



## Flipping scripts

**BJP and INDIA bloc emerge clear winners in Haryana and J&K**

Contrary to pollsters' predictions, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has managed to retain power in Haryana by increasing its seats from 40 to 48 and vote share from 36.5% to 39.9%, securing a third consecutive term. The Congress's vote share also accrued a whopping 11 points to register 39.1% but its seat tally increased marginally, by six, to 37. The two regional parties catering to the influential Jat community, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) did poorly as their combined vote share fell from 21% in 2019 to 7% in 2024, aiding the Congress. But the BJP's astute social engineering, gaining support from non-Jat OBCs by propping up leaders from among them, besides its strengths in urban areas, helped it sail through. This is a remarkable achievement for the BJP which was saddled not just with anti-incumbency but also facing a resurgent Congress that was projected to win more seats. While the farmer and wrestler-led agitations helped the Congress to do well in rural areas, it was not enough to break the BJP's social coalition there or dent the BJP's urban strongholds. The grand old party's bugbear, a divided party leadership, did not help matters. The win also adds gloss to the BJP's central leadership that had taken some flak since the party's underwhelming performance in the 2024 general election. The Congress will have to go back to the drawing board to rework its strategy of upending the BJP in the Hindi heartland.

The results in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) were two-faced. The BJP increased its share by five points to 45% in Hindu-majority Jammu, helping it win 29 seats and retain its seat shares in the region. The National Conference-Congress-led alliance (INDIA bloc) won in four seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes. In the Kashmir Valley, the INDIA bloc changed the script from a decade ago by winning 41 out of the 47 seats and reducing the PDP to three seats. The INDIA bloc's ability to compete in Jammu and dominate in Kashmir was enough for it to win a decisive majority of 49 seats, a number that should have been higher if not for rebel candidates winning in a few seats. The BJP's strategy of isolating the mainstream polity in Kashmir and to use delimitation to manufacture a majority were not successful as the electorate clearly favoured the strongest opposition to it, in the Valley in particular. CM-designate Omar Abdullah has his task cut out and will strive first to get statehood for J&K. An empowered government that has the acceptance of the people, who participated in good numbers, should help the prospects of peace in the conflict-prone province. The BJP-led Centre must heed the mandate and allow the government to function and fulfil its promises.

## Deep roots

**Physics Nobel Prize acknowledges the diverse foundations of AI**

For an idea whose time has come, look no further than artificial neural networks (ANNs) and machine learning, the 2024 Nobel Prize in Physics seems to suggest. John J. Hopfield and Geoffrey E. Hinton have been honoured "for foundational discoveries and inventions that enable machine learning with artificial neural networks". The foundations of ANNs are rooted in various branches of science, including statistical physics, neurobiology, and cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence (AI) has become a household term today by drawing on such disparate insights. ANNs are networks of neurons (or processing centres) designed to operate like those in animal brains. In 1982, Hopfield, a towering figure in biological physics, introduced an ANN called the Hopfield network. Each neuron in this network is connected to all the others, and the flow and weight of information are not preferential to one direction. The neurons can process some input using Hebbian learning ("neurons that fire together, wire together"). The network as a whole was programmed to be analogous to a group of atoms, each with some magnetic energy. When "activated", the ANN could receive, for instance, a noisy image and dynamically denoise it by minimising the analogous magnetic energy of the system. Similarly, the Boltzmann machine was an earlier model for a spin glass - a material in which roughly half of atom pairs have their quantum spins aligned while the other half have them anti-aligned. This disorder causes the material to be frustrated and minimise its energy through more configurations than if the disorder was absent. Alongside Terrence Sejnowski, Hinton popularised the use of Boltzmann machines for cognitive tasks, building on Hopfield's work to enable them to classify data based on similarity or generate new patterns from old ones, again by having the ANN minimise the value of an energy function.

