

PSIR & GS-2

DAILY BRIEF

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Amit Pratap Singh
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Two wounded strongmen & the trouble with being invincible

Two wounded strongmen and the trouble with being invincible

INDIA AND America are facing a new spectre: The prospect of a deeply wounded strongman. A wounded strongman is a leader who rode to electoral success on personalised power as an answer to many of society's major challenges. What happens when the aura collapses? Leaders like Narendra Modi and Donald Trump were regarded by their followers as geniuses, with deep insights into the demands of history that ordinary mortals could not fathom. They could do no wrong. But then the tide turns, and the emperor suddenly has no clothes. Even their die-hard followers don't expect much; they cling on because of sunk costs, or fear, or simply their loathing for anyone else. The bottom line is Both are deeply wounded. But at the same time, they are going to be in power for the next two to three years. Their authority and capacity to govern may have diminished. But their ruthlessness and stakes in power have not. They are still administratively empowered and have the state apparatus at their disposal. This is a novel challenge for us.

The failures that lead to their diminished aura are all real. They are also at a dead end on how to address these failures. The headline numbers in both the United States and India don't look bad. But the deep anxiety about the economy in both countries is palpable. In the US, it is concern over the debt, inflation, jobs, tariffs, and all-round uncertainty. In India, the headline growth number can barely disguise deep unemployment and social discontent. The economy is officially successful, but that success is not translating into better individual life prospects. As

quidlian governance begins to collapse, the leaders appear even more disinterested in mundane administration. The corruption is now openly and palpably talked about. For Trump, there is no easy way to rein in the deficit, tame inflation, reduce tariffs, or maintain low interest rates. For Modi, there is no easy way of producing productive jobs. His governing style is not conducive to ordinary private investors, and his ideology is deeply destructive to education. There is no easy exit from the economic stasis.

Both Trump and Modi promised a foreign policy in which the leader would strike a new direction. Their sheer will would allow their countries to overcome the constraints of the past and ride the world in a blaze of national glory. Trump's foreign policy has been catastrophic, making both America and the world less secure. Modi's failures are subtler. But India is now less respected in the neighbourhood and the Global South; it has less room for strategic manoeuvre, and its overall security environment has not improved. The foreign policy does not provide a compensatory theatre for greatness.

There are big differences between the contexts of Trump and Modi: Modi has a powerful party, an ideological organisation, and an ideology that can survive his power. He is also dealing with weaker institutions. But both have run out of ideas; their paranoia makes their talent pool small; and their administrative style cannot deal with complex governance challenges. In truth, even strongmen rule through a clever combination of co-option,



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

repression, and ideology. But most importantly, they cannot acknowledge political weakness without that weakness becoming a self-fulfilling reality. But their aura of strength is indispensable; give up on that, and everything else collapses.

But what happens when strength cannot be projected through popularity or actual achievement? How do you demonstrate strength when you cannot fix the economy, have failed to navigate the turbulence of world politics, and do not believe in institutions that can actually govern? The only answer is more repression and de-institutionalisation. In Modi's case, it is apparent: There is a surface concession to the Cockroach Janta Party and its demands. But institutionally, the search for more repressive instruments will only intensify. A wounded regime can have an enormous administrative apparatus for coercion at its disposal. Both strongmen have not been averse to using citizenship scrutiny, tax and regulatory enforcement, investigative agencies, welfare eligibility, and playing favourites with business. Both are beginning to toy with the legitimacy of the electoral mechanism, though in different ways. Trump might still try to delegitimise the election process. In India, the legitimacy of the electoral process is now potentially hostage to the cruel and possibly selective procedures of the Election Commission.

How do you demonstrate strength when you cannot fix the economy, have failed to navigate the turbulence of world politics, and do not believe in institutions that can actually govern?

Modi's ecosystem can employ more vigilante street power, targeting students, minorities, and dissenters. Just imagine, as *The Indian Express* reported, churchgoers

in Mumbai are being put in a position of having to self-declare that they are attending prayer voluntarily, as a response to disruptions, allegedly by groups like Bajrang Dal. The epitome of repression is when citizens are being asked to carry proof of their innocence at every turn. The Cockroach Janta Party, notwithstanding this trend towards repression, is not diminishing. Trump may not be able to resort to vigilante street actors without further losing legitimacy. It is an open question how much of the coercive apparatus of the state — ICE or federalisation of law enforcement — Trump can actually deploy. Modi has one more arrow in his arsenal: Communalism, the sense that he can address every cultural grievance. Trump can also try the politics of cultural grievance, but the axis of that grievance is less clear-cut than Modi's Hindutva. There is one final move wounded autocrats might be tempted to make. Since they have failed ordinary tests of competence, they might need a deeper crisis which might change the canons by which their usefulness is judged: A state of emergency of some kind. Can they manufacture one?

