



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Ordinance increases number of SC judges to 37

President Droupadi Murmu has promulgated an ordinance, which will be taken up by Parliament when it convenes; the move is a step towards tiding over crisis of pendency of cases plaguing the court; current backlog of cases stands at over 93,000, which is threatening to reach six figures rapidly even as the court goes into summer recess in June

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu has promulgated an ordinance increasing the number of judges in the Supreme Court to 37 – excluding the Chief Justice of India.

The May 16 Gazette notification says "Parliament is not in session and the President is satisfied that the circumstances exist which render it necessary for her to take immediate action [issue of ordinance]".

The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Ordinance, 2026, has been promulgated in accordance with the powers of the President under Article 123 of the

Constitution. The ordinance will be placed in both Houses of Parliament when it convenes. It will cease to operate if six weeks expire without any resolution passed on it after the reassembly of Parliament or if resolutions are passed in both Houses of Parliament approving the ordinance.

The President can withdraw the ordinance at any time.

Strength crisis

The ordinance has amended Section 2 of the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956 to replace the word "thirty-three" with "thirty-seven".

The promulgation has happened nearly two weeks after the Union Ca-

Judicial numbers

The top court currently has a backlog of over 93,000 cases, which is threatening to reach six figures even as the court is going into summer recess, or "partial working days", in June.

The Framers of the Constitution had originally in Article 124(1) envisaged a Supreme Court consisting of the CJI and not more than seven judges – with no more than two judges to be appointed by law prescribes a larger number".

Graph shows increase in strength of the Supreme Court (Maximum number of judges excluding the CJI)



binet approved the proposal to increase the number of Supreme Court judges.

With the ordinance in place, the total sanctioned judicial strength in the Su-

preme Court, including the Chief Justice of India, will rise from 34 to 38.

The move is seen as a step towards tiding over the continuing crisis of

pendency plaguing the court for years now, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, when the facility of e-filing of cases caught on.

The current backlog is over 93,000 cases.

The backlog is threatening to reach six figures even as the court is going into summer recess, or "partial working days", in June.

Six-year hiatus

The government's approval for more judges in the Supreme Court had come after a six-year hiatus. Parliament had last amended Section 2 of the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956 in 2019, raising the sanctioned strength from 30 to 33, excluding

the Chief Justice of India.

At present, there are two judicial vacancies in the top court. These are of the previous Chief Justice of India, Justice B.R. Gavai, who retired in November 2025, and Justice Rajesh Bindal, who completed office in April 2025.

Three more judges are scheduled to retire in 2026. Justices J.K. Maheshwari and Pankaj Mithal will end their tenure in June, and Justice Sanjay Karol in August.

The Framers of the Constitution had originally in Article 124(1) envisaged a Supreme Court consisting of the Chief Justice of India and "not more than seven judges" until "Parliament by law prescribes a larger number".

The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956, as originally enacted, provided for the maximum number of judges (excluding the CJI) to be 10.

This number was increased to 13 by the Supreme Court (Number of Judges), Amendment Act, 1960, and to 17 by another amendment to the law.

The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Act, 1986, augmented the strength of the Supreme Court judges from 17 to 25, excluding the CJI. Subsequently, a fresh amendment in 2009 further augmented the strength of top court judges from 25 to 30.

This was followed by the previous amendment in 2019.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- President promulgated the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Ordinance, 2026 under Article 123.
- Strength of Supreme Court judges increased from 33 to 37 (excluding CJI).
- Total sanctioned strength becomes 38 including the Chief Justice of India.
- Decision taken due to rising pendency of cases in the Supreme Court.
- Present backlog exceeds 93,000 cases.
- Last increase in strength was made in 2019.

Key Points

- Ordinance amended Section 2 of the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956.
- Ordinance has force of law but requires parliamentary approval after reassembly.
- Supreme Court currently has judicial vacancies and upcoming retirements in 2026.
- Article 124 originally provided for:
 - CJI + maximum 7 judges.
- Evolution of Supreme Court strength:
 - 1956 → 10 judges
 - 1960 → 13 judges
 - Later → 17 judges
 - 1986 → 25 judges
 - 2009 → 30 judges
 - 2019 → 33 judges
 - 2026 → 37 judges
- Aim:
 - Reduce pendency
 - Improve justice delivery
 - Strengthen constitutional adjudication capacity

Static Linkages

- Article 124 → Establishment and composition of Supreme Court.
- Article 123 → Ordinance-making power of President.
- Ordinance valid only when Parliament is not in session.

- Ordinance ceases after six weeks from reassembly of Parliament if not approved.
- Independence of judiciary is part of Basic Structure doctrine.
- Speedy justice linked with Article 21.
- Parliament determines Supreme Court judge strength by law.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- May help reduce case pendency.
- Improves disposal capacity of Supreme Court.
- Enables more Constitution Benches and specialised hearings.
- Strengthens access to justice.

Challenges

- Increase in judges alone may not solve pendency.
- Delay in judicial appointments persists.
- Infrastructure and staff shortages remain.
- Large pendency mainly exists in lower judiciary.

Constitutional Concerns

- Frequent use of ordinance route may bypass parliamentary debate.
- Need balance between executive urgency and legislative scrutiny.

Way Forward

- Fill vacancies quickly.
- Strengthen subordinate judiciary.
- Improve court infrastructure and digitisation.
- Promote ADR mechanisms.
- Ensure judicial reforms in procedure and case management.
- Increase judge-to-population ratio.

India, Netherlands upgrade bilateral ties, sign 17 pacts

Deals inked cover areas of water, agriculture, health, renewable energy, critical minerals and a semiconductor project; govt. pushes back on Dutch concerns over press freedom, minority rights

Suhassini Haldar
OSLO

India and the Netherlands upgraded bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the country on Saturday and Sunday. The two sides signed 17 agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in areas of "WAH" (water, agriculture, and health), renewable energy, critical minerals, and a semiconductor fabrication project between TATA Electronics and Dutch company ASML.

Recently elected Dutch Prime Minister Rob Jetten said he had raised "sensitive topics" with Mr. Modi, including a legal custody and abduction case involving a Dutch-born child, Insiya. Besides, a number of Dutch media outlets reported that Mr. Jetten spoke about concerns over "press freedoms and minority rights in India", which the External Affairs Ministry later pushed back on.

'New momentum'
Mr. Modi said the meetings had added a "new momentum" to the India-Netherlands ties. "From elevating our relationship to a Strategic Partnership to expanding cooperation in water resources, semiconductors, innovation, defence, sustainability and mobility, we have charted an ambitious road map for the future," he said in a social media post after leaving the Netherlands. Mr. Modi flew to Sweden on Sunday for a half-day stop as part of his five-nation week-long visit, which will bring him to Oslo on Monday for bilateral talks and the Nordic-India Summit.



Diplomatic visit: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Dutch counterpart Rob Jetten at a meeting in The Hague on Saturday. ANI

"The strategic partnership we are entering into today between India and the Netherlands also offers us opportunities to discuss sensitive topics more frequently," said Prime Minister Jetten during press statement at his official residence, the Catshuis, where he met with Mr. Modi, Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* reported.

'Lack of understanding'
Mr. Jetten also reportedly said that "the Netherlands and the European Union are worried about press freedom and minority rights, among them the Muslim community and smaller communities". At an External Affairs Ministry briefing on Sunday, two Dutch journalists sought the Ministry's response to the comments and also asked why the Prime Minister had not joined the press conference.