The ubiquity of AI owes much to the robust theoretical foundations laid by this year's physics laureates and many others, drawing on mathematical, physical, and biological insights that few could have imagined would pave the way for AI. Herein lies a sting in the tail for India. Due to decades of low funding, inefficient governance, and inadequate attempts to reconcile the needs of science with bureaucratic processes, blue-sky research has often been a casualty of sudden and often transient bouts of consolidation and reform. Resource constraints may require researchers to conduct research as well as teach, guide, and administer. But as this year's physics Nobel demonstrates, dismissing blue-sky research altogether is also to forfeit opportunities in technology that Indians may not even be aware of.

# Sunset for the U.K.'s coal-fired power, lessons for India



Kunal Shankar

The shuttering of Britain's last coal-fired power plant, in Nottinghamshire, is a milestone and indicates the hastening of an ongoing paradigm shift in energy production globally. But this has by no means been a frictionless transition, as it has been portrayed in much of the press. There have also been calls to replicate the United Kingdom's coal phase-out globally. While Britain's experiment could hold good for a few developed economies, a far more tailor-made approach would be required for developing and least-developed nations.

Britain's coal phaseout must also not be viewed as beginning with its 2015 Paris pledge to bring down unabated coal-fired power to zero by 2025. It must largely begin with the disastrous Great Smog of London of 1952, leading to the enactment of environmental legislation such as the 1956 Clean Air Act and other protracted processes over a 70-year period, which included geo-political, environmental, economic and social pressures. The discovery of natural gas in the North Sea in 1965 and the desire to move away from coal imports from the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, as depleting domestic reserves made mining uneconomical, thereby jacking up costs of coal-fired energy production, collectively hastened the transition away from coal, which began almost 60 years ago. The subsequent forced closures of about 20 mines in the mid-1980s by the Margaret Thatcher government, despite a year-long miners' protest, led to blight and inter-generational poverty that some parts of the erstwhile coal-reliant regions of the U.K. continue to face. This is not to undermine the urgency with which nations must work toward drastically reducing their carbon emissions over the next two decades, but to appreciate and emphasise the vastly different trajectories and plans required to reach this goal.

Let us consider comparing India with the U.K.'s trajectory to achieving net-zero emissions. At the 2021 Glasgow COP, India and China stood out seeking an amendment to the final declaration and having the phrase 'phasing down' and not 'phasing out' of coal introduced. India pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070 and meet half its energy needs from renewables by 2050.

### Cumulative emissions

India is the third largest carbon emitter, behind the United States and China, emitting about 2.9 gigatonnes in 2023, far ahead of the U.K.'s 384 million metric tonnes in the same year. But India's population is over 20 times that of the U.K. Moreover, India's per capita emissions were at 2 tonnes in 2023, less than half the global average of 4.6 tonnes and almost a third of the U.K.'s 5.5 tonnes in the same year.

An analysis by Carbon Brief that considered historical emissions of nations between 1850 and 2024 (till the closure of the Nottinghamshire plant), took into account their carbon footprint as colonial powers. This put the U.K. at fourth place, with emissions touching 10.4 billion tonnes,

which Carbon Brief said was 'more than most countries ever produced from all sources'. Britain built the earliest known coal-fired power plant in 1882 in the heart of London near Fleet Street. Coal became the mainstay in Britain, powering homes, industries and businesses for well over half a century until the mid 1960s. Coal employment peaked in 1920, employing 1.2 million miners at about 3,000 mines nationwide. About a 100 small coal-fired power plants dotted the landscape at this time, supplying power to nearby towns and industrial areas. And, Britain dominated coal exports in the early 20th century accounting for 30% of global exports in 1913. The U.K.'s peak thermal power consumption was in the 1950s and 1960s, when 90% of energy was generated by coal, before steadily shifting to natural gas, nuclear and, more recently, wind and solar.

### India's coal story

India's first coal mine, the Raniganj coalfield, straddles present-day West Bengal and Jharkhand. While it was established as early as in 1774 by the British East India Company (and this is why historical CO<sub>2</sub> emissions matter), this led to large-scale coal extraction from much of India's eastern and central States of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. India's first coal-fired power plant was the Hussain Sagar Thermal Power Station, established in 1920 in Hyderabad, during the Nizam's rule. It powered the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad well into the early 1980s. But it was not until 1956, when the Trombay power station near Mumbai was commissioned, that thermal power was truly heralded as India's mainstay. Moreover, the average age of India's coal-fired power plants is about 12 years, meaning they have a few decades before they could be decommissioned. While India has exported coal to neighbouring Myanmar and Sri Lanka, it has largely used its reserves for domestic power production. Of late, it has even been importing coal as power demand has been steadily rising.

