ForumIAS

Mains Marathon

3rd week January, 2026

HISTORY
ECONOMICS
POLITY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT

INDEX

Analyze the significance of India's transition from a 'dependent user' to a 'sovereign shaper' in the Artificial Intelligence landscape. Examine the strategic imperatives of this 'railway moment' and the policy interventions required to ensure technological autonomy and global leadership.

Introduction (32 words)

Artificial Intelligence, like railways in colonial India, is a **General-Purpose Technology; with NITI Aayog and IMF projecting massive productivity gains**, 2026 marks India's decisive 'railway moment' in the Intelligence Age.

AI as a 'Railway Moment'

1. Civilisational Significance: Economic historians such as Carlota Perez describe technologies like railways and electricity as **General-Purpose Technologies (GPTs)** that reshape state power, markets and institutions. AI in the 21st century plays a similar role**. According to PwC**, AI could add **nearly USD 15.7 trillion** to the **global economy by 2030,** with India's potential estimated at **USD 450–500 billion**. Thus, AI is not merely a productivity tool but a determinant of geopolitical hierarchy, economic sovereignty and social capacity.

2. Dependent User vs Sovereign Shaper: The Strategic Divide: A 'dependent user' relies on proprietary, **opaque ('black-box')** AI models controlled **by foreign Big Tech**. This creates data colonialism, linguistic exclusion of **India's 22 scheduled languages**, and perpetual economic rents. In contrast, a **'sovereign shaper'** controls the **AI stack—data, compute, models and governance**—enabling **'Digital Constitutionalism',** where technology aligns with domestic law, ethics and democratic accountability, as envisioned in the **Puttaswamy judgment (2017).**

3. Strategic Imperatives of India's AI Transition:

· **Economic Resilience**: As global outsourcing faces AI-driven automation, McKinsey (2023) warns of white-collar disruption. Owning AI intellectual property allows India to capture productivity rents rather than merely exporting labour.

· **Social Inclusion**: Indigenous 'Frugal AI' can address market failures—AI-based crop advisories, rural diagnostics (eSanjeevani), and personalised learning—areas often neglected by profit-driven global platforms.

· **National Security**: AI-enabled deepfakes, cyber warfare and autonomous systems pose asymmetric threats. Sovereign AI enables domestic guardrails, auditability and alignment with the DPDP Act, 2023.

· **Global South Leadership**: India can offer a 'Third Way' of AI governance—between US techno-libertarianism and China's state surveillance—enhancing soft power.

Policy Interventions: Building Technological Autonomy

1. **IndiaAI Mission**: With a ₹10,300 crore outlay, the mission **operationalises compute sovereignty (38,000+ GPUs), datasets (AIKosh)**, and indigenous foundation models—addressing entry barriers identified by the OECD.

2. **Compute and Data as Public Goods**: Similar to **Digital Public Infrastructure (UPI, Aadhaar),** AI compute and datasets must be democratised to prevent monopolisation.

3. **Human Capital (FutureSkills)**: **WEF (2024) highlights India's 40% AI skill gap**; training over **one million professionals** is essential for absorptive capacity.

4. **Institutional Architecture**: A mission-mode programme with **PMO-level oversight**—akin to ISRO or the Green Revolution—can overcome bureaucratic silos.

5. **Ethical and Legal Guardrails**: Following **UNESCO's AI Ethics framework**, India must ensure transparency, non-discrimination and accountability without regulatory paralysis.

Way Forward: From 'Action' to 'Impact'

Public–private–academic collaboration, integration of AI with DPI, and outcome-based governance can enable 'population-scale AI'. Hosting global platforms like the India-AI Impact Summit positions India as a norm-setter rather than a rule-taker.

Conclusion

As Justice B.R. Gavai noted, technology must serve constitutional values; India's AI 'railway moment', if guided by sovereignty and ethics, can transform state capacity and global standing.

Examine the judicial rationale for a 'Romeo-Juliet' exception in the POCSO Act. Evaluate the socio-legal tensions between ensuring child protection and acknowledging adolescent autonomy in the context of criminalizing consensual adolescent relationships.

Introduction

Enacted in **2012, POCSO's strict liability** regime faces judicial re-examination as **NCRB data, UNICEF studies and constitutional jurisprudence** reveal tensions between child protection, adolescent autonomy and proportional criminal justice.

Judicial Rationale for a 'Romeo-Juliet' Exception

1. The **Supreme Court's January 2026 observations** reflect a growing discomfort with the **bright-line approach of the POCSO Act**, which criminalises all sexual activity below 18 irrespective of consent. While POCSO was designed as a **beneficial legislation to combat child sexual abuse,** judicial experience reveals systematic **over-criminalisation** of consensual adolescent relationships.

2. The Court noted that a significant number of cases **involve 'romantic' or 'elopement'** situations where **families invoke POCSO to discipline** daughters or oppose inter-caste and inter-religious relationships. Empirical backing comes from a **UNICEF–Enfold Proactive Health Trust study (2016–2020),** which found nearly **25% of POCSO** cases in **Maharashtra, Assam and West Bengal** to be consensual in nature, with low conviction rates due to victims supporting the accused.

3. The proposed **'Romeo-Juliet' or close-in-age exception** draws from comparative jurisprudence in the **US and Europe**, where consensual acts between adolescents with minimal age gaps are excluded from statutory rape laws. The Court implicitly relied on the **mature minor doctrine, recognising** adolescents' 'evolving capacities'—a concept endorsed by the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),** to which India is a signatory.

Socio-Legal Tensions: Protection vs Autonomy

1. At the heart of the debate lies a constitutional tension between **parens patriae protection and individual autonomy**. On one hand, the Union government argues that the **age of consent at 18 constitutes** a non-negotiable **'protective shield', essential to prevent grooming**, trafficking and coercion, particularly in **patriarchal social contexts**. The **Law Commission of India (283rd Report, 2023)** echoed this caution, warning against statutory dilution.

2. On the other hand, criminalising consensual adolescent sexuality raises serious concerns under **Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21. In Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017),** the Supreme Court affirmed bodily autonomy and decisional privacy as intrinsic to dignity. Treating all adolescents as incapable of consent ignores biological maturity, psychological development and social realities.

3. The mandatory reporting clause under **POCSO further exacerbates harm**. As highlighted in **public health literature and WHO adolescent health frameworks**, fear of prosecution deters minors from accessing reproductive and mental-health services, leading to unsafe abortions and untreated trauma—outcomes antithetical to the **'best interests of the child'** principle.

