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One-Horse Races Are No Triumph for Democracy

Context

- Competition is essential in every sphere of life, whether in business, sports, or politics.
- An industrialist once remarked that his greatest challenge was the **lack of competition**, despite his company dominating the market.
- Similarly, cricketers consider victories against strong opponents more meaningful than easy wins. In the same way, democracy derives its strength from healthy political **competition**.
- It allows citizens to choose between alternatives, hold governments accountable, and preserve democratic values.

Competition as the Foundation of Democracy

- **Importance of Political Competition**

- Political competition acts as the **haemoglobin** of democracy. It gives citizens the freedom to remove governments and elect new representatives.
- A democracy without opposition traps people in the idea of **TINA**; there Is No Alternative.
- In such conditions, elections may continue, but genuine choice disappears.
- Competition also motivates governments to improve their performance.
- Just as businesses become more efficient due to market rivalry, political parties refine their policies when opponents constantly expose failures and weaknesses.
- Strong opposition ensures accountability and prevents the concentration of unchecked power.

• **Democracy and Public Trust**

- A government may legally acquire **power**, but it earns a true **mandate** only when citizens believe the electoral process was fair.
- Elections without meaningful contestation create winners without a game. Democratic legitimacy depends not merely on voting, but on the existence of real alternatives.
- Fair competition also gives losing parties hope that they can succeed in future elections. This faith strengthens the peaceful transfer of power, one of democracy's greatest achievements.

Political Theory and Democratic Contestation

• **Robert Dahl's Democratic Perspective**

- Political scientist Robert Dahl argued that systems with high participation but low contestation cannot be considered true democracies.
- He described such systems as **plebiscitary autocracies**. Voting alone is insufficient if citizens lack meaningful alternatives.

• **Importance of Pluralism**

- Democracy depends on **pluralism**, ideological diversity, and open political rivalry. Different political parties represent varying social groups, interests, and ideologies.
- The weakening of opposition parties reduces democratic accountability and encourages excessive centralization of power.

The Role of Neutral Institutions

• **Need for a Level Playing Field**

- Competition can survive only when there is a **level playing field**. In democratic systems, institutions like the Election Commission of India (ECI) act as neutral referees responsible for ensuring free and fair elections.
- If the referee appears biased, even legitimate victories lose credibility. In sports, spectators question results when umpires seem partial.

- Similarly, elections lose public trust when constitutional institutions are accused of favouritism.

- **Institutional Neutrality and Democratic Confidence**

- Neutral institutions are essential for maintaining democratic confidence. Citizens must believe that electoral rules apply equally to all parties.
- Without institutional **neutrality**, opposition groups lose morale, and voters begin to doubt the fairness of elections.

Critique of the Election Commission and the West Bengal Elections

- **Controversy Surrounding the Special Intensive Revision (SIR)**

- The West Bengal Assembly elections became controversial due to the **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** of electoral rolls.
- Large-scale deletions of voters and the classification of many electors as under adjudication raised serious concerns regarding electoral fairness.
- Analysts pointed out that the number of deleted voters exceeded victory margins in several constituencies, suggesting that the outcome may have been influenced by the revision process.

- **Exclusion of Electors and Administrative Concerns**

- Nearly **27 lakh electors** were reportedly removed after a rushed verification process conducted under severe time pressure.
- Many affected individuals were directed toward non-existent **Appellate Tribunals**, leaving their voting rights uncertain.
- The inability to identify genuinely ineligible voters under **Article 326** further weakened confidence in the process.

The Danger of a One-Party Democracy

- **Decline of Political Opposition**

- The gradual weakening of opposition parties at both state and national levels raises fears of a **one-party system**.
- Ideas such as **One Nation, One Election** and **Opposition-mukt Bharat** appear to reduce political contestation rather than strengthen democratic participation.

- **Threat to Democratic Values**

- A democracy without opposition becomes a one-horse race, lacking accountability, public choice, and political excitement.
- If institutions appear partial and challengers become too weak, elections may continue formally while democracy weakens internally.

