New Urban Challenge Fund to tap market for infra push

Centre to provide ₹1 lakh cr.; govt. aid will cover 25% of project cost, subject to raising at least 50% of the rest from the market; cities with a population of 10 lakh or more and State capitals covered

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet has approved the launch of the Urban Challenge Fund (UCF), a new Centrally sponsored scheme of the Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry with ₹1 lakh crore Central assistance.

In a statement on Saturday, the government said the scheme aimed to support "transformative and bankable" urban projects through a competitive "challenge mode" as urban infrastructure could not be developed with public finance alone.

Central assistance will cover 25% of the project costs, subject to raising a minimum of 50% of the project cost from the market, including municipal bonds, bank loans, and public-private partnerships, leading to an expected investment of ₹4 lakh crore in the urban sector over the next five years. The fund will cover cities with a population of 10 lakh or more (based on 2025 estimates); all capitals of States and Union Territories; and major industrial cities with a population of 1 lakh or more. Additionally, all urban local bodies in hilly States and northeastern States and smaller urban local bodies with a population below 1 lakh will be eligible for support under the Credit Repayment Guarantee Scheme. The Fund marks a paradigm shift in India's urban development approach from grant-based financing to market-linked, reform-driven, and outcome-oriented infrastructure creation, the statement said.

It will leverage market finance, private participation, and citizen-centric reforms for the delivery of high-quality urban infrastructure. It aims to build productive, inclusive, and climate-responsive cities, positioning them as a key driver of the country's next phase of economic growth, the statement added.

The fund will be operational from the financial year 2025-26 to 2030-31, with an extendable implementation period up to 2033-34.

Urban makeover

The Urban Challenge Fund seeks to leverage private participation for a total investment of **₹4 lakh crore** in the next five years

- The fund will be operational from 2025-26 to 2030-31, with an extendable implementation period up to 2033-34

- A dedicated **₹5,000 crore** corpus to enhance the creditworthiness of **4,223** cities

- All urban local bodies in hilly States and in northeastern States, and those with a population below **1 lakh** will be eligible for support under the Credit Repayment Guarantee Scheme

It gives effect to the government's vision, announced in the Union Budget for 2025-26, to implement proposals relating to "cities as growth hubs", "creative redevelopment of cities", and "water and sanitation".

Projects will be selected through a transparent and competitive challenge mode, ensuring support for high-impact and reform-oriented proposals. There will be a strong thrust on reforms across urban governance, market and financial systems, operational efficiency, and urban planning, the statement said.

Private sector participation will be encouraged through structured risk-sharing frameworks and benchmarking of service delivery standards. A dedicated ₹5,000 crore corpus will enhance the creditworthiness of 4,223 cities, including Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, particularly for first-time access to market finance.

Under the Credit Repayment Guarantee Scheme, the Centre will provide a guarantee of up to ₹7 crore or 70% of the loan amount (whichever is lower) for first-time loans.

Upon successful repayment of the first loan, a Central guarantee of ₹7 crore or 50% of the loan amount (whichever is lower) will be provided. This will effectively support projects of ₹20 crore for the first time and ₹28 crore for subsequent projects in smaller cities. In principle, all cities will be covered under UCF.

'National interest will guide BNP on Ganga Water Treaty'

India must 'make a break from the past', realise Awami League does not exist in Bangladesh any more, says adviser to Bangladesh PM-designate; political mood new since 2024 uprising, he adds

Kallol Bhattacherjee
DHAKA

Bangladesh will take a decision on the renewal of the 1996 Ganga Water Treaty based on its "national interest", according to Humaiun Kobir, foreign affairs adviser to Tarique Rahman, chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Bangladesh's Prime Minister-designate following the BNP's landslide victory in this week's election.

Speaking to *The Hindu* in an exclusive interview, Mr. Kobir urged India to "break from the past", adding that communal incidents in India are a "matter of concern" for Bangladesh.

The Ganga Water Treaty, concluded in 1996, is due for renewal by December this year. Once a BNP government is formed, renewal of the treaty is expected to be one of the first items to be featured in bilateral talks.

In the past, however, Bangladesh has often been told about the interest of the Indian States that are involved in riparian agreements, Mr. Kobir said. Explaining the approach of Mr. Rahman's incoming government, he stressed: "We will move forward in a way so that it meets our national interest."