Limits of Judicial Discretion and the Need for Structural Reform

1. High Courts have attempted corrective justice by quashing proceedings in romantic cases, but only after prolonged incarceration, social stigma and educational disruption. This underscores the inadequacy of **ex post judicial discretion** within a **rigid statutory framework.**

2. A calibrated response lies in legislative refinement rather than dilution: **a statutory safe-harbour clause** for consensual **acts between minors aged 16–18** with narrow age gaps; graded sentencing as suggested by the **Law Commission;** and diversionary approaches such as counselling **instead of incarceration.** Complementing legal reform with **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (as recommended by UNESCO)** would shift governance from moral policing to informed consent.

Conclusion

As **Justice D.Y. Chandrachud** observed, constitutional morality must temper criminal law; refining POCSO through proportionality ensures child protection without criminalising adolescence itself, preserving justice, dignity and social trust.

Analyze the resilience of Bharat's 'anti-evergreening' patent regime against intensifying global trade pressures. Evaluate whether the strategic utilization of legal levers, such as Compulsory Licensing, is essential to reconcile intellectual property obligations with the constitutional mandate of ensuring affordable healthcare.

Introduction

Bharat's patent regime, shaped by **TRIPS flexibilities, Section 3(d)** and **constitutional commitments under Article 21**, faces renewed global trade pressures, raising critical questions on balancing innovation, sovereignty and affordable public health.

Resilience of Bharat's Anti-Evergreening Patent Regime

1. Bharat's patent framework is internationally recognised for its resistance to **'evergreening'—the practice of extending monopolies** through incremental, non-therapeutic modifications.

2. **Section 3(d) of the Patents Act, 1970** acts as a statutory sentinel by requiring 'significant enhancement of therapeutic efficacy' for patentability of derivatives. This design reflects a conscious policy choice to prioritise access over monopoly rents.

3. The robustness of this regime was judicially affirmed in **Novartis AG v. Union of India (2013), where the Supreme Court rejected** patent protection for **Imatinib Mesylate (Gleevec), clarifying that improved bioavailability** or storage stability does not equate to enhanced therapeutic efficacy. This decision preserved India's generic pharmaceutical ecosystem, enabling affordable cancer treatment domestically and across the Global South.

4. Empirically, this resilience has translated into outcomes: according to **WHO estimates, Indian generics reduce drug prices by 60–90% globally**, while Bharat supplies nearly **20% of global generic medicines** by volume. However, this public-health-oriented stance increasingly attracts geopolitical friction.

5. Trade instruments such as the **US 'Special 301' Watch List and tariff threats** against Indian pharmaceutical exports **exemplify 'hubris-driven tariff sabre-rattling'** aimed at softening India's IPR posture.

Global Trade Pressures and the TRIPS Context

1. Under the **WTO's TRIPS Agreement, Bharat is** obliged to protect intellectual property but retains sovereign policy space through explicit flexibilities.

2. The **Doha Declaration on TRIPS and Public Health (2001)** unequivocally affirms that member states may prioritise public health and promote access to medicines for all.

3. Despite this legal cover, Bharat has exercised restraint. **Since 2005, only** one compulsory licence—**Natco v. Bayer (2012) for Nexavar**—has been issued, reducing prices by nearly 97%. This underutilisation reflects concerns over investor sentiment, retaliatory tariffs and R&D flight, rather than legal incapacity.

Strategic Utilisation of Legal Levers: Necessity, Not Extremism

1. A calibrated activation of statutory levers is essential to reconcile IPR obligations with constitutional mandates. Article 21, as interpreted in **Paschim Banga Khet Mazdoor Samity and Mohinder Singh Chawla**, imposes a positive obligation on the state to ensure access to healthcare.

2. Beyond compulsory licensing under **Sections 84 and 92, Bharat's Patents Act** provides underexplored tools:

- **Section 47(4)** allows government import and distribution of patented drugs without patentee consent for public institutions.

- **Section 66** empowers patent revocation in public interest where enforcement is prejudicial to society.

- **Section 92A** enables export-oriented compulsory licences, reinforcing Bharat's role as 'Pharmacy of the Global South'.

- **Section 102** permits state acquisition of patents under eminent domain principles, with fair compensation.

3. Further, abusive patent practices can be addressed under the **Competition Act, 2002**, as abuse of dominant position—aligning competition law with public health goals, as seen in EU antitrust actions against Big Pharma.

Way Forward: From Defensive to Proactive Health Sovereignty

1. To withstand global pressures, Bharat **must institutionalise a coherent patent–public** health policy, integrating central and state governments, competition authorities and health ministries.

2. **Leveraging TRIPS flexibilities** should be viewed not as protectionism, but as rule-based assertion of sovereignty.

3. Simultaneously, fostering indigenous pharmaceutical innovation through public R&D, open **science platforms and predictable regulatory pathways can counter the narrative that access and innovation are mutually exclusive.**

Conclusion

As **Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer** argued, law must serve social justice; aligning TRIPS flexibilities with Article 21 ensures Bharat's patent regime protects innovation without sacrificing the constitutional promise of affordable healthcare.

Examine the 'prior sanction' requirement under Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act as a tool for protecting honest officials. Evaluate whether it hinders an efficient anti-corruption regime, in light of the recent judicial split verdict in the CPIL case.

Introduction

India ranked **93rd in Transparency** International's **Corruption Perceptions Index 2023**, highlighting entrenched corruption. **Section 17A of the PC Act seeks** to protect honest decision-making, but raises serious constitutional and governance concerns.

Prior Sanction as a Protective Tool for Honest Officials

1. **Preventing Policy Paralysis:** Justice **K.V. Viswanathan emphasised** that absence of prior sanction exposes officers to frivolous and mala fide investigations, encouraging a 'risk-averse bureaucracy' and stalling developmental governance.

2. **Safeguarding Administrative Reputation:** The Court acknowledged that in an era of media trials, even preliminary inquiries can cause irreversible reputational damage—echoing **P. Sirajuddin v. State of Madras (1970),** where reputation was held integral to dignity.

3. **Ensuring Decisional Autonomy:** The **2nd ARC (Ethics in Governance)** observed that excessive vigilance scrutiny undermines bold decision-making, especially in infrastructure, defence procurement and emergency administration.

Prior Sanction as an Impediment to Anti-Corruption Enforcement

1. **Foreclosure of Investigation at Threshold:** Justice B.V. Nagarathna held that Section 17A 'forestalls inquiry itself', preventing discovery of truth and emboldening corruption under the guise of official duty.

2. **Revival of Invalidated Legal Protection:** The provision mirrors Section 6A of the DSPE Act, struck down in **Subramanian Swamy (2014)** for violating Article 14 and diluting the principle that 'however high you may be, the law is above you'.

3. **Conflict with Mandatory FIR Doctrine:** By mandating prior approval even before preliminary inquiry, Section 17A undermines **Lalita Kumari (2014**), which requires compulsory registration of FIR for cognisable offences.

