

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

22-10-2026

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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The struggle to preserve a fair international law

The news that South African jurist Navi Pillay is the recipient of the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize could not have come at a better time for those agonisingly disconcerted by global apathy towards international law. At a time when international law is being battered by powerful, authoritarian men, drunk on power and willing to go to any lengths to pursue their imperialistic designs, the Nobel Committee has unequivocally signalled that international law matters. The real question, however, is what kind of international law matters.

Multiple narratives shape international law. One key narrative, as mentioned, is that vital tenets of international law, such as prohibiting the use of force in international relations, have been completely shredded, with multiple wars raging. Likewise, with rising authoritarianism, there has been a precipitous waning in compliance with international human rights law and an increase in the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While the normative decline of international law has been going on for quite some time, the fall has been precipitous in recent years, accompanied by utter disdain for universally accepted international norms. This scornful attitude towards international law became evident when (then) U.S. President Joe Biden leaned heavily towards using the ambiguous term "rules-based order" instead of "international law", signalling a movement towards an era of norm-light global governance. U.S. President Donald Trump took this several notches up when he said that he did not need international law because he was guided by his own morality.

Authoritarian international law

This brings us to what Tom Ginsburg calls authoritarian international law – an attempt to create a new normative order. Thus, while authoritarian leaders attacking the fundamental tenets of international law might give the



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Authoritarian leaders are undermining legal norms and reshaping international institutions to serve their interests

impression that they are hollowing it out, the more nuanced picture is that authoritarians are retooling international law to pursue their objectives. As Ginsburg, Shirley Scott and others argue, the liberal international law order that emerged after the Second World War and which intensified after the end of the Cold War was a product of what democratic states did on the international plane.

Although the liberal international law order's democratic credentials can always be questioned, civil, political and human rights were institutionalised and made part of its operating system. Countries created international organisations (IOs) to which they delegated significant powers, accompanied by high judicialisation – the creation of international courts and tribunals to settle disputes.

A scant respect for rights

With the rise of authoritarianism, including in liberal democracies, the fundamental nature of the liberal international legal order is being altered or, as Anne Applebaum argues, its operating system is changing. Authoritarian states view international law as a tool for coordinating regime survival. Respect for civil, political and human rights, and holding executive power accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity, has little place in the authoritarian international legal order. Innovative uses of the age-old concept of sovereignty are another key feature. While developing countries often invoke sovereignty to shape international legal norms to serve their aspirations, today, sovereignty seems to be the cloak aimed at shielding authoritarian regimes' excesses from international scrutiny. Israel's systematic rejection of reports by UN human rights bodies that chide it for human rights violations, on the grounds that they interfere in its sovereign affairs, is a case in point.

Creating weak IOs with limited independent

powers is another key feature of authoritarian international law. Once created, an IO takes on a life of its own, and member-states should not be able to control on a whim. This, however, does not suit authoritarian states, which want to retain maximum power while delegating as little as possible to IOs. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a case in point. A preference for negotiation or quasi-judicial mechanisms to resolve disputes, rather than faith in third-party international adjudication, is also a pivotal attribute of authoritarian international law. The recent backlash against international courts, such as the International Criminal Court, is an example.

The need for a fightback

The kind of international law that Ms. Pillay represents is what most authoritarian regimes despise. The clearest example of this is Israel's condemnation of the Nobel prize, saying that the Nobel Committee has awarded the prize to the "greatest lie" of the 21st century. Israel was referring to Ms. Pillay's role as the Chair of the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which concluded that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza.

Rather than serving merely as a tool for extending a regime's influence and values beyond its borders, the kind of international law that Ms. Pillay represents has a thicker conception of the rule of law, laced with values of equality, fairness, accountability and making the individual a subject of international law. Authoritarian regimes cannot be expected to develop a fair international legal order premised on justice.

Other actors, including courts, civil society and academia, must therefore mount international resistance to authoritarian regimes to pave the way for a liberal and fair international law.

The views expressed are personal

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in dire straits

As if the simmering trouble in the Strait of Hormuz were not bad enough, Saudi Arabia has lately been embroiled in an intensifying conflict at the Bab al-Mandeb Strait as well. West Asia's largest economy and the world's eighth-largest defence spender is no pushover. Yet, the simultaneous constrictions at its two vital chokepoints pose an unprecedented challenge to the Kingdom, already grappling with an economic downturn at home and shifting alliances abroad. The evolving situation may be the toughest test yet for Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister, although existential alarms seem overblown. The high-stakes crisis could have profound domestic, regional and global consequences for geopolitics, energy and global trade. A granular analysis of its causes and ramifications is called for.

An old conflict, slanted reportage

Despite media saturation with related developments, the coverage is often myopic and slanted, perpetuating several myths that need either debunking or proper nuancing. Historically, the Saudi-Al-Houthi conflict is nearly a century old. Saudi King Ibn Saud's forces defeated Yemeni Imam Yahya's tribal fighters in 1934, compelling the latter to cede three provinces in the Asir region under the Treaty of Taif. Although a bilateral border was demarcated in 2000, many Yemeni nationalists still question its finality.

