EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

28-11-2026

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Govt. moots freeze on States' LS seat share till 2051

132nd Constitutional Amendment Bill proposes to increase Lok Sabha seats in each State by 50%

Strength of the Lower House will rise from 550 to 850; it is accompanied by a new Delimitation Bill

If passed, the legislations will bring into force 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha

Varghese K. George
Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

A new Constitution Amendment Bill approved by the Union Cabinet on Friday proposes an extension of the existing freeze on the inter-State distribution of Lok Sabha seats for another 25 years, until 2051, addressing the core concern of States that feared a loss of their proportionate strength due to the decline in their share of the national population.

The 132nd Constitutional Amendment Bill marks a significant turn from the 131st Amendment Bill moved by the Centre in April that sought to redistribute Lok Sabha seats among States according to the 2011 Census population.

The proposed amendment removes the linkage of the existing distribution of Lok Sabha seats to the 1971 Census and links it with provisions related to women's quota in Article 334A of the Constitution.

The guarantee for a 50% increase in the number of Lok Sabha seats for each State is being written into this, providing that, for the purposes of giving immediate effect to such reservation for women, "the delimitation so undertaken shall provide for an increase of fifty per cent in the number of seats allocated to each State and Union territory in the House of the People."

The total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of each State and Union territory will also increase similarly, "over and above the number of seats existing immediately before such delimitation", according to the proposed amendment.

The new Bill, accompanied by a fresh Delimitation Bill, proposes to increase the number of Lok Sabha seats in each State by 50%, while the maximum strength of the Lower House will rise from the current 550 to 850.

If these Bills are passed by Parliament in its special sittings from November 30 to December 3, the path to immediate delimitation will open, which will also bring into force the 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha. Amendments to Articles 81 and 82, which mandate the distribution of Lok Sabha seats among the States, propose to extend a sunset clause for the existing proportion until the first Census after 2051.

The existing provision in Article 82 that says that "until the relevant figures for the first Census taken after the year 2026 have been published, it shall not be necessary to readjust" the distribution of seats is being amended in the Bill and will be changed to read "until the year 2051".

Article 82 currently has two definitions for population: for the purposes of distribution among States, the 1971 population; and for the purposes of delimitation of individual constituencies within the States, the 2001 Census. The proposed amendment will extend the sunset clause to "until the year 2051", but the reference to the 1971 Census has been dropped.

The Bill proposes that the distribution among States will be determined "in accordance with Article 334A", while the boundaries of constituencies will be determined by the "latest published Census figures available on the date of the commencement of the Constitution (One Hundred and Thirty-second Amendment) Act, 2026".

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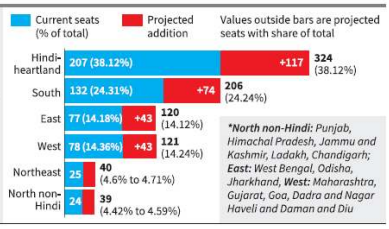
Possible change

The projected region-wise changes, assuming 850 Lok Sabha seats (815 for States and 35 for UTs). Minor changes in shares are due to seats rounded off as per the largest remainder method used in delimitation exercises



DMK stands firm on two demands, maintains Stalin

CHENNAI

DMK chief M.K. Stalin reiterated that the party stands firm on two demands: protecting Tamil Nadu's 7.18% Lok Sabha seat share, and freezing State seat proportions based on 1971 Census for 25 years. » PAGE 4

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Lifting off

Science-based diplomacy could aid India-Pakistan bilateral engagement

The economic and diplomatic consequences of India's efforts to estrange Pakistan often overshadow the costs distributed between them. For example, Pakistani space scientists can today access facilities in China whereas Indian space scientists can access facilities in the United States and Europe. But Indian scientists studying environmental conditions in Pakistan and Pakistani scientists studying conditions in India have far fewer alternatives. The latter matters much more for regional development and stability. On November 25, Beijing's 'Space Silk Road' diplomacy and the strain on New Delhi's hedging strategies converged in the Shenzhou-24 mission as China launched Pakistan's first astronaut, Muhammad Zeeshan Ali, to the Tiangong space station. Pakistan had offered in 2015 to contribute to India's proposed SAARC satellite and wanted the project administered under SAARC, but India insisted on operating it as largesse to its neighbours. If it had really been SAARC's satellite, ISRO and its Pakistani counterpart, SUPARCO, could have developed an institutional relationship and India could have influenced its neighbour's space programme through a multilateral mechanism. But today, India's ability to engage Pakistan on regional matters has increasingly depended on negotiating with powers beyond South Asia, in institutions with other agendas.

Even as spaceflight emerges as a new geopolitical realm, its substantial scientific component affords countries opportunities to engage independently of interstate relations in other domains. The Shenzhou-24 experience will be significant for SUPARCO just as the Axiom-4 mission in the U.S. was for ISRO, helping to significantly lower Islamabad's cost to access similar future opportunities, especially those under the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization, which also includes Bangladesh, and the Belt and Road Initiative's Space Information Corridor. There is no question that Indian spaceflight is technologically superior to that of Pakistan, but the Shenzhou-24 mission is a reminder that China's technological superiority *vis-à-vis* India's leaves India with an unequal contest. India has been ceding the neighbourhood to China's space networks, and by squandering the opportunities afforded by science diplomacy, it has left Pakistan to look to China even on problems it shares with India. The Apollo-Soyuz interaction during the Cold War and India and Pakistan working together to respond to a locust outbreak barely a year after the Balakot crisis (2019) are testament to the ability of science-based diplomacy to clear room for bilateral engagement with guardrails, without compromising the counter-terrorism agenda. India should revive such engagement.

GS 3: ENERGY & INFRASTRUCTURE
THE HINDU PAGE: 06

India's place in the emerging global energy order



Mahesh Sachdev

Retired Indian Ambassador, specialising in West Asian and energy issues

During this decade, strong cross currents have buffeted the global energy system, causing humongous turbulence. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, the El Niño effect and climate change, the geoeconomics of wars in Ukraine and the Gulf, renewables and the shale phenomenon. Their impact has exposed the inadequacy and the unsustainability of the current fossil fuel-based energy order. The dire and chaotic situation necessitates the invention of a new global energy order. Although its contours are hazy, they are likely to be shaped by concerns for energy's improved availability, self-sufficiency, security, affordability and environmental friendliness.

A world of energy inequalities, disruptions

The current global energy ecosystem cuts across the following major fault lines. Global energy is a complex function of the rise in global population and energy intensity. Overall energy demand has tripled during the past half a century, with rampant growth in China (a 10-fold increase) and Asia. Yet, 720 million people lack electricity and two billion cook on polluting fuels. At the other extreme, gigawatt-sized data centres are sprouting. Due to global warming, the world now expends more energy cooling than heating. This energy disparity has concomitant development costs for the "South".

Historically, man has sourced energy largely from nature and fossil fuels, concentrated in some geographies. In 2025, fossil fuels accounted for approximately 86.2% (oil 33.5%, coal 27.7%, natural gas 25.1%) of total global primary energy supply, while low-carbon sources made up the remaining 13.8% (renewables 5.9%, nuclear 5.2%, and hydro 2.7%). This high dependence on fossil fuels has been problematic, causing supply bottlenecks, climate change, pollution, the resource curse and wars. Global warming (a "hoax" to some diehards) in the past two centuries is largely anthropogenic, caused by fossil fuel-burning; we are warned that average global temperatures rising by more than 1.5°C would cause irreversible damage. Yet, the current trend would lead to global temperatures rising by 2.5°C by 2100. The recent failure of COP31 over fossil fuel phase-out and clean technology funding mechanisms underlines this dilemma.

The ongoing wars in central Europe and the Gulf, major hydrocarbon exporting regions, have disrupted an already high-strung global energy situation. In particular, the United States-Israel war against Iran has stymied the Strait of Hormuz, the passage for nearly a fifth of global maritime transport of oil and gas. These wars have so far led to a cumulative loss of 2.8 billion barrels of crude and 60 billion cubic metres of natural gas. The effects of the crisis are global: three-quarters of the world's population live in oil- and gas-importing countries, while more than four billion people live in countries that depend on the Strait of Hormuz for over 30% of their oil supplies.