Constitutional and Institutional Tensions Revealed

1. **Executive Conflict of Interest:** Sanctioning authority resting with the political executive creates a structural conflict, particularly where the accused official and sanctioning minister belong to the same department.

2. **Unequal Protection under Article 14:** Justice Nagarathna noted discriminatory shielding of decision-makers, while lower-level officials executing orders remain exposed—violating equality before law.

3. **Weakening of Rule of Law:** The **N.N. Vohra Committee (1993)** warned that executive interference in investigations strengthens the criminal-bureaucratic-political nexus.

Judicial Middle Path: Reconciling Protection with Accountability

1. **Independent Institutional Gatekeeping:** Justice Viswanathan proposed vesting approval powers in independent bodies like the Lokpal/Lokayukta, aligning the PC Act with the Lokpal Act's normative framework.

2. **Time-Bound and Transparent Sanction:** Imposing a strict statutory timeline for sanction decisions can prevent 'pocket vetoes' and investigative delays.

3. **Exclusion of Per Se Corrupt Acts:** Acts such as bribery, embezzlement and disproportionate assets—clearly unrelated to bona fide official duty—should be statutorily exempted from prior sanction.

Conclusion

As **Justice R.M. Lodha observed, 'corruption corrodes governance.'** The CPIL split affirms that accountability and protection must coexist, ensuring procedure shields honesty without becoming a refuge for corruption.

In an era of demanding bilateralism, India's strategic interests are increasingly served by 'small tables' and 'diplomatic white spaces.' Analyze this shift towards minilateralism and evaluate its potential in securing high strategic dividends for India in a multipolar world.

Introduction

By 2026, deepening **great-power rivalry, WTO paralysis, and UN gridlock** have compelled India to shift from rigid multilateralism towards agile **minilateral 'small tables'** that promise speed, flexibility, and strategic returns.

Shift from Demanding Bilateralism to Minilateral 'Small Tables'

1. **Structural Fatigue:** Traditional bilateral diplomacy with major powers has become increasingly transactional, marked by **tariff threats, technology controls, and geopolitical conditionalities,** constraining India's policy autonomy.

2. **Multilateral Dysfunction:** Consensus-based institutions like the **WTO Appellate Body and UNSC have been paralysed** by veto politics, making them ineffective for timely rule-making or crisis response.

3. **Minilateral Efficiency:** Small, interest-based coalitions such as the **Quad, I2U2, and IMEC enable faster coordination**, limited membership, and outcome-oriented cooperation without unanimity constraints.

4. **Strategic Flexibility:** Minilateralism allows India to **practise multi-alignment, engaging different partners across security, trade, and technology** domains without binding alliance commitments.

Diplomatic White Spaces as New Arenas of Indian Leadership

1. **Conceptual Space:** Diplomatic white spaces are governance gaps **where global problems exist but leadership is absent,** allowing India to emerge as a convenor and agenda-setter.

2. **Global South Bridging:** Through initiatives like **the Voice of Global South Summits**, India has positioned itself as a bridge between developed economies and developing countries.

3. **Digital Public Infrastructure:** India's **DPI model—UPI, Aadhaar, and CoWIN**—has been recognised by the **World Bank** as a scalable global public good, filling a governance vacuum in digital inclusion.

4. **Climate Minilateralism:** Platforms like the **International Solar Alliance and Global Biofuels Alliance** allow India to shape climate action narratives aligned with developmental realities.

Strategic Payoffs of 'Small Tables' for India

1. **Europe De-Risking:** Engagement with the **EU through trade and regulatory diplomacy** strengthens supply-chain resilience and hedges against U.S. protectionism and China-centric dependencies.

2. **Quad as Public Goods Provider:** The **Quad's focus on maritime domain awareness**, **HADR, and resilient infrastructure** reinforces India's role as a net security provider in the Indo-Pacific.

3. **BRICS Functionalism:** India's leadership in **BRICS aims to shift the grouping** from ideological posturing to delivery-oriented development finance and institutional reform.

4. **Norm-Shaping Capacity:** Small tables enable India to influence emerging norms in AI governance, climate finance, and supply-chain security before rules are locked in by major powers.

Constraints and Cautions in the Minilateral Strategy

1. **Coordination Overload:** Managing multiple minilateral platforms strains diplomatic capacity and requires sustained bureaucratic coherence.

2. **Risk of Exclusion:** Excessive reliance on selective groupings may alienate neighbours and dilute inclusive multilateral legitimacy.

3. **Delivery Deficit:** Without institutionalisation, minilateral forums risk degenerating into declaratory talk shops.

Conclusion

Echoing **President Droupadi Murmu's call for 'solution-oriented leadership,'** India's future influence lies not in size of forums but in delivering outcomes—proving, as Hedley Bull argued, order flows from practice, not power.

Analyze the significance of the 2026 US Mid-term elections as a 'bellwether' for the trajectory of the 'Trump 2.0' administration. Evaluate the prudence of India's 'calm engagement' strategy in navigating bilateral volatility while safeguarding its strategic and economic interests.

Introduction

By early **2026, intensified 'America First 2.0' unilateralism**, US withdrawal from multilateral institutions, and tariff-led diplomacy have made the November mid-term elections a decisive test of domestic restraint on President Trump's disruptive global agenda.

The 2026 US Mid-term Elections as a Strategic Bellwether

1. **Domestic Mandate Signal:** The mid-terms, covering **all 435 House seats and 35 Senate seats**, will indicate whether the American electorate endorses Trump's aggressive transactionalism or seeks institutional checks through a divided Congress.

2. **Legislative Constraint:** A Democratic takeover of either chamber could **induce a 'lame-duck' presidency, curbing unilateral tariff actions**, immigration overreach, and abrupt treaty withdrawals through budgetary and oversight powers.

3. **Foreign Policy Recalibration:** Historically, as seen after the 2018 mid-terms, Congressional opposition has tempered executive adventurism, increasing scrutiny over sanctions regimes, defence spending, and coercive trade practices.

4. **Multilateral Re-entry Pressure:** A hostile Congress may push for **partial re-engagement with global institutions like the WHO** or climate mechanisms, moderating Trump's instinctive retreat from rules-based order.

Trump 2.0 and the Intensification of Bilateral Volatility

1. **Transactional Diplomacy:** The Trump administration's reliance on tariffs, bilateral 'deals', and reciprocity demands reflects a mercantilist worldview prioritising leverage over long-term partnerships.

2. **Erosion of Multilateralism:** US **withdrawal from over 60 international organisations** and scepticism toward UN-led conflict management has weakened global governance, increasing systemic uncertainty.

