EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

04-11-2026

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GS 2 & 3: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & INTERNAL SECURITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

On the Arunachal frontier, silence is not a strategy



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For some time, reports have circulated of transgressions by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the Asaphila, Taksing and Longju areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The facts are neither clear nor officially acknowledged. Yet, there are signals that something out of the ordinary is happening along this stretch of the border. The matter warrants close attention.

The clearest signal came on October 22, 2026. Speaking at an Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) function, Director General Shatrujeet Singh Kapoor said: "In the past few days, a situation arose where face-off happened at several locations in Arunachal and it still continues." This was the first official confirmation of the scale of the problem. This daily reported, citing "government sources", that the two sides had been in a stand-off at Asaphila, near Taksing, since late July.

Following a brief face-off near Maja, close to Longju, the PLA reportedly returned in larger numbers and pitched tents about six to seven kilometres inside the Line of Actual Control (LAC), as India perceives it. The stand-off has persisted through meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC), the Special Representatives and Corps Commanders, and Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to India for the BRICS summit (September 2026).

Official responses, several questions

Official reactions are telling. Neither side has denied the face-offs. On October 23, the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) referred questions about specific details to the Ministry of Defence. He added that the situation in the border areas "gets disturbed from time to time when Chinese forces diverge from established patrolling patterns". His Chinese counterpart said on October 26 that China "conducts normal border patrol and control activities to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and stability in the border areas".

The Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu was more direct. "No doubt transgression has happened. It keeps happening," he said on October 29, noting that China does not recognise the McMahon Line.

Local groups have also been persistent in raising concerns. In June, the Nah Welfare Society of Taksing informed the district administration that the PLA had built roads, bridges and camps on traditional grazing and hunting grounds. In August, a fact-finding team from a regional party said that Indian patrols were being denied access to some areas. The Army described the June reports as "incorrect and without any basis". The Director General of the ITBP's remarks now lend weight to these local voices.

Some perspective is needed. Chinese transgressions in the Eastern Sector are not new. In the past, however, instances of adverse Chinese possession south of the international boundary have been confined to a few pockets: the Namkha Chu and Sumdorong Chu valleys, and Longju. Elsewhere, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) coincides with the boundary. If China has now made deeper intrusions, established a presence in new areas, expanded its presence in existing pockets or prevented Indian patrols from accessing certain areas, this is a serious, though not unexpected, development. Many of us have cautioned that China could attempt in the Eastern Sector what it did in Eastern Ladakh in 2020.

Chinese commentators have been less coy. A day after the ITBP Director General spoke, one of them argued that the "bottom line" of China's approach was to enforce the "1959 Line". China, he wrote, had "largely achieved this goal" in the Western Sector and was "very likely to implement it in the Eastern Sector in the future".

China's claims, India's rejection

The so-called LAC of November 7, 1959, has no standing with India. In the Eastern Sector, China claims that it coincides with the "illegal" McMahon Line, except at Khinzemane. However, China defines that line by transposing coordinates from the 1914 maps onto present-day maps, ignoring the highest watershed, which was the basis of the 1914 alignment. This approach is entirely unscientific, and India has never accepted it.

In the negotiations leading to the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the LAC, India accepted the concept of the LAC but specifically rejected the Chinese notion of a 1959 line. The LAC was the line of actual control on the ground as it exists, not a notional or historical alignment. In cases of Chinese transgressions, India pressed for the restoration of the status quo ante. The April 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question goes further. In seeking a boundary settlement, Article V requires the two sides to take into account, among other things, "the actual state of border areas".

Chinese transgressions blatantly violate several border agreements that require both sides to "strictly respect and observe" the LAC and not to "overstep" it. Both sides are also committed to refraining from unilaterally altering the status quo. Compounding the problem, China has begun defining the LAC in terms of sovereignty, as the phrasing of its Foreign Ministry statements suggests. This runs contrary to the basic concept of the LAC. When the two sides first formally agreed to use the term in the September 1993 agreement, they explicitly stated that references to the LAC "do not prejudice their respective positions on the boundary question" (Article 6).

India, on the other hand, keeps referring to "different perceptions" of the LAC. In doing so, India lends a degree of legitimacy to Chinese transgressions and weakens its own position. Why should India make such a reference unilaterally, especially when Beijing has forcefully revived its "Zangnan" (South Tibet) narrative on Arunachal Pradesh? For India, there should be one perception of the LAC, which is India's perception. The 1996 Agreement referred to "different perceptions" of the LAC, but Article X also required the two sides to arrive at a "common understanding" of the "entire alignment" of the LAC through an exchange of maps. The "Eight-Point Consensus" of the Special Representatives, announced on August 26, refers to discussions on "ways to improve understanding of the LAC in appropriate areas".

The MEA spokesperson reiterated this formulation. India would be well advised not to formalise the idea of "improved understanding". Doing so would help China achieve what it has sought for two decades: to wriggle out of a formal commitment to establish a "common understanding" of the LAC through an exchange of maps and clarification of its alignment. Ambiguity over the LAC suits a party bent on salami-slicing.

None of this means that every transgression must be publicised. If transgressions follow the pattern of earlier behaviour, it is understandable that the government would not wish to highlight them. However, if the pattern changes, intrusions spill over into new areas, or, more seriously, adverse possession or a physical presence expands, the situation becomes far more serious. This was the litmus test applied in the past.

Hiding intrusions weakens border security

Nothing suggests that keeping such transgressions under wraps helps resolve them. It is incumbent on the government to bring them into the public domain, as it has done in the past. When Chinese forces moved into Wangdung in 1986, the matter was made public and discussed in Parliament. The government also acknowledged Chinese transgressions in Eastern Ladakh in 2020, though transparency has been inadequate since then. If India falls into a pattern of denials, obfuscation or conflicting signals, it will only encourage more blatant salami-slicing.

A related question is how India should respond. Should such transgressions be raised primarily at meetings of border commanders, or should they be taken up forcefully at the diplomatic level and, if necessary, at the political level?

