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Trust deficits and regional conflicts hinder South Asian economic integration. Analyze how these political obstacles impede the full implementation of trade agreements and impact India's regional leadership role.

Introduction

Despite shared geography, culture, and history, South Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions. Political tensions and trust deficits have systematically undermined regional trade cooperation and India's leadership ambitions.

South Asia's Economic Integration Deficit

1. **Low Intra-Regional Trade Despite SAFTA:** South Asia's intra-regional trade stands at only 5-7% of its total trade, compared to 22% in ASEAN and 45% in the EU. This indicates deep underutilization of regional trade potential despite the SAFTA agreement.
2. **Massive Gap Between Actual and Potential Trade:** According to UNESCAP, South Asia's actual trade value is around \$23 billion, while the potential is estimated at \$67 billion — or even \$172 billion under gravity models — leaving over 86% untapped.

Political Tensions and Trust Deficits

1. **Persistent India-Pakistan Tensions:** Political hostility and security concerns have severely restricted bilateral trade. Trade fell from \$2.41 billion in 2018 to just \$1.2 billion in 2024, reflecting the impact of unresolved disputes.
2. **High Cost of Trading in the Region:** Intra-South Asian trade costs are 114% of goods' value — higher than even with distant partners like the U.S. (109%). This undermines regional competitiveness and deters value chain formation.

High Trade Costs and Structural Barriers

1. **Failure to Leverage Geographic Proximity:** It is 20% costlier for India to trade with Pakistan than with Brazil, which is 22 times farther away. This highlights how political frictions defeat the natural economic advantages of proximity.
2. **Absence of Political Will and Strategic Vision:** Most SAARC countries face internal and external conflicts, ethnic issues, or political instability, which overshadow the economic agenda and delay the full implementation of SAFTA.

Impact on India's Regional Leadership

1. **Regional Rivalries Deter Policy Cooperation:** Mutual suspicion between major players like India and Pakistan, and concerns among smaller countries about India's dominance, hinder efforts to deepen trade and integration.
2. **India's Regional Leadership Is Undermined:** India's aspiration to be a regional and global leader is weakened when it cannot foster consensus and cooperation in its immediate neighborhood. This affects its credibility in forums like G20, BRICS, and SCO.

3. **China's Expanding Influence Complicates Integration:** China's Belt and Road Initiative has made inroads in South Asia, challenging India's leadership. Projects like CPEC in Pakistan and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka are examples of shifting regional alignments.

4. **Missed Opportunity for Shared Prosperity:** Lack of integration restricts economies of scale, innovation, and employment. It also blocks opportunities for regional value chains, digital connectivity, and collective development goals.

Way Forward

1. **Reviving SAARC** with confidence-building measures, separating trade from political tensions.
2. Promote **cross-border infrastructure**, digital trade, and **mutual recognition agreements (MRAs)** to reduce non-tariff barriers.
3. India must **adopt a cooperative, not coercive**, leadership style — echoing "**neighborhood first**" policy.
4. Leverage **BIMSTEC and BBIN frameworks** for subregional progress while keeping SAARC viable.

Conclusion

Trust deficits and political tensions stifle South Asian trade integration, undermining SAFTA's potential. Resolving these issues is essential for regional prosperity and for India to assert effective and inclusive regional leadership.

Food processing drives grassroots transformation through its evolving innovation ecosystem. Analyze its role in industrial growth, enhancing rural incomes, and strengthening agricultural value chains for India's economic development.

Introduction

India's food processing sector acts as a transformative force, integrating agriculture with industry. It fuels industrial expansion, uplifts rural incomes, and fortifies agri-value chains—thus becoming pivotal to sustainable economic growth.

Body

Role in Industrial Growth

1. **Expanding Market Size:** The gross value addition (GVA) of the sector grew from ₹1.34 lakh crore in 2014 to ₹2.24 lakh crore by 2023–24, driven by institutional support and private investment.
2. **Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme:** With ₹8,900 crore committed, it has created over 3.3 lakh jobs and added 67 lakh metric tonnes of processing capacity.
3. **Startup Ecosystem:** Over 5,000 food-tech startups are innovating in AI-driven traceability, plant-based foods, and sustainable packaging, fueling industrial diversification.
4. **Export Contribution:** India's agricultural and processed food exports reached \$41.5 billion in 2022–23, enhancing global competitiveness and industrial footprint.

Enhancing Rural Incomes

1. **Micro-Enterprise Boost via PMFME:** Over 1.41 lakh loans worth ₹11,205 crore and seed capital to 3.3 lakh SHG members have empowered rural entrepreneurs.
2. **Skill Development:** 1 lakh+ individuals trained; 75 incubation centres established, enabling grassroots innovation.
3. **Women-led Enterprises:** Rural women in Bihar (makhana snacks) and Bastar (Mahua products) have leveraged food processing for income diversification and empowerment.
4. **Brand Development:** 17 regional brands like Saral and Shahi Litchi have helped farmers and artisans access new markets and premium pricing.

