



# DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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## Concerns

- CBT implementation may face digital divide challenges.
- Cybersecurity vulnerabilities may emerge.
- Repeated leaks indicate deeper institutional weaknesses.
- Absence of clear accountability mechanisms.
- Ad-hoc reforms may not address systemic governance deficits.

## Challenges

- Weak institutional capacity.
- Inadequate technological safeguards.
- Lack of specialized permanent personnel.
- Poor inter-agency coordination.
- Limited accountability framework.
- Balancing accessibility with technological modernization.

## Way Forward

- Establish a dedicated National Examination Security Framework.
- Strengthen NTA through professional staffing and specialized cadres.
- Institutionalize regular security audits.
- Develop robust cybersecurity architecture.
- Introduce legally enforceable accountability mechanisms.
- Create digital forensic and AI-based monitoring systems.
- Ensure equitable digital infrastructure before full CBT rollout.
- Adopt best practices from UPSC and other high-integrity examination systems.
- Strengthen grievance redressal and whistleblower protection mechanisms.

# IMD curtails its forecast for southwest monsoon, pushes onset date to June

Jacob Koshy  
NEW DELHI

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Friday lowered its forecast for the 2026 southwest monsoon to 90% of the Long Period Average (LPA), down from the 92% it had projected in April, and acknowledged that the monsoon was unlikely to reach Kerala within the four-day window of its predicted date of May 26.

Mrutyunjay Mohapatra, Director-General, IMD, said the monsoon would now "likely arrive" in the first week of June. The only time the IMD erred in its Kerala onset forecast from 2005-2025 was in 2015. "It happens sometimes," Mr. Mohapatra told *The Hindu* on the onset forecast going wrong. "But if you look at it, the monsoon system has been steadily advancing. It is hardly about 100 km away from the Kerala coast. I have said seven days, but it can cross anytime."

The rainfall downgrade entrenches India's principal water source region to "below-normal" territory that the agency indicated in April.

**Spectre of drought**  
Friday's warning, however, has raised the spectre of a drought. The IMD now puts the probability of a "deficient" monsoon (rain under 90% of the LPA) at 60%. The agency does not use the term "drought" in its lexicon, a nomenclature used by the Agriculture Ministry.

Of the four broad geographical regions, only the Northeast is forecast to get



Pre-monsoon clouds approach the coast of Shangumugham amid a drizzle, in Thiruvananthapuram, on Thursday. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

a "normal" monsoon; the Northwest, Central India, the Southern Peninsula and the monsoon core zone that feeds most of the country's rain-fed farmland are all expected to fall short. June alone is pegged at under 92% of its average.

D.S. Pai, who heads the IMD's Regional Meteorological Centre in Chennai and who co-authored the statistical model the department uses to forecast the Kerala onset, offered a finer-grained account.

The monsoon had reached the Andaman Sea on time, even slightly early, and rain was still falling there, he said. "Only thing, the wind has not strengthened."

Issuing a deficiency warning twice before the rain has entered Kerala is something the IMD has not done since 2015. That year offers an uncomfortable rhyme: a mid-May onset prediction of May 30 overshoot to June 5, an April forecast of 93% cut to 88% in June, and a season that closed at 86%.

With the 88% rain in 2014, it made the fourth back-to-back pair of deficient years in 115 years, both under a building El

Niño. Whether 2026 will follow suit depends on intra-seasonal wildcards such as a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (an irregular change in sea-surface temperature that alters wind and rain patterns but which is now absent), a favourable swing of the Madden-Julian Oscillation (an eastward moving cloud and rainfall near the equator every 30-60 days) or a timely low-pressure system – all of which could lift the total rainfall, while their absence could lower it.

**92% chance of El Niño**  
The IMD reckons there is a 92% chance of El Niño conditions during the season – the main reason for the expected shortfall.

"The problem is not just the total reduction in rainfall, but the way the rainfall is distributed," G. V. Rammanjanyulu, executive director, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, said.

"Crops can manage dry spells of about one week. Beyond that, the soils are unable to support them. Insufficient rainfall will prevent groundwater recharge. That may affect irrigated crops as well, including rice and others."

## El Niño

- Periodic warming of sea surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean.
- Generally associated with:
  - Weak Indian Monsoon
  - Reduced rainfall
  - Drought-like conditions
  - Agricultural stress

## Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)

- Difference in sea surface temperatures between western and eastern Indian Ocean.
- Positive IOD can partially offset adverse impacts of El Niño on Indian monsoon.

## Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO)

- Eastward-moving atmospheric disturbance of clouds, rainfall, winds and pressure.
- Influences:
  - Monsoon onset
  - Active-break cycles of monsoon
  - Cyclone formation

## Mains Enrichment Points

### Importance of Monsoon for India

- Contributes about 75% of annual rainfall.
- Supports nearly 50% of net sown area dependent on rainfall.
- Critical for:
  - Food security
  - Groundwater recharge
  - Hydropower generation
  - Rural livelihoods
  - Inflation management

### Key Concerns

- Deficient rainfall may:
    - Reduce agricultural output.
    - Lower reservoir storage.
    - Hamper groundwater recharge.
    - Increase food inflation.
    - Affect rural incomes.
  - Uneven distribution of rainfall is often more damaging than lower seasonal totals.
- ### Climate Change Dimension
- Increased frequency of:
    - Extreme rainfall events.
    - Longer dry spells.
    - Monsoon variability.
  - Challenges conventional monsoon forecasting.