"This question comes because of the lack of understanding," retorted Ministry Secretary (West) Sibi

The spokesperson also told *The Hindu* that the Dutch PM "didn't raise anything like that in the bilateral meetings or any other engagement with PM".

Mr. George acknowledged Mr. Jetten raised the case of Insiya, allegedly abducted by her father (an Indian) in 2016, as her mother protested during Mr. Modi's visit, seeking India's help to trace and extradite the child and bring the father to justice. "A case is in the court, it is *sub judice*, so I would not like to comment on this at this stage, but it was raised [by the Dutch PM]," he said.

George in a lengthy response about India's diversity in culture, language, food, and religion to a question from Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*. "Today we are 1.4 billion people, diverse, living in peace and harmony. And a democratically elected government where peaceful transition of power happens," he said. However, he added that he had not seen the statement by Mr. Jetten that the journalists had referred to, but was giving the "factual position".

"You need to have more understanding of India to appreciate what India is," he told another journalist from NRC.

The spokesperson also told *The Hindu* that the Dutch PM "didn't raise anything like that in the bilateral meetings or any other engagement with PM".

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- PM Narendra Modi visited Norway – first bilateral visit by an Indian PM in 43 years.
- India participated in the 3rd Nordic-India Summit with:
 - Norway
 - Sweden
 - Finland
 - Denmark
 - Iceland
- India and Norway discussed:
 - Energy security
 - LNG supplies
 - Digital infrastructure
 - Space cooperation
 - Green technology
- India and Netherlands upgraded ties to a Strategic Partnership.
- 17 MoUs signed in:
 - Renewable energy
 - Water management
 - Critical minerals
 - Semiconductors
- Semiconductor collaboration announced between TATA Electronics and ASML.

Key Points

- Nordic countries are leaders in:
 - Green energy
 - Clean technologies
 - Maritime economy
 - Digital governance
- Norway is a major exporter of:
 - Oil

- Natural gas
- LNG
- India seeks diversification of energy imports amid uncertainty over Russian oil supplies.
- India's trade with Nordic countries is around \$19 billion.
- More than 700 Nordic companies operate in India.
- ASML is critical for advanced semiconductor lithography technology.
- India aims to become part of resilient global semiconductor supply chains.
- Discussions also covered:
 - Russia-Ukraine war
 - Gaza conflict
 - Climate change
 - Supply-chain resilience

Static Linkages

- Strategic autonomy is a core principle of India's foreign policy.
- Energy security is linked to economic growth and national security.
- Critical minerals are essential for EVs, semiconductors and renewable energy.
- Semiconductor manufacturing is strategically important for technological sovereignty.
- India's Arctic Policy (2022) focuses on sustainable development and scientific cooperation.
- Blue Economy promotes sustainable use of ocean resources.
- Sovereign wealth funds invest surplus revenues for long-term returns.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Strengthens India-Europe strategic engagement.
- Enhances energy diversification.
- Boosts semiconductor ecosystem in India.
- Encourages green technology collaboration.
- Increases investment opportunities from Nordic pension funds.

Challenges

- India remains dependent on imported energy.
- Semiconductor manufacturing requires high capital and advanced technology.
- Geopolitical conflicts can disrupt energy and supply chains.
- Trade barriers continue in India-EU negotiations.

Way Forward

- Accelerate India-EU FTA negotiations.
- Expand cooperation in green hydrogen and offshore wind.
- Develop domestic semiconductor ecosystem.
- Secure long-term critical mineral supply chains.
- Promote technology partnerships with Nordic countries.

Return of Chola-era copper plates should spark efforts for further repatriations, say Indian archaeologists

T.S. Subramanian
CHENNAI

The return of the Chola-era Anaimangalam copper plates charter from the Netherlands this week marks a watershed event in the history of the repatriation of India's irreplaceable bronzes, stone sculptures, and carved temple pillars, according to historians and archaeologists.

The artefacts, which have been in the possession of Leiden University for almost two centuries and are popularly known as the Leiden copper plates, were presented in a ceremony at the Hague on Saturday, in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Dutch counterpart, Rob Jetten.

"This is the first time that the Chola period copper plates are being brought back to India," said V. Vedachalam, an archaeologist who specialises in the Pandya, the Pallava and the Chola copper plate charters, welcoming the development.

"We should make efforts to bring back the *vevikkudi* copper plates issued by



The Chola-era copper plates, which were handed back to India by the Netherlands on Saturday, and, right, the tower of the Buddha vihara, called Chulamanivarma Vihara, near Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu, which was demolished by Jesuit priests in 1867.



command. This is mentioned in the larger Leiden plates, Dr. Vedachalam said.

The Chulamanivarma Vihara was also called the Raja Raja Chola Perum-palli (or the big vihara), during the time of Rajendra Chola I.

"The Leiden copper plates... are a complete set of 21 large plates and three small plates. The large plates were committed to writing by Rajendra Chola I in five Sanskrit plates and 16 Tamil plates, honouring his father Raja Raja's oral commitment," says K. Kirubanidhi in the book titled *Epic: saga of the Cholas: Their art, temples and heritage*, first published by *The Hindu* in August 2023.

"The small plates in Tamil, later given effect to by Kulottunga Chola I (regnal years 1070-1120 CE), talk about the additional grants made to the *sangha* associated with the vihara in Nagapattinam," Mr. Kirubanidhi wrote.

Dr. Vedachalam added that two emissaries from the Javanese kingdom appealed to Kulottunga Chola I to ensure the implementation of Raja Raja Chola I's order.

Kulottunga not only gave them that assurance but made a grant of 4,500 *kalam* (an unit of measurement) of paddy plus land to the Chulamanivarma Vihara. This was in addition to Raja Raja Chola I's grant of 8,043 *kalam* of paddy.

Chola insignia

The Leiden plates were strung together by a ring bearing the royal insignia of the Chola dynasty. These included a tiger, the royal emblem of the Cholas, the two fish of the Pandya, the bow of the Cheras, two *chamara*s, the royal parasol, lamps, and a swastika. The inclusion of the two fish and the bow signified that the Cholas had defeated the Pandyas and the Cheras.

The bigger Leiden plates carry the word "Anaimangalam" in Tamil on the royal emblem, and a short *stotra* in Sanskrit in praise of Rajendra Chola I, Dr. Vedachalam said. The small plates carry a brief *stotra* lauding Kulottunga Chola I.

Static Linkages

Chola Administration

- Strong central administration with local self-government.
- Institutions:
 - Sabha
 - Ur
 - Nagaram

Chola Economy

- Agrarian economy with detailed land surveys.
- Revenue collected in kind and cash.

Maritime Trade

- Nagapattinam was an important port city.
- Cholas maintained naval dominance in the Indian Ocean.

Epigraphy

- Copper plate inscriptions are major historical sources for medieval India.

Heritage Conservation

- UNESCO Convention, 1970:
 - Prevents illegal trafficking of cultural property.
- Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972 regulates antiquities in India.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Restoration of India's cultural heritage.
- Strengthens India's soft power diplomacy.
- Highlights global recognition of Indian civilisation.
- Encourages recovery of other stolen artefacts.

Challenges

- Many artefacts remain abroad.
- Difficult legal procedures for repatriation.
- Illegal antiquities trade continues.
- Need for better preservation infrastructure in India.

Way Forward

- Strengthen provenance tracking of artefacts.
- Improve museum conservation facilities.
- Increase international cooperation for heritage return.
- Digitise ancient inscriptions and records.
- Enhance monitoring against smuggling of antiquities.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- India received the Chola-era Anaimangalam copper plates from the Netherlands after nearly 200 years.
- The artefacts were housed at Leiden University and are popularly known as the Leiden Copper Plates.
- The handover took place at The Hague during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit.
- Historians consider it a major step in the repatriation of India's cultural heritage.