India is yet to reach its peak coal production and consumption, which is expected between the years 2030-35, about 80 years since Britain reached this spot. About 70% of its energy output is currently from coal, accounting for 218 GW of installed capacity. It has more than 350 operational mines and about 120 new ones have been planned. A study by Global Energy Monitor estimates that these mines provide direct employment to almost 3,40,000 miners. This is likely an under-estimation as many from the agriculture sector are seasonal workers at mines. A Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) study estimates that India's thermal power plants employ about 4,00,000, people, again a likely under-estimation as informal employment at thermal power plants is high. This means that at its peak, about 10 years from now, the coal sector is likely to provide employment to well over a million people, which is about how

many miners alone worked in Britain more than a century ago.

Moreover, Britain's per capita energy consumption was almost three times India's in 2022, and this is despite the Russia-Ukraine war-induced energy austerity, and even as the world was at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having made the case that a direct comparison on coal phase-out between the two countries cannot be made, there are lessons that India could learn from the U.K.'s transition particularly in the past decade, and also ensure it does not make the mistakes Britain made in the 1980s and 1990s.

### Britain's transition

After committing to phasing out coal by 2025, when Britain had already reduced its use to a fifth of its energy needs, it pursued a holistic transition of not just the workforce of the sector but also the regions and communities that depended on it. Retraining programmes focused on sectors that required skills similar to those in coal mining and power generation such as engineering, heavy machinery operation and maintenance. This was mixed with early retirement and redundancy payments; new education and apprenticeship programmes, and community and regional redevelopment of historically coal-dependent regions, or impetus to set up new industries in their place. The sighting of renewable energy projects, particularly offshore wind farms close to major coal producing regions such as the North Sea off Yorkshire, and repurposing the existing grid infrastructure to transmit wind energy along with remodelling old coal-fired power plants for other forms of energy generation such as biomass in Drax, have helped alleviate some of the fears of job loss and economic slowdown. This is not to say concerns do not remain, but the gradual decline in coal, with growing awareness about climate change, and transparent, fixed timelines to transition, enabled Britain's coal phase-out. Outliers remain, like the protests at the now shuttered Talbot steel plant as the Tata-owned facility attempts to shift from coking coal to electric furnaces, but this might likely be a temporary closure.

While India has set itself a sufficient timeline of 45 more years to attain net-zero emissions, there has already been a steady and impressive growth in renewables capacity. But coal-fired energy use also has risen, and the country must begin working on fixing timelines on plant decommissioning, regional redevelopment programmes, and retraining of miners and power plant workforces, bearing in mind that India's historically coal-dependent regions are some of the poorest in the country, and have workers who have largely transitioned from agriculture to mining. Only a holistic, transparent, and early forward planning approach, would hasten a transition that is inclusive and just.

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# From solidarity to pseud, India's shift on Palestine



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India's position on Palestine, once a symbol of its anti-colonial ethos, has been diluted since the end of the Cold War and has dramatically shifted over the past decade. The alignment with Israel, the marginalisation of Palestine, and a focus on transactional diplomacy are not isolated phenomena but interconnected trends shaped by an interplay of domestic and global factors.

### Hindutva and foreign policy

First, India's evolving policy on Palestine is inseparable from the rise of Hindutva. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Sangh Parivar have sought to influence India's diplomacy based on a Hindu nationalist worldview. This ideological shift has manifested itself in a growing affinity with Israel, seen as a natural partner against, and apparently a victim of, the perceived threat of an 'Islamic terror' - a narrative deeply ingrained in the Hindutva discourse.

Historically, India's support for Palestine was rooted in its anti-colonial struggle, self-determination, and anti-racism. However, in 'New India', this support is seen through a communal lens, where the Palestinian cause is linked exclusively with the Muslim identity. The public discourse, fuelled by right-wing media, frames pro-Palestinian protests and solidarity as a threat to national security and 'anti-nationalism'.

