



DAILY NEWS PAPER ANALYSIS

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**CIVILS WITH AKASH
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

Release minors held during students' stir: SC

The top court is considering an independent investigation into charges of excesses by police

States allowed to proceed with probes, police are restrained from 'coercive action' against students

CJP spokesperson Saurav Das says on X that the order is in 'direct contradiction' to govt.'s pledge

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday indicated that it would consider constituting a high-powered investigation team to conduct a "thorough, fair, and independent" inquiry into allegations of police excesses during the recent student protests in Delhi and several States.

While permitting the State authorities to proceed with the investigation of the FIRs registered in relation to the protests, the court ordered the immediate release of all minors arrested in connection with the demonstrations and restrained the police from taking coercive action against "protesting students" unless they had criminal antecedents.

The interim order permitting the authorities to proceed with the investigation of the existing FIRs raised concerns among the protesters on Tuesday. Saurav Das, the CJP's sp-

okesperson, said in a post on X that the order "raises extremely serious concerns" and is in "direct contradiction" to the Centre's assurance to the "youth of this nation".

Underlining that the Constitution guarantees the right to peaceful protest, a Bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant, while hearing a batch of petitions alleging disproportionate force by the police during the protests, observed that an independent probe was necessary to examine the allegations of police violence through a "scientific" and "evidence-based" inquiry.

"Whoever has committed excess, committed atrocities on innocent people, the law will take care of them. For that, there needs to be a completely independent and fair investigation... Probe is meaningless if no responsibility is fixed," CJI Kant said.

The Bench, also comprising Justices Jaymalia Bharti and V. Mahan, issued notices to the Union government, the Delhi government and the Chief Secretaries of Maharashtra, Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Kerala, directing them to place their responses on record.

The interim directions came while the top court was hearing a batch of petitions alleging the use of disproportionate force by the police against protesters during demonstrations over the NEET examination paper leak, including the July 20 Parliament march in Delhi and subsequent protests in several States. The Hindu had earlier reported that at least four persons were struck by pellets during the Parliament march and that the Rapid Action Force (RAF) fired two rounds from an anti-riot gun on the directions of a Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) rank officer.

Preserve footage
Taking note of petitions alleging that student protesters had been illegally arrested and detained by the police, the top court directed the authorities to forthwith release all minors detained in connection with the demonstrations. While permitting the police to continue investigating the FIRs registered in relation to the protests, it restrained the authorities from taking any coercive action against students unless they had criminal antecedents.

As an interim measure, the Bench directed the police authorities to preserve all CCTV footage, drone recordings, body-worn camera footage, wireless communication records and PCR call records relating to the protests. It also ordered that while the police may preserve the digital

data of protesters for the purposes of the investigation, they shall not disclose any personal information in the public domain.

Senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, appearing for petitioner Shailender Mani Tripathi, referred to videographic evidence allegedly showing the use of pellet guns and electric batons against protesters and urged the court to fix accountability. He also questioned the absence of any prohibitory orders in the Jantar Mantar area, the lack of name tags on police personnel and the deployment of officers in plain clothes for crowd-control duties.

"There are reports of electric shock weapons being used on protesters. The RAF has admitted the use of projectile-action guns (PAGs) against unarmed protesters. We have set out the details and placed credible media reports on record," senior advocate Shyam Divan submitted.

Acknowledging the concerns raised by the petitioners, the Chief Justice observed that an independent probe would look into the allegations.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Delhi Police and the Union government, submitted that he had no objection to the constitution of an independent probe. He also brought to the Bench's notice that several police personnel had allegedly been injured by miscreants during the protests.

"If students have suffered in any manner, perpetrators have to be brought to book," he said, adding that "anti-social elements" may have infiltrated the demonstrations.

The Bench observed that both "narratives" warranted a fair examination, cautioning that there was always a "danger" of a peaceful movement being discredited.

The Bench posted the matter for further hearing on August 3.



SURYA KANT
Chief Justice of India

Police authorised pellet gun use on July 20: records

NEW DELHI
A general diary entry filed at a police station in New Delhi has revealed that the Rapid Action Force fired two rounds from an anti-riot gun on the directions of a Deputy Commissioner of Police rank officer. » PAGE 4

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Static Linkages

- DK Basu v. State of West Bengal (1997): Guidelines against custodial violence and arbitrary arrest.
- Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India (2018): Right to protest is a fundamental right subject to reasonable restrictions.
- K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017): Right to Privacy under Article 21.
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015: Protection of minors in conflict with law.
- Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023: Arrest, investigation and procedural safeguards.

Critical Analysis

Positives

- Upholds constitutional freedoms.
- Ensures independent investigation and accountability.
- Protects rights of minors.
- Preserves electronic evidence for fair investigation.

Challenges

- Balancing public order and civil liberties.
- Preventing infiltration of violent elements into peaceful protests.
- Ensuring police accountability without weakening law enforcement.
- Protecting privacy while preserving digital evidence.

Way Forward

- Independent investigation with fixed timelines.
- Strict implementation of DK Basu guidelines.
- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for crowd control.
- Greater use of body-worn cameras and digital evidence.
- Human rights-oriented police training.
- Strengthen accountability mechanisms for unlawful use of force.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Supreme Court indicated that it may constitute a high-powered independent investigation team to probe allegations of police excesses during protests over the NEET paper leak.
- Directed the immediate release of minors arrested during the protests.
- Allowed investigation of existing FIRs but restrained police from taking coercive action against protesting students unless they have criminal antecedents.
- Ordered preservation of CCTV footage, drone footage, body-camera recordings, wireless communication records and PCR call records.
- The Court emphasized the need for an independent, fair and evidence-based investigation.

Key Points

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(1)(b): Right to assemble peacefully and without arms.
- Article 19(2) & 19(3): Reasonable restrictions in the interests of sovereignty, integrity and public order.
- Article 21: Protection of Life and Personal Liberty.
- Article 22: Safeguards against arbitrary arrest and detention.
- Supreme Court observed that peaceful protest is a constitutional right, but violence cannot be protected.
- Court stressed fixing accountability if police excesses are established.
- Digital evidence must be preserved while protecting privacy of individuals.

Industrial growth hits 23-month high of 7.3%

Good tidings

Strong performance in manufacturing, electricity, and capital goods has fuelled the growth in June 2026, official data show



T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

India's industrial growth hit a near two-year peak of 7.3% in June 2026, fuelled by strong performance in manufacturing, electricity, and capital goods, official data released on Tuesday showed.

Analysts, however, caution that this strong performance might not continue in the face of a lower-than-expected monsoon, and continued uncertainty due to the war in West Asia.

The data on the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, showed that the index's growth in June was the fastest since July 2024, a 23-month high. The index had grown 5.1% in May 2026.

Within the index, the manufacturing sector grew at a 23-month high of 7.8% in June 2026, compared with 5.5% in May, and 2.4% in June of last year.

"The sharp uptick reflects broad-based strength in industrial activity, supported by improving manufacturing output, resilient domestic demand, and sustained momentum in investment-led sectors,"

Shashwat Singh, Fundamental Analyst at Bajaj Broking said.

The heatwave in several parts of the country in June drove growth in the electricity and gas supply sector to a 25-month high of 10.6%, up from 9.9% in May.