Conclusion

- **Elections alone cannot guarantee legitimacy** unless citizens trust the fairness of the process and believe that real alternatives exist.
- **Strong opposition parties**, independent institutions, and fair electoral practices are essential to preserving democratic values.
- Just as sports lose excitement without rivalry and businesses stagnate without competitors, nations weaken when political opposition disappears.
- The true strength of democracy lies not in guaranteed victories, but in the **constant possibility of defeat**.

One-Horse Races Are No Triumph for Democracy FAQs

Q1. Why is competition important in democracy?

Ans. Competition is important because it gives citizens real choices and keeps governments accountable.

Q2. What does TINA mean in politics?

Ans. TINA means “There Is No Alternative,” where voters feel they have no real political choice.

Q3. Who described low-contestation systems as “plebiscitary autocracies”?

Ans. Robert Dahl described such systems as “plebiscitary autocracies.”

Q4. Why are neutral institutions necessary in elections?

Ans. Neutral institutions ensure fairness and maintain public trust in the electoral process.

Q5. What danger arises from weak political opposition?

Ans. Weak political opposition can lead to excessive concentration of power and weaken democracy.

Source: **The Hindu**

Oslo Summit Must Mark India’s Northward Turn

Context

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Oslo for the **third India-Nordic Summit** comes at a time when India’s engagement with Nordic countries has evolved significantly.
- Earlier focused mainly on climate cooperation, innovation, digitalisation, and the blue economy, the partnership is now acquiring greater strategic and economic significance due to changing global geopolitics.
- Key drivers include the Ukraine war’s impact on Europe’s security architecture, tensions within the trans-Atlantic alliance, and rising strategic interest in the Arctic region, including Greenland.

The Arctic’s Growing Strategic Importance

- The Arctic, once largely insulated from geopolitical rivalry, is now becoming a key arena of competition over shipping routes, energy resources, critical minerals, and strategic infrastructure.

- **Changing Security Dynamics in the Arctic**

- The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has transformed Nordic security architecture, leaving Russia as the Arctic Council's only non-NATO member.
- At the same time, the Russia-China partnership has expanded into the Arctic through cooperation in shipping and energy.

- **Why the Nordics Matter More to India**

- The changing Arctic landscape has increased strategic convergence between India and Nordic countries in areas such as technology, supply chains, maritime security, and green energy.

- **Strategic Roles of Nordic Countries**

- **Norway:** Balancing scientific cooperation with growing security concerns under its revised High North strategy.
- **Denmark (via Greenland):** Important for emerging Arctic sea routes and critical mineral access.
- **Sweden and Finland:** Offer advanced defence technologies, innovation ecosystems, and Arctic expertise.
- **Iceland:** Provides geothermal knowledge relevant to India's Himalayan regions.

- **Militarisation and Technological Transformation**

- The Arctic is increasingly shaped by deterrence, military positioning, and energy competition, with emerging technologies such as autonomous underwater vehicles, satellite seabed mapping, and concerns over undersea cable vulnerabilities.

- **India's Arctic Presence**

- India became an Arctic Council observer in 2013 and has established a presence through:
 - Himadri research station
 - IndARC underwater observatory
 - Gruvebadet atmospheric laboratory (Norway)
- While India has a scientific footprint in the Arctic, the region's growing geopolitical importance means scientific engagement alone will not be sufficient to protect India's strategic interests.

India as an Emerging Arctic Stakeholder

- Although India is not an Arctic nation, it has significant stakes in the region.
- The Arctic is warming more than **three times faster than the global average**, with consequences for India's climate and economy.
- Arctic ice loss, particularly in the **Barents-Kara Sea**, has been linked to variations in India's summer monsoon.
- Rising polar ice melt also threatens India's coastline, ports, and island territories through sea-level rise.

- Melting Arctic ice is opening new possibilities for **shipping, resource extraction, and military activity**.
- The increasingly navigable **Northern Sea Route** along Russia's Arctic coast could reshape global trade and maritime connectivity.