The country must balance rising energy demand with security and sustainability

Before the Iran war, most of the hydrocarbons and derivatives crossing the Strait of Hormuz were headed to Asia. The remainder mostly met Africa's basic needs. The crisis worsened the vulnerabilities of two continents, particularly in transportation and agriculture. These two conflicts continue, defying all peace-making attempts, causing supply and price turbulence to this vital commodity. In its recently published annual World Energy Outlook (WEO), the International Energy Agency (IEA) called 2026 "a year of unprecedented disruption", describing the Strait of Hormuz crisis as "the largest threat to energy security in history".

The global energy transition

Some hopeful signs mitigate these three foreboding factors. Jolted by years of disruption, the world is now prioritising energy security along two broad axes. First, electricity's share in the energy milieu is set to rise, particularly in the transportation sector. Electricity currently constitutes 23% of global final energy demand; the WEO expects its share to reach 30% by 2035 and accelerate subsequently. The increase in electricity share comes with greater efficiency in power generation and downstream appliances.

Second, in a force-multiplier effect, renewables and low-emission sources are rapidly replacing fossil fuels for power generation. With improved efficiency and better storage, the renewables' share in global electricity generation is expected to rise from a third today to half by 2035. The WEO notes that since 2022, energy-consuming economies have invested $500 billion annually in renewables and energy efficiency measures, and the current crisis would boost this further. The energy crisis has also reversed nuclear energy's decline, and nearly 90 GW of generation capacity is currently under construction. While coal's share may rise in the short run due to the crisis, it would start declining from 2030 as more renewables come online.

During the next decade, power distribution would require laying 25 million kilometres of new power lines and upgrading 15 million km of existing ones. On the other hand, on average, $540 billion has been invested annually in the upstream hydrocarbons sector, but 90% of it is to offset the decline in production. While an oil glut may emerge once the crisis abates, the localised shortages of natural gas are likely to persist.

Depending upon the relative intensity of national responses to the energy conundrum, the IEA believes that many of the steps initiated would lead to an irreversible decline in hydrocarbon consumption. It has reiterated its forecast that the global oil demand may peak by 2035.

The WEO, nevertheless, contends that even the most vigorous short-term measures to tackle the current energy crisis may prove insufficient to arrest climate deterioration, and urges long-term plans for a resilient future.

India's rising energy appetite

India is destined to play a prominent role in the emerging global energy order. It is currently the world's third-largest primary energy consumer, with a 6.1% share. India is the second-largest consumer of coal, and ranks as the third-largest power producer, consumer of crude and in renewable capacity. At the micro level, though, the average Indian has been energy thrifty: for instance, India's annual electricity consumption of 1,153 units is a third of the global average. Reflecting its world-beating GDP growth, India's energy demand is projected to gallop by an annual average of 2.5% annually through 2035 – three times the global rate. Its energy appetite is being fuelled by rising incomes, urbanisation, industrial expansion, transport (12,000 new cars added daily), and cooling (200 million new air conditioners). The IEA projects that India will be the world's largest driver of energy demand growth through 2035.

While India's energy canvass is large and expanding, the granular picture is quite mixed. Despite valiant efforts towards greater self-sufficiency, India remains an energy-short economy. It currently imports around 40% of its energy demand, including 90% of its crude oil and 50% of its natural gas, and these dependencies are likely to grow. Electricity currently accounts for 22% of India's total final energy consumption, and this share is likely to double by 2047 as demand grows by 6% annually.

Although its renewable capacity has crossed half of its power generation, 70% of its total electricity is still generated from fossil fuels. During the 2025-35 decade, oil demand is expected to rise by 1.3 mbpd (26%), coal output by nearly 30%, and average annual energy investment is forecast to reach $200 billion, up 85% from 2025 levels. To move closer to the stated ambition of "energy independence by 2047", India would need to de-emphasise its oil and gas requirements, accelerate electrification and dramatically improve energy efficiency. If done right, a comprehensive energy strategy would not only attain long-term energy independence; it would also catalyse overall economic growth and help clean up the environment.

GS 2: INDIA & ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD
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A new model for Delhi's neighbourhood engagement



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Balen Shah's visit promises a new India-Nepal partnership — and could be a model to revive India-Bangladesh ties

One year ago, Nepal was swept by a Gen Z revolution, leading to the electoral victory of a 36-year-old former rapper and Mayor of Kathmandu, known for his anti-India zingers on social media. As he took the prime ministerial oath alongside one of Nepal's youngest-ever cabinets, New Delhi began the uphill battle of reaching out to him.

Pragmatism over diplomatic pageantry

This Monday, November 23, 2026, marked an important, new chapter in that engagement. Prime Minister Narendra Modi met the young man behind the black sunglasses, established a personal rapport in a two-hour-long private discussion, and delivered a massive package of economic support that is bound to build new trust. On his first bilateral visit abroad, Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah communicated concerns and expectations eye to eye with a leader twice his age, set his eyes on the future, and brought back deliverables no other Nepali leader had been able to extract from India before.

This was a brief, clinical, and work-oriented visit, reflecting that Nepal's Gen Z means business and that New Delhi is ready to play ball. There was no side trip to the Taj Mahal. No big banquets or speeches. Unusually little on the historical and civilisational ties. And a loud silence on many issues and irritants that have taken far too much oxygen from negotiation rooms in the past.

Instead, the focus was on a positive, productive, delivery-oriented partnership with economic connectivity at its core. It is difficult to imagine how this could have gone any better for both sides, given all that could have gone wrong.

Rather than playing political victim or geopolitical games with China, Mr. Shah had the courage to visit New Delhi first to reinforce, not deny, geography: India as Nepal's only indispensable partner, a rising regional economic force that should be leveraged, not resisted. For Mr. Modi, this was a shot in the arm for the Neighbourhood First policy, showing that beyond all political calculations or occasional tensions, India remains committed to its regional economic and connectivity strategy. In Nepal's case, after the tragic Himalayan floods, India is proving to be a friend in deed to a neighbour in need.

Three win-wins

Three outcomes from the visit promise a new chapter in bilateral ties. First, the unique road map "Viksit Bharat and Samunnat Nepal" commits both leaders to reimagining the partnership and taking it to the next level toward developed, middle-income status. Accordingly, the first three of the 10 pillars focus on upgrading the engines of interdependence: developmental and economic ties, physical and digital connectivity, and energy and climate.

Second, the vision map drops the tired mantra of a "special relationship", which New Delhi traditionally emphasises, and instead proposes an "aspirational, modern and mutually-beneficial partnership" to "reflect contemporary political, economic and technological realities". The vision map repeatedly mentions a "forward-looking" relationship – clearly what young, *Naya* Nepal expects from Bharat.

Third, Mr. Shah returns to Nepal with his first foreign policy success and a much-needed political boost for his government, which faces constant revolutionary pressure. Among the several deliverables are many that Delhi had delayed for years, including $1.6 billion in grants and lines of credit to revive the economy, steps to improve air connectivity, new railway links, and hydropower investments.

While all this portends a new chapter in India-Nepal relations, only time will tell whether it can be called a historic turning point. That depends also on whether Mr. Shah will consolidate his grip on his party and remain in power. India is never just a silent spectator: its political comfort and preferences are always heard loud and clear in Kathmandu.

To continue building trust and prevent tensions from flaring up again, both leaders should establish direct communication channels, including bimonthly calls. Mr. Modi should also use the positive momentum to travel soon to Kathmandu, after eight long years since his last visit.

Then there is the question of how the ambitious road map can be operationalised, with the devil in the details of implementation. Reviving a High-Level Monitoring Group to track progress is a good device, but it will require strong political support to ensure new cross-border infrastructure advances, from energy pipelines to railway links.

Another challenge will arise as Mr. Shah knocks on other doors for external support and navigates a tense geopolitical context, especially with overconfident adversaries China and Pakistan, as well as an unpredictable United States.

New Delhi will naturally have to communicate its core security concerns and enforce red lines with Kathmandu. But it must also ensure that such tactical security denial does not undermine this week's focus on strategic economic delivery: new ways for India to supply more, better and faster to meet the developmental demands of a new Nepal – young, confident and transactional.

Model for Bangladesh?

This week's joint India-Nepal vision may also serve as a model to repair India-Bangladesh relations. The irritants and stakes are much higher, especially the Sheikh Hasina conundrum, which has delayed normalisation.

