

● POLITY

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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

REVANTH SWORN IN AS
TTELANGANA CM

CONTEXT: Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan administered the oath of office to Mr. Reddy, in the presence of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and other leaders, including Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.

As soon as he took charge, Mr. Reddy signed two files: the first to implement the six welfare measures promised by the Congress during its campaign, and the second to provide a job to T. Rajini, a person with a disability to whom Mr. Reddy had



promised employment while on campaign trail. The outgoing Congress Legislature Party leader Mallu Bhatti Vikaramarka took oath as the Deputy Chief Minister, along with 10 others chosen to be part of the Council of Ministers.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

CENTRE ANNOUNCES
₹1,500-CR. AID TO T.N. AND A.P.
AFTER CYCLONE WREAKS
HAVOC

CONTEXT: The Union government on Thursday released ₹493.60 crore to Andhra Pradesh and ₹450 crore to Tamil Nadu in the wake of the damage inflicted by severe cyclonic storm Michaung this week.

The Centre approved another tranche of ₹561.29 crore for Chennai for flood mitigation efforts.

Help for Chennai

The Centre has approved the first urban flood mitigation project of ₹561.29 crore for 'Integrated Urban Flood Management activities for Chennai Basin Project' under the National Disaster Mitigation Fund (NDMF), which also includes Central assistance of ₹500 crore. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to release in advance the Central share of the second instalment of State Disaster Response Fund "of ₹493.60 crore to Andhra Pradesh and ₹450 crore to Tamil Nadu".

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PANNUN 'ASSASSINATION PLOT' LIKELY TO BE AT TOP OF FBI CHIEF'S AGENDA ON INDIA VISIT NEXT WEEK

CONTEXT: The U.S. indictment of an Indian national for an assassination plot against wanted Khalistani separatist Gurbatwant Singh Pannun, allegedly directed by an Indian government official, is likely to be at the top of the agenda as the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Christopher Wray travels to India next week.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) indictment that was published last week, an unnamed but identified senior Indian government intelligence official had recruited an Indian national Nikhil Gupta, who is involved in the illicit narcotics and arms trade, to hire a hitman in the U.S. for the targeting of Khalistani separatists in the U.S. and Canada. The Ministry of External Affairs has not denied the charges, but announced the constitution of a high-level enquiry and asserted that such operations are "not government policy". Both Pannun and Nijjar have been on the Home Ministry's list of terrorists under the UAPA.

Mr. Wray, whose visit was announced by U.S. Ambassador Eric Garcetti at an event on Wednesday night, will visit Delhi a few days after U.S. Principal Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer, who discussed India's decision to set up a high-level inquiry into the case. The announcement of the FBI chief's trip came just as a U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing got under way on 'Transnational repression: Authoritarians targeting dissenters abroad'.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

CENTRE DIRECTS SUGAR MILLS, DISTILLERIES NOT TO USE CANE JUICE, SYRUP TO MAKE ETHANOL



CONTEXT: The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution on Thursday directed sugar mills and distilleries not to use sugarcane juice or syrup to produce ethanol in the ethanol year 2023-2024.

In a communication to MD and CEOs of sugar mills and distilleries, the Ministry said the direction is with "immediate effect." The "supply of ethanol from existing offers received by OMCs (Oil Marketing Companies) from B-Heavy molasses will continue. The Department of Food and Public Distribution monitors production, sale and stock of sugar in India to ensure sufficient availability for local consumption at stable prices by implementing the Sugar (Control) Order.

Sufficient stock

This move will ensure there is sufficient sugar in the country to meet domestic consumption demand, in light of lower sugar production in the country. This is an important step taken by the government, prioritising food over fuel. Going forward, it will be important to see how the ethanol blending target is fulfilled in the current season, with ethanol supplied mainly from B heavy molasses, broken rice and maize.

