



● POLITY

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Zelensky calls for truce amid aid cut

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Our meeting in Washington, at the White House on Friday, did not go the way it was supposed to be. It is regrettable that it happened this way. It is time to make things right.

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY
President of Ukraine

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed a willingness to work with U.S. President Donald Trump to secure lasting peace in Ukraine. Following Trump's decision to halt U.S. military aid to Ukraine, Zelenskyy called for negotiations and proposed an immediate truce in the air and sea, banning missile and drone attacks on civilian infrastructure—provided Russia agrees to the same. He emphasized that Ukraine is ready to negotiate as soon as possible under Trump's leadership.

Oval Office clash

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy clashed with U.S. President Donald Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance

during a tense Oval Office meeting, following weeks of rising tensions. Trump had called Zelenskyy a “dictator,” while Zelenskyy accused him of falling for Russian “disinformation.” After being expelled from the White House, Zelenskyy expressed regret and called for constructive future cooperation. He also offered the U.S. preferential access to Ukraine's natural resources. Meanwhile, Trump paused all military aid to Ukraine, conditioning its resumption on Ukraine's commitment to peace talks with Russia. Trump also criticized Zelenskyy for suggesting the war could last much longer.

Look into complaints of political parties, EC tells State-level polling officers

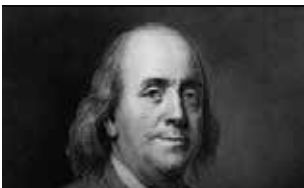
POLITY & GOVERNANCE

The Election Commission (EC) has directed State-level officials to regularly engage with political parties to address concerns about voter list anomalies. During a two-day conference of Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs), the EC instructed them to submit issue-wise action taken reports by March 31. The directive follows allegations from the Trinamool Congress about duplicate voter IDs in West Bengal and claims by the Congress of voter list manipulation in Maharashtra.

'Be approachable'

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar and the Election Commission (EC) interacted with Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) to discuss election management improvements within the legal framework. Kumar emphasized transparency, responsiveness to political parties, and strict adherence to electoral laws, including the Representation of the People Act and related rules. He also instructed officials to ensure that all eligible citizens above 18 are registered as voters. Ease of voting

The Election Commission (EC) has directed officials to ensure polling booths have 800-1,200 voters each and are within two kilometers of electors' residences. To improve accessibility, booths should be set up in rural areas with essential facilities and in high-rise buildings and slum clusters to boost urban voter turnout. The EC has identified 28 key stakeholders in the election process, including officials, political parties, and candidates, and aims to enhance their capacity through the ongoing conference.



“If you invest more in your education, then you are likely to get more interest in it.”

—Benjamin Franklin

Jaishankar meets U.K. PM Starmer, Cabinet officials

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar began his visit to the U.K. with meetings in London, including with Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds to discuss the India-U.K. free trade agreement. He also met Home Secretary Yvette Cooper to discuss talent mobility, people-to-people exchanges, and tackling trafficking and extremism. Jaishankar will inaugurate Indian consulates in Belfast and Manchester to strengthen diplomatic and trade ties. He is set to meet Foreign Secretary David Lammy at Chevening House to discuss the Technology Security Initiative and collaboration in critical minerals, AI, telecom, supply chains, and healthcare.

Belgium to scale up defence ties, set to sign MoU this year

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Maxime Prévot emphasized the need for Europe's "strategic autonomy" in response to U.S. policy shifts on the Ukraine war, highlighting Belgium's plan to strengthen its defense sector and seek cooperation with India. Following talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Belgian Princess Astrid, Belgian Defence Minister Theo Francken announced that India and Belgium would sign a defense cooperation MoU by the end of 2025. Meanwhile, India continues its balanced approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri set to visit Moscow to prepare for a high-level meeting between Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is expected to visit India for the annual summit. Modi has also been invited to Russia's Victory Day celebrations on May 9.

Situation in flux

A high-level Belgian delegation visited India amid European concerns over the U.S. shift on the Russia-Ukraine war, following reports that President Donald Trump is halting aid to Kyiv. The visit follows that of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and precedes an EU summit in Brussels to discuss future strategies. Belgian Deputy PM Maxime Prévot stressed the need for Europe's "strategic autonomy" in defense and reaffirmed Belgium's support for Ukraine. While Ukraine was not discussed in talks with PM Modi, Belgium hopes India will support European defense development, with Belgian companies offering defense technologies for "Make in India."

