

## ● POLITY

## ● ECONOMICS

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## KARNATAKA TO SCRAP ANTI-CONVERSION LAW, REVERSE CHANGES IN TEXTBOOKS

Fulfilling a poll promise, the Congress government in Karnataka has announced the repeal of the State's Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022 — known as the anti-conversion law — which was one of the most controversial laws passed during the previous BJP regime.

The law, while prohibiting unlawful conversions from one religion to another by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement, promise of marriage or any fraudulent means, put the burden of proof on the accused with punishment ranging from imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of ₹25,000.

On Thursday, the State Cabinet also decided to reverse the changes made to Kannada and social studies school textbooks last year, including lessons on Hindutva ideologues. The second full-fledged Cabinet meeting held after the Congress came to power last month decided to repeal the controversial Act, whose validity has been questioned in court.

### Poll promises

The Cabinet also decided to repeal the 2020 amendments to the Agriculture Produce Marketing Act, which were opposed by a number of farmers' groups. Both repeal Bills will be piloted in the Budget Session of the Assembly starting on July 3, State Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H.K. Patil said

after the Cabinet meeting.

In its manifesto for the Assembly polls, the Congress had promised to repeal all "unjust and anti-people law". While he was the Leader of the Opposition, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah had reiterated several times that the anti-conversion law would be withdrawn if the Congress came to power.

The controversial act had generated political and societal heat in the State, with both the Congress and the Christian community bitterly opposing it.

The Cabinet has also decided to drop lessons on RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar and Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar from school textbooks, as well as a lesson written by right-wing activist Chakravarthi Sulibele that had been added to the textbook from this academic year. On the other hand, it decided to reintroduce lessons on Savithri Bai Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru, which had been dropped.

The government will publish supplementary booklets on these topics and distribute them in 72,000 schools across the State. A five-member expert panel identified 45 major changes required in the Kannada and Social Studies textbooks between Class 6 and Class 10, all of which will be incorporated, Primary and Secondary Education Minister Madhu Bangarappa told presspersons.

## EXPORTS DIP AGAIN; TRADE DEFICIT HITS 5-MONTH HIGH

India's merchandise exports fell 10.3% to \$34.98 billion in May, while imports contracted at a slower 6.6% rate to \$57.1 billion, lifting the trade deficit to a five-month high of \$22.1 billion.

This is the sixth time in the last eight months that goods exports have declined year-on-year, although May's decline was lower than the 12.6% fall recorded in April. However, May's exports were just 0.8% over April's six-month low for outbound shipments' value. Imports, on the other hand, spurted 13.8% sequentially in May from April's 15-month low figure, which has been revised upward slightly to \$50.15 billion from the \$49.9 billion estimated earlier.

This is the first time that the goods trade deficit — which hit a 20-month low of \$15.46 billion in April — has crossed the \$20 billion mark since December 2022.

### Demand revival soon

The Commerce Ministry attributed the moderation in exports' growth through 2023 so far to "persisting geopolitical tensions and monetary tightening induced recessionary fears" that have triggered a decline in consumer spending across advanced nations.

Citing the World Trade Organisation's upward revision in global trade

growth for 2023 from 1% to 1.7%, the Ministry said it anticipates the revival of demand from July-August 2023.

Cumulatively, the first two months of 2023-24 have recorded a 11.4% decline in merchandise exports and a 10.24% dip in the import bill. The trade deficit over April and May has declined almost 8% over the same period last year to \$37.6 billion.

Outbound goods shipments' value had grown 6.7% last year to cross \$450 billion, while imports had \$714 billion, reflecting a 16.5% rise from 2021-22 levels. "The available trade data for April and May suggests that the current account deficit is likely to widen to ~\$10-12 billion in the first quarter of 2023-24 from about \$2 billion expected in the previous quarter. However, it will remain manageable at approximately 1.2% of GDP," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist and head (Research and Outreach) at ICRA.

On the sequential spurt in the import bill during May, she said that the month typically tends to see higher imports of several items such as fertilisers, gold and fuels. Engineering goods' exports, India's mainstay in the export basket in recent years, dropped over 4% to \$9.3 billion in May, taking the combined decline in the first two months of this fiscal year to 6%.

## STRONG WINDS BATTER GUJARAT AS CYCLONE MAKES LANDFALL

Relief mode: Huge waves lash Valsad in Gujarat on Thursday. ANI

The severe cyclonic storm Biparjoy made landfall near Jakhau Port in Gujarat's Kutch district on Thursday night after churning across the Arabian Sea for over 10 days, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said.