How much destruction the wounded strongmen can unleash will depend on a lot of factors: The persistence of counter-mobilisation, the nature of the opposition, etc. But it would be a mistake to think that political weakness means a loss of coercive power. Weakness just might be a reason to use power more ruthlessly. As PG Woodhouse might say, we might find ourselves in a novel pickle indeed.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

Context The weakening of the political aura surrounding powerful, personality-driven leaders raises questions about how they respond when electoral authority declines but control over the state apparatus remains intact.

Facts

- Political authority may decline even while the coercive capacity of the state remains intact.
- Economic underperformance & geopolitical turbulence can weaken the legitimacy of personalised leadership.
- In India, the role of party organisation, ideology and communal mobilisation in sustaining political power.

Analytical Crux

The article highlights the distinction between political authority and coercive capacity. Personalised leadership derives legitimacy from the promise that one leader can solve problems that institutions cannot. When this promise weakens, the leader may rely increasingly on state machinery, repression or polarisation to project strength. This makes the decline phase of personalised rule particularly significant for democratic backsliding. However, constitutional institutions, federalism, party competition, civil society and periodic elections can continue to constrain executive power.

Verbatim Quotes

"But it would be a mistake to think that political weakness means a loss of coercive power. Weakness just might be a reason to use power more ruthlessly."

India's return to its central Asian neighbourhood

India's return to its Central Asian neighbourhood

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to travel to Central Asia in the next few days, the first port of call being a state visit to Uzbekistan, followed by participation in the meeting of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, called Frunze in Soviet times. The change of names is not just symbolic. It represents the birth of a new region.

Central Asia is an evocative moniker. The region lies landlocked, situated between two giants, Russia and China. In most of its countries, the post 1991 generation has largely taken over, engaged in finding a new internal equilibrium. Islam is the main religion, but does not define identity and is therefore not a political project. The fight against radicalisation and terrorism is uncompromising. Occasional catastrophes such as the devastating Crocus City Hall terror attack in Moscow in 2024, China's constant fear of spread of radicalisation in the border regions and export of instability and extremist ideology from Afghanistan are everyday reminders of the challenges.

In Central Asia, there are a multitude of ethnicities, languages, geographies and resource endowments. These influence domestic and foreign policy choices, with Turkmenistan practising rigorous neutrality. Relations among countries are complicated by legacy disputes over borders, water resources and overlapping ethnicities. Türkiye and Iran are dominant influences, while the United States and the European Union are working their way in as Russia's hold weakens and China's grows.

Mr. Modi's 2015 visit to all five Central Asian countries was historic. It marked the end of an unstated Indian policy of deferring to Russia in its periphery – politely keeping away. In 2017, India was welcomed into the SCO as a full member by Russia, as Pakistan was, by China. To mark the 30 years of their independence/diplomatic ties, India



Pankaj Saran
Former Deputy
National Security
Adviser, Ambassador
and Convenor,
NatStrat

The Prime Minister's visit is an opportunity for India to deepen its strategic presence, expand economic ties and strengthen its diplomatic influence

made an unprecedented gesture of inviting all Central Asian leaders as chief guests for the Republic Day in 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the event to be held only virtually, but not without it leading to the creation of high-level mechanisms for cooperation, including the India-Central Asia Dialogue.

Beyond geography

If South Asia and West Asia, not to speak of East Asia and the Indian Ocean Region are India's neighbourhoods, Central Asia is no less. A lack of overland connectivity does not take away from the civilisational links India has with the region – in culture, religion, language and architecture. Geographically, India and Tajikistan are separated only by the narrow Wakhan corridor that lies in Afghanistan. India is part of the continuum that is the Eurasian landmass.

Pakistan, a historically new piece in the equation, seeks to usurp the historical lineage based on religious affinity. Its tactic to cut India off, physically and otherwise, from these historical connections, like its other India-centric gambits, is, as anecdotal evidence shows, doomed to failure. Yet, India must not allow this to succeed. Countries of the region are today looking beyond Russia and China for partners in their socio-economic development. India's lived experience as a plural, moderate and democratic society is admired not feared in the region.

It is against this background that Mr. Modi's decision to go back to the region must be welcomed. India should build upon the foundations to consolidate its rightful place in the region, whether in the economic, trade, defence, natural resources, technology spheres or in softer areas such as cultural, educational, health and tourism exchanges. The choice of a state visit to Uzbekistan is consistent with the steady improvement of relations under President Mirziyoyev since 2016. It is among the most

dynamic countries of the region, and most forward in the diversification of its foreign policy. Any Indian visitor to Tashkent, Samarkand or Bukhara will vouch for the empathy and resonance between the two peoples.

