EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

06-11-2026

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GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
THE HINDU PAGE: 08

A middle power moment in a fragmenting world



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When, early in October, this writer found himself in Berlin, addressing the question of whether this is a "Middle Power moment", just a day after External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had made a speech in Delhi on the same topic, it led to a realisation why this theme has gained renewed salience this year. It began with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney calling, in Davos in January, for the middle powers to collectively address the challenges facing the international system, and persisted with the global recognition that the world is no longer defined solely by the gravitational pull of superpowers, nor by the binary alignments of the Cold War, but by a wider constellation of states. These states neither command the international system nor submit passively to it. Instead, their influence derives from strategic positioning, economic weight, diplomatic agility, and normative ambition.

The middle power profile

Middle powers are not easy to define. They are typically characterised by a combination of attributes: significant regional presence and influence, desire for greater relevance, growing economic capabilities, credible diplomatic networks, and the political will to act beyond their immediate neighbourhoods. They are not "great" powers in the traditional sense, but they possess enough weight to matter in global governance, and enough autonomy to pursue independent strategies. Their influence is exercised less through coercion than through coalition-building, agenda-setting, and the ability to act as bridges between different parts of the international system.

There are many middle powers, and they are not a monolith: India, Brazil, Canada, Egypt, South Africa, Japan, Indonesia, Türkiye, Mexico, and Germany, all exemplify this category, though in different registers. Nor are they the only ones: in different circumstances or in specific areas, South Korea, the Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, Nigeria, even Qatar, might fit the term too. And what about France and the United Kingdom, which sometimes seem to have faded from great powers of the past to middle powers today? Clearly, the definition must remain a loose one. But what binds them all is not uniformity of size or interests but a shared sense that the existing global order neither fully reflects their aspirations nor adequately accommodates their agency. They navigate, negotiate, and increasingly seek to shape a changing world order.

Yet, the institutions created to govern the world have changed far less than the world itself. The United Nations Security Council still looks remarkably like a photograph from 1945, despite the end of empires, the emergence and growth of newly independent nations and profound shifts in economic power. Its legitimacy is weakened both by inadequate representation and by inconsistent adherence to international law. Countries asked to defend a rules-based order are entitled to ask which rules apply to all, and whether the powerful are equally bound by them. Countries excluded from meaningful influence cannot indefinitely accept the existing distribution of authority as sacrosanct. But dismantling institutions would destroy protections they themselves need. The middle powers' task is to make the international order more representative and more credible while preserving its capacity to restrain power and sustain cooperation.

A weakening global order creates opportunities for middle powers to act as stabilisers and sustain international cooperation

The label "Middle Power" therefore captures both capability and intent. It describes countries that are no longer content to be rule-takers but are not yet rule-makers in the classical sense. While middle powers share a desire for a multipolar world, they are increasingly norm-shapers for their own specific camps rather than a unified bloc. They seek a more equitable distribution of voice and influence in global institutions, advocate for reforms in multilateral governance, and often champion issues such as development, climate justice, equitable trade, and technology access that resonate across the Global South. Their diplomacy tends to be pragmatic rather than ideological, multi-vector rather than aligned, and oriented toward preserving strategic autonomy in a world of intensifying great-power rivalry.

Room to act

In today's geopolitical turbulence, with the repositioning of the United States and assertiveness of China and Russia, the possibilities for effective action by middle powers are both expanding and constrained. On the one hand, the erosion of great power consensus, the paralysis of multilateral institutions, and the fragmentation of global supply chains create uncertainty and limit the scope for collective action. On the other, at a moment when the assumptions underpinning post-war international cooperation are being questioned, institutions face growing scepticism, and great-power rivalry turns shared challenges into occasions for competition, space has opened for middle powers to exercise initiative. They view themselves as stakeholders of the global architecture and would surely seek to act, ideally in concert, should there be a further deterioration. They can convene issue-based coalitions, mediate in conflicts where great powers are distrusted, and shape global norms in areas such as digital governance, climate finance, health security, and development cooperation. Their ability to speak simultaneously to the West and the Global South gives them diplomatic leverage that neither superpowers nor smaller states possess.

The last few years have shown that the middle powers are increasingly willing to use this space. India's leadership of the G-20 in 2023, Brazil's stewardship of climate diplomacy, South Africa's activism on global health and vaccine equity, and Germany's efforts to stabilise the European order while engaging the Indo-Pacific, all illustrate the diverse ways in which these states are asserting themselves. They do not always agree with one another, but they share a conviction that the international system must evolve to reflect contemporary realities rather than the power structures of 1945.

The weakening of the post-war international order has created an opening for countries that possess considerable diplomatic, economic or technological influence, but cannot determine the international environment on their own. They have a substantial stake in cooperation and a growing capacity to help shape the world together. Whether that capacity becomes consequential will depend on the partnerships they are prepared to build.

The demand for cooperation

What, then, makes this a "middle power moment"? Certainly more than the desire of several countries to be more important. What is distinctive is the convergence of a weakening institutional order, an unpredictable superpower whose commitment to the international system it itself had created is now in question, the dispersal of economic and technological capabilities, and global rivalries that increasingly prevent the strongest states from leading common endeavours.

The demand for cooperation has grown precisely as the supply of uncontested leadership has diminished. That gap creates an opening for countries with the capacity to act and the ability to bring others with them. This need not exclude the great powers: in fact, the Quad, BRICS, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the International North-South Transport Corridor, all include co-operation between middle powers and established great ones. Of course this varies: India's preference for multi-alignment, pursuing advantageous relationships with multiple partners, clearly reflects the turbulence of the past year or two in its international relations. While Brazil or Indonesia might view China primarily as an economic engine, India's pessimism about Beijing is rooted in tensions over their undefined border that makes relations with the U.S. and Russia a pragmatic necessity. And now the midterm election results in the U.S. have introduced new uncertainties over Washington's posture in world affairs.