Protests supporting Palestine are often met with crackdowns, arrests, and even charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Leaders such as Asaduddin Owaisi, who publicly voice support for Palestine, are routinely vilified, while students expressing solidarity are targeted. The state's tacit approval in delegitimising the Palestinian cause helps it align with Israel, not just diplomatically but also ideologically.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unscheduled stop at Mount Herzl to pay tribute to Theodore Herzl, the founder of Zionism, during his 2017 visit is emblematic of this ideological convergence. Under him, foreign policy is no longer framed by its historical commitments, but

In these times of great power politics, the legacy ideals of non-alignment and anti-colonialism are seen as baggage

by a new narrative that views Israel as a strategic ally in a shared battle against perceived threats.

### Values or interests?

The second factor driving India's shift is a transition from values-based to transactional diplomacy. During the Nehruvian era, India's foreign policy was deeply intertwined with anti-colonialism, including strong backing for Palestinian statehood. At the end of the Cold War, that ideological foundation began to give way to a more transactional approach, where narrowly defined interests took precedence over historical commitments. India-Israel relations are a product of this transition.

India's ties with Israel have flourished recently, with bilateral trade reaching over \$10 billion in 2022-23. Cooperation extends across sectors such as defence, agriculture, and technology, areas where Israel has become an invaluable partner. The renewed engagement is defined by the dual pillars of 'dehphenation', treating India's relations with Israel and Palestine as separate, and 'depoliticisation', enhancing cooperation by circumventing politically sensitive questions. To dephenate and depoliticise are political acts. This allows New Delhi to deepen its engagement with Israel while paying lip service to the Palestinian cause.

However, this shift towards transactional diplomacy is not unique to India. Globally, foreign policies are increasingly guided by constructed economic and strategic interests. In India's case, the West Asia policy has evolved significantly since the 1990s, with energy security, diaspora, and investments taking centre stage. The old Non-Aligned paradigm, which once governed India's position, is now seen as inadequate for pursuing these objectives.

India's approach to Palestine reflects this trend. As the government focuses on attracting investments from the Gulf and forging new partnerships, the Palestinian issue, lacking immediate economic or strategic benefits, has been relegated to the margins. The shift is stark when contrasted with Jawaharlal Nehru and

Indira Gandhi's India which saw support for Palestine as a moral duty.

### Ambitions and the great game

Finally, India's aspiration to emerge as a great power has also played a crucial role. While it is flirting to emerge as a broker in the Ukraine conflict, it is simultaneously abdicating its support for Palestine. India's alignment with the U.S., Israel's staunch ally, amidst the China-U.S. contest across various theatres, including West Asia is also a contributing factor. In these times of great power politics, the legacy ideals of non-alignment and anti-colonialism are seen as baggage. This is best reflected in the rhetorical shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy to multilateralism. While the operational essence remains the same, every rebranding has witnessed normative dilution. This is evident in India's muted response to Israel's war on Gaza.

Despite the extensive loss of life and destruction, New Delhi's reaction has been limited to (non) statements calling for peace and dialogue. The focus remains on strengthening ties with Israel, securing defence partnerships, and leveraging other sectoral opportunities.

The rise of Hindutva, transactional diplomacy, and India's strategic ambitions in the context of the China-U.S. rivalry have all contributed to the marginalisation of the Palestinian cause.

While official rhetoric may still endorse a two-state solution, the reality on the ground reveals a distinct shift towards strengthening ties with Israel and prioritising economic and strategic interests over normative commitments.

In this new era of international politics, India seems to have moved away from its role as a champion of anti-colonial struggles. Instead, it has embraced a path defined by narrow interests over values. As the global order continues to evolve, will India continue down a path that increasingly aligns it with power politics over principles?