Experience offers a clear answer. In September 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised the Chumar transgression with Mr. Xi on the first day of his visit to India. This was a key factor in China agreeing to restore the status quo ante. In Eastern Ladakh, by contrast, the status quo ante of April 2020 has yet to be restored, even after six years. India cannot allow China to get away with its playbook of incremental gains that, taken together, create a qualitatively new situation to its advantage.

If there are indeed Chinese transgressions beyond areas of persistent intrusion, particularly if Chinese forces are present in areas on India's side of the LAC or the PLA is preventing India's border forces from patrolling regularly, India would be better served by acknowledging this publicly. Candour will strengthen New Delhi's hand in dealing with Beijing, not weaken it.

India's silence on Chinese border intrusions risks emboldening Beijing and undermining New Delhi's position

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

In Tehran, a search for the future of West Asian security



Kabir Taneja

The Executive Director of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) Middle East

The 'Mecca Agreement' alliance's outreach to Tehran highlights competing visions for West Asian security

More than eight months after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran, West Asia remains on tenterhooks, as the United States, Israel, and Iran continue to flirt with a resumption of military hostilities. Elections in Israel as well as the U.S. midterm polls offered an interesting pause, even as war rhetoric remained high. Amid these tensions, an alliance of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan, known as the "Mecca Agreement", arrived in Iran's capital in October to discuss regional security.

A large part of Iran's response since the U.S. and Israel began bombing the country in February 2026 has been to target American interests, including data centres, and military installations across the Gulf states. This forms part of Tehran's strategy of asymmetric warfare, shaped by its view of the conflict as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic, particularly following the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in an airstrike.

Why now

The Tehran visit was perhaps one of the most consequential diplomatic moves initiated. From Riyadh's point of view, despite the official statement issued by its Foreign Ministry highlighting diplomatic efforts to disallow a return to military conflict in the region, the outreach had a singular aim: to prevent its conflict with the Houthis from escalating.

Riyadh's airport has been largely shut since October 10, after Houthi-launched missile strikes. A Saudi-led coalition responded with air strikes, but with limited impact. The Houthis have since gained further territorial control in the embattled country, as Saudi Arabia looked clueless on what to do next. Air campaigns against the Houthis have yielded limited results since 2015.

The delegation in Tehran was not led by diplomats but by defence and intelligence leaders from the three countries. It included Pakistan's Army chief, Asim Munir, a favoured military leader of U.S. President Donald Trump, who has also played a mediating role between Washington DC and Tehran. The main point of interest, however, was the Iranian delegation, led by Mohsen Rezaei took over the country's powerful Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in August, succeeding Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, who had replaced Larijani after his death in March. Rezaei's prominence in the talks also highlights where the nucleus of Iran's emerging power structure lies. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has taken centre stage as the country remains on a wartime footing, with multiple power centres vying for influence following the death of the Ayatollah. The IRGC's leading role is not surprising, given that it has always operated directly under the Supreme Leader's authority.

Conflict into leverage

Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan travelling to Iran for this exchange came as a surprise to many, given that Tehran had struck several Arab countries in response to American and Israeli aggression. However, Iran would have sought such an exchange, as it stands to benefit from it. It has made no bones about its support for newer, region-led securitisation taking precedence over those operating under American auspices. The Mecca Agreement, signed in August and tested to its limits by October, has shown little appetite for collaborative military action in the region, despite comparisons with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Following its signing, Iran supported the initiative, with some reports even suggesting that Islamabad might seek Tehran's official membership. For Iran, however, being part of every forum and conversation about the future of West Asian security is exactly what it seeks. Tehran believes that the events of recent months, and its response to them – including the high-risk decision to target its Gulf neighbours – have created leverage that countries such as Saudi Arabia may now seek to address through dialogue. Iran's access to the Houthis, whom it has helped strengthen, is what Riyadh hopes to mobilise for de-escalation, while Pakistan and Türkiye play supporting roles and consolidate their own positions in another iteration of the proverbial "new West Asia".

The road ahead

Ultimately, for Iran, the crevasses created by a conflict that has not delivered the intended outcomes for the Trump administration present an opportunity to consolidate its position with the Gulf states. Many of its neighbours may grudgingly accommodate its demands because they have few alternatives. However, not all may agree with or support the Mecca Agreement's outreach. This could lead to greater divisions over how to engage with Iran within the construct of a regional security architecture for the future, particularly as Tehran is now widely seen as an aggressor – a label the IRGC will not mind, as it seeks to project Iran as a regional power – and remains a geographic reality to contend with. Iran has previously said it is willing to meet its Gulf partners "anywhere" and on any platform to discuss regional security. Although this remains conjecture, the idea of hosting the talks in Tehran may well have originated with Iran itself.

The months ahead will remain tense in West Asia. Recalibrating a long-standing security order is often a chaotic process. The U.S. will not exit the region, but it may have to share space. Mr. Trump will be fine with this. Whether a U.S. accustomed to hegemonic dominance will accept it remains to be seen.

GS 1: URBANIZATION
THE HINDU PAGE: 10

Need for a unified urbanisation plan

The Union Budget, Economic Survey and Finance Commission recognise that India is urbanising across a rural-urban continuum. Yet Census 2027 will use the 2011 definitions, deepening the undercount of urban India; a National Urbanisation Policy can recognise this gap and build the institutional and fiscal mechanisms to bridge it

ECONOMIC NOTES

Sudeshna Chatterjee
Jaya Dhindaw

India's 2027 Census, happening after 16 years, will classify a settlement as urban if it is either notified by a State as a statutory town or meets three census-town criteria: a population of at least 5,000, a density of at least 400 persons per sq km, and at least 75% of male workers engaged in non-agricultural work. Everything else will be counted as rural.

This preserves comparability across Census years, but it also means the Census will measure urban India with a yardstick that our own economic and fiscal institutions have begun to move beyond.

Measuring urbanisation

In 2011, India had 377 million urban residents across ~8,000 cities and towns. Since then, States have notified another 1,000 statutory towns. The United Nations estimates that 44% of Indians live in urban areas today, projecting the urban population to cross 720 million by 2050.