There are also hardnosed reasons – Uzbekistan has been uncompromising in its fight against terrorism and extremism. Its intimate knowledge of Afghanistan, and pragmatic approach towards the Taliban, are of key importance to India. India has had detailed discussions with it on alternative rail and road connectivity routes through Iran and Afghanistan which need to be revisited in the light of recent developments in these countries.

India and the SCO

Starting from the small beginnings of the "Shanghai Five" in 1996, the SCO, in its 25th anniversary, has grown to 10 members, 15 dialogue partners and two observers. With the exception of 2024, Mr. Modi has been a regular participant in SCO Heads of States meetings. India's SCO engagement is driven by geography, not ideology. Within the SCO chambers, negotiating against a China-Pakistan dyad is demanding but essential. India has kept its head above the swamp by suggesting several ideas to enhance cooperation in the economic, technological and civilisational fields. In Tianjin last year, Mr. Modi put forward the vision of security, connectivity, and opportunity for the SCO. In the instant case, for a country as overwhelmingly dependent on China as Kyrgyzstan, the SCO, and India in particular, offers a valuable geopolitical lifeline.

Taken together with his visits to the Indian Ocean Region last month, Mr. Modi would have traversed far-flung corners of India's maritime and continental neighbourhood in quick succession reflecting India's geostrategic imperatives and opportunities.

Context Central Asia is emerging as an increasingly important component of India's extended neighbourhood due to its geographical location, energy resources, connectivity potential & links with Afghanistan, Russia and China.

Facts

India's 2015 visit to all 5 central Asian republics marked a shift away from its earlier deference to Russia in the region.

India & Pakistan joined the SCO together in 2017, sponsored respectively by Russia and China.

The Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan separates India from Tajikistan, making alternative connectivity through Iran and Afghanistan strategically important.

Analytical Crux

India's central Asian policy reflects the convergence of geography, connectivity & strategic autonomy. Although the absence of direct overland access constrains economic engagement, central Asia remains important because of its proximity to Afghanistan, Russia and China & its resource potential. The SCO provides India with an institutional platform for engagement despite the China-Pakistan factor. Connectivity initiatives through Iran & Afghanistan can reduce India's geographical disadvantage, but political instability in these transit states remains a major constraint.

Verbatim Quotes

"A lack of overland connectivity does not take away from the civilisational links India has with the region - in culture, religion, language and architecture."

Strengthening defence Shakti for Atmanirbhar Bharat



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Strengthening Defence Shakti for Atmanirbhar Bharat

Lt Gen (Dr) V K Saxena (Retd), PVSM, AVSM, VSM

August 27, 2026 Views: 127 Comments: 0

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Lt Gen (Dr) V K Saxena (Retd), PVSM, AVSM, VSM

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Strengthening Defence Shakti for Atmanirbhar Bharat

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Context India's pursuit of Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence requires moving beyond domestic assembly towards indigenous design, intellectual - property ownership & technological sovereignty.

Facts

The proposed PSFIR (Private Self-Funded Indigenous R&D) framework seeks recognition for privately funded indigenous defence technologies.

PSFIR eligibility would require development entirely through private capital & achievement of Technology Readiness Level 7 or above.

Analytical Crux

Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence is reframed as technological sovereignty rather than mere domestic production. Indigenous capability becomes meaningful only when India owns the underlying intellectual property & possesses the authority to modify, upgrade and customise systems. This strengthens strategic autonomy and reduces dependence during crises. However, preferential procurement for private developers must balance innovation incentives with competition, cost efficiency and accountability. A product-specific PSFIR framework could therefore bridge the gap between public sector capability and private sector risk taking.

Verbatim Quotes

"Companies that have self-funded indigenous defence R&D to the point of a proven, deployable product are vanishingly rare."

UPSC LINK

- **PSIR 2025, 15 marks** — Do you think that legitimacy acquired by consent or manufactured by indoctrination is an essential element in maintenance of political rule? Justify your answer with relevant examples.
- **PSIR 2024, 20 marks** — Legitimacy adds positive value to political authority and obligation. Discuss.
- **GS-2 2024, 10 marks** — Critically analyse India's evolving diplomatic, economic and strategic relations with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) highlighting their increasing significance in regional and global geopolitics.
- **GS-2 2024, 10 marks** — 'The West is fostering India as an alternative to reduce dependence on China's supply chain and as a strategic ally to counter China's political and economic dominance.' Explain this statement with examples.
- **GS-2 2025, 10 marks** — "With the waning of globalization, post-Cold War world is becoming a site of sovereign nationalism." Elucidate.

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