As it stands, the 'new' international order will likely be the same game with just new players.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Exit polls, actual results

The spectacular victory of the BJP in Haryana has jettisoned all exit polls. Such a 'pre-result exercise' lacks proper analysis. Even

the exit polls for Jammu and Kashmir were quite off the mark. As all pre- and post-election exit polls vitiate the free will and mental peace of voters

respectively, the Election Commission of India may consider banning them in the interests of a healthy democracy. The people have reposed full faith in

the government of the day and its leader.  
**K. Chellappan,**  
Chennai

The poll results have spelt a

surprise for the main national parties, the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party, and psephologists alike. Psephology has lost its

earlier charm. In the last two or three elections, psephologists' predictions have been going awry.  
**A. Thiruganasambantham,**  
Coimbatore



## CACHE



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# Global Digital Compact: advancing digital innovation in a sustainable fashion

The GDC is a diplomatic instrument which focuses on the potential of digital technologies, with the specific intention to harness and regulate them for the common good. The GDC rests on the idea that digital technologies are dramatically changing our world

Neethu Rajam  
Krishna Ravi Srinivas

In the recently concluded 'Summit of the Future' organised by the United Nations, member countries adopted the 'Global Digital Compact' (GDC). This ambitious instrument is perhaps the first of its kind in the international arena focusing on the potential of digital technologies, with the specific intention to harness and regulate them for the common good.

## What is the GDC?

The GDC is not a binding law but a diplomatic instrument with a set of shared goals for governments, institutions, firms, and other stakeholders to bear in mind. Once there is greater adherence, the terms of the compact may become soft laws in each country.

Earlier, the UN helped pilot and legitimise two other compacts: the 'Global Compact' ("a voluntary initiative based on CEO commitments to implement universal sustainability principles and to take steps to support UN goals") and the 'Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration' (covering all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner).

The GDC rests on the idea that digital technologies are dramatically changing our world. While they offer potential benefits for societies and for our planet – by enabling Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – they also pose serious challenges and concerns.

## Realising the GDC

The GDC is a collaborative project with the objective of ensuring human oversight of technologies in ways that advance sustainable development. Building on the norms of international law, the Universal Declaration of Human rights, and the UN 2030 Agenda, among others, the GDC

proposes global cooperation in the governance of data and digital technologies

To meet the Compact's goals, UN member countries have committed to establish two panels – an 'Independent International Scientific Panel on AI [Artificial Intelligence]' and a panel for 'Global Dialogue on AI Governance'.

These goals include closing the digital divide, including everyone in the digital economy, improving access to data, and advancing responsible and equitable data governance. In the same vein, the Compact's principles are based on inclusive participation, access to data and digital technologies, sustainability, and trustworthy technologies that function within a free and competitive market.

## Digital goods and services

To address the digital divide, the GDC proposes "digital public goods" that will include open-source software, open data, and open AI models, plus adherence to privacy and best practices.

This is an acknowledgment of digital public goods' ability to drive social change as elements of a "digital public infrastructure" that delivers services. Such infrastructure involves the development and use of shared digital systems according to specific priorities and needs of stakeholders. To this end, the GDC envisions partnerships, including with private entities.

## What are the GDC's lacunae?

First, the extensive European experience with public-private partnerships vis-à-vis digital projects suggests openness within such partnerships is restricted between 'as open as is required' and 'as closed as is essential'. In other words, openness in the context of the digital public infrastructure may be limited by contractual requirements such as non-disclosure, confidentiality, and

protection of intellectual property.

Second, the GDC adds little to existing frameworks of internet governance but importantly it calls for digital technology companies to self-regulate to keep their users safe and their users' trust. This is not an optimum solution because self-regulation has already proved to be ineffective in practice.

Third, the GDC recognises interoperable data governance as essential to foster innovation and promote economic growth. But experts have noted that the increasing collection, sharing, and processing of data – particularly for AI – may amplify risks in the absence of effective personal data protection and privacy laws.

Fourth, the Compact stresses on achieving SDGs within a paradigm where governments and private entities track, collect, and analyse data to measure progress, while underscoring the importance of governing data in the public interest. For this the Compact proposes to give corporate entities more power in data and internet governance. However, it fails to emphasise the countervailing measures required to stave off monopolistic control.