Strengthening Agricultural Value Chains

1. **Reducing Post-Harvest Losses:** Estimated at ₹92,000 crore annually (ICAR), post-harvest losses are mitigated by cold chains, preservation units, and irradiation centres.
2. **Infrastructure Development:** The Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMPADA Yojana has created 250 lakh metric tonnes of annual preservation capacity through 1,600+ sanctioned projects.
3. **Linking Farm to Fork:** Formalization and value addition bridge the gap between farm output and consumer demand, stabilizing prices and boosting profitability for farmers.
4. **Improving Quality and Safety:** 100 NABL-accredited food testing labs and upcoming irradiation units ensure safety and market readiness, especially for exports.

Conclusion

Food processing catalyzes inclusive economic development by industrializing agriculture, boosting rural livelihoods, and building resilient value chains. It is vital for India's aspiration of becoming a global food powerhouse.

De-escalation in West Asia is crucial for global stability amidst widening rifts. Analyze its implications for multilateralism, international peace, and how it shapes India's strategic interests in the region.

Introduction

West Asia's volatility poses grave threats to global peace, energy security, and economic stability. De-escalation is essential not just for regional calm, but for sustaining multilateralism and India's long-term strategic calculus.

Body

Implications for Multilateralism and International Norms

1. **Erosion of International Law:** Pre-emptive strikes by Israel and U.S. on Iranian nuclear facilities violate sovereignty norms, setting dangerous precedents for unilateral action.
2. **Selective Multilateralism:** Institutions like the UN Security Council remain paralysed due to geopolitical alignments, weakening their credibility as neutral arbitrators.
3. **Global Hypocrisy in De-escalation Appeals:** The world's call for "de-escalation" often ignores the power asymmetry between aggressor and aggrieved, blurring accountability—mirrored in how India was asked to de-escalate post-Pulwama (2019).
4. **Undermining NPT Framework:** With Iran cornered and Israel remaining the region's sole undeclared nuclear power, the relevance of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) suffers a strategic blow.

Impact on Global Peace and Economic Stability

1. **Oil Market Volatility:** Any blockade of the Strait of Hormuz—through which a fifth of global oil passes—would destabilise international energy markets, with India especially vulnerable as 54% of its oil comes from the Gulf.
2. **Potential Spillovers:** Missile strikes on U.S. bases in Qatar and Iraq signal an expanded war theatre, risking conflict spillover into other fragile regions like Yemen, Syria, and even Afghanistan.
3. **Humanitarian Consequences:** With 56,000 Palestinians killed in Gaza (as per independent observers), Israel's actions deepen regional resentment, radicalisation, and undermine peace prospects.

India's Strategic Interests and Foreign Policy Dilemma

1. **Energy and Diaspora Concerns:** With over 8 million Indians in West Asia and 40% of remittances sourced from the region, India's economic and human security are directly tied to regional stability.
2. **Chabahar and INSTC:** India's \$85 million investment in Iran's Chabahar Port—strategically vital for connectivity to Central Asia and Afghanistan—faces risk amid U.S.-Iran tensions.
3. **Balancing Act:** India maintains robust defence and tech ties with Israel (e.g., Barak missiles, Heron drones) while supporting Iran in connectivity and energy security, reflecting a complex diplomacy.
4. **Muted Diplomacy:** India's cautious "de-escalation" stance reflects its strategic need to avoid alienating any regional bloc, similar to its neutral position on the Russia-Ukraine war, showcasing issue-based multipolar diplomacy.

Future Outlook and Global Role

1. **Opportunity for Leadership:** As a member of BRICS, SCO, and G-20, India can push for peace platforms and revival of the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal), enhancing its credibility as a peace broker.
2. **Defence Preparedness:** Increased volatility underscores India's need for diversified energy imports, strategic reserves, and enhanced maritime security along its extended neighbourhood.

Conclusion

De-escalation in West Asia is vital to prevent wider conflicts, uphold international norms, and safeguard India's strategic and economic interests. A balanced, proactive diplomacy is India's best long-term approach.

"Despite gains in grassroots politics, women's representation in urban bureaucracy lags. Analyze the governance challenges hindering gender equity in administration and its implications for inclusive urban development and effective public service delivery."

Introduction

India's urban governance is undergoing rapid evolution, yet the underrepresentation of women in bureaucracy persists. Bridging this gender gap is vital for equitable, inclusive city planning and effective public service delivery.

Body

Progress in Political Representation, But Bureaucratic Disparity Remains

1. The **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** ensured 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), extended to **50%** in many states.
2. **Women now constitute 46%** of elected local representatives (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2024).
3. However, in bureaucracy, **women are just 20%** of IAS officers (IndiaSpend, 2022), and only **11.7%** of the police force (BPRD, 2023), with lower presence in urban planning and transport roles.