The Indian Sugar Mills Association said it was gathering more details. Industry sources said this will ensure adequate supply of sugar in the domestic market as sugarcane production is affected in States such as Maharashtra and Karnataka. But, it is also likely to impact the ethanol blending programme. The country is looking at 20% ethanol blending by 2025-2026 ethanol year. Ethanol is produced from sugarcane juice and molasses. There are several investments in units to produce only ethanol. Such units are likely to be affected, the sources added.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

RBI'S MPC MAY REJIG GROWTH, INFLATION MATH



CONTEXT: Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das, who will outline the Monetary Policy Committee's decisions on Friday, is expected to convey a continuation of the central bank's hawkish stance with a pause on interest rates, but may reset growth and

inflation projections for 2023-24 in view of the second quarter growth numbers and food inflation worries.

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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

NO FAIT ACCOMPLI

CONTEXT: It has been more than five and a half years since an elected government collapsed and Governor's rule was imposed in Jammu & Kashmir amidst the suspension of the elected Assembly — a step that heralded dramatic changes in the erstwhile State.

Subsequently, Article 370 that provided for special status for the erstwhile State was removed, the State bifurcated with the region encompassing Jammu and the Kashmir Valley made into a new Union Territory and Ladakh hived off into another. The constitutionality of these changes is still under question and the Supreme Court has reserved its verdict on it. But this has not deterred the Union government from bringing about legislation that will change the make-up of the UT's prospective Legislative Assembly beyond the completion of the delimitation exercise. On Wednesday, the Lok Sabha passed the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Bill, 2023 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023. These Bills do not necessarily bring about any significant change. The first increases the total number of Assembly seats from 107 to 114, with reservation of nine seats for Scheduled Tribes (a first), besides empowering the Lieutenant-Governor to effect some nominations. The second seeks to replace the term "weak and underprivileged classes (social castes)" in the J&K Reservation Act, 2004, enacted by the State legislature, to "Other Backward Classes" as declared by the UT.

Propriety would have demanded that even these changes could have waited for the Supreme Court's verdict, which is due soon, on the legality of the abrogation of special status besides the bifurcation of the erstwhile State and the procedure adopted to do so. Without the involvement of elected representatives from J&K in the process, the changes proposed in the Lok Sabha would only seem to be acts that are presented as fait accompli to the UT's citizens. This should also be taken together with the fact that the last five and a half years have seen the suspension of political and civil liberties of politicians; arbitrary arrests and detentions; communication shutdowns; a chilling effect on the media; and, more recently, long power cuts. Any change to the political life of J&K, citing its status as a region affected by separatism and terrorism, should not be done in a way that the citizens feel alienated. The first order of business in J&K has to be the restoration of the democratic process by holding popular elections and the restoration of its Statehood. This should help not just fill a glaring void in public life in the region in the immediate but also set the stage for addressing the long-pending issues that have led to the persistence of militancy.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

GAZA IN FLAMES

CONTEXT: Two months after Israel launched its attack on Gaza following Hamas's October 7 cross-border raid in which some 1,200 Israelis were killed, the tiny Palestinian enclave, with razed buildings, a maze of rubble and unprecedented human suffering, looks battered beyond repair. But the war is far from over.

Over 1.7 million of Gaza's 2.3 million people have been forced out of their homes; some 16,000 Palestinians have been killed, and tens of thousands more wounded. Israel has taken over parts of northern Gaza and pushed its population towards the south. And now, the Israeli forces are expanding the offensive towards the south, particularly targeting Khan Younis, a city of 4,00,000 people in normal times that has seen its population more than double since the war. The widening offensive has displaced more Gazans who are now forced into a sliver of territory in Rafah, on the Egyptian border. Israel, which has witnessed mounting international criticism, seems unfazed by the unfolding humanitarian tragedy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says Israel will continue the war until its goals are met — primarily the dismantling of Hamas.

When Israel stormed the al-Shifa hospital in northern Gaza, its claim was that a Hamas command centre was located in underground bunkers. Weeks after raiding the enclave's largest medical facility, Israel is yet to provide any proof that it was a command centre. Now, the IDF claims that top Hamas leaders, including Yahya Sinwar, are based in southern Gaza.

The U.S. continues to send aid to Israel and President Joe Biden still refuses to call for a ceasefire. The violence has already triggered regional tensions with Hezbollah firing rockets into Israel and the latter retaliating, and the Houthis of Yemen launching drones and missiles towards Israel, which are mostly being intercepted by American systems. An end to the violence in Gaza has become imperative for regional stability. Israel is unlikely to pause the offensive on its own. But the U.S. and other major regional powers should press Israel and Hamas to restart negotiations to find a lasting ceasefire and the release of hostages.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

INDIA'S GROWING NEIGHBOURHOOD DILEMMAS

CONTEXT: : Neighbourhoods are difficult for any major power, but contemporary India is faced with an exceptionally hard one, complicated by a rising superpower in its neighbourhood, for the first time in its history.