Key Points

About the Copper Plates

- Belong to the Chola period.
- Consist of:
 - 21 large plates
 - 3 small plates
- Written in:
 - Tamil
 - Sanskrit

Rulers Associated

- Raja Raja Chola I
- Rajendra Chola I
- Kulottunga Chola I

Main Content of Inscriptions

- Record land and paddy grants to the:
 - Chulamanivarma Vihara at Nagapattinam.
- Vihara linked with:
 - Srivijaya kingdom (Java/Southeast Asia).

Historical Importance

- Shows:
 - Chola maritime relations
 - Trade and diplomatic links with Southeast Asia
 - Religious tolerance of Cholas
 - Advanced revenue administration

Chola Symbols on Plates

- Tiger → Chola emblem
- Fish → Pandya emblem
- Bow → Chera emblem

One-horse races are a triumph for democracy

There was an industrialist whose company was doing exceptionally well. In a decade since its inception, it captured over 40% of the market share. When I asked him, "Having reached this far, what do you perceive as your biggest challenge going forward?", he paused for a while, his eyes gazing into the distant future, and replied gravely: "Lack of competition".

Ask cricketers legends who have been successful batsmen and they will tell you that their finest innings were those played against formidable bowling attacks, not the centuries scored against minnows. Even spectators enjoy a season, hard fought contest more than a tame one-sided affair, even if it involves their favourite player trouncing a neophyte.

As in business and sports, competition is the haemoglobin of a democracy. It gives meaning to the precept of "rule by the people" by allowing citizens to "fire" incumbents and choose alternatives, thereby liberating them from the TINA ("there is no alternative") trap. However, that presupposes the existence of rivals with the capacity to contest, and challengers who aspire to win against the odds because they believe in the fairness of the system.

Mandates require genuine contests
It is ironic that the rules of the game, as far as elections are concerned, do not consider competition essential to an electoral outcome. Section 53(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, provides for "unopposed" winners, which means that competition takes place only when enough players enter the fray. Otherwise, one can have a contestant but no contest, a winner without a game, and a people's representative without a single vote cast in his favour – a walkover "killing" both the game and its spirit.

For a player to toast his victory there should have been a contest. For a government to claim legitimacy, the electorate must believe that those elected "earned" (pun unintended) their position through a fair process. You can win power without a contest; not a mandate. Competition also gives "losers" hope that they can try to win in the future, making them accept fair electoral outcomes. Peaceful transition of power is one of the healthiest achievements of any electoral democracy.

Competition and contestation enable differing ideologies and social classes to flourish. Going by the economic logic of competition breeding efficiency, it would be reasonable to expect political parties to refine their policies as opponents always look to highlight failures.



Ashok Lavasa
Former Election Commissioner of India and former Union Finance Secretary

Political scientist Robert Dahl referred to a system with high participation but low contestation (like one-party States with high voter turnout) as a "plebiscitary autocracy" rather than a true democracy.

However, competition also presupposes a level playing field and a neutral referee to ensure that. The absence of either tilts the scales against challengers, minimising their chances of success while also denoting their morale and undermining the people's confidence. In fact, the partisanship of a referee tends to rob the victor of the sweet taste of success, even if deserved. One might be seeded higher, have played better than the opponent, enjoy spectators' support, and even deserve to win, but if the referee is seen as partial, the triumph appears tainted.

In West Bengal

Take the example of the West Bengal Assembly elections. Anti-incumbency could well have influenced the voters' choice, and the winning party may have run an effective campaign for its resounding victory. And yet, its performance stands tarnished by accusations of favouritism against the constitutionally designated umpire mandated to provide the "superintendence, direction, and control" of the electoral process.

The outcome is being linked to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls (ER), and analysts have presented constituency-wise data showing deletions of electors that exceed the victory margins, suggesting that the result might have been different but for the SIR.

That the SIR was unwarranted is established by the inability of the process to identify those "ineligible" in terms of Article 326, which was the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s war cry when it commenced the SIR in Bihar in June 2005. Neither at the end of the Bihar SIR nor for the States in the second round has the ECI released figures on the "ineligible" electors weeded out for not meeting the eligibility conditions under Article 326. There have, no doubt, been deletions through the SIR, but these pertain to "permanently shifted, dead, or duplicate" entries, which could have been removed through the normal revision process mandated before every poll.

What we had instead in West Bengal was over 60 lakh electors included in the electoral rolls under the "under adjudication" category, with 27.36 lakh of them deleted after a lightning exercise carried out by judicial officers hastily appointed by the Supreme Court of India. Over 700 judicial officers sprinted through a marathon in their "supreme" effort to accomplish the impossible task of disposing these cases in a short

span of time. Those whose claims were rejected were asked to appear before non-existent Appellate Tribunals.

How, when, and even whether their appeals will be heard is hard to tell, going by the experience of those placed on the doubtful voters (D-voter) list a few years ago in Assam. No official data is in the public domain to indicate whether their voting rights have been restored or whether they remain in limbo. Soon, the 27 lakh affected in West Bengal may join those "missing in action". The crucial factor is that the ECI excluded Assam from the current SIR process, even though the National Register of Citizens prepared there a few years ago classified over 19 lakh people as "non citizens", yet their voting rights remain unaffected.

A neutrality that faces scrutiny

The ECI has invited an indelible taint by engineering a system that made such omission possible under its "superintendence". What sanctity does its slogan, "No voter to be left behind", hold if 27 lakh electors were treated as jetsam? How could the ECI "direct" the use of the illogical "logical discrepancy" tool that created discrepancies of its own? Why did it allow the legitimate functions of the Electoral Registration Officer to be exercised by a system beyond its "control"? Why did it announce the election schedule if it was not confident of finalising the electoral rolls on time? Why did it abdicate the legal provision that allowed the existing rolls to remain valid in the case of "under adjudication" electors who could not go through the full process because of a paucity of time? Why did the ECI not seek the Court's permission to defer the schedule when a mandatory process could not be completed? That the Court did not think it worthwhile to ask the ECI to "tarry a little", and was willing to "suspend" the voting rights of 27 lakh electors, is inexplicable and unfortunate.

With the gradual fading away of political rivals in the States and at the national level, will we witness more "victories" without a fight because the arena is either bereft of competitors, the challengers are too weak, or the umpire's decisions tilt the balance? Interestingly, the umpire himself would become an "extra" if there were no competition. Neither the "pathbreaking" constitutional reform of One Nation, One Election nor the idea of an Opposition made Bihar is aimed at fostering competition, and that does not augur well. There will be little thrill left in a one-horse race.

That it strikes at the very roots of the democratic character of the nation may be a minor matter.

Static Points

- Free and fair elections are part of the Basic Structure doctrine.
- Universal Adult Franchise is a cornerstone of Indian democracy.
- Democracy requires:
 - Participation
 - Political competition
 - Rule of law
- Natural justice requires fair hearing before deprivation of rights.
- Independent constitutional bodies are essential for democratic legitimacy.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Accurate electoral rolls improve electoral integrity.
- Removal of fake voters strengthens democracy.
- Competitive elections ensure accountability.

Concerns

- Large deletions may disenfranchise genuine voters.
- Perceived bias reduces public trust in institutions.
- Weak appeal mechanisms affect vulnerable sections.
- Uneven political competition weakens democratic legitimacy.

