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1. The 'Great Abandonment' of Afghanistan

Context: The meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last month drew global attention, but it resonated most with Afghans, many of whom live in exile. Many saw parallels with how the U.S., under Trump and later Joe Biden, lost interest in Afghanistan, cut funding, withdrew, and left the country under Taliban rule. The U.S. and Europe have washed their hands of the problem inside Afghanistan; India should worry about losing mind-space among Afghans. After closing its embassy in Kabul in 2021, India reopened a "technical mission" in 2022, engaging Taliban ministers at the level of a Ministry of External Affairs.

Key points

- **Overview:** The U.S. and Europe have stepped away from Afghanistan's issues, and India should be concerned about losing influence and connection with the Afghan people.
- **Recent events:** *September 2017* - Trump signed a deal with then-President Ashraf Ghani, allowing U.S. companies access to rare earth minerals in Afghanistan.
July 2018 - The U.S. began direct negotiations with the Taliban, excluding the elected Afghan government from discussions.
February 2020 - The Doha Accords were signed, favouring the Taliban, with no guarantees on: A political process, Closure of terror camps, Rights for women and minorities.
- **Impact of the U.S. Withdrawal:** *2001-2021* - Women had access to education, jobs, and leadership roles. Afghanistan had a female presidential candidate.
Post-2021 (Taliban 2.0) - Taliban imposed harsh restrictions on women. Girls banned from schools, colleges, and employment.
Present Situation - Afghanistan faces severe oppression and isolation. No country officially recognizes the Taliban regime.
- **Global Response to the Taliban's Rule:** *U.S. & Europe* - Have disengaged, showing little interest in Afghanistan's affairs.
Russia, China, Pakistan, & Central Asia - Have embraced the Taliban, allowing their flag at embassies.
- **India's stand:** *Current Approach* - No formal recognition of the Taliban government. No support for diplomats of the former Afghan Republic. Reopened a "technical mission" in Kabul in 2022 for humanitarian engagement.
Potential Shift in India's Policy - Sources suggest India may expand its diplomatic presence in Kabul. Discussions underway to allow a Taliban-appointed Ambassador in New Delhi.
- **Potential Risks for India:** *Losing Influence Among Afghans* - Many Afghans feel abandoned by India, particularly after - The Modi government's refusal to grant visas to Afghans fleeing the Taliban in 2021. India's security agencies feared refugees could be potential terrorists.
Impact on India's Long-Term Goodwill in Afghanistan - Visa restrictions have alienated many Afghans. Afghans loyal to India feel betrayed by the recent outreach to the Taliban.
- **Conclusion:** India should be open to allowing exiled Afghan leaders to hold conferences and discussions in the country to voice their concerns about political representation in Afghanistan. Past experiences in the region have shown that New Delhi must engage with those in power while also maintaining ties with different political groups to stay relevant in any situation.

2. A bad omen for public trust in vaccines

Context: Over the past few years, multiple petitions have been filed in courts related to vaccine approval and administration. These petitions highlight concerns about transparency in clinical trials, adverse effects, and compensation for vaccine-related deaths. While not all these petitions have been admitted by the courts, they reflect growing concerns related to how vaccines are approved and administered in India. One petition from Kerala raised concerns about deaths linked to the anti-rabies vaccine. Other petitions question the lack of transparency in clinical trial data and the disclosure of vaccine side effects.

Key points

- **Role of Courts and Legal Challenges:** Courts are not well-suited to handle scientific issues related to vaccines. These cases take years to resolve and often do not provide clear conclusions. Some courts have issued orders protecting vaccine manufacturers, which could weaken public trust.
- **Lack of Transparency in Vaccine Approval:** The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) plays a major role in vaccine approvals. However, details about decision-makers and their conflicts of interest are not disclosed. Making this information public could improve trust in the approval process.
- **Need for Better Clinical Trial Data Disclosure:** The CDSCO does not release clinical trial data used for vaccine approvals. Publicly sharing this data, while protecting patient privacy, would increase transparency.
- **Informed Consent and Public Awareness:** Citizens need clear information about vaccine side effects to make informed decisions. This information should be presented in an understandable format at the time of vaccination.
- **Strengthening Vaccine Monitoring:** India does not have a strong legal framework for tracking adverse vaccine reactions. Existing guidelines are not fully enforced and need to be backed by law.
- **Compensation for Vaccine-Related Deaths:** Some petitions demand compensation for families of those who may have died due to vaccine side effects. A court ruling in 2022 asked the government to create a policy for compensation, but the final decision is still pending.
- **Responsibility for Compensation:** Vaccine manufacturers should compensate affected individuals since they profit from vaccine sales. The government's role in compensation remains unclear due to undisclosed agreements with manufacturers.
- **Conclusion:** Except for compensation, other concerns should be addressed through policies, not court cases. Public trust in vaccines is essential for successful immunization programs. The Ministry of Health should take steps to address these concerns through clear policies or new laws.