## The GDC and the UN

In many sections the GDC makes wishful statements that bypass the complexity of underlying issues, assuming the comity of nations will be enough to achieve its objectives. But this stance may also reflect the UN's wish to remain a major player in governing technologies, including AI.

For example, in the 21st century data is oil: it is as valuable even as its use is embedded in extractive industries with polluting effects. Consider the ongoing explosive growth of generative AI models and the spheres, volumes, and varieties of data collected to train them. The GDC acknowledges issues in AI governance but has little to offer in terms of concrete

solutions or even strategies.

Similarly, the GDC does bat for "data flow with trust" but many countries have refused to accept this idea because it goes against the spirit of digital sovereignty. Some even have specific laws that require data about their citizens to remain within their borders.

Finally, the GDC links various objectives and proposed actions with the relevant SDGs. This is a welcome move because it reflects the view that digitisation should play a prominent role in realising the SDGs. At the same time, when the SDGs were adopted in 2015, the current AI revolution hadn't started. Given the unimpressive record of nations in realising the SDGs, it is doubtful whether an add-on Compact like the GDC could make a difference.

The UN's member states are striving to find ways to work with and regulate Big Tech while also asserting their digital sovereignty. The global governance of digital technologies thus is too complex to be captured or 'fixed' by a singular entity like the GDC. We need multilateral as well as regional negotiations to go with it to address jurisdictional, regional, and/or local needs.

By appealing to existing modes of digital governance as well as by combining SDGs with digitalisation, the GDC is positioning itself as an instrument of brainstorming rather than as a provider of roadmaps. Still, the GDC can help with capacity building and with South-South and North-South collaborations in the development of digital public goods. In sum, the GDC may not result in a paradigm shift in the world's governance of digital technologies but it can facilitate significant and tangible outcomes if member states take it seriously.

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## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian  
Uppendran

Recently we got a copy of the 1892 FA General English question paper of Madras University. "FA" stands for "Fellow of Arts." The question paper gives us an idea of the General English syllabus one hundred years ago.

I. (a) What is case? Name, and explain the functions of the different cases of the noun.

(b) Write down the plural forms of: father-in-law, genus, series, alkali, deer, phenomenon.

II. Explain and illustrate the difference in the use of (1) that and which as relatives, and (2) each and every.

III. (a) What is tense? Construct short compound or complex sentences, introducing correctly the forms: I was going, I want, I have gone, I had gone.

(b) Write down the past tense and past participle of sow, saw, smite, seethe, spoil; and the 2nd person singular. Past Perfect, Subjunctive, Passive Voice, of the verb call expressed negatively.

IV. Remark in explanation of the italicised portions of the following words, and give another example illustrating each case explained: kine, chicken, hillock, needs (adverb).

V. (a) "If a horse falls down. I miss the train."

(b) Supply the future auxiliary for each person.

(c) How would you recast the conditional clause, if it is to express a supposition opposed to the actual fact employing first that "the horse did not fall," and secondly that "the horse did fall," and what corresponding changes would have to be made in the consequent clauses?

(d) "The stream was very shallow. Consequently I could not swim in it."

Express the thought of these two sentences (1) in a simple sentence, employing (i) the expression "too shallow," (ii) the correlatives "so" – "as," and also (2) in a complex sentence, employing the correlatives "so" – "that."

(c) Convert the following – addressed by Brutus to Cassius – into the indirect speech, modernising where necessary:

"That you do love me, I am nothing jealous;

What you would work me to, I have some aim

How I have thought of this and of these times,

I shall recount hereafter, for this present, I would not so with love I might entreat you, Be any further moved.

VI. (a) Tabulate, with care, the clauses in the following sentence and describe their character and relations:

"He who hath pleased himself with anticipated praises and expected that he should meet in every place with patronage or friendship, will soon remit his vigour, when he finds that from those who desire to be considered as his admirers nothing can be hoped but cold civility, and that many refuse to own his excellence, lest they should be too justly expected to reward it."

(b) (i) "The King commanded his minister to see to the execution of the prisoner." Recast this sentence, employing a clause in place of the infinitive phrase.