The growth has been extraordinarily uneven. Greater Mumbai had close to 12 million residents in 2011, while statutory towns like Gangotri Nagar Panchayat in Uttarakhand have a population of 110.

Around 94% of India's urban settlements are small towns, while ~60% of the urban population lives in Class I cities—which includes cities with populations ranging from 1 lakh to 20 million. It lumps together megacities like Mumbai and Delhi with non-metropolitan cities like Mangaluru and Amravati, obscuring radically different needs and capacities. Meanwhile, the fastest growth is unfolding beyond cities: peri-urban areas are expanding at ~4.15% a year, compared to 2.9% growth occurring within administrative boundaries.

The Economic Survey 2026 stated that India is far more urban in functional terms than its definitions admit, citing satellite data that placed the country at 63% urban in 2015. The 2026 Union Budget allocated ₹5,000 crore each to City Economic Regions, shifting the focus from individual cities to wider economic geographies. The 16th Finance Commission raised the share of local grants earmarked for urban local bodies to 45%. It also created a ₹10,000-crore 'urbanisation premium' to encourage States to merge peri-urban villages into adjoining municipal areas and develop rural-to-urban transition policies.

These measures signal a critical shift, but they do not constitute a coherent framework for recognising transitioning settlements, planning across administrative boundaries or aligning fiscal incentives across India's system of cities. That is the missing link which a National Urbanisation Policy could bridge.

Rethinking the rural-urban binary

Firstly, why does a classification carry so much weight? In India, classification is a gateway. Master plans, municipal finance, Finance Commission grants, building regulation, environmental clearance thresholds and scheme eligibility all depend, in different ways, on how a settlement is classified. This classification is also politically reversible. Article 243Q(2) leaves the notification of an area as urban to the discretion of States, with no standard criteria or requirement to publish reasoning behind the decision.

The law treats rural and urban as mutually exclusive and not a continuum. Consider Bhiwandi region near Mumbai that spans 60 villages and nine census towns. Here, 91.8% of employment is non-agricultural, yet it is still governed as rural, leaving Panchayats responsible for land use, waste, water and air quality, without a mandate or technical capacity.

The planning consequences are stark. Around 52% of statutory towns and 76% of census towns have no master plan. Nine States have not updated their planning legislation since the 74th Constitutional Amendment in 1992. Meanwhile, the model law most States rely on dates from 1985, and says nothing about the rural-urban continuum, the 74th Amendment, the 2013 Land Acquisition Law, and the emergence of climate adaptation as a planning imperative.

The necessity of national guidance

National guidance on urbanisation already exists, although unacknowledged. Census classification rules, Finance Commission formulae and scheme eligibility criteria, collectively determine which settlements count as urban and what they receive. Because these were not designed as a coherent policy framework, no single institution is answerable for their combined effects.

A National Urbanisation Policy would not prescribe a one-size-fits-all blueprint or a parallel delivery system. Grounded in subsidiarity, it could establish shared principles to build coherence across existing institutions, letting the Centre channel funds, build capacity and coordinate across tiers of government.

The need for a National Urbanisation Policy

WRI India's report *'Equitable, Productive, Low-carbon and Resilient System of Cities in India – Recommendations for a National Urbanisation Policy'* proposes seven systems transformations:

Standardise the definition and classification of statutory urban settlements; modernise spatial and regional planning; reorient public and private finance flows into urbanisation; embed a tiered coordination architecture, anchored by a National Urbanisation Council; build sectoral reforms on functional foundations; align urban politics with reform incentives; and support knowledge exchange and local innovation.

The first three are foundational and their sequence matters. Article 243W makes devolution permissive rather than mandatory, so notification does not automatically transfer all 18 municipal functions listed in the Twelfth Schedule, to newly notified urban areas. A settlement that has not been classified as urban cannot even begin the transition towards receiving critical municipal services. Therefore, settlement status should be reviewed at fixed intervals against set criteria, not only during the Census, using satellite and geospatial data on built-up growth and economic activity, as the Economic Survey recommends.

Spatial planning comes second because every other reform, from housing and infrastructure to climate adaptation and finance, must ultimately be located somewhere. Yet for most Indian settlements, the plans that should guide these decisions do not exist.

The institutional foundations for better coordination do exist. Metropolitan and District Planning Committees have existed under Articles 243ZE and 243ZD of the Constitution for over three decades. Guidance must acquire statutory force to drive change: regional planning must extend below the million-plus threshold as most of the growth is unfolding there. In such areas, peri-urban zoning cannot be optional.

Finance comes third because implementation requires monetary resources. India's municipal revenue is ~1% of GDP, compared with 7.4% in Brazil and 6% in South Africa, while property tax yields only 0.15% of GDP. Piecemeal, scheme-specific transfers leave cities unable to predict cash flow. India has developed a sophisticated set of blended financing instruments, but access is limited. Own-source revenue and formula-based transfers should become the fiscal pillars of urban governance, besides project preparation capacity.

Coordination comes next. The Inter-State Council dates from 1990 and the Central Council of Local Government from 1954. While NITI Aayog routinely brings States together, a National Urbanisation Council could better connect institutions and mechanisms.

The fifth transformation is about jurisdictional fit. Sectoral reforms are generally designed around administrative jurisdictions that do not match the geography of the problem. For instance, 65% of Delhi's PM 2.5 originates outside the city, so a municipal air quality plan cannot succeed, however well-funded. Reforms should be built on functional units – the airshed, the basin, the city region – with institutions empowered at that scale.

The final two transformations concern incentives and learning. Untied grants should reach municipalities directly through a published formula, paired with the knowledge and innovation support that cities need to meet benchmarks.