## Prelims Trap Areas

### Remember:

- El Niño ≠ Drought every year, but increases drought probability.
- Positive IOD generally benefits Indian monsoon.
- MJO is not stationary; it moves eastward.
- Southwest Monsoon contributes nearly 75% of India's annual rainfall.
- IMD does not officially use the term "drought"; it classifies rainfall as deficient, below normal, etc.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Why in News?

- IMD reduced the 2026 Southwest Monsoon forecast from 92% to 90% of Long Period Average (LPA).
- Monsoon is expected to reach Kerala in the first week of June.
- IMD estimates a 92% probability of El Niño conditions during the monsoon season.
- There is a 60% probability of deficient rainfall (<90% of LPA).

## UPSC Prelims Facts

### Long Period Average (LPA)

- Average rainfall received over a 50-year period (1971–2020).
- Used as the benchmark for monsoon forecasting.

## IMD Rainfall Classification

Category	Rainfall (% of LPA)
Large Excess	>110%
Excess	105–110%
Normal	96–104%
Below Normal	90–95%
Deficient	<90%

# International law, 'optional' for powerful states

Voltaire's famous quip about the Holy Roman Empire – that it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire – has often come to mind when I think about the contemporary state of public international law. For all its lofty aspirations, it is frequently neither truly public, nor reliably international, nor consistently law. It is public only in the sense that it concerns states rather than private actors; international only insofar as sovereign consent to be bound; and law only to the extent that it can be enforced – an increasingly fragile proposition in a world where power, not principle, is again determining outcomes.

**The erosion of an edifice of norms**  
Over the last century and a half, humanity painstakingly constructed an edifice of norms, treaties and institutions meant to restrain the worst impulses of states. From the Hague Conventions to the Geneva Conventions, from the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), from human rights covenants to arms-control regimes, the international community sought to replace the anarchy of the past with a rules-based order. Yet, in recent years, that order has been fraying at an alarming pace. Across continents and conflicts, states have violated foundational principles with impunity, eroding the credibility of the very system meant to protect global peace and stability.

The most fundamental of these principles is the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force and its guarantee of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran in 2026 stand as the starkest breaches of this norm in decades: an unprovoked assault on a sovereign state, justified through dubious claims and enforced through overwhelming military might. Both invasions confirmed that the Charter's core promise could be shredded when a powerful state chose to do so.

The U.S. and Russian records are equally deplorable in disregarding the prohibition on force. The 2003 Iraq invasion, undertaken without Security Council authorisation and justified on grounds later proven baseless, remains one of the most consequential breaches of the Charter that set a precedent for Russia's conduct. More recently, the targeted killing of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran have raised serious questions about the erosion of norms against unilateral force. Israel's repeated military operations in Gaza and Lebanon, including large-scale bombardments causing extensive civilian casualties, have also drawn widespread allegations of disproportionate force and violations of international humanitarian law.

The pattern is not confined to major powers. Türkiye's incursions into northern Syria,



**Shashi Tharoor**  
Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram (Congress party), the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including 'Van India' (2012) and 'The New World Disorder' (2025)

Azerbaijan's use of force in Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ethiopia's conduct in the Tigray conflict, including cross-border strikes into Sudan, have all arguably breached international norms.

Beyond the use of force, states have violated UNCLOS, one of the most widely ratified treaties in the world. The South China Sea has become a theatre of systematic disregard for maritime law. China's expansive "nine-dash line" claim, rejected by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016, continues to be enforced through militarised artificial islands, harassment of foreign vessels, and coercive coast-guard tactics. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia have all faced incursions into their exclusive economic zones.

The Strait of Hormuz has witnessed repeated blockades and interdictions. Iran and the U.S. have seized foreign tankers, closed the Strait, and imposed maritime blockades in the region, without clear legal justification under UNCLOS. These actions undermine the principle of freedom of navigation, a cornerstone of global trade and maritime stability.

**Brazen actions across the world**  
International humanitarian law has also suffered grievous violations. In Syria, the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, and siege tactics have been extensively documented. Non-state actors such as the Islamic State (IS) and various militias have committed atrocities on a massive scale. In Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition and Houthis rebels alike have been accused of targeting civilians, hospitals, and critical infrastructure. In Ethiopia's Tigray region, reports of mass killings, sexual violence, and starvation as a weapon of war have shocked the conscience of the world.

Human rights treaties, too, have been flouted with increasing brazenness. Israel's indiscriminate killing of civilians in Gaza and China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang – including mass detention, forced labour, and cultural erasure – have been described by several governments and scholars as crimes against humanity. Myanmar's military junta has carried out systematic abuses against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, prompting genocide allegations. In Iran, the violent suppression of protests following the death of Mahsa Amini revealed a pattern of extrajudicial killings and torture. Even democratic states have not been immune: the U.S.'s use of torture during the "war on terror", Australia's offshore detention of asylum-seekers, and Europe's pushbacks of migrants in the Mediterranean have all raised serious legal and moral concerns.