Dim outlook ahead

The capital goods sector also saw growth accelerating to 14.2% in June 2026, up from 3.45% in June last year. However, analysts say that despite this growth, the outlook for the months ahead is not as positive.

"While this reflects steady capital expenditure execution, our forward-looking credit outlook adopts a cautious stance," Vikrant Chaturvedi, Associate Director at Brickwork Ratings said. "The 9.3% growth in intermediate goods supports near-term supply chain stability, yet the broader macroeconomic landscape is clouded by significant risks."

The prospect of a below-normal monsoon threatens rural consumption and poses upward inflation pressure while regional tensions in West Asia continue to drive oil price volatility, according to him.

- Manufacturing has the highest weight (77.63%) in IIP.
- Capital Goods are considered a leading indicator of investment and future industrial capacity.
- Electricity demand generally rises with increased industrial and commercial activity.

Static Linkages

- IIP measures changes in physical production, not prices.
- IIP is a high-frequency indicator of industrial performance.
- IIP and GDP measure different aspects of economic activity and therefore may not always move identically.
- Industrial growth contributes to employment generation, Gross Value Added (GVA), exports, and tax revenues.
- Rural consumption significantly influences demand for consumer goods.
- Crude oil price increases raise production and transportation costs, contributing to cost-push inflation.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Higher manufacturing growth indicates improved industrial activity.
- Strong capital goods output reflects sustained investment demand.
- Rising electricity generation signals expanding economic activity.
- Intermediate goods growth indicates stronger manufacturing supply chains.

Challenges

- Deficient monsoon may reduce rural demand and manufacturing growth.
- Higher crude oil prices can increase inflation and production costs.
- Global geopolitical uncertainties may disrupt trade and supply chains.
- Export-oriented industries remain vulnerable to slowing global demand.

Way Forward

- Strengthen domestic manufacturing under Make in India and PLI Scheme.
- Sustain public capital expenditure on infrastructure.
- Improve rural purchasing power through agricultural support.
- Diversify energy sources to reduce dependence on imported crude oil.
- Enhance logistics efficiency through PM Gati Shakti.
- Promote ease of doing business to attract private investment.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- India's Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew by 7.3% in June 2026, the highest in 23 months (since July 2024).
- Growth was driven by Manufacturing (7.8%), Electricity (10.6%), and Capital Goods (14.2%).
- Going forward, below-normal monsoon and West Asia geopolitical tensions may adversely affect industrial growth through weaker rural demand and higher crude oil prices.

Key Points

- Index of Industrial Production (IIP):
 - Measures the volume of industrial production in the economy.
 - Released monthly by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).
 - Base Year: 2011–12.
- Three Industrial Sectors under IIP
 - Manufacturing
 - Mining
 - Electricity
- Use-Based Classification
 - Primary Goods, Capital Goods, Intermediate Goods, Infrastructure/Construction Goods, Consumer Durables, Consumer Non-Durables

Centre reissues draft on Western Ghats eco-zone

Move comes amid the continuing differences with six States over the areas to be included in the ecologically sensitive area. States worried about notification's impact on farming, infrastructure

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

The Union Environment Ministry has reissued, for the seventh time in over a decade, its draft notification proposing an ecologically sensitive area (ESA) across the Western Ghats, after the previous draft lapsed on July 27 without being finalised.

The latest draft, issued on July 27, 2026, will remain open for public objections for 60 days before the Centre considers issuing a final notification. The notification reiterates that once finalised, it would prohibit mining, quarrying, sand mining, new thermal power plants, certain industries and large construction projects within the ESA, while regulating activities such as hydel power generation.

The fresh notification underscores the Centre's inability to resolve long-standing differences with the six Western Ghats States – Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu – over the precise villages



The latest notification retains the proposed ecologically sensitive area at 56,825.7 sq. km, spread across the six States. FILE PHOTO

and regions that should be included within the eco-sensitive zone. The States had raised concerns over the impact of the ESA declaration on agriculture, plantations, infrastructure, and development. The notification itself notes that an expert committee constituted in 2022 is continuing to examine objections from the States regarding "the correct names and area of villages to be included in the ecologically sensitive area" as well as other suggestions submitted by the State governments.

The latest notification

changed in places highlighted during earlier consultations. For instance, the 13 villages in Kerala's Wayanad district across Manantharady, Sulthan Bathery and Yittiri taluks that figured in the previous draft continue to be included in the 2026 notification.

The dispute over protecting the Western Ghats dates back to 2011, when a panel chaired by late ecologist Madhav Gadgil recommended that the entire 1,29,000 sq. km mountain chain be treated as ecologically sensitive, with graded levels of protection. Following objections from the States, a high-level working group chaired by K. Kasturirangan reviewed the proposal and recommended that about 37% of the Western Ghats, covering 59,940 sq. km of natural landscape, be designated an ESA. The notification records that Kerala subsequently carried out its own field verification exercise, reducing the proposed ESA within the State from 13,108 sq. km recommended by the high-level working group to 9,993.7 sq. km.

No changes

A comparison of the latest draft with the previous notification issued in July 2024 shows no substantive changes in the notified area, State-wise extent or regulatory provisions. The list of villages proposed for inclusion also remains un-

- through graded Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ 1, 2 & 3).
- 2013: K. Kasturirangan High-Level Working Group – Recommended 59,940 sq. km (≈37%) of the natural landscape as ESA.
- Kerala Verification: Reduced proposed ESA from 13,108 sq. km to 9,993.7 sq. km.

Static Linkages

- Western Ghats is one of the 36 Global Biodiversity Hotspots.
- Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (39 serial sites).
- Extends for about 1,600 km across Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
- Covers nearly 1.8 lakh sq. km.
- Source of major peninsular rivers:
 - Godavari, Krishna, Kaveri, Tungabhadra, Periyar
- Acts as an orographic barrier, influencing the Southwest Monsoon.
- Home to nearly:
 - 30% of India's plant species.
 - Over 325 globally threatened species.
- ESAs are notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- ESAs regulate developmental activities to conserve fragile ecosystems while permitting sustainable livelihoods.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Conserves one of the world's richest biodiversity regions.
- Protects watersheds of major peninsular rivers.
- Supports India's commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- Reduces ecological degradation, landslides and habitat fragmentation.

Concerns

- States fear restrictions on infrastructure and economic development.
- Concerns over impact on agriculture and plantations.
- Delay reflects Centre–State coordination issues.
- Boundary demarcation remains contentious.
- Livelihood concerns of local communities.

Way Forward

- Finalize ESA boundaries through scientific mapping and stakeholder consultation.
- Adopt a landscape-based conservation approach.
- Promote community-based conservation and eco-tourism.
- Provide compensation/incentives for conservation efforts.
- Strengthen GIS-based monitoring and enforcement.
- Balance ecological security with sustainable development.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- MoEFCC reissued the draft notification (7th time since 2014) for declaring 56,825.7 sq. km of the Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA).
- Draft will remain open for 60 days for public objections before final notification.
- Reissued due to continued disagreement between the Centre and six Western Ghats States regarding ESA boundaries and village inclusion.
- An Expert Committee (2022) continues to examine objections raised by States.