New Delhi's dilemmas, the causes

In general, there are three types of dilemmas that India faces in the neighbourhood. One, the rise of politically anti-India regimes in South Asia such as the one in the Maldives where the new government is effectively asking Indians to pack up and leave. While the Maldives is anti-India in an instrumental sense, a Khaleda Zia-led government in Dhaka, which goes to the elections early next year, could turn out to be ideologically anti-India. The second type of dilemma India faces in the neighbourhood is structural, resulting from Beijing's growing influence in South Asia.

Three things stand out. The growing entanglement of the region's smaller states in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other Chinese projects. Beijing's assiduous outreach to South Asian states when the rest of the international community abandons or avoids them for normative or other reasons — as was the case with Taliban-led Afghanistan, military-ruled Myanmar and crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India does too, but the overall impact of China's outreach is far higher than that of India primarily as a function of deeper pockets. Finally, China's desire to settle border disputes with its neighbours (minus India), as seen in the case of Bhutan, is also a strategy to win over the region.

The net result, or one that could potentially develop overtime, is somewhat alarming. If we do not take innovative measures, there is a good chance that we will be geopolitically locked in within an unfriendly South Asia. This may well be a case of overstating the point, but is to lay emphasis on a potential future scenario.

There are three broad sets of causes behind the dilemmas India faces in the neighbourhood. The first is the regional geopolitical architecture characterised by five overlapping elements. Contemporary South Asia is characterised by a diminishing presence of the United States, which, for a long time, was a geopolitical constant in the region. For New Delhi, Washington's presence in South Asia was not always advantageous, but its departure is definitely disadvantageous, in particular given how China has filled the power vacuum created by Washington's departure. The aggressive and stupendous rise of China has come as a 'geopolitical buffer', at least for now, for the smaller states in the region which have become adept at using the 'China card' in their foreign policy assertions. While our neighbours are keen to practise strategic autonomy with us, there is little appetite to do so vis-à-vis China.

Third, in one of the least interconnected regions in the world, and poor, it is natural that the inhabitants of the region will tilt towards a power with the ability to cater to their material

needs. With India's ability to meet those needs being limited, China is that power. Fourth, India, for the most part, has had a normative and political approach towards the region, with the states in the region acquiescing, rebelling, and falling in line given the absence of choices. Beijing has changed that India-centric calculus by offering itself as the no-frills non-normative alternative. For the first time in modern South Asian history, the region is a 'norms-free-zone'.

Finally, for much of its independent existence, New Delhi enjoyed unrivalled primacy in the region. Today, the downside of being the resident power in South Asia — with all its attendant cultural, ethnic, refugee and other spillovers — is felt more sharply than being the primary power. China, on the other hand, is the region's non-resident power which benefits from the absence of complications — ethnic, linguistic, religious — arising out of being a resident power.

The second cause behind India's regional dilemma is related to its policy stance which exhibits a deep-seated status quo bias when it comes to dealing with the region's domestic politics and the multiplicity of actors/power centres therein. Dealing only with, for the most part, those in power in the regional capitals, elected or otherwise, is perhaps the right thing to do as well as less risky. However, such a one-track policy generates path-dependencies often alienating other centres of power or opposition leaders. Bangladesh is perhaps one such example.

Furthermore, India's dilemmas are also caused by two mistaken assumptions that we have long held. For one, there has, for some time, been a strong belief in India that South Asia minus Pakistan would be amenable to Indian geopolitical reasoning which prompted an attempt to deal proactively with South Asia without Pakistan. However, in retrospect, one has to admit that this policy has not exactly panned out that way India imagined. The second (mistaken) assumption that New Delhi approached the neighbourhood with was that India's special relationship with the region rooted in culture, soft power, history and ethnicity would help the country deal with the neighbourhood better than those without intimate knowledge of the region, namely China. Has India's culture-connect with its neighbours indeed become a liability in the conduct of foreign policy towards them?