Arms-control regimes have also weakened. The collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the erosion of the Open Skies

Treaty, and the uncertain future of the New START agreement have revived fears of a new arms race. North Korea continues to defy UN resolutions with missile tests and nuclear development.

Iran's nuclear programme, once constrained by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has allegedly accelerated following the agreement's unravelling. These developments threaten to undo decades of painstaking progress in nuclear restraint.

Environmental law, too, has suffered. States have failed to meet their commitments under the Paris Agreement, with emissions rising and climate targets slipping out of reach. Illegal deforestation in the Amazon, often abetted by state actors, violates international norms on biodiversity and environmental protection. Deep-sea mining, pursued without adequate regulation, threatens fragile marine ecosystems.

**There is a vacuum**

What ties these disparate violations together is not merely their frequency but their impunity. International law depends on consent, reciprocity, and enforcement through collective mechanisms. Yet, the Security Council is paralysed by geopolitical rivalries; the International Criminal Court faces accusations of bias and lacks jurisdiction over major powers; and treaty bodies often rely on voluntary compliance. In this vacuum, states increasingly act as though power, not principle, determines legality. Thucydides' bleak observation – "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must" – resonates today with unsettling clarity. When powerful states violate international law without consequence, they signal to others that norms are optional and that might is right. The result is a world sliding back toward the law of the jungle.

This is not merely a philosophical concern. The erosion of international law has tangible consequences: conflicts become harder to resolve, civilians bear the brunt of violence, global commons are degraded, and trust between nations evaporates. The rules-based order, imperfect as it is, remains humanity's best defence against chaos.

The challenge is reaffirming the value of international law in that it requires strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing accountability mechanisms, and cultivating a global political culture that prizes restraint over adventurism. It also requires recognising that international law is not a panacea but a framework – a set of shared expectations that guide behaviour even when perfect compliance is elusive. Without it, the world risks returning to a state where power alone determines outcomes. And in such a world, it is not only the weak who suffer; ultimately, everyone does.

- Arms Control Frameworks:
  - Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)
  - Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)
  - New START Treaty
- Environmental Governance:
  - Paris Agreement
  - Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
  - UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

## Static Linkages

- Sovereign Equality of States
- Territorial Integrity
- Non-Intervention Principle
- Peaceful Settlement of Disputes
- Collective Security
- Freedom of Navigation
- Exclusive Economic Zone (200 Nautical Miles)
- Geneva Conventions, 1949
- Hague Conventions
- International Court of Justice (ICJ)
- International Criminal Court (ICC)
- UN Security Council and Veto Power
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime
- Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR-RC)

## Why is this Important for India?

- India supports a rules-based international order.
- Freedom of navigation is crucial for India's maritime trade.
- Stability in West Asia affects India's energy security.
- Respect for sovereignty aligns with India's foreign policy principles.
- Strong multilateral institutions are essential for addressing climate change, terrorism, and emerging technologies.

## Critical Analysis

Significance of International Law

- Protects smaller states from coercion.
- Promotes stability and predictability.
- Facilitates international trade and cooperation.
- Provides mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution.

Challenges

- Selective compliance by powerful states.
- UNSC veto leading to institutional paralysis.
- Weak enforcement mechanisms.
- Increasing geopolitical competition.

Declining trust in multilateral institutions

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- Growing concerns over the weakening of international law due to repeated violations of global norms by both major and regional powers.
- Recent conflicts and geopolitical rivalries have exposed limitations of institutions such as the United Nations, International Criminal Court (ICC), and other multilateral mechanisms.
- The issue highlights the challenge of maintaining a rules-based international order amid rising power politics.

### Key Points

- UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states except in:
  - Self-defence (Article 51)
  - UN Security Council-authorized action
- UNCLOS (1982) governs:
  - Territorial waters
  - Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs)
  - Freedom of navigation
  - Maritime dispute resolution
- International Humanitarian Law (IHL):
  - Based on Geneva Conventions (1949)
  - Protects civilians, prisoners of war, and non-combatants during conflicts.
- Human Rights Regime:
  - Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
  - International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
  - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

Imperfect though it may be, the rules-based order remains humanity's strongest defence against chaos

## Implications

- Rise of power politics over legal norms.
- Increased regional instability.
- Threats to maritime security.
- Weakening of global climate and arms-control commitments.

## Way Forward

- Reform the UN Security Council.
- Strengthen international dispute-resolution mechanisms.
- Enhance accountability for violations of international law.
- Promote rule-based maritime governance.
- Strengthen multilateral cooperation.
- Develop norms for cyber security, AI, and emerging technologies.
- Improve compliance and monitoring mechanisms under international treaties.