3. **Strategic Unpredictability:** Actions such as **ad-hoc mediation in Ukraine**, strikes on Iran-linked assets, and Gaza ceasefire brokering demonstrate policy driven by impulse rather than institutional consensus.

India's 'Calm Engagement' Strategy: Strategic Rationale

1. **Strategic Patience:** India's avoidance of public retaliation and preference for quiet diplomatic channels reflects an understanding that Trump-era volatility is cyclical, not structural.

2. **Issue Compartmentalisation:** By insulating **defence, critical technology, and Indo-Pacific** cooperation from trade disputes, India preserves the ballast of the partnership despite episodic frictions.

3. **Quad Leverage:** India's centrality in the **Quad aligns with US strategic priorities on China**, allowing New Delhi to remain indispensable even amid trade or visa disagreements.

4. **Economic Hedging:** Parallel acceleration of FTAs with the EU, UK, and Global South reduces India's vulnerability to US tariff shocks and labour mobility restrictions.

Risks and Limits of Calm Engagement

1. **Tariff Exposure:** Continued US tariff threats on **pharmaceuticals, steel, and IT services** underline the economic costs of asymmetric bilateralism.

2. **Labour Mobility Stress:** Tighter **H-1B regimes directly affect India's IT sector**, necessitating domestic skilling and market diversification.

3. **Over-Personalisation Risk:** Excessive reliance on leader-level chemistry risks fragility if domestic US politics turns sharply adversarial.

Conclusion

Echoing **Kautilya's realism and President Droupadi Murmu's** emphasis on 'strategic restraint', India's calm engagement treats Trump-era turbulence as weather, not climate—preserving autonomy, resilience, and long-term national interest.

Analyze how reusable launch technologies are revolutionizing the economics and sustainability of the global space sector. Evaluate the potential of such innovations in driving a trillion-dollar space economy while addressing the environmental risks associated with increased mission frequencies and orbital debris.

Introduction

Reusable launch vehicles mark a paradigm shift from expendable spaceflight to a transportation economy, **cutting launch costs by nearly 70%,** accelerating access, and redefining sustainability in a trillion-dollar global space ecosystem.

Reusability as an Economic Game-Changer in the Space Sector

1. **Cost Amortisation and Launch Economics:** Traditional expendable rockets discard hardware **constituting nearly 60–70% of mission cost**. Reusability spreads this capital cost over multiple flights, lowering per-kg launch prices from **~$20,000 to below ~$2,000 (Falcon 9).**

2. **Increased Launch Cadence and Market Expansion:** Rapid refurbishment enables high-frequency launches. In **2023–25, global launches crossed 300 annually (FAA data),** enabling mega-constellations like Starlink and Kuiper, expanding downstream markets.

3. **Private Capital and Innovation Flywheel:** Reduced entry barriers have attracted venture capital into NewSpace start-ups. **According to Morgan Stanley**, launch reusability underpins projections of a **$1 trillion space economy by 2030.**

Sustainability Gains through Reusable Launch Architectures

1. **Material Efficiency and Circular Economy:** Reusability recovers high-grade alloys, avionics, and engines, aligning with **circular-economy principles and reducing industrial waste** compared to ocean-discarded stages.

2. **Energy and Emissions Trade-off:** Fewer rocket constructions reduce lifecycle emissions. Life-cycle assessments by **ESA show reusable systems** have lower embodied **carbon per launch** despite recovery burns.

3. **Reduced Physical Space Debris:** Controlled recovery prevents spent stages from becoming long-term orbital or oceanic debris, improving compliance with **UN COPUOS space-sustainability guidelines**.

Environmental and Orbital Risks of High-Frequency Spaceflight

1. **Atmospheric Impact of Re-entry and Propellants: Studies (Nature, 2022) highlight** soot and alumina deposition in the stratosphere from frequent launches, potentially affecting ozone chemistry, especially with kerosene-based engines.

2. **Orbital Congestion and Kessler Syndrome:** While reusability reduces launcher debris, mass satellite deployment raises collision risks. **ESA's Space Debris Office reports** over 36,000 trackable objects in orbit.

3. **Regulatory Lag:** Absence of binding global **Space Traffic Management (STM)** norms creates a governance deficit amid rapid technological expansion.

Driving the Trillion-Dollar Space Economy: Opportunities Ahead

1. **Commercialisation of Space Services:** Lower **launch costs enable Earth observation**, satellite internet, in-space manufacturing, and space-based solar power, multiplying economic spillovers.

2. **Strategic Autonomy and National Competitiveness:** For India, **ISRO's RLV-LEX and future reusable LVM platforms** can enhance competitiveness of **SSLV and Gaganyaan missions, supporting Atmanirbhar Bharat** in space.

3. **Technological Convergence:** Advances in **methalox engines, AI-based landing systems**, and additive manufacturing further reinforce reusability-led growth.

Way Forward: Balancing Innovation with Sustainability

1. **Green Propulsion Transition:** Adoption of methane-based and green monopropellants can reduce soot emissions and environmental damage.

2. **Global Governance Mechanisms:** A multilateral **STM regime, akin to ICAO for aviation**, is essential to regulate launch frequency and orbital safety.

3. **Designing Sustainability by Default:** Embedding reusability, debris-mitigation, and end-of-life disposal as non-negotiable design drivers is critical for long-term viability.

Conclusion

Reusability must harmonise innovation with responsibility, ensuring space remains a shared, sustainable commons for humanity.

Analyze the strategic rationale behind the 'Pax Silica' initiative in mitigating coercive dependencies within global AI supply chains. Evaluate the potential of India's Digital Public Infrastructure in positioning the country as a trusted partner within this secure technological framework.

Introduction

Emerging geopolitical rivalries have shifted global power from hydrocarbons to code and chips; the Pax Silica initiative reflects this transition by securitising AI supply chains against coercive dependencies and systemic technological vulnerabilities."

Pax Silica as a Strategic Response to Weaponised Interdependence

1. **From Globalisation to Friend-shoring:** Pax Silica marks a decisive shift from efficiency-driven global value chains to resilience-oriented 'friend-shored' ecosystems, reflecting lessons from COVID-19 and the Ukraine conflict.

2. **Countering Resource Coercion:** China controls over 60% of rare-earth processing (IEA, 2023) and has used export restrictions as strategic leverage, including curbs on REEs and gallium. Pax Silica seeks to dilute this chokepoint power.

3. **Securing the AI Stack:** The initiative spans critical minerals, advanced lithography, GPUs, High Bandwidth Memory (HBM), cloud infrastructure, and foundational models—treating compute and chips as strategic assets akin to energy security.