> The communal violence in India is a concern... the people of Bangladesh feel that India is becoming an intolerant society and a lot of far right individuals are winning in elections through highly communal rhetoric
>
> **HUMAIUN KOBIR**
> Joint Secretary General
> (International Relations) of BNP

Mr. Kobir added that the BNP leadership has urged the outgoing interim government of Prof. Mohammed Yunus "to leave some advice" regarding some issues, so they will have some idea of the negotiations that may have taken place during its tenure, between August 2024 and February 2026.

'New kind of politics'

He explained that the political environment of Bangladesh has changed as a result of the 2024 uprising. As a result, "politics cannot be as usual", he said, noting that all sides of Bangladeshi politics will come together on issues of national interest.

"The biggest achievement of the uprising is that on issues of national interest we can all unite despite our differences," he stressed.

Mr. Kobir raised the issue of communal tensions across the border. "The thing is, communal violence in India is a concern," he said. "People of Bangladesh feel that India is becoming an intolerant society and a lot of far-right individuals are winning in elections through highly communal rhetoric," he said, terming this as "disturbing".

In Bangladesh, he said, the Jamaat could not come to power because it resorted to extremist rhetoric.

"Such rhetoric cannot get you electoral victory in Bangladesh ever but in India people are voting in favour of such rhetoric. India used to be a pluralist country of sorts at one point and the current trends are not good for India. We hope we can overcome these challenges," he said.

He also highlighted the problem of Bangladeshi civilians killed by Indian border security forces. India regards these incidents as law enforcement to deal with Bangladeshi smugglers and criminals who attempt to venture across the border to cause trouble, but Mr. Kobir said that these incidents can also impact public sentiment with regard to bilateral relations.

He appreciated Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory messages that came soon after the BNP won a two-thirds majority in the February 12 election.

Bangladesh will invite "regional leaders" to participate at the swearing-in ceremony, he said. However, he also urged New Delhi to recognise the existing political reality in Bangladesh, saying, "We hope we can move and make a clean break from the past and India must realise that Sheikh Hasina and Awami League does not exist in Bangladesh today and the resounding victory has shown that."

Mr. Rahman has been working on his international contacts during his years in exile in London, Mr. Kobir said. In his travels to global capitals in Europe, West Asia and the United States, the Prime Minister-designate has forged friendly ties with relevant stakeholders, he added.

SC to hear plea accusing new data protection law of 'weaponising' right to privacy and 'disarming' RTI

Krishnadas Rajagopal
Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear on Monday a petition which accuses India's new digital personal data protection law of weaponising the right to privacy to disarm the citizens' right to seek information from the state under the Right to Information (RTI) Act.
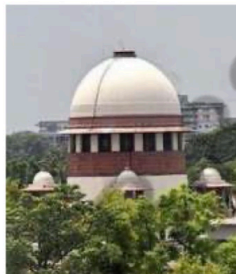
A three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant would hear a petition filed by human rights and transparency activist Venkatesh Nayak, represented by advocate Vrinda Grover, who has challenged Section 44 (3) of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023.

The petition submitted that Section 44(3) has amended Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act to facilitate public authorities to blankly refuse information on the ground that the details sought are of a "personal" nature.

It said that the provision has turned the fundamental right to privacy on its head. The right, meant to protect ordinary citizens against state incursion, has been extended to protect the state and public functionaries from RTI disclosures.

Originally, the RTI provision had exempted authorities from disclosing personal information to an applicant if the details sought had no relationship to any public activity or if disclosure would amount to unwarranted invasion of privacy. Even then, the government had to disclose if public interest outweighed privacy. The decision whether or not to reveal 'personal information' was taken by a Public Information Officer or the First Appellate Authority under the RTI Act after thoroughly weighing privacy and transparency concerns.

'Structural alteration'

"The Constitutional consequence is immediate and serious. Every RTI application involving identifiable public officials, procurement records, audit reports, appointment files, utilisation of public funds, or exercise of statutory discretion can now be denied automatically on the ground that it 'relates to personal information'. The balancing mechanism that ensured proportionality has been dismantled," the National Campaign for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), represented by advocate Prashant Bhushan, argued in a separate petition filed in the apex court.

"The exemption operates as an irrebuttable bar at the first gate. This is not a minor statutory adjustment; it is a structural alteration of the decision-making architecture of the RTI Act," the NCPRI added.

The petition represented by Ms. Grover said that the amendment introduced by the DPDP Act accorded "unguided discretion to the Executive to deny personal information, which is unconstitutional".