Key Points

Proposed ESA Coverage

State	ESA (sq. km)
• Karnataka	20,668
• Maharashtra	17,340
• Kerala	9,993.7
• Tamil Nadu	6,914
• Goa	1,461
• Gujarat	449
• Total	56,825.7

Activities Prohibited

- Mining and quarrying
- Sand mining
- New thermal power plants
- Red-category industries
- Large construction projects

Activities Regulated

- Hydroelectric projects
- Infrastructure projects subject to environmental safeguards

Committee Timeline

- 2011: Madhav Gadgil Committee (WGEEP) – Recommended ecological protection for the entire Western Ghats (≈1,29,000 sq. km)

The urban nightmare — a fire with no escape

On June 22, 2026, 15 people gasped to death in a burning building in Aliganj, Lucknow. Trapped behind smoke-filled corridors and sealed exits, they never had a chance. The commercial establishment operating from a residential neighbourhood was a veritable death trap — pigeonhole-sized workstations crammed into an unauthorized structure with no viable fire escape. It was not merely a building that caught fire, but a system that failed. A tragedy waiting to happen, added by those whose job it was to prevent it.

All this happened, while the TV channels discussed animatedly U.S.-Iran parleys, where India played no role, and analysts dissected the number of Members of Parliament defecting to the Ekam Shinde-led Shiv Sena. Not aware if there was ever a mention of a collapse of political ethics and morality. But then, do ethics, morality and professionalism figure in urban governance today? Major fires have erupted in cities across India in 2026 on account of failures of urban regulation — signifying abject greed and mismanagement.

On June 3, a fire in a bed and breakfast facility, Malviya Nagar, Delhi, was also caused by illegal construction with no emergency exit. In February, a Bhiwadi garment plant, Rajasthan, which caught fire was an illegal firecracker manufacturing unit behind closed doors, the fire in a cracker manufacturing unit in Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu, took place when the factory was running illegally on a Sunday.

Yet, amidst the horror, emerged stories of extraordinary courage. In Delhi's Malviya Nagar fire, a mattress shop owner reportedly emptied his entire stock onto the street to cushion those jumping from the burning building. Young residents rushed forward without waiting for instructions, while police personnel administered CPR, evacuated victims and continued rescue efforts despite injuries to themselves. Such acts of humanity stand in sharp contrast to the institutional failures.

Historical data trends suggest that India sees approximately 13,000–15,000 fire deaths annually, with the summer of 2026 projected to be one of the worst due to extreme heatwaves triggering electrical fires. In the first quarter of 2026, 39 people have died in fires in Delhi alone, even before the summer peak begins.

Violations without consequences
The problem extends far beyond Aliganj and Malviya Nagar. Death traps of varying forms exist in countless urban settlements across India. They may differ in appearance but share a common characteristic: everyone knows the violations exist, yet they continue.

This is what makes the present crisis particularly troubling: India today possesses technological capabilities unimaginable even a decade ago. Satellite imagery can identify encroachments. Drones can map illegal



Yashvardhan Anand
Retired Indian Police Service officer, who has served as the Central Information Commissioner, Secretary - Security, Government of India, and Special Director, Intelligence Bureau

constructions. Geographic Information Systems can track land use changes. Digital property databases can identify violations. Artificial intelligence can flag anomalies and real-time dashboards can monitor compliance.

Is it really difficult for a municipal commissioner, a development authority official, a State government functionary or the Lieutenant Governor to call for a list of establishments operating without licences, fire clearances or in myriad violations of building norms? The difficulty lies elsewhere. It lies in political pressure and vote-bank calculations and in the thriving informal economies that governments are reluctant to confront and where urban laws and regulations are routinely violated. But, most importantly, it lies in corruption.

Could the fire in Lucknow have been averted? Yes. In 2016, a notice for fire clearance was given but within two months was withdrawn. It was clearly a political decision. The property stood out as a symbol of political patronage under benign oversight of officials, right in the midst of a prominent locality of the capital. This sends out a message to the lower officials, the enforcers, who then entrench a system of their own beneficiaries, overlooking various violations for monetary benefits.

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed to investigate the fire comprised two senior officers, from the IAS and the IPS from the State of Uttar Pradesh, with the report to be submitted to another IAS officer of the government. The head of Lucknow land development authority is also an IAS officer. In such a situation, can the inquiry yield anything purposeful. If a calamity of this kind results only in a conversation between a closed loop of bureaucrats, can there ever be any meaningful reform? No. But it was certainly possible if the Minister of Urban Development and the head of the capital land development authority were indicted for this tragedy.

This pattern is visible across the country. In Noida, a young professional lost his life after falling into a waterlogged, poorly protected urban hazard. In Indore, celebrated nationally for cleanliness, deaths linked to contaminated water supply raise disturbing questions about basic civic safeguards. Bengaluru, India's technology capital, repeatedly grinds to a halt after heavy rains. Mumbai, India's financial capital, continues to struggle with flooding despite decades of investment and repeated expert recommendations.

A common thread
Different cities. Different governments. Different political parties, but the same outcome. The real concern is the absence of accountability and governance deficit. What happened after Delhi's basement coaching centre tragedy? Arrests were made. Committees were constituted. Headlines were generated. Yet, illegal and unsafe basement operations continue to flourish in many cities. How many inquiry reports have fundamentally

altered urban governance? How many officials have faced meaningful consequences years after disasters? How many systemic reforms have followed repeated tragedies? India has actually become adept at managing outrage and far less effective in preventing a recurrence of man-made tragedies.

At the heart of the problem lies a governance structure nobody wishes to discuss honestly. For over three decades, since the 74th Constitutional Amendment, India has spoken of empowering urban local bodies. Yet, most city governments remain weak. Every Chief Minister is the de facto mayor for all cities in his/her State and municipal corporations have responsibility without authority. Elected representatives have visibility without power. Important functions remain scattered across development authorities, municipal corporations, public works departments, water boards, transport agencies and numerous specialised bodies.

A flooded road belongs to one agency, a drain to another, land to a third and enforcement to a fourth. Citizens, meanwhile, simply see government. This fragmentation has created a dangerous accountability vacuum.

Fix governance first

The answer therefore is not another scheme. Indian cities are already overflowing with schemes, missions, projects and programmes. Every few years a new initiative comes up with a new acronym and fresh funding. The problem is not the absence of schemes, but the absence of governance. A number of well-meaning schemes lie buried under corruption and mismanagement. Cities require empowered local institutions, professional urban management, clear accountability and fearless enforcement. Technology must become an instrument of compliance rather than a showcase of modernisation. Most importantly, governments must find the political courage to dismantle entrenched systems of tolerated illegality.

Officers, the enforcers, look away fearing a clash with political vested interests. The victims of Lucknow and Delhi fires did not die because India lacks fire safety laws. They died despite those laws. That is the distinction policymakers must understand. Urban governance is ultimately measured not by the number of projects inaugurated, smart-city dashboards installed or schemes announced, but by the number of tragedies prevented. The real test of governance is whether an ordinary citizen can work, live, study, shop or sleep in a building without fear of dying because somebody chose to ignore the rules.

Will this tragedy become yet another file, another enquiry and another forgotten headline? Or will it finally compel us to confront the uncomfortable truth that India's cities are not merely growing beyond their capacity but are increasingly failing the very citizens they were meant to serve?

- State Fire Services Acts.
- Municipal Building Bye-laws.
- National Building Code (adopted by States/ULBs).
- Rapid urbanisation has increased:
 - Mixed land use.
 - High-density settlements.
 - Encroachments.
 - Informal commercial activities.