Strong winds and heavy rain battered the Kutch and Saurashtra coasts from Thursday morning as State and Central agencies remained on high alert. Two drowned in flood waters in Saurashtra.

The Railways cancelled or short-terminated more than 70 trains. Around one lakh people living in vulnerable areas have been evacuated to 1,500 temporary shelters set up as part of the State's disaster management efforts after the IMD's warning of the storm's "extensive damaging potential".

### Power supply disrupted

Several areas in coastal districts plunged into darkness as the strong winds disrupted



power supply. There were reports of hundreds of trees, hoardings and electric poles being uprooted in coastal districts. Many houses were damaged. Due to strong winds, coal stored in storage grounds in Okha and Jamnagar caught fire. Many people recalled the devastation caused by a massive cyclone exactly 25 years ago in June 1998, when over 3,000 people were killed in Kutch and the coastal areas of Saurashtra.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a telephonic talk with Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel who briefed him on the ground situation. Mr. Patel held several meetings at the State emergency operation centre to take stock of the relief operations. Food packets are being delivered by government agencies at all temporary shelters, while Opposition party leaders and NGOs have also joined the rescue and relief efforts.

## INDIA TO BUY 31 MQ-9 REAPER UAVS; ANNOUNCEMENT DURING PM'S U.S. TRIP



*Boosting security: Of the 31 UAVs to be procured, 15 are meant for the Navy and eight each for the Army and Air Force. ANI*

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the U.S., the Defence Acquisition Council on Thursday approved the procurement of 31 armed MQ-9 Reaper Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) from General Atomics, defence sources confirmed. The deal is now awaiting final approval from the Cabinet Committee on Security and is expected to be announced during next week's visit.

## INDIA AND PAKISTAN ENVOYS PARTICIPATE IN TALKS WITH TALIBAN

Taliban representatives met Indian and Pakistani special envoys and officials amongst a number of international diplomats this week, in an effort by the Norwegian government to break the impasse in talks on the sidelines of a peace conference in Oslo.

The talks, which came in for criticism from Afghan diaspora groups, including in Norway, for "legitimising" the insurgent group that took control of Kabul in August 2021, are the first time India and Pakistan were invited to a European country for the talks.

"Isolating Afghanistan now will be unfortunate, both for the Afghan people and for us. It could worsen the situation for the Afghan people and it could lead to terrorist groups such as IS (Islamic State) building up in the country," Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt told local media. She confirmed that three Afghanistans civil servants, and not "top leadership", were participating in the Oslo Forum and speaking about the "major challenges" in the country.

Afghanistan faces a humanitarian crisis with acute food shortages, and continuing human rights violations including denial of education and employment to women by the Taliban.

Despite the challenges, New Delhi reopened its mission in Kabul in

June 2022 and maintains a "technical team" there to oversee aid and development initiatives. While officials of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) declined to comment on the talks in Oslo, it is understood that India's latest shipment of 20,000 tonnes of wheat that is arriving via the Chabahar port in Iran this week was among issues discussed.

While there, the Taliban officials held closed-door talks with special envoys from the U.S., the U.K., Norway, Qatar, India, Pakistan, and the head of the UN Afghanistan Mission (UNAMA) Roza Otunbayeva, as well as with members of Afghan civil society, including a woman negotiator and a leading lawyer. They spoke at a session at the Forum where many angry questions over the decision to stop girls' education were raised by participants.

According to Pakistan's special envoy on Afghanistan, Asif Durrani, the discussions also highlighted "priority areas to stabilise the situation" in Afghanistan, and said that amid the concerns, the Taliban regime received some "admiration" from the U.S. and European delegations on the crackdown on opium production in the country.

*(The reporter attended the Oslo Forum at the invitation of the organisers)*

Apart from 30 National and State Disaster Response Force teams, personnel from the Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard and Border Security Force have been deployed in eight coastal districts where the IMD has issued a red alert.

The IMD had earlier warned of very heavy (11.5 cm to 20.4 cm) to extremely heavy rainfall (over 20.5 cm) in Kutch, Devbhumi Dwarka, Jamnagar, Porbandar, Rajkot, Morbi and Junagarh districts. "We won't be surprised if some areas record more than 25 cm of rainfall. Therefore, there is a risk of flooding in the low-lying areas," IMD Director General Mrutyunjay Mohapatra had said.