But here too, political leadership can play a facilitating role with workarounds to restart a mutually beneficial India-Bangladesh economic partnership based on trade, transportation, energy, and cross-border connectivity that transformed the entire East South Asia sub-region since 2009.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has been postponing a much-expected visit to New Delhi and different readings point to either his inability or his unwillingness to invest political capital in repairing ties with India. But the struggling Bangladeshi economy, as well as the success of Mr. Shah's visit to New Delhi, might now be raising the stakes and changing the calculus in Dhaka.

The views expressed are personal

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This special session is not for women. It is for delimitation



SAGARIKA GHOSE

A BILL that could redraw India's electoral map has arrived in an artfully draped sari. Before Parliament passes it, the Narendra Modi government must answer one question: Why should it be trusted?

The Modi government wants a big House but a small Parliament. This Bill is likely to swell the Lok Sabha to 850 members, even as Parliament itself is being hollowed out and stripped of the power to hold the government to account. The chamber grows larger while the institution tragically shrinks.

Consider how this Bill has arrived. For days, the country was kept guessing about the Winter Session and a rumoured special session, while the Monsoon Session was not prorogued for a record 103 days. No all-party meeting was called. Then a special session was announced through a tweet, for "essential government business".

That business is the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, the Delimitation Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill , the same three-bill legislative package that was defeated in April. As I write, not a single copy has been circulated to parties or the public. All we are told is that it will bring more women into Parliament. Such extreme irony! A Bill being marketed as giving women a voice in Parliament is being pushed through without giving Parliament a voice. The Modi—Amit Shah-led dispensation, which has kept women waiting for three years, is suddenly in a tearing hurry to give representation to women.

But women's reservation is already the law of the land. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam was passed almost unanimously in September 2023, with every party calling for its immediate implementation. The law then sat in cold storage until it was abruptly notified late on the night of April 16, 2026. This special session is not for women. It is for delimitation.

Why is the Modi regime linking the two? Seats can be reserved for women in the existing 543-member House, in existing constituencies, from the very next general election. But the government's calculation is deeply cynical. Their gamble is nobody will dare vote against a women's quota, so delimitation has to be smuggled in under the cover of the pallu. The sari is the packaging, the redrawn electoral map is the product. Women are being used as a shield, not empowered as equals. This is hardly surprising given the BJP-RSS's contempt for gender equality.

Gaze on the arithmetic. In a 543-member House, it's 181 women and 362 men. In an 850-member House, 283 women would face 567 men, a male bloc larger than the entire Lok Sabha today. Not a single man gives up his seat. This is not genuine transformative power sharing. It is simply enlarging the ladies' compartment — or the *zenana dabba* — while the main train runs on as before.

A bigger House does not make a stronger Parliament. Modi and Shah have reduced Parliament to a notice board, where bills are bulldozed and sessions are cut short. When 850 MPs are squeezed into a handful of sittings, when will any of them get to speak and raise the issues citizens care about? Will the government guarantee 120 sitting days a year? Will the PM come to the House and answer questions? Will Parliament be allowed to demand answers on citizens' concerns like the smog that chokes north India every winter and is shortening our children's lives? Going by the record, no.

> Nobody will dare vote against a women's quota, so delimitation has to be smuggled in under the cover of the pallu. The sari is the packaging, the redrawn electoral map is the product. Women are being used as a shield, not empowered as equals

The citizen-taxpayer foots the bill. By some estimates, 307 more MPs will cost over Rs 1,300 crore a year. That is more than Rs 6,500 crore over a single Lok Sabha term. Citizens will pay more for a Parliament that is not allowed to work for citizens.

Then there is the question of who draws the map. Subverting institutions is second nature to the Modi regime, and the Delimitation Commission will be no exception. Under the Bill, the Chief Election Commissioner or his nominee sits on it. That means Gyanesh Kumar, the CEC on whose watch faith in the electoral rolls has been badly shaken, and whom the united Opposition holds responsible for vote *chori* on a gigantic scale. A neutral, upright commission was never on the cards. The same hands accused of deleting lakhs of voters will now redraw every constituency in India. Can there be any doubt whose interests the new electoral map will serve? This Bill is a make-the-BJP-win-at-all-costs Bill.

Why the desperate hurry? Under the Constitution, seats are frozen until the first Census after 2026. Delimitation was due after the 2027 Census anyway. Fresh data is around the corner, and new seats could realistically take effect in 2034. Instead, the government wants to lift the freeze and redraw constituencies based on the 2011 Census, figures that are 15 years old. Why? So the new map is ready for 2029.

What has changed since April, when this Bill failed to win a two-thirds majority? Only the numbers, rearranged through murky backroom deals. Since April, parties have been broken and coerced. Twenty traitor TMC MPs will vote on this Bill in the Lok Sabha, though disqualification petitions against them are pending and the Speaker has not ruled on them for six long months. Are the votes of these 20 turncoats legal? Could the amendment itself be struck down if it rests on MPs whose status is undecided? This is defining legislation, yet there has been no wider consultation and no public conversation. We have seen where such high-handed methods lead: The 2020 Farm Laws were rammed through without dialogue and had to be repealed.

No amount of nari shakti sloganeering can wish away the trust deficit this government has created. Trust is earned, not demanded. If the government is sincere, it will send the Delimitation Bill to a Joint Parliamentary Committee and implement women's reservation in the existing 543-member House now. Until then, citizens have every reason to ask: Why should the Modi government be trusted?

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GS 2: INDIA & ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD
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Between India and Nepal, a bond that has survived ups and downs



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

IN THE Rajamandala theory of the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya surmised that neighbours can be both friends and foes. He advocated for the *shadgunya niti* — a six-pronged strategy to deal with them — involving friendship and alliance when possible, patience when required, and toughness when necessary. No other relationship India shares with its neighbours has passed through all these phases like the one with Nepal. This relationship, which all successive governments on both sides have described as "age-old" and "civilisational", has witnessed several ups and downs over the past seven-plus decades. Ultimately, however, what prevailed was a natural bond of emotional oneness — a feeling of brotherly affinity that has helped the two countries overcome strains on many occasions.

Prime Minister Balendra Shah's visit to New Delhi earlier this week — although a short one — proved once again that the bilateral relationship is based not just on agreements and treaties, but on mutual goodwill and natural affinity. After becoming PM in March this year, Shah took his time before engaging in diplomatic ventures, initially declining to meet with foreign dignitaries. He took time to meet the Indian ambassador and India's foreign secretary. Although this raised eyebrows, one could eventually appreciate that the Prime Minister, being new to the national role, wanted time to understand the complex dynamics of his country's relationships with its immediate neighbours.

As PM Shah's visit to India faced delays, strategic circles in India kept their fingers crossed, recalling his earlier nationalist stance on border issues when he was the mayor of Kathmandu. On its part, India conveyed its desire for a cordial bilateral relationship by extending the PM an invitation to visit New Delhi. When Rabi Lamichhane, a senior minister and leader of the ruling party, visited India in July this year, he received warm hospitality. Given this background, the 25-hour visit turned out to be a successful one, helping to reset the relationship. His mature and positive demeanour helped remove any lingering apprehensions in Indian strategic circles.

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, relationships with immediate neighbours — which he assiduously built from the day he assumed office by inviting all heads of state of those countries to his swearing-in — remain a priority. Going beyond protocol, Modi held an hour-long one-on-one meeting with then Nepal PM K P Oli when he visited New Delhi in 2016. A similar meeting took place at Hyderabad House during Shah's visit, where Modi spent close to two hours with his counterpart discussing various issues pertaining to the bilateral relationship. This generous, personalised approach — a trademark of Modi's foreign policy — helped the leaders not only build a warm personal bond, but also exchange views frankly, unhindered by protocol, and resolve complicated issues. This time, too, the lengthy meeting between the two prime ministers led to the release of a joint statement without the two sides having to sit across the table for formal negotiations.

This demonstrated the level of trust and confidence India has in its relationship with the Himalayan neighbour and its leader. Modi lavishly praised Shah for "his clear vision and unwavering commitment to the future of Nepal and to India-Nepal relations" and reminded him that the relationship between the two countries is "not merely one of neighbourhood; it is rooted in a deep sense of kinship and enduring trust". Prime Minister Shah reciprocated the sentiment by calling India a "dependable and trusted neighbour" and described the bond between the two countries as being as tall as the Himalayas.