Defence cooperation

Belgium will enhance defense cooperation with India by posting a Defence Attaché and signing a defense cooperation MoU by the end of 2025. This agreement is part of a broader engagement, with 24 MoUs signed between the two countries in sectors including food processing, health, engineering, and education.

India hit targeted maternal mortality rate of 100 deaths per lakh live births: Nadda

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

India has achieved its National Health Policy target of reducing maternal mortality to 100 deaths per one lakh live births, with an 83% decline in MMR between 1990 and 2020, surpassing global trends. Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda, chairing the ninth Mission Steering Group meeting, highlighted significant declines in Infant Mortality Rate (69%) and Under-5 Mortality Rate (75%) during the same period. He emphasized the need for effective implementation of health schemes, capacity-building for Chief Medical Officers, and better incentives for ASHA workers. Nadda also stressed ensuring quality in new healthcare initiatives like BHISHM.

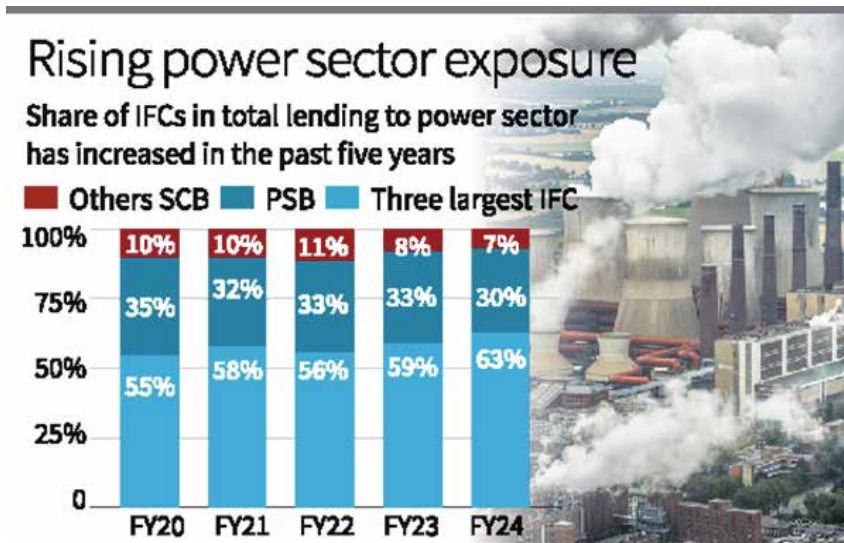


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IMF: overexposure by NBFCs may imperil financial system

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT



The IMF's *India Financial System Stability Assessment* warns that stress in non-banking finance companies (NBFCs), particularly those overexposed to the power and infrastructure sectors, could pose risks to the financial system. In fiscal 2024, 63% of power sector loans came from three large infrastructure financing NBFCs, with increasing reliance on market instruments over bank borrowings. State-owned NBFCs like IREDA face higher risk. The IMF also conducted stress tests on banks, finding that in a stagflation scenario, public sector banks (PSBs) may struggle to maintain the required 9% capital adequacy ratio (CAR). It recommends that PSBs strengthen their capital base by retaining earnings instead of paying dividends to ensure economic stability.

U.S. tariffs take effect; China, Mexico, Canada announce countermeasures

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

U.S. President Donald Trump's tariffs on Canada and Mexico took effect, imposing a 25% tax on imports and a 10% duty on Canadian energy products. Tariffs on Chinese imports were also doubled to 20%, prompting Beijing to retaliate with tariffs on U.S. farm exports and restrictions on American companies. Canada announced retaliatory tariffs on over \$100 billion of U.S. goods, with Prime Minister Trudeau accusing Trump of economic sabotage. Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum pledged countermeasures, to be announced soon. The escalating trade war has sparked concerns about inflation and economic instability, despite Trump's claims that tariffs will boost U.S. prosperity.

Little has changed in the Income-Tax Bill, 2025

ECONOMICS & DEVELOPMENT

The Union Finance Minister introduced the Income-Tax Bill, 2025, in Parliament to replace the Income-Tax Act, 1961, aiming to simplify tax laws and reduce litigation. The government claims the existing law is complex and unclear due to numerous exceptions and clauses. However, despite structural changes, critics argue the Bill retains many of the current law's ambiguities and even grants more authoritarian powers. Globally, legal drafting trends favor plain language for greater accessibility and transparency. While some believe simplification may reduce legal precision, global examples suggest clearer laws can improve compliance and lower litigation.