4. **Normative Architecture of 'Trusted Tech':** Pax Silica embeds values of supply-chain transparency, IP protection, and cybersecurity, aiming to build a 'trusted digital commons' distinct from authoritarian techno-statism."

Mitigating Coercive Dependencies in Global AI Supply Chains

1. **De-risking from Single-Country Dominance:** By pooling capabilities of the US (design), Japan (materials), Netherlands (ASML lithography), Korea (memory), and Australia (critical minerals), Pax Silica reduces systemic overdependence.

2. **Collective Investment Frameworks:** The initiative enables public-private co-investment in fabs, data centres, and energy grids, recognising compute power as a determinant of national competitiveness (WEF, 2024).

3. **Export Controls with Coordination:** Unlike unilateral controls, Pax Silica aims for harmonised export regulations to prevent technology leakage while avoiding fragmentation seen in past tech embargo regimes.

India's Digital Public Infrastructure as a Strategic Value Proposition

1. **DPI as a Global Public Good:** India's DPI—Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, and Bhashini—has demonstrated population-scale, low-cost digital inclusion, praised by the IMF as a 'template for digital transformation'.

2. **Democratising AI Adoption:** Unlike corporate-led Western models, India's DPI-led AI enables 'last-mile intelligence', supporting welfare delivery, fintech, and multilingual governance across diverse socio-economic contexts.

3. **IndiaAI Mission and Compute Sovereignty:** With over ₹10,000 crore allocated, India is building sovereign GPU infrastructure and indigenous LLMs, aligning with Pax Silica's emphasis on trusted and secure AI ecosystems.

4. **Human Capital Advantage:** India supplies nearly 20% of the world's AI workforce (LinkedIn, 2024). Reverse brain drain amid restrictive visa regimes can further strengthen domestic AI and semiconductor capabilities."

Strategic Challenges for India within Pax Silica

1. **Strategic Autonomy vs. Alignment:** Joining a US-led framework may generate pressure to align on export controls and geopolitical positions, potentially constraining India's multi-alignment doctrine.

2. **Late-Entrant and Capability Gaps:** India lags in advanced node fabrication (<2% global share), necessitating calibrated protection, subsidies, and phased integration into Pax Silica norms.

3. **Developing-Country Sensitivities:** As the first major developing economy in Pax Silica, India must ensure that the initiative does not evolve into an exclusive high-income technology cartel.

Way Forward: From Participation to Co-Architecture

1. **Strengthening Domestic Foundations:** Accelerating the India Semiconductor Mission and National Critical Minerals Mission is essential to convert strategic intent into tangible capacity.

2. **Norm-Setting Leadership:** India can leverage platforms like the Global Partnership on AI and India-AI Summits to embed principles of ethical, inclusive, and development-sensitive AI.

3. **Balancing Security with Openness:** India must advocate a Pax Silica that secures supply chains without undermining South–South cooperation or affordable access for emerging economies.

Conclusion

India's Pax Silica engagement must harmonise technological alignment with strategic autonomy, ensuring security without sacrificing developmental equity in the digital age.

Examine the role of 'second-generation reforms' in higher education as a catalyst for Viksit Bharat. Evaluate how enhancing faculty capability and integrating inclusive, reflective learning practices can transform Indian universities into centers of global excellence and equitable growth.

Introduction

With India's **Gross Enrolment Ratio crossing 28% (AISHE 2023)** and **NEP 2020** entering implementation maturity, second-generation reforms are vital to shift higher education from expansion-led growth to quality-driven national development.

Second-Generation Reforms as the Qualitative Core of Viksit Bharat

1. From Structural Access to Learning Outcomes: First-generation reforms expanded access through **multiple entry-exit systems**, **Academic Bank of Credits**, and institutional flexibility. Second-generation **reforms now target the classroom**—the **true engine of capability creation.**

2. **Knowledge Economy Imperative: World Bank (2023) estimates** show that human capital contributes over **60% of long-term economic growth** in developed nations. Without deep learning reforms, India **risks remaining a 'credential economy'** rather than a knowledge economy.

3. **Global Competitiveness: QS and THE rankings** consistently highlight teaching quality, research culture, and **faculty-student engagement** as determinants of global excellence—areas directly addressed by **2G reforms.**

Enhancing Faculty Capability as Human Infrastructure

1. **Pedagogical Capacity Deficit:** Nearly **30% of Indian faculty enter** classrooms without formal training in **pedagogy (UGC, 2024),** limiting effectiveness in **outcome-based education and interdisciplinary teaching.**

2. **Continuous Professional Development (CPD):** Second-generation reforms emphasise **CPD over episodic workshops, aligning with OECD models** where faculty upskilling is treated as institutional responsibility, not individual discretion.

3. **From Instructor to Learning Facilitator:** Faculty roles must evolve from **content delivery to mentoring, problem-solving, and AI-assisted facilitation**—critical in blended and flipped classrooms.

4. **Institutional Enablers: Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTLs),** as adopted in IIT Bombay and Ashoka University, institutionalise evidence-based pedagogy and instructional leadership.

Aligning Pedagogy with Assessment for Outcome-Based Education

1. **Beyond Rote Evaluation:** India's examination-centric culture prioritises recall over cognition. Authentic assessments—portfolios, simulations, capstone projects—align with Bloom's higher-order learning objectives.

2. **Learning-Outcome Mapping: Outcome-Based Education (OBE), endorsed** by NBA and **Washington Accord,** ensures curricular coherence between teaching intent and assessment design.

3. **Industry-Academic Integration: NASSCOM (2024)** reports persistent employability gaps despite rising degrees. **Aligning pedagogy** with industry-validated competencies bridges this structural mismatch.

4. **Formative Feedback Loops:** Continuous assessment enables timely feedback, improving retention, **critical thinking, and learner motivation.**

Inclusivity and Reflective Learning as Pillars of Equitable Excellence

1. From Access to Success: Second-generation reforms prioritise success metrics for **SEDGs and Divyang students** through assistive technologies, adaptive AI tutors, and **universal design for learning (UDL).**

2. **Multilingual and Cultural Inclusion:** Platforms like Bhashini enable instruction across Indian languages, while integrating **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)** ensures epistemic diversity and **civilisational continuity.**

3. **Reflective Learning Models: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle**—experience, reflection, conceptualisation, application—builds metacognition and problem-solving capacity essential for innovation-led economies.

4. **Mental Well-being and Cognitive Equity: WHO and UNICEF studies** link student well-being with academic performance, necessitating counselling, mentoring, and balanced workloads.

Systemic Challenges and the Way Forward

1. **Regulatory Mindset Shift:** Transitioning from compliance-centric regulation to trust-based academic autonomy remains essential.