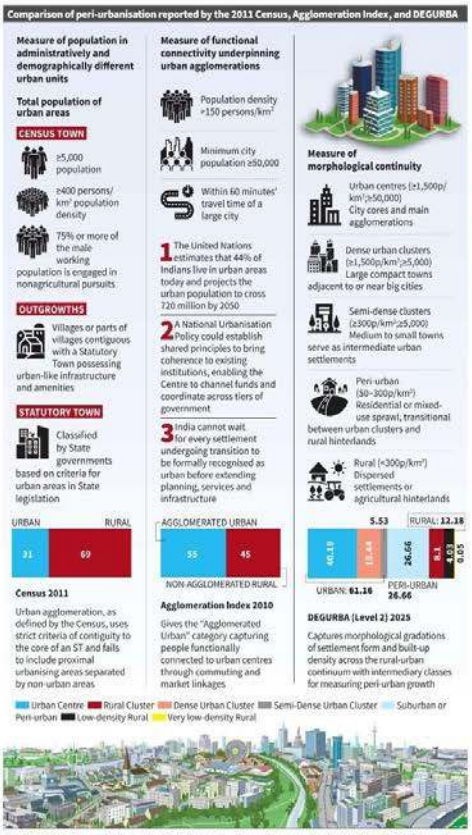
In most cases, the institution, criterion or instrument already exists. What is missing is regularity, enforceability, reach and accountability for non-performance. India cannot wait for every transitioning settlement to be formally recognised as urban before extending planning, services and infrastructure. A National Urbanisation Policy addresses this by shifting the unit of planning from administrative boundaries to functional areas.

(Sudeshna Chatterjee is Director of Research and Jaya Dhindaw is Executive Director of WRI India's Sustainable Cities Program.)

THE URBAN PICTURE

The Economic Survey 2026 stated that India is far more urban in functional terms than its definitions admit, **citing satellite data that placed the country at 63% urban in 2015**

Comparison of peri-urbanisation reported by the 2011 Census, Agglomeration Index, and DEGURBA



Note: DEGURBA = Degree of Urbanisation. ST = Statutory Town. Source: Conceptualised by the WRI India Cities Research, Knowledge and Engagement (RKE) Team based on ORGI (2011c, 2011e); Schiavina et al. 2023; European Commission 2020

THE GIST

- The 2027 Census will classify a settlement as urban if it is either notified as a statutory town or meets three census town criteria. This means the Census will measure urban India using a yardstick that the country's own economic and fiscal institutions have begun to move beyond
- Around 94% of India's urban settlements are small towns, while about 60% of its urban population lives in Class I cities. The classification lumps together megacities with non-metropolitan cities, obscuring their radically different needs and capacities
- Grounded in subsidiarity, a National Urbanisation Policy could establish shared principles to build coherence across existing institutions

GS 2: POLITY

THE HINDU PAGE: 10

How the Supreme Court shaped due process in death penalty cases

In *Bachan Singh*, the apex court upheld the death penalty but laid down guidelines for judicial discretion; in *Manoj v. State of Madhya Pradesh*, it prescribed 'practical guidelines', including the submission of mental health evaluations and custody conduct reports of the accused

L. Nageswara Rao

The Day Against the Death Penalty, observed on October 10, offered a fitting moment to look back on how the Supreme Court's 1980 safeguards, laid down when it upheld capital punishment, have fared over the past four decades.

In *Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab* (1980), the Constitution Bench upheld the death penalty, but imposed specific conditions in the shape of guidelines for the exercise of judicial discretion. Following the legislative scheme of Section 354(3) of the CrPC, now Section 393(3) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, life imprisonment was to be the norm, and death sentence could be imposed only for "special reasons". Courts were to weigh the circumstances of the crime alongside those of the accused, and impose death only where life imprisonment was "unquestionably foreclosed".

The exceptionality principle

This idea of exceptionality of the death sentence in *Bachan Singh* is not quantitative regarding an offence's rarity but rests on "a real and abiding concern for the dignity of human life". The methodology adopted by the Court to ensure that the promise of human dignity is fulfilled is individualised sentencing. It is the idea that the death penalty, while being proportionate, must be imposed after properly considering the individual circumstances of the accused. This allows courts to assess how social, structural and psychological factors shape moral blameworthiness, and whether reformation is truly foreclosed. And it is for the state to prove, by evidence, that the probability of reformation does not exist.

Regrettably, this dignity-oriented jurisprudence was soon made precarious. *Machhi Singh v. State of Punjab* (1983), as the Court later acknowledged in *Sangeet v. State of Haryana* (2013), shifted the inquiry towards the crime, in effect asking whether there were reasons to impose life imprisonment rather than special reasons to impose death. In December 1995, a two-judge Bench went further. *Ravji v. State of Rajasthan* held that the nature and gravity of the offence, not the circumstances of the criminal, was what mattered in deciding punishment. Ravji was hanged in May 1996; Surja Ram, in April 1997. Two men were sent to the gallows on a principle the Supreme Court would later declare contrary to binding law.

A decade later, in *Santosh Kumar Bariyar v. State of Maharashtra* (2009), the Court held that *Ravji* had been decided in ignorance of *Bachan Singh*, and noted that it had been followed in at least six other cases in which the death sentence was awarded. *Bariyar* also clarified that life imprisonment is "unquestionably foreclosed" only when the sentencing aim of reformation is unachievable. In 2012, 14 retired judges called the two executions "the gravest known miscarriage of justice" in independent India.

A focus on reformation

Since then, including in the 262nd Law Commission Report in 2015, reformation has been championed as an important goal in death penalty cases. Yet sentencing, particularly in trial courts, looked much the same. A nationwide study of 306 death sentences imposed between 2018 and 2020 found that 36.1% were pronounced on the same day as conviction, and another 18.4% on the following day. In most cases, the defence neither argued nor presented evidence on mitigation.

It is against this record of crime-centric practice that the Supreme Court has, in recent years, turned to the fairness of the sentencing procedure itself. In *Manoj v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022), it prescribed 'practical guidelines' to operationalise the collection of information on the accused, requiring the state to produce mental health evaluations, reports on conduct in custody, and a probation officer's report. In a *suo motu* Writ Petition, since referred to a Constitution Bench, the court insisted that the defence must have a real and meaningful opportunity to present material on sentence. And in *Vasanta Sampat Dupare v. Union of India* (2025), it held that a sentencing hearing which is compliant to *Manoj* flows from Articles 14 and 21. A death sentence imposed without one is unconstitutional and can be reopened even after it has attained finality.