Complex and knotty text

Despite its goal of simplifying tax laws, the Income-Tax Bill, 2025, fails to make the law more accessible. It retains dense language, merely replacing complex terms without improving clarity for taxpayers. While fiscal laws are inherently technical, the Bill does not introduce substantial policy changes, making it more of a restructured version of the 1961 Act rather than a true reform. Some outdated provisions have been removed, and compliance timelines consolidated, but these changes could have been made through amendments instead of a complete overhaul. The Bill remains complex and litigious, as cross-references and structural tweaks do not resolve its fundamental issues.

Cosmetic alterations

The Income-Tax Bill, 2025, retains references to the old law, undermining its goal of simplification. Key definitions, such as "income," still rely on the 1961 Act, raising questions about the necessity of a new law. Without altering the statute's core philosophy, the Bill risks reopening settled legal interpretations, leading to increased litigation and uncertainty. For instance, reassessment powers, a contentious issue, were modified in 2021 but left ambiguous regarding "risk management

strategy." The Bill does not clarify such gaps but merely reorganizes existing provisions, failing to reduce complexity or prevent executive overreach.

The point of search and seizure

The Income-Tax Bill, 2025, expands the government's search and seizure powers, raising serious privacy concerns. It permits officials to access electronic data, including emails, social media accounts, and digital platforms, even overriding access codes if necessary. This marks a significant shift from existing law, which does not explicitly allow digital intrusions. The Bill lacks judicial oversight, allowing authorities to conduct searches without disclosing their reasons. Given the Supreme Court's 2017 privacy ruling, these provisions may be unconstitutional. The Bill's broad powers could be dangerous, and a more measured approach to reforming tax laws may be preferable.

Against domination

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

NASA acting administrator Janet Petro's remark about the U.S. aiming to "dominate" the moon reflects a broader aggressive stance in American space policy. While the U.S. space program is the most advanced and well-funded, her comment, similar to Donald Trump's approach, blurs the line between leadership and domination. This reveals America's self-serving priorities, much like its recent handling of international relations, and serves as a lesson for the global space community.

The moon and cislunar space are part of the global commons but face increasing protectionism and regulatory gaps. The slow pace of legal evolution, as seen in the FAA's refusal to take responsibility for SpaceX debris over Poland, raises concerns about unchecked U.S. dominance in space. NASA's stance, influenced by political rhetoric, risks undermining decades of international cooperation in space exploration. To counter unilateral actions, national and global space agencies, including ISRO, must collaborate to ensure space remains a shared domain rather than one dominated by a single nation.

Designing India's AI Safety Institute

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

India is advancing its AI ambitions with the launch of an indigenous AI model and the establishment of an AI Safety Institute (AISI) under the IndiaAI Mission's Safe and Trusted Pillar. Globally, governments are setting up AISIs to address AI risks without relying on rigid regulations. Since 2023, countries like the U.K., U.S., Singapore, and Japan have joined the global AISI network to foster a shared technical understanding of AI risks. The U.K.'s AISI introduced an open-source platform, 'Inspect,' to evaluate AI models, while the U.S. created a task force to address national security risks. Singapore's AISI focuses on content assurance, safe model design, and rigorous testing. These initiatives highlight the importance of technical precision and international cooperation in AI safety.

India-specific solutions

India must focus on local AI challenges, particularly inaccuracies and potential discrimination. The AI Safety Institute (AISI), operating on a hub-and-spoke model, will collaborate with academia, startups, industries, and government to address India's unique linguistic and technological gaps. Startups like Karya are creating high-quality, representative datasets, promoting multilingual AI development and social equity. India's AISI aims to advance indigenous research, leveraging Indian datasets and supporting Responsible AI Projects in areas like ethical AI, risk assessment, and deep-fake detection. While addressing domestic issues, AISI should also collaborate globally, drawing insights from initiatives like the Bletchley Declaration to combat cybersecurity threats and disinformation.

Common global understanding

India's AI Safety Institute (AISI) must balance local relevance with global alignment by adopting international standards while adapting them to India's context. Interoperability is key for seamless collaboration and accountability. A crucial step is establishing a global AI safety taxonomy to standardize terminology, enabling multidisciplinary research and clear responsibility attribution. Additionally, an international AI model notification framework would enhance transparency and coordinated governance.

