

America Steps Back, The World Rearranges

Multilateralism in a time of strategic retrenchment

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

In the early weeks of 2026, Washington delivered yet another jolt to the fragile architecture of global cooperation. President Donald Trump's decision to suspend participation in, and funding for, 66 international organisations was received in many capitals with a mix of alarm, resignation and, in some quarters, quiet anticipation. Alarm—because the United States remains the single most consequential pillar of the post-war international system. Resignation—because this was hardly unprecedented. And anticipation—because history suggests that when a hegemon recalibrates, the system does not collapse; it mutates.

To read this moment as simple American isolationism would be to miss the deeper story. What is unfolding is not withdrawal in the traditional sense, but a deliberate reconfiguration of engagement—one that seeks to renegotiate the terms of multilateralism itself. The implications of this shift extend far beyond Washington's immediate policy priorities. They raise fundamental questions about the future of global governance, the resilience of international institutions, and the strategic space available to middle and emerging powers such as India.

A Pattern, Not a Departure

The latest move is best understood as a continuation rather than a rupture. During his first term, Trump famously withdrew the United States from key international frameworks—the Paris Agreement, the World Health Organization, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council. These decisions were rooted in a worldview that viewed multilateral commitments as constraints on sovereignty rather than instruments of influence.

The intervening years under President Joe Biden saw a partial reversal. Washington re-entered climate accords, re-engaged with UN bodies, and revitalised partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Yet the underlying tension—between global leadership and domestic political imperatives—never fully dissipated.

Trump's return to office has brought that tension back to the fore, but with sharper edges. The suspension of ties with dozens of international entities, many linked to climate change, human rights, and development cooperation, signals a deeper scepticism toward the normative foundations of the multilateral order. It is not merely about cost-cutting or bureaucratic efficiency; it is about redefining what kinds of global commitments are deemed worthwhile.

Symbolism with Substance

At first glance, the withdrawal from such a large number of organisations might appear largely symbolic. After all, the United States has not exited the United Nations itself, nor has it relinquished its position in the Security Council or the General Assembly. These remain the core arenas of global diplomacy.

Yet symbolism, in international politics, is rarely trivial. The organisations targeted—ranging from climate bodies like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to development platforms such as the UN Conference on Trade



and Development—represent the softer, yet increasingly vital, dimensions of global governance. They are the spaces where norms are negotiated, standards are set, and long-term cooperation is built.

By stepping back from these domains, Washington is not dismantling the system outright. Instead, it is hollowing out parts of it—weakens the connective tissue that binds states together on issues that do not yield immediate strategic returns but are nonetheless essential for global stability.

The financial dimension compounds this effect. With nearly \$2 billion in unpaid dues and a suspension of funding to key bodies like the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Relief and Works Agency, the United States is exerting pressure not only through absence but through fiscal leverage. For institutions already grappling with limited resources, this creates both operational challenges and political uncertainty.

Reform or Retreat?

Interestingly, even as the United States disengages, its leadership insists that it is not abandoning the idea of international cooperation. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's remarks at the Munich Security Conference underscore this duality. The problem, he argued, is not the existence of global institutions but their perceived inefficiency and lack of alignment with contemporary realities.

This raises an important question: is Washington seeking to reform the system or bypass it? The answer appears to be a combination of both. On one hand, the rhetoric of reform suggests a desire to reshape institutions in ways that better reflect American interests. On the other, the exploration of alternative mechanisms—such as the

proposed "Board of Peace"—points to a parallel effort to build new platforms where the United States can exercise greater control.

The difficulty, however, lies in legitimacy. Unlike the United Nations, whose authority rests on near-universal membership and decades of institutional evolution, newer initiatives lack both representativeness and credibility. The "Board of Peace," despite its ambitious framing, remains ill-defined in mandate and limited in acceptance. Its inability to respond effectively to escalating tensions in West Asia has already exposed its constraints.

The Myth of Disengagement

It would be misleading to interpret these developments as a retreat from global affairs. The United States continues to wield unparalleled economic and military power. Its network of alliances remains extensive, and its influence over global financial systems is undiminished.

What is changing is the mode of engagement. Instead of broad-based multilateralism, Washington appears to be privileging more flexible arrangements—bilateral deals, trilateral partnerships, and issue-specific coalitions. These formats offer greater manoeuvrability and allow the United States to avoid the compromises inherent in larger, consensus-driven forums.

This shift reflects a broader trend in international politics: the move from universalism to selectivity. In a world marked by competing interests and divergent values, the appeal of smaller, like-minded groupings is understandable. Yet this comes at a cost. Fragmentation makes it harder to address global challenges that require collective action, from climate change to public health.