Second, until 1990, Yemenis did not need visas to travel to and work in Saudi Arabia, leading millions to migrate to the booming oil economy. A significant number of Saudi nationals, particularly in the Hijaz and Asir regions, still have Yemeni ancestry, the most egregious example being al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.

Third, sectarian differences sharpen the divisions: while Saudis are predominantly Wahhabi Sunnis, al-Houthis are mostly Zaidis, a five-worshipping Shia sect. Al-Houthis constitute around a third of Yemen's total population, with the rest being Sunnis. This sectarian divide underlies the vicious 12-year-old Yemeni civil war – Saudi Arabia supports anti-Houthi Sunni factions and accuses al-Houthis of attacking Islam's holiest cities.

Fourth, although al-Houthis have strong ties with Iran, describing the relationship as a proxy arrangement is an oversimplification, as it gives insufficient weight to their Arab identity. Al-Houthis remained inactive during the two recent United States-Iran wars. In contrast, when Israel attacked Hamas and Hezbollah in 2023-24, al-Houthis were the only Arab side to wade into hostilities, launching missile and drone attacks against Israel and disrupting shipping through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, despite intensive American and Israeli airstrikes. Rather than supporting al-Houthis, Iran recently offered to mediate between Riyadh and Sana'a. Similarly, al-Houthis



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have reportedly promised not to attack U.S. and Israeli assets unless in retaliation, causing U.S. President Donald Trump to vacillate over MBS's call for support. Arguably, the al-Houthis' successful closure of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait set a precedent for Iranian action in the Strait of Hormuz 18 months later.

Last but not least, the media has also been silent on al-Houthis' rationale for air and naval attacks against Saudi Arabia: retaliation for the Kingdom's decade-old air and sea blockade against them.

Similar myths are percolating about navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and need to be challenged. A 70% rise in global oil prices belies loud and repeated claims that oil and gas flows from the Gulf are near normal. Truth has been collateral damage in Trumpian hyperbole to 'talk down' U.S. pump prices ahead of crucial congressional midterm elections.

Second, Iran has been inconsistent about its self-appointed role as the 'supervisor' of Hormuz traffic. After turning a blind eye to the U.S.-protected stealthy oil shuttle for weeks, it has stepped up attacks on tankers. This has raised suspicions that Iran's Revolutionary Guards initially entered into an informal tolling arrangement with some Gulf oil exporters. However, Tehran has now decided to restrict supplies to keep oil prices high until the U.S. midterm elections.

Lastly, why has Pakistan, credited with the June 17 Islamabad Memorandum, been sidelined from a peacemaking role, even as Qatar, Iraq and even Moscow are being requisitioned? Some reports indicate that Mr. Trump has quietly demoted Islamabad as a go-between, with Iran blaming Pakistani diplomacy for being either glibble or complicit in selling him a document tilted in Iran's favour.

The Iran-Houthi pincer

Riyadh has long perceived Tehran as a geopolitical and sectarian rival and sought to resist its influence in West Asia. It remains deeply suspicious of the Iran-backed "Axis of Resistance" of non-state actors in general, and al-Houthi militias in particular. The Kingdom aims to keep Yemen as a weak but not dysfunctional state. Yemenis, on the other hand, chafe at Saudi interference and nurse their historic grievances against Riyadh.

These smouldering tensions, kept in check by a tenuous ceasefire since 2022, exploded in July 2026. In September, in a sudden escalation, the al-Houthi militia occupied coastal plains along the Red Sea, positioning themselves more strategically at the Bab al-Mandeb chokepoint, menacing nearly 12% of global maritime traffic. The Saudi-led coalition's recent counteroffensive has rekindled the fighting, with a strong Saudi bombing campaign. The al-Houthi militia retaliated by launching missiles and drones at strategic Saudi targets, including Riyadh airport and Aramco headquarters, denting Saudi Arabia's

image as a safe and stable country. This is the first time in 35 years that the Kingdom's cities have come under sustained attack. Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, the al-Houthi threat to Saudi-linked maritime activity, and the disruption of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, allegedly by Iraqi Shia militias, have created a worst-case scenario for Saudi Arabia, jeopardising its vital oil exports, particularly to Asia.

The Saudis have no good options for untangling this unprecedented Iran-Houthi pincer. Despite an \$83 billion defence budget, Riyadh lacks the military heft to dislodge the al-Houthis from their mountainous perches by a ground offensive. The offensive by its local Yemeni allies has bogged down into a war of attrition. Pro-Saudi stakeholders, such as the White House and the partners to the Makkah Agreement, have responded with tokenism, seemingly daunted by Yemen's reputation as a graveyard of foreign interventions and the prospects of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait being blocked again. The only other viable strategy, therefore, is to negotiate a package of measures to de-escalate tensions, lift mutual air and maritime blockades, and negotiate a truce based on the 2022 ceasefire. From Riyadh's perspective, the risks would include a loss of prestige both domestically and regionally, the possible collapse of Yemen's fractious "internationally recognised government", and the consolidation of the Tehran-Sana'a axis.

