonotic diseases.

Global Health Governance

- WHO coordination important for:
 - Disease surveillance
 - Information sharing
 - Quarantine protocols
- Weakening international cooperation can reduce pandemic preparedness capacity.

India-Relevant Dimensions

- Importance of:
 - Port health infrastructure
 - Disease surveillance
 - Pandemic preparedness
 - One Health approach

Static Linkages

- International Health Regulations (2005)
- Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897
- Disaster Management Act, 2005
- One Health Approach
- Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP)
- National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC)
- WHO's role in global health governance
- Zoonotic diseases and biodiversity linkages

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Rapid international coordination helped contain spread.
- Genomic sequencing enabled identification of virus strain.
- WHO protocols strengthened response mechanism.

Challenges

- Lack of vaccine or specific cure.
- High fatality rate.
- Weakening global funding for health preparedness.
- Difficulty in managing outbreaks in closed settings like ships.

Concerns

- Emerging zoonotic diseases increasing globally.
- Globalization accelerates disease transmission.
- Need for stronger international cooperation.

Way Forward

- Strengthen WHO-led surveillance mechanisms.
- Promote One Health framework.
- Increase investment in pandemic preparedness.
- Improve international disease reporting systems.
- Strengthen India's IDSP and port surveillance systems.
- Enhance genomic sequencing infrastructure.

Behind govt ban on sugar exports: Iran war, El Niño

The govt already faces worries over fuel, fertiliser and food inflation. It would not want any potential sugar shortage to add to these concerns



HARISH DAMODARAN

TWO TERMS are spooking Indian policymakers with regard to agriculture: Iran war and El Niño. These also explain the thinking behind the government's decision to ban exports of sugar, notwithstanding the reasonably comfortable domestic availability of the sweetener for now.

The Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) Wednesday issued a notification placing exports of all raw, white and refined sugar in the "prohibited" category "with immediate effect till September 30, 2026".

In other words, no sugar — barring the 14,500-odd tonnes under preferential quotas as concessional duties to the European Union and the US — can go out of the country in the remaining part of the 2025-26 crushing year (October-September).

Supply situation

Indian mills are expected to produce 279 lakh tonnes (lt) of sugar in 2025-26. With opening stocks on October 1, 2025 at over 40 lt, the total supply of 329 lt would exceed the projected domestic consumption of 280 lt.

As far as exports go, the government had initially (on November 14) allowed 15 lt of shipments for the current sugar year (the sugar year runs from October to September). On February 18, it permitted an additional 5 lt of exports, taking the overall allocation for 2025-26 to 20 lt.

Out of the 20 lt, around 6 lt has already been shipped out of the country. Add to this another 0.5 lt now in ports, and the loading of which on vessels had commenced before the DGFT notification's publication.

This would take the exports for the whole of 2025-26 to 6.5 lt. Deducing this,

MEASURING INDIA'S SUGAR LEVEL

Chart 1: Sugar tally in 2025-26 (lakh tonnes)

Opening stock (i)	50.03
Domestic production (ii)	279
Total supply (i+ii)	329.03
Domestic consumption (iii)	280
Exports (iv)	6.5
Closing stock (i+ii-iii-iv)	42.53

The sugar year runs from October to September. *Industry estimates, Source: National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories Ltd. Note: Complete chart on indianexpress.com

along with the 280-lt domestic consumption, from the total availability of 329 lt will take the closing stocks as on September 30 to 42.5 lt (see chart 1).

This closing stock level would be the lowest since the 39.4 lt of the 2016-17 sugar year (see chart 2). That, by itself, shouldn't be cause for concern, as it is equivalent to about 1.8 months of domestic consumption, which can comfortably cover the country's requirement through (b) until in early-November. Mills would, moreover, be struggling for the next sugar year from November.

Trouble in the seas

Sugarcane requires high doses of fertilisers and plenty of water. The Iran war has choked fertiliser supply through the Strait of Hormuz. And the El Niño ocean warming phenomenon will affect the monsoon.

Taking no chances

This raises the question: Why has the Union government banned sugar exports, moving it from the "restricted" that is, subject to quantitative caps to the outright "prohibited" category? There are three reasons.

The first has to do with El Niño — an abnormal warming of the waters of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean that leads to increased evaporation and



Chart 2: Sugar closing stocks at a nine-year low

Sugar stocks in lakh tonnes

cloud-formation activity around South America, while depriving India, Southeast Asia and Australia of convective currents. El Niño is generally associated with sub-normal monsoon rainfall and higher than-average temperatures in India.

Most global climate models are forecasting that a "weak-to-moderate" El Niño will emerge towards July, which can affect rains in the second half of the four-month southwest monsoon season (June-September). The models also suggest that the El Niño will persist till at least the end of 2026, with a significant probability of turning into a "strong-to-very strong" event.

