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A Year of Dissipating Promises for Indian Foreign Policy

Context

- After a politically focused 2024, New Delhi anticipated renewed diplomatic momentum, progress on long-pending trade agreements, and greater regional stability in 2025.
- Engagements with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, alongside outreach to neighbouring states, suggested confidence and ambition.
- However, by the end of the year, India faced mounting pressures across economic, energy, global, and regional security domains.
- The trajectory of 2025 exposed structural weaknesses and highlighted the limits of **performative diplomacy** in a rapidly changing international environment.

Economic and Energy Security Challenges

- India's most severe setbacks emerged in the economic and energy spheres, particularly in relations with the United States.
- Rather than a reset under the second Trump administration, ties deteriorated sharply.
- High tariffs on Indian exports disrupted labour-intensive sectors, leading to job losses and contract cancellations.
- Immigration restrictions further weakened remittance inflows, a vital support for India's balance of payments.
- Despite early optimism, major trade agreements with the United States and the European Union remained incomplete, underscoring the gap between diplomatic intent and tangible outcomes.
- Energy security became an equally pressing concern. India's increased reliance on discounted Russian oil initially strengthened supply resilience, but renewed sanctions pressure forced difficult trade-offs.
- The possibility of reducing Russian imports raised economic and reputational risks, recalling earlier disruptions caused by compliance with sanctions on Iran and Venezuela.
- High-profile engagements with Moscow **failed to deliver major agreements** in defence, energy, or strategic cooperation, reinforcing the limited returns of symbolic engagement amid rising **economic coercion**.

Shifting Global Strategic Environment

- The global strategic landscape in 2025 grew increasingly unpredictable.

- The United States' revised National Security Strategy adopted a more cautious tone toward China and Russia while offering limited articulation of India's broader global role.
- This shift weakened assumptions about deeper strategic alignment with Washington.
- Discussions of a **potential U.S.-China G-2 arrangement** intensified concerns over India's position in the Asian balance of power, particularly as traditional U.S. allies also faced diminished attention.
- Simultaneously, the global response to conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza reflected a weakening commitment to the rules-based international order.
- Peace proposals perceived to favour aggressors, combined with China's push for alternative global governance frameworks, signalled an evolving international architecture.
- For India, these developments highlighted the risks of **strategic ambiguity** and the need to articulate a clearer vision for global order rather than relying on declining multilateral mechanisms.

Regional Security and Diplomatic Constraints

- India's immediate neighbourhood became more volatile as the year progressed.
- Terrorist attacks in Jammu and Kashmir demonstrated the **persistence of security threats** despite years of counterterrorism measures.
- While India's military responses were tactically effective, they failed to secure strong and sustained international diplomatic backing.
- This gap exposed a **recurring challenge**: military action alone does not guarantee political legitimacy.
- Regional instability further complicated India's strategic environment. Political transitions and protests in neighbouring countries reduced predictability and constrained New Delhi's influence.
- Relations with several regional and extra-regional actors deteriorated, while new defence alignments involving Pakistan altered the regional security calculus.
- Despite active engagement, India struggled to shape outcomes in its immediate periphery, revealing limits to its regional leadership aspirations.

Credibility, Norms, and Foreign Policy Consistency

- A central lesson from 2025 lies in the importance of credibility. India's external advocacy for democracy, minority rights, and regional stability risks losing force when domestic and regional practices appear inconsistent.
- Normative influence depends on alignment between principles and actions.
- In a world increasingly driven by transactions rather than values, India's ability to invoke principles rests on **normative consistency** across both its foreign and domestic policies.

Conclusion

- India's foreign policy in 2025 was marked by a **sharp contrast** between early promise and eventual disillusionment.
- External pressures exposed economic and strategic vulnerabilities, while overreliance on symbolism limited diplomatic returns, at the same time, regional instability and global uncertainty constrained India's strategic choices.

- As New Delhi looks ahead, it must **recalibrate its approach by prioritising substance over spectacle**, aligning principles with practice, and adopting a realistic assessment of its strategic environment.
- Such adjustments are essential for strengthening India's credibility and resilience in an increasingly unstable international order.

A Year of Dissipating Promises for Indian Foreign Policy FAQs

Q1. Why did expectations for India's foreign policy in 2025 not materialise?

Ans. Expectations faded due to economic pressures, strategic uncertainty, regional instability, and limited diplomatic outcomes.

Q2. How did U.S. policies affect India's economic security in 2025?