India's relations with its Himalayan neighbours, such as Nepal and Bhutan, were shaped by the Cold War-era geopolitics of the 1950s. Those were also the tense years when Mao Zedong's China extended its rule over Tibet, with Mao reportedly pursuing the "Five Fingers Policy" — which described Tibet as China's right palm, and Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh as its five fingers. With a view to helping each other protect their sovereign interests, India entered into bilateral treaties with Bhutan and Nepal in 1949 and 1950, respectively.

India conveyed its willingness to discuss all outstanding bilateral issues in the spirit of the treaty. It was decided during Shah's visit that the foreign secretaries of both countries would soon initiate discussions on those issues.

Since the 1990s, India has followed the "Neighbourhood First" principle, which PM Modi has vigorously pursued. However, he added an important dimension to it by insisting on the motto "Together We Grow". India expects its neighbours to appreciate this spirit, which suggests that while foreign policy is the sovereign prerogative of every country, one nation's decisions should help — not hinder — the interests of its neighbours.

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GS 2: INDIA & ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD
INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

Balen Shah in Delhi wasn't diplomacy as usual



YUBARAJ GHIMIRE

SINCE HIS tenure began, Balendra Shah's political understanding and diplomatic skills have been matters of speculation. His lack of response to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitations to Delhi and his refusal to meet with Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, who was planning a trip to Kathmandu in May, did not draw approval even from his senior cabinet colleagues. Shah has never explained the rationale behind these snubs. Despite this, when his first state visit to India finally took place in his ninth month in office, Shah received accolades he might not have imagined. Welcoming him at Hyderabad House, Modi praised Shah, painting him as a farsighted statesman in whose hands the future of Nepal and Indo-Nepal relations were safe.

Yet, as the visit concluded, Misri said some things that Shah may not have wanted to hear: That the Kalapani border dispute and the consensus report by an eight-member group — four each from Nepal and India — to reset and update the multifaceted bilateral relationship were "in the past". The dismissal of the Kalapani issue may trigger anti-India sentiment in Nepal and damage Shah's image, given that as mayor of Kathmandu, he had adorned his office with Nepal's map that included the disputed territories of Kalapani, Lipulek and Limpiadhura.

These setbacks, however, should not undermine the significance of continued diplomatic engagement at the highest level. India pledged a Rs 15,000 crore package as "development assistance" for reconstruction and rehabilitation following the devastation of the August floods in Nepal. India also agreed to open the Lucknow-Bhairahawa airspace to Nepal, which could mitigate the existing air traffic congestion at Nepal's Tribhuvan International Airport and bring into operation two new airports — in Bhairahawa and Pokhara — connecting them with other international destinations. Nepal was not open to India's demand for the Bagdogra-Jhapa airspace due to the risk of hostility it could attract from China and Bangladesh.

Shah also appeared to take certain liberties, attracting hostile comments on social media for wearing black on official and ceremonial occasions. It is not yet clear if his black robes were dictated by his faith in tantra and practice of Bhairav Sadhana, but they certainly dominated the discourse and news cycle in Nepal. He rejected a guard of honour while departing for Delhi but chose to accept one at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. Shah's supposed "undiplomatic" behaviour during his maiden bilateral visit to India will no doubt be debated in Nepal.

The pledges regarding connectivity, roads, energy projects, fibre, and setting up an offshore IIT in Nepal as part of a joint vision for a "developed India and prosperous Nepal" will require regular monitoring and time-bound execution. Nepal and India have almost always been generous in signing agreements and pledges but slow and careless in execution, something the Europeans and the Chinese have excelled at.

Pledges regarding connectivity, roads, energy projects, fibre, and setting up an offshore IIT in Nepal will require regular monitoring and time-bound execution

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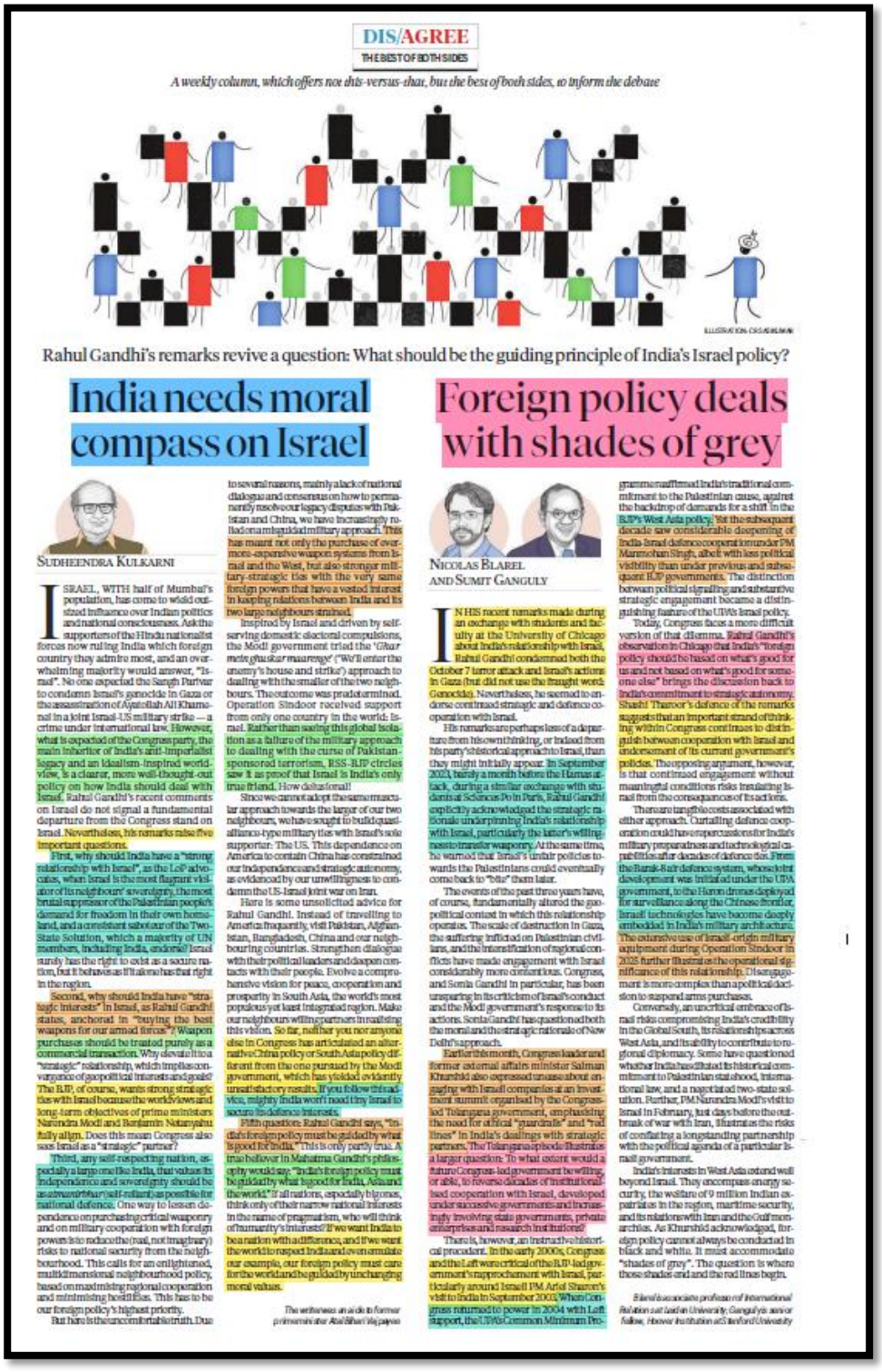

DIS/AGREE

THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate

Rahul Gandhi's remarks revive a question: What should be the guiding principle of India's Israel policy?

India needs moral compass on Israel

SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

ISRAEL, WITH half of Mumbai's population, has come to wield outsized influence over Indian politics and national consciousness. Ask the supporters of the Hindu nationalist forces now ruling India which foreign country they admire most, and an overwhelming majority would answer, "Israel". No one expected the Sangh Parivar to condemn Israel's genocide in Gaza or the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a joint Israel-US military strike — a crime under international law. However, what is expected of the Congress party, the main inheritor of India's anti-imperialist legacy and an idealism-inspired worldview, is a clearer, more well-thought-out policy on how India should deal with Israel. Rahul Gandhi's recent comments on Israel do not signal a fundamental departure from the Congress stand on Israel. Nevertheless, his remarks raise five important questions.