- Technology available for urban regulation:
 - GIS mapping.
 - Remote sensing.
 - Drone surveys.
 - AI-enabled compliance monitoring.
 - Digital property databases.
- NCRB (Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India Report) records around 13,000–15,000 fire-related deaths annually in India.

Static Linkages

- 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992
- Article 243W
- Twelfth Schedule
- National Building Code (NBC), 2016
- Disaster Management Act, 2005
- Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030)
- Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) recommendations on urban governance.
- Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)

Critical Analysis

Issues

- Poor enforcement despite adequate legal provisions.
- Weak devolution under the 74th Constitutional Amendment.
- Fragmented urban governance among multiple agencies.
- Corruption and political interference.
- Lack of accountability after disasters.
- Inadequate periodic fire safety audits.

Significance

- Highlights governance deficit rather than legislative deficiency.
- Demonstrates need for disaster prevention over post-disaster response.
- Reinforces importance of empowered Urban Local Bodies.

Way Forward

- Effective implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment.
- Strengthen functional and financial autonomy of ULBs.
- Mandatory periodic fire safety and structural audits.
- GIS-based identification of illegal constructions.
- Digital monitoring of building approvals and compliance.
- Time-bound action against unauthorized buildings.
- Fix administrative accountability for regulatory failures.
- Capacity building of municipal and fire service personnel.
- Adopt Sendai Framework principles for urban disaster risk reduction.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- On 22 June 2026, a fire in an illegal commercial establishment operating in a residential building at Aliganj, Lucknow killed 15 people.
- Similar fire incidents in Delhi (Malviya Nagar), Bhiwadi (Rajasthan) and Virudhunagar (Tamil Nadu) highlighted systemic failures in urban planning, fire safety enforcement and municipal governance.
- The incidents have renewed focus on implementation of the 74th Constitutional Amendment, urban local governance, fire safety regulations and disaster risk reduction.

Key Points

- Major causes of urban fire disasters:
 - Illegal constructions.
 - Unauthorized land-use conversion.
 - Violation of fire safety norms.
 - Lack of emergency exits.
 - Weak enforcement by local authorities.
- National Building Code (NBC), 2016 provides comprehensive fire and life safety standards for buildings.
 - 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 Constitutional status to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).
 - Twelfth Schedule includes:
 - Urban planning.
 - Regulation of land use.
 - Roads and bridges.
 - Public health.
 - Fire services.
- Fire safety regulation is primarily implemented through:

Iran's Afghan balancing act amid regional upheaval

The funeral proceedings of Iran's late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that stretched over a week amid a spiralling war and significant internal turmoil at the seat of power for Shiism, saw multiple personalities visit Tehran. Almost unnoticed, however, was the presence of delegations from both the Taliban and the opposition Northern Alliance. The two have been fighting each other, in various iterations, over Afghanistan since the 1990s.

Complex equations

The presence of the Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar along with Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttagi on the one hand and the Northern Alliance's Ahmed Massoud, son of the group's founder Ahmed Shah Massoud on the other, highlighted the delicate game of geopolitics that continues to persist on Tehran's eastern front. While Iran is the one country which has built the strongest influence with Kabul since the collapse of the government of President Ashraf Ghani (August 2021), it still does not officially recognise the Taliban government. This is hardly surprising, considering that until the 1990s, Iran, along with India, Russia, Tajikistan and other neighbouring and foreign states, supported the Northern Alliance.

The chaotic withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, in August 2021, two decades after a post-9/11 war launched against al Qaeda was a critical moment in Tehran. The consistent and massive deployment of western military power on its borders was a perpetual nightmare that had to be factored into its calculations. Pakistan's support for and incubation of the Afghan Taliban, while simultaneously backing the U.S.-led 'war on terror', created a shinkhole of competing interests, where the Venn diagram of who was supporting whom became so



Kabir Taneja
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convoluted that foreign powers often ceded the upper hand to regional players. The fact that al Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden was eventually found in Abbottabad, Pakistan (May 2011), in a large house – and not a cave in the infamous Tora Bora – was not a coincidence.

The Afghan chessboard

The Iranian viewpoint on the Taliban and the Afghan landscape changed significantly after 9/11. While Tehran remains sceptical of the Taliban and the future of its rule to this day, it simultaneously recognises that an insurgency turned government will always carry a question mark over its long-term stability. The ideological and tribal fissures that persist also require micromanagement, which means creating enemies along volatile borders is not in anyone's long-term interests.

Following 2021, the Taliban was in search of both power and patronage. Iran could offer some of the power, but only a limited amount of the patronage. The calculation behind this was to free up a major front from as much conflict as possible. The Northern Alliance, largely concentrated in the mountainous northern province of Panjshir, was both weak and disorganised, with infighting having hollowed out any possibility of cohesion and structure. In fact, since February, as clouds of war gathered, the Taliban reiterated that it would support Iran should the country come under attack. Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman close to Taliban Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, said in an interview with Iranian state radio that they would support Iran if needed. The nature and extent of such support, of course, remain subjects of debate. Diplomatic support from Kabul has been robust over the past year, including access to the country's civilian airports. But the Iranians hosting Masoud and the Northern Alliance delegation in Tehran shows

that, despite the war in West Asia, Iran is not willing to put all its eggs in one basket when it comes to Afghanistan. The country, and its intricacies, remain a problem that needs strategic management. The fact that the Taliban is still prioritising solidifying its own power and structure, especially between Kabul, the political capital, and Kandahar, the ideological one, highlights that homogeneously supporting the group is still not seen as being wise. For Tehran, this geography remains critical. For example, Quds Force, the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) elite external operations branch, has been run by Komal Qaani since the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2020 by the U.S. Qaani is known to be a Khorasan hand (Iran's north/eastern neighbours such as Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, among others). Qaani's operational history goes back to the Taliban versus Northern Alliance era of the 1990s.

Ties with Pakistan

The war currently engulfing West Asia is expected to remain a constant for at least a few months to come. Pakistan's role as a mediator between Tehran and Washington DC, has given a new lease of 'brotherhood' between the two. Nonetheless, their aims are divergent. For Pakistan, the objective is to get back into the good books of both the U.S. and Gulf partners (Islamabad now has troops stationed in Saudi Arabia). For Iran, it is about reaching out to the U.S. through a neighbour it knows, if not trusts, better than most. The Iran-Pakistan bilateral relationship is incidental to everything else. Increasingly, no binaries exist in international diplomacy. Neither do brotherhoods. Every hug is exchanged with one eye always open. These realities predate contemporary politics in South Asia and West Asia, long before the disintegration of western power began to take the shape we are witnessing today.

- Declaratory and Constitutive theories of recognition under international law.
- Strategic Autonomy in foreign policy allows engagement with competing actors.
- Balance of Power and Hedging Strategy are important concepts in international relations.
- Afghanistan is India's gateway to Central Asia through connectivity initiatives.
- India advocates a peaceful, stable, sovereign, united, and inclusive Afghanistan.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- Iran invited delegations from both the Taliban and the National Resistance Front (NRF/Northern Alliance) during the funeral proceedings of its late Supreme Leader.
- The move reflects Iran's policy of strategic balancing (hedging) in Afghanistan amid prolonged instability in West Asia.
- Although Iran has expanded engagement with the Taliban since August 2021, it has not officially recognized the Taliban government.
- The development highlights Afghanistan's continued importance in Iran's regional security calculus.