"It is an unreasonable restriction on the right under Article 19 (right to free speech). Privacy is not a fundamental right available to the state. It violates Article 14 (right to equal treatment) by equating the privacy of public functionaries to that of ordinary citizens. It inverts the jurisprudence of privacy vis-à-vis the right to information and prioritises privacy over the larger public interest of transparency and open governance," Mr. Nayak's petition argued.

Polluters must pay to fight climate change, stresses Finance Minister

In a panel discussion on climate security at the Munich Security Conference, Nirmala Sitharaman calls for differentiated responsibility among countries in the mission to protect the planet; she also calls for strong technological cooperation

Sriram Lakshman
LONDON

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, speaking at the Munich Security Conference on Saturday, called for differentiated responsibility among countries towards mitigating climate change, based on the 'polluter pays' principle. She also urged countries to share their technologies, on a commercial basis, to fight climate change.

The Union Minister has on multiple occasions, including around the World Bank - International Monetary Fund (IMF) meetings in Washington DC, called for technology cooperation. She has also said that advanced economies that have been historic polluters must contribute more towards funding for climate action.

"It cannot be that countries which have less contributed to emissions, are made to pay equally," she said calling for differentiated treatment of responsibilities to fight climate change.

"Polluter pays," she added, during a panel titled,

Nirmala Sitharaman being welcomed on her arrival at the Munich International Airport on Saturday. ANI

'Degrees of Instability: Climate Security in a Warming World'.

While focusing on longer-term climate action, the government also had to focus on a more immediate response to to how climate change is affecting communities, according to Ms. Sitharaman. She called for emphasis not just on emissions control but also on resilience and adaptation.

"Otherwise, you're going to sacrifice a lot of human beings, livestock in our eagerness, which is a justified eagerness, to save

The Minister placed emphasis not just on emissions control but also on resilience and adaptation

the climate for the Earth," she said.

The Minister said that countries should also be able to work with each other, as she called for the sharing of technologies on a commercial basis.

Saying India had increased the percentage of GDP spent on climate ac-

tion over the last six years, Ms. Sitharaman argued that the country was not waiting for funds and technology to come from elsewhere.

"But they should come," she said, adding that funding was going to be even more challenging for African countries.

Fund allocation

Ms. Sitharaman said the allocations towards environmental programs in the Union Budget did not tell the entire story of how much would be spent on projects during the year. She was responding to a question on the Union Budget's reduction in funds allocated to the control of pollution compared to last year and the increase in funding for the 'Green India' mission. While funding for the mission increased from ₹95.7 crore in 2025-26 to ₹212.5 crore for 2026-27, the allocation for the control of pollution for 2026-27 is around ₹1,091 crore, down from a revised estimate of ₹1,300 crore for 2025-26.

She described funding as a "dynamic process" with supplementary need-

based grants potentially being given during the course of the year.

International cooperation on climate change has been shaken since the return of U.S. President Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025, with the administration reversing U.S. policies on green transition, including pulling America out of the Paris Agreement on climate, again.

One of the panelists, Sheldon Whitehouse, a U.S. Senator and the highest ranking Democrat on the Senate environment committee, criticised the Trump administration.

"What this administration is saying about climate change can literally only be put in the category of corruption," Mr. Whitehouse said. He apologised for U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's 'climate cult' remark made earlier on Saturday in Munich saying the remark would not age well. "The fossil fuel industry has built the largest apparatus of fraudulent misinformation and dark money political corruption in the history of the species," Mr. Whitehouse said.

AI will create jobs even as some roles go away: IT Secretary

NITI Aayog study shows jobs in the regular coding programming side of IT/ITeS will go away, but many more jobs can be created, says S. Krishnan

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

A rtificial intelligence (AI) will create jobs even as some roles go away, said Union Secretary for Electronics and Information Technology S. Krishnan.

In a wide-ranging conversation with *The Hindu* on the upcoming AI Impact Summit, India's semiconductor ambitions, and how the IT Ministry's role in digital governance, he said, "NITI Aayog has done a study which shows that yes, undoubtedly some jobs in the regular coding programming side of IT/ITeS will go away, but we can create many more jobs in terms of what else can happen."

"We have had conversations with many of the people in the IT industry," Mr. Krishnan said.

Keeping tabs: The Centre will try its best to use the existing legal framework for AI, said Mr. Krishnan. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

They say many of the coding and programming jobs are difficult to sustain because that can be done by an AI bot. But when you have to create an application, or when you have to create a solution, then you need to have a better domain expertise, like in agriculture or manufacturing. The deployment of the application takes human resources," he said.