First, why should India have a "strong relationship with Israel", as the LoP advocates, when Israel is the most flagrant violator of its neighbours' sovereignty, the most brutal suppressor of the Palestinian people's demand for freedom in their own homeland, and a consistent saboteur of the Two-State Solution, which a majority of UN members, including India, endorse? Israel surely has the right to exist as a secure nation, but it behaves as if it alone has that right in the region.

Second, why should India have "strategic interests" in Israel, as Rahul Gandhi states, anchored in "buying the best weapons for our armed forces"? Weapon purchases should be treated purely as a commercial transaction. Why elevate it to a "strategic" relationship, which implies convergence of geopolitical interests and goals? The BJP, of course, wants strong strategic ties with Israel because the world views and long-term objectives of prime ministers Narendra Modi and Benjamin Netanyahu fully align. Does this mean Congress also sees Israel as a "strategic" partner?

Third, any self-respecting nation, especially a large one like India, that values its independence and sovereignty should be as *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) as possible for national defence. One way to lessen dependence on purchasing critical weaponry and on military cooperation with foreign powers is to reduce the (real, not imaginary) risks to national security from the neighbourhood. This calls for an enlightened, multidimensional neighbourhood policy, based on maximising regional cooperation and minimising hostilities. This has to be our foreign policy's highest priority.

But here is the uncomfortable truth. Due to several reasons, mainly a lack of national dialogue and consensus on how to permanently resolve our legacy disputes with Pakistan and China, we have incrementally relied on a misguided military approach. This has meant not only the purchase of ever-more-expensive weapon systems from Israel and the West, but also stronger military-strategic ties with the very same foreign powers that have a vested interest in keeping relations between India and its two large neighbours strained.

Inspired by Israel and driven by self-serving domestic electoral compulsions, the Modi government tried the '*Ghar mein ghus kar maarenge*' ("We'll enter the enemy's house and strike") approach to dealing with the smaller of the two neighbours. The outcome was predetermined. Operation Sindoor received support from only one country in the world: Israel. Rather than seeing this global isolation as a failure of the military approach to dealing with the curse of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, RSS-BJP circles saw it as proof that Israel is India's only true friend. How delusional!

Since we cannot adopt the same macular approach towards the larger of our two neighbours, we have sought to build quasi-alliance-type military ties with Israel's sole supporter: The US. This dependence on America is certain. China has constrained our independence and strategic autonomy, as evidenced by our unwillingness to condemn the US-Israel joint war on Iran.

Here is some unsolicited advice for Rahul Gandhi. Instead of travelling to America frequently, visit Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China and our neighbouring countries. Strengthen dialogue with their political leaders and deepen contacts with their people. Evolve a comprehensive vision for peace, cooperation and prosperity in South Asia, the world's most populous yet least integrated region. Make our neighbours willing partners in realising this vision. So far, neither you nor anyone else in Congress has articulated an alternative China policy or South Asia policy different from the one pursued by the Modi government, which has yielded evidently unsatisfactory results. If you follow this advice, mighty India won't need tiny Israel to secure its defence interests.

Fifth question: Rahul Gandhi says, "India's foreign policy must be guided by what is good for India." This is only partly true. A true believer in Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy would say, "India's foreign policy must be guided by what is good for India, Asia and the world." If all nations, especially big ones, think only of their narrow national interests in the name of pragmatism, who will think of humanity's interests? If we want India to be a nation with a difference, and if we want the world to respect India and even emulate our example, our foreign policy must care for the world and be guided by unchanging moral values.

The writer was an aide to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee

Foreign policy deals with shades of grey

NICOLAS BLAREL AND SUMIT GANGULY

IN HIS recent remarks made during an exchange with students and faculty at the University of Chicago about India's relationship with Israel, Rahul Gandhi condemned both the October 7 terror attack and Israel's actions in Gaza (but did not use the fraught word: Genocide). Nevertheless, he seemed to endorse continued strategic and defence cooperation with Israel.

His remarks are perhaps less of a departure from his own thinking, or indeed from his party's historical approach to Israel, than they might initially appear. In September 2023, barely a month before the Hamas attack, during a similar exchange with students at Sciences Po in Paris, Rahul Gandhi explicitly acknowledged the strategic rationale underpinning India's relationship with Israel, particularly the latter's willingness to transfer weaponry. At the same time, he warned that Israel's similar policies towards the Palestinians could eventually come back to "bite" them later.

The events of the past three years have, of course, fundamentally altered the geopolitical context in which this relationship operates. The scale of destruction in Gaza, the suffering inflicted on Palestinian civilians, and the intensification of regional conflicts have made engagement with Israel considerably more contentious. Congress, and Sonia Gandhi in particular, has been unsparing in its criticism of Israel's conduct and the Modi government's response to its actions. Sonia Gandhi has questioned both the moral and the strategic rationale of New Delhi's approach.

Earlier this month, Congress leader and former external affairs minister Salman Khurshid also expressed unease about engaging with Israeli companies at an investment summit organised by the Congress-led Telangana government, emphasising the need for ethical "guardrails" and "red lines". In India's dealings with strategic partners. The Telangana episode illustrates a larger question: To what extent would a future Congress-led government be willing, or able, to reverse decades of institutional-ised cooperation with Israel, developed under successive governments and increasingly involving state governments, private enterprises and research institutions?

There is, however, an instructive historical precedent. In the early 2000s, Congress and the Left were critical of the BJP-led government's rapprochement with Israel, particularly around Israeli PM Ariel Sharon's visit to India in September 2003. When Congress returned to power in 2004 with Left support, the UPA's Common Minimum Programme reaffirmed India's traditional commitment to the Palestinian cause, against the backdrop of demands for a shift in the BJP's West Asia policy. Yet the subsequent decade saw considerable deepening of India-Israel defence cooperation under PM Manmohan Singh, albeit with less political visibility than under previous and subsequent BJP governments. The distinction between political signalling and substantive strategic engagement became a distinguishing feature of the UPA's Israel policy.

Today, Congress faces a more difficult version of that dilemma. Rahul Gandhi's observation in Chicago that India's "foreign policy should be based on what's good for us and not based on what's good for someone else" brings the discussion back to India's commitment to strategic autonomy. Shashi Tharoor's defence of the remarks suggests that an important strand of thinking within Congress continues to distinguish between cooperation with Israel and endorsement of its current government's policies. The opposing argument, however, is that continued engagement without meaningful conditions risks insulating Israel from the consequences of its actions.

There are tangible costs associated with either approach. Curtailing defence cooperation could have repercussions for India's military preparedness and technological capabilities, as the case of defence ties between the Barak-Sudri defence system, whose joint development was initiated under the UPA government, to the Heron drones deployed for surveillance along the Chinese frontier, Israeli technologies have become deeply embedded in India's military architecture. The extensive use of Israeli-origin military equipment during Operation Sindoor in 2025 further illustrates the operational significance of this relationship. Disengagement is more complex than a political decision to suspend arms purchases.

Conversely, an uncritical embrace of Israel risks compromising India's credibility in the Global South, its relationships across West Asia, and its ability to contribute to regional diplomacy. Some have questioned whether India has diluted its historical commitment to Palestinian statehood, international law, and a negotiated two-state solution. Further, PM Narendra Modi's visit to Israel in February, just days before the outbreak of war with Iran, illustrates the risks of conflating a longstanding partnership with the political agenda of a particular Israeli government.

India's interests in West Asia extend well beyond Israel. They encompass energy security, the welfare of 9 million Indian expatriates in the region, maritime security, and its relations with Iran and the Gulf monarchies. As Khurshid acknowledged, foreign policy cannot always be conducted in black and white. It must accommodate "shades of grey". The question is where those shades end and the red lines begin.

Blarel is associate professor of International Relation at Leiden University; Ganguly is senior fellow, Hoover Institution at Stanford University

GS 3: INDIAN ECONOMY & TRADE

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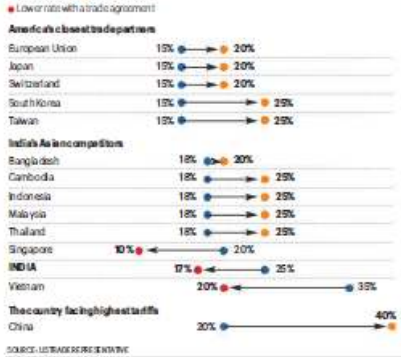
•ECONOMICS

Tariffs come full circle for India

• India gets a marginal edge over ASEAN countries

The USTR released a cumulative proposed rate for each of the 14 countries targeted by its Section 301 probe. These tariffs will go into effect by mid-Feb unless some trade partners sign a deal, which will result in lower rates.