A System Under Strain

Multilateralism today stands at a critical juncture. The post-war order was built on the assumption that a dominant power would provide both leadership and public goods. While this model has always been imperfect, it offered a degree of stability.

The current moment is different. The United States remains dominant, but its willingness to underwrite the system is increasingly conditional. This creates a paradox: the system's principal architect is no longer fully invested in its maintenance.

For smaller and middle powers, this introduces a layer of uncertainty. Progress on global issues becomes more difficult without American participation, yet over-reliance on a single actor is no longer viable. The result is a more fluid, but also more unpredictable, international environment.

Space for Adaptation

Paradoxically, American retrenchment may also open up opportunities. History suggests that multilateral institutions are more resilient than they appear. During Trump's first term, many organisations continued to function, adapting to reduced US involvement and, in some cases, finding new sources of support.

This resilience is rooted in shared interests. States participate in multilateral frameworks not out of altruism, but because these institutions serve practical purposes—facilitating trade, managing conflicts, and addressing transnational challenges. As long as these needs persist, the demand for cooperation will endure.

The current phase of US disengagement could therefore act as a catalyst for reform. Institutions may be compelled to become more efficient, more representative, and more responsive to the concerns of a broader membership. Emerging powers, in particular, may find greater space to shape agendas and norms.

The Rise of Multi-Alignment

One of the most significant consequences of this shift is the acceleration of what might be termed "multi-alignment." Countries are increasingly engaging with multiple platforms simultaneously—regional, plurilateral, and global—rather than relying on a single framework.

For instance, groupings such as the European Union, BRICS, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are gaining prominence as alternative venues for dialogue and cooperation. These forums, while not without their own limitations, offer flexibility and reflect a more diverse distribution of power.

For India, this environment presents both challenges and opportunities. As a country that has long championed strategic autonomy, India is well-positioned to navigate a multi-aligned world. It can engage with Western-led initiatives while deepening ties with other groupings, thereby maximising its diplomatic and economic leverage.

However, this also requires careful calibration. Fragmentation increases the complexity of decision-making and raises the risk of conflicting

commitments. Managing these dynamics will demand both strategic clarity and institutional agility.

The Limits of Hegemony

The evolving role of the United States also invites a broader reflection on the nature of global leadership. Historically, hegemonic powers have played a stabilising role, providing the resources and coordination necessary for collective action. Yet this model has always been contingent on domestic political support.

In the United States, scepticism toward multilateralism is not confined to a single administration. It reflects deeper currents within American society—concerns about economic competitiveness, sovereignty, and the perceived inequities of globalisation. As these sentiments persist, future administrations may also adopt more selective approaches to international engagement.

This suggests that the current moment is not an aberration but part of a longer-term transition. The era of unquestioned American leadership is giving way to a more diffuse and contested order.

Between Fragmentation and Renewal

Where, then, does this leave the international system?

The immediate outlook is one of fragmentation. Competing initiatives, overlapping frameworks, and divergent priorities are likely to define the near term. Coordination will become more difficult, and the risk of institutional redundancy will grow.

Yet fragmentation does not necessarily imply decline. It can also be a precursor to renewal. As old structures are questioned, new forms of cooperation may emerge—ones that are better suited to the realities of a multipolar, multi-aligned world.

The key challenge will be to ensure that this transition does not erode the core principles that underpin global stability. Even in a more fragmented landscape, there must be mechanisms for dialogue, conflict resolution, and collective action.

A Moment of Reckoning

The United States' withdrawal from multiple international bodies is, ultimately, a moment of reckoning for multilateralism. It exposes the vulnerabilities of a system that has long depended on a single dominant actor, while also highlighting its underlying resilience.

For policymakers around the world, the task is not merely to react to Washington's decisions but to adapt to a changing environment. This means investing in existing institutions, exploring new partnerships, and, above all, recognising that global cooperation is no longer a given—it must be actively sustained.

In this evolving order, power will be more dispersed, alignments more fluid, and outcomes less predictable. Yet the fundamental need for cooperation remains unchanged. The challenge lies in finding new ways to meet it.

As America steps back, the world does not stand still. It rearranges itself—tentatively, unevenly, but inevitably—towards a new equilibrium.

Control, Consent, and the Crisis of Confidence in Kashmir

BY EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK

In a political climate where signals from New Delhi are often parsed with caution, even suspicion, the recent outreach by a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) to India's leading human rights organisations briefly stirred a sense of guarded optimism. For groups long accustomed to operating under scrutiny—if not outright hostility—this invitation appeared, at first glance, to mark a subtle shift in tone. It hinted at the possibility that the Centre might be willing to reopen channels of dialogue, to listen, and perhaps to recalibrate its approach in matters of governance and rights.