An expeditious resolution of the Yemeni crisis is a Saudi priority, as it would help insulate the Kingdom from the fallout of the next round of U.S.-Iran conflict, which could follow the U.S. midterm elections. Iran has made no secret of its intention to retaliate for American attacks on its civilian infrastructure by hitting the Gulf Arab states acting as the U.S. accomplices. In the past, Riyadh has been privately inconsistent on this issue, advising Washington to clobber Iran until regime change at one time, and also cautioning it about the potential blowback against Saudi Arabia's vulnerabilities. Unless the current fracas with Yemen is sorted out, Saudi Arabia may have to face attacks from Iran as well as the al-Houthis.

The stakes for India

Although India has avoided any direct entanglement at the two maritime chokepoints in the Arabian Peninsula, it is not immune from the impact. Beyond the ongoing economic losses and related supply disruptions from interrupted trade, high oil, gas and fertiliser prices, India needs to look after the safety and well-being of nine million of its citizens currently resident in the Gulf. It is worth recalling that in 1990-91, the huge expense involved in repatriating 1,60,000 Indians from Kuwait precipitated the economic crisis, forcing the country to pledge its sovereign gold for the first time. While India is much stronger today, it remains sobering to note that the number of Indians living in the Gulf now exceeds that figure by more than 50 times.

Two chokepoints, one crisis – Riyadh faces growing threats to its security, oil exports and regional influence

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 09

Why sensitive legal language matters

Over the last few months, the Supreme Court of India has been engaged in an ongoing conversation about reforming judicial language, through the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant's call for revising its 2024 Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes. In February, the CJI claimed that the Handbook was 'technical and Harvard-oriented', prompting a revised version which was published in August 2026. The revised Handbook on Judgments and Gender also advocates sensitivity in judicial language and practice.

In light of these developments, the Karnataka High Court's recent decision to replace the term 'visitation' with 'parenting time' in child custody cases is a welcome step in furthering the conversation around sensitive judicial language. Justice Lalitha Kanneganti's October 7 order rightly recognises the fact that parenting is not a responsibility that can be easily abdicated.

Unfortunately, such steps continue to remain limited and context-specific, rather than becoming widespread judicial initiatives.

For every instance of the judiciary displaying empathy, multiple instances of insensitivity continue to persist. This was recognised by the Supreme Court itself, while condemning the remarks of an Allahabad High Court judge in a 2025 Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) judgment which eventually led to the revision of the 2024 Handbook. The 2026 Handbook analysed 125 trial court judgments across



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States, and admitted that although judgments reflected 'a modern, gender-sensitive judicial approach', the use of outdated, patriarchal terms such as 'real victim' and 'rape myths' persisted.

Past attempts to introduce gender sensitivity have clearly not been very successful. Judges have been sent for training and awareness sessions at judicial academies, and have been asked to study the recommendations for using specific language which have been laid out in the Handbooks as well as other material, including international frameworks such as the 2022 Bangkok General Guidance for Judges on Applying a Gender Perspective in South and Southeast Asia.

What will be done differently this time?

Dealing with insensitivity

The answer, perhaps, lies in the way shown by Justice Lalitha in truly engaging with what judicial insensitivity means, and why it matters. At first glance, her statement that 'no parent is a visitor in the life of a child' could be taken as a simple, universal fact. The parent's gender does not really make a difference when it comes to not being a 'visitor'. The truth, however, goes back – as all things do – to patriarchal expectations. The general assumption is that mothers are the more natural parents. The immediate parenting responsibility is thrust upon them in child custody cases. This is again linked with gendered parenting norms, such as the idea that mothers 'take care' while fathers 'babysit' their children, particularly in the

Indian social context where women are still overwhelmingly the primary caregivers at home.

The powerful reminder that fathers, then, are not merely 'visitors' but must also be cast as active parents beyond the payment of maintenance understands that judicial sensitivity is not just a matter of swapping one problematic term for another slightly less problematic term. Words have meanings which cannot be separated from their social contexts, and change will come forth only when we are willing to recognise and confront them. This is what the Feminist Judgments Project aims to do. Sensitivity cannot be brought in by memorising and using specific terminology. The aim should be to examine underlying assumptions and identify areas where a feminist gaze would confront these biases and lead to a different conclusion, upholding substantive equality.

This requires meaningful representation of women and other diverse communities on the Bench in order to proactively identify areas where seemingly neutral terms cover up stark insensitivity. Attention must also be paid to insensitivity that can slip through other contexts: for example, well-intentioned efforts to provide access to persons with disabilities which nevertheless continue to dismiss dignity and individuality, or gaps in understanding caste or tribal socio-historical realities. The judiciary's ongoing conversations on sensitive language must contextualise these, delve deeper, and dismantle structural societal barriers.