3. Vision to Victory

Context: India successfully conducted the 100-day Intensified TB Mukht Bharat Abhiyaan, leveraging technology and community participation to accelerate TB detection, treatment, and awareness, marking a significant step toward TB elimination. The campaign was launched on December 7, 2024. The Abhiyaan introduced cutting-edge strategies to detect TB early, ensuring that even those without symptoms were identified and treated. The campaign reached every corner of the country, screening 12.97 crore people belonging to vulnerable populations.

Key points

- **Tuberculosis:** Tuberculosis (TB) is an infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It commonly affects the lungs but can also affect other parts of the body. It is a treatable and curable disease.
Transmission - TB is spread from person to person through the air. When people with lung TB cough, sneeze or spit, they propel the TB germs into the air.
Symptoms - Common symptoms of active lung TB are cough with sputum and blood at times, chest pains, weakness, weight loss, fever and night sweats.
Vaccine - Bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) is a vaccine for TB disease.
- **Impact of the 100-Day Campaign:** The campaign made unprecedented strides in screening vulnerable populations. In just 100 days – 7.19 lakh TB patients were notified, including 2.85 lakh asymptomatic cases that would have been missed without proactive testing. By detecting and treating these cases early, the program broke the chain of TB infection, making it a historic milestone in India's fight against TB.
- **Early Detection Through Innovation:** A key feature of the campaign was the use of advanced diagnostic tools to detect TB early, even among asymptomatic individuals. This approach significantly curbed transmission by ensuring timely treatment, saving thousands of lives that may have otherwise gone undiagnosed.
- **Community engagement activities included:** 35,000+ awareness and nutrition support activities across 22 ministries. 21,000+ TB awareness events conducted in collaboration with PSUs, trade associations, and voluntary organizations.
- **Challenges in TB Elimination:** Despite significant progress, India faces challenges in meeting the TB-free India target: Drug-Resistant TB (DR-TB): The rise in multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) poses treatment challenges.
 - *Social Stigma* - Many TB patients hesitate to seek treatment due to fear of discrimination.
 - *Underreporting of Cases* - Many private healthcare facilities do not report TB cases, leading to gaps in surveillance.
 - *Malnutrition & TB* - Poor nutrition is a major risk factor for TB infection, particularly in marginalized communities.
- **Conclusion:** By combining cutting-edge innovation, grassroots mobilization, and strong government commitment, the country is leading the way in global TB elimination efforts. The 100-day campaign has proven that when technology meets access, and communities unite for a cause, the impossible becomes reality.

4. Let Our Money Travel

Context: With the depreciation pressure on the Rupee increasing, the RBI and the government have been turning up the heat on money outflows from India. The increase in regulatory interventions w.r.t to capital controls and heightened scrutiny of outward remittances demonstrate the crisis of currency depreciation. The RBI has implemented a series of controls on who can invest outside India, for what purposes, in what kinds of instruments and on what terms and conditions.