Governance Challenges Hindering Gender Equity in Bureaucracy

1. **Recruitment and Promotion Biases:** Cultural stereotypes, lack of mentorship, and male-dominated networks limit career progression for women in technical and administrative roles.
2. **Hostile Work Environments:** Urban institutions often lack gender-sensitive infrastructure like childcare support, flexible work hours, and grievance redressal mechanisms.
3. **Gendered Division of Labour:** Women officers are often restricted to “soft” roles like welfare and education, limiting influence in planning, policing, and engineering.
4. **Urban Patriarchy in Policy Space:** Despite policies promoting gender equity, structural biases in institutions perpetuate male-centric planning and governance.

Implications for Urban Development and Service Delivery

1. **Mismatch in Policy Priorities:** Urban projects often ignore gendered mobility and safety needs. For instance, **84% of women** in Delhi and Mumbai use public/shared transport vs. **63% of men** (ITDP & Safetipin).
2. **Neglect of Neighbourhood-Level Infrastructure:** Focus remains on mega-projects over essentials like street lighting, safe pedestrian pathways, and childcare centres.
3. **Poor Gender Budgeting Outcomes:** While India adopted a Gender Budget Statement in 2005-06, GRB remains **underutilized** and **tokenistic** at the ULB level (UN-Women, NIPFP).
4. **Safety Gaps:** Low women representation in police forces weakens initiatives aimed at tackling gender-based violence in public spaces.

Global Best Practices for Inclusive Bureaucracies

1. **Philippines:** Mandates 5% of local budgets for gender equity programs; uses gender tagging for all public expenditures.
2. **Rwanda:** Gender-balanced leadership increased investment in maternal health and primary education.
3. **South Korea:** Gender impact assessments transformed urban mobility planning and transit infrastructure.
4. **Mexico and South Africa:** Link GRB to results-based and participatory planning, improving responsiveness to women's needs.

Policy Solutions for India

1. **Affirmative Action in Technical Cadres:** Quotas, scholarships, and training for women in urban planning, engineering, and municipal governance.
2. **Strengthening Gender Budgeting:** Institutionalize GRB across all ULBs with monitoring, audits, and public disclosure.
3. **Local Gender Equity Councils:** Use models like **Kudumbashree (Kerala)** to promote community-led planning and female economic participation.

4. **Capacity Building and Mentorship:** Regular training programs and leadership fellowships for women administrators to ascend higher decision-making levels.

Conclusion

Gender equity in urban bureaucracy is essential for inclusive, citizen-centric development. Empowering women administrators ensures cities are not just built for women—but are also shaped by them.

The 'Axis of Upheaval' in West Asia challenges Cold War-era power blocs. Analyze how this complex reality impacts the global order and shapes India's non-aligned foreign policy approach in a multipolar world.

Introduction

The emerging “Axis of Upheaval” in West Asia, lacking formal alliances yet pursuing strategic autonomy, reflects a shift from Cold War bipolarity to multipolar fluidity, prompting recalibration of India’s foreign policy.

Body

Disintegration of Traditional Power Blocs

1. Unlike Cold War-era blocs (e.g., NATO vs. Warsaw Pact), today’s alignments—such as the Iran-Russia-China trio—are **non-binding and interest-driven**, lacking **formal military treaties**.
2. Iran’s isolation after Israeli and U.S. strikes in 2025, despite “strategic partnerships” with Russia and China, shows the **limits of informal axes**.
3. **BRICS and SCO**, while supportive diplomatically, have not intervened militarily—highlighting that **economic and institutional ties** do not translate to **security guarantees**.

Implications for the Global Order

1. This axis highlights a **fracturing world order** with a contest between **U.S.-led hegemony** and emerging powers demanding **de-dollarisation** and new multilateral institutions (e.g., expansion of BRICS, promotion of local currencies).
2. Russia’s inability to assist Iran due to its entanglement in Ukraine, and China’s silence despite its energy dependence on Iran, reflect **strategic pragmatism over ideological alignment**.
3. The **realpolitik** nature of modern alignments implies **flexible, interest-based coalitions** replacing rigid, treaty-bound blocs.

Strategic Calculations of China and Russia

1. China continues to **import oil from Iran**, supporting its economy under sanctions, but refrains from **military entanglement**, preserving its trade ties with the West.
2. Russia’s **preoccupation with Ukraine** and the **loss of military bases** in Syria after regime change, limits its ability to project power in West Asia.
3. Both powers **gain geopolitically** by watching the U.S. stretch itself thin between the **Indo-Pacific, Ukraine, and West Asia**, potentially weakening its dominance.

Impact on India’s Foreign Policy

1. India follows a **non-aligned but multi-aligned approach**, maintaining **strategic partnerships with the U.S., Israel, Iran, and Russia**.
2. India's **balancing act**: abstaining on UN resolutions critical of Israel, while continuing infrastructure partnerships with Iran (e.g., **Chabahar Port**), and maintaining energy ties with Gulf states.
3. The **Ceasefire in West Asia** and collapse of the "Axis of Resistance" shows the necessity of India's **strategic autonomy**, allowing flexibility amid shifting power centers.
4. India's cautious calls for "**de-escalation**" rather than judgment demonstrate a **mature neutrality**, vital in safeguarding its **diaspora, energy interests**, and regional connectivity ambitions (e.g., **INSTC**).

