

XI IN DC: PAGEANTRY, BUT LITTLE SUBSTANCE

Xi Jinping walked down the red carpet at Joint Base Andrews this week for his first Washington visit in over a decade—the third face-to-face meeting between him and Donald Trump in under a year, after Busan in October and Beijing in May. The optics were unmistakably warm: a military review in the Rose Garden, a state dinner in the East Room, and both leaders speaking of mutual respect.

Beneath it, the same unresolved fault lines—trade, technology, Taiwan—remain exactly where they were. Xi's concerns were not disguised. On artificial intelligence, Beijing wants Washington to ease chip export controls and open the door to Chinese AI models, while offering rhetorical convergence on keeping AI “under human control” and pitching a multilateral governance framework built around China's newly launched World AI Cooperation Organisation.

On trade, China wants relief from tariffs and validation of the rare-earth leverage it has built, in exchange for renewing the Busan truce. On Taiwan, Xi's line hasn't moved: no separation, and “utmost caution” urged on US arms sales.

None of this travels far. Washington's own reporting shows Beijing's offer to extend the rare-earths truce to the end of Trump's term collapsed on mutual distrust before the summit even began. The May Beijing agreement—\$17 billion in annual agricultural purchases, 200 Boeing jets, new trade boards—is already behind schedule, with farm purchases undershooting and the boards still not operational.

AI cooperation, the one area both sides call promising, is constrained by the same suspicion: Beijing believes safety talk is a pretext for containment, while Washington doubts any Chinese commitment would be honoured. The realistic ceiling is a narrow, symbolic step—perhaps an incident-warning channel—not a governance breakthrough. The real story is what each side is buying with this summit, not what they're solving. Trump needs a trade win before midterms dominated by cost-of-living anger. Xi needs to project strength before his party congress, and he has spent recent weeks doing exactly that—courting BRICS in Delhi, pitching a Middle East “security architecture” in Cairo, and positioning China as the stabilising power to Washington's war-fatigued unpredictability.

Iran's war, in its seventh month, has quietly shifted leverage towards Beijing: depleted US munitions stocks need the rare earths and critical minerals China still dominates.

Expect the Busan truce extended, an AI working group formalised without teeth, and Taiwan left carefully unresolved. That last point deserves attention: allies from Tokyo to Taipei worry Trump could trade Taiwan assurances for a trade headline, and nothing in his instincts rules that out.

For the rest of the world, including India, the takeaway is a fragile equilibrium, not a settled order. Two leaders too entrenched in their own judgement to concede ground are buying time, not making peace. The contest for technological and economic primacy continues exactly as before—only with better photographs.

MD Afshar Alam

Artificial intelligence has moved from the margins of defence planning to the heart of the war room, and the diplomacy meant to govern it is being left far behind. Machines now sift oceans of surveillance data and hand commanders ranked target lists in seconds. The people who set the rules are still arguing over definitions that date back to the last decade.

Washington, Beijing and Moscow treat AI as a strategic asset of the same order as air power or the nuclear arsenal. President Putin said years ago that whoever leads in AI will rule the world. President Xi has called for self-reliance and mastery across every core AI technology. President Trump has committed the United States to doing whatever it takes to lead the field. Those words have turned into budgets. The US Army trains officers on the Maven Smart System, and the Pentagon has created a Defense Autonomous Warfare Group that is absorbing tens of billions of dollars. China and Russia are pouring rising sums into swarming drones and autonomous strike systems, and the two defence ministries have held talks on how AI might aid a large conventional conflict.

The sharpest question is what happens when AI stops driving weapons

and starts advising the humans who fire them. At a Congressional hearing this month, witnesses cautioned that an AI system can influence a human decision leading to a strike while the person retains formal responsibility for the final call, and that recommendations can arrive faster than officers can authenticate them, compressing the time to intervene. Responsibility becomes blurred. A commander who approves a target in seconds, trusting a system he cannot fully audit, is accountable in name while the real selection happened inside a model.

Gaza offers the most documented example of what this looks like in practice. Israeli forces used AI systems called Lavender and the Gospel to generate targets at speed, with Lavender marking around 37,000 people as suspected militants and Gospel flagging buildings and infrastructure. A separate tracking tool named “Where's Daddy?” signalled when a target entered his home, and in some cases the house was marked for bombing while the family was present. Intelligence officers described treating the machine's output as though it were a human decision, and reported that the army accepted the deaths of 15 to 20 civilians for a junior operative and more than 100 for a senior commander. Legal scholars have identified these practices as potentially violating the principles of distinction, proportionality and

Sabir Nishat

Few songs in modern Indian history carry the emotional and political weight of Vande Mataram. Composed in the late nineteenth century, it became a battle cry of the freedom struggle and entered the national imagination long before Independence.

A hundred and fifty years on, it is back at the centre of a political storm. The Congress Working Committee has chosen to retain its 1937 position that only the first two stanzas be sung, drawing criticism from the BJP-led government, which promotes the full six-stanza composition at official functions. The row arrives in the familiar vocabulary of Indian politics: nationalism, appeasement, secularism, patriotism. Perhaps the question itself is wrong. The real issue is whether a national symbol can command respect without becoming a test of political loyalty.