### Navy's pressing need

Earlier, the plan was to buy 30 UAVs, with 10 for each service. However, the Navy has the most pressing requirement for these platforms, which will significantly enhance its maritime surveillance capability over the Indian Ocean Region while reducing the stress on the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft.

In December, Navy chief Admiral R. Hari Kumar had said that the deal was in progress and at a stage "where we are discussing if numbers need to be rationalised or kept as it is". The Navy leased two MQ-9As in 2020, and have since extended that lease. In November 2022, General Atomics announced that these leased UAVs had completed 10,000 flight hours in two years since their maiden flight on November 21, 2020, and have helped the Navy to cover over 14 million square miles of operating area.

### HAL collaboration

At Aero India in Bengaluru in February, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) and General Atomics announced that the turbo-propeller engines which power the MQ-9 would be supported by HAL's engine division for the Indian market. The companies are looking to formulate a comprehensive engine maintenance, repair and overhaul programme for upcoming high altitude long endurance UAV projects, they said in a joint statement.

# WE AIM TO INSPIRE YOU

## BIMSTEC TO ADOPT BANGKOK VISION 2030 AT NEXT SUMMIT

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit at end of this year will adopt Bangkok Vision 2030, according to Saurabh Kumar, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs.

He also stated that a marine transport cooperation agreement is expected to be concluded at the summit. He said that the Bangkok Vision 2030 would be an overarching kind of document and would give direction to the organisation.

"Thailand has put forth the Bangkok Vision 2030 which seeks to propel BIMSETC towards a region that is prosperous, resilient and open... moving us in a forward-looking trajectory for sustainable and balanced growth," said Thailand's

Vice Foreign Minister Vijavat Isarabhakdi on Thursday. He was speaking at an event "BIMSTEC – the way forward" organised by India Foundation.

Towards this an eminent group of persons has been introduced for monitoring progress in all seven sectors, he stated. "Thailand as the current chair has worked closely with member-states to prepare them for the future by trying to strengthen on three aspects. The first way is by enhancing regional inter-connectedness, involvement of all stakeholders and promoting BIMSTEC's internal strength," he said.

The grouping comprises Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

## 'FED'S TALK OF MORE HIKES NOT A BIG RISK'



*Allaying fears: The CEA noted the U.S. market remained buoyant despite a 500 basis points increase in interest rates. SRINATH M*

*Chief Economic Adviser Anantha Nageswaran sees U.S. financial markets pushing back rate cut expectations to 2024, with the possibility of a spillover to global markets; however, sees little risk to the Indian economy from such a recalibration*

Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran said he does not

anticipate a big impact on the Indian economy after the U.S. Federal Reserve signalled it may raise rates later in the year in the wake of its decision on Wednesday to pause its monetary tightening and keep the benchmark interest rate unchanged.

Observing that U.S. financial markets had initially factored in rate cuts by the end of this year, the CEA said, they would now have to push back the rate cut expectations to 2024.

"To that extent there will be an impact on the financial markets, which would spill over to the global markets," Mr. Nageswaran noted in a media interaction on Thursday, adding, "But I don't think [it is] such a big risk factor for us to worry about."

He noted the U.S. market had remained buoyant despite a 500 basis points increase in interest rates. "There has not been a bad market for a while; this remains a risk factor for the global economy," he said.

**Inflation outlook**

On India's inflation, Mr. Nageswaran said the Reserve Bank of India's expectation was that it would be 'well behaved' in the 2-6% range, or closer towards 4% rather than 6%. "That is something we also anticipate," he added. On the monsoon and concerns about a possible El Nino effect, he said the impact was unlikely to be big as there was adequate storage of water, availability of seeds and fertilizer.

For FY24, the projection for real GDP growth was 6.5%, a figure backed by both the RBI and the Ministry of Finance, the Chief Economic Adviser said.

The risks surrounding the number were evenly balanced, suggesting a strong likelihood of achieving the growth target, Mr. Nageswaran emphasised.

## NaBFID RAISES ₹10,000 CRORE VIA LISTED BOND ISSUE

The National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) said it has raised ₹10,000 crore by issuance of listed bonds in its maiden issuance on Thursday.

"The issue received overwhelming response from the investors with bids

worth ₹23,629.50 crore," NaBFID said in a statement.

"The infrastructure bonds were oversubscribed by approximately 4.7 times, against the base issue of ₹5,000 crore."

## ECB RAISES INTEREST RATES TO 22-YEAR HIGH

The European Central Bank raised borrowing costs to their highest level in 22 years on Thursday and left the door open to more hikes, extending its fight against inflation that remains stubbornly high even as the euro zone economy flags.