India's Role in a Multipolar World

1. India's emphasis on **rule-based order, sovereignty, and peaceful diplomacy** aligns with the **Global South's aspirations**.
2. India's leadership in forums like **G20 (2023 Presidency)** and **BRICS+** positions it as a **bridge-builder** in turbulent regions, not a bloc loyalist.
3. As the geopolitical centre shifts, India's ability to **engage across ideological lines** without deep entanglement provides diplomatic **strategic space and leverage**.

Conclusion

Enabling voting rights for inter/intra-State migrants through combined options is crucial for inclusive democracy. Analyze the constitutional, logistical, and social justice implications of such electoral reforms in India.

Introduction

Migrants, despite being key contributors to India's economy, often remain disenfranchised. Enabling their voting rights is vital for deepening democratic inclusion, upholding constitutional values, and strengthening social and political equity.

Constitutional Implications: The Right to Vote and Equality

1. **Article 326 of the Constitution** guarantees universal adult suffrage, yet millions of internal migrants are effectively excluded due to mobility and documentation issues.
2. **Article 14 (Right to Equality)** and **Article 19(1)(e) (Freedom of Movement)** further affirm that all citizens, irrespective of migration status, deserve equal access to electoral participation.
3. Denial of voting due to migration violates the spirit of **free and fair elections**, a basic feature of the Constitution affirmed in *Indira Nehru Gandhi vs. Raj Narain (1975)*.

Logistical Challenges and Innovations

1. **Scale of Migration**: As per the 2011 Census, India has over 45 crore internal migrants, with a 28.9% migration rate in 2021 (NSSO). Many are seasonal, circular, or semi-permanent migrants.
2. **Low Turnout in Migrant-Heavy States**: Bihar's 56% turnout in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, below the national average, points to disenfranchisement due to out-migration.

Proposed Solutions:

1. **Remote Voting Machines (RVMS):** Piloted in 2023, capable of catering to up to 72 constituencies per machine. Though politically and administratively contentious, it remains a promising innovation.
2. **Postal Ballots:** Already extended to service voters, this option can be scaled to informal sector migrants with improved verification and delivery systems.
3. **Constituency Transfer for Long-Term Migrants:** Simplifying enrolment at destination locations, especially for settled migrants, can integrate them better into local governance.
4. **Ensuring Poll-Day Leave:** For intra-state migrants, strict enforcement of paid leave and subsidised transport could increase participation.

Social Justice and Democratic Equity

1. Migrants, particularly those in **informal and precarious jobs**, are among the most **politically vulnerable**. Their inability to vote perpetuates economic and political marginalisation.
2. **Gender Dimension:** A large portion of female migration is due to marriage. Enrolling women at their marital residence can increase female political agency, addressing another layer of exclusion.
3. **Empowering the Margins:** Voting empowers migrants to demand policies on **housing, health, labour protections**, and **minimum wage compliance**, bridging the rural-urban divide in governance.
4. Countries like **South Africa** and **Indonesia** have successfully implemented **mobile or advance voting options** for internal migrants—providing templates for scalable solutions in India.

Political and Electoral Reforms

1. The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** must institutionalise a **composite mechanism** involving a mix of technology, legal reforms, and political will.
2. Coordination with **Labour Departments, state governments**, and **civil society organisations** can facilitate migrant registration, information dissemination, and voter awareness.
3. **Voter Portability**, akin to Aadhaar-linked services, can be explored as a long-term goal.

Conclusion

Facilitating migrant voting strengthens constitutional democracy and ensures political inclusion. A multi-pronged, inclusive strategy is essential to protect electoral rights and deepen democratic participation for all citizens.

The high prevalence of zero-dose children, especially among the poor, reflects critical gaps in India's vaccination efforts. Analyze the socio-economic and governance challenges hindering universal immunization and suggest policy reforms for equitable health outcomes.

Introduction

Despite India's vast immunization infrastructure, the persistence of zero-dose children among the poorest reflects systemic inequities. Addressing socio-economic barriers and governance bottlenecks is essential to achieving universal immunization goals.

Magnitude of the Problem

1. According to The Lancet (2024), India had **1.44 million zero-dose children** in 2023 — second only globally — accounting for **6.2%** of the 23 million annual births.
2. India is among the eight countries that comprise over **50% of global zero-dose children**.
3. This marks a reversal from earlier progress: India reduced zero-dose prevalence from **33.4% in 1992 to 10.1% in 2016**, yet COVID-19 disruptions caused a spike to 2.7 million in 2021 before partially recovering.