The impact of a poor monsoon won't be felt much in the coming sugar year. There's no dearth of water for the cane that is standing in the fields now and would be crushed in 2025-27. The problem will be for the crop that is planted for the 2027-28 sugar year, said a Maharashtra-based miller.

Farmers in Uttar Pradesh plant sugarcane between February and April. It becomes ready for crushing in 11-12 months. However, a



Farmers in Uttar Pradesh plant sugarcane during February-April. It becomes ready for crushing in 11-12 months. (Source: AP/ICICI)

accounted for by a 15-month "pre-seasonal" crop planted during July-December. The balance 10% and 15% comprise an 18-month "adult" (April-June) and a 12-month "nursery" (January-February) planting respectively.

It is the new cane that farmers have planted will die soon from July — for crushing only next year — which would bear the brunt of El Niño.

This crop can also suffer from a shortage of fertilisers due to the ongoing West Asia supply crisis. And that links up with the second reason for the decision to ban exports — sugarcane requires high doses of fertilisers, in addition to water, for optimal growth and yields.

The third reason is stocks. Sugar mills are supposed to file "P" forms before the tenth of every month, furnishing data on the stocks held by them at the start of the month. Based on this data filed online, the Department of Food and Public Distribution allows ("releases") the quota of sugar for each mill to sell in the whole of that month.

"The government is not sure if all mills are actually holding the quantity of stocks declared in their monthly 'P' returns. Such mills may have monthly release quota, but not the corresponding physical sugar to sell," said the miller quoted earlier.

Either way, the government does not want to risk any prospective shortfall in supply, adding to its worries over fuel, fertiliser and food inflation.

Buy the export ban per se may not help. Ex-factory prices of sugar are at Rs 36-38.5 per kg in Maharashtra and Rs 40-40.5 in Uttar Pradesh. In comparison, export prices of Indian white sugar loaded onto ships are about Rs 41 per kg, and Rs 34 per kg for raw sugar. With bagging, transportation and port handling charges at Rs 2.5/kg, the ex-factory realisations from exports would be lower than realisations from domestic sales.

The absence of price parity already limited the quantity of sugar that could be exported from India. The ban shuts that window altogether.

Static Linkages

- El Niño:
 - Periodic warming of central/eastern Pacific Ocean.
 - Usually linked with below-normal monsoon in India.
- Sugarcane:
 - Tropical crop requiring high temperature, irrigation and fertilisers.
- India:
 - Largest sugar consumer globally.
 - Among top sugar producers.
- Food inflation:
 - Major component of Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- Strait of Hormuz:
 - Critical global trade route for crude oil and fertiliser supplies.
- DGFT:
 - Functions under Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Helps maintain domestic sugar availability.
- Controls food inflation.
- Prevents speculative hoarding.
- Ensures food security amid climate uncertainty.

Concerns

- Reduces export revenue.
- May affect sugar mill profitability.
- Can impact timely payment to farmers.
- Frequent export restrictions reduce policy predictability.

Structural Issues Highlighted

- Overdependence on water-intensive crops.
- High vulnerability of agriculture to climate variability.
- Dependence on imported fertiliser inputs.
- Regional concentration of sugarcane cultivation in water-stressed areas.

Way Forward

- Promote crop diversification in drought-prone regions.
- Increase drip irrigation and micro-irrigation coverage.
- Develop climate-resilient agriculture systems.
- Strengthen fertiliser supply chain security.
- Improve transparency in sugar stock reporting.
- Adopt stable and predictable export policies.
- Expand ethanol blending programme for better sugar management.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- The Government of India banned sugar exports till September 30, 2026 through a DGFT notification.
- The decision was taken due to:
 - Emerging El Niño conditions,
 - Concerns over weak monsoon,
 - Fertiliser supply disruptions due to West Asia tensions,
 - Need to control food inflation and maintain adequate domestic sugar stocks.
- India had earlier allowed 20 lakh tonnes (LT) of sugar exports in 2025-26, but the remaining exports are now prohibited.

Key Points

- Estimated sugar production (2025-26): 279 LT.
- Total sugar availability including opening stock: 329 LT.
- Estimated domestic consumption: 280 LT.
- Expected closing stock: 42.5 LT (lowest since 2016-17).

Reasons Behind Export Ban

- El Niño may weaken southwest monsoon and affect future sugarcane production.
- Sugarcane is a highly water-intensive crop.
- West Asia crisis may disrupt fertiliser supply through Strait of Hormuz.
- Government aims to prevent food inflation and maintain buffer availability.
- Concerns regarding actual physical sugar stocks held by mills.

Economic Dimensions

- Domestic sugar prices currently provide better returns than exports.
- Government prioritised domestic availability over export earnings.
- Policy reflects India's precautionary food security approach.