More recently, in *Waris v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (September 2026), the Court upheld a conviction for the rape and murder of a child but commuted the death sentence, because the State had led no evidence to exclude the possibility of reformation. The gravity of the crime, however extreme, could not by itself establish that life imprisonment was unquestionably foreclosed.

The promise, however, remains unfulfilled where it matters most. In 2025, trial courts sentenced 128 people to death. In 95.18% of the cases where compliance could be assessed, the procedure prescribed in *Manoj* was not followed.

A troubling record

However, the greater worry lies not with the question of sentence but elsewhere. Over the past decade, nearly a third of the death sentences decided by the High Courts and the Supreme Court have ended in acquittals. In 2025 alone, the Supreme Court acquitted the accused in 10 of the 19 death penalty cases it decided, repeatedly noting seriously flawed investigations and prosecutions. In *Dupare*, it acknowledged that investigations often rest on "confessions extracted in opacity" and forensic material "of doubtful rigour". A system so prone to error cannot safely decide an irreversible punishment on the crime alone. *Bachan Singh* left us a warning: "Judges should never be bloodthirsty."

The anguish that brutal crimes provoke is real, and no one is insulated from it. But *Ravji* stands as a stark reminder of what follows when that anguish overwhelms legal reasoning. The safeguards developed from *Bachan Singh* to *Dupare* are not obstacles to justice; they are the conditions on which the constitutionality of the death penalty rests. Fidelity to that process is not mercy. It is what the Constitution mandates.

(The author is a former judge of the Supreme Court of India. Views expressed are personal.)

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 10

Midterms will play a part in the reset of US policy, at home and abroad



RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

WITH DEMOCRATS confident of regaining the House of Representatives and hopeful of capturing the Senate in the midterm elections, speculation is growing that the Donald Trump era is drawing to a close. Not so fast, caution the realists. The emerging political picture in the US is more complex — the election is one important piece of a long-term reorientation of US policies at home and abroad.

A sweeping Democratic victory will demonstrate American democratic resilience and the capacity of its institutions to resist strongman rule. It would restore some of the traditional balance between the executive and legislature and internal distribution of power within the Republican Party. It would also encourage democratic forces everywhere at a time when obituaries are being written for democracy around the world.

Five broad likely consequences from the midterm elections deserve attention.

First, a weaker Trump at home could become more active abroad. Losing Congress would not deprive him of his executive privilege over the conduct of foreign policy. Politically, presidents frustrated by legislative gridlock have often turned to diplomacy. Trump can pursue international initiatives until his last day in office in January 2029.

George H W Bush signed the START II nuclear arms control treaty with Russia's Boris Yeltsin in January 1993, days before handing over power to Bill Clinton. India's historic civil nuclear agreement cleared its final American hurdles in the closing months of George W Bush's presidency, despite a Democratic-controlled Congress. In the last lap of his presidency, Barack Obama pursued an opening with Cuba and concluded the Iran nuclear agreement despite Republican opposition in Congress.

The difference lies in bipartisan support. It helped sustain the agreements with Russia and India. Its absence allowed Trump to abandon Obama's Iran agreement. A hostile Congress need not prevent consequential diplomacy, but agreements resting largely on presidential authority are easier for successors to dismantle.

Trump's ambition for a grand bargain with Russia over Ukraine and energy cooperation faces considerable resistance in Congress and the American security establishment. His challenge is to mobilise support in both parties in favour of an accommodation with Moscow. On Iran, too, there is considerable sentiment across the political spectrum for an immediate end to the current war. The question is about the terms of war termination. Congress can restrict funding and authorisations, but overcoming a presidential veto requires two-thirds majorities in both chambers. Such a consensus appears unlikely.

Second, Democratic control of Congress would bring investigations into alleged wrongdoing, conflicts of interest and the activities of Trump's family. These could hurt his standing and consume the administration's attention without necessarily disabling it.

The Supreme Court has granted presidents substantial criminal immunity for official acts. Presidents are also protected from federal prosecution while in office. Neither prevents congressional scrutiny or provides blanket protection for private conduct and family members. Washington could become even more divided as Trump retains substantial executive authority.

> Losing Congress would not deprive him of his executive privilege over the conduct of foreign policy. Politically, presidents frustrated by legislative gridlock have often turned to diplomacy

Third, arguments about immigration reveal competing currents in American politics. Trump's emphasis on sovereign borders answered the powerful public sentiment against illegal immigration. But the opposition to the administration's enforcement methods is real and growing. Similar tensions surround legal immigration, especially the H-1B visas, of particular interest to India. American capital wants access to foreign talent, while opposition to labour imports has grown on both the left and the right. The next two years are unlikely to resolve these contradictions.

Fourth, the biggest political changes could unfold within the two parties. Socialists and progressives have gained influence within the Democratic Party, challenging its traditional leadership on economic and foreign policy questions. Capturing Congress could intensify rather than settle these internal arguments in the party. On the Middle East, progressives challenge the party's traditional support for Israel.

Change is inevitable within the Republican Party, too. Sections of the populist right have cooled towards Trump. If he is seen as an electoral liability, mainstream Republicans could become more willing to challenge him. The approaching contest over the Republican presidential nomination in 2028 will also reopen questions about the party's ideological direction and the future of Trumpism.

Fifth, the campaign's focus on affordability and rising living costs brings into view America's unfinished argument over economic globalisation. Trump promises industrial renewal through import tariffs, ease of living, and higher economic growth. Tariffs can raise costs for consumers and businesses, while the anticipated benefits of industrial reshoring and economic growth take time to materialise.

Democrats attack this contradiction but remain divided over how much protectionism to retain. Defeating Trump's candidates would not restore the old free-trade consensus. Both parties must reconcile household affordability with industrial jobs, economic security and competition with China.