● Proposed rate ● Higher rate if consultations and commitments are unsatisfactory
● Lower rate with a trade agreement



SOURCE: US TRADE REPRESENTATIVE

• India's trade surplus with US in 2026

(Figures in $ billion)

● Exports ● Imports



SOURCE: COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY MINISTRY

On the face of it, India faces a slightly lower rate than its competitors. But the new duties effectively recreate the old regime, albeit under a different legal provision



ANIL SASI

THE LEGAL justification for slapping trade tariffs by the US may have changed, but American protectionism is clearly showing no sign of winding down.

On April 2, 2025, US President Donald Trump delivered his "Liberation Day" tariff announcement that led to sweeping "reciprocal tariffs" on global trading partners. Then, on November 25, 2026, Trump's administration indicated it would restart these global trade wars with fresh tariffs on 14 countries under a separate legal head.

In these 20 months, Washington's trade stance has ostensibly come full circle.

Initiated by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on March 11, 2026 as action against 16 economies, the proposed duties target 14 trading partners while keeping Mexico and Norway out of this action for now.

As part of these new levies, the US has proposed a final tariff rate of 25% on India after concluding two investigations on the import of goods produced through alleged "forced labour" and "industrial overcapacity". Both investigations were conducted under Section 301 of the US Trade Act of 1974. The proposed tariff rate would drop to 17% if India and the US sign a formal trade deal.

On the face of it, the proposed tariff rate on India is slightly better than its competitors Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, according to a notice by the office of the USTR Wednesday.

Tariffs on India

Here's a look at how the tariff architecture shaped up for India in the months since the "Liberation Day" tariffs were announced:

APRIL 1, 2025: India was first hit with a 26% reciprocal tariff on exports to the US when the reciprocal tariffs were announced.

APRIL 10, 2025: The US announced a "90-day pause" on the higher reciprocal tariffs, while keeping a 10% baseline duty on imports for most trading partners.

JULY 31, 2025: Trump announced a blanket 25% tariff on Indian exports to the US, citing hurdles in market access for agricultural and dairy products, while warning of penalties over Russian oil purchases.

AUGUST 2025: Trump announced an additional 25% tariff for Russian oil purchases.

FEBRUARY 2026: The International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) tariffs were struck down that month by the US Supreme Court that month, rendering the reciprocal tariffs redundant.

FEBRUARY 2026: The same month, the Trump administration offered India an 18% rate in the joint framework signed by the two countries in February. Alongside that, the USTR threatened the use of Section 301 investigations under multiple heads to come up with the latest round of tariffs.

As things stand, the two tariff numbers — the USTR's proposed 25% tariff on India, which could drop to 17% when New Delhi signs a trade deal — are largely in line with the two main numbers touted earlier — the July 31, 2025 blanket 25% tariff on Indian exports and the 18% rate offered subsequently in the February 2026 joint framework. One way or the other, in 20 months, the tariffs have come back to where they were, albeit under a different legal provision.

The two tariff numbers — the proposed 25% tariff, which could drop to 17% when India signs a trade deal — are largely in line with the figures touted earlier.

There may be a few silver linings: the proposed 17% deal rate replaces, instead of stacking up on some existing tariffs (such as a 10% rate tied to prior Section 301 investigations), are net of the earlier tariffs; and this new tariff is marginally lower than the 18% rate outlined in the US-India February 2026 joint framework. Also, India is also better off than Vietnam and other ASEAN countries, which will face a 20% rate after its deal with the US takes effect.

The Commerce and Industry Ministry stated Wednesday that India does not have overcapacity in any sector and that trade-related concerns should be addressed within the framework of the trade talks. The ministry said the government remains committed to working closely with the US towards the early conclusion of the pact.

Tariffs on China

According to the USTR notice, US duties on China are also set at 20% above existing duties, which could take the total incidence up to around 40%.

Despite all the shows of solidarity in Shenzhen last week in China in that meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Trump, Wednesday's USTR announcement shows tariffs are here to stay.

"It is another reminder that while the legal justification for tariffs keeps changing, US protectionism is becoming increasingly difficult to unwind," ING analysts wrote in a note quoted by *Reuters*.

On Wednesday, Beijing reiterated its opposition to "trade wars" and dismissed the notion of overcapacity, even as it stopped short of announcing any retaliatory measures. "The so-called 'overcapacity' is a false issue, and China opposes using it as an excuse for political manipulation," foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said.

Lingering concerns

Ajay Srivastava, founder of Global Trade Research Initiative, said the new tariffs "recreate the reciprocal-tariff regime under a new name, engineered to bait trading partners into signing one-sided, expensive trade deals rather than genuinely addressing structural industrial overproduction".

"By deploying a dual-rate structure — threatening steep baseline tariffs against countries that refuse a pact while offering lower rates to those that sign — Washington reclaims the bargaining power to impose duties at will and extract unilateral concessions, allowing a government to secure tariff relief even if the industrial capacity that prompted the investigation remains unchanged," Srivastava said.

For India, the Section 301 probe flagged potential excess capacity or export surpluses in seven sectors: solar modules, petrochemicals, steel, textiles, health-related goods, construction materials and auto products.

Under the proposal, Indian imports face a 17% tariff if a trade pact is finalised — offering a 1% edge over Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (18% deal rate) and a 3% edge over Vietnam and China (20% deal rate) — which goes up to 25% without a deal.

But there are concomitant risks that hang in the balance: that any adverse USTR ruling in the future could bring further duties or import quotas. There is also the threat of tariffs of up to 100% over India's purchase of Russian oil, which can be redeployed by Washington DC in the future.

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Old playbook: Why India may be better prepared this time



RAVI DUTTA MISHRA & AANCHAL MAGAZINE

THE US Trade Representative (USTR) on Wednesday announced a fresh tariff structure, replacing the reciprocal tariffs that the US Supreme Court declared illegal in February.

New tariffs were announced on 14 major trade partners after concluding months-long Section 301 investigations to assess whether countries have excess industrial capacity and have taken sufficient measures to restrict goods produced through forced labour from entering their supply chains.

The USTR has proposed two rates for all 14 trade partners. Close trading partners such as South Korea, the EU and Japan remain at 15% for those who have already struck a deal with the US, and 20% without an agreement, while countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand stand at 18% with a pact and 25% without one. For India, the rate with a deal is 17% and at 25% without one. The US tariff rate for Pakistan remains at 10%.

By laying down the two tariffs, likely to go into effect from mid-February, the US has given trading partners a window to sign agreements. This is a familiar carrot-and-stick approach that has been used since Donald Trump began his second term to force countries into signing a one-sided trade agreement, which falls outside the scope of typical WTO-compliant trade pacts.

While India's demand to get a comparative advantage seems to have been accepted by the US, as it has offered rates better than Vietnam, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, the steep US demands on agriculture remain a political risk for the government. Still, India is now also in a better position to handle US tariffs, with scores of trade deals in the process of getting operationalised and exporters now having the experience of using alternate routes.

Relatively strong macro footing, diversification

India has seen several periods of breakdown in trade negotiations, which at one point resulted in the steepest US tariffs on any country globally. New Delhi faced 50% tariffs between August 2025 and February 2026. However, this triggered an aggressive push for diversification and a flurry of trade deals, which is expected to boost Indian exports.

Amid the threat of tariffs, India concluded two crucial trade deals with the UK and European Union, opening two large markets for Indian exports. While the UK deal has come into effect, the EU agreement may take a year to get operationalised, offering Indian exports some cushion from volatile US trade policy.

Emkay Global Financial Services said that front-loading of exports (pushing them through before tariffs take effect) would help, as the new tariffs would not come into effect before January 2027. US exports are already running at $8.4 billion per month in FY27 year-to-date, but scope for a short-term increase remains. Growth could improve optically as well due to a favourable base, Emkay Global said in a note.

The note further said that similar to 2025, destination diversification should provide some cushion. "US exports fell 10% between Sep-25 and Mar-26 when a 50% tariff was in place, but exports to RoW rose 3%. Rest of the World (RoW) exports are already running at ~30%, but could see further improvement," the note said. "India remains on a strong macro footing despite tariffs and the West Asia conflict. Goods exports in the first seven months of FY27 are up 22%, and the current account deficit as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product remains below 1.5%," Emkay Global said.