Ans. U.S. tariffs, sanctions, and immigration restrictions harmed exports, employment, and remittance flows.

Q3. What challenge did India face regarding Russian energy imports?

Ans. India faced sanctions pressure that threatened its energy security and strategic autonomy.

Q4. Why was India's military response not diplomatically effective?

Ans. Military actions did not translate into strong international diplomatic support.

Q5. What key lesson does the analysis highlight for India's future foreign policy?

Ans. India must align diplomatic symbolism, strategic interests, and consistent principles to enhance credibility.

Source: **The Hindu**

The Urban Future with Cities as Dynamic Ecosystems

Context

- Cities occupy a central position in global development, shaping economic growth, governance, science, and innovation.
- Despite this prominence, urban progress frequently overlooks the most fundamental element of city life: the people who inhabit these spaces.
- A persistent disconnect exists between the cities that are designed, the cities people aspire to live in, and the cities they actually experience.
- This gap is most visible in the lives of migrants and linguistically diverse residents, revealing a critical weakness in contemporary urban thinking that prioritises systems over lived realities.

Linguistic Exclusion and the Invisible Tax

- Migration into cities often comes with an unspoken expectation of assimilation.
- Language becomes the primary measure of belonging, determining who can fully participate in urban life.
- Those unable to meet this standard are burdened with an **invisible linguistic tax**, facing daily barriers to communication, recognition, and validation.

- This exclusion goes beyond inconvenience; it affects emotional security and reinforces the idea that belonging must be earned rather than assumed.

Economic Implications of Marginalisation

- Linguistic exclusion quickly translates into **economic and social exclusion**.
- Navigating employment markets, housing systems, healthcare services, and government institutions becomes disproportionately difficult when official processes remain monolingual.
- These structural barriers frequently push migrants toward informal employment, where exploitation is more likely and opportunities for advancement are limited.
- Cities depend heavily on migrant labour and tax contributions, yet simultaneously restrict access to formal economic pathways.
- This contradiction undermines social cohesion and weakens long-term urban resilience.

The Limitations of Modern Urban Planning

- A fundamental weakness in contemporary urban design lies in **flawed urban planning assumptions**. Cities are often planned for a static, homogeneous population, despite their increasingly diverse reality.
- Infrastructure, public services, and smart city technologies typically serve established residents who already meet linguistic and bureaucratic norms.
- As a result, innovation benefits a narrow segment of the population while rendering newcomers invisible.
- This problem is intensified when governance and planning bodies lack cultural and demographic diversity, allowing uniform perspectives to dominate decision-making for heterogeneous communities.

Reimagining Cities for All

- Inclusive urban futures require a conceptual shift. Cities must be understood as **cities as dynamic ecosystems**, capable of adaptation, expansion, and regeneration. Designing better infrastructure alone is insufficient if cultural belonging is ignored.
- Urban planners must anticipate friction between established populations and new arrivals, addressing it proactively rather than reactively.
- Targeted cultural sensitisation training for public-facing staff can improve institutional efficiency, safeguard democratic access, and reduce everyday barriers.
- While such transitions may involve temporary disruption, they are essential for sustainable and equitable development.

Empathy as the Foundation of Urban Futures

- The most critical element missing from urban design is **empathy as planning principle**.
- Successful cities are not measured solely by technological advancement or economic output, but by the comfort, security, and belonging experienced by their residents.
- A city designed with empathy recognises all inhabitants: those born there, those who have settled over time, and those yet to arrive.

- This approach transforms urban planning from a technical exercise into a social commitment grounded in human experience.

Conclusion

- As cities continue to expand and diversify, the challenge is no longer simply how to build smarter or faster, but how to build **fairer and more humane environments**.
- Linguistic and cultural diversity should be recognised as strengths rather than obstacles.
- By embedding empathy, inclusion, and adaptability into urban planning and governance, cities can bridge the gap between design and reality, ensuring that progress is defined not only by infrastructure, but by the dignity and **belonging of all who call the city home**.

The Urban Future with Cities as Dynamic Ecosystems FAQs

Q1. What central problem do modern cities face?

Ans. Modern cities often fail to align urban design with the lived experiences and needs of diverse residents, especially migrants.

Q2. What is meant by the invisible linguistic tax?

Ans. The invisible linguistic tax refers to social and economic disadvantages caused by limited access to services due to language barriers.

Q3. How does linguistic exclusion affect economic participation?

Ans. Linguistic exclusion restricts access to formal jobs and services, often forcing migrants into insecure informal employment.