Socio-Economic Challenges

1. **Poverty and Maternal Education:** A majority of zero-dose children belong to **poor households**, especially those with **low maternal literacy**. Poor families often prioritize daily subsistence over health-seeking behavior due to **opportunity costs** and wage loss.
2. **Marginalized Communities:** Zero-dose prevalence remains high among **Scheduled Tribes (STs)**, **Muslims**, and **migrant families**, especially in **urban slums** and **remote tribal belts**. States with the highest burden include **Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat**.
3. **Geographical and Infrastructural Gaps:** Immunization coverage is low in **Northeast India** (e.g., Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh) due to **difficult terrain**, poor connectivity, and understaffed health facilities.
4. **Vaccine Hesitancy and Misinformation:** Cultural and religious hesitations — particularly in **Muslim-dominated households** — remain a major barrier despite outreach efforts. Misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic further eroded trust in vaccines.

Governance and Programmatic Challenges

1. **Underutilization of Mission Indradhanush:** While **Mission Indradhanush** aimed to achieve 90% full immunization, its progress has been uneven and **coverage stagnated at around 76%** as per NFHS-5 (2019–21).
2. **Fragmented Urban Health Governance:** Urban slums often fall under overlapping jurisdictions of municipal and state health bodies, creating **accountability gaps** and poor outreach.
3. **Data and Monitoring Deficiencies:** Weak surveillance systems limit real-time tracking of zero-dose children. The **eVIN system** for cold chain logistics exists but doesn't ensure child-level follow-up.
4. **COVID-19 Setback:** Immunization drives were halted or diverted during the pandemic, disrupting routine services and contributing to a surge in missed vaccinations.

Policy Reforms and Solutions

1. **Equity-Focused Targeting:** Prioritize **geographic and community-specific micro-planning**, especially in high-burden districts under **Intensified Mission Indradhanush (IMI) 5.0**. Use **social behavior change communication (SBCC)** to counter vaccine hesitancy.
2. **Strengthening Frontline Workforce:** Empower **ASHAs, ANMs and Anganwadi workers** with incentives, mobility support, and training to target hard-to-reach populations.
3. **Integrated Urban Health Strategy:** Implement the **National Urban Health Mission** more effectively with robust community linkages for slum populations.
4. **Technology and Innovation:** Utilize **AI-enabled dashboards**, Aadhaar-linked **real-time immunization records**, and **mobile vaccination vans** in remote zones.
5. **Community-Based Interventions:** Leverage **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, **religious leaders**, and **civil society organizations** to build trust and increase awareness.

6. **Global Best Practices:** India can learn from **Bangladesh's door-to-door immunization** and **Rwanda's mobile health clinics** that successfully reached underserved populations.

Conclusion

India's universal immunization goal hinges on addressing persistent socio-economic and governance challenges. Targeted, inclusive, and data-driven policies can ensure equitable access to vaccines and healthier futures for all children.

America's evolving AI proliferation strategy, exemplified by framework changes, impacts global governance. Analyze its implications for multilateral cooperation, dual-use technology control, and India's strategic interests in responsible AI development.

Introduction

The U.S.'s shifting strategy to manage AI proliferation—marked by rescinding the AI Diffusion Framework—signals a recalibration of power. Its implications for global cooperation, tech sovereignty, and India's AI trajectory are profound.

America's AI Proliferation Strategy: A Tactical Shift

1. In early 2025, the Biden administration proposed the **AI Diffusion Framework**, treating advanced AI technologies akin to military assets like nuclear weapons, via **export controls and licensing** of AI chips and model weights.
2. Its withdrawal by the Trump administration is less a reversal and more a **tactical repositioning**. Controls remain in place via other tools—**entity lists, chip-level monitoring, location tracking mandates**, and updated blacklists.

Implications for Global Governance and Multilateral Cooperation

1. **Undermining Multilateralism:** The unilateral nature of the U.S. framework raised concerns among allies and Global South nations, who saw it as an attempt to **centralize AI power**. It strained trust even among U.S. partners, pushing them to **seek strategic autonomy** in AI (e.g., **EU AI Act, Japan's Sovereign AI push**).
2. **Contradiction with Global AI Ethics Dialogue:** Platforms like the **Global Partnership on AI (GPAI)**, **OECD AI Principles**, and **UNESCO's AI ethics recommendations** promote **inclusive, transparent development**. U.S. control-centric policies risk contradicting these efforts, **reducing credibility in AI governance leadership**.
3. **Triggering Technological Hedging:** The framework spurred countries, including China and France, to **invest in sovereign compute infrastructure**, AI research, and **alternative semiconductor ecosystems**. China's **DeepSeek R1** model rivaled U.S. models with **less computational power**, illustrating the **limits of hardware export control** strategies.

Dual-Use Technology Control Challenges

1. **Blurred Civil-Military Lines:** AI is a **dual-use technology**; civilian innovation drives military application. Treating AI like nuclear tech **ignores its collaborative, open-source nature**. Over-

regulation may stifle innovation while incentivizing **black-market or open-source workarounds**, especially in adversarial nations.