Way Forward

- Ensure transparent electoral roll revision process.
- Publish detailed voter deletion data.
- Strengthen grievance redressal systems.
- Provide adequate time for appeals.
- Conduct independent audits of electoral rolls.
- Enhance institutional neutrality and public trust.
- Use technology with human oversight to avoid exclusion errors.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Concerns emerged over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls conducted before elections in some States, especially West Bengal.
- Allegations were raised regarding large-scale deletion of voters and possible impact on electoral outcomes.
- Debate centred on neutrality and transparency of the Election Commission of India.
- Issue highlights the importance of free and fair elections in a parliamentary democracy.

Key Points

- Article 324: ECI has powers of superintendence, direction and control of elections.
- Article 326: Elections based on Universal Adult Suffrage.
- RPA, 1950:
 - Preparation and revision of electoral rolls.
 - Allocation of seats.
- RPA, 1951:
 - Conduct of elections.
 - Election disputes.
- Electoral roll revision aims to remove:
 - Duplicate voters
 - Dead voters
 - Shifted electors
- Major concerns:
 - Voter deletions exceeding victory margins in constituencies.
 - Lack of transparency in identifying "ineligible voters".
 - Weak grievance redressal mechanisms.
 - Questions over institutional neutrality.

Democracy demands not merely elections, but also meaningful and fair competition

PM summit must mark southward turn

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Oslo on May 18-19 for the third India-Nordic Summit comes as the logic of India's engagement with Northern Europe has fundamentally changed. When India first met the Nordics – Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland – in Stockholm in 2016, and again in Copenhagen in 2022, the relationship was anchored largely in climate cooperation, innovation, digitalisation and the blue economy. Those priorities remain important, but a transformed geopolitical landscape is giving the partnership strategic depth and economic purpose.



Ajith Malhotra
Distinguished Fellow and Senior Adviser (Climate Change), IIS, and former Indian Ambassador to Russia, Kuwait, UN, New York, and Romania

The change underway reflects developments beyond bilateral ties. The war in Ukraine has transformed Europe's security order, while strains within the trans-Atlantic alliance have unsettled long-standing assumptions. Denmark, current chair of the Arctic Council, faces renewed pressure from the United States and strategic interest over Greenland.

The spotlight on the Arctic
The Arctic, once insulated from geopolitical rivalry, is emerging as a theatre of competition over shipping routes, energy resources, critical minerals and strategic infrastructure. Finland and Sweden's respective accessions to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have reworked Nordic security architecture, leaving Russia as the Arctic Council's sole non-NATO member. The Russia-China partnership has acquired a polar dimension through cooperation on Arctic shipping and energy. These shifts shape the agenda Mr. Modi will encounter in Oslo.

India and the Nordics now matter more to each other than before, with shared interests in technology, supply chains, maritime security and green energy.

Norway's revised High North strategy balances scientific cooperation with rising security concerns. Denmark, through Greenland, occupies a pivotal position in emerging Arctic sea routes and critical mineral networks. Sweden and Finland contribute advanced defence technologies, innovation ecosystems and Arctic capabilities. Iceland offers geopolitical expertise

directly relevant to India's Himalayan regions. The Arctic, once defined by scientific cooperation, is increasingly shaped by deterrence, energy rivalry and military positioning. New technologies, from autonomous underwater vehicles to satellite-enabled seabed mapping, are reshaping Arctic security, even as vulnerabilities in undersea cables and critical infrastructure grow.

India joined the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013. Its Himadri research station, IndARC underwater observatory and Gruevbadet atmospheric laboratory, in Norway, give India a meaningful Arctic footprint. But science alone cannot safeguard Indian interests in a region increasingly shaped by geopolitics.

As a stakeholder
India is not an Arctic nation, but it is undeniably an Arctic stakeholder. The Arctic is warming more than three times faster than the global average. Ice loss in the Hareits Kara Sea has been linked to variability in India's summer monsoon, while rising polar melt threatens India's coastline, ports and island territories through sea-level rise.

The commercial and strategic stakes are equally important. Accelerating ice melt is opening Arctic waters to shipping, resource extraction and military deployment. The Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast is becoming more navigable, with implications for trade and maritime connectivity. Extending the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor to Murmansk and onward to the Nordics would create a maritime link connecting India, Japan, Russia and Northern Europe. India's Arctic engagement with the Nordics can proceed alongside its partnership with Russia; the two are not a zero-sum game.

India must construct a small fleet of five Arctic-capable, ice-class tankers under its Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy by 2030-31. Delay in building such capacity risks locking India out of early-mover advantages in Arctic shipping and energy logistics. An India-Arctic Economic Forum could connect Indian industry with opportunities in manpower, shipping, energy and infrastructure. It could champion an "Arctic-Himalaya Climate Data

Corridor" with the Nordics for joint monitoring of climate linkages affecting monsoons and sea-level rise. India should appoint a Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs. Unlike the four other Asian observer states in the Arctic Council, it lacks one.

Focus areas
Nordic countries lead globally in offshore wind, hydrogen, electric mobility and green shipping, while India's clean-energy ambitions require technology, investment and trusted partnerships. Cooperation must move beyond buyer-seller arrangements towards co-development and production in offshore wind manufacturing, green hydrogen and grid balancing technologies. Norway's deep-sea mining ambitions, Sweden's rare earths and iron ore, and Denmark's Greenland link offer supply-chain diversification amid concerns over China's processing dominance. Nordic strengths in shipping technology, maritime digitisation, shipbuilding innovation and sustainable port infrastructure. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have exposed maritime vulnerabilities, making route and partnership diversification strategically valuable. Deeper India-Nordic maritime cooperation would advance the economic and geopolitical interests of both.

Maritime cooperation deserves equal attention. India's economic future depends on secure sea lanes, resilient ports and efficient logistics, while Nordic countries lead globally in shipping technology, maritime digitisation, shipbuilding innovation and sustainable port infrastructure. Disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have exposed maritime vulnerabilities, making route and partnership diversification strategically valuable. Deeper India-Nordic maritime cooperation would advance the economic and geopolitical interests of both.

For the Nordics, a re-emerging India offers scale, growth and a trusted democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific; for India, the Nordics provide technology, capital and expertise, without hegemonic pressures. As the Arctic becomes more contested and consequential, the Oslo summit should mark the point at which episodic engagement gives way to sustained strategic partnership.

The views expressed are personal

- Sustainable shipping
- AI and semiconductors
- Critical mineral supply chains
- Climate research cooperation

Suggestions Highlighted

- Develop Arctic-capable ice-class vessels.
- Establish India-Arctic Economic Forum.
- Create Arctic-Himalaya Climate Data Corridor.
- Appoint Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs.

Static Linkages

- Arctic Council established in 1996 through Ottawa Declaration.
- Members of Arctic Council:
 - Canada
 - Denmark
 - Finland
 - Iceland
 - Norway
 - Russia
 - Sweden
 - USA
- India is an Observer State in Arctic Council.
- Northern Sea Route connects Europe and Asia through Arctic Ocean.
- UNCLOS governs maritime rights in Arctic waters.
- Arctic ice melting affects global sea levels and climate systems.
- India's monsoon linked with Arctic climatic variability.
- SAGAR doctrine:
- Security and Growth for All in the Region
- India's Net Zero target: 2070.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Enhances India's role in Arctic governance.
- Improves access to critical minerals and energy resources.
- Diversifies maritime trade routes.
- Strengthens clean energy partnerships.
- Supports resilient supply chains.