Key Points

- Iran follows a hedging strategy by engaging multiple Afghan stakeholders simultaneously.
- Before 2001, Iran supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban.
- Since the Taliban takeover (2021), Iran has:
 - Expanded diplomatic and economic engagement.
 - Increased border security cooperation.
 - Continued withholding formal recognition.
- Major concerns for Iran:
 - Border security
 - Terrorism (ISKP)
 - Refugee inflows
 - Narcotics trafficking
 - Helmand River water dispute
- IRGC-Quds Force remains an important institution shaping Iran's Afghanistan policy.
- Taliban seeks greater regional legitimacy despite limited international recognition.

Static Linkages

- Recognition of a State ≠ Recognition of a Government.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Enhances Iran's strategic leverage in Afghanistan.
- Prevents dependence on a single political actor.
- Secures Iran's eastern border amid West Asian instability.
- Preserves channels with all future power centres in Afghanistan.

Challenges

- Taliban's internal divisions create policy uncertainty.
- Persistent terrorist threats (especially ISKP).
- Refugee and humanitarian pressures.
- Helmand River water-sharing disputes.
- Competing interests of Pakistan, China, Russia, Central Asian states and Gulf countries.

Implications for India

- Stability in Afghanistan remains essential for regional security.
- Impacts connectivity projects towards Central Asia.
- Influences India's counter-terrorism and regional engagement strategy.

Way Forward

- Promote an inclusive Afghan-led political process.
- Strengthen regional cooperation against terrorism and narcotics trafficking.
- Resolve transboundary water disputes through dialogue.
- Expand humanitarian assistance while preventing extremist exploitation.
- Encourage regional diplomacy through multilateral platforms.

Protecting protest

Protests that inconvenience people must not be confused with violence

A defining feature of the recent Cockroach Janta Party agitation related to its under-estimation by the government, which hoped to quell the protests by force. The net result was widespread student anger, which served to entrench the agitation. The Supreme Court has just commenced hearing petitions on the police's alleged use of disproportionate force, especially on July 20 in Delhi and a constable's aerial firing of an assault rifle allegedly to disperse crowds on July 25 in Bihar's Siwan. The Court has also agreed to hear petitions from the families of police personnel claiming that they were assaulted and "lynched". The ferocity of the July 20 police crackdown against protesters is not in doubt; in addition to tear gas, videos also purported to show the police using lathis studded with nails. But as Justice Joymalya Bagchi observed, the state should also answer why some police officers allegedly lacked protective gear. Under-equipped police are more likely to escalate force out of fear, and this is why international best practices in crowd control involve graduated responses. There is also merit in pleas that the same police force accused of using excess force also investigating it could potentially undermine credibility.

However, the Chief Justice of India's remark that protests are permissible "with due permission and at designated places" could come at odds with the right to protest. The democratic purpose of a protest is to inconvenience the state and thus should not be limited to its happening at the state's convenience. At the same time, not every inconvenience is constitutionally protected. The answer lies in proportionality. If the CJI's insistence on 'discipline' comes to mean protests must be orderly and predictable, it risks imposing administrative preferences on a constitutional right. The state is responsible for preventing violence, protecting life, and maintaining essential services. But modern cities are also dense and even a peaceful blockade could deprive thousands of uninvolved citizens of their liberties. The judiciary should thus resist conflating disruption that results in inconveniencing the public – which is one of the mechanisms by which a protest acquires its political force – and violence, which infringes on the rights of others. A unified set of procedures will also be welcome since policing is a State subject under the Seventh Schedule, and States have different training, equipment, escalation, and documentation rules. A national protocol could standardise the thresholds at which the use of high-impact crowd-control measures can be authorised and mandatory documentation of lathi charges, medical assistance after use of force, preservation of evidence, and independent inquiries into serious injuries.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- The Supreme Court is hearing petitions alleging disproportionate use of force by police during recent student protests.
- The Court examined issues relating to:
 - Alleged police excesses during crowd control.
 - Need for an independent and impartial investigation.
 - Adequacy of protective equipment provided to police personnel.
 - Balancing the Fundamental Right to Protest with the State's duty to maintain public order.
- The issue highlights the constitutional debate on individual liberties vis-à-vis public order.

Key Points

- The Right to Protest is a constitutional right derived from Article 19, but not an absolute right.
- Restrictions must satisfy the test of reasonableness and proportionality.
- Police and Public Order are State subjects under the Seventh Schedule (State List).

- Use of force by police should follow the principles of:
 - Necessity, Legality, Proportionality, Accountability
- Independent investigation into allegations of police excesses enhances public confidence in the rule of law.

Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(a): Freedom of Speech and Expression.
- Article 19(1)(b): Right to assemble peacefully and without arms.
- Articles 19(2) & 19(3): Reasonable restrictions in the interests of public order, sovereignty and integrity of India.
- Article 21: Right to Life and Personal Liberty.
- Article 32 & Article 226: Constitutional remedies.
 - Seventh Schedule (State List): Entry 1 – Public Order
 - Entry 2 – Police
- Doctrine of Proportionality
- Rule of Law
- Judicial Review
- Natural Justice

Important Supreme Court Judgments

- **Himat Lal K. Shah v. Commissioner of Police (1973):**
 - Citizens have the right to hold peaceful public meetings, subject to reasonable regulation.
- **Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) v. Union of India (2018):**
 - Right to protest is a Fundamental Right but must be balanced with the rights of commuters and residents.
- **Amit Sahni v. Commissioner of Police (Shaheen Bagh Case, 2020):**
 - Public ways cannot be occupied indefinitely; protests should occur in designated places.
- **Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India (2020):**
 - Restrictions on Fundamental Rights must satisfy the test of proportionality.

Critical Analysis

Arguments in Favour

- Protects democratic dissent.
- Judicial oversight strengthens constitutional governance.
- Independent investigation enhances accountability.
- Uniform crowd-control protocols improve policing standards.

- Better training reduces unnecessary escalation.

Concerns

- Excessive force may violate Articles 19 and 21.
- Violent protests threaten public safety and essential services.
- Lack of uniform SOPs across States.
- Police investigating allegations against themselves may undermine credibility.
- Poor protective equipment may increase use of force due to fear.

Way Forward

- Adopt a Model National Crowd Management Protocol while respecting State powers.
- Ensure graded and proportionate use of force.
- Mandatory use of body cameras and videography during crowd-control operations.
- Independent inquiry into deaths or grievous injuries during protests.
- Modernize police equipment and provide regular crowd-control training.
- Strengthen implementation of Supreme Court directions in *Prakash Singh v. Union of India* (2006) on police reforms.
- Promote dialogue and mediation before resorting to force.