Vande Mataram is more than a song by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. It is also a historical record. Its opening two stanzas earned their place in the freedom movement, sung at political gatherings and bound up with the anti-colonial cause. The later verses carry religious imagery, including invocations of Durga. Even before Independence, that difference mattered.

In 1937, the Congress resolved that the first two stanzas could serve national purposes, while portions that might unsettle some of India's religious communities were set aside. From the vantage point of 2026, it is easy to dismiss this as appeasement, but that would flatten history. The leaders of that era were building a nationalism that had to accommodate vast religious, linguistic and cultural diversity. Their concern was less literary merit than making a national symbol acceptable to as many Indians as possible.

But history cannot be invoked selectively either. The Union government's push for the complete version rests on a different argument: the song should be understood as Bankim wrote it, not



merely through the two stanzas once chosen for public use. That position is not unreasonable. The full composition belongs to India's literary and cultural heritage, and the later stanzas cannot be erased merely because some modern listeners find them uncomfortable. But acknowledging the whole composition is not the same as compelling everyone to embrace every line of it. That distinction has sharpened after the Supreme Court stepped in.

On September 22, the Court heard Carnatic vocalist T M Krishna's petition challenging the constitutional validity of the 2026 amendment to the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, which punishes intentionally preventing the singing of Vande Mataram or disrupting a gathering engaged in it. A bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant, with Justices Joy-malya Bagchi and V Mohana, gave the Centre two weeks to respond.

The bench indicated that someone who declines to sing all the stanzas on grounds of conscience or religion should not face criminal action. Justice Bagchi cited the 1986 Bijoe Emmanuel judgment, which protected schoolchildren who respectfully declined to sing the National Anthem on religious grounds.

The Court has not yet settled whether

official renditions should be limited to two stanzas or extend to all six. The political fight goes on. But the intervention reinforces a constitutional line between respecting a national symbol and compelling an individual to express that respect in a prescribed way. A law may protect a symbol's dignity. It cannot manufacture affection for it.

The controversy has also moved beyond party politics. In Karnataka, the Congress-led government has ordered that only the first two stanzas be sung at state government programmes, except at functions attended by the President, Vice-President, Prime Minister or Governor.

A petition in the Karnataka High Court challenges the order, arguing that the state cannot prescribe a version different from the Union's official protocol and citing a July 9 Home Ministry communication requiring the official version whenever the National Song is performed. That raises a question weightier than the Congress-BJP quarrel: can a state government prescribe a different version of a national symbol for official functions? It concerns constitutional competence and Centre-state relations, and the courts must settle it. A party choosing what to sing at its own meeting is one thing; a government direct-

ing what must be sung at an official ceremony is another.

The government has a legitimate role in setting protocol for official ceremonies. But protocol should not become a proxy for patriotism.

The BJP should accept that the complete version need not be a litmus test of loyalty. Questioning the later stanzas does not make someone less patriotic, and a party favouring the historically accepted two-stanza version should not be casually branded anti-national. The Congress, for its part, should recognise that its 1937 position belongs to a specific historical moment. If it backs the two-stanza version today, it owes the country a historical and constitutional explanation, not just an inherited party resolution.

Indian nationalism has never been uniform. It holds many languages, faiths, literary traditions, regional memories and rival readings of the freedom struggle. The Constitution seeks to hold those differences together without demanding that everyone feel the nation in the same way. Indianews updates

The law can punish deliberate insult or disruption, and protocol can decide what is performed at a ceremony. Beyond that lies the democratic space where citizens argue about history, and that space is not disrespectful.

There is an irony here. A song that once helped Indians challenge colonial rule is now used to divide them. Vande Mataram belongs to India's history. Its full composition deserves preservation, its role in the freedom struggle deserves remembrance, and its dignity can rightly be protected. But its patriotic worth must not become a weapon to make Indians prove they belong. The challenge is not to decide who owns Vande Mataram, but to ensure that nobody does. India does not need another culture war over a song. It needs the confidence to hold two truths: the song is inseparable from the freedom struggle, and pluralism from the idea of India.

The writer is Deputy Director, Assam Information Centre, New Delhi; Views presented are personal.

INDIA'S SPIRITUAL TOURISM: THE NEXT FRONTIER

Divya Bhatia

Every September 27, World Tourism Day is celebrated around the world to spare a thought to the industry that not only is a money spinner but also connects the world. This year it is hosted by El Salvador, with UN Tourism choosing “Digital Agenda and Artificial Intelligence to Redesign Tourism” as its theme. For India, the day is also a moment to ask a sharper question: is the country monetising the one asset no competitor can copy—its spiritual depth? Travel-Guides & Travelogues

The economic case for tourism needs no dressing up. Provisional National Accounts Statistics for 2023-24 put tourism's contribution to India's GDP at 5.22 per cent, and roughly 13 per cent of all employment in the country. The Ministry of Tourism and NITI Aayog jointly project wellness tourism alone could add \$18 billion to GDP by 2030.