Challenges

- Arctic militarisation increasing geopolitical tensions.
- Fragile Arctic ecosystem vulnerable to exploitation.
- India lacks Arctic shipping infrastructure.
- Balancing Russia-West relations remains difficult.
- High technological and financial requirements.

Way Forward

- Strengthen Arctic research infrastructure.
- Develop indigenous ice-class shipping capability.
- Expand India-Nordic clean energy partnerships.
- Increase role in Arctic governance mechanisms.
- Promote sustainable and rules-based Arctic development.
- Enhance climate cooperation on monsoon-Arctic linkages.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- PM Narendra Modi visited Oslo, Norway (May 18-19, 2026) for the 3rd India-Nordic Summit.
- India's engagement with Nordic countries has expanded from climate cooperation to strategic, technological and geopolitical partnership.
- The Russia-Ukraine war, NATO expansion and Arctic competition have increased the strategic relevance of the Nordic region.
- Arctic region is emerging as a major zone for:
 - Shipping routes
 - Critical minerals
 - Energy resources
 - Strategic military positioning
- India is an Observer State in the Arctic Council since 2013.

Key Points

India's Arctic Presence

- Himadri Research Station – Svalbard, Norway
- IndARC underwater observatory
- Gruevbadet atmospheric laboratory
- India released Arctic Policy (2022):
 - "India and the Arctic: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development."

Strategic Importance of Arctic

- Arctic warming is occurring over 3 times faster than global average.
- Melting ice opening Northern Sea Route (NSR).
- Arctic contains:
 - Rare earth minerals
 - Oil & gas reserves
 - Fisheries
 - Strategic sea lanes

Areas of India-Nordic Cooperation

- Green hydrogen
- Offshore wind energy
- Maritime technology

Diversification gains

India needs to improve export competitiveness in terms of cost, quality

India's export performance in April 2026 has been commendable, underscoring the attempts by the government and industry to diversify in times of crisis. Despite the various trade disruptions, merchandise exports grew nearly 14% in April 2026 to \$43.6 billion. Some of this, as even the Commerce Secretary has acknowledged, is due to the overall rise in prices. Another significant factor has been the increase in the number of markets served by Indian exporters. According to government data, at least 20 exporting sectors have added 17 or more new destinations in the last year. For example, handloom products are now exported to 29 more countries than in 2024-25. The additional exports thus generated are still small, but establishing these pathways is vital progress. The data also show that several of India's key export sectors – engineering goods, petroleum products, electronic goods, drugs and pharmaceuticals, and organic and inorganic chemicals – exported more in April 2026 than in the same month last year. This suggests resilience in these supply chains, and the establishment of new ones. Another test of the strength of India's export growth is to remove the effect of petroleum products and their inflated prices from the mix. Here, too, India has performed reasonably well. India's non-oil exports grew 9% in April 2026 to about \$40 billion. Notably, India's merchandise export growth also outpaced the growth of its imports at 9.9%.

That said, the impact of the West Asia crisis is clear. Exports to West Asia fell by 28% in April, following up on an even larger contraction in March. Imports from the region, too, fell about 32%. This is a vital trade link for India and gains in other regions are not yet enough to outweigh the losses here. Imports of the safe-haven asset gold jumped 82% in April, which is perhaps what prompted the Prime Minister to urge Indians to stop buying gold, and the government to hike the import duty. Another highlight of the data is the continued rise in the significance of the services sector. The share of services in total exports has risen to about 49% compared to 39% in 2014. Rather than a reason for complacency, this should make the government take note. Any loss of a competitive edge in IT services, especially, due to the rise of Artificial Intelligence, will be an increasingly costly loss to India. Overall, however, the government's push for diversification of export destinations – including through concerted activity to seal various trade deals – seems to be bearing fruit. Now, if only it could also improve export competitiveness in terms of cost, scale, and quality, India would really become a global contender.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- India's merchandise exports increased by nearly 14% in April 2026 to about \$43.6 billion despite global trade disruptions.
- Non-oil exports also grew by around 9%, indicating broader export resilience.
- Several sectors such as:
 - Engineering goods
 - Electronics
 - Pharmaceuticals
 - Chemicals
 - recorded strong export performance.
- India expanded exports to new destinations, reflecting diversification of markets.
- However, exports to West Asia declined sharply due to regional geopolitical tensions.

Key Points

- More than 20 export sectors added several new export destinations.
- Handloom exports expanded to many additional countries.
- Services exports now account for nearly 49% of India's total exports compared to 39% in 2014.

- Gold imports surged by 82%, raising concerns regarding trade deficit and Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- Export growth exceeded import growth, showing relative external sector strength.

Important Static Linkages

- Exports are part of national income:
$$GDP = C + I + G + (X - M)$$
$$GDP = C + I + G + (X - M)$$
- Current Account of BoP includes:
 - Goods trade
 - Services trade
 - Remittances
- Export diversification reduces dependence on a single market or region.
- High logistics costs reduce export competitiveness.
- Services exports are important for foreign exchange earnings.

Government Initiatives

- Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme
- PM Gati Shakti
- National Logistics Policy
- Districts as Export Hubs
- Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)

Challenges

- Geopolitical instability in West Asia
- Rising gold imports
- High logistics and manufacturing costs
- Dependence on imported intermediate goods
- Threat to IT services from Artificial Intelligence

Way Forward

- Improve manufacturing competitiveness and quality.
- Reduce logistics and transaction costs.
- Diversify export destinations further.
- Promote value-added and high-technology exports.
- Strengthen MSME export ecosystem.
- Invest in AI and advanced digital skills.

Rupee

81-per-dollar mark for the first time in September 2022, the rupee moved in a narrow range of 81-83 per dollar for the next two years or so. It broke past 84 in October 2024 and 85 in December 2024. Since the start of 2025, the rupee is down 11%.

The RBI's stated policy is that it does not target any specific level of the exchange rate and only steps in the market to prevent excessive volatility and ensure orderly movement in either direction: up or down.

However, people aware of the RBI's forex market interventions in 2023 and 2024 disagree with these assertions, arguing that there was a huge Balance of Payments (BoP) surplus at the time which was exerting upward pressure on the rupee. Moreover, the rupee weakened in 2024-25 in line with the long-term trend.

The BoP is the difference between the money Indians send abroad to pay for imports and make investments and the money India receives from overseas for exports and in the form of remittances and what foreigners invest in India – be it in the stock market and bonds or direct investment in the form of factories on the ground.

As India buys more goods and services from abroad than it sells overseas, it suffers from what is called a trade deficit. However, in most years, it is more than able to make up for

this trade deficit thanks to the money that flows in from abroad as investments and remittances. When these foreign fund flows are greater than the trade deficit, the BoP is in surplus, which strengthens the rupee. A negative BoP weakens the rupee.

In 2022-23, India witnessed a deficit of \$9 billion in 2022-23 and the rupee weakened by 7.6% against the US dollar, with the RBI selling then a record \$213 billion as its forex reserves declined by \$29 billion.

In 2023-24, the BoP moved sharply into surplus to the tune of \$64 billion, forcing the RBI to not only reduce its gross dollar sales but buy \$41 billion of foreign currency on a net basis, leading to the forex reserves increasing by \$68 billion. The rupee, meanwhile, declined by 1.4%.

In 2024-25, the BoP moved back to a deficit of \$5 billion and the rupee fell by 2.5%, largely in line with the average 3.2% depreciation witnessed in the previous 10 years. The RBI's gross sales jumped to a record \$399 billion.