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GS 3: ECONOMY

THE HINDU PAGE: 09

Unlocking agri-potential of FRA lands

For millions of forest-dwelling communities, securing rights over land is a vital milestone. For a tribal household, a parcel of land can mean much more than just a legal right. It can be the foundation of livelihood security – provided that conducive conditions exist to make the land productive and sustainable.

While the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, has strengthened land and livelihood rights of millions of tribals and forest-dwelling communities, the next step is to complement these rights with sustainable agriculture practices, improved soil and water management, institutional support, and market access.

Oilseed and pulses can play a significant role in unlocking the productive potential of FRA-recognised lands. Promoting the cultivation of these crops can turn these lands into more productive and remunerative livelihood assets, while simultaneously strengthening domestic supplies and helping reduce India's import dependence. The adaptability of pulses and oilseeds to rain-fed and marginal lands make them a suitable choice to improve agricultural productivity and promote climate-resilient agriculture.

The geographical spread of tribal districts across 33 States and Union Territories reflects ecological and socio-economic diversity. These regions also differ in settlement patterns, resource availability and agricultural potential, underscoring the importance of approaches that are responsive to local conditions and development priorities. An



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While the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, has strengthened the livelihood rights of millions of tribals and forest-dwelling communities, the next step is to complement these rights with sustainable agriculture practices

analysis based on the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) soil map suggests that several tribal regions are well suited to crops such as soybean, groundnut, sunflower, mustard, chickpea and other pulses. Further, a State-wise cropping pattern analysis shows considerable diversity across tribal regions: paddy and maize dominate the Kharif season, while wheat, gram, mustard, lentil and other pulses are important Rabi crops.

Regional crops namely millets, soybean, cotton, groundnut, sesame, spices, and horticulture crop further reflect local agro-ecological conditions, offering scope for sustainable diversification of oilseed and pulse cultivation on FRA lands.

Scoping the country

The analysis also found that out of 244 tribal districts, 60 districts have major oilseed production potential, 31 have strong pulse production potential, while 23 districts possess favourable conditions for the cultivation of both pulses and oilseeds. Such a spatial alignment of FRA lands with agricultural potential suggests that one needs targeted interventions to expand sustainable pulse and oilseed cultivation in these regions. Expanding access to quality seeds and improved varieties, improving the soil moisture regime, and scientific crop management can strengthen pulse and oilseed production, with potential benefits for farm incomes, nutrition and livelihood resilience. Integrating these measures with FRA land development can make tribal development more resilient and simultaneously strengthen national food security and improve tribal

livelihoods, particularly since many tribal districts overlap with aspirational districts.

A region-specific strategy could be adopted to help develop oilseed and pulse production clusters on FRA lands in high-potential tribal districts. Priority measures could include timely and adequate access to certified seeds, improved irrigation and watershed management and stronger agri-extension. Further, investments in local drying, storage, grading and primary processing infrastructure can reduce post-harvest losses and improve value realisation. Empowered and stronger farmer producer organisations, cooperatives, self-help groups and other community institutions in and around tribal regions can facilitate aggregation, value addition and market access. Convergence with programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, National Food Security and Nutrition Mission, National Mission on Edible Oils, Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan and Van Dhan Yojana can broaden institutional support. GIS-based crop planning, together with improved institutional credit, crop insurance and assured procurement can strengthen the overall marketing ecosystem.

The journey from forest rights to livelihood security does not end with land recognition; it begins from there. The productive potential of FRA lands can be strengthened by aligning local agro-ecological conditions with suitable pulses and oilseeds and providing the support needed to cultivate and market them effectively.

GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE (HEALTH)

THE HINDU PAGE: 09

Drug prices: overcharging claims of ₹8,447 crore remain unpaid

The outstanding amount accounts for about 84% of the cumulative demand

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani

On October 12, the Centre informed the Supreme Court that it had decided to cap trade margins at 30% for non-scheduled anti-cancer medicines. A Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta questioned why similar restrictions could not be extended to other medicines and medical products. Citing steep differences between the prices at which products were supplied and those charged to patients, the court asked the government to work out broader measures for regulating medicine prices. The matter is scheduled to be heard again on October 27.

While high trade margins are not necessarily illegal, overcharging beyond regulated prices violates the Drugs (Prices Control) Orders (DPCO), which governs medicine pricing in India. Both, however, raise questions about the costs borne by patients.

The National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA), the government's drug-price regulator, continues to pursue companies over past cases of overcharging. Although established in 1997, the NPPA's records cover cases dating back to 1979. Since certain pricing violations can attract penalties, as of March 31, 2026, ₹10,029.8 crore had been demanded, including with interest. Of the total demanded, ₹1,582.4 crore had been realised, leaving ₹8,447.4 crore outstanding. The scale of the issue matters because medicines make up a significant share of household hospitalisation costs. According to the National Statistics Office's Household Social Consumption: Health survey, conducted in 2025, medicine expenditure averaged ₹6,368 per hospitalisation case in rural areas, out of a total of ₹32,884 – nearly one-fifth of the cost. In urban areas, the average was ₹6,948 out of ₹46,774, or

about one-seventh (Chart 1).