# Concrete fever

## India must mandate green cover and reflective materials for its cities

**S**ri Ganganagar, in Rajasthan touched 48° Celsius this week, the hottest that India has been this year so far. Scorching summer heat in the run-up to the monsoon, which is delayed, is not unusual, but many Indians in the informal sector have to work directly under the sun in unprotected environments. Climate change is inextricably linked to heatwaves. India Meteorological Department data show that the frequency of heatwave spells has risen by 0.1 days per decade since 1961 over India's Core Heatwave Zone that includes the central, northwestern, and eastern coastal regions, or about 30% of India's total land area. Their maximum duration has increased by 0.55 days per decade; and the 2015-25 interval is, according to the World Meteorological Organization, the warmest 11-year stretch since records began. But the emissions that produced these numbers are only the proximate villain. What makes India's heat uniquely lethal is not the atmosphere alone. Urban heat islands across Indian cities now run 2°C to 10°C hotter than their surrounding rural areas, the difference manufactured by concrete, asphalt, the butchering of tree cover, and the waste heat exhaled by the thousands of air-conditioners cooling offices. Delhi's average humidity rose by eight percentage points between 2015-19 and 2020-24. This has a lot to do with an increasingly sealed urban surface than global warming alone. This is where the seduction of the technological fix becomes dangerous with the instinct being to reach for more, better and cheaper ACs. This might shield the privileged office worker at the expense of the vast majority, many of whom are outdoor workers and street vendors. Paradoxically, the machines are, in a thermodynamic sense, fuelling the problem.

What is called for instead is unglamorous, slow and politically difficult: urban design that mandates reflective materials and green cover, building codes calibrated to a climate that has already shifted; and, most urgently, the enforcement of labour laws that already exist but are honoured largely in the breach. These laws require employers to stop outdoor work when the heat index crosses thresholds that human physiology cannot safely absorb. India has not yet had a serious national conversation about budget heads for heat management.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- Sri Ganganagar (Rajasthan) recorded 48°C, the highest temperature in India this year.
- Delayed onset of the Southwest Monsoon has intensified heatwave conditions across several parts of India.
- IMD data show increasing frequency and duration of heatwaves in India's Core Heatwave Zone.
- Rapid urbanization and declining green cover are amplifying the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, making cities significantly hotter than surrounding rural areas.
- The issue highlights the growing challenge of climate adaptation, public health protection, urban planning, and labour welfare.

### Key Points

- According to IMD:
  - Heatwave frequency has increased by 0.1 days per decade since 1961.
  - Heatwave duration has increased by 0.55 days per decade.
- Core Heatwave Zone covers:
  - Northwestern India
  - Central India
  - Eastern Coastal India
- Urban Heat Islands can raise city temperatures by 2°C–10°C above nearby rural areas.

- Major causes:
  - Concrete and asphalt surfaces
  - Loss of urban green cover
  - High building density
  - Waste heat from vehicles and air-conditioners
- Informal sector workers are the most vulnerable to heat stress.
- Excessive dependence on air-conditioning may increase energy demand and contribute to localized warming.

### Static Linkages

- Albedo effect and heat absorption by different surfaces.
- Role of vegetation in regulating local climate through evapotranspiration.
- Urbanization and environmental degradation.
- Climate change as a consequence of enhanced greenhouse effect.
- Disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.
- Safe and humane working conditions as a governance objective.
- Environmental protection as a constitutional responsibility.
- Sustainable development and climate-resilient infrastructure.

### Critical Analysis

#### Significance

- Heatwaves are emerging as one of the deadliest climate-related disasters.
- Impact extends beyond health to productivity, livelihoods, agriculture, and energy security.
- Urban Heat Island effect increases vulnerability in densely populated cities.

#### Challenges

- Weak implementation of Heat Action Plans.
- Inadequate protection for outdoor and informal workers.
- Lack of heat-resilient urban planning.
- Shrinking urban green spaces.
- Rising electricity demand due to cooling requirements.

#### Concerns

- Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable populations.
- Existing labour safety regulations are poorly enforced.
- Heat-related deaths and illnesses remain underreported.

### Way Forward

- Develop a dedicated National Heat Action Framework.
- Integrate heat resilience into urban master plans.
- Promote cool roofs and reflective construction materials.
- Increase urban forests and green corridors.
- Strengthen early warning systems and public awareness.
- Enforce heat-index-based work regulations for outdoor labour.
- Expand access to drinking water, cooling shelters, and emergency healthcare.
- Promote passive cooling and energy-efficient buildings.

## Different directions

The Quad is unable to push toward its worthy objectives

The Quad Foreign Ministers' Meeting this week, the third such engagement since U.S. President Donald Trump began his tenure, was meant to reassure all partners – India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. – that the grouping remains valid and viable, despite all the rapid geopolitical developments. To that end, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong and Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister Toshimitsu Motegi, who were hosted by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Delhi, agreed to firm up a number of initiatives. On Indo-Pacific maritime security, they agreed on three initiatives including one for Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC), a Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), and a Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission. They also finalised a Quad Critical Mineral cooperation initiative, an energy security partnership, and the first ever Quad infrastructural project to build a port in Fiji. The joint statement reiterated their commitment to the Quad's geopolitical positions: a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP); respecting territorial integrity; countering cross-border terrorism; and upholding international law with a focus on UNCLOS. The statement expressed concern over the Pahalgam attack, developments in the East and South China Seas, and the Strait of Hormuz blockade. Yet, there were also clear constraints on the language, which appeared to arise out of the U.S.'s new engagement with China and Russia. Quad partners decried Iranian actions in the conflict but made no mention of the U.S.-Israel's initiation of the conflict with Iran, the U.S. torpedoing of an Iranian ship in the Indian Ocean, or Washington's talks with Tehran using Pakistan as mediator. Each of these newly developed vectors poses a challenge to Quad unity, while the lack of consultation before and during the West Asia conflict raises questions about the Quad's relevance.

