

STATE VS CENTER

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call that India's growth is powered by the progress of its states come a much needed reassurance. Though he has spoken the obvious yet at times the center may look like a powerful entity and the states as subservient even though India is a union of states. Also the local politics in which the state and the center seem to be positioned as adversaries creates an impression of the inequality. The fact is that over the year Indian federalism and evolved to a level that division of power and financial responsibilities has been rationalised to a great extent. The GST and its successful implementation was one of the major moves in this direction. Different states are being promoted for manufacturing different products. For example J&K is being encouraged to take up agri-processing units and IT parks while states like Tamil Nadu and already way ahead of others in manufacturing.

FESTIVAL OF NAVRATRI

Hinduism is the only religious philosophy that has the concept of female divinity. Maybe the Greek civilisation had a form of female divine power but it is no longer a living concept since the Greek civilisation has undergone changes and the philosophy is extinct. The nine days of navratri celebration is thus a unique festival is the world and Indians need to understand its importance beyond rituals. Even in the scripts, the female divinity is so powerful that at times male Gods seek help from the Shakti to ward off the Asuras. Navratri should therefore be an occasion for Indians to ponder why women are still struggling for their rights in a society with such an exalted philosophy. Navrati's real meaning is lost in rituals. The NGOs working in the field of women's rights must use the festival to invoke the inherent superiority of female power in our society and addressing the evils that has crept in to undermine these in today's society.

Sino-Indian transactions of territory and trade

Anil Bhat

A day after the September 12-13, 2026, BRICS Summit attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping and preceded by the August 25, 2026, Special Representative Talks on the India-China Boundary Question in Beijing, India's Ministry of Defence (MoD) publicly released its 2025-26 Annual Report, stating that the PLA had scaled down its deployments opposite India's northern borders. The timing of this report led to viral social media claims and news summaries inadvertently implying that the troop pull-back was an immediate, direct result of the 2026 summit. Soon afterwards, the MoD clarified that this troop reduction took place in 2024 and 2025.

While the India-China eight-point agreement offers mutual security and economic mechanisms, critics are apprehensive about the "early harvest" approach as it primarily suits Beijing's strategic pacing. They argue that it favours China because: (a) it is a shift from a comprehensive package to piecemeal delimitation; (b) it focuses on easier middle/Sikkim sectors first; (c) it leaves the basic western/eastern disputes unresolved; (d) it normalises ties before full 2020 status quo restoration; and (e) it allows China to project a peaceful diplomatic image globally.

The mutual benefits for India are: (a) reduction of immediate military friction along the Line of Actual Control (LAC); (b) adds hotlines to prevent accidental tactical escalation; (c) resumes traditional Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra pilgrimage batches; (d) reopens designated local border trading points; and (e) restores routine diplomatic communication channels. While experts believed that all previous special representative talks have been used by China primarily as a tool for crisis management and narrative diplomacy rather than a medium for a final, permanent border resolution, it remains to be seen if New Delhi can leverage these talks to secure a fair, permanent boundary frame-



work.

Scepticism surrounding Chinese diplomatic agreements is highly justified, given the historical pattern of unilateral actions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). However, looking closely at the tangible outcomes of the diplomatic process culminating in the 2024 LAC Patrolling Agreement and subsequent bilateral talks in 2025 and 2026, India did secure several specific, measurable operational advantages. Following the 2020 Galwan standoff, the Chinese military blocked Indian troops from reaching long-held Patrolling Points (specifically PPs 10 through 13 in Depsang). The diplomatic breakthrough made a return to the pre-2020 status quo in these sectors, legally and physically reinstating India's access to contested patrolling grounds.

China significantly reduced its frontline military deployment opposite India's northern borders in 2025, cutting troop levels in eastern Ladakh by about half compared with peak crisis numbers, primarily due to high logistical and operational strains. The nature of disengagement in eastern Ladakh vs. Arunachal Pradesh reveals distinct, considered priorities for Beijing. Hence, there has been no reduction in the deployment in Arunachal Pradesh, which China continuously keeps claiming as its own.

In eastern Ladakh, the PLA's reduction of frontline troops from specific friction points (such as Galwan, Pangong Tso, Depsang and Demchok) was not a full retreat. Instead, it was an optimised force reconfigura-

tion driven by geography: the high-altitude desert of Ladakh, with extreme sub-zero temperatures, often dipping below -20°C to -40°C, and scarce oxygen levels, takes a heavy physical toll on operating tank units and infantry and rapidly degrades advanced military hardware. The Indian Army generally displays better operational endurance in extreme high-altitude regions compared

with Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops, largely due to decades of continuous deployment and specialised training.