The outstanding amount is more than five times the amount realised and accounts for about 84% of the cumulative demand. Moreover, these figures cover only cases in which the NPPA has raised demands against companies for overcharging. They do not include cases that may have gone undetected or have not been pursued by the regulator. The NPPA's year-wise data show that the number of cases has varied considerably between 2009-10 and 2025-26. The highest count in this period was 268 cases in 2015-16, followed by 224 in 2017-18. The number fell to 38 in 2020-21 before rising to 148 in 2022-23. In 2025-26, the regulator recorded 133 cases (Chart 2).

The annual entries after 2009 add up to approximately ₹5,265 crore in demands, including interest, of which about ₹4,460 crore remain outstanding. For the period before 2009, the NPPA recorded 731 cases, with ₹4,764.75 crore demanded and ₹3,987.5 crore outstanding. Outstanding amounts were highest in 2015-16, at ₹1,003.3 crore, followed by ₹576 crore in 2017-18. In 2025-26, ₹45.1 crore remained outstanding against a demand of ₹72.2 crore (Chart 3). Of the total outstanding amount, more than ₹5,800 crore is tied up in litigation. Another ₹200 crore relates to cases referred to collectors for recovery, while ₹2,369.3 crore remains under process (Chart 4).

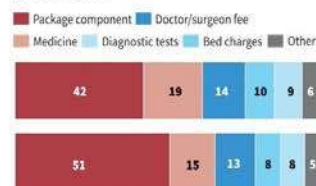
Importantly, recovering money from pharmaceutical companies is distinct from compensating patients who paid higher prices. In a Lok Sabha reply in 2019, the Department of Pharmaceuticals stated that "there is no mechanism to compensate the consumers for the amount overcharged." However, the NPPA accepts complaints from consumers about medicine overpricing, shortages, new drugs being sold without prior price approval, and refusal to supply or sell medicines. The regulator takes action where warranted.

A bitter pill to swallow

The data for the charts were sourced from the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) and NSS Report no. 596: Household Social Consumption: Health (2025) by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation



CHART 1: The break-up of average medical expenditure (₹) (excluding childbirth) per hospitalisation case by its component across medical institutions in rural and urban areas during 2025



When hospitals charged a single package price and households could not specify expenditure on individual items, the amount was recorded as a lump sum under the 'package component'. Since these packages may include medicines, the actual share of hospitalisation costs spent on medicines could be higher than the separately reported figures of nearly 1/5th in rural areas and 1/7th in urban areas

CHART 2: Number of overcharging cases recorded by the NPPA each financial year, from 2009-10 to 2025-26

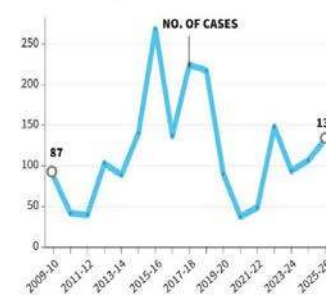


CHART 3: Amount outstanding and amount realised against demands raised by the NPPA for each financial year cohort, from 2009-10 to 2025-26 (₹ crore). Recoveries may occur in years subsequent to the demand

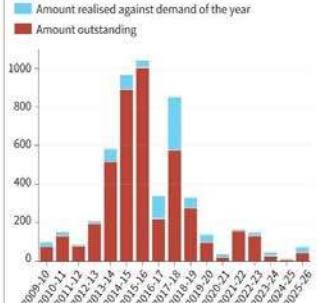


CHART 4: Break-up of the NPPA's outstanding overcharging dues by status as of March 31, 2026 (₹ crore)



Note: Consumers can complain to the NPPA through the Pharma Jan Samadhan portal, the Pharma Sahi Daam mobile app, the toll-free number 1800-11-1255, or by emailing monitoring-nppa@gov.in.

GS 3: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY & SECURITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

How exposed is India to foreign tech?

Elon Musk's reported restrictions on satellite services to Ukraine show the risks of India's dependence on foreign-controlled technology; from satellite navigation to cloud computing and military equipment, gaps in domestic capabilities can leave critical infrastructure exposed to external pressure

EXPLAINER

Vasudevan Mukunth

U.S. space tycoon Elon Musk recently throttled the military-grade Starshield network provided by his company SpaceX to Ukraine in retaliation for Ukraine's attacks on Russian oil infrastructure. *The Wall Street Journal* has reported, Musk's actions are not without precedent – with a similar move in 2022 (although SpaceX disputed media reports) – but his most recent transgression should put other countries still using or planning to use his services on alert.

