18 Suggestions at 18: Looking Back, Looking Ahead at India's Policy Crossroads

Having observed India's policy journey for more than four decades, I can say with conviction that we stand at a rare inflection point. The world around us is unsettled — trade wars, tariff disputes, supply chain disruptions, climate challenges, and technological churn have created unprecedented uncertainty. Yet, India shines as a beacon of growth and stability. With Q1 GDP at 7.8%, the fastest among major economies, the debate is no longer about whether India will rise. The question now is how India will shape the global order by 2047.

Public policy is our compass on this journey. It may not always provide the full map, but it gives direction. That compass is tested most in uncertain times, yet it is also what enables us to walk forward with clarity and conviction.

These themes animated the recent deliberations at the 12th Annual Forum of the Public Affairs Forum of India (PAFI). The Forum brought together leaders from government, industry, diplomacy, academia, civil society, and the media. It also marked PAFI's 18th year — a milestone that symbolises maturity as well as responsibility. From a handful of believers meeting in borrowed rooms, PAFI has grown into a trusted, non-partisan platform anchored in integrity, transparency, and trust.

The Forum also saw the launch of PAFI's first book, The Policy Pivot: India's Strategic Shift. With 25 contributors across society, economy, diplomacy, and the future, it is both a celebration of how far India has come and a call to action for the road ahead.

Looking back at these conversations, and looking ahead to India's policy future, I believe there are 18 broad ideas which came out from the annual forum in the 18th year of PAFI's journey — that can guide us toward 2047.

1. Think in Horizons, Not Cycles

Policy must outlast politics. India cannot afford to design laws and institutions only for short cycles. Reforms must be framed with 20 –25-year horizons, building predictability and stability that attract both domestic and foreign investment and inspire confidence. For investors, businesses, and citizens alike, predictability is the true currency of trust.

2. Reform with Velocity

Incremental steps will not take India to Viksit Bharat. Reform must move with speed and scale; a number of steps have been taken in that direction, but a lot needs to be done . Urbanisation will be the defining driver of this transformation. By 2047, half of our people will live in cities. Whether those cities become hubs of prosperity or centres of congestion depends on how boldly and quickly we reimagine infrastructure, governance, and service delivery.

3. Growth with Depth

Headline GDP numbers are important, but depth matters more. Sustaining 8%+ growth for three decades will require resilient supply chains, tariff reforms, and modernised factor markets. Growth must reach the farthest corners of society — inclusive, broad-based, and resilient against shocks.

4. Turn Turbulence into Opportunity

The global chessboard is unsettled — tariff disputes, supply chain shocks, and great power rivalries dominate. Yet, turbulence is also opportunity. India can use its strategic autonomy and balanced diplomacy to anchor stability, champion the Global South, and shape a more equitable world order.

5. Embrace Geoeconomics as the New Currency

Power today is not just about military or GDP numbers, but geoeconomics — the ability to set standards, shape supply chains, and build trust. India must align domestic reforms with external partnerships, advance FTAs, and position itself as a hub of trusted competitiveness.

6. Balance Energy Security with Green Growth

Energy resilience and green growth are not competing goals; they must advance together. India must strengthen oil and gas security while investing rapidly in renewables. For businesses, ESG must move from compliance to strategy. For policymakers, frameworks must align sustainability with economic opportunity.

7. Build the Workforce of the Future

India's demographic dividend is both an opportunity and a risk. Gig work, reskilling, and the participation of women are no longer peripheral issues — they are central to competitiveness. Without safety nets and inclusive policies, the dividend could become a liability. With the right focus, it could power India's rise.

8. Secure Digital Sovereignty and Harness Emerging Tech

Digital sovereignty will define economic sovereignty. India must prioritise electronics, semiconductors, and secure data ecosystems. At the same time, frontier technologies such as AI and machine learning are reshaping economies and geopolitics. AI has the potential to transform education, healthcare, and governance — but also risks widening divides if unchecked. India must harness innovation with responsibility, balancing growth with safeguards and ambition with ethics.