2. **Surveillance and Privacy Concerns:** New measures like **chip-level location tracking** risk **surveillance overreach**, reducing trust among legitimate users. Allies may view such provisions as **techno-imperialism**, potentially leading to **fragmentation in global AI supply chains**.

Implications for India's Strategic Interests

1. **Access and Autonomy:** India was **not favorably positioned** under the original AI Diffusion Framework, with no guaranteed access to advanced AI chips. The withdrawal opens space for **bilateral technology partnerships**, like the **India-U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET)**, which prioritizes AI.
2. **Responsible AI Development:** India aims to be a leader in **"Responsible AI for All"**, aligned with NITI Aayog's principles of inclusion, transparency, and security. Heavy dependence on U.S. hardware and platforms threatens India's **AI sovereignty**. The need to develop **homegrown compute infrastructure** (e.g., through C-DAC and DRDO) is urgent.
3. **Multilateral Leadership:** India, as **G20 Presidency (2023)** and founding GPAI member, must **bridge Global North-South divides** in AI governance. India's approach should balance **collaborative R&D with strategic safeguards**, drawing lessons from U.S. overreach while encouraging **inclusive tech governance**.

Conclusion

America's evolving AI controls shape global tech geopolitics, challenging inclusive governance. India must assert strategic autonomy through multilateral leadership, indigenous innovation, and ethical AI frameworks to safeguard national and developmental interests.

India's fight against terrorism faces challenges within the SCO. Critically analyze India's strategic options to strengthen the SCO's counter-terrorism stance and foster effective regional security cooperation.

Introduction

Despite the SCO's anti-terrorism mandate, India faces persistent roadblocks—especially from Pakistan and China—in its efforts to internationalize cross-border terrorism. Strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation requires diplomatic finesse and recalibrated strategic engagement.

India's Counter-Terrorism Concerns at the SCO

1. **Terrorism as a Core Security Threat:** India has been at the forefront of highlighting **cross-border terrorism**, particularly from **Pakistan-based groups** such as Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Post the **Pahalgam terror attack** and **Operation Sindoor**, India reiterated a three-pronged doctrine of **no tolerance, pre-emptive response, and global sensitization** to terrorism.
2. **SCO's Mandate and Inertia:** Though the SCO Charter (2002) identifies **terrorism, extremism, and separatism** as core threats (via the **Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure** or RATS), consensus-based decision-making weakens its impact. India was forced to **withdraw from the 2025 Qingdao Defence Minister's declaration** due to the absence of references to terrorism.

Challenges to India's Counter-Terror Strategy within the SCO

1. **China-Pakistan Axis Within SCO:** China often **shields Pakistan** in multilateral platforms (e.g., **vetoing Masood Azhar's UNSC listing until 2019**) and **downplays India's terror concerns**. At Qingdao, China reportedly supported Pakistan's push to mention **Balochistan disturbances** while omitting **Pahalgam or cross-border terrorism**.
2. **Geopolitical Ambiguity Among Central Asian States:** Most Central Asian republics have **close economic ties with China and Russia**, making them reluctant to antagonize Pakistan or take firm positions. India's **limited economic presence** in the region also weakens its diplomatic leverage.
3. **Russia's Balancing Act:** While historically supportive of India, Russia now **balances ties** with both China and Pakistan, particularly amid Western sanctions and its dependence on Beijing.
4. **Diplomatic Gaps by India:** India's **diplomatic outreach post-Operation Sindoor** focused on Western and Indo-Pacific countries, **neglecting SCO states**. India **opted for a virtual SCO summit in 2023**, which may have diluted its regional engagement.

Strategic Options for India

1. **Revive Multilateral Momentum in SCO:** India must **actively participate** in future SCO forums (e.g., **2025 Summit**) and use its presence to demand **explicit commitments** on counter-terrorism. Propose institutional reforms to strengthen RATS with **transparent terror listings**, joint intelligence-sharing, and **joint anti-terror drills**.
2. **Parallel Track Engagement with Central Asia:** Use forums like the **India-Central Asia Dialogue** and **Connect Central Asia Policy** to deepen bilateral ties and **build consensus** outside the China-Pakistan influence. Offer capacity-building, counter-terror training, and **joint border management programmes**.
3. **Leverage Global Forums for Alignment:** Utilize India's presence in the **G20, BRICS, and UN Counter-Terrorism Committee** to amplify concerns sidelined at SCO and **expose Pakistan's duplicity**. Promote a **UN-based comprehensive convention on international terrorism (CCIT)** that aligns with India's definitions and experiences.
4. **Boost Economic Linkages:** Invest in **Chabahar Port** and the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** to expand trade with SCO members and **reduce reliance on China-dominated supply chains**.

Conclusion

India must stay engaged with the SCO to counter terrorism regionally. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, deepening bilateral ties, and strategic diplomacy are key to overcoming geopolitical hurdles and ensuring regional security cooperation.

Despite climbing SDG rankings, India's governance shortcomings hinder sustainable development. Examine how these deficiencies impact economic growth, resource management, and environmental goals, suggesting policy reforms for inclusive and green development.