The ECB increased its key interest rate — the one banks pay to park cash securely at the central bank— for the eighth consecutive time, by 25 basis points to a 22-year high of 3.5%.

"The key ECB interest rates will be brought to levels sufficiently restrictive to achieve a timely return of inflation to the 2% medium-term target and

will be kept at those levels for as long as necessary," ECB President Christine Lagarde said.

**'Eye on profits'**

Ms. Lagarde said wage rises and companies pushing up prices to increase their profits are becoming an increasingly important driver of inflation. "Inflation has been coming down but is projected to be too high, for too long," she said.

The ECB's latest hike followed Wednesday's first pause in U.S. rate increases in over a year.

## CODE RED

*The push for a uniform civil code should not become a divisive tool*

The Law Commission's decision to solicit views from the public on the idea of a uniform civil code appears to be a political initiative aimed at bringing the potentially divisive issue under focus in the run-up to next year's general election. The Commission, the 22nd such panel, has claimed that years have elapsed since similar views were sought by the previous panel, and that a fresh effort was needed to garner varied opinions. The 21st Commission had released a

consultation paper in 2018 that categorically said a uniform civil code was "neither necessary nor desirable" at that stage. In a well-reasoned document, it had then argued that the focus of initiatives to reform the various personal laws should be the elimination of all forms of discrimination rather than an attempt to bring about uniformity in the laws governing various religions. The document was progressive in nature, inasmuch as it emphasised non-discrimination over uniformity, and recognised that there could be diverse means of governing

aspects of personal law such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and adoption instead of imposing a single set of rules on society. This would entail the removal of discriminatory provisions, especially those that affect women, and adoption of some overarching norms rooted in equality. Nothing significant has happened since to warrant a fresh look, except perhaps a political need for the current dispensation to bring the issue to the electoral arena.

A uniform civil code for the entire country is indeed a lofty goal, but the question whether introducing one for all aspects of personal law would impinge on the freedom of religion has been part of the debate. B.R. Ambedkar viewed it as desirable, but favoured its being voluntary. It is possible that a uniform code may be adopted without offending any religion, but the concept evokes fear

among sections of the minorities that their religious beliefs, seen as the source of their personal laws, may be undermined. In fraught times such as the present, a common code will inevitably be seen as an imposition by the majority. Basic reforms can be given priority — such as having 18 as the marriageable age for all across communities and genders. Introducing a ‘no-fault’ divorce procedure and allowing dissolution of marriage on the ground of irretrievable breakdown, and having common norms for post-divorce division of assets were other matters the previous Commission threw up for a debate. Within each community’s laws, it will be desirable to first incorporate universal principles of equality and non-discrimination and eliminate practices based on taboos and stereotypes.

## CULTURE SHIFT

*UNESCO must act on nations exiting, re-entering on frivolous grounds*

The United States said earlier this week that it was rejoining the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 2017, the Trump administration withdrew from the organisation after the Obama administration ceased funding, in 2011. The reason for the U.S.’s return is ostensibly ‘China’, with senior U.S. administration officials stating that the U.S.’s absence had helped China gain “more influence” in setting the rules around artificial intelligence and the ensuing technological shifts. For a change, this is the first time that ‘China’ has been proffered as a reason for the U.S.’s re-entry into, rather than its exit of, a multi-lateral treaty. During the pandemic, in 2020, President Trump announced the U.S.’s withdrawal from funding the World Health Organization — the year too when he moved to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Agreement. This followed from the Trumpist world view that the U.S. was being shortchanged by major polluters such as China and India. In the case of WHO, the case was over its ‘inadequate’ response time to the gravity of the pandemic originating in China. Following political change, President Joseph Biden has now brought the U.S. back into the fold of funding WHO as well as rejoining the climate treaty.

Unlike the ‘America First’ policies that propelled the Trump administration’s exits, the U.S.’s UNESCO re-entry has little to do with why it

exited it in the first place, which was, as it was believed, “an anti-Israel bias”. The U.S., then and now, remains Israel’s staunchest ally and does not recognise Palestine. It is not unreasonable to infer that the re-entry is a sign of America’s growing paranoia about China. It is also appropriate to recall that the Reagan administration withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 for, among other things, “advancing Soviet interests”. Developments in AI are slightly different from historical technological developments. Here, product patents and their enforcement have helped countries such as the U.S. maintain their edge, but with AI, China, along with a rising repertoire of patents and research publications, has the advantages of a much larger population and a more powerful surveillance state. This feeds into a cycle of generating greater troves of data that in turn feed and improve machine learning systems that make its AI far more formidable. Unlike other technologies, no country can have a sustained, natural edge in AI indefinitely. America might bring in at least \$600 million in outstanding dues to the UNESCO but it is high time — and countries such as India would do well to point this out — that the organisation gets stricter on countries exiting and entering on frivolous grounds, alongside framing policies and research that accommodate the tussles of a hyper-connected world.