The future of the Quad engagement emerged as another concern. The Quad began at an official level in 2007, was reborn in 2017 at a higher official level, and was upgraded to leader-level engagement in 2021. India assumed the Quad chair in 2024, but has since faced difficulties in hosting the summit. In 2024, tensions with the U.S. over the Pannun-Nijjar case delayed the summit and the Biden administration insisted on holding it in Baltimore. In 2025, tensions over tariffs, sanctions, trade, and Operation Sindoor claims disrupted plans for Mr. Trump and other leaders to meet in Delhi. Mid-way through 2026, that meeting is yet to be scheduled, and if India demits the Chair to Australia without holding a Summit, it may indicate a downgrade in engagement. The Quad's regional initiatives on climate change, health, debt financing, infrastructure and maritime security remain a force for good in the Indo-Pacific. However, the grouping's internal contradictions, particularly in the face of the U.S.'s unilateral moves across the world, are a challenge. The Quad could benefit from some reflection on how to ensure that the grouping moves forward in tandem on its worthy objectives, not as one that pulls in different directions.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- Quad Foreign Ministers met in New Delhi to reaffirm commitment to the grouping amid evolving geopolitical developments.
- Member countries agreed on new initiatives related to maritime security, critical minerals, energy security, and infrastructure.
- Joint statement reiterated support for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), territorial integrity, international law, and counter-terrorism.
- Concerns were expressed over developments in the East and South China Seas, the Strait of Hormuz, and terrorism.
- Delays in convening the Quad Leaders' Summit have raised concerns regarding the future trajectory and cohesion of the grouping.

### Key Points

#### New Initiatives

- Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration (IPMSC).
- Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).
- Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission.
- Quad Critical Minerals Initiative.
- Energy Security Partnership.
- First Quad infrastructure project: Development of a port in Fiji.

## Strategic Focus Areas

- Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP).
- Maritime security and freedom of navigation.
- Supply chain resilience.
- Critical mineral security.
- Counter-terrorism cooperation.
- Rules-based international order under UNCLOS.

## Significance for India

- Strengthens India's Indo-Pacific strategy.
- Supports SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region).
- Enhances maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean Region.
- Reduces dependence on concentrated critical mineral supply chains.
- Expands India's engagement with Pacific Island countries.

## Static Linkages

- Quad established in 2007, revived in 2017.
- Members: India, USA, Japan, Australia.
- Quad is not a military alliance.
- UNCLOS (1982) provides the legal framework for maritime governance.
- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extends up to 200 nautical miles.
- India's maritime vision: SAGAR.
- Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) launched in 2019.
- Critical minerals include lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite, and rare earth elements.
- Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) are vital for global trade and energy security.

## Critical Analysis

### Positives

- Strengthens maritime security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.
- Promotes resilient supply chains and critical mineral cooperation.
- Enhances strategic coordination among major democracies.
- Supports regional infrastructure development.
- Reinforces rules-based international order.

### Concerns

- Absence of institutional structure and treaty obligations.
- Divergent strategic priorities among members.
- Delays in leadership-level engagement.
- Dependence on changing U.S. foreign policy priorities.
- Potential perception as an anti-China grouping.

## Challenges

- Maintaining strategic cohesion.
- Balancing national interests with collective objectives.
- Ensuring continuity despite geopolitical shifts.
- Converting announced initiatives into tangible outcomes.

## Way Forward

- Institutionalize regular Quad Summits.
- Strengthen maritime information-sharing mechanisms.
- Enhance cooperation in critical minerals and emerging technologies.
- Expand engagement with ASEAN and Pacific Island nations.
- Improve coordination during regional and global crises.
- Focus on functional cooperation rather than geopolitical rhetoric.
- Promote inclusive and rules-based regional governance.

# India, US: From estranged to engaged to restrained democracies

IT WAS an American diplomat, Dennis Kux, who famously termed the United States and India "estranged democracies" during the Cold War era. The historic India-US civil nuclear energy agreement, authored by President George Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was seen as converting them into "engaged democracies". That honeymoon is not viewed any longer as having lasted more than a decade. President Donald Trump, it is widely believed, has downgraded a "strategic partnership" what President Barack Obama called the "defining partnership of the 21st century", to a purely transactional relationship.

The recent visit of US Secretary of State Marco Rubio is being interpreted as an attempt to reduce the transactionalism and return to a more "strategic" relationship based on "geopolitical" convergence. However, it bears mentioning that even this "convergence" of interests is defined by transactionalism.

The fact is that the so-called India-US strategic partnership was always based on a transactional foundation. Several quid pro quo deals defined the terms of negotiations of the nuclear deal. India's willingness to sign on to "A New Framework for the US-India Defence Relationship" in June 2005 was the key that opened the door to negotiations on a nuclear deal.