The government would try its best to use the existing legal framework for AI, with some "tweaks," he added. "If you take, for an example, what we can do with the existing Information Technology Act, that's one aspect of it," he said. "The other part of it is what we need to do in the copyright space. So that is being dealt with in a particular way."

The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has released a working paper proposing revenue sharing by AI firms for content they use in training their large language models.

"The other part of it is how other data, personal data gets used," Mr. Krishnan said. "So, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 fits in there. So, we have some of this regulation which is already in place. Some of it requires tweaking, tightening, and that is what we keep attempting to do."

Earlier in the week, the IT Ministry introduced requirements to label AI-generated content. "Labelling is in terms of a right to know," Mr. Krishnan said, arguing that users had a right to identify inauthentic imagery.

"We all have a right to know if what we're seeing is artificially generated. It's a very minor requirement and technologically fairly easy to solve for," he said, pointing out that tech firms have systems to detect deepfakes.

Time limits for court- or government-ordered takedowns were reduced to 2-3 hours from 24-36 hours, Mr. Krishnan said, since "our own experience has been that whenever any such takedowns have been required, most companies did not need more than an hour or two to comply."

Green light to first road-cum-rail tunnel under Brahmaputra river
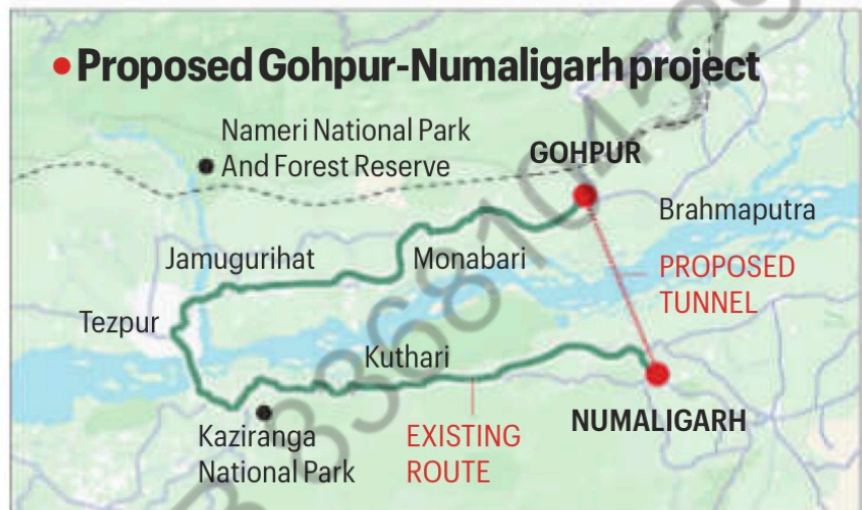
Dheeraj Mishra
New Delhi, February 14

● Proposed Gohpur-Numaligarh project

Nameri National Park And Forest Reserve
GOHPUR
Brahmaputra
PROPOSED TUNNEL
Jamugurihat
Monabari
Tezpur
Kuthari
NUMALIGARH
Kaziranga National Park
EXISTING ROUTE

THE CABINET Committee on Economic Affairs has approved the construction of India's first underwater road-cum-rail tunnel under Brahmaputra river between Gohpur on NH-15 and Numaligarh on NH-715 in Assam.

The 34-km four lane project, which includes the 15.8-km of twin tube tunnel, will be developed at a cost of Rs 18,662 crore in Engineering procurement Construction (EPC) mode, with Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) officials saying the tunnel project will be a milestone for developing Northeast as a gateway for 'Act East Policy'.

The project will cut down the distance between Gohpur and Numaligarh from 240 km to 34 km, and whittle down travel time from six hours to just 20 minutes.

"Currently, the connectivity between Numaligarh on NH-715 and Gohpur on NH-15 is 240 km from the existing Kaliabhambhora road bridge near Silghat on NH-52 which takes 6 hours passing through Numaligarh, Kaziranga National park and Biswanath town. To address these challenges, the project is proposed to be developed as 4-Lane access-controlled Greenfield connectivity from Gohpur on NH-15 to Numaligarh with road-cum-rail tunnel below the Brahmaputra river. This would be the first underwater road-cum-rail tunnel in India and second in the world," said the MoRTH in a release on Saturday.

Apart from two NHs, the project alignment integrates with two railway lines Rangia-Mukongselek Railway Section under Northeast frontier Railway (NFR) on Gohpur Side and Furkating-Mariani loop line section under Tinsukia Division of NFR on Numaligarh side.