India, as a Global South leader, can help emerging economies develop AI safety frameworks. The MeitY-UNESCO collaboration provides a foundation for ethical AI governance, while IndiaAI Mission projects focus on AI bias mitigation, synthetic data, and privacy tools. India's AISI should create indigenous responsible AI frameworks while actively engaging with the global AISI network to ensure collaboration and interoperability.

Government talks big on gender budget, delivers little

INTERNAL SECURITY

Tipping the scales

The data for the charts were sourced from India's Budget documents. They include the author's computation of gender budgets

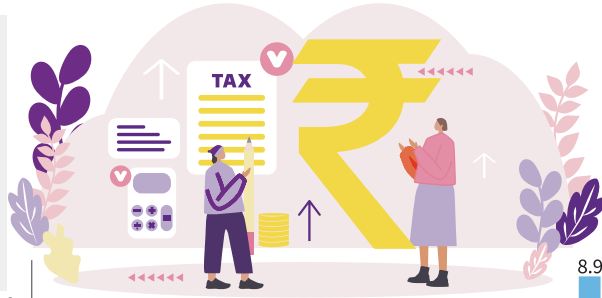


Chart 1: The chart shows the proportion of the Union Budget towards gender (%)

It is important to note here that there is no separate gender budget in the overall Budget; this term simply refers to all the allocations to gender-related schemes under various ministries and departments

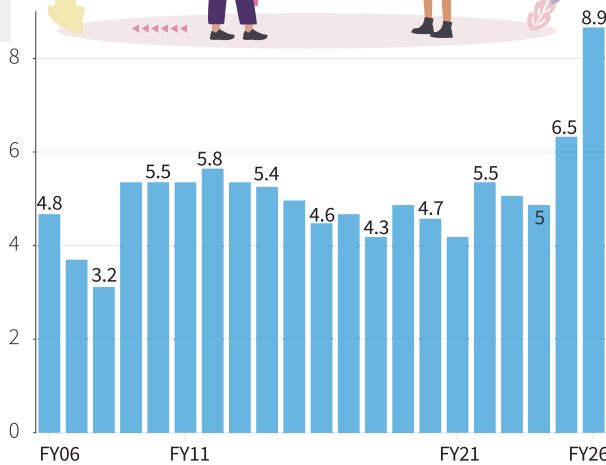


Chart 2: Distribution of gender budget over years

Part A: Schemes with 100% provision for women and girls; Part B: Schemes with 30-99% allocations for women and girls; Part C: Schemes with allocations for women and girls below 30% of the provision

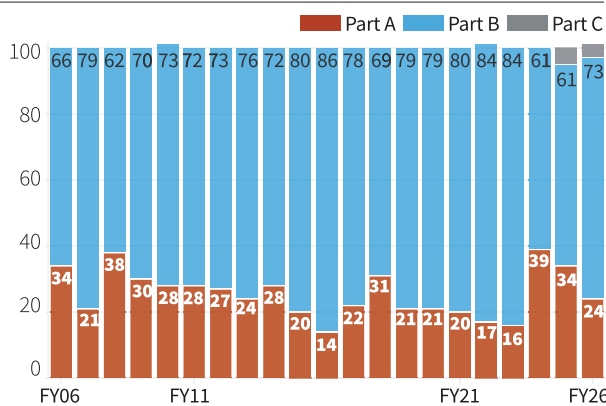
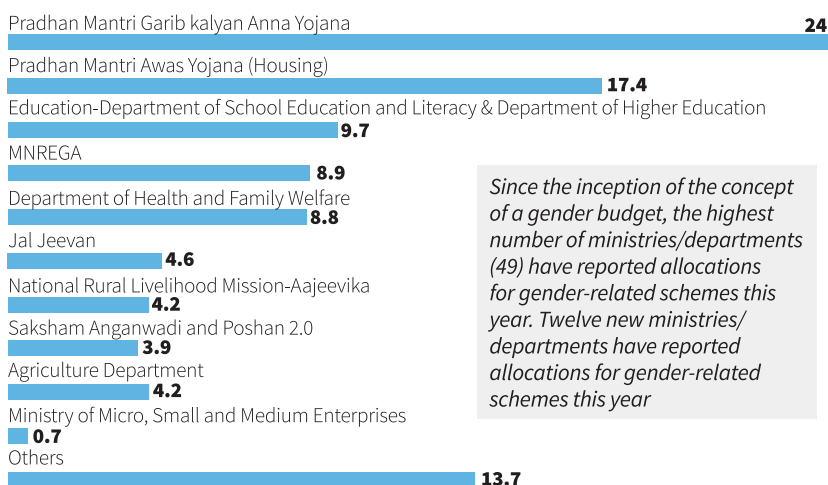