The framework established a Defence Policy Group that would, as the agreement stated, "expand two-way defence trade between our countries. The United States and India will work to conclude defence transactions, not solely as ends in and of themselves, but as a means to strengthen our countries' security, reinforce our strategic partnership, achieve greater interaction between our armed forces, and build greater understand-



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ing between our defence establishments." The intention was to secure an opening-up of the Indian defence market to US business, reducing India's dependence on Russia. Going beyond this commitment, India was required to reduce dependence on oil imports from Iran and Venezuela. The US establishment drove ahead with the deal that finally required a presidential veto to get the agreement signed. Credit must go to Bush for taking a long-term view of India's economic rise and restricting the element of transactionalism in the partnership.

Bush viewed India's rise as a global public good and in itself serving US strategic interests. Trump expressed that perspective when he made the relationship mainly transactional. Whatever the rhetoric that now fills up new documents signed by the two governments, the fact is that the US establishment is no longer willing to give India a free pass.

This in itself is understandable. What has come to hurt the relationship is the fact that the US has taken steps to curtail the economic consequences for India. The unilateral actions on the trade front, the support to Israel in destabilising the Gulf, pushing oil and gas prices up and reducing access to these, and the new relationship with Pakistan all have adverse geopolitical and geo-economic consequences for India.

The weaponisation of trade, finance and energy flows by the US, with its allies playing second fiddle, has deeply hurt Indian economic interests, impacting India's economic rise, and as a consequence, its national security and global standing. Barely two years ago, the New Delhi establishment was celebrating India's emergence as the world's third-largest econ-

omy. As a consequence of both domestic and global developments, India has slipped back to the sixth rank. A naïve hope is being expressed by some that the extensive people-to-people relationship between the two democracies will somehow help secure the relationship. It is time for a reality check with respect to the role of the so-called diaspora in the bilateral relationship. It is true that in the 1990s and early 2000s the Indian American community did play a facilitating role in strengthening the bilateral partnership. However, evidence today suggests that two aspects of the diaspora have come to limit its positive role.

As I have elaborated in my recent book, *Sensation of the Successful: The Flight Out of New India*, the Indian American community, especially second- and third-generation immigrants, have become an integral part of MAGA — making America great again. Their role in "making India great" is increasingly limited as elite emigration has come to define exit from India to the West.

While Indian political leadership and media celebrate the achievements of high-profile Indian Americans, it should be remembered that they are now increasingly American and less Indian. They have become an important part of the engine of American economic resurgence. As US Congressman Jim Himes put it candidly, Indian Americans are "a secret weapon for (American) economic growth".

Second, people-to-people connect means little when larger geopolitical and national interests are in play and define Trump's "America First" policy. Despite all the visible nationalism of overseas Indians, on display every time Prime Minister Narendra Modi

travels abroad, non-resident Indians (NRIs) have become "non-returning Indians". Moreover, the communalisation of the Indian diaspora and growing Western concerns about the direction of Indian domestic politics, with implications for minority rights, has also come to limit the so-called "soft power" of the diaspora.

It is time for Indian policymakers and analysts to come to terms with the reality of a fundamental shift away from the "strategic partnership", which defined the move from "estrangement" to "engagement" at the turn of the century and in the first decade and a half, to the more "what is in it for me" transactionalism that has come to define a restrained relationship.

It is just as well that External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defined India's approach to the new realities of the world as "multi-alignment". The full meaning and implications of multi-alignment appear not to have sunk into the minds of analysts and media. If actions taken by both the US and China are hurting Indian economic interests, then Indian policy must be based on a recognition of this fact. Neither power is going to help build India as a third pole of the global economy.

Addressing the Constituent Assembly in December 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru famously said that India's foreign policy would have to be defined by her economic policy and interests. The Modi government's policy of *atmanirbharata* is defined by the same approach. India's external relationships must once again give precedence to our national economic interests and not be defined only by concerns about defence and security.

The writer is former editor, The Financial Express and was media advisor to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context of the News

- Recent discussions on India-US relations highlight a shift from the Cold War-era concept of "Estranged Democracies" to a more pragmatic and interest-driven partnership.
- Concerns have emerged regarding increasing transactionalism in bilateral relations amid changing global geopolitics.
- The debate gains significance in the backdrop of:
  - Quad cooperation.
  - Indo-Pacific strategy.
  - Defence and technology partnerships.
  - Global supply chain realignments.
  - India's policy of Strategic Autonomy.

### Key Points

- India-US relations have evolved through three phases:
  - Estranged Democracies (Cold War period).
  - Engaged Democracies (Post-1991 reforms and Civil Nuclear Deal).
  - Restrained Democracies (Current phase marked by strategic convergence and issue-based differences).
- Major milestones:
  - 2004: Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP).
  - 2005: India-US Civil Nuclear Agreement.
  - 2016: Major Defense Partner Status.
  - 2022: Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET).
- Foundational Defence Agreements:
  - LEMOA (2016).
  - COMCASA (2018).
  - BECA (2020).
- Areas of convergence:
  - Indo-Pacific security.
  - Counter-terrorism.

- Areas of divergence:
  - Russia-Ukraine conflict.
  - Energy imports from Russia.
  - Trade disputes.
  - WTO-related issues.
  - Strategic autonomy concerns.