That includes India. The Indian government and industry have thus far resisted Starlink's entry. Musk is unhappy and likely to keep pushing. On the flip side, quite a bit of India's critical infrastructure is exposed to services provided by other foreign operators. They have acted lawfully so far, but the country still retains strong incentives to substitute them with homegrown alternatives.

The worst possible outcome on the spectrum of possibilities vis-à-vis India is for a foreign operator to directly restrict a continuing service. Two other possibilities include foreign-controlled platforms disrupting access to an otherwise Indian system and a foreign supplier non-abruptly degrading India's ability to sustain important capabilities.

Satellite communications
The Indian government has currently licensed three companies to provide satellite communications services: Starlink, the Indian subsidiary of Eutelsat OneWeb, and Jio Satellite Communications. As of October 16, none had received the security clearance they need to offer broadband services provided by commercial satellites.

Musk's SpaceX controls Starlink and retains the ability to manage its network and restrict services (if needed). Eutelsat OneWeb is backed by the governments of European countries and its satellite network is effectively controlled by the continental bloc. The Bharti group has invested in it to the tune of 26%.

The French company Eutelsat operates the Eutelsat OneWeb satellite network, in which the French government holds a 29.65% stake, the British government 10.89%, and Bharti Space 17.88%. Bharti Airtel also separately owns 26% of OneWeb's Indian subsidiary.

Finally, Jio Platforms and the Luxembourg-based communications satellites provider SES announced a joint venture in 2022 in which Jio would own 51% in exchange for being able to use the provider's satellites. However, again, even majority Indian ownership of the business doesn't yield control of the network to Jio.

That said, India doesn't depend all that much on foreign satellite networks for communications at large: most ordinary telephone and Internet traffic travels over terrestrial networks and the two core communications satellites the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has launched since 1981 support broadcasting and strategic communications. The country also has dedicated military satellite communications capabilities.

Note, however, that the three aforementioned ventures plan to provide satellite broadband services alone.

Satellite navigation
India's position is particularly weak here because it has funded the setting up of its NavIC constellation, a group of



The Indian government and industry have thus far resisted Starlink's entry; Elon Musk is unhappy and likely to keep pushing. REUTERS

satellites to provide position and navigation services over the Indian subcontinent the same way the U.S. GPS system does around the world.

On July 29 this year, Minister of State for the Department of Space Jitendra Singh admitted in Parliament that only three NavIC satellites are at present able to provide positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) signals, i.e., that the constellation currently can't provide standalone positioning services. At least four satellites are required for this purpose.

The U.S. discontinued its policy to be able to deliberately degrade global civilian GPS accuracy in 2000 and committed to not reinstating that mechanism. However, it retains the ability to deny PNT services for military purposes over specific areas.

A less-than-direct but nonetheless important reason India hasn't been able to maintain NavIC's functional integrity is ISRO's ongoing difficulties with improving its launch rate.

Cloud computing and IT
Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud currently provide cloud-computing infrastructure and managed services to thousands of businesses and public institutions in India, with Gartner forecasting that Indians' expenditure on cloud services would reach \$17.5 billion in 2026.

That said, the government operates its own cloud infrastructure, called MeghRaj, through the National Informatics Centre (NIC). In December 2025, the government reported that 2,170 ministries and departments were hosting applications on MeghRaj, but that they also depended on empaneled private cloud providers, including those based abroad.

In February, AWS and an Indian company named Yotta announced they would deploy AWS Outposts technology for MeghRaj 2.0, allowing cloud services managed by AWS to operate from within NIC data centres and thus keeping Indian data physically within India.

However, the AWS documentation says

Outposts need a connection to an AWS regional control system for monitoring and software updates, meaning it's possible the arrangement will continue to leave Indian physical infrastructure exposed to a management service controlled by foreign operators.

In the cloud-computing as in the satellite services domain, while the providers' actions are constrained by contracts and Indian law, the services they deliver technically depend on their systems.

Finally, experts have also called to increase adoption of open-source software, including operating systems. The Union government's 2015 policy already made open-source software the preferred option for e-governance projects. The Centre for Development of Advanced Computing, under the Ministry of Electronics and IT, has developed the Linux-based 'Bharat Operating System Solutions'.

A good example from recent memory was a defective update from the U.S. cybersecurity company CrowdStrike disrupting Windows computers worldwide, including at Indian airlines, airports, and securities firms. Not all disruptive actions are retaliatory but are disruptive nonetheless.

Digital payments
The National Payments Corporation of India operates the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and the domestic infrastructure provides India with considerable independence from Visa and Mastercard. That said, the consumer-facing layer is non-trivially concentrated in businesses controlled by foreign players such as Google Pay, owned by Google.

However, Google Pay shutting down would not disrupt UPI itself: users could simply switch to another solution, such as PhonePe. (Although U.S.-based Walmart has a majority stake in PhonePe, it can't control the underlying infrastructure itself – unlike with the Jio-SES venture.)

