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A Disrupted World  
in  
2026 Preparing  
India for an Uncertain,  
Ambiguous,  
&  
Contested Global Order

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# *A Disrupted World in 2026 Preparing India for an Uncertain, Ambiguous, & Contested Global Order*

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the contemporary disrupted global order of 2026, marked by geopolitical fragmentation, ideological contestation, weaponised economies, technological disruption, and the erosion of post-Second World War institutions. It argues that volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) now define international politics—rendering alliances transactional and global governance ineffective. For India, this disruption presents both strategic risk and opportunity. The paper advocates strategic autonomy, indigenous national security capabilities, civil-military fusion, economic and technological self-reliance, and ethical, agile leadership. Emphasising whole-of-government integration and public trust, it contends that adaptability, and not prediction, is central to safeguarding India's sovereignty and shaping a stable future order.

**Keywords:** Disrupted World, Fragmentation, Strategic Opportunity, VUCA, Leadership

## **Disrupted World of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The telltale signs were evidenced during the transition from 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century—but few noticed the changing dynamics, even fewer acknowledged the fact—the irony was that, none was prepared for the coming disruptions in the world. In the second quarter of the century, all countries were navigating the troubled waters wherein standard diplomatic norms and language have been cast away, friends and allies have gloves off for each other with economies drowning and new age technology pushing the old-world order towards a precipice.

For strategic thinkers and leaders, chaos is also opportunity, ‘disruption will be followed with displacements and then eventual stability’. From a Europe colonial world to cold war era to the unipolar world policed and disciplined by US, the world has circled back to multiple power centres trying to rapidly ally based on immediate survival interests. Now, there is an opportunity for Bharat to harness the stated policy of strategic autonomy and the

principled stand of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” and be a leader in a domain not yet accepted but now appreciated by atleast the Global South of “*Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*”.

The international organisations, created post-World War II, were defunct, dollar was being over printed, the institutionalised weaponised Islamic terror was replacing the ideological extremism and China rose silently for few decades and then with disruption in last decade—2025,hence, was a clear indicator of a rapidly falling apart of stable peace.

Today, the international system stands profoundly disrupted—the assumptions that shaped the post-WW II order, which was premised on rule-based global governance, ideological convergence, economic interdependence as a stabilising force, and the reliability of alliances, are steadily eroding. The world is no longer moving towards a single liberal equilibrium; instead, it is fragmenting into competing ideologies, contested sovereignties, fractured supply chains, and technologically driven power asymmetries. For India, a civilisational state with rising global influence and unresolved internal and external challenges, this disruption is both a risk and an opportunity.

In 2025, the acceptance of unreasonable and brazen tariffs by all, deal of USD 10 million with terrorists' leaders (Doucet, L. 2025) and installing them as Head of State as well as inviting those who perpetuated terror attacks in exchange of business deals, resources, submission, platitudes and Noble recommendations for lunch in the most powerful address in the world (The White House), exposed the hollowness of the world leaders.

The start of 2026 with overthrow of Nicolás Maduro (Ellis, R.E. 2026) the Venezuelan President, by the US forces on ‘trumped up charges’ of narco-terrorism and silence of the world has clearly exposed the hypocrisy of virtually all the powerful countries. The façade fell off rapidly when President Trump announced intention of a peaceful buy or forced takeover of Greenland from Denmark for a future strategic security challenge—All European leaders responded in unison with disagreement (Lister, T. 2026).

The present moment is characterised by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA). Geopolitical alignments are fluid, technology is reshaping power faster than institutions can adapt, demographic and climate pressures are intensifying, and societies across the world are polarising. This paper examines the structural shifts shaping the global order in 2026 and outlines how India must prepare strategically, institutionally, and culturally to safeguard its sovereignty, stability, and long-term national interests.

## **Ideological Disruptions and the Collapse of Old Frameworks**

In the decades following the Second World War, Western universities, institutions, and political systems saw the gradual rise of socialist and post-colonial intellectual frameworks. These frameworks, rooted in narratives of victimhood, historical guilt, and moral universalism, became deeply embedded in policymaking, academia, and global governance institutions. While, initially intended to address inequality and historical injustice, they were also instrumentalised by global elites, corporations and transnational actors, to perpetuate a subtler form of economic and cultural dominance. A colonial rule couched in universalism. Unknown to the academics and the strategic thinkers of the First World, the education system was producing future practitioners and leaders rooted in the thoughts of socialism, workism and religious radicalism. The predominant thought of democracy, free speech, and capitalism were to be challenged by those whose freedom and education was funded by these very institutes. The fractures are clearly visible in the first or the modern world confounding the rest of the countries that were eagerly trying to follow the same modern thoughts and systems.

This broader ideological ecosystem functioned effectively as long as economic and technological superiority, remained concentrated in few Western states. However, the rapid rise of China, India, and other erstwhile “Third World” countries fundamentally altered this balance. These nations leveraged the very rules-based order, open markets, and demand for low-cost goods that Western economies had designed, thereby redistributing global manufacturing, capital flows, and technological capacity with advantages skewed in their favour.