According to economists, it is difficult to say if the rupee's current travails have been exacerbated by how the exchange rate moved in previous years.

"I think it's hard to make that assertion with great confidence. For one, in 2023, the rupee would have appreciated and the RBI didn't allow for that too much and built reserves instead. In 2024, it would have depreciated and instead RBI used

the built-up reserves to defend the exchange rate at more stable levels," said Lavanya Venkateswaran, Senior ASEAN Economist at Singapore-based OCBC Bank.

"I think irrespective of what happened in 2023-24, the rupee would be under pressure today. The question may be whether the levels would be this high, but it's hard to play with a counterfactual argument," she said.

Going by current trends, economists are increasingly of the opinion that 100-per-dollar is a "very imminent possibility, either next year or even this year". Rajeswari Sengupta, Associate Professor of Economics at Mumbai's Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR), said attempts to stop the rupee from depreciating as per market forces "can backfire as the issues are structural – band-aids can't heal a deeper wound", adding that "fundamental issues" need to be addressed and structural measures are required to attract foreign capital.

At the same time, the continued depreciation is undermining measures being undertaken to stem the rot. In a report on Friday, State Bank of India Group Chief Economic Advisor Soumya Kanti Ghosh said the rupee has already approached a "critical depreciation threshold" beyond which further currency weakness could substantially erode the intended benefits of domestic fuel price hikes announced last week.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Indian rupee crossed ₹96 per US dollar, touching a record low amid:
 - West Asia geopolitical tensions,
 - rising crude oil prices,
 - strengthening US dollar,
 - foreign capital outflows.
- Debate emerged over RBI's earlier policy of maintaining rupee stability through heavy forex intervention during 2023–24.
- Concerns are rising that rupee may breach ₹100/\$ if external pressures continue.

Key Points

- RBI follows a managed float exchange rate system.
- RBI intervenes in forex markets to:
 - reduce excessive volatility,
 - maintain orderly market conditions.

Balance of Payments (BoP) Trend

- 2022–23: BoP deficit → rupee weakened sharply.
- 2023–24: BoP surplus of about \$64 billion → RBI accumulated reserves.
- 2024–25: BoP again moved into deficit → rupee depreciated further.

Forex Reserves

- RBI used reserves extensively through dollar sales.
- Forex reserves help:
 - stabilize currency,
 - manage external shocks,
 - control imported inflation.

Impact of Rupee Depreciation

Negative

- Costlier imports, especially crude oil.
- Imported inflation rises.
- External debt servicing becomes expensive.
- Investor sentiment may weaken.

Positive

- Exports become more competitive.
- Higher remittance value in rupee terms.
- IT and export-oriented sectors may benefit.

Static Linkages

- Managed floating exchange rate system.
- Balance of Payments:
 - Current Account,
 - Capital Account.
- Current Account Deficit (CAD).
- Foreign Exchange Reserves.
- Imported inflation.
- RBI's role in exchange rate management.
- FEMA, 1999.
- Trilemma in international economics:
 - fixed exchange rate,
 - capital mobility,
 - independent monetary policy.

Critical Analysis

Benefits of RBI Intervention

- Prevents panic in forex markets.
- Controls excessive rupee volatility.
- Helps contain inflationary pressures.
- Maintains macroeconomic stability.

Concerns

- Artificial currency stabilization may delay market correction.
- Excessive intervention can reduce forex reserves.
- Long-term structural issues remain unresolved:
 - oil import dependence,
 - weak manufacturing exports,
 - volatile capital flows.

Way Forward

- Allow gradual market-based exchange rate adjustment.
- Increase export competitiveness.
- Diversify energy sources and reduce oil dependence.
- Attract stable long-term FDI.
- Promote rupee trade settlement mechanisms.
- Maintain adequate forex reserves.
- Strengthen macroeconomic fundamentals.

At Beijing summit, both Trump, Xi got what they came for. But Xi got a bit more

DONALD TRUMP'S state visit to China was a performance of diplomacy. Carefully choreographed, heavy on optics, and light on binding detail. Both sides were eager to show progress: Trump called the visit "very successful", Xi Jinping declared it "historic". The Chinese catered to Trump's weakness for spectacle with the state banquet, the paring tea, and Xi accompanying Trump to the Temple of Heaven — but the substance, as expected, was meagre. Significantly, Beijing, not Washington, controlled the narrative throughout. Trump needed a foreign policy "win" to serve as a distraction from the political headwinds of the Iran war, and to impress markets and domestic constituencies. Xi needed validation: That China had weathered the tariff storm, emerged from geopolitical fiction with its strategic position intact, and was now being counted as a peer by the US, something Chinese leaders have long sought. Both got what they came for. But Xi got a little more.

The new formulation — "constructive strategic stability" — for the bilateral relationship, described by Foreign Minister Wang Yi as "the most important political consensus" of the summit, is Beijing's handiwork. It is a deliberate conceptual move to displace the American vocabulary of "strategic competition" with a Chinese-preferred notion of long-term coexistence with guardrails. Beijing acknowledges the relationship as competitive but talks about keeping it within acceptable limits. Xi's four-part elaboration — "positive stability with cooperation as the mainstay, healthy stability with competition within proper limits, constant stability with manageable differences, and lasting stability with expectable peace" — is designed to lock in the post-

Busan detente. Trump, characteristically, reached for a simpler frame: "It's the two great countries... I call it the G-2." The image of two great powers on equal terms was exactly what Xi had engineered. Both sides signalled a willingness to manage the relationship through summitry and bilateral validation rather than the harder work of resolving underlying disputes.

The lack of two readouts illuminates how much remains unresolved. The White House summary emphasised commercial concerns — buying aircraft orders, agricultural purchases, market access, Chinese investments — and agreement that the Strait of Hormuz must remain open and not be militarised. The Chinese readout was cautious and silent on most US specifics. Neither readout mentioned China's state-nurtured industrial overcapacity and other systemic differences. Most structural problems were kept off the table, allowing China to preserve its policy space.

But Taiwan was an exception. The most striking moment was Xi's Taiwan warning, delivered in a highly staged, public setting carried immediately by state media. If the Taiwan question is handled "poorly", Xi said, "the two countries' risk" "clashes and even conflicts". Taiwan was absent from the US readout entirely. On Air Force One, Trump said he made "no commitment either way" on the pending \$14 billion arms package and called it "a very good negotiating chip". When a reporter inquired about Ronald Reagan's assurance to Taiwan that no resident would consult Chinese leaders on arms sales, Trump dismissed the premise. Decades of US commitment on "Six Assurances" to Taiwan were



ASHOK K. KANTHIA

On Iran and maritime security, the summit produced a measure of concrete, if still qualified, convergence. Both leaders agreed that the Strait of Hormuz must remain open. According to the US readout, Xi expressed interest in purchasing more American oil, agreed that Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon and committed not to sell weapons to Iran. The Chinese readout was circumspect, and the gap between Washington's public optimism and Beijing's operational delivery has a long history. The continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz is hurting China, but it is disinclined to deploy its leverage with Iran beyond a point.

On technology and AI — perhaps the most consequential long-term dimension of the rivalry — the summit was studded with ambiguity. Trump confirmed that chip exports came up, and that Xi told him China wants to make its own. A candid declaration of an indigenisation agenda. Licences for 750,000 H200 NVidia chips remain stalled on the Chinese side, even as the US has cleared sales. Both sides have frozen new technology controls since the October 2025 truce, a freeze that disproportionately benefits Beijing. An AI dialogue was agreed in principle, its content remains undefined.