## Static Linkages

- Non-Alignment Policy.
- Strategic Autonomy.
- Panchsheel Principles.
- Article 51 of the Constitution.
- Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).
- Balance of Power Theory.
- Indo-Pacific Concept.
- Soft Power and Diaspora Diplomacy.
- Multi-Alignment in Foreign Policy.

## Critical Analysis

### Significance

- Strengthens India's position in the Indo-Pacific.
- Enhances defence modernization.
- Facilitates technology transfer.
- Supports supply chain diversification.
- Increases investment and trade opportunities.

### Challenges

- US sanctions regime affecting India's strategic choices.
- Dependence on external technology.
- Divergence over Russia and West Asia.
- Trade protectionism.
- Uncertainty due to changing US administrations.

### UPSC Angle

- India seeks partnership, not alliance.
- Strategic autonomy remains the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy.
- Bilateral cooperation is increasingly driven by national interests rather than ideological alignment.

## Way Forward

- Strengthen technology partnerships under iCET.
- Expand defence co-development and co-production.
- Deepen cooperation in semiconductors, AI and critical minerals.
- Maintain strategic autonomy while expanding strategic partnerships.
- Resolve trade disputes through institutional mechanisms.
- Promote reforms in global governance institutions.
- Enhance maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

## On fertiliser, Centre and states must align policy

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi wants Indian farmers to cut consumption of chemical fertilisers by 25-50 per cent, in order to conserve precious foreign exchange as well as protect the long-term fertility of Indian soils. However, the governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra are doing the opposite. All three — many more may follow — have decreed that manufacturers and suppliers of subsidised fertilisers such as urea and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) cannot sell nutrient products where no government subsidy or price controls are in place. In other words, fertiliser companies can sell only those products whose usage is being discouraged by the Modi government. They have been banned from selling any bio, nano, water-soluble and liquid speciality fertilisers or micronutrients and bio-stimulants.

The ban orders are not only an example of the Centre and states working at cross purposes, but also of ease of doing business going into reverse. Most of the non-subsidised nutrient products being marketed by the likes of Iffco, Coromandel International and Yara Fertilisers are applied in low doses for high-value crops such as grapes, apple and pomegranate. Moreover, they are notified under the Centre's Fertiliser Control Order after field trials for bio-efficacy and toxicology conducted by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. What incentive would companies have now to innovate and introduce such products that can deliver nutrients more efficiently either straight into the plant's root zone via drip irrigation or onto leaves by foliar application? If the Modi government is serious about weaning away farmers from urea and DAP — whose applied nutrients are more prone to volatilisation, leaching or locking in soils than being available for uptake by crops — it should crack down on states that are sending contrary signals to the industry and farmers alike.

India has enough land, water and sunshine for growing crops. But that's not the case with fertilisers, where it is overwhelmingly import-dependent. In 2025-26, the country's imports of fertiliser inputs and products were valued at about \$27.2 billion. The unresolved West Asia conflict and closure of the Strait of Hormuz could result in that bill even surpassing the 2022-23 high of \$33.4 billion post Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The current crisis is both a moment of reckoning and an opportunity to transform the existing product-specific fertiliser subsidy regime into an expanded PM-Kisan 2.0 direct income support programme. When fertiliser prices are market-determined, farmers will start using the right nutrients in the required quantities for their crops. And they will be enabled even more when guaranteed a minimum income per acre per crop.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Context

- The Union Government has advocated reducing chemical fertilizer consumption by 25–50% to improve soil health, promote sustainable agriculture, and reduce import dependence.
- Some states have imposed restrictions on the sale of certain non-subsidised fertilizers such as bio-fertilizers, nano-fertilizers, micronutrients, and specialty fertilizers.
- The issue highlights policy divergence between the Centre's objective of balanced nutrient management and state-level regulatory measures.
- Rising fertilizer import dependence and subsidy burden have brought fertilizer reforms into focus.

### Key Points

- India is heavily dependent on imports for phosphatic and potassic fertilizers.
- Fertilizer imports were estimated at around \$27.2 billion in 2025–26.
- Excessive use of urea has led to:
  - Soil nutrient imbalance.
  - Declining soil fertility.
  - Groundwater contamination.
  - Increased greenhouse gas emissions.
- Specialty fertilizers improve nutrient-use efficiency and reduce wastage.
- Fertilizers are regulated under the Fertiliser (Control) Order (FCO), 1985.

- Fertilizer subsidy remains a major component of agricultural expenditure.
- Balanced fertilizer use is critical for sustainable agricultural growth.

### Static Linkages

#### Important Facts

- Agriculture is a State List subject (Entry 14, State List).
- Fertilizers fall under the Essential Commodities framework and are regulated through FCO, 1985.
- N:P:K ratio recommended for balanced nutrition is 4:2:1; several states record much higher nitrogen use.
- Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) promotes balanced use of organic and inorganic nutrient sources.
- Soil Health Card Scheme provides crop-specific nutrient recommendations.
- Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) applies to P&K fertilizers; urea remains outside NBS.
- PM-PRANAM promotes reduction in chemical fertilizer consumption.
- Nano Urea has been developed to enhance nitrogen-use efficiency.

### Critical Analysis

#### Significance

- Reduces import dependence and foreign exchange outflow.
- Improves long-term soil health.
- Encourages sustainable agriculture practices.
- Promotes innovation in nutrient management technologies.