The key elements of the discussion between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in New Delhi were reportedly bilateral cooperation, border stability and mutual sensitivities.

On bilateral cooperation, PM Modi welcomed President Xi to India and thanked China for its support during India's BRICS chairmanship, noting that the engagement provided a constructive opportunity to discuss economic and cultural ties.

PM Modi emphasised that future relations should be guided by "mutual respect, mutual interest and mutual sensitivity".

Both leaders acknowledged that maintaining peace along the border areas serves as an essential foundation for normalising and developing broader bilateral ties. They committed to working towards a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution of the boundary question while observing existing agreements.

The leaders addressed economic and structural trade imbalances, supply chain challenges and the need for predictable market access to foster cooperative growth.

For years, China's official position was that the border dispute should be "set in its proper place" while resuming normal business and trade. India rigidly maintained that normal relations are impossible without border peace. By compelling Xi Jinping to

engage in direct bilateral border management reviews at the SCO and BRICS summits, India appears to have, at long last, made China accept border peace and the "three mutuals"—mutual respect, sensitivity and interest—as the fundamental prerequisite for broader ties.

It is critical to distinguish between tactical advantages and strategic trust. Security analysts emphasise that China did not act out of selflessness; Xi's compromises were driven by practical necessities, including a slowing domestic economy, escalating technology trade wars with the US and a desire to stabilise its regional periphery. The current operational reality between India and China is a tactical supply-chain and border stabilisation truce rather than a full strategic reset. On the economic front, India has reportedly made Beijing lift critical trade blockades. Recent diplomatic rounds made China ease export restrictions on vital industrial resources, including rare earths, fertilisers and heavy infrastructure equipment (like tunnel boring machines), which Beijing had previously been holding up as strategic leverage.

On the ground, India must not lower its guard. While physical troop presence has thinned, China continues to build permanent military infrastructure and deploy surveillance technology along the border. India's response has been maintaining a robust, heavily mirrored deployment across all sectors, while using the diplomatic agreements strictly as a mechanism to prevent active conflict while matching China's capabilities on the ground.

New Delhi must maintain a stance of cautious pragmatism towards Beijing and distinguish that, while certain critical trade blockades and export curbs have been lifted, severe structural vulnerabilities and strategic mistrust remain.

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THE GIFT THAT GOES BEYOND GIVING

Namrata Kohli

What if a gift could keep giving? Could it have a second life, an afterlife, long after the wrapping paper has been discarded?

I found an interesting answer at the PM Mementos E-Auction exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art recently. The gifts and mementos received by Prime Minister Narendra Modi include paintings, sculptures, handicrafts, religious objects and memorabilia from across India. But what interested me was not simply what they were, but what happens to them next.

They are documented, displayed and auctioned. The proceeds go towards Namami Gange. This year, 1,498 mementos have been put up for auction. Previous editions have raised more than `50 crore. "Apne uphaaron ka bhi upyog," Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat told me. Even our gifts can be put to use. "The idea is to create value for a very special cause," he said, describing the Ganga as not merely a river but "jeevan ka aadhar", the basis of life for millions.

There is something powerful in that journey. An object begins as a gift, acquires another layer of meaning through its re-



recipient, finds another owner and ultimately creates value for an entirely unrelated cause.

Standing there at the beginning of the festive season, I wondered whether there was a larger lesson here. Diwali gifting has increasingly become an industry of excess. Bigger hampers, elaborate packaging, imported chocolates, candles, crockery and

dry fruits move from office to home and often from one home to another.

We spend enormous energy deciding what to give and remarkably little wondering what happens to it afterwards.

Why should the life of a gift end with its first recipient? Pass it on. Auction it. Donate it. Repurpose it. If something sitting unopened in my cupboard can bring plea-

sure or value to somebody else, why should we feel embarrassed about giving it another life?

Better still, think about its consequence before buying it. Buy a handwoven textile and your gift supports a weaving tradition. Choose something made by an artisan and your festive budget becomes somebody's livelihood. Gift a book and it may begin a conversation. Give an experience and there may be no packaging to discard. Donate in someone's name and a person who already has everything doesn't receive yet another thing.

A good gift need not be expensive. It should have meaning, utility or consequence.

We talk a great deal about the circular economy in the context of industry. Perhaps we need a circular economy of generosity too.

This Diwali, instead of only asking, "What should I give?", ask another question: "What good can my gift do after I have given it?" Because sometimes the most valuable gift is the one whose value doesn't end when it changes hands.