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## THE DAILY QUIZ

### Sindhu Nagaraj

#### QUESTION 1

On this day in 2004, for the first time in this country's history, voters went to the polls to choose a President, selecting Hamid Karzai, who had served as the interim President since 2001. Name the country.

#### QUESTION 2

This 15-year-old activist was shot at on this day in 2012. Despite being struck in the head, she survived the assassination attempt. Identify her.

#### QUESTION 3

This dam, initially known as Boulder Dam begins to generate electricity and transmit it to Los

#### QUESTION 4

The Khmer Republic was proclaimed in this country on this day in 1970. Name the country in which this happened.

#### QUESTION 5

He was an officer of the Bengal Army and later the newly constituted British Indian Army. Born on this day in 1864, he was responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that took place on April 13, 1919, in Amritsar. Name the officer.

#### QUESTION 6

This international day is observed every year on October 9 to commemorate the anniversary of this specialised agency of the United Nations that coordinates postal policies among member nations and facilitates a uniform worldwide postal system. What is the day? Name the



#### Visual question:

Identify this film from the image given here. The person on whom the

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The year in which the post of the Chief Minister came into existence in erstwhile J&K. The CM post replaced this one. Ans: 1965; Prime Minister

2. The first Chief Minister of erstwhile J&K. Ans: Ghulam Mohammed Sadiq

3. The first general election in post-independence J&K. Ans: For the Constituent Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir

4. The first woman to be a Cabinet Minister in Jammu and Kashmir. Ans: Sakina Itoo

5. The seats reserved for Pakistan-occupied regions in Kashmir. Ans: 24

6. The number of times Governor's rule was imposed in J&K while it was a State. Ans: 8

Visual: Identify this person. Ans: Sheikh Abdullah

Early Birds: Tamal Biswas| Dodo

## Word of the day

### Comity:

a state or atmosphere of harmony or mutual civility and respect

Usage: There is a lack of comity between the political parties.

Pronunciations: newsth.live.com/typro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kə'mɪti/

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# Study uncovers surprising new 'spatial grammar' of gene expression

The findings can 'help filter and refine genomic tools and algorithms that predict gene expression,' which can inform new diagnostic and therapeutic strategies for diseases like cancers caused by mutations in regulatory elements, says Meenakshi Ghosh, a structural biologist turned clinical scientist

Sneha Khedkar

In his quest to understand how each cell of an organism interprets the same genome in a different way, researcher Sascha Duttkie wondered whether there might be any undiscovered rules of biology.

The human genome contains information about our development, functioning, growth, and reproduction, and all of it takes up only about 2 MB of space.

"That led us to wonder: maybe some of the magic is in the CD player, too?" Duttkie, an assistant professor at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Washington State University, wrote in an email. "In this analogy, the CD is our genome and the CD player is the regulatory machinery," and the transcription factors are important components in the player.

## Inspired by a toddler

Transcription factors are proteins that bind to specific portions of the DNA and control the rate at which the cell transcribes genetic information from DNA to RNA. The cell then makes proteins by "reading" the RNA.

Groundbreaking new work by Duttkie and his colleagues has shown that the fate of a gene being transcribed depends on the location of the transcription factor binding site relative to the location where transcription begins.

The results, published in the journal *Nature*, provide insights into how different spatial arrangements of the same transcription factors can have different effects.

The findings can "help filter and refine genomic tools and algorithms that predict gene expression," which can inform new diagnostic and therapeutic strategies for diseases like cancers caused by mutations in regulatory elements, Meenakshi Ghosh, a structural biologist turned clinical scientist, said.

"Watching my toddler destroy a puzzle by forcing in the right colour but the wrong shaped piece made me think: maybe we've been focusing too much on transcription factor binding sites and protein interactions, and not enough on how everything fits together spatially and in an even bigger picture," Duttkie said.

## Before or after?

The team investigated whether the arrangement of transcription factors relative to the transcription start site could influence gene expression.

When presented with the DNA, the activator transcription factor binds to it at



Transcription factors are proteins that bind to specific portions of the DNA and control the rate at which the cell transcribes genetic information from DNA to RNA. Representative illustration. GETTY IMAGES

specific points, the binding sites. These points are different from the transcription start site.