Diminishing relevance

The Commonwealth Games look increasingly like a relic from the past

As Olympic and World Championships medalist Mirabai Chanu stood atop the podium in Glasgow on Sunday, tears rolling down her cheeks after becoming the first woman weightlifter to secure her third consecutive Commonwealth Games gold medal, she provided much-needed succour to a Games that had risked fading into oblivion a few years ago. With India set to host the centenary edition of the Games in Ahmedabad in 2030, there could not have been a better advertisement than Mirabai's golden triumph, which also ensured her fourth medal of any colour in a row in the women's 48kg category with a total of 190kg. The seasoned weightlifter's feat may not be the only glorious chapter written in the Scottish city, as other leading Indian athletes are expected to climb the podium in athletics and para-athletics, weightlifting and para-weightlifting, boxing, judo, and lawn bowls and para-bowls. According to an internal estimation by the Union Sports Ministry, India's athletes are expected to win around 30 medals even though several disciplines in which Indians have traditionally excelled – such as wrestling, badminton, table tennis, hockey and squash – were dropped from the scaled-down Glasgow event. Medals are expected from Neeraj Chopra, Murali Sreesankar, Praveen Chithravel, and boxers Lovlina Borgohain and Jaismine Lamboria.

The curtailed Commonwealth Games highlights the diminishing relevance of the erstwhile British Empire's sporting tradition. The 2026 edition, originally allotted to Victoria, faced an existential threat after the Australian State withdrew as a host three years ago due to spiralling costs. Glasgow, the host in 2014, saved the Games from embarrassment by proposing a scaled-down version – with 10 integrated disciplines, across four venues within an eight-mile corridor. Even though the Commonwealth Games do not match the global or regional excellence of the Olympics or the Asian Games, the platform still holds a strong appeal for Indian sportspersons and administrators. While India's success at the elite world level across different sports has been sporadic, it has the dubious distinction of topping the global doping charts for three successive years. Multiple athletes across disciplines have been caught for consuming banned substances even in the run-up to Glasgow 2026. Either they have been withdrawn from the Indian contingent or have failed to qualify due to this, impacting the nation's medal chances and bringing it shameful international headlines. As the country prepares to organise a bigger Commonwealth Games – especially against the backdrop of the corruption-tainted Delhi 2010 edition – it would do well to enhance its vigilance to curb financial malpractices and promote clean sport over the next four years.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Mirabai Chanu became the first woman weightlifter to win three consecutive Commonwealth Games (CWG) gold medals at Glasgow 2026.
- India is expected to win around 30 medals, despite the exclusion of several traditional medal-winning sports.
- The 2026 CWG was conducted in a scaled-down format after Australia's Victoria withdrew due to escalating costs.
- India will host the Centenary Commonwealth Games in Ahmedabad in 2030, making governance, infrastructure, and sports administration key focus areas.

Key Points

- Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) governs the Commonwealth Games.
- 2026 Host: Glasgow, Scotland.
- 2030 Host: Ahmedabad, India.
- Glasgow 2026 featured only 10 integrated sports, significantly fewer than previous editions.
- Sports excluded included:
 - Wrestling, Hockey, Badminton, Table Tennis, Squash

- Mirabai Chanu won:
 - Third consecutive CWG Gold Medal.
 - Fourth consecutive CWG medal.
- India continues to strengthen its international sporting profile but faces concerns regarding anti-doping violations.
- Hosting CWG 2030 aligns with India's objective of strengthening sports infrastructure and enhancing global sporting credentials.

Static Linkages

- Entry 33, State List (Seventh Schedule): Sports, entertainment and amusements.
- Article 51A(j): Fundamental Duty to strive towards excellence.
- National Sports Development Code, 2011 – Governance framework for National Sports Federations.
- National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) – India's anti-doping authority implementing the World Anti-Doping Code.
- Sports Authority of India (SAI) – Apex body for sports development.
- Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) – Financial and scientific support for elite athletes.
- Khelo India Programme – Grassroots sports development.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Enhances India's sporting diplomacy and soft power.
- Promotes investment in sports infrastructure ahead of CWG 2030.
- Encourages grassroots participation and athlete development.
- Boosts tourism, employment and urban infrastructure.

Challenges

- Rising cost of hosting mega sporting events.
- Weak governance and accountability in sports administration.
- Repeated anti-doping violations affecting India's credibility.
- Risk of corruption and cost overruns, as witnessed during Delhi CWG 2010.
- Limited relevance of Commonwealth Games compared to Olympics and Asian Games.

Way Forward

- Strengthen anti-doping enforcement through NADA.
- Ensure transparent procurement and financial accountability for CWG 2030.
- Improve governance and autonomy of National Sports Federations.
- Expand sports science, nutrition and athlete support systems.
- Prioritise Olympic disciplines alongside Commonwealth events.
- Promote sustainable and legacy-based sports infrastructure.

India among the powers: Forever rising, never risen?



RAJA MANDALA
By C RAJA MOHAN

SINCE CANADIAN Prime Minister Mark Carney called on the world's "middle powers" to collaborate amid growing turbulence in the international order, the idea has attracted little strategic-scholarly attention. However, it has been less than enthusiastic. Asked about Carney's formulation, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argued that it may be more relevant to America's treaty allies in coping with President Donald Trump's unpredictable policies than to India. The middle-power label, he implied, understates India's geopolitical weight and its potential to emerge as a great power. Yet scepticism about India's great-power prospects is growing. In his new book, *The Return of the Great Powers*, the Cambridge historian Brendan Simms places India in the category of "almost great powers", alongside France, Germany and Japan. They possess several great-power attributes, but not enough of them to be the world's system-shapers. Whether or not one accepts Simms's classification, his larger argument deserves attention. He reminds us that international politics has always been driven by the interaction among great powers — through rivalry as much as cooperation. The post-Cold War hope that globalisation, markets and international institutions would tame geo-

politics has proved to be short-lived. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the sharpening US-China rivalry, and the weaponisation of trade, finance and technology all point to the return of hard power as the organising principle of world politics.

What, then, defines a great power? Simms offers an unspectacularly material answer. Industrial strength, technological leadership, military capability, including nuclear weapons, the capacity to project force beyond one's borders, and the ability to influence war and peace in multiple theatres remain the essential attributes of great-power status.

Measured against these standards, India is clearly a power in transition rather than a completed one. It has continental scale, the world's largest population, nuclear weapons and one of the world's largest economies. Yet it still trails the US and China by a wide margin in per capita income and global military reach. India's economy, at around \$4 trillion, is impressive, but it remains far behind those of the US and China (at \$31 and \$20 trillion respectively).

Even if India overtakes Britain, Japan and Germany in aggregate GDP over the next decade, it will still be a distant third to America and China. Its per capita income remains below \$3,000, it continues to depend heavily on imported military technologies, and its investment in research and development remains modest compared to the world's technological leaders.

Simms is not alone in questioning whether that transition will happen. Michael Beckley of Tufts University advances an even more

sobering argument in a recent *Foreign Affairs* essay, 'The Stagnant Order'. He suggests that China may well be the last country to have made the leap into the front rank of global powers. Demographic ageing, slowing productivity and the concentration of economic power and advanced technologies in the US and China are making it progressively harder for latecomers from the Global South to catch up. India will remain an important global actor in world politics, Beckley argues, but is unlikely to become a true great power given its many domestic weaknesses, including a lack of necessary skills among its young demographic.

India's aspiration to great-power status, however, is hardly new. Long before independence, Indian nationalists, including Jawaharlal Nehru, imagined India reclaiming a special place in world affairs. At independence, despite widespread poverty, India was among the world's largest economies and possessed political institutions and human capital that suggested considerable promise. But India slowed as the East Asian tigers and China surged ahead. India's geopolitical drift in the second half of the 20th century towards the Soviet Union put Delhi on the losing side of the Cold War.