The writer is an author, podcaster and a Senior Fellow at the Ministry of Culture, Government of India; Views presented are personal.

India's ambitions hostage to geopolitics

Parul Chandra

The peaks and troughs that have come to define the development of Iran's strategically located Chabahar port offer a stark reminder of how geopolitics can hamper major infrastructure projects. Vital for Iran, the port is also crucial for India, which views it as a strategic anchor for its own sub-regional connectivity efforts.

The Chabahar project, however, remains severely hobbled by an ever-shifting global landscape. Over the years, the port's development and operational use have been crippled by unilateral US sanctions stemming from long-drawn Washington-Tehran tensions.

The recent completion of a key rail link between Chabahar and Iranshahr, part of the larger planned 630-km line extending to Zahedan near the Afghan border, should have given India cause for cheer. But use of this rail link by India will have to wait, with Chabahar under sanctions.

Construction of the Chabahar-Iranshahr-Zahedan rail link has also suffered from prolonged delays. But Iran

now says the entire Chabahar-Zahedan rail link, designed to carry 7.7 million tonnes of freight and 2.2 million passengers annually, will be ready by January next year. Once operational, this rail link could be a game-changer for regional connectivity and commerce.

Chabahar and Iranshahr are key cities in its Sistan and Baluchistan province, which shares long, porous borders with both Pakistan and Afghanistan, while Zahedan is its capital. Iran is also hopeful that the Chabahar connectivity project will bring economic prosperity to this underdeveloped province.

Yet, India's ability to utilise this infrastructure remains on hold. Amid Iran's ongoing conflict with the US and Israel, the Strait of Hormuz, which is so vital for global trade and commerce, has been under a blockade. First imposed by the Iranians after military strikes by the US and Israel, Washington also initiated a naval blockade in retaliation.

With the Strait of Hormuz becoming a choke point, Chabahar, Iran's only oceanic port located close to the Gulf of Oman and overlooking the In-



dian Ocean, can be an alternative trading gateway. For India, Chabahar port also offers an invaluable sea-land route to landlocked Afghanistan, Central Asian countries and even Europe, effectively bypassing its hostile neighbour Pakistan and giving it the much-needed access to countries in its extended neighbourhood and beyond.

With the likelihood of Pakistan allowing transit rights to India in the foreseeable future being remote, Chabahar seems a viable alternative route to Afghanistan and beyond. The denial of transit rights by Pakistan found indirect mention by a senior Indian diplomat, who was recently in Islamabad to participate in the SCO co-

ordinators' meet, where he stressed the need for regional connectivity.

To secure this strategic foothold, India has assisted Iran in developing the port's Shahid Beheshti terminal. However, the US sanctions have seriously impacted India's ambitions to use the Iranian port. The waiver India

had obtained for using the port lapsed on April 26 this year. The Trump administration, which has been riding roughshod over Indian interests, threatening tariffs of up to 100 per cent for purchasing Russian oil being one such instance, did not grant a further extension to the waiver. India had used the previous waiver to good effect, providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

India, however, was forced to withdraw hastily from operating the Shahid Beheshti terminal in Chabahar for fear of inviting US sanctions.

This has been a huge setback for India's regional connectivity ambitions.

Amid heightened US-Iran tensions, it's unlikely that a sanctions waiver will come again anytime soon. While Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, during his visit to India last month, pressed upon New Delhi to increase its investments in Chabahar and deepen economic ties with his country, US sanctions preclude any such thing happening for now.

The ongoing sanctions on this strategic connectivity project are part of US strategy to apply maximum pressure on an adversary that has, over the decades, refused to be cowed down by Washington's arm-twisting tactics.

Beyond trade access, Chabahar for India can serve as a strategic counterweight to Pakistan's Gwadar port, which is located just 140 km away and has been built with China's assistance. India has justifiable concerns about China actively using Gwadar as a military outpost.

In the long term, India also envisions Chabahar as the maritime anchor for the ambitious International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-modal transport network to access regions beyond its ex-

tended neighbourhood, right up to St. Petersburg in Russia and beyond.

Backed by India, Iran and Russia, the INSTC project, however, also remains a challenging one, given the geopolitical turmoil that is currently at play. The continuing Russia-Ukraine war and the consequent nosedive in Moscow's relations with European countries are further setbacks for this ambitious connectivity project.

Despite all these formidable obstacles, India has demonstrated strategic patience, maintaining its long-term investment in Chabahar in the hope that shifting geopolitical tides will eventually allow the project to realise its full potential. New Delhi is keeping its fingers crossed.

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