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The Lesson is National Security Cannot be Outsourced

Context

- The war involving Iran, the United States, and Israel has exposed serious weaknesses in the security framework of the Persian Gulf.
- What was expected to be a rapid victory for two of the world's most **technologically advanced militaries** has instead evolved into a conflict that challenges long-standing assumptions about **military power**, **deterrence**, and **regional alliances**.
- Iran's ability to retaliate against strategic targets has shaken the confidence of Gulf states in decades-old **security guarantees** offered by the United States.
- The unfolding conflict reveals the fragility of externally backed security arrangements and reinforces a fundamental principle: **national security** cannot be permanently **outsourced**.

Iran's Strategic Retaliation and the Changing Nature of War

- Iran's response has altered the anticipated course of the war. Rather than collapsing under pressure, Iran has demonstrated the capacity for **strategic retaliation** by striking targets previously considered safe.

- These include multiple **American military bases** across the Gulf region in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Oman.
- By targeting these facilities, Iran has demonstrated that even the most protected installations are not immune to modern warfare.
- The attacks have extended beyond military installations to include **critical energy infrastructure**, such as **oil depots, oil fields, and gas facilities**.
- The most disruptive development has been the closure of the **Strait of Hormuz**, one of the world's most vital energy chokepoints.

The Gulf Security Arrangement and Its Failures

• The Gulf Security Arrangement

- After the **Iranian Revolution** of 1979–80, Gulf monarchies perceived Iran as a major geopolitical and ideological threat.
- In response, the United States emerged as the primary guarantor of regional stability.
- The **Carter Doctrine** declared that any attempt by external forces to control the Persian Gulf would be viewed as a threat to American **vital interests**, to be countered with **military force** if necessary.
- Over time, this commitment evolved into an extensive system of **defence partnerships**, military deployments, and arms agreements with Gulf states.
- One initiative was the proposed **Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA)**, often described as an Arab NATO.

• The Failures

- The framework aimed to unite **Gulf Cooperation Council** members with Egypt and Jordan in a coordinated regional defence structure supported by the United States.
- However, political divisions within the region, including the **Qatar blockade** in 2017, prevented the alliance from materialising.
- Reports indicate that several Gulf countries have depleted their **missile interceptors**, while the United States prioritises limited defensive resources for **Israel**.
- For many Gulf states, the realisation that **external security guarantees** may not hold during major crises has been deeply unsettling.

Regional Consequences and Strategic Reassessment

- Gulf states are increasingly reassessing their dependence on American military protection.
- Discussions have emerged about reducing investment commitments in the United States and reconsidering the presence of **American military bases** on Gulf soil.
- Such decisions would represent a profound transformation of the **regional security architecture** that has existed since the late twentieth century.
- The strategic alignment between the Gulf monarchies and the United States has long been a cornerstone of **Middle Eastern geopolitics**.
- A shift away from this arrangement could lead to new partnerships, diversified security strategies, or greater emphasis on **regional self-reliance**.

Lessons for India: The Importance of Strategic Self-Reliance

- For decades, India remained one of the world's largest **arms importers**, relying heavily on foreign suppliers for military equipment.
- The **Kargil War** of 1999 exposed critical shortages and operational vulnerabilities caused by excessive dependence on imports.
- The **Kargil Review Committee** subsequently emphasised the need for **defence self-reliance**.
- Meaningful progress accelerated after 2014 with the policy emphasis on **Atma Nirbharta**.
- Domestic defence manufacturing expanded significantly, reducing the share of imports while encouraging **private sector participation**.
- Indigenous platforms such as the BrahMos missile, the Tejas fighter aircraft, advanced artillery systems, and domestic ammunition production strengthened India's strategic capabilities.
- India has also expanded defence exports, reaching record levels in recent years while reducing import dependency.
- The development of a stronger domestic defence industry has improved **strategic autonomy**, ensuring that national security decisions are not constrained by external suppliers during crises.