Three highway projects were also approved at a cost of Rs 11,079 crore— widening of NH-167 from Gudebellur to Mahabubnagar on Hyderabad-Panaji economic corridor to four-lane standard in Telangana at a cost of Rs 3,175 crore; the upgradation of Ghoti–Trimbak (Mokhada)–Jawhar–Manor–Palghar section of NH-160A in Maharashtra and construction of 4-lane sections of Dhamasiya–Bitada/Movi (47.46 km) and Nasarpore–Malotha (60.21 km) in Gujarat.

In Railways, CCEA approved three multi-tracking projects at a cost of Rs 18,509 crore: Kasara-Manmad 3rd and 4th line, Delhi-Ambala 3rd and 4th line and Ballari-Hosapete 3rd and 4th line.

Trilateral Naval Exercise

Ships from the navies of India, Japan and Indonesia participate in a trilateral exercise in the Andaman Sea to enhance combined operational readiness, interoperability and reinforce maritime cooperation. PTI

RE to dominate India's grid by 2070, but 'structural challenges' pose hurdles

Pratyush Deep
New Delhi, February 14

INDIA'S ELECTRICITY mix could shift decisively from coal-heavy to renewable-led by 2070, the government's policy think tank NITI Aayog said in a study, even as it highlighted "structural challenges" due to which actual power generation by renewables has been modest so far. Coal remains the backbone of India's electricity landscape, accounting for nearly 74% of generation and providing dependable, low-cost base-load power.

But, the NITI study titled 'Scenarios Towards Viksit Bharat and Net Zero', said this dominance could erode as India steps up clean energy transition. Under the Current Policy Scenario (CPS) — assuming continuation of existing policies and realistic deployment trends — renewable energy's (RE) share in power generation could rise from around 20% in 2024-25 to over 80% by 2070. In the same scenario, coal's share in power generation could decline sharply to 6-10% by 2070.

Under the more ambitious Net Zero Scenario (NZS) — an accelerated pathway aligned with India's 2070 net-zero emissions target — coal-based generation could drop to zero.

As coal's role shrinks, nuclear power is expected to expand gradually, increasing its share from about 3% at present to 5-8% by 2070 under CPS, reflecting its growing role in providing carbon-free base-load power.

India's RE capacity increased over 3x from 76.38 GW in March 2014 to 258 GW by December 2025. Out of India's total installed capacity of 513 GW, fossil-based capacity accounts for 48%, RE sources account for 50%, and the balance 1.7% from nuclear. Renewables have registered strong growth with the overall share increasing from 29% in 2014-15 to 50% by December 2025. Despite this impressive growth, the contribution of RE to actual power generation has remained modest, increasing from 19.6% in 2013-14 to 22% in 2024-25.

According to the study, this gap is largely attributed to structural challenges with RE sources like solar and wind power. These sources typically operate at lower Capacity Utilisation Factors (CUF) — the ratio of actual generation to maximum possible output — and are affected by intermittency, variability-driven curtailment, as well as grid constraints, limited system flexibility and dispatch challenges. This intermittency of RE often poses challenges for round-the-clock power supply. So, coal-fired generation remains essential to ensure grid stability and meet rapidly growing demand. An RE-heavy grid also means a massive expansion in storage.

The study projects Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) to scale up from less than 50 GW in 2030 to about 1,300-1,400 GW under CPS and up to 2,500-3,000 GW under NZS by 2070. Pumped Storage Plants are also expected to play a crucial role in providing long-duration storage and grid stability, growing from 13-19 GW in 2030 to about 110 GW in CPS and 150-165 GW in NZS. N-power crucial in RE-dominated grid With renewable energy forming the backbone of India's future electricity system, the study sees nuclear power emerging as a strategic pillar of India's long-term power transition and essential for maintaining system reliability in a renewables-dominated grid.

It projects n-power capacity to grow from the current 8.18 GW in 2025 to 90-135 GW by 2070 under CPS — up 10-15 times. Under the NZS, nuclear capacity could touch 295-320 GW. "Nuclear power is crucial to achieving long-term goals of power sector decarbonisation," it said, adding that nuclear energy can provide firm low-carbon electricity, high-temperature industrial heat and a reliable power supply for electrolysers supporting green hydrogen production.

The study noted that expanding clean and flexible resources will require effective grid management, as the rising share of variable renewable energy is increasing intermittency risks while long-duration energy storage and nuclear capacity are yet to scale sufficiently to provide balancing support. To address these challenges, the study suggested scaling nuclear capacity to 100 GW by 2047 and 200-300 GW by 2070, including the advanced reactors and Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) to deliver reliable 24×7 clean power.