What can be done

To begin with, it is time India made a mental switch and acknowledged that South Asia and its balance of power have changed fundamentally. Old South Asia where India enjoyed primacy no longer exists. 'Southern Asia' which has pretty much replaced South Asia is a space where China has emerged as a serious contender for regional primacy. India's neighbours and periphery are China's too, even if we do not like it. Such a realistic and pragmatic framing would help India deal with the reality as it is rather than working with the mental frame of Indian primacy which is long gone.

Second, New Delhi must proactively pursue the involvement of friendly external actors in the region. That is the only way to deal with the impending possibility of the region becoming Sino-centric.

Third, Indian diplomacy must be flexible enough to engage multiple actors in each of the neighbouring countries. The art of diplomacy is not about hating the anti-India elements in the neighbourhood, but, instead, lessening their anti-India attitude. In a similar vein, dealing with whoever is in power is a good policy, but engaging only those in power is bad policy.

Finally, here is the highlighting of an issue that has been spoken of ad nauseum — India needs more hands for its diplomatic pursuits. The glaring shortage of sufficient diplomats to implement the foreign policy of a country of 1.4 billion people will prove to be India's single most crucial challenge going forward. The more India's role in world affairs grows, the more the shortage of personnel will be felt by us and others. If the current state of affairs continues, there will be no one to show up with the Indian flag when opportunities beckon or crises emerge.

INTERNAL SECURITY

REGULATING DEEPFAKES AND AI IN INDIA

CONTEXT: Deepfakes are digital media, video, audio, and images, edited and manipulated using Artificial Intelligence (AI). Since they incorporate hyper-realistic digital falsification, they can potentially be used to damage reputations and undermine trust in democratic institutions.

Have deepfakes been used in politics?

Back in 2020, in the first-ever use of AI-generated deepfakes in political campaigns, a series of videos of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Manoj Tiwari were circulated on multiple WhatsApp groups. The videos showed Mr. Tiwari hurling allegations against his political opponent Arvind Kejriwal in English and Haryanvi, before Delhi elections. In a similar incident, a doctored video of Madhya Pradesh Congress chief Kamal Nath recently went viral, creating confusion over the future of the State government's Laadli Behna Scheme.

Other countries are also grappling with the dangerous consequences of rapidly evolving AI technology. In May last year, a deepfake of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy asking his countrymen to lay down their weapons went viral after cybercriminals hacked into a Ukrainian television channel.

How did deepfake tech emerge?

Deepfakes are made using technologies such as AI and machine learning, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Although they have benefits in education, film production, criminal forensics, and artistic expression, they can also be used to exploit people, sabotage elections and spread large-scale misinformation. While editing tools, like Photoshop, have been in use for decades, the first-ever use of deepfake technology can reportedly be traced back to a Reddit user who in 2017 had used a publicly available AI-driven software to create pornographic content by imposing the faces of celebrities on to the bodies of ordinary people.

Now, deepfakes can easily be generated by semi-skilled and unskilled individuals by morphing audio-visual clips and images. As such technology becomes harder to detect, more resources are now accessible to equip individuals against their misuse. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) created a Detect Fakes website to help people identify deepfakes by focusing on small intricate details. The use of deepfakes to perpetrate online gendered violence has also been a rising concern. A 2019 study conducted by AI firm Deeptrace found that a staggering 96% of deepfakes were pornographic, and 99% of them involved women. Highlighting how deepfakes are being weaponised against women, Apar Gupta, founding director of Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) says, "Romantic partners utilise deepfake technology to shame women who have spurned their advances causing them psychological trauma in addition to the social sanction that they are bound to suffer."

What are the laws against the misuse of deepfakes?

India lacks specific laws to address deepfakes and AI-related crimes, but provisions under a plethora of legislations could offer both civil and criminal relief. For instance, Section 66E of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) is applicable in cases of deepfake crimes that involve the capture, publication, or transmission of a person's images in mass media thereby violating their privacy. Such an offence is punishable with up to three years of imprisonment or a fine of two lakh. Further, Sections 67, 67A, and 67B of the IT Act can be used to prosecute individuals for publishing or transmitting deepfakes that are obscene or contain sexually explicit acts. The IT Rules, also prohibit hosting 'any content that impersonates another person' and require social media platforms to quickly take down 'artificially morphed images' of individuals when alerted. In case they fail to take down such content, they risk losing the 'safe harbour' protection — a provision that protects social media companies from regulatory liability for third-party content shared by users on their platforms.

Provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) can also be resorted for cybercrimes associated with deepfakes — Sections 509 (words, gestures, or acts intended to insult the modesty of a woman), 499 (criminal defamation), and 153 (a) and (b) (spreading hate on communal lines) among others. The Delhi Police Special Cell has reportedly registered an FIR against unknown persons by invoking Sections 465 (forgery) and 469 (forgery to harm the reputation of a party) in the Mandanna case.

Is there a legal vacuum?

"The existing laws are not really adequate given the fact that they were never sort of designed keeping in mind these emerging technologies," says Shehnaz Ahmed, fintech lead at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy in Delhi. She, however, cautions that bringing about piecemeal legislative amendments is not the solution. "There is sort of a moral panic today which has emanated from these recent high profile cases, but we seem to be losing focus from the bigger question — what should be India's regulatory approach on emerging

technologies like AI?”, she says. She highlights that such a regulatory framework must be based on a market study that assesses the different kinds of harm perpetrated by AI technology.

Pointing out a lacuna in the IT Rules, she says that it only addresses instances wherein the illegal content has already been uploaded and the resultant harm has been suffered; instead, there has to be more focus on preventive measures, for instance, making users aware that they are looking at a morphed image.

Agreeing that there is a need to revamp the existing laws, Mr. Gupta points out that the current regulations only focus on either online takedowns or criminal prosecution but lack a deeper understanding of how generative AI technology works and the wide range of harm that it can cause. “The laws place the entire burden on the victim to file a complaint. For many, the experience that they have with the local police stations is less than satisfactory in terms of their investigation, or the perpetrator facing any kind of penalty,” he asserts.

What has been the Centre’s response?

The Union Minister of Electronics and Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw on November 23 chaired a meeting with social media platforms, AI companies, and industry bodies where he acknowledged that “a new crisis is emerging due to deepfakes” and that “there is a very big section of society which does not have a parallel verification system” to tackle this issue. He also announced that the government will introduce draft regulations, which will be open to public consultation, within the next 10 days to address the issue.

However, the Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) Rajeev Chandrasekhar has maintained that the existing laws are adequate to deal with deepfakes if enforced strictly. He said that a special officer will be appointed to closely monitor any violations and that an

online platform will also be set up to assist aggrieved users and citizens in filing FIRs for deepfake crimes. Mr. Gupta points out, “The advisory issued by the MeitY does not mean anything, it does not have the force of law. It is essentially to show some degree of responsiveness, given that there is a moral panic around generative AI sparked by the Rashmika Mandanna viral clip. It does not account for the fact that deepfakes may not be distributed only on social media platforms.”

How have other countries fared?

In October 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden signed a far-reaching executive order on AI to manage its risks, ranging from national security to privacy. Additionally, the DEEP FAKES Accountability Bill, 2023, recently introduced in Congress requires creators to label deepfakes on online platforms and to provide notifications of alterations to a video or other content. Failing to label such ‘malicious deepfakes’ would invite criminal sanction. The European Union (EU) has strengthened its Code of Practice on Disinformation to ensure that social media giants like Google, Meta, and Twitter start flagging deepfake content or potentially face fines. Further, under the proposed EU AI Act, deepfake providers would be subject to transparency and disclosure requirements.

What next?

According to Mr. Gupta, AI governance in India cannot be restricted to just a law and reforms have to be centred around establishing standards of safety, increasing awareness, and institution building. “AI also provides benefits so you have to assimilate it in a way that improves human welfare on every metric while limiting the challenges it imposes,” he says. Ms. Ahmed points out that India’s regulatory response cannot be a replica of laws in other jurisdictions such as China, the US, or the EU. “We also have to keep in mind the Indian context which is that our economy is still sort of developing. We have a young and thriving startup eco-system and therefore any sort of legislative response cannot be so stringent that it impedes innovation” she says.



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