That said, banks also operate within

payment and correspondent banking networks that involve foreign institutions. This is why, for instance, the European Union decided in 2022 to disconnect select Russian banks from the SWIFT transaction messaging network, significantly upsetting the ability of affected banks to access international payment channels.

India could face comparable disruptions if foreign governments imposed sanctions affecting Indian financial institutions even if the relevant banks have not violated Indian law. As a result, in the larger scheme, domestic payment systems like UPI insulate against but don't eliminate exposure to the risks accompanying cross-border commerce.

Military equipment
After the Operation Shakti nuclear tests in 1998, the U.S. imposed sanctions on India, including restricting military supplies. As a result, the Comptroller and Auditor General later found that the 30 LHTDG T800 helicopter engines Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. had ordered from a U.S.-based manufacturer in April that year couldn't be delivered. So HAL fixed the arrangement and ordered replacements from a French manufacturer.

Both parties here acted within the law (such as they were) and neither engaged in unilateral corporate retaliation like Musk has. Yet a foreign political decision still disturbed an Indian procurement programme.

According to a Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) analysis published in March this year, India was the world's second-largest importer of major arms between 2021 and 2025. Russia accounted for 40% of these imports, with India increasingly also purchasing equipment from France, Israel, and the U.S.

Even the indigenous Tejas fighter programme banks on U.S.-made GE Aerospace engines, and delays in the delivery of these machines have already constrained production and pushed delivery deadlines.

THE GIST

India's satellite broadband, cloud computing and military programmes rely partly on foreign-controlled networks, systems and equipment

NavIC's operational shortcomings and India's dependence on foreign cloud management systems expose gaps in domestic capabilities

Homegrown alternatives such as UPI offer greater autonomy, but dependence on foreign suppliers and international financial networks leaves India vulnerable to disruptions

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Let's recreate the UN — 81 years show why it's worth the effort



THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE UNITED NATIONS (UN) celebrates its 81st birthday on Saturday, though with the Security Council (UNSC) deadlocked on who will lead the organisation as secretary-general in the New Year, celebrations are somewhat muted. The UN stands today at a precarious crossroads, frequently condemned as a relic of a bygone era in urgent need of reform, yet remaining undeniably central to the global agenda, while failing at its vital task, the maintenance of international peace and security.

Over its history, the UN system has constructed the normative architecture of international society and saved millions of lives. On the humanitarian front, specialised agencies have driven historic triumphs: Joint campaigns by UNICEF and the World Health Organisation nearly halved child mortality from 12 million in 1990 to 6.9 million by 2011, brought polio to the brink of eradication, and coordinated global responses to public health crises like Ebola and Covid. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (the organisation I served from 1978 to 1989) assists over 35 million displaced people annually, while the World Food Programme regularly delivers vital relief to millions of people struck by catastrophic disasters.

This humanitarian impact is matched by an ambitious global development and environmental agenda. The Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) halved extreme

poverty worldwide, expanded access to primary education for millions, and significantly reduced maternal mortality, laying the groundwork for the 2015–2030 Sustainable Development Goals, even as these multilateral commitments now face severe challenges because of funding cuts under the second Trump administration. UN-brokered instruments ranging from the Montreal Protocol, which successfully phased out 99 per cent of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons, to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, have redefined global environmental responsibility. From advancing women's rights at the landmark Beijing Conference to establishing the first unified international framework for migration (the 2018 Global Compact for Migration), the UN has expanded the boundaries of global social policy, though a backlash against these achievements has been mounting.

That brings us to peace and security: Through its peace-making and peace-keeping machinery, which I served from 1989 to 1996 and helped oversee from secretary-general Kofi Annan's office for another decade, the UN has brokered roughly 170 peace settlements, helping to defuse existential flashpoints from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Iran-Iraq War, containing complex civil conflicts, and stabilising nations transitioning to freedom like Namibia, East Timor, and Mozambique. However, in recent years, the UN has seemed increasingly ineffectual, as wars have raged, unchecked by UN intervention, in Ukraine, Iran, Gaza, Libya and Yemen. Critics point to the UNSC's chronic paralysis and the apparent inability of recent secretaries-general to stand up for the principles of the UN Charter.

It is undeniable that the UNSC anachronistically reflects the geopolitical realities of 1945 and not

those of 2025. The world has undergone a radical transformation over those eight decades. The collapse of European colonial empires spawned dozens of vibrant, independent nations, while new dynamic powers have emerged as drivers of regional growth and stability. Yet the composition of the Council's permanent membership looks like a war photo from 1945. Billions of people remain without permanent representation, while major nations and economic leaders are excluded from the primary decision-making organ of global security. The disconnect between actual relevance and formal authority creates a representational deficit, eroding confidence in the international rule of law and leading more and more states to view Council resolutions with cynicism.