Conclusion

- The Iran-U.S.-Israel conflict has exposed structural weaknesses in the **Gulf's long-standing security framework**.
- Iran's ability to strike high-value targets has challenged the perception of **military invulnerability** surrounding American infrastructure in the region.
- More importantly, the inability of the United States to fully shield its allies has raised serious questions about the credibility of **external protection systems**.
- In an era of rapidly evolving warfare, **self-reliance**, preparedness, and strategic independence remain the most reliable guarantees of national security.

The Lesson is National Security Cannot be Outsourced FAQs

Q1. Why did Iran target American military bases in the Gulf region?

Ans. Iran targeted American military bases to retaliate against the joint offensive and to demonstrate that U.S. military installations in the region are vulnerable.

Q2. How did the closure of the Strait of Hormuz affect the conflict?

Ans. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz disrupted global oil transportation and created serious concerns for global energy security.

Q3. What weakness in the Gulf security arrangement was revealed during the conflict?

Ans. The conflict revealed that long-standing U.S. security guarantees to Gulf states may not be fully reliable during large-scale regional crises.

Q4. What major lesson does the conflict offer regarding national security?

Ans. The conflict shows that national security cannot be outsourced and must rely on strong domestic capabilities.

Q5. What lesson does the situation provide for India's defence policy?

Ans. The situation highlights the importance of defence self-reliance and strengthening indigenous military production in India.

Source: **The Hindu**

Reversing Falling Fertility - Financial Incentives Approach and Lessons from Sikkim and the World

Context

- Recently, **Andhra Pradesh** Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu proposed a ₹25,000 cash **incentive for couples** having a second or third child to counter the state's declining fertility rate.
- Andhra Pradesh's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is about 1.4, well below the replacement level of 2.1.
- This has revived the broader debate on whether financial incentives can reverse declining birth rates, an issue already witnessed in Sikkim and several countries globally.

India's Emerging Demographic Concern

- **Declining fertility in States**
 - Several Indian states are witnessing fertility decline below replacement level.
 - For example, **Sikkim** has the lowest TFR in India (~1.1). Andhra Pradesh (1.4) is also facing a similar trajectory.
- **Potential implications:** Ageing population, shrinking workforce, pressure on social security systems, and reduced demographic dividend
- These concerns have prompted state governments to explore **pro-natalist policies**.

Sikkim's Pro-Natalist Policy Experiment

- Around 2022, Sikkim introduced one of India's most comprehensive pro-natalist policies.
- Key features of these policies:
 - **Financial incentives for government employees:** One additional salary increment for the birth of a second child, and two increments for a third child.
 - **Childcare support:** State-funded childcare attendants for women employees after childbirth. This is designed to reduce work-family conflict.
 - **Expanded parental leave:** Maternity leave extended to one year, and paternity leave introduced to promote shared parenting.
 - **Benefits for private sector mothers:** ₹5,000 per month for one year after the second child. ₹10,000 per month for one year after the third child.
 - **Addressing infertility:** (The Vatsalya Scheme)
 - Government funding for up to two IVF cycles for couples unable to conceive naturally.
 - 38 women enrolled in the initial phase, indicating infertility as a contributing factor.

- **Outcome:** Despite these extensive incentives, Sikkim's fertility rate remains extremely low, and the anticipated baby boom has not materialised.

Global Experience with Pro-Natalist Policies

- Many countries facing demographic decline have experimented with similar policies. For example,
- **Singapore** (TFR: 1.0): Measures include baby bonuses, tax rebates, subsidised childcare, and housing incentives. Despite generous support, fertility remains very low.
- **South Korea** (TFR: 0.7 [lowest globally]): Massive investment in cash grants, childcare subsidies, housing benefits, and parental leave. Yet fertility continues to decline sharply.
- **Japan** (TFR: 1.3): Long-standing policies to support families, but birth rates remain below replacement level.
- **China:** After abandoning the one-child policy, China allowed two and later three children, with incentives. However, birth rates continue to fall.
- **Hungary** (a partial success):
 - TFR rose from 1.23 (2011) to 1.55 after aggressive family-support policies – housing subsidies, subsidised loans written off after multiple births, and lifetime income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children
 - However, fertility still remains below replacement level, and some experts attribute the rise to earlier childbirth rather than more children overall.