Yet India is yet to realise its full potential. India ranks 39th of 119 countries—despite scoring in the global top ten for natural, cultural and non-leisure resources, one of only three countries to do so. The gap between resource and rank is exactly where policy must work



harder: on connectivity, visa friction, last-mile infrastructure and destination marketing. This is where spirituality becomes strategy, not sentiment. India is the only country on earth that is simultaneously the birthplace of Buddhism, the home of yoga, and a living laboratory of meditation traditions stretching back millennia. Nowhere else can a traveller walk in the Buddha's actual footsteps and take a sunrise yoga class on the same trip.

The Buddhist circuit—Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, Nalanda, Sravasti—draws only around 1.2 million

pilgrim visits a year, a fraction of the world's roughly 500 million Buddhists, concentrated overwhelmingly in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. India's hand strengthened considerably

this July when

Sarnath, where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, was inscribed as the country's 45th UNESCO World Heritage Site. That recognition should be the trigger for a harder push: direct flights into Gaya, Varanasi and Kushinagar from Buddhist-majority countries, a unified multi-country e-visa with Nepal for the Lumbini leg, and monastery-standard stays instead of ad hoc guesthouses. Schemes like Swadesh Darshan and the IRCTC's Buddhist Circuit train must be scaled. The yoga and wellness story is, if anything, moving faster than policy can track it. Realising the full value of that

lead needs three things New Delhi has only partly delivered: certification standards so a “yoga retreat” or “meditation centre” actually means something to a foreign traveller booking sight unseen; river and ecological safeguards around the Ganga so Rishikesh does not develop itself into the very congestion tourists are fleeing; and a coordinated diplomatic push, riding on the goodwill already built by International Yoga Day, to position yoga and Vedic meditation as India's answer to Japan's onsen tourism or Bali's wellness branding. Buddhism

This year's World Tourism Day theme of AI and digital tourism is not a distraction from that spiritual case—it is the delivery mechanism. AI-powered translation at Buddhist pilgrimage sites, digital queue and crowd management at Rishikesh's ghats, and app-based authentication of genuine yoga schools would do more for India's spiritual tourism brand than any glossy campaign. The Buddha and the yogi built India's spiritual capital over two millennia; it is now government policy's turn to compound the interest.

The writer is an educator and a columnist; Views presented are personal.

AI enters the war room as diplomacy struggles



precaution.

Ukraine has become the world's largest live proving ground for the same technology. AI-enabled combat systems there are being tested at a scale seen nowhere else, and Russia has fielded AI-powered strike drones that can evade air defences, identify targets and operate offline. What one war validates spreads quickly to every arsenal watching.

Diplomacy has produced movement without much grip. At their summit in May, the American and Chinese leaders agreed to improve policy exchanges on

AI, and a bilateral channel on AI governance was announced, after which Chinese officials urged the world to close the regulatory vacuum around military AI and backed rules that could eventually become binding. Yet both powers sent substantially smaller delegations to the recent Responsible AI in the Military Domain summit in Spain than they had to the 2024 meeting in South Korea. The one understanding they had quietly held, keeping AI away from the decision to use nuclear weapons, looks to be eroding rather than consolidating.

At the United Nations, the picture is slower still. The Group of Governmental Experts spent much of its three-year mandate debating what human control even means and reached the end of that mandate without a binding text, leaving the question to the Seventh Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in November. In December 2025, the General Assembly passed Resolution 80/57, and India voted in favour of it. New Delhi holds to a careful line of its own. It backs the expert process and insists that any use of autonomy obey the laws of armed conflict with human accountability intact, while declining to support a legally binding ban. On that stance, it sits alongside the United States, Russia and Israel among the main opponents of treaty negotiations, wary of rules that could freeze its own options.

This is where AI has become a weapons danger of a new kind. The same models that draft text and design molecules can speed the engineering of novel arms and lower the skill needed to build them. Capabilities once held by great powers can pass to smaller states and to groups that answer to no state. Systems that can select and engage targets on their own already exist, are being deployed in combat, and are being procured at unprecedented scale. More than 160 countries have voted for restraint, while the strongest military

powers resist anything that might constrain their programmes. ExploreAI Tools

The problem forces a rethink of what a weapon is. For centuries, a weapon waited for a human to aim and fire. A system that picks its own targets breaks that assumption and asks whether a machine should ever be allowed to make the choice that ends a life. Defence ministries insist a person will always stay in the loop. That loop keeps tightening as the systems grow faster, and a human given three seconds to say yes is a supervisor in title alone. For now, the race is ahead of the rulebook by a clear margin. Whether governments can close that gap before an AI-driven error, in a crowded sky or a nuclear command chain, forces a decision no one intended is the test the coming summits and the November review will have to meet. The technology will not wait for them to agree.

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The writer is a former Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi; Views presented are personal.