The reforms launched by P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh 35 years ago reversed that trajectory. Rapid economic growth and a diversification of India's great-power relations transformed international perceptions of the country.

Washington began to see Delhi not merely as a developing country but as a rising power capable of contributing to the Asian balance and the wider international order. That optimism is now under a cloud. Global headlines have

played a role but so have domestic policy choices. India has not built on the momentum generated by the growth in the first decade of the 21st century. Productivity growth has slowed, manufacturing has underperformed, investment in science and technology remains inadequate, and the next wave of structural reforms has stalled. The gap between India's geopolitical ambitions and its economic foundations has therefore widened.

The challenge is larger than economics. Deepening political polarisation, the resurgence of feudal and pre-modern forces, and growing strains on democratic institutions at home will weaken India's ability to deal with a rapidly changing world marked by sharpening geopolitical rivalry, less open markets, and the rise of disruptive technologies.

Pessimists worry that India may have missed its moment of opportunity in the early 21st century and will remain forever an emerging power — at odds with itself politically and growing at a suboptimal pace. Optimists are not ready to give up. They believe India's natural advantages and its people's talents can still be mobilised to accelerate its rise on the world stage. Such an outcome will depend on whether India can return to the unfinished business of economic, technological and social modernisation and boosting national unity and political cohesion. Only then can India move from being an "almost great power" to becoming one.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for *The Indian Express*. He is a distinguished professor at the Motwani Jodha Institute of American Studies, Jindal Global University and holds the Ramo Foundation Chair in Asian geopolitics at the Council on Strategic and Defence Research.

Deepening political polarisation, the resurgence of feudal and pre-modern forces, and growing strains on democratic institutions at home will weaken India's ability to deal with a rapidly changing world

- Limited manufacturing competitiveness.
- Heavy dependence on imported critical technologies and defence equipment.
- Low R&D expenditure (around 0.65% of GDP).
- Skill and productivity gaps.
- Infrastructure and logistics challenges.
- Need for faster structural reforms.

Static Linkages

- Comprehensive National Power (CNP) depends upon:
 - Economic strength
 - Military capability
 - Technological advancement
 - Demographic advantage
 - Political stability
 - Diplomatic influence
 - Soft power
- Strategic autonomy remains the guiding principle of India's foreign policy.
- Economic growth is the primary foundation of geopolitical influence.

Critical Analysis

Opportunities

- Demographic dividend.
- Expanding domestic market.
- Strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific.
- Leadership of the Global South.
- Digital Public Infrastructure.
- Growing defence exports.

Challenges

- Manufacturing share remains below desired levels.
- Low investment in research and innovation.
- Dependence on imported high-end technologies.
- Skill deficit and low labour productivity.
- Slow pace of second-generation economic reforms.
- Global geopolitical uncertainty.

Way Forward

- Accelerate structural economic reforms.
- Increase manufacturing competitiveness.
- Raise R&D expenditure.
- Strengthen semiconductor and AI ecosystem.
- Promote defence indigenisation.
- Improve education and skill development.
- Enhance logistics and infrastructure.
- Deepen strategic partnerships while maintaining strategic autonomy.
- Strengthen institutional capacity and governance.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- Canadian PM Mark Carney proposed greater cooperation among middle powers amid increasing geopolitical instability.
- India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated that India should not be viewed merely as a "middle power" but as an emerging great power.
- Historian Brendan Simms, in *The Return of the Great Powers*, categorizes India as an "almost great power", citing significant economic and technological gaps.
- The debate comes amid an increasingly multipolar world order, intensifying US-China strategic competition, and the growing importance of hard power.

Key Points

Great Power: Essential Attributes

- Strong and diversified economy.
- Technological leadership and innovation.
- Advanced manufacturing capability.
- Military strength with credible nuclear deterrence.
- Indigenous defence-industrial base.
- Ability to project power beyond national borders.
- Influence over global governance and international institutions.

India's Strengths

- World's most populous country.
- 4th largest economy (Nominal GDP).
- Nuclear weapon state.
- Rapidly growing digital economy.
- Major space power.
- Strategic location in the Indian Ocean.
- Active role in G20, BRICS, Quad, SCO, BIMSTEC.

Key Constraints

- Low per capita income.

Our strategic imagination must look beyond geography



SYED ATA HASNAIN

FOR MUCH of its post-Independence history, India's strategic outlook was shaped by geography. The Himalayas, the Line of Control, the Line of Actual Control, the Indian Ocean and the immediate neighbourhood defined the security calculus. Pakistan and China dominated strategic discourse, while South Asia became the primary frame through which the external environment was viewed. That paradigm served India well when territorial defence and regional stability were the foremost concerns. But India today is the world's fourth-largest economy, an emerging technology power, a leading maritime nation and an increasingly influential voice in global affairs. Its interests have expanded far beyond its contiguous borders. Strategic thinking must now evolve at the same pace as national transformation.

The 21st century is seeing a shift in the way nations perceive security and influence. Geopolitics is increasingly governed by what may be called the geometry of interests. Energy security begins in the Persian Gulf. Sea lanes stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca sustain economic growth. Critical minerals originate in distant regions. Supply chains span continents. Strategic proximity is therefore no longer determined solely by physical distance but by connectivity, partnerships, technology, maritime reach and the ability to shape outcomes. This is why India's strategic horizon now extends from the Gulf and Central Asia to Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

Viewing India's external environment through the narrow prism of South Asia no longer reflects contemporary realities. China's rise spans technology, trade, infrastructure and maritime influence across the Indo-Pacific. Pakistan will continue to demand vigilance, but the long-term objective should be to reduce its ability to constrain India's wider strategic choices.

Bangladesh today is far more than an immediate neighbour. Its stability influences connectivity to the Northeast, the security of the Bay of Bengal and India's eastern frontier. Developments in Afghanistan shape Central Asian connec-

tivity, counter-terrorism and regional stability. The Middle East has evolved from an energy source into a vital strategic partner. The Indo-Pacific has become the arena where India's maritime aspirations, strategic partnerships and economic future converge. None of this diminishes the importance of the immediate neighbourhood. It places it within a broader strategic continuum.

India has an advantage often overlooked in strategic discourse — its civilisational legacy. As Governor of Bihar, I have often reflected on the enduring significance of Nalanda. Scholars travelled from across Asia not because India exercised coercive power, but because it commanded intellectual and cultural influence. This legacy carries contemporary relevance. Influence is rarely sustained by coercion alone. It is strengthened by credibility, openness and the willingness to create shared opportunities. India's engagement with Southeast Asia, the Gulf, Central Asia and Africa therefore rests not only upon economics and diplomacy but also upon historical links.

History offers many examples of rising powers whose emergence generated anxiety among neighbours. But India's rise has generally been viewed with confidence rather than apprehension. Its strategic autonomy, democratic institutions, developmental partnerships, humanitarian assistance and respect for sovereignty have contributed to this perception. That trust is one of India's greatest strategic assets and must be carefully preserved. The success of its foreign policy will be judged by whether it can shape a wider strategic environment that remains stable, connected and conducive to national development.

The task before us is to move from the geography of borders to the geometry of interests — and in doing so, align India's strategic imagination with the realities of its rise.