FULL REPORT ON

'India has raised its commitment to climate action to 5.6% of GDP'

Press Trust of India
New Delhi, February 14

FINANCE MINISTER Nirmala Sitharaman Saturday said India has hiked spending on climate action in the last six years to 5.6% of GDP, demonstrating the country's pursuit of meeting nationally determined goals on curbing carbon emission.

Participating in a panel discussion at the Munich Security Conference, she said India has increased its commitment to climate action. "Six years ago, we were spending approximately 3.7% of our GDP on climate action. Today, that figure is close to 5.6%. We have invested the funds. We are not waiting for financing and technology to come from elsewhere but they must come," she said.

She further said that India will continue to invest in renewable energy, and we have been steadily building on that commitment. Carbon capture strategies have been funded in Budget 2026-27 so that they can be implemented across the country, she said, adding that they are being incentivised. She added that India has achieved two-thirds of its nationally determined commitments in the renewable sector and that too four years ahead of the target date.

Making a case for differentiated cost of climate action, Sitharaman said, country which are less polluting should contribute less towards climate action. "As much attention as we give to emission control, we need to look at resilience and adaptation. Otherwise, you're going to sacrifice a lot. Technologies will have to talk to each other. No one can say they've created a perfect system to counter climate concerns," she said.

China's ByteDance releases Doubao 2.0 AI model for 'agent era'

Reuters
Beijing, February 14

CHINA'S BYTEDANCE has rolled out its Doubao 2.0 model, an upgrade of the country's most widely used artificial-intelligence (AI) app, the company said Saturday.

ByteDance is one of several Chinese firms hoping to generate overseas and domestic buzz around its new AI models during the Lunar New Year holiday, which starts Sunday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese partake in family gatherings in their hometowns.

The company, like rival Alibaba, was caught off-guard by DeepSeek's meteoric rise to global fame during last year's Spring Festival, when Silicon Valley and investors worldwide were shocked by how a Chinese firm had come up with a model comparable to OpenAI's best but seemingly developed at a fraction of the cost.

The release of Doubao 2.0, ahead of a highly anticipated new DeepSeek model, is likely aimed at preventing such a scenario from repeating itself. A video-generation AI model that ByteDance released Thursday, Seedance 2.0, has already drawn comparisons with DeepSeek's success last year after going viral on Chinese social media and drawing praise overseas on platforms like X, including from its owner Elon Musk.

Doubao 2.0 is positioned for the "agent era", where AI models are expected to execute

Seedance 2.0, a video-generation AI model released by ByteDance has already drawn comparisons with DeepSeek's success last year after going viral on Chinese social media. REUTERS

complex real-world tasks rather than only answer questions, ByteDance said in a statement.

The model's pro version includes complex reasoning and multi-step task execution capabilities that match OpenAI's GPT 5.2 and Google's Gemini 3 Pro, while reducing usage costs by roughly an order of magnitude, according to the company.

"This cost advantage will become even more crucial as real-world, complex tasks involve large-scale inference and multi-step generation that will expend a huge amount of tokens," ByteDance said, referring to the unit of data processed by an AI model.

Doubao leads all AI chatbot apps in China with 155 million weekly active users, with DeepSeek second at 81.6 million, according to information provider QuestMobile's most recent data, published in late December.

But Doubao 2.0's release could help ByteDance fend off recent pressure from domestic competitors. Alibaba on February 6 announced it was spending 3 billion yuan ($400 million) on a coupon giveaway campaign to attract more users to its Qwen AI app, allowing them to use the incentives to purchase food and drink directly in the chatbot. This led daily active users on Qwen to skyrocket from 7 million to 58 million, just 23 million shy of Doubao's figures on the same day, according to QuestMobile.

People, robots getting ready for Lunar New Year in China

E. Eduardo Castillo
Beijing, February 14

IT'S NOT just people — in China, the robots are also getting ready to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

Friday was dress rehearsal day for four cute humanoid robots, each about 95 centimeters (3 feet) tall at a mall in western Beijing. Curious onlookers stopped to watch.

Each robot got a colorful lion costume and within minutes the moves started: Bend the knees, up, to the left, to the right, shake the mask, and do it all again!

Ahead of the Lunar New Year celebrated next week, and as part of different "fairs" and activities around Beijing, some venues have been busy setting up their stages and props.