2. **Sustained Public Investment:** Achieving the **6% of GDP education target (Kothari Commission)** is critical for faculty research, inclusive infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems.

3. **Leadership and Governance Capacity:** Professional university leadership and differentiated academic roles enhance productivity without eroding autonomy."

Conclusion

Echoing Justice D.Y. Chandrachud's emphasis on constitutional capability-building, second-generation higher-education reforms must transform classrooms into engines of equity, excellence, and innovation—ensuring India's demographic dividend matures into a global developmental asset.

Analyze the procedural and political challenges that render the judicial removal process in India a 'tough law with loopholes.' Evaluate whether the current framework effectively balances judicial independence with accountability in light of the Supreme Court's pronouncements on judicial standards.

Introduction

By 2026, repeated impeachment attempts and resignations underline India's judicial accountability crisis. Despite **Articles 124 and 217,** India faces a paradox: constitutionally strong safeguards, yet procedurally fragile enforcement.

Tough Law: Constitutional Design to Protect Judicial Independence

1. **High Constitutional Threshold: Articles 124(4) and 217** mandate removal only for 'proved misbehaviour or incapacity', reflecting the Constituent Assembly's fear of executive or legislative reprisals against judges.

2. **Rigorous Parliamentary Majority:** Removal requires a **special majority—absolute majority** plus **two-thirds of members present** and voting in both Houses—making impeachment politically rare in coalition-era legislatures.

3. **Quasi-Judicial Investigation Mechanism:** Under the **Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968,** a three-member committee (SC judge, HC Chief Justice, eminent jurist) ensures due process, reinforcing the doctrine of **judicial independence as part of the basic structure** (Kesavananda Bharati).

Loopholes: Procedural Gaps Undermining Accountability

1. **Speaker/Chairman's Discretion at Admission Stage:** The presiding officer may admit or disallow a motion without statutorily defined criteria. This **threshold veto** can nullify a motion supported by **100 Lok Sabha MPs**, creating scope for arbitrariness and politicisation.

2. **Resignation as an Escape Route:** Cases such as **Justice Soumitra Sen (2011)** and later instances show judges resigning mid-process, terminating proceedings and retaining post-retirement benefits—undermining the **principle of proved misbehaviour.**

3. **Absence of Graduated Sanctions:** The framework lacks intermediate penalties (censure, suspension, pension curtailment). Consequently, ethical violations often go unaddressed because impeachment is viewed as a 'nuclear option'.

Political Challenges: Accountability in a Polarised Democracy

1. **Partisan Calculus over Constitutional Morality:** Impeachment motions often succeed or fail based on political alignment rather than evidentiary merit, diluting Parliament's role as a constitutional sentinel.

2. **Executive Influence by Indirection:** Though formally excluded, the executive may influence outcomes through majority control or persuasion of the presiding officer, weakening the separation of powers.

Judicial Pronouncements: Lofty Standards, Limited Enforcement

1. **Ethical Absolutism in Judicial Conduct:** In **K. Veeraswami v. Union of India (1991),** the Court stressed that judicial honesty admits **"**no legal relativity**"**, demanding conduct beyond reproach.

2. **Narrow Interpretation of Misbehaviour: M. Krishna Swamy v. Union of India (1992)** clarified that only wilful misconduct with mens rea qualifies, excluding mere errors of judgment—raising the evidentiary bar further.

3. **In-House Procedure: Soft Accountability:** The judiciary's internal mechanism, evolved in **C. Ravichandran Iyer**, promotes peer review but faces criticism for opacity and lack of public confidence, as noted by the Second Administrative Reforms Commission.

Evaluation: Balance Between Independence and Accountability

1. **Strength in Design, Weakness in Operation:** While the framework robustly protects independence, procedural chokepoints and political discretion erode accountability, producing what scholars call an 'accountability vacuum'.

2. **Comparative and Reform Perspectives:** Law Commission Reports and global practices (UK Judicial Conduct Investigations Office) suggest independent oversight bodies with graded sanctions can reconcile autonomy with responsibility.

Conclusion

As Justice J.S. Verma warned, independence without accountability risks erosion of trust. Reforms aligning procedure with constitutional morality are vital to preserve the judiciary's democratic legitimacy.**"**

Examine the strategic shifts proposed in the Draft National Electricity Policy 2026. Analyze how the integration of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) and tariff rationalization can revolutionize India's energy landscape while ensuring industrial competitiveness and sustainable decarbonization.

Introduction

In **2026, India's Draft National Electricity Policy** marks a decisive shift from access-centric reforms to a low-carbon, competitive power ecosystem, aligning energy security, industrial growth and climate commitments under **Viksit Bharat @2047.**

Strategic Reorientation of India's Power Policy: From Coal-Dependence to Clean Baseload

1. **Policy Reset after Two Decades:** Replacing **NEP 2005, the Draft NEP 2026** recalibrates priorities from mere electrification to **reliability, sustainability and financial viability,** anticipating per capita consumption **beyond 4,000 kWh by 2047,** as projected by **NITI Aayog.**

2. **Energy Transition with Security Lens:** Unlike earlier renewable-heavy narratives, the policy explicitly recognises the need for **round-the-clock (RTC) low-carbon baseload**, positioning nuclear alongside renewables to ensure grid inertia and frequency stability.

Integration of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs): Nuclear as a Transition Enabler

1. **Technological Leap through SMRs and Bharat Small Reactors:** By promoting **220–300** MWe SMRs, **NEP 2026 embraces modularisation, fleet-mode deployment and passive safety**, consistent with **IAEA's SMR roadmap** and **global pilots in Canada and the UK.**

2. **Decarbonising Hard-to-Abate Industrial Sectors:** Allowing direct nuclear power use by **commercial and industrial (C&I) consumers** enables substitution of coal-based captive plants in steel, aluminium and cement—sectors responsible for **nearly 30% of India's** industrial emissions (IEA).

3. **Private Participation after SHANTI Act, 2025:** Breaking the state monopoly, the **SHANTI** Act operationalises **public–private partnerships** in nuclear generation, unlocking green finance, including Green Bonds, and reducing fiscal stress on the exchequer.

Tariff Rationalization: Restoring Financial Health and Market Discipline

1. **Index-Linked Automatic Tariff Revision:** To address DISCOM losses exceeding **₹7 lakh crore (RBI, 2025)**, **NEP 2026 proposes index-linked tariff resets,** ensuring timely cost pass-through and reducing populist tariff suppression.