## REFLECTIONS ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AS FRIEND OR FOE

*P.J. Narayanan*

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been dominating the headlines for its triumphs, and also fears being expressed by many including some of the best minds in AI. The Association for Computing Machinery released a statement in October 2022 on ‘Principles for Responsible Algorithmic Systems’, a broader class of systems that include AI systems. Several leading AI experts and thinkers have been part of different cautionary messages about AI, issued by the Future of Life Institute, the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence and the Center for AI Safety. There is deep concern about AI among many who know it. What is behind this?

### Areas of use, limitations and AGI

AI systems are capable of exhibiting superhuman performance on specific or “narrow” tasks, which has made it to the news in the field of chess, Go (a game several orders harder than chess) and also in biochemistry for protein folding.

The performance and utility of AI systems improve as the task is narrowed, making them valuable assistants to humans. Speech recognition, translation, and even identifying common objects such as photographs, are just a few tasks that AI systems tackle today, even exceeding human performance in some instances. Their performance and utility degrade on more “general” or ill-defined tasks. They are weak in integrating inferences across situations based on the common sense humans have.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) refers to intelligence that is not limited or narrow. Think of it as human “common sense” but absent in AI systems. Common sense will make a human save his life in a life-threatening situation while a robot may remain unmoved. There are no credible efforts towards building AGI yet. Many experts believe AGI will never be achieved by a machine; others believe it could be in the far future.

A big moment for AI was the release of ChatGPT, in November 2022. ChatGPT is a generative AI tool that uses a Large Language Model (LLM) to generate text. LLMs are large artificial neural networks that ingest large amounts of digital text to build a statistical “model”. Several LLMs have been built by Google, Meta, Amazon, and others. ChatGPT’s stunning success in generating

flawless paragraphs caught the world’s attention. Writing could now be outsourced to it. Some experts even saw “sparks of AGI” in GPT-4; AGI could emerge from a bigger LLM in the near future.

Other experts refute this vociferously, based on how LLMs work. At the basic level, LLMs merely predict the most probable or relevant word to follow a given sequence of words, based on the learned statistical model. They are just “stochastic parrots,” with no sense of meaning. They famously “hallucinate” facts, confidently (and wrongly) — awarding Nobel prizes generously and conjuring credible citations to non-existent academic papers.

True AGI will be a big deal if and when it arrives. Machines outperform humans in every physical task today and AGI may lead to AI “machines” bettering humans in many intellectual or mental tasks. Bleak scenarios of super-intelligent machines enslaving humans have been imagined. AGI systems could be a superior species created by humans outside of evolution. AGI will indeed be a momentous development that the world must prepare for seriously. I believe current LLMs and their successors are not even close to AGI. But will AGI arrive some day? I reserve my judgement. However, the hype and panic about LLMs or AI leading directly to human extinction are baseless. The odds of the successors of the current tools “taking over the world” are zero.

### Where the dangers lie

Does that mean we can live happily without worrying about the impact of AI? I see three possible types of dangers arising from AI.

Superhuman AI: The danger of a super intelligent AI converting humans to slaves. I do not worry about such a highly unlikely scenario.

Malicious humans with powerful AI: AI tools are relatively easy to build. Even narrow AI tools can cause serious harm when matched with malicious intent. LLMs can generate believable untruths as fake news and create deep mental anguish leading to self-harm. Public opinion can be manipulated to affect democratic elections. AI tools work globally, taking little cognisance of boundaries and barriers. Individual malice can instantly impact the globe. Governments may approve or support such actions against “enemies”. We have no effective defence against malicious human behaviour. Well-meaning people

have expressed concern about AI-powered “smart” weapons in the military. Unfortunately, calls for a ban are not effective in such situations. I do not see any easy defence against the malicious use of AI.