Conspicuously absent from both readouts were rare earths and export controls, despite their centrality to the current detente. China's weaponisation of critical mineral supply chains — shutting off rare-earth exports last year and forcing Washington to stand down from tariff escalation — is the background condition for the Busan truce, reaffirmed in Beijing. That leverage is carefully maintained, and a China-resilient rare-earth supply

chain remains years away. The larger truth is structural and enduring. China has gained relative to the US and grown more confident despite its economic history without the tools, patience and strategic discipline to manage escalation dynamics. China is ready for long-term, indefinite competition. As the Wei of Tsinghua University observed: "The US side looked a little passive. The Chinese side prepared very well." Trump's instinct for spectacle suits Beijing well; it allows Xi to accumulate the symbolic validation of peer-to-peer summitry without meaningful concessions. The summit was, in that sense, a tactical triumph for China.

For India, the summit is a sobering signal. The immediate effect — reduced risk of sudden great-power crises, some easing of energy market pressures — is modestly positive. But the structural implications are more uncomfortable. The G2 "overlay" — not a formal diarchy, but the atmospheric effect of two great powers coordinating — narrows the manoeuvring space available to other major powers. India included. A Beijing that reads India's interest in improving bilateral relations as a result of India's declining importance in the US strategic calculus has less incentive to offer meaningful concessions on unresolved issues.

The visit is a continuation of a tactical detente, not a strategic reconciliation. By agreeing to a rhetorical framework of "strategic stability", the US and China are buying time even as they know that strategic rivalry is baked in the system. Yet, it is advantageous Beijing. The writer is former ambassador to China and holds the Subhan Chandra Bose Chair of International Relations, Chhatrapati University, Bengaluru

China has gained relative to the US and grown more confident despite its economic headwinds. It has the tools and the strategic discipline to manage escalation dynamics

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- U.S. President Donald Trump visited China amid ongoing U.S.–China strategic rivalry.
- China projected the summit as a move towards “constructive strategic stability” in bilateral ties.
- Discussions focused on:
 - Taiwan issue
 - Trade and tariff tensions
 - Semiconductor and AI competition
 - Rare earth supply chains
 - Iran and Strait of Hormuz security
- The summit reflected a temporary detente rather than resolution of structural rivalry.

Key Points

- China introduced the idea of “constructive strategic stability” to replace the U.S. narrative of “strategic competition”.
- Trump described U.S.–China ties as a possible “G-2” framework.
- Taiwan remained the major flashpoint:
 - China warned against external interference.
 - U.S. maintained ambiguity on arms sales.
- Semiconductor and AI rivalry continues despite limited easing of restrictions.
- China retains strategic leverage through dominance in rare earth minerals.
- For India:
 - Short-term global stability may benefit energy markets.
 - Long-term “G-2” tendencies may reduce strategic space for middle powers.

Static Linkages

- “One China Policy” and Taiwan dispute originated after the Chinese Civil War (1949).
- Rare earth minerals are essential for:
 - Defence production

- EV batteries
- Semiconductor industry
- Renewable energy technologies
- Strait of Hormuz is a critical global oil transit chokepoint.
- India supports a rules-based Indo-Pacific and multipolar world order.
- Strategic autonomy remains a core principle of Indian foreign policy.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reduced immediate risk of major-power confrontation.
- Temporary stability in:
 - Energy markets
 - Global trade
 - Supply chains

Concerns

- Structural rivalry remains unresolved.
- Taiwan issue can trigger Indo-Pacific instability.
- China's rare earth dominance creates global dependency.
- “G-2” atmosphere may marginalise countries like India.

Implications for India

- Need to strengthen:
 - Semiconductor ecosystem
 - Critical mineral partnerships
 - Maritime security
 - Strategic autonomy
- Importance of balancing ties with both U.S. and China.

Way Forward

- Accelerate India Semiconductor Mission.
- Diversify critical mineral supply chains.
- Deepen Indo-Pacific partnerships such as Quad.
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing and technology capacity.
- Continue multi-alignment and strategic autonomy approach.

We need to snap out of agricultural subsidy spiral



AJAY VIR
JAKHAR

MANDISADIQ Gunj is a village in the Bahawalnagar district of Pakistan's Punjab province, where farmers are sowing cotton now. There, struggling farmers must shell out PKR 4,500 for a 50 kg bag of urea and PKR 417 per litre for diesel. One could hardly blame them if they looked across the border and wished they were farming in Modi's India instead. Just a few kilometres away in Maujgarh — a village on the Indian side of Punjab — many own farms under a completely different economic reality.

He pays just Rs 266.50 for a 45 kg bag of urea and Rs 90.94 per litre for diesel. After adjusting for currency exchange rates, Pakistani farmers are paying a staggering 5.8 times more for urea and 1.5 times more for diesel than their Indian counterparts. This glaring disparity stands as a powerful testament to the strength and necessity of India's farmer support systems.

In months, since the war began in the Middle East, the Indian rupee has depreciated by 5 per cent, crude has risen by 10 per cent and the price of urea has doubled. Probably, India is the only country in the world where retail agricultural input prices have remained constant, and there is no shortfall. This week, the government announced an additional hike in the minimum support prices of crops.

The quantum of subsidy going forward is beyond belief and logic. A farmer pays Rs 266.50 and Rs 1,350.00 for a bag of urea and DAP (diammonium phosphate). Since the beginning of the conflict, this will entail a subsidy component of Rs 4,229 and Rs 3,578 per bag. A typical green revolution farmer growing wheat and paddy uses about eight bags of urea and three bags of DAP per acre. The subsidy works out to Rs 44,000 per acre. For a small Indian agricultural household cultivating 2.5 acres, the fertiliser subsidy would amount to a mind-boggling Rs 1,10,000. The monthly cash transfer of Rs 1,000 to women (in many states) and the value of free electricity, pale in comparison.

Yet, subsidy is only part of the story. Modi's political success cannot mask the economic reality that the Indian debt and foreign exchange position will not allow for endless subsidies. India's whole could end up being less than the sum of its parts. The issue for the BJP is not that deliverism is failing. Instead of tracking actual ground sentiment, the BJP has internalised a narrative of widespread farmer resistance to reforms. This fear has forced the government to put agricultural reforms on the back burner. But if it is to subsidise farmers to this large an extent, it opens the door to go back to the drawing board — and not be inhibited by tunnel vision of a legal MSP, or of repurposing subsidies, or the idea of cash transfers to replace subsidies, but instead prioritise environment and livelihoods, and where reforms and transition entail manageable political fallout.

Lack of conviction in their own delivery makes risk-aversion rife among political parties and the government. Thus, the Indian economy faces a "paradox of risk" — in seeking to avoid risks, we amplify challenges and put out on reforms. No piece of legislation can fix the problem. Whatever ability India had is vanishing with the politics of populism, regionalism, nationalism and misgovernance across states. The best possible outcome is that things don't get any worse.

There is a lack of fiscal seriousness across much of India's political class. It's not that they don't understand how subsidies hamper development and incentives generate growth. They rank their core objectives in a fundamentally different order. Political parties like the Congress, TMC, SP or AAP prioritise their own leaders, while for the RSS, BJP and Modi himself, the party takes precedence. Unlike the rest, because the BJP is playing the long game, there is a higher probability of major agricultural reforms. We are only beginning to grasp what lies ahead and the PM's recent appeal for austerity and quiet admission of dependence points to something deeper. There is so much more than just inflation to worry about.