Of course, middle powers are more vulnerable than superpowers to economic shocks, which can limit their influence. Their role will not be to replace great powers but to moderate, mediate and innovate – to act as stabilisers in a world where stability is increasingly scarce.

GS 2 & 3: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS and ENVIRONMENT

THE HINDU PAGE: 08

The ecological fallout of Israel's war in Gaza



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On November 5, 2001, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) designated November 6 each year as the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict. This recognition underscores the far-reaching impacts of environmental damage caused by armed conflict, including degradation of ecosystems and resource depletion well after the conflict period. This impact often extends beyond the limits of national territories and affects future generations.

Considering the importance of the issue, the International Law Commission (ILC), in its report titled 'Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts' (PERAC), adopted 27 draft principles in 2022, which were formally noted by the UNGA on December 7, 2022. The overarching purpose of these principles is to enhance the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts. The first principle of the PERAC provides that the principles apply to the protection of the environment before, during and after an armed conflict, including in situations of occupation. In this context, Israel's responsibility for internationally wrongful acts causing environmental harm arises not only from its ongoing genocide in Gaza but also from its continuing role as an occupying power.

The devastation in Gaza

In its report released on September 23, 2025, titled the 'Environmental Impact of the Conflict in the Gaza Strip', the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) documented that two years of escalating hostilities have resulted in unprecedented environmental devastation in Gaza, severely affecting its soils, freshwater resources, and coastline. It says that since 2023, Gaza has lost 97% of its tree crops, 95% of its shrubland, and 82% of its annual crops, leaving its population on the brink of famine.

Freshwater resources are critically scarce, and much of the remaining supply is contaminated.

The destruction of Gaza's ecosystems underscores the need for accountability under international law

The destruction of sewage treatment facilities, piped water systems, and the increasing reliance on cesspits have likely worsened pollution of the aquifer that provides most of Gaza's water. The UNEP further notes that marine and coastal environments are also likely contaminated.

Approximately 78% of Gaza's estimated 2,50,000 buildings have been damaged or destroyed, resulting in around 61 million tonnes of debris. The loss of vegetation cover and soil compaction from military activity have further degraded soil quality, reducing its capacity to absorb water, heightening flood risks, and limiting groundwater recharge. The UNEP report does not capture the full extent of the environmental devastation in Gaza, as the situation continues to deteriorate and statistics are rapidly rendered obsolete amid Israel's ongoing genocidal assault.

Violations of environmental obligations

As an occupying power, Israel is obligated under the PERAC principles to administer and use the natural resources in an Occupied Palestinian Territory (OTP), for the benefit of the protected population of the occupied territory, while ensuring respect for and protection of the environment. It must integrate environmental considerations into the administration of the OTP.

Nevertheless, Israel has engaged in the systematic extraction of natural resources from the OPT and transferred them to itself, resulting in significant environmental degradation; this has been acknowledged by the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion of July 19, 2024, 'Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies And Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem'.

Such practices not only contravene environmental protection obligations but also infringe upon the Palestinian people's collective rights, including their permanent sovereignty over natural resources and their right to self-determination. International law affirms that all peoples, including those under occupation, have permanent sovereignty over natural resources, imposing strict limitations on the actions of occupying powers regarding these natural resources. Yet, Israel's prolonged occupation – characterised by territorial expansion, settlement construction, and systematic resource appropriation – has consistently undermined these foundational principles of international law.

Principle 9 of the PERAC stipulates that a state that commits an internationally wrongful act in relation to an armed conflict, resulting in environmental damage, bears international responsibility and is obligated to provide full reparation for such damage, including damage to the environment itself. Accordingly, Israel bears an obligation under international law to provide full reparation for the environmental destruction it has caused in Gaza – an obligation reaffirmed by the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion of July 19, 2024, 'Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies And Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem'.

The overall picture of occupation

On this International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict, it is critical to acknowledge that the devastation inflicted on Palestine, beginning with the formation of the state of Israel and its ongoing settler-colonial project, constitutes a serious breach of international law. This has become more pronounced since October 7, 2023 when Hamas-led attacks on Israel were followed by Israel's genocidal attack on Gaza.

As Swedish climate activist Andreas Malm aptly observes, the destruction of Palestine is the destruction of the earth. The international community must recognise that climate justice is impossible without dismantling Israel's settler-colonial structure and ensuring the liberation of Palestine.

GS 2& 3:HEALTH and SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Are lower MRPs on cancer drugs translating into affordable care?



Indu Bhushan

Bureaucrat, Economist and the first CEO of Ayushman Bharat



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PARLEY

In a move to make cancer treatment more affordable, the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) has capped trade margins at 30% for 137 non-scheduled anti-cancer drugs, reducing the price of nearly 900 cancer medicine brands by up to 70%-93%. However, for comprehensive cancer care in India, price regulation might not be enough. Are lower MRPs on cancer drugs translating into affordable care? Indu Bhushan and K.M. Gopakumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Bindu Shajan Perappadan**.

After the NPPA's move, the price of one of the drugs has fallen from ₹40,000 to ₹2,720. Does this mean that Indians have been paying inflated prices for these medicines?