Highly capable and inscrutable AI: AI systems will continue to improve and will be employed to assist humans. They may end up harming some sections more than others unintentionally, despite the best intentions of their creators. These systems are created using Machine Learning from data from the world and can perpetuate the shortcomings of the data. They may introduce asymmetric behaviours that go against certain groups. Camera-based face recognition systems have been shown to be more accurate on fair-skinned men than on dark-skinned women. Such unintended and unknown bias can be catastrophic in AI systems that steer autonomous cars and diagnose medical conditions. Privacy is a critical concern as algorithmic systems watch the world constantly. Every person can be tracked always, violating the fundamental right to privacy.

Another worry is about who develops these technologies and how. Most recent advances took place in companies with huge computational, data, and human resources. ChatGPT was developed by OpenAI which began as a non-profit and transformed into a for-profit entity. Other players in the AI game are Google, Meta, Microsoft, and Apple. Commercial entities with no effective public oversight are the centres of action. Do they have the incentive to keep AI systems just?

Everything that affects humans significantly needs public oversight or regulation. AI systems can have a serious, long-lasting negative impact on individuals. Yet, they can be deployed on mass scale instantly with no oversight.

How do we bring about effective regulation without stifling creativity? What are the parameters about an AI system that need to be watched carefully and how? There is very little understanding of these issues.

Many a social media debate rages about AI leading to destruction. Amidst doomsday scenarios, solutions such as banning or pausing research and development in AI — as suggested by many — are neither practical nor effective. They may draw attention away from the serious issues posed by insufficient scrutiny of AI. We need to talk more about the unintentional harm AI may inflict on some or all of humanity. These are solvable, but concerted efforts are needed.

### India must be prepared

Awareness and debate on these issues are largely absent in India. The adoption of AI systems is low in the country, but those used are mostly made in the West. We need systematic evaluation of their efficacy and shortcomings in Indian situations. We need to establish mechanisms of checks and balances before large-scale deployment of AI systems. AI holds tremendous potential in different sectors such as public health, agriculture, transportation and governance. As we exploit India's advantages in them, we need more discussions to make AI systems responsible, fair, and just to our society. The European Union is on the verge of enacting an AI Act that proposes regulations based on a stratification of potential risks. India needs a framework for itself, keeping in mind that regulations have been heavy-handed as well as lax in the past.

*The views expressed are personal*

## JUMPSTARTING THE NEXT PHASE OF U.S.-INDIA DEFENCE TIES



Harsh V. Pant

Over the last few years, there has been incredible momentum in U.S.-India ties, driven primarily by their defence relationship. United States Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin travelled to India from June 4-5 to reinforce the major defence partnership and advance cooperation in critical domains. Noticeably, his visit secured an agreement on a road map for defence industrial cooperation, announced as part of the U.S.-India initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET) agreement (announced in May 2022) and which had its inaugural meeting in January this year. The road map envisages boosting defence manufacturing in India through greater technological cooperation. While the objectives complement India's own self-reliance mission and its desire to lessen import dependence, it potentially repositions the U.S. in the broader context of the U.S.-India strategic relationship.

The visit's objective had two important legs: technological innovation and growing military cooperation. One of the most important steps taken during the visit was towards strengthening the bilateral defence relationship by creating a road map to promote collaboration in the defence industry. The road map aims to expedite crucial co-development and co-production initiatives, fostering stronger connections between the defence sectors of the two countries.

There was the launch of a new initiative, Indus-X, which is to provide a new impetus to the defence innovation engagement between the two countries. This builds on the U.S.-India bilateral Space Situational Awareness arrangement signed in 2022, which promises to enhance information-sharing and cooperation

in the space sector. Furthermore, new areas in defence space exchanges have been identified based on the cooperation between the U.S. Space Command and India's Defence Space Agency.

India's 'Major Defence Partner' (MDP) status along with the four foundational agreements signed with the U.S. now allow for the sharing of technology and more frequent cooperation. These have not only allowed the sharing of sensitive technologies without India having to become an ally but have also proved to be effective mechanisms to prevent backsliding due to procedural difficulties or structural differences.