For the rest of the world, arguments over American trade policy should not obscure the underlying strength of the US economy. Its massive GDP at nearly $33 trillion and the latest quarterly growth rate of 3.4 per cent will mean American dominance of the global economy is here to stay. Continuing technological leadership, deep capital markets and capacity for innovation continue to provide the US strategic advantages over its potential peers. Political turbulence in Washington does not automatically translate into widely presumed, or hoped for, American decline.

The dramatic changes in US policies in Trump's second term have encouraged simplistic assumptions about the country and a tendency to confuse the President with America as a whole. India's stakes in the US relationship are likely to grow even amidst its internal turbulence. For a more informed debate and effective policymaking towards Washington, Delhi and its political class need deeper engagement with the diverse and competing political, economic and social forces shaping the US.

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An alliance for multilateralism by other means



AMRITA NARLIKAR

AMID ALL the drama that surrounds the high-level week of the UN General Assembly in New York, it is all too easy to miss some of the quiet and constructive work that happens on the sidelines. The Partners for Multilateralism (P4M), which was launched at the 81st UNGA Week in New York in September, could turn out to be one such initiative.

Co-sponsored by Australia, Brazil, Barbados, Canada, the EU, India, and Kenya, and further signed by 18 other countries, the P4M commits to strengthening multilateral cooperation, and the institutions and rule of law that underpin it. This matters at a time when multilateralism is under severe pressure. The US, a principal founder and long-time guarantor of the system, is now rejecting it through word and deed; other major players are also flouting rules and norms with frequency and impunity. Any declarations of support are only to be welcomed, and doubly so when they come from a group that includes large and small countries from both the Global South and the Global North. Moreover, some of the language of the P4M declaration is reform-oriented, like, "we commit to strengthening multilateral cooperation that is open, fair, equitable, inclusive, networked and practical".

Developing countries have spent decades seeking to make multilateral institutions "fair, equitable, inclusive", only to be given patronising lectures on why the system worked, and that they just needed to get their house in order. Today, there is more of a receptive ear for the reform agenda in parts of the Global North. This is so for a variety of reasons, including turmoil in Western democracies and obvious weaknesses in the Transatlantic partnership, but also the growing clout of the Global South. P4M recognises and reflects the changing balance of power.

That said, if the group does not want to join the list of well-intended but failed initiatives, it would be well-served to focus on the following. First, P4M needs to get cracking on a concrete plan of action, the costs of its implementation, and the distribution of these costs. Second, it needs to establish clarity on the principles that will underpin its vision of an updated and reformed multilateralism. This will require deliberation on how it distinguishes itself from similar endeavours like China's four Global Initiatives. Third, a problem with (otherwise) promising exercises to revamp the multilateral system is that they fail to engage with the affected populations. At a time when global discontent is rife, it would be foolhardy to ignore the importance of public engagement.

Finally, it remains to be seen if the P4M declaration will be able to provide the out-of-the-box thinking needed today to protect not just people, but also the planet. The diversity of its membership provides it with a potential treasure trove of alternative ideas on deep ecology and interspecies coexistence. Diving deep into these ideas with global thinkers, the P4M practitioners could develop an updated framework for multilateralism, which may have a chance to reduce the existential risks that affect us all.

P4M matters at a time when multilateralism is under severe pressure. The US, a principal founder and long-time guarantor of the system, is now rejecting it through word and deed

The writer is distinguished fellow at ORF and honorary fellow of Darwin College, University of Cambridge

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• GLOBAL

Signals from Xi Jinping's anti-graft military purge

Sweeping removals, also encompassing command theatres responsible for Taiwan and India, raise questions about the health of China's defence apparatus



RISHIKA SINGH

AT THE conclusion of a four-day closed-door meeting of senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders on Thursday, it was difficult to miss the main messaging — "full and rigorous party self-governance".

Underneath the jargon commonly spotted in official communiques was the goal that CCP General Secretary and Chinese President Xi Jinping has pursued over nearly 15 years in power: ridding the Party of corruption. Of late, however, it has taken the shape of major leaders being removed across key bodies, including military ones.

The meeting, known as the Fifth Plenum, saw a record number of Party members expelled. It also saw the elevation of General Zhang Shengmin into the Politburo, which includes top party leaders.

In January this year, General Zhang Youxia, holding the top rank in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), was purged from the Central Military Commission (CMC) — China's apex military decision-making body, involved in procurement, testing and other key functions. Nearly all of the CMC's top leadership have come under corruption investigations in recent years.

And it's not just the CMC. Suyash Desai, a Non-Resident Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia and an analyst of the Chinese military, told *The Indian Express* that within the PLA, "over 55% of its top leadership (three-star and above) has been purged" to date. The fact that the purge has affected "every section of the PLA" makes it unique in terms of its scale, scope, and nature, he added.

Major gaps

Since Xi assumed power as the general secretary of the CCP in 2012, he has described tackling corruption as a top priority. In fact, his first few years also saw senior military leaders purged, including CMC Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong, who was then the highest-ranking general to ever face a corruption charge. He is serving a life term.

Initially, some analysts in the West saw the campaign as a means for Xi to remove rivals and consolidate power, but over the years, not even his loyalists and appointees have been spared. The campaign has taken the shape of sudden removals and probes.

Defence has increasingly come under focus. Key posts are now vacant *(see chart)* in top bodies, while others have witnessed a churn. Five of the seven CMC positions remain unfilled, and while the political head of defence has historically been part of the body, current Defence Minister Admiral Dong Jun has yet to be made a member. In May, former defence ministers Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu were sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve (later converted to life imprisonment) over graft charges.

Desai said that across the five theatre commands, almost all commanders and commissars (who handle major political responsibilities) have been purged on multiple occasions over the past three years. This also includes the Eastern and Western Theatre Commands, responsible for Taiwan and India, respectively.

Anushka Saxena, a Staff Research Analyst at the Takshashila Institution in Bengaluru who tracks the PLA, also laid out the case of the PLA Rocket Force. Responsible for managing China's conventional and nuclear missiles, the force saw senior leaders removed in 2023.