Introduction

India's rise to 99th in the 2024 Sustainable Development Report is commendable. However, governance deficits threaten progress toward holistic, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable development, undermining both implementation and institutional trust.

Progress in Sustainable Development: A Mixed Picture

India's performance on SDGs shows **steady gains**:

1. **Poverty (SDG 1)**: Significant reduction with the World Bank estimating poverty halved from 22% in 2012 to 12% in 2023.
2. **Energy (SDG 7)**: Near-universal electrification; India is now the **4th largest** renewable energy deployer globally.
3. **Digital infrastructure (SDG 9)**: Strong mobile and UPI-linked financial penetration, improving inclusion.

However, core governance metrics remain weak:

1. **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)**: Reflects lag in rule of law, press freedom, institutional independence, and participatory governance.
2. **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)** and **SDG 4 (Quality Education)**: Poor implementation and inequity persist despite policy efforts.

Governance Deficits: Implications for Development

1. **Weak Rule of Law and Institutional Autonomy**: An **undermined judiciary**, politicized institutions, and attacks on press freedom reduce accountability and citizen trust. **Example**: India ranks **161st in press freedom** (Reporters Without Borders, 2024), raising concerns about transparency in public policy execution.
2. **Disparities in Service Delivery**: **Electricity and internet access** are near-universal in terms of connections but **quality and reliability vary**, especially in rural areas. As per TRAI (2023), urban internet penetration is 104%, rural is 37%, limiting digital education and governance outreach.
3. **Administrative Inefficiencies and Data Deficits**: Lack of **updated poverty line** and **no public consumption survey since 2018** affect poverty-targeted interventions. Absence of timely data weakens India's ability to **track and adjust policies**, affecting schemes like PM Poshan or MGNREGS.
4. **Environmental Governance Weakness**: Poor regulatory enforcement leads to **unchecked pollution and deforestation**, undermining SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). India ranks **176 out of 180** in the 2024 Environmental Performance Index (Yale University), mainly due to lax implementation of environmental laws.
5. **Political Centralization and Erosion of Local Governance**: Excessive **centralization weakens local bodies**, undermining SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Many State Finance Commissions remain non-functional, limiting Gram Panchayats' capacity to deliver sanitation, water, or climate resilience projects.

Policy Reforms for Inclusive and Green Development

1. **Institutional Strengthening**: Reinforce autonomy of **regulatory bodies**, courts, and oversight institutions like the **CAG and Election Commission**. Enact **civil service reforms** to depoliticize and professionalize administration.

2. **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Restart and modernize the **Household Consumption Survey** and ensure **real-time SDG tracking** via integrated platforms (similar to NITI Aayog's SDG Index).
3. **Strengthen Local Governance:** Operationalize State Finance Commissions and allocate predictable funds to **urban and rural local bodies** with accountability frameworks.
4. **Environmental Reforms:** Shift from clearance to **regulation-based environmental governance**. Incentivize States through a **Green Budget Performance Index**, linking environment to fiscal devolution.
5. **Bridging Digital Divides:** Expand **BharatNet** to all rural areas, integrate digital inclusion into education and health schemes.

Conclusion

India's SDG success requires more than economic progress. Strengthening governance, transparency, and institutional accountability is key to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and environmentally responsible development for all citizens.

The I-T Bill 2025's proposed digital search powers into 'virtual digital space' raise privacy concerns. Examine the technological implications and the balance required between effective tax enforcement and safeguarding citizens' digital rights.

Introduction

The Income-Tax Bill 2025 proposes unprecedented powers to access individuals' "virtual digital space," raising deep concerns around privacy, surveillance, and overreach. Balancing digital enforcement with constitutional liberties is now imperative.

Understanding the Digital Search Provision

1. The proposed provision allows tax authorities to search and seize data from **emails, cloud storage, social media, messaging apps**, and "any other space of similar nature," with the **power to override access codes**. The rationale: as **financial activity shifts online**, so should enforcement.
2. However, the inclusion of an open-ended term "virtual digital space" makes the scope **unbounded**, lacking clear distinctions between **financially relevant data** and **personal, non-financial content**—raising the risk of **mass surveillance**.

Technological and Legal Implications

1. **Intrusion into Multi-Stakeholder Spaces:** Digital accounts often contain data from **friends, family, clients**, and **confidential third-party interactions**. For professionals like **journalists or lawyers**, this can **compromise sources or clients' privacy**, violating fundamental rights.
2. **Challenge of Encrypted Communication:** End-to-end encrypted platforms like **WhatsApp or Signal** are technically difficult to access without user cooperation or backdoors. Bypassing encryption may **weaken digital security**, increasing vulnerability to cyber threats and state surveillance alike.
3. **Absence of Judicial Oversight:** The current proposal does **not mandate prior judicial warrant**, violating the **Puttaswamy judgment's proportionality principle** on privacy. Global standards, such as **Canada's Charter Section 8** or **U.S. Supreme Court's Riley v. California (2014)**, require **judicial authorization** before accessing digital devices.