### The Indo-Pacific imperative

During the 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in April 2022, the U.S. Defence Secretary referred to the U.S.-India defence partnership as the cornerstone of their engagement in the Indo-Pacific. He outlined broad aspects in the Indo-Pacific including coercive actions by the People's Republic of China; the aggressive actions of Russia towards Ukraine aimed at forcibly redrawing borders and undermining national sovereignty; transnational issues such as terrorism and climate change. The combined threat assessments by India and the U.S. in the region point to China as a common and most conspicuous challenge. As stated in China's Military Power Report 2022 brought out by the U.S., the People's Liberation Army Navy is the world's largest navy by number of ships. With the Indo-Pacific region getting more contested, it is estimated that the subsurface presence of China is likely to increase in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Beyond the Indo-Pacific, a strong rationale for projecting broader industrial cooperation between Indian and U.S. companies in the defence sector is the existing scale of American investments in India. Behind this is an almost declaratory support by the U.S. government exhorting its companies to support India's defence modernisation. In the long run, this could lead to at least three dominant trends under the umbrella of U.S.-India defence cooperation: nurturing and growth of an ecosystem of joint ventures between companies; the U.S. incrementally gaining a larger share in the Indian defence manufacturing, and both sides ironing out existing impediments in co-development and co-production. American companies led by Boeing, Lockheed Martin, BAE Systems, Honeywell Aerospace, Raytheon, Textron and others partner across a range of manufacturing activities related to the defence sector with Indian companies, most prominently with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and the Tata group. These are likely to be supplemented by linking defence start-ups from both countries through an 'innovation bridge' that was announced in the iCET agreement.

The Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI) has often been criticised for being too ambitious and caught in the maelstrom of bureaucratic resistance, technicalities related to sensitive technology transfer, and structural differences in how the India-U.S. defence ecosystems work. However, recent steps promise to jump start the DTTI by providing specific momentum to co-production and co-development in the defence sector. A standout in this

regard has been the elevation of the India-U.S. relations strategic partnership with the iCET agreement.

The visit of the U.S. Defence Secretary has prepared the ground for the official state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the U.S. on June 22 which

could see a few big ticket announcements, especially in the area of defence cooperation. The sky, it seems, is the limit in the emerging defence partnership between two of the world's leading democracies.

## IS THE RANKING SYSTEM OF COLLEGES FLAWED?

The story so far:

In a country as diverse as India, ranking universities and institutions is not an easy task. The Ministry of Education established the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2016 to determine the critical indicators in which institutions' performance could be measured. Since then, institutions nationwide, including universities and colleges, eagerly await their standings in this nationally recognised system every year.

### How does the NIRF rank institutes?

Currently, the NIRF releases rankings across various categories: 'Overall', 'Research Institutions', 'Universities', and 'Colleges', and specific disciplines like engineering, management, pharmacy, law, etc. The rankings are an important resource for prospective students navigating the labyrinth of higher education institutions in India.

NIRF ranks institutes by their total score and it uses five indicators to determine this score — 'Teaching, Learning & Resources' (30% weightage); 'Research and Professional Practice' (30%); 'Graduation Outcomes' (20%); 'Outreach and Inclusivity' (10%); and 'Perception' (10%). Academic communities have had concerns about the construction of these indicators, the transparency of the methods used, and the overall framework. An important part of it is focused on the research and professional practices part of the evaluation because they pay a lot of attention to bibliometric measures.

### What are bibliometrics?

Bibliometrics refers to the measurable aspects of research, such as the number of papers published, the number of times they are cited, and the impact factors of journals. The allure of bibliometrics as a tool for assessing research output lies in its efficiency and convenience compared to qualitative assessments performed by subject experts, which are more resource-intensive and require time.

However, science policy experts have cautioned authorities against relying too much on bibliometrics as a complete assessment. They argued that bibliometric indicators don't fully capture the intricacies of scientific performance, and that we need a more comprehensive evaluation methodology.

The journal *Science* recently reported that a dental college in Chennai was using "nasty self-citation practices on an industrial scale" to inflate its rankings. They reported the use of bibliometric parameters to understand the research impact of institutions as well as the risk of a metric becoming the target.

### What is the issue with overly relying on bibliometrics?

This criticism has been leveled against the NIRF vis-a-vis the efficacy and fairness of its approach to ranking universities. For example, the NIRF uses commercial databases, such as 'Scopus' and 'Web of Science', to get bibliometric data. But these entities aren't impervious to inaccuracies or misuse. Recently, 'Web of Science' had to delist around 50 journals, including a flagship journal of the publisher MDPI.

The NIRF's publication-metrics indicator solely considers research articles, sidelining other forms of intellectual contributions, such as books, book chapters, monographs, non-traditional outputs like popular articles, workshop reports, and other forms of grey literature.

As a result, the NIRF passively encourages researchers to focus on work that is likelier to be published in journals, especially international journals, at the cost of work that the NIRF isn't likely to pay attention to. This in turn disprivileges work that focuses on national and local issues, as international journals prefer work on topics of global significance.