Structural Causes of Fertility Decline

- Financial incentives often fail because fertility decline is driven by **deeper** socio-economic **transformations**.
- These are –
 - **Changing social norms:** Delayed marriage (declining fertility window), greater female workforce participation (childbirth leading to career interruptions for women), and changing aspirations regarding family size.
 - **Rising cost of living:** Urban housing costs, expensive education and childcare.
 - **Quality vs quantity of children:** Couples prefer fewer children with higher investment per child.
 - **Work-life balance challenges:** Limited flexible workplaces, lack of affordable childcare infrastructure, gender inequality in caregiving responsibilities.

Way Forward - Building Family-Friendly Societies

- International experience suggests that **long-term structural support** works better than short-term incentives.
 - **Affordable childcare infrastructure:** Publicly supported daycare systems.
 - **Predictable parental leave:** Gender-neutral parental leave policies.
 - **Flexible work arrangements:** Remote work, flexible hours, and work-life balance policies.
 - **Housing and social security support:** Family-friendly housing policies. Strengthening social protection systems.
 - **Addressing infertility:** Expanded access to assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as IVF.

- Countries like **France** and **Nordic states** have managed to stabilise fertility levels by making parenthood compatible with modern lifestyles.

Conclusion

- The proposal by Andhra Pradesh reflects growing concern about India's long-term demographic trajectory. However, financial incentives alone cannot reverse declining fertility.
- Therefore, effective population policies must focus on creating a **supportive ecosystem for families** shaped by economic security, social stability, gender equality, and work-life balance.
- Ultimately, the decision to have children is less about incentives and more about a family's confidence in its economic future and social stability.

Reversing Falling Fertility FAQs

Q1. Can financial incentives effectively reverse declining fertility rates?

Ans. These alone have limited impact as structural factors like urbanisation, career priorities, shape reproductive decisions.

Q2. What are the major demographic concerns arising from declining fertility rates in India?

Ans. This may lead to population ageing, a shrinking workforce, and pressure on economic growth and social security systems.

Q3. What are the lessons from Sikkim's pro-natalist policy experiment?

Ans. Sikkim introduced salary increments, extended parental leave, IVF assistance, but fertility rates remain extremely low.

Q4. Why have pro-natalist policies in countries like Singapore, South Korea, largely failed to significantly raise fertility rates?

Ans. Because fertility decline is driven by deeper socio-economic changes including delayed marriage, rising living costs, etc.

Q5. What policy measures can help stabilise fertility rates in modern societies?

Ans. Long-term family-friendly policies such as affordable childcare, flexible workplaces, gender-equal parental leave, etc.

Source: IE

The Need to Recognise 'Volunteer' Care Work

Context

- The Union Budget 2026–27 proposes to create a strong **care ecosystem** by training 1.5 lakh multiskilled caregivers in geriatric and allied care under the **National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF)**. This step is important as India's demand for care services is increasing.
- However, the proposal highlights a contradiction. While the government plans to train new care professionals, it does not address the condition of over five million women already working in the care system.
- These include ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers, and mid-day meal workers.
- These workers provide essential health, nutrition and childcare services, but they are still classified as 'volunteers' rather than regular employees.
- As a result, they remain excluded from the formal care ecosystem that the government aims to strengthen.