Indu Bhushan: The answer is yes, but that would be a simplistic way of looking at the problem. There is certainly considerable scope to rationalise medicine prices. However, we must also understand who benefits from the difference between the supply price and the price paid by the patient. There must be adequate incentives for pharmaceutical companies to invest in Research and Development (R&D), particularly in India, where investment in this area remains low. At the same time, a disproportionate share of the value cannot be captured by traders, intermediaries and, in some cases, hospitals. The savings should either support R&D or reach patients.

K.M. Gopakumar: The price reductions announced by the NPPA are impressive, but the numbers need to be examined carefully. Of the 1,024 brands in the list we analysed, nearly 45.4% recorded price reductions of more than 50%. Around 19.6% saw reductions exceeding 70%, while 0.8% registered cuts of more than 90%. However, these percentages can be misleading. The absolute value of the reduction matters. Only 16.5% of the brands recorded reductions of more than ₹10,000. The frequently cited example of Palbociclib, the price of which fell from approximately ₹40,000 to ₹2,720, relates to just one brand. There were already 767 other brands available in the market in the price range of ₹2,800 to ₹9,000. Similarly, in the case of Enzalutamide, one company's price fell from ₹3.14 lakh to ₹1.17 lakh, although several other companies were already supplying the medicine at substantially lower prices.

This points to the exploitation of patients over the years. Hospitals have considerable bargaining power because of bulk purchases. However, instead of negotiating lower procurement prices, they benefit from medicines being sold at high MRPs, allowing them to capture substantial margins. India regulates sectors such as telecommunications and electricity, but there is no comparable mechanism to regulate healthcare charges.



GETTY IMAGES

Several patented cancer drugs and immunotherapies still remain prohibitively expensive. Is India addressing the real problem of affordability or merely correcting excessive margins?

KMG: The limitations become evident when we examine the medicines whose prices have not changed. Of 1,024 brands, nearly 194 brands recorded no price reduction. Their prices range from over ₹1 lakh to as much as ₹10 lakh. Ribociclib, a breast cancer medicine, is an example. It was subject to trade margin rationalisation in 2019, yet its MRP has not changed under the present exercise. Pembrolizumab, an important medicine used in cancer treatment and designated an essential medicine by the World Health Organization, is another example where the intervention has not delivered a price reduction. The exercise therefore exposes the limitations of trade margin rationalisation. It has not ensured affordable access to newer treatments.

There is also a danger that uniform trade margins could discourage hospitals from stocking cheaper generic brands. A 30% margin on a medicine priced at ₹8,000 gives a hospital a greater return than a 30% margin on one priced at ₹2,000. This could undermine the generic medicine business model, where affordability and higher volumes are central to competition.

IB: We should avoid a blanket approach towards patented medicines. Developing new medicines requires substantial resources, and pharmaceutical companies must have an opportunity to recover their investments for future R&D. But patients must also be protected from overcharging. Regulators, including the Union Health Ministry and State health departments, must ensure that patients receive the most appropriate and affordable treatment without compromising on quality. Before prescribing a branded medicine, the first question should be whether an effective and quality-assured generic alternative is available.

> Developing new medicines requires substantial resources, and pharmaceutical companies must have an opportunity to recover their investments for future R&D. But patients must also be protected from overcharging
>
> INDU BHUSHAN

What independent mechanism should be put in place to verify prices across stockists, manufacturers, hospitals and pharmacies?

IB: The government has a legitimate role in addressing this because healthcare is a market with several failures, particularly the asymmetry of information between providers and patients. A cancer patient often has very little choice. The treatment is largely determined by doctors and healthcare providers, and patients are not necessarily in a position to question the medicines prescribed or their prices. The government must act as an honest broker and obtain reliable information from the industry.

KMG: Every actor in the healthcare supply chain must be accountable, from pharmaceutical manufacturers to stockists, retailers and hospitals. The NPPA has powers under the Essential Commodities Act and can use notifications to require companies to disclose prices and regulate margins across the supply chain. We do not necessarily need a new law to initiate these measures. The government must also develop its own independent pharmaceutical pricing database rather than depending on private agencies for information.

Cancer treatment also involves diagnostics, surgery, travel and follow-up care. Are existing health insurance schemes adequate?

IB: The cost of treatment varies depending on the type and stage of cancer, the treatment protocol, the location and whether the patient goes to a public or private hospital. One study estimates the median expenditure on cancer treatment at approximately ₹4.1 lakh. Of this, around ₹3.3 lakh, or nearly 80%, is paid out of pocket by patients.

Schemes such as Ayushman Bharat and State government health insurance programmes are therefore important. The ₹5 lakh coverage under Ayushman Bharat is a significant starting point, although it may not be sufficient for every cancer patient. Some States have extended financial support through Chief Minister's relief funds and other assistance mechanisms. We must strengthen public-sector cancer treatment capacity. Most advanced cancer services are currently concentrated in the private sector.

KMG: A Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health report in 2022 noted that nearly 40% of cancer patients borrow money or pledge assets to finance treatment. The tools to extend lives are available, but they remain unaffordable for many. In high-income countries, around 90% of women diagnosed with breast cancer survive for at least five years. In India, the corresponding figure is approximately 65.5%. Insurance coverage also remains fragmented. Existing schemes frequently cover only parts of the treatment rather than guaranteeing comprehensive care.

What should India's next policy intervention be to address the cancer burden?