### Is the NIRF transparent?

## ARE NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES INCREASING IN INDIA?

*What are the causes of such an increase? What are these figures trying to tell us? Which States are highly prone to NCDs? How can we stop this developing problem?*

The story so far:

The new national estimates for diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCD) shows that 31 million more Indians became diabetic in four years (2019-2021).

### What were the findings?

In 2021, a study found that India has 101 million people with diabetes and 136 million people with prediabetes. Additionally, 315 million people had high



*Rat race: A man walks past the campus of the Indian Institute of Technology, in Chennai.PTI*

*Is the National Institutional Ranking Framework's method of assessment and scoring universities and colleges sound? Why are experts arguing against too much emphasis on bibliometric indicators? Does it lack transparency? Does the current ranking process lead to unhealthy competition?*

University rankings are controversial. NIRF, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, and the QS World University Rankings all have flaws. Experts have emphasised that they ought to be transparent about the data they collect, the sources and how they collect it, and how that data becomes the basis for the total score. The NIRF is partly transparent as it publicly shares its methodology, but it doesn't provide a detailed view.

The framework for assessment and scoring are based on bibliometric data. However, there is a potential discrepancy in how they label research quantity and quality. The labels in question are imprecise and potentially misleading.

### What's the overall effect on the NIRF?

The case of the dental college is emblematic of the dangers of over-relying on one type of assessment criterion, and it opens a door to manipulation and obscure the true performance of an institution.

No matter how rigorous the methods, university rankings invariably involve some level of ambiguity. The NIRF's emphasis on rankings can lead to unhealthy competition between universities, fostering a culture that puts metrics in front of the thing they are trying to measure: excellence in education and research.

Dr. Moumita Koley is a consultant with the Future of Scientific Publishing project and an STI policy researcher.

blood pressure; 254 million had generalised obesity, and 351 million had abdominal obesity. 213 million people had hypercholesterolaemia (wherein fat collects in arteries and puts individuals at greater risk of heart attack and strokes) and 185 million had high low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol. The decade-long nationwide study was funded by the Indian Council of Medical Research and Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and co-ordinated by the Madras Diabetes Research Foundation. The

results of the study are to be published in The Lancet Diabetes and Endocrinology journal.

#### What is the significance of the study?

The study is the first comprehensive epidemiological research paper which includes participants from 31 States and some Union Territories, with a large sample size of 1,13,043 individuals. There are two big trend indicators in the study.

First, diabetes and other metabolic non-communicable diseases, such as hypertension, obesity and dyslipidemia are much more common than estimated previously in India and second, while currently urban regions had higher rates of all metabolic NCDs than rural areas, with the exception of prediabetes, rural India will see a diabetes explosion in the next five years if left unregulated.

The study also highlights interstate and inter-regional variations. The highest diabetes prevalence was found in Goa, Puducherry and Kerala. While prediabetes was prevalent in Sikkim, hypertension was highest in Punjab. Generalised obesity and abdominal obesity were highest in Puducherry, while Kerala had high hypercholesterolemia and high LDL cholesterol. The lowest prevalence of NCDs was found in U.P., Mizoram, Meghalaya and Jharkhand. This cross-sectional, population based survey of adults aged above 20 years, across the country uses a stratified, multistage sampling design in the study titled — "Metabolic non-communicable health report of India-the ICMR-INDIAB National Cross-sectional Study."

While the diabetes epidemic is stabilising in the more developed States

of the country, it is still increasing in most of the other States. Thus, there are serious implications for the nation, warranting urgent State-specific policies and interventions to arrest the rapidly rising epidemic of metabolic NCDs in India.

#### How does this study impact India?

While India in the past four years has substantially added to its burden of diabetics and hypertensive persons with generalised and abdominal obesity, the study gives us an early warning that if not controlled, this population is predisposed to NCDs and life-altering medical conditions including strokes.

Experts have explained that India is facing the dual problem of malnutrition and obesity. There is availability of surplus food, but after being exposed to fast foods, a lack of sleep, exercise and stress creates a perfect setting for NCDs to latch-on.

#### What is the way forward?

The answer to this developing problem, is in wellness and in having a lifestyle that encompasses healthy diet and exercise. NCDs have also been one of the major concerns of the Health Ministry. It has identified the four major NCDs — cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes. They all share four behavioural risk factors — unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity, and use of tobacco and alcohol. Programmes have been brought in to strengthen health infrastructure, human resource development, health-promotion and awareness-generation for prevention, early diagnosis and ensuring referrals to appropriate healthcare facilities for NCDs.

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