Women Care Workers: A Shadow Labour Force

- Women such as Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, and mid-day meal workers form the backbone of India's health, nutrition, and childcare services.
- They play a crucial role in delivering welfare programmes across the country.
- Despite their essential role, these workers operate in uncertain and insecure conditions.
- They receive low honorariums, and lack formal employment contracts, paid leave, and maternity benefits.
- **Limited and Fragmented Support**
 - Some support is provided through state-level honorarium increases, gratuity benefits, and national schemes like Ayushman Bharat and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan. However, these measures vary across states and remain limited.
 - India's care economy relies heavily on this large feminised workforce, yet the state continues to classify them as 'honorary workers' rather than formal employees.
 - This limits their access to labour rights and social security protections.

Care Work in India: A Gendered Reality

- Care work in India reflects deep gender inequalities. According to the 2024 Time Use Survey, about 41% of women aged 15–59 spend 140 minutes daily on caregiving, while only 21.4% of men spend about 74 minutes.
- **Care Work Viewed as Women's Duty**
 - India's welfare system often treats care work as an extension of women's domestic responsibilities.
 - Many women providing health and welfare services are labelled as 'volunteers', even though their work requires significant skill and effort.
 - Because care work is considered '**natural**' for women, it is often undervalued and poorly paid.
 - This creates a cycle where care work is not recognised as skilled labour, keeping a large female workforce in informal and insecure employment.
- **Neglect of the Existing Care Workforce**
 - While recent policies aim to train new care workers, they do not adequately address the needs of the existing workforce.

- Current workers already perform complex tasks requiring community knowledge, coordination, and emotional labour, yet remain underpaid and unprotected.
- India's care workers are central to the functioning of the welfare state.
- Strengthening the care economy will require greater financial investment and a shift in societal attitudes, recognising care work as skilled labour deserving fair wages and protections.

Reimagining India's Care Economy

• Ending the 'Volunteer' Label

- India needs to move beyond classifying care workers as 'volunteers'.
- The Supreme Court's 2025 ruling in "*Dharam Singh vs State of U.P.*" stated that work that is continuous and essential to an institution cannot remain temporary indefinitely.
- This strengthens the case for converting such roles into permanent posts.

• Transition to Formal Employment

- With the Union Budget's focus on skilling, there is an opportunity to review employment norms in the care sector.
- The state can create transition frameworks to move workers from honorariums to fair wages and formal contracts.

• Skill Development for Existing Workers

- The proposed NSQF-aligned training programmes should also be extended to ASHA and Anganwadi workers, who already perform complex and essential tasks in the welfare system.

• Recognising Workers' Rights and Voice

- Care workers have long demanded dignity and recognition.
- The government should implement the '**Reward**' and '**Represent**' principles of the International Labour Organisation's **5R Framework for Decent Care Work**, ensuring fair pay and a voice in policy decisions.

• Toward a Fair Care Economy

- Strengthening India's care economy requires proper compensation, formal employment protections, and meaningful participation of care workers in decision-making.

The Need to Recognise 'Volunteer' Care Work FAQs

Q1. Why is the Union Budget 2026-27's care ecosystem proposal seen as contradictory?

Ans. The Budget proposes training new caregivers but ignores the condition of over five million existing care workers who provide essential services yet remain classified as volunteers without formal employment protections.

Q2. Who are India's major 'volunteer' care workers?

Ans. India's volunteer care workforce mainly includes ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers and helpers, and mid-day meal workers who deliver health, nutrition, and childcare services across the country.

Q3. What does the 2024 Time Use Survey reveal about care work in India?

Ans. The survey shows strong gender inequality in care work, with 41% of women spending about 140 minutes daily on caregiving compared to 21.4% of men spending around 74 minutes.

Q4. How does the Supreme Court's 2025 Dharam Singh judgment support care workers' demands?

Ans. The ruling states that work which is continuous and essential to an institution cannot remain temporary indefinitely, strengthening demands to convert honorary care worker roles into permanent posts.

Q5. What reforms are suggested to strengthen India's care economy?

Ans. Reforms include ending the volunteer label, formalising employment, extending skill programmes to existing workers, ensuring fair wages and social security, and implementing ILO's 'Reward' and 'Represent' principles.

Source: TH

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