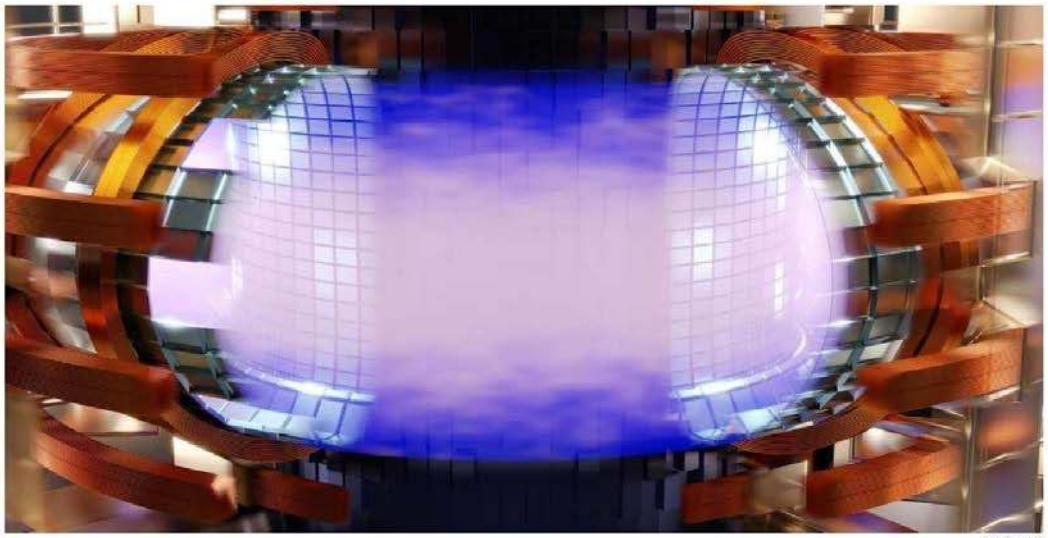
IB: India needs a dedicated national mission for cancer prevention, treatment and care. A cancer mission should strengthen public healthcare facilities, establish standard treatment protocols for different cancers and create systems for second opinions. Drug price regulation must also be expanded intelligently. Strategic pooled procurement by government institutions and health schemes could help negotiate lower prices. Different government agencies currently procure medicines separately.

KMG: The government should introduce cost-based caps on cancer treatment, linked to standard treatment protocols. India has the manufacturing capacity to produce generic medicines at competitive prices. Public procurement can further reduce costs. There must also be greater transparency about the actual cost of pharmaceutical R&D and the revenues companies earn from their products. The ultimate objective must be to ensure that a cancer diagnosis does not push an Indian family into poverty. Reducing the price of medicines is only one part of that responsibility.

To listen to the full interview **Scan the code or go to the link** www.thehindu.com

GS 3:SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
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BUILDING BLOCKS



GETTY IMAGES

How do tokamaks work to make nuclear fusion possible?

A tokamak uses magnetic fields to confine superhot plasma to enable nuclear fusion; despite advances in research, engineering challenges remain, and no tokamak has generated net energy for commercial power

Jacob Koshy

A tokamak is a device that uses magnetic fields to trap very hot plasma inside a ring-shaped vacuum chamber. Plasma, a fourth state of matter, is a gas whose atoms have been stripped of their electrons, leaving free electrons and charged nuclei. The word comes from a Russian acronym describing a toroidal (ring-shaped) chamber with magnetic coils. The best-known fusion energy project in the world, the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), uses this design.

What problem does tokamak solve?
Nuclear energy today comes almost entirely from fission, the controlled chain reaction of uranium atoms, but fusion has always been theoretically possible and a subject of consistent long-term investigation by scientists. When light atomic nuclei such as deuterium and tritium, two isotopes of hydrogen and the best-studied candidates, join, they form helium and a fast neutron. But even this simple merger requires temperatures hotter than the sun's core, which no earthly material can contain. In physics, this is called the problem of containment. Contact with a wall would also cool the plasma and contaminate it with impurities. Plasma, being made of charged particles, can be steered by magnetic fields, and a tokamak uses that property to hold it away from the walls long enough for fusion to occur.

Who first conceived it?
The concept was developed in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s, largely credited to physicists Igor Tamm and Andrei Sakharov.

Experimental work followed at the Kurchatov Institute in Moscow, where the first machines operated in the late 1950s and, once word of its potential spread, it was adopted in research programmes in several universities.

Why is it shaped the way it is?
Charged particles in a magnetic field spiral around the field lines. In a straight tube, they would simply travel along the lines and escape through the ends, but bending the tube into a closed ring removes the ends, making the field lines loop back on themselves.

A ring alone does not work, however. The field from coils around a ring is stronger on the inner side than on the outer, which makes ions and electrons drift in opposite directions, up and down. This creates an electric field that pushes the whole plasma outwards into the wall.

The tokamak gets around this by driving a large electric current through the plasma itself, typically induced by a central magnet acting like a transformer. This current produces a second magnetic field that twists the field lines into a helix around the ring. Particles following a twisted line spend time at both the top and the bottom, which cancels the drift. A tokamak therefore combines two fields: one running around the ring, from external coils, and a twisting one from the plasma current. Additional coils shape and position the plasma.

How does all this create useful energy?
The plasma is kept away from the walls, but the energy it releases is not. In fact, the design depends on that energy reaching them. In a deuterium-tritium reaction, about 80% of the 17.6 MeV (million electron-volts) released goes to the neutron and about 20% to the helium nucleus (alpha particle). A kilogram of this fuel would release about 3.4×10^{14} J if fully fused, roughly 10 million times the energy in the same quantity of coal.

In a power plant design, the inner wall is backed by a thick layer called a blanket. The neutrons slow down in it and deposit their energy as heat, much as in a fission reactor's core. A coolant, such as water or helium, carries the heat out to make steam and spin a turbine, as in a conventional power plant. The blanket also contains lithium. Neutrons striking lithium produce tritium, which is rare and radioactive, so a plant would breed its own fuel this way.