The writer is chairman, Bharat Krishi Samaj

Modi's political success cannot mask the economic reality that the Indian debt and foreign exchange position will not allow for endless subsidies

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Rising global crude oil and fertilizer prices due to the West Asia crisis have increased agricultural input costs worldwide.
- Despite global inflation and rupee depreciation, India has maintained low retail prices of fertilizers and diesel through heavy subsidies.
- The Union Government has also announced higher MSP for Kharif crops.
- Debate has emerged regarding:
 - Fiscal sustainability of subsidies,
 - Delay in agricultural reforms,
 - Environmental impact of input-intensive farming,
 - Political economy of welfare policies.

Key Points

Fertilizer Subsidy

- Farmers pay highly subsidised prices for fertilizers:
 - Urea remains heavily price-controlled.
 - DAP also receives substantial subsidy support.
- India's fertilizer subsidy burden has sharply increased after global price rise.

MSP Support

- MSP for Kharif crops has been increased to protect farmers from inflation and rising costs.
- MSP procurement remains concentrated mainly in wheat and rice.

Fiscal Implications

- Rising subsidy expenditure increases pressure on:
 - Fiscal deficit,
 - Public borrowing,
 - Revenue expenditure.
- High subsidies may reduce capital expenditure on infrastructure and agriculture modernization.

Environmental Concerns

- Cheap urea promotes excessive fertilizer use.
- Consequences:
 - Soil degradation,
 - Groundwater depletion,
 - Nutrient imbalance,
 - Greenhouse gas emissions.

Reform Debate

- Farm law repeal has increased political caution toward reforms.
- Policy debate continues over:
 - Legal MSP guarantee,
 - Direct cash transfers,
 - Rationalisation of subsidies,
 - Crop diversification.

Static Linkages

- Green Revolution caused wheat-rice monoculture in Punjab and Haryana.
- Urea is outside the Nutrient Based Subsidy (NBS) regime.
- MSP is recommended by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).
- Agriculture is a State subject under the Seventh Schedule.
- Soil Health Card Scheme promotes balanced fertilizer use.
- PM-KISAN provides direct income support to farmers.
- Excessive nitrogen fertilizer use releases nitrous oxide, a greenhouse gas.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Protects farmers from global price shocks.
- Ensures food security and production stability.
- Supports small and marginal farmers.
- Prevents sudden food inflation.

Challenges

- Rising subsidy burden affects fiscal stability.
- Overuse of urea damages soil and environment.
- MSP-centric system promotes monoculture.
- Larger farmers capture greater subsidy benefits.
- Political resistance delays structural reforms.

Way Forward

- Gradual rationalisation of fertilizer subsidies.
- Promote crop diversification towards pulses and millets.
- Expand micro-irrigation and sustainable farming.
- Increase investment in agricultural R&D.
- Improve targeted DBT-based support.
- Link agricultural reforms with environmental sustainability.
- Encourage balanced fertilizer usage through awareness and incentives.

Don't deprive sports ecosystem of its due

MOST SPORTING powers rely on ecosystems that nurture young talent and instil confidence in athletes to compete at the highest level. In India, the creation of such an enabling milieu remains a work in progress. The National Sports Development Fund (NSDF), established in 1998, was conceived as an important step in that direction — to support promising sportspersons, expand access to training facilities and coaching, and help athletes gain crucial international exposure. Over the years, the fund has played a significant role in backing initiatives such as the Target Olympic Podium Scheme. That is why the findings of an investigation by this newspaper are deeply troubling — between 2021 and 2025, more than Rs 6 crore from the NSDF was used to construct recreational facilities for bureaucrats. The justification offered — that this did not constitute a diversion of funds but was intended to promote sporting culture — is specious. India's bureaucratic elite do not lack access to clubs and leisure amenities, while athletes across the country continue to grapple with inadequate training facilities and limited institutional support.

The revelations come at a time when the NSDF's resources are shrinking. The contribution to the fund fell sharply from Rs 85.26 crore in 2023-24 to Rs 37.02 crore in 2025-26. Last year, a 31-member parliamentary panel expressed concern about waning corporate faith in government-administered sports bodies. It also noted that public sector units are reducing their contribution to government-administered sports initiatives. Such trends warrant greater financial discipline and probity in the use of resources meant to enhance infrastructure at the grassroots levels, where sporting talent is emerging. Funding is urgently needed in rural West Bengal and Tripura, which have consistently produced gifted gymnasts. The country has fewer than 20 swimming pools that satisfy Olympic standards. The need is equally pressing for badminton courts in Punjab, Chhattisgarh and Haryana, wrestling mats in Kolhapur, judo infrastructure in Manipur, and hockey astro turfs across the country, where the sport has a strong grassroots presence. Aspiring boxers in Haryana continue to train in substandard facilities despite the state's success in the sport. Telangana, Bengal and Gujarat, where youngsters have shown a hunger for table tennis, need more international-quality infrastructure. Even metros such as Mumbai require accessible multi-purpose indoor complexes where children can take up sports, other than cricket, without prohibitive costs.

The allocation and utilisation of NSDF resources should be subject to regular audits. Public disclosure of expenditure could restore the fund's credibility. This paper's investigation is a warning. A nation aspiring to emerge as a global sporting power cannot afford the elite capture of resources intended to lay the foundations of athletic excellence.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- An investigation revealed that over ₹6 crore from the National Sports Development Fund (NSDF) was allegedly used during 2021–2025 for recreational facilities meant for bureaucrats.
- The issue has triggered concerns regarding:
 - Diversion of public funds
 - Weak accountability in sports governance
 - Neglect of grassroots sports infrastructure
- The controversy emerged amid declining NSDF contributions:
 - ₹85.26 crore (2023–24)
 - ₹37.02 crore (2025–26)
- Parliamentary committees have earlier highlighted falling corporate and PSU confidence in government-administered sports bodies.

Key Points

- NSDF established: 1998
- Ministry: Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports
- Purpose:
 - Support talented sportspersons
 - Training and coaching
 - International exposure
 - Sports infrastructure
- TOPS (Target Olympic Podium Scheme) Financial and technical assistance to elite athletes.

- Supported through NSDF.
- Major Concerns Misallocation of sports funds.
- Weak financial oversight.
- Declining private/CSR participation.
- Poor grassroots infrastructure despite sports potential.
- Sports Infrastructure Deficit Less than 20 Olympic-standard swimming pools in India.
- Inadequate:
 - Hockey astro turfs
 - Wrestling mats
 - Indoor complexes
 - Badminton courts

Static Points

- Sports is a State List subject (Entry 33).
- Transparency and accountability are essential principles of good governance.
- Khelo India focuses on grassroots talent identification and sports infrastructure.
- National Sports Policy aims at:
 - Broad-basing sports
 - Achieving excellence in international events.
- 2nd ARC emphasized:
 - Ethical governance
 - Outcome-based expenditure
 - Public accountability.

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Elite capture of public resources.
- Poor monitoring of fund utilisation.
- Declining trust of corporates and PSUs.
- Grassroots athletes suffer due to inadequate infrastructure.

Governance Concerns

- Lack of transparency in expenditure.
- Weak audit mechanisms.
- Reduced efficiency in public spending.

Impact

- Affects India's Olympic ambitions.
- Weakens athlete development ecosystem.
- Discourages CSR participation in sports.

Way Forward

- Independent audit of NSDF expenditure.
- Public disclosure of fund utilisation.
- Greater investment in grassroots infrastructure.
- Athlete representation in sports administration.
- Technology-based monitoring systems.
- Strengthening CSR participation through transparent governance.