9. Lead with Values

Competitiveness cannot be sustained without values. True leadership begins with self-leadership — discipline, integrity, and purpose. Public affairs, too, must remain anchored in values: never about power, always about purpose. Trust is built not through transactions, but through consistent integrity.

10. Strengthen Federalism and Subnational Diplomacy

Policy may be shaped in Delhi, but it is tested in the states. States are where the rubber meets the road — where reforms touch the citizen, where investments find ground, where results are measured. Telangana, our Partner State, highlighted the role of state-level innovation. The 40-member delegation from New Jersey underlined how subnational diplomacy is becoming a vital new frontier of global engagement.

11. Empower Parliamentarians as Anchors of Reform

For reforms to endure, they must be anchored in democratic legitimacy. Parliamentarians provide continuity, consensus, and scrutiny. Their role goes beyond passing laws — it is about ensuring that reforms reflect the people's voice and survive political cycles.

12. See States as Laboratories of Innovation

Many of India's most successful national reforms began as state-level experiments. From digital governance to industrial policy, states are laboratories where bold ideas are tested. Encouraging state-level innovation and scaling best practices nationally is key to sustaining reform momentum.

13. Institutionalise Consultation Before Legislation

Policy works best when it is co-created. Structured consultation with industry, civil society, and stakeholders before laws are drafted prevents surprises, ensures smoother implementation, and builds trust. Consultation is not a formality; it is the foundation of good governance.

14. Encourage Domestic Industry to Lead

India cannot rely only on foreign capital. Domestic industry must move from seeking protection to delivering performance. Indian businesses must innovate, invest responsibly, and compete globally. The future belongs to industries that see themselves not just as beneficiaries of reform, but as champions of competitiveness.

15. Recognise Public Policy Professionals as Strategic Guides

Public policy professionals are no longer just advocates — they are strategic navigators. In many ways, they have become the "Chief Geopolitical Officers" of their organisations, interpreting global risks, building trust, and turning uncertainty into opportunity. The profession itself must be strengthened with training, ethics, and recognition.

16. Build Global Partnerships on Trust

In an age of fractured trust, India's diplomacy and industry must lead with predictability. Whether in trade, investment, or multilateral forums, India's most valuable offering is reliability. Trust will be the decisive factor in India's global rise.

17. Make Inclusion Non-Negotiable

Growth without inclusion is fragile. Bridging rural-urban divides, closing gender gaps, and ensuring digital access for all are non-negotiable for sustainable development. An India that leaves no one behind is the only India that can lead.

18. Accelerate Factor Reforms and Smart Governance

India's transformation depends on continuing reforms in land, labour, and capital markets. Progress has been made — from landmark GST reforms to the government's focus on deregulation and ease of doing business. States, too, are taking bold steps to simplify laws, modernise labour codes, and enable investment. The task ahead is to deepen these reforms, while embracing smart governance that uses technology to make regulation simpler, faster, and more transparent. The journey from red tape to smart tape is already underway — and must be sustained with urgency and conviction.

The Policy Pivot: India's Strategic Shift embodies these themes across society, economy, diplomacy, and the future. The Forum reaffirmed that India has both the compass and the conviction to walk confidently towards 2047.

As someone who has seen India's journey from cautious liberalisation in the 1980s to the bold ambition of Viksit Bharat 2047, I believe the essence of public affairs has never changed. It is about bridging divides, nurturing trust, and guiding policy with humility and integrity.

As PAFI turns 18, its mission becomes sharper: to strengthen public affairs as a profession, to foster transparent dialogue, and to provide thought leadership. Our task is to ensure that public policy professionals continue to turn uncertainty into opportunity.

In the end, predictability is what we seek, and uncertainty is what we prepare for. That is India's policy pivot. And that is the true spirit of public affairs — never about power, always about purpose.

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Views are personal