#### Concerns

- Conflicting Centre–State policies create uncertainty.
- Restrictions may discourage adoption of advanced fertilizers.
- Continued subsidy distortions encourage excessive urea use.
- Low farmer awareness regarding balanced nutrient application.

#### Challenges

- High fertilizer subsidy burden.
- Regional imbalance in fertilizer consumption.
- Weak agricultural extension services.
- Dependence on imported raw materials.
- Limited adoption of precision farming technologies.

### Way Forward

- Expand Integrated Nutrient Management practices.
- Strengthen Soil Health Card-based fertilizer application.
- Promote nano-fertilizers and bio-fertilizers.
- Rationalize fertilizer subsidies towards balanced nutrient use.
- Encourage precision agriculture and fertigation.
- Improve Centre–State policy coordination.
- Enhance farmer awareness through extension services.
- Reduce import dependence through domestic capacity enhancement.
- Link incentives to sustainable nutrient-use practices.

# Meanwhile, Israel goes on with its wrecking ball

**I**N A clear violation of the October 2025 Donald Trump-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday that he had ordered the military to take control of 70 per cent of Gaza, where the population is crammed into the little territory that remains habitable. That Israel was not abiding by the ceasefire had long been evident from its continued strikes on Gaza even as West Asia was engulfed by the Iran war. Yet it is difficult not to wonder if Netanyahu's decision to escalate further, at this particular moment, serves his political objectives ahead of the country's first elections since Hamas's horrific October 7, 2023 terror attack.

The past few weeks have not gone Netanyahu's way. Tel Aviv has largely been sidelined in the talks between Tehran and Washington aimed at ending a war that the US and Israel jointly initiated. Trump and Netanyahu's tense phone call a few days ago underscored their differing approaches to Iran, an inevitable divergence given the war's growing unpopularity in the US and the mounting political costs for the Trump administration. Netanyahu's apparent pursuit of eternal war follows a familiar script: Prolong conflict for political self-preservation and to defer domestic accountability for the October 7 security failure. In more than two years, Israel has failed to achieve its stated objective of destroying Hamas, even as it has killed at least 75,000 civilians and reduced Gaza to dust and ashes.

When Trump emerged as the unlikely peacemaker in Gaza, there was a sense of optimism about resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. Announcing his 20-point plan and the "Board of Peace", the US president had declared: "The people of Gaza have suffered long enough. The time is NOW." Since then, however, Israel's repeated violations of the ceasefire have effectively shredded the plan, while the peace board is yet to receive any of the billions of dollars pledged by donors. Peace in Gaza requires Israeli restraint and an institutional credibility capable of assuaging Palestinian fears. Netanyahu's latest order does precisely the opposite. And the one man who claims he can make the Israeli PM do "whatever I want him to do" has turned a blind eye.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

### Why in News?

- Israel has announced an expansion of military operations in Gaza despite international calls for a ceasefire.
- The development has intensified the humanitarian crisis and renewed debates on international humanitarian law, civilian protection, and the future of the Israel-Palestine issue.

### Context

- The ongoing conflict began after Hamas launched attacks on Israel in October 2023.
- Israel responded with large-scale military operations in Gaza.
- Despite ceasefire efforts by international actors, hostilities have continued intermittently.
- Recent Israeli actions indicate a possible expansion of military control in parts of Gaza.
- The situation has led to large-scale displacement, civilian casualties, and destruction of infrastructure.

### Key Points

- Gaza is a Palestinian territory located on the eastern Mediterranean coast.
- Hamas controls Gaza, while the Palestinian Authority governs parts of the West Bank.
- The conflict has created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.
- The United Nations has repeatedly called for protection of civilians and unhindered humanitarian access.

- The issue remains central to West Asian geopolitics and global security discussions.
- The conflict has implications for energy security, maritime trade routes, and regional stability.

### Static Linkages

- Two-State Solution.
- UN Charter provisions on self-defense.
- Geneva Conventions, 1949.
- International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
- Protection of civilians during armed conflict.
- Role of the UN Security Council.
- International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- Principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Refugee protection under international law.
- India's support for a sovereign and independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

### Critical Analysis

#### Concerns

- Rising civilian casualties and humanitarian distress.
- Violation of principles of proportionality and distinction under IHL.
- Increased displacement and refugee concerns.
- Weakening prospects of a negotiated political settlement.
- Possibility of regional escalation involving Iran and other actors.

#### Israel's Perspective

- National security concerns.
- Elimination of terrorist threats.
- Prevention of future attacks.

#### Palestinian Perspective

- Civilian protection.
- Humanitarian assistance.
- Right to self-determination and statehood.

#### International Community's Perspective

- Need for immediate ceasefire.
- Protection of civilians.
- Long-term political resolution through dialogue.

### Way Forward

- Immediate cessation of hostilities.
- Ensure humanitarian corridors and aid delivery.
- Strengthen adherence to International Humanitarian Law.
- Resume peace negotiations.
- Revive the Two-State Solution framework.
- Increase international cooperation for reconstruction and rehabilitation.
- Strengthen multilateral efforts through the UN and regional organizations.