'Competitive edge not significant'

Despite the gains made over the last few months, the comparative positioning matters. Reacting to the new tariff structure, exporters said that the competitive advantage over partners is not large enough to make a difference and the new tariffs could be a barrier to exports.

Pankaj Chadha, Chairman, Engineering Exports Promotion Council India, said, "Our government's stated position has been that India must have a competitive advantage over its neighbouring countries as well as other competing nations under a trade deal with the US. However, when I look at countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, they are all facing tariffs of around 18%. If India is at 17% under a trade deal with the US, I am not entirely sure that gives us a significant competitive advantage."

Under the current US tariff structure, Bangladesh is at around 18%, which could go up to 20% if its consultations with the Trump administration fail. Vietnam, another major exporter, is at 20%, with a fallback of 25%. "Our view is that as long as India and its competing countries are facing the same tariff rates, there are no issues, but if our competitors end up with lower tariffs than India, there is significant concern," Chadha said.

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Women's reservation, delimitation: About equality

ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

AS PARLIAMENT reconvenes on November 30 for a special session, it is set to revive, arguably, two of the most significant pieces of legislation in recent history: Delimitation and the legislation on women's political representation. Both, despite all the political whataboutery, are urgent: One addresses the issue of unequal representation of citizens across constituencies, and the other, the persistent exclusion of women from legislatures. Prime Minister Narendra Modi must be lauded for putting his weight behind women's reservation before the 2029 general elections. And, as Bharatiyas, we must avoid thinking in the binaries of North vs South or ruling vs opposition parties.

While preparing for the first election in 1951-52, the Election Commission faced a peculiar issue. Women in many places, as was customary, did not disclose their original names and were known by the relationship they had with their male relative ("wife of", "daughter of"). For several decades post-Independence, women's empowerment and agency were terms reserved for academic discourse, despite India having a woman head of government relatively soon after Independence.

Cut to 2019. The country saw a 67.18 per cent women voter turnout, which was higher than the male turnout. Some states counted more women than men in their electoral rolls. The current delimitation exercise and giving effect to the 106th Constitutional Amendment — one-third reservation for women lawmakers in state legislatures and Parliament — is a final push to make women not mere constituents but also active participants in law-making.

> The 131st Constitutional Amendment will provide for women's reservation immediately after delimitation, instead of waiting for the next census

As it stands, the 131st Constitutional Amendment Bill provides for an increase in Lok Sabha seats to 815 (plus 35 seats for UTs). It will provide for women's reservation immediately after delimitation, instead of waiting for the next census. The bills will in all likelihood incorporate assurances given to the southern states. Contrary to some political statements, delimitation is an essential part of any functioning democracy. It provides for fair and equitable representation, ensuring that each vote has the same weight. The process is essential for ensuring that each constituency has a roughly equal population.

The more important transformative aspect of the present debate is the question of women's representation. In 2023, the Modi government secured the passage of the 106th Constitutional Amendment Act. It was popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. The name reflects the spirit of women's empowerment by recognising their potential and giving them parity with men in the country. In the words of Iris Young, this enhanced presence of women enhances the democratic legitimacy of the institutions. Thus, women's representation will bring about the long-awaited corrective action to their structural exclusion.

India's experience with women's reservation in Panchayati Raj tells us why this representation matters. Economists Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo showed through their research that reserved leadership positions for women also influence the political economy of the village and positively affect the allocation of public goods. Thus, women's entry into Parliament is a step towards a more inclusive, accommodative, and just democracy.

Where delimitation seeks to provide equality of representation, women's reservation will not only provide equity to the largest constituency in India but also correct the historical wrong of marginalising the *nari shakti* of this country. Delimitation will become an instrument of democratic redistribution whose benefits will be reaped by future generations, especially Gen Z women. It can bring India's representative institutions closer to the constitutional promise of substantive equality. We must stand behind and support this watershed moment.

The writer is associate professor, Dr Ambedkar International Centre

GS 2: INDIAN POLITY & PARLIAMENT

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 17

• DELIMITATION

More seats, same balance of power

Uniformly increasing seats across states raises questions about the Constitutional basis of the exercise



VIKAS PATHAK

THE UNION Cabinet on Friday cleared the Constitution Amendment Bill to implement reservation for women in Parliament and state legislatures through a delimitation exercise. The proposal would increase Lok Sabha seats across states by 50%, potentially taking the House's strength to up to 850, while freezing their relative share of representation until 2051.

The government will likely introduce the delimitation package in a special sitting of Parliament from Monday.

What is the Constitutional basis of delimitation?

Delimitation involves redrawing constituency boundaries and reallocating parliamentary seats among states based on population. Article 81 of the Constitution provides for the "one person, one vote, one value" principle. Article 81(2)(a) says: "There shall be allotted to each State a number of seats in the House of the People in such manner that the ratio between that number and the population of the state is, so far as practicable, the same for all States."

The only exception the Article makes to the norm is for very small states with a population not exceeding six million, so that they can still get proper representation in the Lower House.

This principle is an extension of the idea of equality for all citizens — India gave a single vote to the rich, the poor, men and women, and rural and urban people.

The Constitution also mandated delimitation after each decennial Census to implement the one-person, one-vote, one-value principle. Article 81(3) says: "In this article, the expression 'population' means the population as ascertained at the last preceding census of which the relevant figures have been published."

Why was delimitation to allocate seats among states frozen in '70s?

In the 1970s, there was considerable stress on family planning, and the freeze aimed to ensure that those states that stabilised their population first did not lose seats. In 2001, too, the same logic was used to incentivise family planning. But delimitation after each Census would award more seats to states with higher population growth because of the one-person, one-vote, one value principle.

So, in 1976, delimitation between states was frozen for 25 years via a Constitutional amendment without changing the formula, and this was repeated for another 25 years in 2001. The most recent delimitation exercise took place in 2008, involving the redrawing of some constituency boundaries on the basis of the 2001 Census.

Southern states say that if present Census data is used, they would lose their relative share of seats in Lok Sabha, as the decadal rates of growth of population of states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are higher than southern states.

How did delimitation get linked to women's reservation?

Parliament passed a Constitutional amendment Bill for 33% women's reservation in Lok Sabha and state Assemblies on September 21, 2023, with all major Opposition parties on board. Lok Sabha passed the Bill with just two AIMIM MPs voting against it, while Rajya Sabha passed it unanimously. However, the Constitutional amendment tied the implementation of women's reservation to the next Census, which is now underway, saying that delimitation would take place once the Census data is out, and then women's reservation would be implemented.

Why did the government then try to amend it again?

In April 2026, the Centre introduced in a special session of Parliament three Bills for the purpose of providing women's reservation in the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies as early as 2029:

1. The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill to amend the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023, in order to expedite women's quota in Lok Sabha and state Assemblies;
2. A Delimitation Bill to set up a Delimitation Commission for the purpose of delimitation based on latest available figures;
3. And a Bill to extend women's quota to Union Territories with Assemblies.

It said that while the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam had laid down that women's reservation would be implemented following delimitation on the basis of the first Census after the Act was passed, this would delay the process as Census figures would take time to be published. The Bill sought to amend Article 81 of the Constitution to lay down that Lok Sabha shall not exceed 815 members from states and 35 from the UTs.

So, the Bill aimed to operationalise women's reservation following delimitation on the basis of the latest Census exercise for which figures had already been published. This meant the 2011 Census.

However, given the fact that some states had increased their populations much more than some others by 2011, it is difficult to understand how a 50% increase across states — as the government was verbally saying — would be compatible with the principle of "one-person, one-vote, one-value" under Article 81(2)(a).

The Constitutional Amendment Bill also sought to amend Article 82 to do away with the necessity to carry out delimitation after each Census.

The Bill failed to get the required two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha.

Why was Opposition against it?

Opposition parties said the Bills were riddled with contradictions and made no mention of the proportion of seats allocated to all states remaining unchanged, unlike what the government had been verbally saying. So, they argued that this would lead to states that did not implement family planning being "rewarded" with a higher share of seats.

Some parties also opposed the idea of a uniform 50% increase, saying that the gap between states whose population had stabilised and the ones whose population hadn't would increase in absolute numbers.

What has changed now?