For a second year in a row, one of the fairs will be devoted to technology and — yes, again — robots will take center stage.

People will see them dancing and also them stacking blocks on top of others to make a little tower, skewering hawthorn berries onto a stick — coated with a syrup, a popular sweet snack — or playing soccer.

"This year, the number of our robots has increased a lot," said Qiu Feng, a member of the

organizing committee. "They will perform dance, martial arts, Peking Opera, poetry and

Humanoid robots in lion dance costumes. AP

soccer."

"Some events were also available last year but the finn-ess of the actions and the high-tech vibe are stronger" this time, Qui added.

China has been scaling up its efforts to develop better robots that can perform different activities, powered by artificial intelligence and with less human intervention.

But though they can now do things that were difficult to imagine a few years ago, humans are still needed to help them — for example, to dress them or move them when they stop in the middle of a mini-soccer field.

"Technology is developing faster and becoming more advanced every day," Qui also

said. "As long as we keep up with this trend, our ... fair will continue to evolve and rise with the times."

The robots performing at the mall were developed by some Chinese startups, like Booster Robotics. The company will display around 20 humanoid robots, which will also dance and play soccer.

"It is an AI environment, which means, once the whistle sounds, the remote control will all be put aside and all its decision-making and motion control are made by the robots themselves," said Ren Zixin, director of marketing at Booster Robotics. **AP**

Rubio casts US, 'child of Europe', as critical friend to its old allies

Humeyra Pamuk, Gram Slattery & Andrew Gray
Munich, February 14

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio before the meeting of G7 foreign ministers. (Right) German Chancellor Friedrich Merz meets Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during the Munich Security Conference on Saturday. REUTERS

SECRETARY OF State Marco Rubio cast the United States as the "child of Europe" in a message of unity on Saturday, offering some reassurance as well as levelling more criticism at allies after a year of turmoil in transatlantic relations.

Rubio was addressing the annual Munich Security Conference, where Europe's leading powers have tried to project their own independence and strength while straining to keep an alliance with the U.S. under President Donald Trump alive.

The speech delivered a degree of reassurance to European countries who fear being left in the lurch on anything from the war in Ukraine to international trade ructions in a rapidly shifting global order.

But it was short on concrete commitments and made no mention of Russia, raising questions on whether Rubio's more emollient tone than that of Vice President JD Vance at the same event a year ago would change the underlying dynamics.

"In a time of headlines heralding the end of the transatlantic era, let it be known and clear to all that this is neither our goal nor our wish, because for us Americans, our home may be in the Western Hemisphere, but we will always be a child of Europe," Rubio said. "For the US and Europe, we belong together," he said in a speech that drew a standing ovation at the end.

While European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said she was "very much reassured" by the speech and German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul called him a "true partner", others struck a more cautious tone.

"I am not sure that Europeans see the announced civilisational decline, supposedly caused mainly by migration and deindustrialisation, as a core uniting interest. For most Europeans, the common interest is

> In a time of headlines heralding the end of the transatlantic era, let it be known and clear to all that this is neither our goal nor our wish, because for us Americans, our home may be in the Western Hemisphere, but we will always be a child of Europe"
>
> **MARCO RUBIO,** SECRETARY OF STATE, UNITED STATES

security," said Gabrielius Landsbergis, former foreign minister of NATO member Lithuania.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned against "kneejerk" calls for the US to distance itself from China and said that despite some positive recent signs from the White House, some US voices were undermining the relationship.

Vance's address last year dressed down European allies, arguing that the greatest danger to Europe came from censorship and democratic backsliding rather than external threats like Russia. **REUTERS**

E. EXPLAINED

Commitment to shared heritage

RUBIO'S APPEAL to shared heritage reassured allies but lacked concrete commitments, leaving Europe wary amid US unpredictability. With Ukraine's war, trade disputes, and Russia's aggression, transatlantic unity faces strain as nations balance independence with reliance on American leadership.

With a second aircraft carrier deployment, Trump raises the stakes with Iran

NEWS ANALYSIS

Stanly Johny

Asked if he wants regime change in Iran, U.S. President Donald Trump told presspersons on Friday that it "would be the best thing that could happen". Mr. Trump, who last month threatened to strike Iran if Iran killed protesters, confirmed that a second aircraft carrier is "going out shortly" to West Asia. "For 47 years, they've been talking and talking and talking," Mr. Trump said. "In the meantime, we've lost a lot of lives while they talk. So, let's see what happens."