Chart 3: The chart shows the scheme/department/ministry-wise distribution of the gender budget. Figures in %



Since the inception of the concept of a gender budget, the highest number of ministries/departments (49) have reported allocations for gender-related schemes this year. Twelve new ministries/departments have reported allocations for gender-related schemes this year

The Union and State governments regularly talk about their commitment to women's empowerment. One of the four pillars of a Viksit Bharat 2047 is mahila or woman. The Finance Minister mentioned women several times in her 74-minute speech during the Union Budget.

Fiscal support is a key measure of commitment to women's empowerment. This year, the gender budget has risen to 8.9% of the overall Budget. However, the gender budget is not a separate allocation but includes funding for gender-related schemes across various ministries and departments.

Gender budgets have three components: Part A comprises schemes with 100% provision for women and girls; Part B comprises schemes with 30-99% allocations for women and girls; and Part C reflects schemes with allocations for women and girls below 30% of the provision. Part C was introduced only in the 2024-25 Budget. Over time, as seen in Chart 2, the proportion of Part A has decreased and the proportion of Part B has increased.

This year, a record 49 ministries and departments have allocated funds for gender-related schemes, with 12 new ones joining the effort. This reflects a diversification of the gender budget beyond the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Ten ministries have allocated over 30% of their funds to gender-related initiatives for FY 2025-26. The Finance Minister highlighted increased support for women, particularly in women-led enterprises and MSMEs. However, questions remain about whether the Budget will fully meet these promises.

Only 0.7% of the gender budget has been allocated to the Ministry of MSMEs, with just ₹38.4 crore (0.0009% of the gender budget) designated for women's skill development in entrepreneurship. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and the Capacity Building and Skill Development Scheme under the Ministry of Electronics and IT have received just 0.23% of the gender budget. In contrast, nearly 10% has been allocated to school and higher education, emphasizing the role of education and technical training in closing the gender gap in the labour market and contributing to long-term growth under Viksit Bharat.

The agricultural sector, which has significantly contributed to the rise in female labour force participation, has received only 4.2% of the gender budget. Notably, ₹15,000 crore of the ₹18,739 crore allocated to the Agriculture Department is for the PM-Kisan scheme, which provides ₹6,000 annually to land-owning farmers. However, since most farmland is owned by men, women who work on

these lands will not directly benefit from the scheme.

A majority (64.5%) of women aged 15-59 cited childcare and personal commitments as reasons for not working in 2023-24, highlighting the need for childcare services. However, the Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 schemes received only 3.9% of the gender budget, with little increase in recent years. While 17.5% of the budget was allocated to the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and 8.9% to MGNREGA, long-term empowerment requires more investment in skill development, childcare, and elderly care. State allocations for women vary significantly, with Gujarat dedicating over 37% of its budget to women, while Maharashtra allocates only 3%. Despite discussions on women as key drivers of economic growth, both the Union and State governments fall short in providing substantial fiscal support, making gender parity and women-led development difficult to achieve.

What are the issues around delimitation?

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

Proportional representation

The number of seats in the Lok Sabha, based on the 1971 Census, was fixed at 543, when the population was 54.8 crore. However, since then, it has been frozen in order to encourage population control measures

Exhibit 1: If seats are retained at 543 and reapportioned among States based on 2026* population

Exhibit 2 : If the number of seats is increased to 848 based on the 2026* population