The Union Cabinet Friday approved a Constitutional Amendment Bill, saying there would be a 50% increase in seats across states and the present ratio of seat allocation to states would be frozen till 2051.

Behind the government's confidence of securing a two-thirds majority are signals from the DMK that it would be open to backing the Constitution amendment Bill if Tamil Nadu's existing share of roughly 22% of Lok Sabha seats is assured. The ruling alliance is also counting on support from the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar).

In the 540-member Lok Sabha — three seats are vacant — the DMK has 22 MPs and NCP(SP) eight. For a Constitutional amendment, at least 360 MPs will have to support the Bill.

In the 245-member Upper House, the NDA has 142 MPs. Support of 161 members will be required for the Constitutional amendment, so the ruling alliance needs support of another 19 members. The DMK has eight Rajya Sabha MPs and NCP(SP) one. Non-NDA parties, including regional parties, account for around 100 members and the BJP is confident of securing adequate support in the Upper House, too.

The DMK cites an Assembly resolution of February 2024: "Due to unavoidable reasons, if the number of (Lok Sabha and Assembly) seats on the basis of population were to (change), (they) shall be maintained at the present ratio for constituencies within states... and for both Houses of Parliament, (which were) fixed based on the population of 1971." Party leader M K Stalin has also demanded that the present ratio of seat allocations to states remain unchanged for the next 25 years.

What are the Constitutional pitfalls involved?

Former Lok Sabha Secretary General PDT Achary told *The Indian Express* that the Constitution provides a formula under Article 81(2)(a) for distribution of seats between states on the basis of one-person, one-vote, one-value principle and, for this, delimitation is Constitutionally required to be undertaken after each census — something that has been frozen for 50 years through Constitutional amendments.

"But the formula is still there, and a Delimitation Commission will have to abide by the Constitutional formula, unless the Article itself is amended to provide for a fresh formula that takes account of southern states' concerns. This will have to be done with all-party consultation, and would require amendments in Article 81 to move to a new formula for a future Delimitation Commission to follow," Achary said. "The government cannot instruct a Delimitation Commission to increase 50% seats across states while the one-vote, one-value formula is still there in the Constitution."

In other words, while the Bill that fell in April just said that the delimitation would be done on the last available Census data — meaning 2011 — without specifying, beyond verbal assurances, that each state would gain 50% seats, even specifying the same may not be in sync with Article 81, unless the present formula itself is dispensed with.

What is the present status of women's reservation?

As of now, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam of 2023 stands. As per the 2023 Act, the Census will be followed by delimitation on the basis of the latest Census data, following which women's reservation will become a reality after the next Lok Sabha polls.

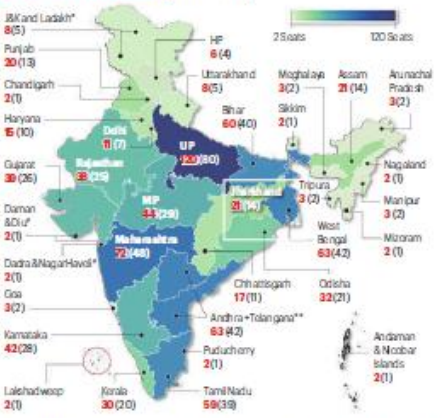


The new Lok Sabha chamber can accommodate up to 888 members. n.r.

• WHAT NEW SEAT COMPOSITION COULD LOOK LIKE

States that have controlled population growth, especially those in the south, say delimitation will reduce their Lok Sabha representation. To allay this, the government is looking at an across-the-board 50% increase that will maintain seat proportions. But this will not fix the current disparities in representation.

Proposed Lok Sabha seats (current seats)



NOTE: 3. U.T. OF LADAKH WAS CARVED OUT OF ERSTWHILE STATE OF J&K IN 2019; **TELANGANA WAS CARVED OUT OF ANDHRA IN 2014; *DNH & A NAGAR HAVELI AND DAMAN AND DIU MERGED INTO A SINGLE U.T. IN 2020. POPULATION DATA: 2011 CENSUS

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Why Centre is looking to use 2011 Census when a new one is due



DEEPTIMAN TIWARY

WITH THE Centre expected to bring a fresh set of Bills on delimitation and implementation of women's reservation in the special sitting of Parliament beginning Monday, a key question confronting the exercise is why the government wants to rely on the 2011 Census when the enumeration for a fresh Census is scheduled to be completed in most of the country in just over three months.

The government is expected to address one of the major concerns raised by Opposition parties, particularly those from southern states, in April by incorporating in the legislation a provision for a uniform 50% increase in Lok Sabha seats across states. This would ensure that the relative representation of states in Parliament remains broadly unchanged. But it would also raise questions about the continued insistence on the 2011 Census.

Why does a uniform increase in seats change the debate?

The Constitution envisages two kinds of readjustment through delimitation — a change in the number of seats or a change in boundaries of constituencies.

While the allocation of seats among states continues to be broadly based on the 1971 Census, constituency boundaries in most of the country were last redrawn using the 2001 Census in 2008.

While a uniform 50% increase in seats would reduce the number of people represented by an individual MP, it would not address the existing disparities in representation among states. Even going by the 2011 Census, the population represented by an average MP in Bihar would be around 17.35 lakh against 11.14 lakh in Kerala after the proposed increase.

With the government deciding the allocation of seats among states independently of their contemporary population, the principal purpose of a fresh Census for delimitation would be to determine where the additional seats come up within states and how many of them are reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

For these purposes, the latest population data would ordinarily be desirable.

So why use 2011 Census to determine constituency boundaries?

The government's objective is to operationalise the 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies by the 2029 general election.

The Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, passed by Parliament in September 2023, linked the implementation of women's reservation to a delimitation exercise following the first Census conducted after the enactment of the legislation.

Speaking in Lok Sabha on April 17, Union Home Minister Amit Shah argued that a delimitation exercise undertaken after the fresh Census could not be completed before the 2029 elections, given the extensive public consultations involved.

There is a distinction between the completion of Census enumeration and the availability of population figures necessary for delimitation.

The first digital Census of the country is expected to significantly reduce the time taken to process population data. As reported by *The Indian Express* in June last year, provisional population figures were expected to become available within 10 days of the completion of enumeration, with verification likely to take another six months. Delimitation, however, requires granular population data down to the level of villages, towns and wards, including the population of SCs and STs.

Forming a Delimitation Commission immediately after the passage of the Bills could give it over two years to complete the exercise using the 2011 Census. But waiting for 2027 Census figures could substantially reduce the time available.

What are the pitfalls of using the 2011 Census?

One of the principal arguments advanced by the government itself in the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the Delimitation Bill introduced in April was that uneven population growth and migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, had resulted in varying population densities in electoral constituencies.

But much of the demographic change that has taken place in the country since the last delimitation falls outside the 2011 Census. Rapidly expanding metropolitan regions, satellite townships and industrial centres have attracted large populations over the past decade and a half.

While electoral rolls cannot substitute for Census data, they provide an indication of the demographic changes that have taken place in different constituencies.

Consider a hypothetical state which gets 150 seats after delimitation. A region that accounted for 10% of the state's population in 2011 would be entitled to roughly 15 seats. If its share of the state's population has increased to 15% by 2027, it could be entitled to 22 or 23 seats on the basis of a fresh Census. The choice of Census could thus influence the geographical distribution of political representation within states. It could also determine the number and location of constituencies reserved for SCs and STs using population proportions that are no longer contemporary.

Will another delimitation follow the 2027 Census?

The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026, which failed to secure the requisite majority in the Lok Sabha, proposed to remove the Constitutional requirement of undertaking delimitation after every Census. It sought to amend Articles 81 and 82 to allow Parliament to determine through legislation which Census would form the basis of delimitation and when such an exercise would be undertaken. Even if fresh Census figures became available while the Commission was working, there would be no obligation to incorporate them.

If these provisions are retained in the new Bills, there would also be no constitutional requirement to undertake another delimitation following the publication of the 2027 Census. The constituencies drawn on the basis of the 2011 Census could thus continue for several elections until Parliament legislates for another exercise.

Why link women's reservation and delimitation?

Implementing women's reservation by 2029 would allow the BJP to go into the general election claiming to have delivered on a major promise of political empowerment of women. Also, implementation of women's reservation in the existing 543-member House would leave only 362 seats open to candidates of either gender. In an expanded House of 816 members, even after reserving a third of the seats for women, 544 seats would remain open.