Why haven't tokamaks so far produced the energy?
The principles are well understood, but the engineering challenges are formidable. ITER is funded and run by seven members – China, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States – representing more than 30 countries. It has been plagued by delays over funding, and its projected costs, which were €5 billion in 2005, have increased at least fourfold.

ITER has not been switched on. It is still being assembled at Cadarache in France, so it has had no chance to succeed or fail. It is designed to produce about ten times the heating power fed into its plasma, but only once it begins deuterium-tritium operation. Deadlines are constantly shifting. In 2024, the project moved the start of research operations to 2034 and deuterium-tritium operation to 2039, adding about €5 billion in costs. Officials attributed this to the Covid-19 pandemic, supply-chain and quality problems, and "over-optimistic planning" for a first-of-a-kind machine. Even when it runs, ITER is a physics experiment and will not convert heat into electricity.

What about China?
China's EAST tokamak in Hefei sustained a high-confinement plasma for 1,066 seconds in January 2025, a record for duration, with electron temperatures of about 100 million degrees. In January 2026, it reported running at plasma densities well above a long-standing empirical limit. EAST is a physics machine, though, and has not generated net energy.

How many tokamaks does India have?
The two main machines are at the Institute for Plasma Research (IPR) in Gandhinagar. ADITYA, India's first tokamak, began operating in 1989 and was rebuilt as ADITYA-U, which resumed operations in 2017. SST-1, the Steady State Superconducting Tokamak, produced its first plasma in 2013 and uses superconducting magnets. India is also a member of ITER and manufactures components for it. Bengaluru-based Pranos Fusion has unveiled PRAGYA, which it describes as India's first privately developed compact tokamak. The experimental machine is intended to develop capabilities in plasma control and magnetic confinement, rather than generate commercial electricity.

Are there alternatives?
Fusion research broadly follows two approaches: magnetic confinement, which includes tokamaks, and inertial confinement.

Stellarators also use a ring, but create the twisted field entirely with complex external coils rather than a plasma current. This allows steadier operation and avoids some instabilities, but the coils are harder to design and build. Germany's Wendelstein 7-X is the best-known example.

Inertial confinement, which doesn't use tokamaks at all, compresses a tiny fuel pellet with lasers or other beams so quickly that fusion occurs before the fuel can fly apart. The U.S. National Ignition Facility used this approach in 2022 to claim the production of "net energy." Other magnetic designs include mirror machines, which use open-ended fields, and compact configurations such as field-reversed configurations that have no central hole.

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India's time will come. For now, it is a middle power in a bi-multipolar world



SANJAYA BARU

FROM HIS debating days at Jawaharlal Nehru University, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has had a knack for wit and repartee. Not surprisingly, therefore, when he found a European interlocutor wondering whether India, like all European powers, was a "middle power", not a Big Power like the United States and China, Jaishankar was quick to respond with a clever one-liner — we are a "power in the middle".

The rapid rise of China over the past two decades and the slowing down of the Indian growth process over the past decade have raised new questions about India's place in the world. Economic status alone does not define either power or influence in world affairs. But it matters. It was not a happenstance that the view of India within the international community began to change at the turn of the century when the economy began to perform better and India's skills in the then new field of information technology were globally sought after.

Recall the fact that the Goldman Sachs report on emerging economies, clubbing India with China, Brazil and Russia, the famous BRIC report, was published in 2001. In the same year, the influential American foreign affairs analyst, Stephen P Cohen, published his book *India: Emerging Power*. Through the first decade of this century, several such books were published overseas and in India. The Japanese diplomat Hiroshi Hirabayashi went to the extent of titling his book *India: The Last Super Power*. By 2007 an India sceptic like Singapore's founder-mentor Lee Kuan Yew referred to China and India as "two engines" that would power the rise of Asia.

What made the difference? Clearly, the increase in India's long-term growth from 3.5 per cent in 1950-80 to 6.0 per cent in 1980-2010, with a peak of over 8.0 per cent growth achieved during 2003-2010, made the world look at India with new eyes. India was beginning to show the potential to catch up with East Asian Tigers and the then rapidly rising China. The economy also demonstrated the capability to survive economic sanctions imposed by the US, Japan and other US allies in 1998 after the country conducted nuclear weapons tests and made public her nuclear power capability.

Conscious of the impact of economic performance on the country's power status, the strategic affairs guru, K Subrahmanyam, tasked me to write a paper for the National Security Advisory Board in 2000 that was eventually published as "Strategic Consequences of India's Economic Performance". The strategic affairs community recognised that strong economic performance is key to India's global status.

There was, to be sure, a time when the world did view a poorer India as a "great power" because of what it had come to represent as the first post-colonial, democratic nation in the developing world. India's support for anti-colonial movements and record as a plural, secular democracy imparted a global stature that was not yet warranted by economic performance. In the long run, however, economic performance and capability matter.

Developments over the past decade have contributed to the present scepticism about India's global status. First, the non-fulfilment of the exaggerated claims made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi about India's place in the world. Not only did Modi claim an ideological pre-eminence for India as a "*vishwaguru*", he also made premature claims on economic performance by stating that by 2020 national income would be $5 trillion. Last year, his officialdom rushed to claim that India was now the third largest economy, when in fact it is still the sixth largest.

> At one time, the world did view a poorer India as a 'great power' — as the first post-colonial, democratic nation in the developing world.