Key points

- **RBI's Capital Controls:** To mitigate rupee depreciation by curbing capital outflows.
Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS) - Allows individuals to remit up to \$200,000 annually for foreign investments.
Mutual Fund Limits - \$7 billion aggregate cap since 2009 on mutual fund investments in foreign securities. ETF cap: \$1 billion (frozen since 2009).
Current Status - Mutual funds hit the \$7 billion limit in February 2022, blocking fresh investments.
- **Impact on Retail Investors:** *Restricted Diversification* - Indian investors are confined to domestic markets (2% of global market share vs. 61% for the U.S.). Missed opportunities in high-growth sectors (e.g. tech giants like Google, AI leaders).
Wealth Inequality - Affluent Investors use LRS to access global markets (despite higher transaction costs). Average Investors are limited to domestic options due to mutual fund caps.
Suppressed Demand for Global Exposure - Mutual fund investments in foreign assets surged from \$1 billion in April 2020 to \$ 7.7 billion in December 2021. This reflects strong retail interest despite regulatory hurdles.
- **Market Dynamics and Equity Concerns:** *Global Diversification Benefits* - U.S. equity markets delivered 6.5% annualized real returns since 1900 (highest among major economies). A balanced portfolio requires mix of domestic/international assets to mitigate risk.
Inequitable Access - LRS favours wealthy investors who can afford complex processes (brokers, international accounts). Middle-class investors rely on mutual funds, which are restricted.
- **Long-Term Risks of Regulatory Overreach:** *Distorted Asset Prices* - Restrictions inflate demand for domestic assets, raising valuations unsustainably.
Stifled Financial Innovation - Limits mutual funds' ability to design global investment products.
Erosion of Investor Confidence - Arbitrary caps contradict India's deregulation agenda for financial markets.
- **Way ahead:** *Revisit Mutual Fund Caps* - Increase or remove limits to align with global diversification needs.
Enhance Retail Access - Simplify LRS processes to democratize foreign investments.
Transparent Cost-Benefit Analysis - Evaluate if capital controls truly stabilize the rupee or merely penalize retail investors.

5. Researchers, locals join hands to conserve Nagaland fish species

Context: Researchers at the Nagaland University have collaborated with the local community to study and conserve indigenous fish species in the Dikhu river in Nagaland. The river, one of the most important tributaries of the Brahmaputra, flows through Nagaland and is home to many freshwater species crucial for local biodiversity and the economy. The research integrates traditional ecological knowledge from local villagers to better understand fish diversity, fish species assessment, indigenous fishing techniques, and community-based fishing practices.

Key points

- **Overview:** The study, funded by ICAR-National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources, Lucknow, recorded 28 fish species across six orders, 13 families, and three subfamilies, with Cypriniformes being the most dominant order.
- **Sustainable Fishing Practices:**
 - Fishing Quotas and Bans* - Implement fishing quotas and seasonal bans to allow fish stocks to replenish.
 - Selective Fishing Gear* - Use gear that minimizes bycatch and habitat damage, such as circle hooks and turtle excluder devices.
 - Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)* - Establish MPAs to protect critical habitats and allow fish populations to recover.
 - Prohibition of Destructive Practices* - Ban destructive fishing methods like pair trawling, LED lights, and bull trawling.
- **Habitat Protection:**
 - Protecting Coastal Areas* - Safeguard mangroves, coral reefs, and estuaries, which are vital fish breeding grounds.
 - Restoring Damaged Habitats* - Implement restoration projects to rehabilitate degraded habitats.
 - Reducing Pollution* - Address pollution from agriculture, industry, and sewage, which can harm fish populations.
 - Addressing Climate Change* - Mitigate climate change impacts, such as rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification, which can disrupt fish ecosystems.
- **Policy and Governance:**
 - National Fisheries Policy* - Implement and strengthen national fisheries policies that promote sustainable fishing and conservation.
 - Enforcement of Regulations* - Ensure effective enforcement of fishing regulations and laws.
 - Community Involvement* - Engage local communities in fisheries management and conservation efforts.
 - Research and Monitoring* - Conduct research to monitor fish populations and assess the effectiveness of conservation measures.
- **Other measures:**
 - Addressing Illegal Fishing* - Combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which can decimate fish stocks.
 - Promoting Sustainable Seafood Consumption* - Encourage consumers to choose sustainable seafood options and reduce their overall consumption.
 - Supporting Fisheries Extension Services* - Provide fish farmers with technical assistance and training on sustainable practices.
 - Focus on Diadromous Fish* - Protect migratory fish species that move between freshwater and marine habitats, as they are particularly vulnerable to anthropogenic pressures.