This crisis of legitimacy is further compounded by the veto power, which has transformed the UNSC into a stage for strategic obstruction. When individual permanent members use the mere threat of a veto to shield themselves or their allies from accountability during humanitarian catastrophes, wars or blatant violations of sovereign borders, the fundamental purpose of the Charter is subverted. When gridlock recurs in the Council, countries increasingly turn to smaller, self-selected coalitions, ad hoc regional alliances, or exclusive economic forums like the G20.

But the G20 cannot dispatch peacekeepers to crisis spots, and it does not enjoy the moral authority that comes from the UN's universal membership. Regional blocs and "mini-lateral" groupings, while useful for specific economic or defensive interests, lack the global inclusiveness and universal authority that only the UN possesses. A world without a functioning, effective UNSC would be a Thucydidean world where "the strong do what they can and the

weak suffer what they must". In other words, where might is right, and smaller and developing nations possess virtually no institutional recourse or voice. The universal membership of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the binding legal authority of UNSC decisions under international law therefore remain irreplaceable public goods.

Everyone agrees the UN needs reform, but they don't agree on what that means. When the developed West speaks of reform, they mean budget cuts, merger of UN departments and organisations, and streamlining of mandates, staff numbers and costs; but when developing countries speak of reform, they call for greater inclusion, better representation and a definitive voice in determining the UN's priorities. Expanding permanent seats to include underrepresented regions and emerging powers, establishing clear norms to limit veto usage, and deepening formal accountability between the UNSC and the UNGA are steps that would restore the UN's credibility in much of the world. But reform must stop short of the point where the most powerful and influential member states might walk away, because that would end the UN.

The UN matters because global governance of international peace and security requires an anchor grounded in both universalism and broad legitimacy. At its best, the UN embodied the core idea of the post-war order: Multilateralism could function as a shock absorber, providing a permanent, continuous space where adversaries could meet, de-escalate tensions, and negotiate behind closed doors even during moments of extreme global confrontation. It is that UN we need to recreate, and 81 years is long enough to show us why it's worth doing.

The writer, an MP, served the UN from 1978 to 2007. He was India's candidate for UN secretary-general in 2006

But reform must stop short of the point where the most powerful and influential member states might walk away, because that would end the UN

GS 3: ENVIRONMENT

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V B MATHUR

THE WORLD'S seven big cats inhabit different continents and ecosystems, but their futures are increasingly interconnected. A puma in Brazil, a snow leopard in Asia and a tiger in central India's forests face the same challenge: Nature does not recognise administrative and political boundaries. Their survival will depend not only on protecting individual species and habitats, but also on sharing knowledge and building cooperation across borders.

This ecological reality gives the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) its purpose. Launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2023, it became a full-fledged

Big cats need protection beyond sanctuaries

treaty-based Intergovernmental International organisation in 2025. Headquartered in India, it provides a common platform for conserving the tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, cheetah, jaguar and puma.

Big cats need adequate prey, secure habitats and space to move. They also need the tolerance and participation of people living alongside them. Protected areas (PAs) are essential, but they are rarely large enough to contain their movement. Animals routinely enter community lands, farms, and infrastructure corridors. As apex predators, they signal the health of forests, grasslands and mountain systems that store carbon, regulate water and support livelihoods. Protecting these can strengthen climate resilience and safeguard ecological assets. India has earned credibility through Project Tiger, the recovery of the Asiatic lion and its experience

with leopards, snow leopards and cheetahs. The IBCA enables India to share this experience while learning from others. Latin America offers lessons on jaguar corridors and puma coexistence; Africa brings experience from lion and cheetah landscapes.

The Alliance's proposed Big Cat Dashboard could become the instrument that converts cooperation into action. Today, population estimates, habitat-change maps, mortality data, conflict reports and conservation investments are often scattered across agencies and research projects. A well-designed Big Cat Dashboard could organise this

They also need the tolerance and participation of people living alongside them

information around four essentials: Population trends, emerging threats, conservation responses and the effectiveness of PAs and wider landscapes. It could warn governments of rising road and rail-induced mortality, retaliatory killing or habitat conversion before these pressures become crises. It could identify transboundary populations, guide the placement of wildlife crossings, reveal gaps in monitoring and help direct finance to landscapes where most needed.

Trust is critical. Countries must retain ownership of their data, and sensitive information on animal locations must be protected. The dashboard should accommodate different levels of national capacity. Countries with limited resources should receive training and technology. Indigenous knowledge and the experience of frontline staff must complement technological evidence.

The IBCA should focus on three priorities. First, establish common but flexible standards for monitoring populations, threats and outcomes. Second, build capacity through training, technical partnerships and finance. Third, connect big-cat conservation with infrastructure, climate and development planning so that critical habitats are considered before projects are approved.

If the IBCA can help countries convert knowledge into timely decisions and cooperation into measurable recovery, it will protect more than seven iconic species. It will show that conservation across borders is possible when science, policy and political commitment move together.

The writer is a former chairperson of India's National Biodiversity Authority and former director of the Wildlife Institute of India