2. **Cross-Subsidy Reform for Industrial Competitiveness:** Exempting manufacturing, railways and metros from cross-subsidy surcharges aligns with **Make in India and logistics efficiency goals,** correcting decades of industrial overpricing where tariffs often exceeded cost of **supply by 80–100%.**

3. **Demand Charges and Cost-Reflective Pricing:** Shifting fixed-cost recovery to demand charges strengthens **DISCOM balance sheets amid rooftop solar** and distributed generation growth, echoing recommendations of the **Electricity (Amendment) Bill** debates.

Transformational Impact on India's Energy Landscape

1. **Grid Stability in a High-RE Scenario:** Nuclear provides system inertia and complements **Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS),** reducing reliance on costly storage as renewable penetration rises beyond 50%.

2. **Energy Security and Import Substitution:** Scaling nuclear capacity to **100 GW by 2047** lowers dependence on imported fossil fuels, insulating India from geopolitical energy shocks, as witnessed during the **Russia–Ukraine conflict.**

Constraints and Caveats

1. **Capital Intensity and Fuel Sovereignty:** With nuclear costing nearly **₹30 crore/MW versus ₹6–7 crore/MW** for coal, affordability and uranium supply control remain key investor concerns, necessitating regulatory clarity and fuel assurance mechanisms.

2. **Regulatory and Social Readiness:** AERB must evolve towards fleet licensing, while public acceptance around SMR siting near industrial clusters demands transparent risk communication.

Conclusion

Echoing President Droupadi Murmu's call for sustainable growth, NEP 2026 blends reform and realism. As Amartya Sen notes, development endures only when efficiency, equity and ethics advance together.

Analyze the paradox of India's stable aggregate growth amidst declining household savings and surging consumer debt. Evaluate the long-term implications of this 'growing financial fragility' on the sustainability of consumption-driven development and the overall resilience of the Indian economy.

Introduction

By **2026, India exhibits a macroeconomic paradox:** GDP growth **above 6% coexists** with declining net household financial savings and rising consumer debt, raising concerns about the sustainability of consumption-led growth.

Aggregate Stability versus Household Stress: Understanding the Paradox

Macro Comfort Masking Micro Fragility

1. At the aggregate level, India appears resilient. **RBI's Financial Stability Report (Dec 2025)** shows household debt at **~41–42% of GDP**—lower than peers like **China or Malaysia**.

2. Yet, **Net Household Financial Savings (NHFS)** have structurally compressed to nearly **5–7% of GDP,** signalling erosion of precautionary buffers.

3. This divergence reflects what economists term **"balance-sheet illusion"—**headline stability hiding underlying stress.

Declining Household Savings: Structural and Behavioural Shifts

1. **Income–Consumption Decoupling: RBI Annual Report (2024–25) highlights** uneven real income growth, especially in the informal sector **(≈85% of workforce).** Despite this, consumption has remained buoyant, implying reliance on credit rather than income-led demand.

2. **Portfolio Reallocation and Financialisation:** Households are shifting from traditional safe assets **(bank deposits, PPF)** to market-linked instruments. **Monthly SIP inflows** exceeding **₹26,000 crore in 2025** sustain a **wealth effect**, but expose households to volatility and pro-cyclicality.

Surging Consumer Debt: From Asset Creation to Gap-Filling

1. **Rise of Unsecured Retail Credit:** Over **55% of incremental retail credit** is now non-housing—personal loans, credit cards, **BNPL schemes**. Unlike housing loans, these do not generate productive assets, weakening long-term repayment capacity.

2. **Credit as Shock Absorber:** Borrowing increasingly substitutes for state and employer risk-sharing. Rising out-of-pocket expenditure on health and education—despite schemes like **Ayushman Bharat—forces households** to leverage high-cost credit, heightening vulnerability.

Risk Transfer from State to Households

1. **Fiscal Consolidation with Limited Cushioning:** State Finances **(RBI, 2024–25)** show capital expenditure prioritisation amid constrained revenue spending. Committed expenditures **consume over 30% of state revenues**, shrinking fiscal space for counter-cyclical transfers.

2. **Investment-Led but Household-Neutral Growth: Union Budget 2025–26's** emphasis on infrastructure **(effective capex ₹15.5 lakh crore) boosts** medium-term potential but offers limited short-term income smoothing, implicitly shifting adjustment burdens onto households.

Macroeconomic Implications of Growing Financial Fragility

1. **Reduced Domestic Savings Pool:** Households are India's largest net capital suppliers. Declining savings raise dependence on **volatile FPI flows and external borrowing**, increasing exposure to global financial shocks.

2. **Heightened Monetary Policy Sensitivity:** High leverage makes middle-class consumption vulnerable to **"higher-for-longer" interest rates**. RBI tightening could trigger abrupt demand compression, amplifying business cycle volatility.

3. **Consumption-Led Growth at Risk:** With private consumption contributing **nearly 60% of GDP, debt-financed demand lacks resilience**. Any income shock, asset price correction, or employment slowdown could force sharp household retrenchment.

Way Forward: Rebuilding Household Resilience

1. **Income-Centric Growth Strategy:** Boosting real wages through **labour-intensive manufacturing, MSMEs**, and services is critical to restoring savings-led consumption.

2. **Fiscal and Regulatory Nudges:** Rebalancing tax incentives towards safe savings instruments and tightening RBI oversight on unsecured lending can rebuild buffers without stifling credit access.

3. **Strengthening Social Safety Nets:** Expanding health, education, and social insurance coverage would reduce precautionary borrowing and align India closer to **OECD-style risk-sharing models.**

Conclusion

Growth without security is fragile. Echoing **President Droupadi Murmu,** India's development must restore household resilience—ensuring citizens remain shock absorbers by choice, not compulsion.

Analyze the governance challenges and institutional gaps fueling the 'silent crisis' of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) in India. In light of a drying antibiotic pipeline, evaluate the policy measures required to regulate antibiotic overuse while ensuring future health security.

Introduction

By 2026, **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) has emerged as India's 'silent pandemic',** with **ICMR and IHME data** showing rising resistance to **last-resort antibiotics, threatening routine healthcare, surgeries, and public health security.**

AMR as a Governance Failure, Not Merely a Medical Problem

1. From clinical issue to **systemic crisis, AMR** in India reflects deep governance and institutional deficits rather than isolated clinical misuse.

2. Despite **Schedule H1 regulations, weak enforcement and fragmented oversight** have allowed **irrational antibiotic consumption** to flourish across human, animal, and environmental interfaces.

Governance and Institutional Gaps Fueling AMR

1. **Regulatory Weakness and Enforcement Deficit:** India formally restricts **over-the-counter sale** of critical antibiotics, yet studies show **widespread non-prescription access**, especially in rural and peri-urban areas. The absence of pharmacist accountability and poor inspection capacity undermine regulatory intent, exemplifying **implementation failure.**

2. **Diagnostic Deficiency and Empirical Prescribing:** Limited access to rapid diagnostics at the primary healthcare level forces physicians into empirical, broad-spectrum antibiotic use. RBI-style data transparency exists for finance, but health systems lack equivalent real-time surveillance architecture for infections and resistance patterns.