Q4. Why is current urban planning considered limited?

Ans. Current urban planning assumes a homogeneous population and overlooks cultural and linguistic diversity in cities.

Q5. Why is empathy essential for future cities?

Ans. Empathy ensures urban spaces support dignity, belonging, and equal participation for all residents.

Source: [The Hindu](#)

Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill 2025 - Reforming Higher Education Governance

Context

- The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill 2025 was introduced in the Winter Session of Parliament and referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee.
- With the Bill now in the public domain, it has triggered **debate** on the balance between **institutional autonomy and centralisation** in higher education governance.

- The Bill operationalises key ideas of the National Education Policy (**NEP**), 2020, particularly the principle of a “**light but tight**” regulatory framework.

Objectives and Vision of the Bill

- To propel India towards **Viksit Bharat @2047**, by advancing the decolonisation of the Indian education system.
- It will enhance autonomy, quality, transparency, and global competitiveness of Higher Education Institutions (**HEIs**).
- It tries to shift regulation from control-based to facilitative governance.

Key Features of the VBSA Bill 2025

• Unified higher education regulator

- The Bill proposes a single overarching commission by subsuming UGC (1956), AICTE (1987), NCTE (1993), and other education regulators.
- However, it excludes law and medical education regulators.
- So, the Bill addresses long-standing fragmentation and regulatory overlap.

• Three-council structure for clarity

- The Commission will function through three clearly demarcated councils –
 - Viniyaman Parishad – Regulatory Council
 - Gunvatta Parishad – Accreditation Council
 - Manak Parishad – Standards Council
- **Significance:** Clear mandates reduce regulatory ambiguity and discretion.

• Enhanced institutional autonomy

- Graded and time-bound autonomy for HEIs.
- Shift from micromanagement to self-governance.
- Regulator to play a **facilitator**, not controller.
- Single technology-driven window for approvals and compliance.

• Outcome-based evaluation framework

- Moves away from input-based UGC norms (infrastructure, faculty count), and focuses on **learning outcomes**, student skills, employability, societal and real-world impact.
- It aligns with global best practices and accountability standards.

• Internationalisation of Indian higher education

- Enables high-performing Indian universities to establish campuses abroad. Supports India’s aspiration to become a global education hub.

- **Transparency and student-centric governance**

- Mandatory public self-disclosure (online and offline) of academic, operational, and financial details.
- It ensures robust grievance redressal mechanisms, **building trust**, fairness, and accountability in the system.

Concerns and Clarifications

- **Concerns**

- Fear of excessive centralisation, despite assurances of autonomy.
- Perception of reduced role of states in higher education governance.
- Implementation challenges in transitioning from multiple regulators to a single body.

- **Government's clarifications**

- No dilution of institutional autonomy. No adverse impact on funding.
- States retain powers under their respective Acts, including establishing universities, and curriculum development.

Way Forward

- Strengthen Centre-State consultation mechanisms.
- Ensuring federal balance and cooperative federalism in education
- Ensure transparent appointments and functioning of councils.
- **Capacity-building** of HEIs to adapt to outcome-based evaluation.
- Periodic parliamentary and public **review** of the new regulatory framework.

Conclusion

- The VBSA Bill 2025 represents a structural and philosophical shift in India's higher education governance.
- Its success, however, will depend on balanced implementation, safeguarding federal principles, and ensuring that autonomy translates into genuine academic excellence rather than centralised control.

Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill 2025 FAQs

Q1. How does the VBSA Bill, 2025 operationalise the NEP 2020?

Ans. By unifying multiple regulators into a single commission with minimal regulation, graded autonomy, and outcome-based evaluation.

Q2. What is the rationale behind subsuming UGC, AICTE and NCTE?

Ans. To remove regulatory fragmentation, overlap, and compliance burden while ensuring clarity and efficiency in higher education governance.

Q3. How does the VBSA Bill, 2025 seek to enhance institutional autonomy in higher education?

Ans. By providing graded, time-bound autonomy, facilitating self-governance, and reducing procedural controls through a single-window system.

Q4. What is the outcome-based evaluation framework proposed under the VBSA Bill?

Ans. It shifts focus from input-based norms to learning outcomes, skills, employability, and real-world impact.

Q5. Why have concerns of centralisation been raised against the VBSA Bill, 2025?

Ans. Concerns arise due to a single central regulator, while the government assures preservation of state powers, autonomy, and funding.

Source: IE

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