• **Potential New Maritime Corridor**

- Extending the **Chennai-Vladivostok corridor** to Murmansk and the Nordic region could create a strategic maritime link connecting India, Japan, Russia, and Northern Europe.
- India's Arctic engagement with the Nordics can complement, rather than conflict with, its partnership with Russia.

Policy Measures India Should Consider

- **Build Arctic Shipping Capacity** – India should develop a small fleet of five Arctic-capable ice-class tankers by 2030-31 under the Shipbuilding Financial Assistance Policy to avoid missing early strategic opportunities.
- **Create an India-Arctic Economic Forum** – Such a platform could connect Indian businesses with opportunities in shipping, energy, infrastructure, and skilled manpower in the Arctic region.
- **Strengthen Climate Cooperation** – India should promote an Arctic-Himalaya Climate Data Corridor with Nordic countries for joint monitoring of climate linkages affecting monsoons and sea-level rise.
- **Appoint a Special Arctic Envoy** – Unlike the other four Asian observer states in the Arctic Council, India does not have a Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs, making this an important institutional gap to address.

Key Focus Areas in India-Nordic Strategic Cooperation

• **Clean Energy and Green Technology Partnership**

- Nordic countries are global leaders in offshore wind, hydrogen, electric mobility, and green shipping, while India's clean energy transition needs technology, investment, and reliable partnerships.
- Cooperation should move beyond simple trade to joint development and manufacturing in areas such as offshore wind, green hydrogen, and grid-balancing technologies.

• **Supply Chain Diversification and Critical Minerals**

- Nordic countries can help India diversify supply chains amid concerns over China's dominance in critical mineral processing:
 - Norway: Deep-sea mining potential
 - Sweden: Rare earths and iron ore
 - Denmark (via Greenland): Strategic mineral access
- Nordic strengths in telecommunications, semiconductors, batteries, artificial intelligence, and advanced materials align with India's manufacturing ambitions and engineering capabilities.

• **Strengthening Maritime Cooperation**

- Maritime collaboration is strategically important as India depends on secure sea routes, resilient ports, and efficient logistics.
- Nordic countries bring expertise in:
 - Shipping technology
 - Maritime digitisation
 - Shipbuilding innovation
 - Sustainable port infrastructure
- Recent disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have highlighted maritime vulnerabilities, making diversification of routes and partnerships increasingly important.

• **Mutual Strategic Benefits**

- For the Nordics, India offers market scale, economic growth, and a trusted democratic partner in the Indo-Pacific. For India, the Nordics provide technology, capital, and expertise without hegemonic pressures.

Towards a Long-Term Strategic Partnership

- As the Arctic becomes more strategically contested, the Oslo Summit should mark a shift from occasional engagement to a sustained India-Nordic strategic partnership.

Oslo Summit Must Mark India's Northward Turn FAQs

Q1. Why is India's relationship with Nordic countries becoming more strategically important?

Ans. Changing geopolitics, the Ukraine war, Arctic competition, supply chain concerns, and clean energy needs have given India-Nordic ties greater strategic and economic significance.

Q2. Why is the Arctic important for India despite not being an Arctic nation?

Ans. Arctic changes affect India's monsoon, sea-level rise, maritime trade routes, energy access, and strategic interests, making India an important stakeholder in the region.

Q3. What strategic opportunities can Arctic engagement offer India?

Ans. The Arctic offers opportunities in shipping, energy logistics, critical minerals, climate cooperation, and new maritime corridors linking India with Russia, Japan, and Northern Europe.

Q4. What policy steps should India take to strengthen Arctic engagement?

Ans. India should build Arctic-capable tankers, create an India-Arctic Economic Forum, establish climate data cooperation, and appoint a Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs.

Q5. What are the major areas of India-Nordic strategic cooperation?

Ans. Key areas include clean energy, green hydrogen, critical minerals, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, maritime technology, sustainable shipping, supply chains, and defence-related innovation.

Source: TH