Saxena termed it the "pillar of China's long-range strategic deterrent and the arm that would open a campaign against Taiwan and threaten US naval vessels". "After former PLARF Commander Li Yuchao was pulled in 2023 and replaced by Wang Houbin, who was parachuted from the Navy, Wang himself was expelled in October 2025... the PLARF has been decapitated twice in barely two years, and no successor commander has surfaced in public since," she told *The Indian Express*.

Why the removals matter

Desai said, "There are direct implications of these purges for military operations and effectiveness... For instance, the PLA's operational textbooks divide the Taiwan contingency scenario into three parts: Joint Strike, Blockade, and Amphibious Landing Operations. The Joint Strike is the first operation led by the PLARF to clear the ground for the invading Chinese forces. However, these purges have set back the PLA's operational effectiveness by a few years."

Saxena added that when seen in relation to the PLA's equipment development ecosystem and the removals at major defence State-Owned Enterprises, it is clear that layers of dishonesty run deep. "The command architecture for a joint operation has been altogether disrupted at the top. That is corrosive to the trust, continuity and rehearsed coordination on which jointness actually depends," she said.

Apart from the military, another senior figure to have been abruptly removed was Qin Gang, the Foreign Affairs Minister who served a tenure of less than a year. His ouster was suspected to be linked to personal reasons, but it again raised questions about Xi's picks.

With his rise, Xi at times elevated officials with links to two major factions in Chinese politics — the so-called Shaanxi and Fujian "gangs". These are the names of the two provinces where Xi has served.

While Zhang Youxia was part of the Shaanxi grouping, other purged CMC members, including He Weidong and Miao Hua, were part of the Fujian gang. Factional rivalries have previously been cited as drivers for the purges.

Yet another probable theory for the sudden revival in purges in the last few years is the question of Taiwan. Several US analysts have argued that Xi wants the PLA to be ready for a potential battle scenario by 2027 — the centenary year of the PLA's founding, and when Xi seeks a record-extending fourth term as general secretary of the CCP next year. Xi has also earlier stated the goal of turning the PLA into a "world-class" military by 2027.

However, Desai was of the view that these theories only made sense up to a certain point: "It is very clear now that the purges are not related to any single contingency, since all theatre commands are affected and all factions are chopped."

The most likely explanation, he said, was corruption. While Xi ordered several rounds of restructuring upon assuming power, the PLA's power base remained intact. "And over the past two tenures before Xi, the PLA gained significant commercial autonomy, making it one of the most corrupt armed forces in the world," Desai said.

It could point to a leader who, despite commanding the top of the leadership as few Chinese leaders have, remains concerned about inefficiencies and how they could affect his — and the party's — standing in a real-world battle.

Saxena noted that while disloyalty might be a worry, paramount concerns may be related to "mediocrity, inefficiency, and graft, which is also important at a time when China is competing with the world's biggest superpower — the US." She pointed out that "a striking share of the CMC-level purge does cluster around a Taiwan-facing network," referring to the Fujian faction. The region is the closest to Taiwan from mainland China.

But, she cautioned, one should avoid a "siloed reading." "It can be both a cleanup before contemplated action and a symptom of rot in the Taiwan mission... And much of the wider churn doesn't map neatly onto just Taiwan."

• GROWING GAPS IN CHINA'S KEY DEFENCE INSTITUTIONS

XI JINPING, PRESIDENT

CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION

Top military decision-making body

5 of 7 seats vacant since Jan. Xi and Zhang Shengmin are its only members.



THEATRE COMMANDS

Five commands for region-based military operations (Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western and Central)

TOP 2 LEADERS in almost every command — commander and political commissar — potentially purged since 2022.

38 OFFICERS at the level of theatre command leader have been dismissed or disappeared.

ONE-THIRD: Size by which the pool of officers who can be promoted to theatre command positions has been cut.

PLA ROCKET FORCE

Responsible for nuclear and ballistic missiles

4 FORMER commanders officially purged since 2023

DEPUTY COMMANDERS, political commissars and other officials have been purged or are being purged.

ONLY 2 APPOINTMENTS officially announced since 2023 — commander **Wang Houbin** and commissar **Xu Xisheng**. Some temporary appointments and elevations have also been made.

SOURCE: CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, OPEN-SOURCE REPORTING

Wide spread

Initially, some analysts in the West saw the campaign as a means for Xi to remove rivals and consolidate power.

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Of late, however, not even his loyalists have been spared. The campaign has taken the shape of sudden removals.

GS 2: POLITY

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• POLICY

Flagship fest ahead, why Nagaland wants permit regime scrapped

Shinjini Ghosh
New Delhi, November 3

THE NAGALAND government has urged the Centre to completely withdraw the Protected Area Permit (PAP) scheme from the state ahead of the state's flagship Hornbill Festival. The festival sees a footfall of over one lakh visitors, including tourists from various countries. This year, it will be held in Kohima between December 1 and 10.

The state claims that the regime and accompanying restrictions hinder investment opportunities, economic growth, and tourist flow to the annual cultural event.

What is the Protected Area Permit (PAP) regime?

Issued by the Government of India, the PAP authorises foreigners to visit states along India's international borders in areas designated centrally as protected or restricted. The PAP regime was initially imposed under the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958 and spans most northeastern states, including Nagaland.

In a bid to boost tourism, PAP was relaxed for Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland in 2011. However, it was reimposed in December 2024, citing security reasons. Since then, the Nagaland government has insisted it be completely withdrawn.

How does PAP differ from ILP, or Inner Line Permit?

Very simply speaking, PAP is meant for foreigners while ILP is meant for Indian citizens. The concept of ILP was introduced during the British era. It separated tribal-populated hill areas in the Northeast from the plains in order to preserve indigenous cultures. To enter and stay in these areas, Indian citizens from other areas need an ILP. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur come under it.

What issues does the Nagaland government have with PAP?

Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio had written to the Union Home Ministry in September seeking a withdrawal of the PAP.