As a purely political slogan in a contentious democracy, one can understand such claims. However, these claims were then buttressed by books and conferences that may well have made the PM believe that he was prescient in his declamations. Senior officials, scholars and journalists joined the bandwagon. Many westerners worried about the rise of China went along with the narrative in the hope that India would join the West in standing up to China. India's decision to join the Quad and enhance military engagement with the US added to such expectations.

The problem is that, between 2010 and 2025, not only did China's economy take off, à la W W Rostow, but China emerged as a knowledge power with advanced capabilities in science and technology. On the other hand, the BJP's obsession with electoral dominance at home and the unleashing of bigotry, majoritarianism and antediluvianism have combined to damage the narrative of India's rise.

The fact that economic growth rate has not been able to significantly rise above the long-term average of around 6.0 per cent only affirmed the view that India's emergence as a Big Power will take more time. It is now evident that Modi's other slogan about a Viksit Bharat by 2047 is also tall talk since the economy would have to grow well above 8.0 per cent per annum over the next decade for that goal to be met.

There is in fact no harm in conceding that in the foreseeable future we will remain a "middle power". Our time will come but effort is required. Meanwhile, it is India's status as a middle power and a developing country that will in fact empower its voice in world affairs. Even to get elected to the UNSC, a diplomatic objective that Jaishankar has been tasked to meet, it is an India that speaks for the weak that will fetch the votes. Not an India that desperately courts the powerful.

In the foreseeable future, the global balance of power system is best seen as a "bi-multipolar" system, with the US and China as the two dominant powers with global reach and several other middle powers defining the many ends of a multipolar power structure. In this system, there is no point in India pretending to be a third big power. It is best to build alliances with other middle powers including Russia, the EU, the UK, Japan, Brazil, South Africa and other like-minded countries.

Both the US and China pose a challenge for India. Neither is an option in dealing with the other. Neither can be weaponised against the other. Ensuring stability in relations with both should remain a priority in the present phase of bi-multipolarity.

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GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12



AUDREY DMELLO

A Zero FIR is a good provision, but it must be extended to every procedure where the victim is required to attend thereafter. The state must issue clear directions that ensure survivors receive support at their doorstep

One of the National Commission for Women, Vijaya K Rahatkar, described the Zero FIR as one of the new criminal laws' most progressive provisions. Under Section 173 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), a woman can walk into the nearest police station to get her FIR registered, regardless of where the offence has taken place. In her words, it "places accessibility before technicalities".

It was the 2013 Justice Verma Committee, constituted in the aftermath of the December 2012 gangrape, that first recommended the recording of Zero FIRs in cases of sexual violence.

Since then, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has issued several advisories stating that an FIR must be registered irrespective of territorial jurisdiction and that refusal to do so will result in prosecution and disciplinary action against the police officer.

Yet, even today, police remain resistant to filing Zero FIRs. It takes painful persuasion and reiteration of the law to convince them to do so. But what happens immediately after a Zero FIR is filed? Accessibility ends and the ordeal of the victim begins. The FIR is transferred to the police station with jurisdiction, and every procedure thereafter is done in that jurisdiction.

Take the case of Mitra (name changed), a 15-year-old orphan, who lives in one of the poorest Mumbai slums. Mitra lives with her two brothers, one 18 and the other 13. Her elder brother does delivery work to support the family. None of the siblings has attended school since their father died four years ago.

Mitra was taken by her friend to Raigad district, where she was brutally raped and beaten. When she missed her periods, she shared her ordeal with a local NGO. With great difficulty, we filed a Zero FIR at a police station near her home. The next day, the case was transferred to Raigad, and the police insisted that Mitra travel to Raigad, a four-hour journey each way from her home, for the procedure. We explained to them Mitra's vulnerabilities — her pregnancy, her motion sickness, her younger brother being home alone, the loss of wages for her elder brother — but they refused to budge. They even threatened us with severe action if we

Mitra and her elder brother were forced to travel several times to Raigad at their own cost. They were made to wait for hours for spot identification, panchnama, Mitra's medical examination — which took a few days — the recording of her statement before a magistrate, and production before the Child Welfare Committee.

We had spoken to the government hospital near her home for the medical termination of Mitra's pregnancy, but the police refused.

Eventually Mitra was admitted to a shelter in Raigad. To conduct her MTP, Mitra was admitted to a hospital where she spent almost 20 days with no clear information on when the procedure would begin. The child victim was not informed who her support person was.

Her elder brother was made to run from pillar to post simply to meet her. For the past one-and-a-half months, the police have repeatedly called him to the Raigad police station and court. Mitra has not yet been granted the Maharashtra victim compensation, even though interim compensation is meant to reach her within seven days.

A Zero FIR is a good provision, but it must be extended to every procedure where the victim is required to attend thereafter.

To make the Zero FIR truly accessible, the state must issue clear, enforceable directions that ensure survivors receive support at their doorstep. Two suggestions come to mind: In the case of a Zero FIR, as far as possible, the medical examination, magistrate statement recording, Production before the Child Welfare Committee and shelter placement should be arranged near the survivor's place of residence, and if a survivor must be called to another district, the state must provide transport, not only for her but for a family member or support person accompanying her.

The measure of a progressive law is how it treats a victim after she finds the courage to speak. If reporting rape costs a family its income, safety and stability, it's not surprising that families choose silence.

The writer is director, Majlis, a legal centre for women and children

GS 2: POLITY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 13

In clean-up of voter lists, why not use Aadhaar as disinfectant?