3. **Fragmented Surveillance Architecture: ICMR's AMR surveillance network** covers only around **25 tertiary hospitals, producing skewed, high-resistance data**. Unlike **Japan's JANIS model (2,000 hospitals),** India lacks a nationally representative, interoperable surveillance grid, weakening evidence-based policymaking.

4. **Environmental and Pharmaceutical Externalities:** Poor wastewater treatment near pharmaceutical clusters such as **Hyderabad and Baddi creates resistance hotspots**. Environmental regulation remains weak, allowing antibiotic residues to select resistant organisms, a classic case of unpriced by policy.

5. **Behavioural and Cultural Misuse: Self-medication for viral illnesses**, reliance on informal providers, and prophylactic prescribing reflect low antibiotic literacy. AMR is driven largely by human behaviour, not merely animal antibiotic use.

The Drying Antibiotic Pipeline: A Structural Market Failure

1. **Innovation Stagnation: WHO (2024) reports** that most antibiotics in development lack novel mechanisms of action. Pharma firms face poor returns due to short treatment durations and stewardship-driven restricted use—an archetypal **market failure requiring state** intervention.

2. **Dependence on Toxic Last-Resort Drugs:** India increasingly relies on drugs like Colistin, once abandoned due to toxicity. Resistance to such **"last lines" reflects a broken pharmaceutical buffer**, risking a post-antibiotic era where minor infections become fatal.

Evaluating Policy Measures for Future Health Security

1. **Strengthening Antibiotic Stewardship: Kerala's decade-long antimicrobial stewardship** programme demonstrates that rational prescription, clinician **training, and phased OTC restrictions** work better than abrupt bans. Stewardship must be **institutionalised nationwide** through mandatory **hospital antibiotic policies.**

2. **Scaling Diagnostics and Surveillance:** Expanding free diagnostics under the **National Health Mission** and deploying **rapid tests at PHCs can shift care from empirical** to **evidence-based treatment**. A nationwide **AMR data grid, akin to JANIS,** is essential for **predictive governance.**

3. Reforming Pharmaceutical Innovation Policy: India **must deploy pull incentives**—market entry rewards, public procurement guarantees, and public-private partnerships—**to revive antibiotic R&D.** The success of vaccine missions **shows state-led innovation is feasible.**

4. Operationalising the One Health Framework: NAP-AMR 2.0 (2025–29) must integrate human health, veterinary regulation, **food safety (FSSAI residue norms), and environmental governance, r**ecognising the gut microbiome as a **reservoir of resistance genes**.

5. **Balancing Access and Excess:** The core dilemma lies in **ensuring antibiotic access** for vulnerable populations while preventing misuse. This requires **calibrated regulation**, not prohibition—aligning public health ethics with **constitutional duties under Article 47**.

Conclusion

Public health is constitutional governance. Echoing PM Modi's warnings, India must treat AMR as a security threat—combining stewardship, innovation, and One Health to protect future generations.

Examine the critique that the World Economic Forum has morphed into a 'Western Geopolitical Forum.' Evaluate how China is leveraging this shift to institutionalize alternative platforms for the Global South and its implications for the future of inclusive global economic governance.

Introduction

By 2026, declining **Global South participation and WEF surveys reveal Davos'** drift from economic coordination to strategic signalling, reviving critiques of the **'Davos Consensus' as Western-centric global governance.**

WEF's Transformation into a Western Geopolitical Forum

1. **Geopoliticisation of an Economic Platform:** Originally envisioned by Klaus Schwab as a space for **stakeholder capitalism,** the WEF has increasingly **prioritised geopolitics over growth**. Recent Davos agendas have been dominated by **NATO expansion, sanctions, technology decoupling, and transatlantic frictions**—issues reflecting **Western strategic anxieties rather** than developmental concerns of the **Global South.**

2. Western Dominance and Representational Deficit: Despite rhetoric of **"Global South inclusion,"** panels and outcomes remain dominated by **G7 policymakers and Western multinational CEOs. Oxfam's 2024 Davos inequality report** noted that over **60% of speakers represented advanced** economies, reinforcing perceptions that developing countries are **"subjects of discussion, not agenda-setters."**

3. **Normative Conditionalities and the 'Values Gap':** The emphasis on **ESG norms, carbon border taxes (CBAM), and liberal political conditionalities** is often **perceived as regulatory imperialism**. For low-income countries prioritising poverty reduction and infrastructure, such standards raise compliance costs without commensurate capacity support, undermining policy autonomy.

China's Strategic Response: Institutionalising Economic Alternatives

1. **Development-First Multilateralism:** China has leveraged this vacuum through platforms like the **Boao Forum for Asia and the Annual Meeting of the New Champions (AMNC),** focusing on trade facilitation, industrial value chains, digital economy, and green manufacturing—minimising overt geopolitical contestation.

2. **Narrative of 'True Multilateralism':** Through initiatives such as the **Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI),** China projects an alternative discourse centred on **sovereignty, non-interference, and "shared development."** This resonates with countries wary of Western interventionism.

3. **Parallel Financial and Technological Architectures:** China showcases alternatives to Western-dominated systems—**AIIB for infrastructure finance, the Digital Yuan via mBridge for cross-border payments, and BeiDou for navigation**—reducing dependence on institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and SWIFT, often associated with political conditionalities.

Why the Global South Is Pivoting Away from Davos

1. **Pragmatic Minilateralism:** Many African, Southeast Asian, and Latin American states prefer issue-based coalitions delivering tangible outcomes. **Belt and Road projects,** despite criticisms, have financed ports, railways, and energy grids where Western finance retreated post-2008.

2. **Economic Complementarity with China:** China is the largest trading partner **for over 120 countries (UNCTAD, 2024).** Its forums offer direct market access to the world's largest manufacturing base at a time when Western economies pursue protectionism and industrial subsidies.

Implications for Global Economic Governance

1. **Fragmented Multilateralism:** The erosion of Davos' neutrality signals a shift toward **club-based governance,** with competing norm-setting hubs rather than universal platforms, risking regulatory fragmentation.

2. Strategic Space for Middle Powers: Countries like **India, Brazil, and Indonesia** are emerging as swing states, engaging both **Western and Chinese platforms** to maximise strategic autonomy—evident in **India's G20 presidency emphasising "development over dogma."**

Conclusion

Inclusive global governance demands plural platforms. As President Droupadi Murmu noted, development **must unite, not divide**—beyond Western or Chinese binaries.