As a consequence, the ideological coherence of the old order has fractured—the world is now witnessing intense contestation between globalism and sovereignty-based statecraft, between universalist norms and civilisational identities, and between liberal internationalism and realist power politics. International institutions that once enforced discipline through sanctions, tariffs, and regulatory control have lost credibility and effectiveness.

## **Geopolitical Fragmentation and the End of Predictability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The world entered 21<sup>st</sup> century by setting the future course of events to follow. The world famed—the iconic WTC Twin Towers in New York collapsed in full world view after having been struck by two airplanes on 11 September 2001. The Pentagon, the most secure place on the earth, was struck by another plane, crashing as a flying explosive device in a similar time frame. The Great Power called America was struck at home by terror for the first

time ever, in the scale and tactic that was never heard. It led to the famed Global War on Terror, attack in Afghanistan and Iraq. The tool of religious extremism exploited by US, came calling within two decades but it let loose a global phenomenon of Islamic radicalism and terror. The 21<sup>st</sup> century technology gave an exponential impetus to the rise and rise of Al- Qaeda, ISIS and similar radical organisations (Vision of Humanity, 2022). It took two decades for the coalition of willing to leave Afghanistan unceremoniously after having handing over power to the Taliban against whom the entire war campaign was driven (Schaeffer, K. 2022). It took more than two decades for US to finally exit Iraq on 17 January 2026 (Tawfeeq, M., Najim, A. and Hallam, J. 2026). With the radicals having taken firm control, the region is now more chaotic and challenged than ever before.

The prolonged Russia–Ukraine conflict and the Israel - Hamas conflict, the challenges faced by the internal strife in most of Africa and the muscular approach of the rising China, has been watched on the sidelines by the international organisations with zero capacities and will power to intervene. All this has collectively dismantled the illusion of global stability and rules-based order controlled by the world famed and respected international organisations.

On the economic front, the world has not yet recovered from the 2008 financial collapse triggered by the US Subprime mortgage crisis that led to the most severe global recession since the Great Depression wherein the banks failed, world GDP contracted, forcing governments to launch unprecedented fiscal and monetary interventions to stabilise markets ( Weinberg, J. 2013). The Arab Spring of 2010–2012, with mass uprisings sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, toppling governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, ignited prolonged conflicts, especially in Syria and the region. The economic crises and the human rights challenges in Africa and Asia led to the European Refugee Crisis (2015) with millions of refugees fleeing war and poverty entered Europe, thus straining social systems and fuelling political polarisation. Thereafter, the world gets hit by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Supply chains that favoured a handful of powerful actors collapsed under stress of conflicts, covid and economic crises. Energy security, food security, and industrial resilience returned to the centre of national strategy. Jobs, resources and markets became central concern of all the leaders across the world.

The United States' ballooning debt, approaching USD 38 trillion (FiscalData), has far-reaching implications not only for American economic stability but also for the dollar-centric global financial system (Tully, S. 2026). Sanctions fatigue, currency diversification, and

bilateral trade arrangements increasingly bypasses traditional financial institutions. This signals the weakening of economic coercion as a reliable strategic tool even though American sanctions and tariffs are still being used as tools of enforcement or punitive punishment.

Europe's strategic autonomy, however remains uncertain— Forced decoupling from Russian energy under American pressure strained European economies and public consensus. In 2025 and by early 2026, signs of divergence between US objectives and European interests have become visible, with segments of the European Union exploring re-engagement with China and tentative dialogue with Russia. The fluctuation in objectives and end states of US and its allies were not in sync. The independent countries in NATO, Europe and the EU were unable to reconcile the strategic course across all the realms of DIME. This fragmentation underscores a fundamental truth— alliances are transactional, temporary, and contingent and not permanent guarantees of security.

The most important reality exposed was the irrelevance of the UN, WTO, IMF, World Bank, Human Rights organisations etc. when powerful countries, corporates and interest groups are involved. These were never meant for the developing Nations or economically poor segments of the society but were leverage for exercising restraint and control.

### **Identity Politics, Migration, and Civilisational Conflict**

Another profound disruption shaping the Western world is the internal contest over identity, migration, and governance. Large-scale migration, demographic shifts, and the politicisation of minority identities have altered social contracts in Europe and North America. What began as inclusive democratic ideals increasingly manifests as political capture by identity-based groups exploiting democratic and socialist frameworks to entrench power and reshape institutions.

The rise of political Islamism presents a particularly complex challenge. The ideological tension between modern secular governance and a rigid, 7<sup>th</sup> century worldview has intensified. Decades of instrumentalising Islamist groups by the Western powers for geopolitical objectives, particularly since the success in Afghan conflict of the 1980s, have produced an uncontrollable transnational movement. By 2026, radicalisation is no longer geographically contained; it is digitally networked, ideologically hardened, and operationally adaptive.