The essay is based on the Jasjit Singh Memorial Lecture at the Centre for Aerospace Power & Strategic Studies, delivered by the writer, who is a former commander of the Indian Army's Chinari Corps and now Governor of Bihar

Strategic proximity is no longer determined solely by physical distance but by connectivity, partnerships, technology, maritime reach and the ability to shape outcomes

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context of the News

- A recent strategic commentary highlights that India's strategic outlook is shifting from a geography-centric approach to an interest-centric approach.
- Traditionally, India's security policy revolved around Pakistan, China, the Himalayas, LoC, LAC, and the Indian Ocean.
- As India emerges as a major economic, technological, and maritime power, its strategic interests now extend across the Indo-Pacific, West Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa.
- The article argues that national interests are increasingly shaped by connectivity, trade, technology, energy security, maritime access, and supply chains rather than geographical proximity alone.

Key Points

Evolution of India's Strategic Thinking

- Earlier emphasis on:
 - Territorial security.
 - Immediate neighbourhood.
 - Border disputes.
- Present emphasis on:
 - Economic security.
 - Maritime security.
 - Technology partnerships.
 - Supply-chain resilience.
 - Critical minerals.
 - Global connectivity.

From Geography to Geometry of Interests

- Strategic proximity now depends upon:
 - Energy security.
 - Maritime connectivity.
 - Trade networks.
 - Critical mineral access.
 - Strategic partnerships.
 - Technological cooperation.

Strategic Importance of Key Regions

West Asia (Middle East)

- Energy security.
- Indian diaspora.
- Investment.
- Maritime security.

Central Asia

- Connectivity.
- Counter-terrorism.
- Energy resources.

Southeast Asia

- Act East Policy.
- ASEAN partnership.
- Indo-Pacific cooperation.

Indo-Pacific

- Freedom of navigation.
- Secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).
- Maritime security.
- Rules-based international order.

Importance of Immediate Neighbourhood

- China: Principal long-term strategic challenge.
- Pakistan: Security and cross-border terrorism concerns.
- Bangladesh: Northeast connectivity and Bay of Bengal security.
- Afghanistan: Counter-terrorism and Central Asian connectivity.

India's Strategic Advantages

- Strategic autonomy.
- Democratic credentials.
- Civilisational soft power.
- Development partnerships.
- Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).
- Credibility among Global South countries.

Static Linkages

- Neighbourhood First Policy
- Act East Policy
- SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)
- Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)
- Strategic Autonomy
- Multi-alignment in Foreign Policy
- Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)
- Critical Minerals Security

- Blue Economy
- Soft Power Diplomacy

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reflects India's transformation into a major global power.
- Diversifies strategic partnerships beyond South Asia.
- Strengthens energy and supply-chain security.
- Enhances India's role in the Indo-Pacific.
- Expands diplomatic and economic influence.

Challenges

- Simultaneously managing China and Pakistan.
- Instability in West Asia and Afghanistan.
- Dependence on imported energy and critical minerals.
- Balancing strategic autonomy amid great-power rivalry.
- Limited defence and diplomatic resources for wider engagement.

Way Forward

- Strengthen Neighbourhood First while expanding global partnerships.
- Enhance maritime capabilities under SAGAR and IPOI.
- Secure critical mineral supply chains through diversification.
- Deepen engagement with ASEAN, Gulf countries, and Central Asia.
- Promote resilient trade and connectivity corridors.
- Leverage India's soft power, democratic values, and development partnerships.
- Maintain strategic autonomy through multi-alignment.

Learning the right lessons at the bank

TWO MONTHS after an investigation in this paper revealed that HDFC Bank had camouflaged crores as marketing spend to pay higher interest to the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation, the bank's board has initiated action. It has issued warning letters and imposed a penalty of Rs 1 lakh on three high-ranking officials — the managing director and chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and group head of retail assets. The action is unprecedented, and the board under a new chairman may be sending a signal down the line. But the saga raises troubling questions of corporate governance at the country's largest private bank.

On March 12, HDFC's audit committee of the board had ordered an "internal vigilance investigation" into the Rs 45 crore paid to the corporation during 2023-24 and 2024-25. Earlier, an internal audit of the bank's marketing division for 2024-25 had marked out these payments, while rating the division's performance as "unsatisfactory". The investigation revealed this amount was the interest paid over the specified interest rate on deposits. While there is fierce competition among banks to attract deposits, the RBI's master directions on interest rates do not allow for rates to be negotiated between the parties. This "differential interest" was not routed directly into the corporation's account as interest earned, but was channelled through the bank's marketing department, dressed up as contribution to awareness campaigns. On March 18, six days after the probe was ordered, the bank's then chairman, Atanu Chakraborty resigned, saying that "certain happenings and practices within the bank" were not in "congruence" with his personal values and ethics.

Given the seriousness of the matter, some questions must be asked. After this paper's investigation two months ago, in a note to stock exchanges the bank claimed that the "internal controls at the bank are robust". Its latest statement speaks of two such deposits, the earlier one is of 2017. Could there have been more such instances, flagged by internal audits and ignored by the board? Shouldn't the board review the audits of at least the last five years? This will ensure that the right lessons are learnt from this episode. The question also is whether or not oversight processes will be effective. Trust is central to the banking system. It needs to be nurtured. For that, all appropriate steps should be taken urgently.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

Context

- HDFC Bank's Board took disciplinary action against its MD & CEO, CFO and Group Head (Retail Assets) over an internal vigilance investigation.
- The investigation found that around ₹45 crore was allegedly routed through the marketing department to provide higher returns on deposits to the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC), instead of paying it as interest.
- The issue raised concerns regarding corporate governance, internal controls, regulatory compliance and banking ethics.
- The matter highlights the importance of RBI regulations and board oversight in maintaining public confidence in the banking system.

Key Points

- Reserve Bank of India (RBI) regulates banks under the Banking Regulation Act, 1949.
- RBI issues Master Directions on Interest Rates on Deposits, which prohibit banks from offering unauthorized negotiated interest rates.
- Internal Audit and Audit Committee detected the irregularity.
- The Board imposed penalties and warning letters on senior executives.
- The case highlights:
 - Weak internal controls
 - Need for effective board oversight

- Importance of compliance and ethical governance
- Protection of depositor confidence

Static Linkages

- RBI is the regulator of scheduled commercial banks.
- Corporate governance is based on:
 - Transparency
 - Accountability
 - Integrity
 - Responsibility
- Audit Committee supervises:
 - Financial reporting
 - Internal controls
 - Compliance
- Internal Audit acts as an independent assurance mechanism.
- Good corporate governance promotes financial stability and depositor protection.
- Basel Committee principles emphasize sound governance and risk management in banks.

Critical Analysis

Significance

- Reinforces accountability of senior management.
- Demonstrates the role of internal audit in detecting governance failures.
- Strengthens confidence in institutional oversight.

Challenges

- Weak compliance culture.
- Ineffective board oversight.
- Risk to depositor confidence.
- Reputational risk for the banking sector.

Way Forward

- Strengthen board independence and oversight.
- Enhance internal audit and risk management systems.
- Ensure strict compliance with RBI regulations.
- Improve transparency in financial reporting.
- Strengthen whistleblower mechanisms.
- Promote ethical leadership and governance culture.