State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net Gain/ (Loss)	State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net Gain
Uttar Pradesh	80	91	11	Uttar Pradesh	80	143	63
Bihar	40	50	10	Bihar	40	79	39
Rajasthan	25	31	6	Rajasthan	25	50	25
Madhya Pradesh	29	33	4	Madhya Pradesh	29	52	23
Tamil Nadu	39	31	-8	Tamil Nadu	39	49	10
Andhra Pradesh + Telangana	42	34	-8	Andhra Pradesh + Telangana	42	54	12
Kerala	20	12	-8	Kerala	20	20	-
Karnataka	28	26	-2	Karnataka	28	41	13
Punjab	13	12	-1	Punjab	13	18	5
Himachal Pradesh	4	3	-1	Himachal Pradesh	4	4	-
Uttarakhand	5	4	-1	Uttarakhand	5	7	2
Northeast-ern States (excluding Assam)	11	11	-	Northeast-ern States (excluding Assam)	11	11	-

*projected figures

Source: Based on Vaishnav et al, Carnegie endowment

Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. Two scenarios are being discussed for delimitation: (1) retaining 543 seats and redistributing them among States, or (2) increasing the number of seats to 848 with proportional adjustments. Home Minister Amit Shah has assured that no State will lose seats, but the criteria for allocation remain unclear. If based on projected population, northern States would gain more seats, disadvantaging southern and smaller northern States, potentially disrupting federalism and reducing the political influence of States that have controlled their population. Southern

There has been a renewed debate about delimitation after the issue was raised by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. The delimitation of constituencies for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is to be carried out on the basis of the first Census after 2026.

What are constitutional provisions?

Delimitation is the process of determining the number and boundaries of constituencies for the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, conducted by a Delimitation Commission established by Parliament. This exercise was previously based on the 1951, 1961, and 1971 Censuses. The Lok Sabha's seat count was fixed at 543 in 1971 when India's population was 54.8 crore, and it has remained unchanged to promote population control. However, a readjustment is scheduled after the first Census post-2026. With the 2021 Census delayed due to COVID-19, debates have emerged about its impact on delimitation.

What are the issues?

India's population growth over the past five decades has been uneven, with northern States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan experiencing higher increases than southern States like

States' share of seats would drop by 5%.

What can be a solution?

Democracy is based on the principle of "one citizen-one vote-one value," but this has been diluted since 1976 to encourage population control. Unlike India, the U.S. has capped its House of Representatives at 435 seats since 1913 despite significant population growth. In India, the Lok Sabha has remained at 543 MPs for five decades while the population has nearly tripled. With India's population expected to peak at 165-170 crore before declining, maintaining the current number of MPs could uphold federalism and ensure balanced representation. Leaders from southern, smaller northern, and northeastern States should push for this cap to protect their political interests. Instead, the number of MLAs in State Assemblies could be increased to address democratic representation.

What is the current status of U.S.-Taiwan relations?

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The U.S. State Department's February 16 update on Taiwan omits its previous stance of not supporting Taiwan independence and affirms support for Taiwan's membership in international organizations where applicable. While Washington called this a routine update and Taiwan welcomed it, Beijing strongly opposed the change, calling it a serious regression and a misleading message to pro-independence forces. U.S. policy on Taiwan is guided by the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, which promotes close U.S.-Taiwan ties and mandates providing Taiwan with defensive arms—something that has long drawn criticism from China.

Trump on Taiwan

Former U.S. President Donald Trump's unpredictability and tariff policies have complicated U.S.-China relations, while U.S.-Taiwan ties are also becoming more intricate. Trump has suggested that Taiwan "stole" the U.S. chip industry and should pay for U.S. protection by increasing its defense budget. Taiwan is currently negotiating a \$7-10 billion U.S. arms deal and has raised its defense spending to 2.5% of GDP. President Lai Ching-te aims to strengthen ties with Trump and boost U.S. investments, with TSMC planning a \$165 billion investment in U.S. manufacturing. Despite Trump hinting at Taiwan being geographically vulnerable, his previous administration approved \$10 billion in arms deals, sold \$18 billion in weapons, and enacted pro-Taiwan laws like the Taipei Act and Taiwan Travel Act.

Taiwan's vulnerable position

China has intensified military exercises across the Taiwan Strait and is pushing a global narrative to isolate Taiwan. Since the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took power in 2016, Taiwan has lost diplomatic allies, with only 12 countries now recognizing Taipei. The 2024 elections occurred amid heightened Chinese military drills, including spy balloons and cyber-attacks, reinforcing the threat of invasion. The U.S.-China tensions pose existential risks for Taiwan—Xi Jinping sees Taiwan's reunification as part of national rejuvenation, while the U.S. values Taiwan for its semiconductor industry and as a key defense partner.





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