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

THERE ARE 16.3 crore adults (18+ years) in Uttar Pradesh. This is not just an estimate on paper. These are real people whose biometrics, photographs and addresses are registered in the Aadhaar database. (UIDAI, 'Aadhaar saturation report', 2026)

Some of these 16.3 crore may have died, may be living abroad or are foreign citizens. But these are a tiny fraction of the total, according to UIDAI. So, roughly 16 crore adults in UP are entitled to vote.

Yet only 13.4 crore people in UP are on the electoral rolls published by the Election Commission of India (ECI) after its Special Intensive Revision (SIR). That is, nearly 3 crore adults (18 per cent) are missing from the electoral rolls.

Aadhaar is a live database of real people, most of whom use their Aadhaar to collect MGNREGA wages, operate bank accounts, buy rations and so on. It is also biometrically de-duplicated, so no one person can be registered twice under different names, photographs or addresses. Contrast that with the electoral rolls, where one Brazilian model's photo appeared against 22 voters in Haryana.

Sure, many of these adults may have migrated to other states for work but are still registered in UP. But the EC allows such migrants to stay on the voter rolls of their home state. And where one's Aadhaar is registered in one state and one's vote in another, the two should even out in a national count.

Even after allowing for every exception, UP is missing 2.5-3 crore voters (15-18 per cent of its adults). The question then becomes — is this deliberate, targeted exclusion by the SIR, or simply adults who don't bother to register because voting is not compulsory in India?



ILLUSTRATION: VIKAS AGARWAL

Yogendra Yadav and Jean Drèze argue it is the former, while economist Surjit Bhalla says it is the latter. This is the crux of four long articles between them in this paper.

If this were just voter apathy, as Bhalla argues, then such apathy should be roughly similar across states, allowing for some variation in political awareness. It is not. In the 14 large states that have completed the SIR, which together account for 70 per cent of all of India's adults, the "apathy" factor ranges from 7 per cent to 21 per cent. Can apathy towards voting really vary threefold within one nation? Bhalla's "apathy" explanation is unconvincing.

I analysed the count of Aadhaar adults (18+ years) with post-SIR count of enrolled voters in 14 states — Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Odisha, Keralam, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Goa — using official data from UIDAI and EC.

This is the first such article to compare "Aadhaarised" adults with enrolled voters because until now, all arguments have been based on population counted by Census 2011 (too dated) or projected population estimates from the report of the Technical Group of the government (an estimate). Aadhaar is a register of real people, each enrolled with fingerprints and iris scans and biometrically de-duplicated, far more credible and authentic.

The analysis threw up four curious findings.

One: Across these 14 states, 9 crore adults are on Aadhaar's servers but missing from the ECI's rolls. For numerical context, this is akin to the entire nation of Germany being excluded from the electoral rolls of all of Europe.

Two: The share of missing voters ranges from 21 per cent in Goa and 19 per cent in Punjab and Uttarakhand to 7 per cent in Odisha and Tamil Nadu. Are Goans and Punjabis three times more apathetic about elections than Odias and Tamils? Obviously, a factious question.

Three: Why are missing voters highest in exactly the states that vote next? Goa, Punjab, Uttarakhand and UP top this table of missing voters, and all four go to the polls in early 2027. If anything, an upcoming election should inspire more people to register, not fewer. Can this really be dismissed as mere coincidence or is it indicative of something more devious?

Four: If inter-state migration can explain this gap between Aadhaar adults and enrolled voters, then "receiving" states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Gujarat should have more voters than "Aadhaarised" adults. None does. If a worker from Gorakhpur has moved to Chennai semi-permanently for work, the combined Aadhaar and voter data of UP and Tamil Nadu should account for her. They do not. And Bihar, India's great exporter of labour, should top the table of missing voters. It is near the bottom. Clearly, inter-state migration cannot explain the missing voters.

All this raises another simple question — if the stated intent of the SIR is to clean up voter lists, why not use Aadhaar as the disinfectant? The Narendra Modi government claims Aadhaar-enabled direct benefit transfers have saved a whopping Rs 5 lakh crore (over $50bn) by weeding out ghost, duplicate and fake beneficiaries. If Aadhaar is good enough to save $50bn for the nation by removing ghosts, then surely it is good enough to purify the nation's electoral rolls? The argument that foreign citizens can get Aadhaar and so it cannot be used to clean voter rolls is fallacious. Every Aadhaar holder need not be a voter but every voter is an Aadhaar holder.

In fact, in March 2025, the ECI itself announced that it would link voter IDs with Aadhaar to weed out duplicates and ghosts. The opposition parties supported the move. Three months later, much to everyone's surprise, the ECI suddenly announced the SIR instead, abandoning the Aadhaar linkage proposal.

Suffice it to say, all is not well with the SIR, in idea or in implementation. It raises more questions than it answers. No amount of data obfuscation or statistical jugglery can justify 9 crore adults missing from the rolls of just 14 states. The ECI under Gyanesh Kumar is, at best, incompetent and, at worst, malevolent. Either way, he has to go.

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GS 2: HEALTH

INDIAN EXPRESS : PAGE: 18

• HEALTH

Why India's rejection of a TB drug patent matters

India has the world's highest TB burden. The decision could open the door to competition and lower costs for BPaL, a shorter treatment regime



ANURADHA MASCARENHAS

THE INDIAN Patent Office's rejection of a patent application for a combination of three tuberculosis (TB) medicines — bedaquiline, pretomanid and linezolid, collectively known as BPaL — has been welcomed by experts as a major step towards making treatment for drug-resistant TB more affordable and accessible.