Yet, as details of the proposed constitutional amendment began to surface, that optimism dissipated almost as quickly as it had arisen. What was initially perceived as an attempt at inclusive consultation soon revealed itself, in the eyes of many invitees, as a procedural formality preceding a legislative move with far-reaching political implications.

At the heart of the controversy lies a draft amendment that seeks to disqualify a minister if they are detained for 30 consecutive days on charges carrying a potential sentence of five years or more. On paper, the provision is framed as a tool to combat corruption—a theme that has consistently anchored the Centre's legislative narrative. But critics argue that beneath this ostensibly clean objective lies a more troubling possibility: the creation of a mechanism that could be used to destabilise elected governments without the due process of conviction.

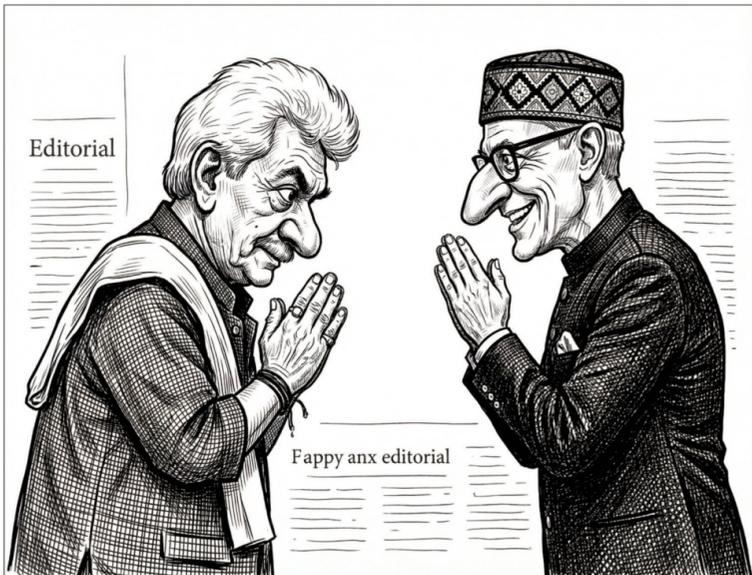
For civil liberties advocates, this raises fundamental questions about the presumption of innocence—a cornerstone of democratic jurisprudence. The idea that an elected representative could be removed from office solely on the basis of arrest, without judicial determination of guilt, is seen not merely as a legal anomaly but as a political instrument waiting to be deployed.

The concerns are particularly acute in the context of Jammu and Kashmir, where governance has, since 2019, operated within an altered constitutional framework. The abrogation of Article 370 and the subsequent reorganisation of the former state into two Union Territories fundamentally reshaped the region's political architecture. What emerged in its wake was a dual power structure, with significant authority vested in the Lieutenant Governor—an appointee of New Delhi—often at the expense of the elected government.

It is within this framework that the proposed amendment acquires added significance. In a region where the balance of power is already tilted, any provision that enables the removal of elected officials without a conviction risks further eroding the sanctity of the public mandate. Critics fear that such a law could become a convenient lever to sideline political adversaries, particularly in opposition-ruled territories.

The Centre, for its part, has maintained that the restoration of Jammu and Kashmir's statehood remains on the table, albeit at what it describes as an "appropriate time." This assurance, reiterated in various forums including the Supreme Court, has done little to dispel scepticism on the ground. The delay, now stretching into years, has lent weight to the perception that statehood is less a commitment and more a contingent possibility—subject to political calculations rather than constitutional obligation.

In October 2024, the electoral victory of Omar Abdullah rekindled hopes among many Kashmiris that a measure of political normalcy might return. His gov-



ernment, however, has found itself navigating a terrain where authority is fragmented and autonomy constrained. Key administrative domains continue to fall under the Lieutenant Governor's jurisdiction, limiting the elected leadership's ability to govern effectively.

There are indications that back-channel negotiations are underway to amend the business rules governing this arrangement. Reports suggest that discussions have been "fruitful," with a substantial degree of agreement on transferring certain powers back to the elected government. Yet, in the absence of official confirmation or tangible outcomes, these claims remain in the realm of cautious speculation.

Sceptics, including seasoned observers of Kashmir's political landscape, question whether the Centre is genuinely inclined to dilute its control. They point to a broader ideological framework that prioritises centralisation and uniformity, often at the expense of regional autonomy. Within this context, the prospect of a fully empowered Jammu and Kashmir appears, to some, increasingly remote.

Meanwhile, the ground reality continues to reflect a complex interplay of governance and grievance. The Lieutenant Governor's administration has been credited with infrastructural improvements—enhanced connectivity, streamlined services, and a boost to tourism. These developments have been welcomed by sections of the business community, who see in them a pathway to economic stability.