4. **Lack of Relevance Threshold:** No requirement exists to **filter financially relevant content** from unrelated personal material. This undermines **data minimization**, a key principle under **India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023**.

Balancing Digital Tax Enforcement and Privacy

1. **Tax enforcement needs** as the **rise of digital assets**, cryptocurrencies, and e-commerce necessitates robust digital oversight.
2. Digital forensics can detect **benami holdings**, **undisclosed foreign assets**, or **illegal income streams** across online platforms.

But with Safeguards:

1. **Judicial Warrants:** Require **pre-approval by a magistrate or tax tribunal** before digital access, based on "reasonable belief."
2. **Narrow Definition:** Clearly define "virtual digital space" to exclude **irrelevant personal data** unless demonstrably linked to undisclosed income.
3. **Redress Mechanism:** Establish fast-track grievance redressal cells within the **CBDT or ITAT** for those whose data is wrongfully accessed.
4. **Digital Audit Trails:** Mandate detailed documentation of each action during search to ensure **accountability and transparency**.
5. **Independent Oversight:** An independent **Digital Search Oversight Authority**, akin to India's proposed Data Protection Board, could review the legality and necessity of each access.

Conclusion

The I-T Bill 2025 must reconcile legitimate enforcement with constitutional safeguards. Robust oversight, judicial control, and data protection are essential to protect citizens' digital rights in a tax-compliant digital economy.

For Western Ghats' ecological revival, a people-centric approach and democratic decentralisation are crucial. Examine how this strategy fosters sustainable conservation and balances local livelihoods with environmental protection.

Introduction

The Western Ghats, a global biodiversity hotspot, face ecological degradation driven by centralized forest governance. A people-centric, decentralized approach promises sustainable conservation while safeguarding local livelihoods and cultural heritage.

Ecological Importance of the Western Ghats

The **Western Ghats**, spanning six states, account for **over 7,400 plant species**, **500 bird species**, and **139 mammal species**, many of them endemic. They are critical for **monsoon stability**, **water security**, and **carbon sequestration**, but have faced relentless degradation due to monoculture plantations, industrial logging, and urban expansion.

Limitations of Top-Down Forest Governance

1. **Forest Department's Structural Issues:** Data from the **Forest Survey of India (FSI)** is outdated, overly aggregated, and sometimes distorted, hindering scientific planning. **Example:** FSI reported 23% forest cover in the 1970s, while ISRO's satellite imagery showed only 15%.
2. **Exploitation and Mismanagement:** The **Grasim Rayon Plant in Kerala** caused ecological and public health crises by discharging toxic effluents and overexploiting bamboo at exploitative rates (₹1/tonne vs ₹1,400/tonne market rate). Unsustainable eucalyptus and acacia plantations replaced native species, leading to biodiversity loss and pesticide use.
3. **Alienation of Local Communities:** Forest dwellers are often excluded from governance, despite **the Forest Rights Act, 2006**, recognizing **Community Forest Rights (CFRs)** for those residing in forests for generations. The **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (Gadgil Committee, 2011)** had advocated participatory governance, but its recommendations were diluted by the subsequent **Kasturirangan Committee**.

The Case for Democratic Decentralization

1. **Empowering Local Communities:** The village of **Pachgaon (Chandrapur, Maharashtra)** was granted CFRs over 1,000 hectares and has become a model for sustainable forestry: Bamboo sales improved incomes, Slash-and-burn for tendu leaves stopped voluntarily. 30 hectares preserved as sacred grove and migration reduced due to local employment.
2. **Benefits of Decentralization:** **Greater transparency** and **local monitoring** of resources, harnesses **indigenous knowledge** and **cultural practices** (e.g., sacred groves), enhances **livelihood security** without ecological damage and promotes **carbon sequestration**, biodiversity protection, and **climate resilience**.
3. **Legal and Constitutional Backing:** **Forest Rights Act (2006)**, **PESA Act (1996)**, and **73rd Constitutional Amendment** promote participatory resource management. Yet, implementation remains weak—only about **20% of potential CFR claims** have been recognized nationally (MoTA, 2023).

Policy Reforms and the Way Forward

1. **Accelerate FRA implementation** with transparency, grievance redressal, and capacity-building at the Gram Sabha level.
2. **Strengthen Panchayats and Forest Management Committees (JFMCs)** for joint planning.
3. **Revise forest classification** using real-time, open-access satellite data to reflect ecological realities.
4. Promote **nature-based livelihoods** like non-timber forest products (NTFPs), eco-tourism, and organic farming.
5. **Restrict industrial exploitation**, especially in Ecologically Sensitive Zones (as recommended by the Gadgil Panel).

Conclusion

Reviving the Western Ghats requires people-led governance rooted in ecological wisdom. Democratic decentralization ensures that conservation aligns with justice, empowering communities while protecting one of India's richest ecological treasures.