The application was filed by the US-based Global Alliance for TB Drug Development (TB Alliance). Its rejection means that the company cannot use this particular patent application to claim exclusive rights over the combination in India. This could allow more manufacturers to produce the medicines, encouraging competition and potentially bringing down prices.

The decision follows two formal objections, known as pre-grant oppositions, filed in 2020. Such oppositions allow individuals or organisations to challenge a patent application before it is granted. The first was filed by Eldred Tellis of Sankalp Rehabilitation Trust and Ganesh Acharya, with support from the Lawyers' Collective and Médécins Sans Frontières Access Campaign. The second was filed by the Delhi Network of Positive People (DNP+), with support from Third World Network.

Experts say rejecting the patent application is only one part of the larger effort. The key task is to ensure that every patient who is medically eligible can access the shorter treatment regimen through the national TB programme. India has the world's largest TB burden, accounting for nearly a quarter of all cases globally. India's TB incidence rate was 187 cases per 100,000 people in 2024.

What is BPaL?

It is a six-month, all-oral treatment regimen recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for eligible patients with drug-resistant TB. It combines three medicines: bedaquiline (B), pretomanid (Pa) and linezolid (L). A related regimen, BPaLM, adds a fourth medicine, moxifloxacin (M). The BPaLM regimen recorded a treatment success rate of 89%, compared with 52-75% for standard regimens. More than 15,000 patients have already started BPaLM treatment under India's national TB programme.

How does the ruling help patients?

It removes one potential legal barrier to competition among manufacturers of the BPaL combination. However, the ruling does not automatically make treatment cheaper or guarantee that medicines will become available everywhere. That will depend on the number of quality-assured suppliers, government procurement arrangements and uninterrupted supplies.

"The ruling is an opportunity to improve access to affordable treatment for drug-resistant TB. It does not approve a new medicine or change treatment guidelines," says Dr Vikas Oswal, pulmonologist and former National Technical expert member of the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme. "With this rejection, every bedaquiline-related patent application that was challenged in India has been refused. These include the bedaquiline salt form (2023), the paediatric formulation (2024), the long-acting injectable and now the BPaL combination. No single company can claim exclusive rights over this regimen in India and any TB drug manufacturer can produce it for the Indian programme and export," said Leena Menghaney, a public health policy expert.

Pratibha Sivasubramanian, senior researcher with Third World Network, feels the ruling acknowledges patients' fight against frivolous and secondary patents on known medicines. "In short, the evergreening of patents on important TB medicines," she said. Evergreening refers to attempts to extend a company's period of patent protection by seeking additional patents for minor changes or new formulations of an existing medicine. Patient groups have argued that such practices can delay competition from generic manufacturers.

Will TB treatment become cheaper?

For patients, the importance of shorter treatment goes beyond the number of medicines they take. "Only those who have been treated for TB know what it feels like to go through more than a year of antibiotics with painful injections. Access to a shorter, oral and effective treatment can mean returning to work and rebuilding their lives," Loon Gangte from the Delhi Network of Positive People (DNP+) said.

The potential savings, however, need to be understood in context. Patients receiving drug-resistant TB treatment through the public health system already get their medicines free of cost. Therefore, the main financial benefit of lower drug prices would initially accrue to the government, which purchases medicines for the national programme. Menghaney said generic competition had already helped reduce the cost of treatment following the rejection of the patent on bedaquiline fumarate salt in India. "A six-month BPaLM course now costs $284 down from $588 in 2022," Menghaney said. In simple terms, if the government can purchase each treatment course at a lower price, the same budget could potentially cover treatment for more patients. Greater competition could also make supplies more dependable by reducing reliance on a few manufacturers.

Will cheaper generic drugs become available soon? What steps remain?

The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation, India's drug regulator, has approved bedaquiline and pretomanid for use under the National TB Elimination Programme (NTEP). Linezolid and moxifloxacin are older antibiotics that are now being used as part of treatment for drug-resistant TB. The most important step, according to Menghaney, is for the government to scale up BPaL/BPaLM to every eligible patient diagnosed with rifampicin-resistant TB.

However, the rejection of the patent application should not be mistaken for automatic permission to sell the combination without restrictions. Patent approval and drug regulatory approval are two different processes. A patent determines whether a company can claim exclusive rights over an invention, while drug regulators assess whether a medicine can be marketed and used under specified conditions. In India, access to these regimens is linked to the national TB programme and its treatment standards. Similarly, WHO prequalification — a measure of whether a medicine meets international standards of quality, safety and efficacy — doesn't replace the marketing permissions from Indian regulators.

Could cheaper generic medicines compromise quality or safety?

Generic medicines contain the same active pharmaceutical ingredients as the corresponding reference medicines and are expected to meet regulatory standards. Quality checks should continue even as more manufacturers enter the market.

• A SHORTER, ECONOMICAL COURSE

WHAT IS BPaL?

It is a six-month, all-oral treatment regimen recommended by the WHO for eligible patients with drug-resistant TB.

WHO STANDS TO BENEFIT MOST FROM THE PATENT RULING?

The biggest potential beneficiaries are patients with multidrug-resistant or rifampicin-resistant TB, particularly those who face financial difficulties, delays in starting treatment or problems reaching treatment centres.



WHY BPaL WORKS

Unlike older regimens, which could involve taking antibiotics for many months and sometimes receiving painful injections, BPaL-based treatment offers a shorter course using oral medicines. This can reduce the physical, financial and emotional toll on patients.

Potential savings

Patients getting drug-resistant TB treatment through the public health system already get medicines free of cost.

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If govt can buy each treatment course at a lower price, the same budget could potentially cover treatment for more patients.