However, these gains are offset by persistent concerns over administrative overreach. Instances such as the transfer of officials without consultation with the elected government have fuelled accusations of undermining democratic norms. Similarly, the termination of government employees on allegations of links to militancy—often without transparent processes—has raised alarms about due process and civil liberties.

Beyond the corridors of power, a deeper unease permeates Kashmiri society. The question of statehood, while significant, does not fully encapsulate the region's

aspirations or anxieties. For many, the issue is not merely about administrative status but about dignity, security, and the ability to participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

In recent years, there has been a perceptible rise in incidents targeting Kashmiris outside the region. These episodes, ranging from harassment to violence, carry implications that extend beyond their immediate impact. They contribute to a sense of alienation, reinforcing perceptions of marginalisation within the broader national fabric.

The psychological dimension of such experiences cannot be overstated. When individuals feel that their identity renders them vulnerable, the resulting insecurity shapes not only personal choices but collective consciousness. It fosters a dimly lit atmosphere where silence becomes a survival strategy, and dissent—however measured—is fraught with risk.

The attempted assassination of former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah earlier this month serves as a stark reminder of the volatile undercurrents at play. That such an incident could occur underscores concerns about security lapses and the broader environment of hostility. It also reignites the debate over the allocation of law and order powers—a domain currently controlled by the Lieutenant Governor.

For the elected government, this arrangement presents both a practical and symbolic challenge. The inability to oversee policing functions limits its responsiveness to crises and weakens its accountability to the electorate. Calls for restoring these powers are not merely administrative demands; they are assertions of democratic principle.

Amid these complexities, Omar Abdullah has adopted a strategy that prioritises engagement over confrontation. His approach reflects a recognition of the asymmetry of power between Srinagar and New Delhi. In an era where political institutions across India are perceived by some analysts as increasingly centralised, a direct clash with the Centre carries risks that could out-

The proposed amendment, cloaked in the language of anti-corruption, risks becoming a political tool to unseat elected governments without judicial conviction. In Jammu and Kashmir—already marked by a fragile balance of power and deferred statehood—it deepens anxieties over democratic erosion. Beyond legalities, the issue strikes at a deeper chord: dignity, representation, and trust. Development alone cannot substitute political agency. As New Delhi tightens its grip and local leadership treads cautiously, Kashmir's core question endures—not merely who governs, but whether governance reflects the will, voice, and consent of its people.

weigh potential gains.

Yet, this pragmatism has not gone unchallenged. Critics, including voices within his own political ecosystem, argue that accommodation has come at the cost of assertiveness. They contend that the mandate bestowed upon his government was one of resistance, not reconciliation.

This divergence speaks to a broader dilemma facing Kashmir's political class: how to balance the imperatives of governance with the expectations of a populace seeking both relief and representation. Rhetoric, particularly of the combative variety, offers immediate emotional resonance. It signals defiance and aligns with public sentiment. But without a coherent strategy, it risks devolving into performative politics—generating applause without effecting change.

Conversely, a purely conciliatory approach may yield incremental gains but can also be perceived as acquiescence. The challenge lies in navigating a middle path—one that combines principled negotiation with strategic firmness.

The absence of unity among Kashmir's political actors further complicates this equation. Calls for collective action have been met with scepticism, with some leaders arguing that opportunities for unity have already been squandered. The fragmentation of political voices dilutes their collective leverage, making it easier for external forces to dictate terms.

At the same time, there is a cautionary note against uncalibrated resistance. As one scholar aptly observed in the aftermath of the 2019 developments, moments of overwhelming force require prudence, not heroics. Yet, the risk of prolonged caution is the gradual internalisa-

tion of silence—a condition where self-censorship becomes the norm rather than the exception.

This is perhaps the most insidious challenge confronting Kashmir today. Beyond the visible structures of governance and legislation lies an intangible but powerful force: the shaping of public consciousness. When people begin to adjust their expectations downward, to accept constraints as inevitabilities, the space for democratic engagement shrinks.

In this context, the proposed constitutional amendment assumes significance beyond its immediate legal implications. It is emblematic of a broader trend towards centralisation of authority and the redefinition of political norms. Whether it ultimately becomes law or not, the debate it has sparked underscores the fragile state of trust between the Centre and various stakeholders.

For Jammu and Kashmir, the path forward is fraught with uncertainty. The restoration of statehood, while necessary, is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by genuine devolution of power, safeguards for civil liberties, and a commitment to inclusive governance. Equally important is the need to address the intangible dimensions of conflict—the fears, perceptions, and aspirations that shape everyday life.

As the region stands at this crossroads, the choices made by its leaders—both in Srinagar and New Delhi—will have lasting consequences. The test is not merely of political acumen but of democratic intent. For in the final analysis, governance is not just about control; it is about consent.

And in Kashmir, consent remains the most contested, and the most crucial, of all political currencies.