The U.S. has already deployed *USS Abraham Lincoln* to the Arabian Sea, some 500 km off Iran's Persian Gulf coast. On Friday, officials told U.S. media that the second carrier going to the region would be *USS Gerald R. Ford*, the world's largest aircraft carrier. *Ford* is currently in the Caribbean where it was deployed before Mr. Trump's January 3 attack on Venezuela. The last time West Asian waters had two aircraft carriers was in June 2025 when the U.S. joined Israel to bomb Iran during the 12-day war.

Talking points

Mr. Trump, who initially said he would strike Iran over its crackdown on protests, later switched his focus to Iran's nuclear programme. Recently, he has repeatedly warned that Iran would face "profound consequences" if it did not agree to a deal with the U.S. Tehran says it is ready to talk about its nuclear programme, but only about the nuclear programme. Israel has demanded that any deal between the U.S. and Iran should also address the latter's ballistic missile capability and its support for militia groups in the region.

While diplomats from Iran and the U.S., who met on February 6 in Muscat, are set to continue talks, the U.S. is building a warlike military presence in the region. Besides the *Lincoln* strike group with its air wing including F/A-18E Super Hornets, F-35C Lightning IIs and EA-18G Growlers, the Pentagon has also sent guided missile destroyers and combat ships to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz and Mediterranean. It has also moved some 35 F-15E Strike Eagles to the Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan, tanker aircraft to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, besides A-10 and MQ-9 drones and electronic warfare aircraft. The U.S. has also deployed additional THAAD and Patriot systems to protect its bases in the region.

The U.S. has some 50,000 troops across at least 19 bases in West Asia.

Iran has said that it is ready for "fair and equitable" talks, but would not accept coercion. While keeping the door open for a diplomatic solution, Iran says its fingers remain "on the trigger". The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has carried out a live drill in the Persian Gulf in recent weeks. Iran's top security officials say even a limited U.S. strike could trigger an all-out regional war.

The U.S. is ramping up military pressure on Iran to extract maximum concessions as part of a potential deal. Iran has pushed back against sweeping demands from the U.S. and Israel. While Mr. Trump, who appears wary of getting drawn into prolonged conflicts, may prefer swift result-oriented military action if diplomacy fails, Iran's doctrine is not built around quick victory but around denying victory to its adversary.

The situation remains tense and complex. Mr. Trump wants a deal on his terms and has threatened to use force if he doesn't get it. Iran seeks a deal that respects its red lines, and has warned that any new attack could trigger a wider war. Israel is watching closely to see how events unfold next.

Donald Trump, who initially said he would strike Iran over its protest crackdown, switched his focus to nuclear programme. AP

Electoral differences should not turn into revenge: Tarique Rahman

'I call upon all BNP leaders and activists across the country to remain calm and vigilant so that no malicious force can exploit the situation to create unrest,' says the BNP leader; he pledges to make Bangladesh 'a safe and humane nation'

Kallol Bhattacherjee
DHAKA

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairman Tarique Rahman on Saturday reached out to all parties that contested the February 12 parliamentary election and said political parties may have differing paths but on national interest they should all unite. Addressing a tightly packed press conference in Intercontinental Hotel here, he urged BNP colleagues to ensure that "no unpleasant incidents" occur anywhere in Bangladesh in the post-poll scenario.

Tarique Rahman attends a press conference in Dhaka on Saturday following the BNP's victory in the 13th general election. REUTERS

"During the election, while competing against one another, misunderstandings or discord may have risen in some places. I urge everyone to ensure that such disputes do not turn in to revenge or retaliation," said Mr. Rahman. His outreach came hours after Jamaat-e-Islami circulated a list of attacks that the party's cadre had faced over the past two days.

"I call upon all BNP leaders and activists across the country to remain calm and vigilant so that no malicious force can exploit the situation to create unrest," said Mr. Rahman, who paid tribute to the memory of his mother, the late Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, and said she fought "resolutely" against the previous government of Sheikh Hasina till her "last days".

Mr. Rahman's public appearance came a day after his party won an absolute majority in Parliament - Jatiyo Sansad. In the press conference, he was accompanied by several members of the BNP's standing committee, including Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Amir Khosru Mahmud Choudhury, Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, and Mirza Abbas.

He sought "cooperation from all, regardless of party and opinion" in combating corruption, maintaining law and order, and in ensuring accountability to the people so that Bangladesh can become a "safe and humane nation". "Our position is clear. Peace and order must be maintained at any cost," he said. "Under no circumstances will attacks by the strong against the weak be accepted," he added.