The relative silence of Western governments and media during significant internal protests in Iran in end 2025 and early 2026, contrasting with earlier aggressive postures, further reveals the selective application of values in international politics. Principles are increasingly subordinated to expediency.

### **Strategic Uncertainty in 2026**

The global environment in 2026 is marked by contradictions—Traditional allies diverge in interests; adversaries cooperate tactically; and international organisations struggle for relevance. Tariff wars, technological decoupling, and regional conflicts have become the norm rather than exceptions. In such an environment, long-term predictability has vanished.

For India, this uncertainty demands a rethinking of national security, governance, and leadership. The era of outsourcing security, technology, or economic resilience is over.

### **India's Imperatives in a Disrupted World**

#### ***Develop National Security as the Core of Responsible Statecraft***

For India, national security must be understood as the foundation of sovereignty and development. Capabilities and capacities must be the constant focus as they allow missions and objectives to be variable based on challenges and opportunities. Alliances and international commitments must be treated as inherently unreliable and therefore India, with shared capabilities and capacities, can be held hostage to international vulnerabilities. Strategic autonomy is not a slogan but a necessity. National Security can not be outsourced but has to be indigenous.

Modern statecraft demands recognition of the deep interlinkages among the elements of national power viz. Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic, and Technological (DIMET). Decisions in one domain invariably cascades into others. Trade liberalisation, for instance, has implications for internal security, social cohesion, and long-term strategic independence. Defence procurement choices influences diplomacy, domestic industry, and technological ecosystems. Even symbolic diplomatic decisions can have lasting strategic consequences.

Economic power without credible military capability is insufficient. Likewise, military strength without technological self-reliance is fragile. Indigenisation, though costly and slow initially, provides enduring strategic dividends. For India, a “*Surakshit Bharat*” (secure India) is the prerequisite for a “*Sashakt Bharat*” (strong India).

### ***Civil- Military Fusion and Whole-of-Government Approaches***

India’s national security architecture continues to reflect colonial-era compartmentalisation, with rigid separations between instruments of power. This fragmentation undermines responsiveness and integration. Modern challenges demand civil-military fusion (CMF) and whole-of-government approaches that prioritises outcomes over hierarchies.

Accountability must, therefore, extend beyond political leadership to institutional instruments. Decision paralysis, delayed responses, and risk aversion carry strategic costs. Empowered inter-ministerial mechanisms should move beyond advisory roles for essential coordinated actions.

### ***Ethical Leadership, Organisational Culture, and Human Capital***

Institutions are only as strong as the culture that animates them. India must cultivate organisational cultures that are ethical, adaptive, future-oriented, and interoperable. Rigid silos must give way to collaborative ecosystems.

Human capital development is central to national power. Training, reskilling, and technological literacy, especially in artificial intelligence and data sciences, must be continuous processes. The future battlefield, marketplace, and diplomatic arena will all be shaped by cognitive and technological superiority.

### ***Develop Strategic Leadership in an Age of Turbulence***

Leadership in a VUCA world requires more than administrative competence. Strategic leaders must possess a deep understanding of tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions across domains. Decision-making under conditions of incomplete information is no longer exceptional—it is routine.

Effective leaders communicate decisively and transparently. In the information age, the first narrative often becomes the dominant one. Leaders must therefore engage proactively across platforms, building public trust and resilience. Equally critical is the ability to anticipate emerging scenarios, build adaptive capacities, and convert disruption into opportunity.

Strategic Agility is the most central strength for leaders in the VUCA environment. The capacity to take hard decision earliest and modify the end states and application of resources along the way as the situation emerges is an imperative. A risk taker, with long term vision and capacity to manage stress and situation at all levels should be the core strength to be developed.

The linkages of tactical, operational and strategic should be understood by the future leaders. An organisational culture of tactical excellence, in specialised fields, must be nurtured to engaging with other verticals of the government for a whole of nation approach to overcome compartmentalisation.

There are born leaders and there are some who can be trained. An ecosystem is an imperative in India for identifying and building up a pool of leaders. The bureaucracy and politicians should be made to go through the paces of decision-making exercises and wargames with scenario building.

National Security, as a subject, must be introduced in all colleges and universities for the larger population to understand the linkages of each facet of government, governance and the society.

### ***From Vision to Outcomes: Trust as Strategic Capital***

Finally, strategic vision must translate into tangible outcomes. National stability depends not only on coercive power but also on public trust. Transparent governance, credible institutions, and consistent policy execution reinforces societal resilience against internal and external manipulation.

### **Conclusion**

The disrupted world of 2026 represents a decisive break from the past. The erosion of old certainties, the rise of new powers, and the acceleration of technological change demands a fundamental reorientation of strategy. For India, the path forward lies in embracing realism

without abandoning values, autonomy without isolation, and technological progress without societal fragmentation.

Preparation for uncertainty is not about prediction but about adaptability. A ‘secure, confident, and strategically integrated India’ can not only navigate this turbulent era but also shape the emerging global order in alignment with its civilisational ethos and national interests.

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## About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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