"At a time when states are being encouraged to compete for investments, build international partnerships, promote tourism and contribute to India's global outreach, such restrictions place Nagaland at a distinct disadvantage. A regulation conceived in a very different historical and security environment should not become an impediment to the developmental aspirations of a peaceful state," the letter read.

Rio said that the continued application of the PAP regime was creating "avoidable frustration and a sense of alienation".

Y Patton, Deputy Chief Minister of Nagaland and the state's Home and Border Affairs Minister, told *The Indian Express* that the state government is seeking a complete withdrawal of PAP to facilitate tourism, especially during the Hornbill Festival, which attracts tourists from across the globe.

"We have already discussed the issue with Home Minister Amit Shah, and he has assured us that he will study the matter and get back to us. However, till date we do not have any concrete information. Nagaland is a very small and peaceful state," said Patton.

Former Nagaland Director-General of Police Besesayo Kezo cited bureaucracy and a convoluted application process as obstacles for international tourists that have resulted in a drastic fall in visitors.

"On one hand we are encouraging tourism in Nagaland, and on the other, when people from outside try to visit they are required to get the PAP mandatorily," Kezo told *The Indian Express*. "International tourists have a limited number of days, and they should not get locked up in the bureaucratic process."

Ahead of the Hornbill Festival in 2025, the Centre relaxed PAP restrictions following requests from the Nagaland government. But Rio had written in September that the limited relaxation had little practical benefit. "Foreign visitors plan their journeys... weeks and months in advance. A relaxation announced only around the Festival cannot provide certainty required for international travel planning," he wrote.

Protected Area Permit

- The PAP authorises foreigners to visit states along India's international borders in areas designated centrally as protected or restricted.
- It spans most northeastern states, including Nagaland.

GS 3: ENERGY

INDIAN EXPRESS : PAGE: 15

• POWER

Rooftop solar and grid instability: Lessons for India from Sri Lanka blackout

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, November 3

ON OCTOBER 17, Sri Lanka's national power grid collapsed, plunging the country's 23 million people into darkness for over five hours. As authorities scrambled, the country's power grid operator issued an unusual directive: it asked rooftop solar operators to switch off their systems until further notice.

The directive highlighted the challenges of integrating large volumes of rooftop solar into the power grid. During a similar blackout last year, rooftop solar was identified as a factor. The latest incident has renewed questions about how growing volumes of decentralised solar generation can be managed without compromising grid stability. The issue is relevant for India, too, as it rapidly expands rooftop solar capacity. So, how can rooftop solar affect grid stability?

Sri Lanka's blackout

Sri Lanka's installed power generation capacity comprises 51% renewable energy, with hydropower accounting for 21% of the total, followed by oil-based power plants at 17% and coal at 11%. Rooftop solar makes up 48% of the country's total installed renewable energy capacity, amounting to 2,499 MW.

While the extent to which distributed rooftop solar contributed to the grid failure remains unclear, the preliminary report on the October 17 power system failure, prepared by the operator, has indicated the possible role of "non-dispatchable generation sources" in triggering the disturbance. Non-dispatchable generation sources include renewable energy sources such as rooftop solar and wind power, whose generation depends on weather conditions and cannot be ramped up or down by grid operators as easily as conventional power plants.

The report suggests that a sudden loss of generation from such sources may have triggered the sequence of events that eventually led to the nationwide blackout.

According to the report, the disturbance began at 11:43:29 am. The country's largest coal-based power plant rapidly reduced its net power generation from 187 MW to 5 MW within 450 milliseconds. This was followed by a sharp decline in the grid's frequency — a measure of the balance between electricity supply and demand. Frequency falls when supply suddenly drops below demand.



India is expanding rooftop solar capacity. PTI

The report said this sudden drop might have been caused by the rejection of non-dispatchable generation sources such as rooftop solar connected to the grid at the time. This initial disturbance may then have triggered the disconnection of non-dispatchable generation sources, causing a further loss of supply and accelerating the decline in frequency.

Rooftop solar systems are connected to the grid through inverters, which convert the direct current generated by solar panels into alternating current used by the power system. These inverters have mechanisms that can disconnect the systems if grid voltage or frequency moves outside specified limits. If a large number of rooftop solar systems disconnect simultaneously, the resulting loss of generation can destabilise the grid.

Rooftop solar and grid stability

Rooftop solar systems, particularly their inverters, had also come under scrutiny when Sri Lanka's power grid suffered a similar failure in February 2025.

While it was not identified as the initiating cause, its high penetration and the response of its inverters were found to have contributed to the rapid escalation of the disturbance into a total system failure. A report prepared by the Ceylon Electricity Board found that a fault in a part that collects, carries and distributes high-current electrical power at a substation triggered localised voltage drops. This prompted a large number of rooftop solar inverters to automatically disconnect from the grid.

The sudden loss of rooftop solar generation increased the burden on the conventional power plants. This strained the system and accelerated the frequency decline.

After the 2025 blackout, utilities required rooftop solar inverters to adopt low-voltage and frequency ride-through settings, said Kumar M, CEO of Smart Grid Analytics, which provides grid management solutions to renewable energy operators. The settings allow inverters to stay connected during voltage and frequency disturbances.

Kumar estimated that less than 50% of the installed rooftop solar capacity had adopted these settings. He attributed the gap to older inverters, firmware that could not be updated and weak enforcement.

Challenges for India

India, according to him, has already faced similar grid integration challenges at the utility scale, with the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission recording 68 disturbances in renewable complexes between January 2022 and June 2025, involving generation losses of 1 GW to 7 GW.

He said stricter enforcement had helped reduce such incidents, but managing distributed solar would be the next challenge as India expands rooftop installations.

Kumar said every state should assess how its grid would perform on days when power demand is at its lowest and solar generation is at its highest. This would involve studying how much rooftop solar each local distribution feeder can safely accommodate and simulating how the grid responds to sudden disturbances using combined models of rooftop solar and other distributed resources. States should also determine the impact of the sudden loss of the largest source of electricity supply that the grid may reasonably be expected to withstand.