Team members developed tools to help them analyse patterns in the building blocks of the DNA that are typically found at the start sites. They subjected cells specially cultured in the lab to a form of RNA sequencing that could detect these sites in RNA. Then they identified the preferred locations at which transcription factors bound relative to an active start site.

The researchers found the binding sites for activator transcription factor NRF1 were located before the start sites and for factor YY1 it was located after the start site. Curiously, NRF1 is an activator whereas YY1 is both an activator and a repressor, a factor that stops transcription.

Next they checked how the relative position of the start site affected how the transcription factor behaved.

When they knocked down the gene that cells used to make NRF1, the cells transcribed less DNA only when NRF1's binding site was located before the transcription start site. If its binding site was located after, the absence of NRF1 increased the transcription rate.

## Natural genetic variations

These results were "surprising," Duttkie said. "If you look in textbooks or even Wikipedia, transcription factors are usually grouped into either activators or repressors. The fact that some factors can do both was considered unusual."

Organisms often carry natural genetic variations at the binding sites. The researchers assessed how these variations influenced the start of transcription. They analysed more than 4 million variations



If you look in textbooks or even Wikipedia, transcription factors are usually grouped into either activators or repressors. The fact that some factors can do both was considered unusual

and 80,000 start sites in mice cells and found opposing transcription outcomes depending on whether the variations affected the factors before or after the start site. For instance, only mutations affecting NRF1 binding before the start site reduced the transcription rate.

The researchers also synthetically inserted binding sites for six factors at different distances from the start sites in some DNA sequences. They observed similar position-dependent outcomes. For example, adding an NRF1 binding site ahead of the start increased transcription, consistent with its activator function. Inserting it after the start site reduced transcription.

## 'Spatial grammar'

Last, the researchers studied the relevance of these effects in human diseases.

They identified start sites from genomic sequences from 67 people and combined this information with databases that describe disease risk linked to specific genetic variants. Consistent with previous results, they observed position-dependent effects of disease-associated variants based on the location of the start sites and the binding sites.

"Uncovering this spatial 'grammar' was

a true eureka moment for many scientists like us who are working to understand how DNA encodes the instructions for turning genes on and off," Duttkie said, adding it would be "exciting" to explore how interactions between different factors affect this spatial grammar.

These results have "vast potential applications," including helping researchers identify and predict disease-associated mutations, called polymorphisms, that occur outside genes and provide a basis for therapeutic interventions.

"How many of those polymorphisms contribute to disease is currently largely unknown," he said. "The discovery of the spatial grammar may help to change that."

## The light of evolution

"This study is pretty cool," Ghosh said. "It adds crucial new insights about how positioning and spacing relative to [start sites] can impact the ability of [factors] to either activate or repress gene expression."

She added that the results can also improve our understanding of evolution and how organisms regulate gene expression to adapt to environmental changes.

Duttkie said he would like to understand more about how this grammar evolved and how it helped create complex organisms like humans. He quoted the title of geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky's famous 1973 essay to make his point: "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution."

(Sneha Khedkar is a biologist turned freelance science journalist. snehakhedkar30@gmail.com)

## THE GIST

Transcription factors are proteins that bind to DNA and control the rate at which the cell transcribes genetic information from DNA to RNA. The cell then makes proteins by reading the RNA

The fate of a gene depends on the location of the transcription factor binding site relative to where it begins. Cells transcribed less DNA only when NRF1's binding site was before the transcription start site. If it was located after, absence of NRF1 increased transcription

This spatial grammar was a defining moment for scientists working to understand how DNA encodes instructions for turning genes on and off. The results have vast potential, including helping researchers identify and predict disease-associated mutations

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+

## BIG SHOT



This NASA image released in 2015 shows Pluto's moon Charon just before the New Horizons spacecraft made its closest approach in July that year. Scientists using the James Webb Space Telescope have detected carbon dioxide on the frozen surface of Pluto's biggest moon, Charon, for the first time, research revealed on October 1 this year. The discovery, along with hydrogen peroxide, is hoped to shed light on how icy worlds formed and evolved. NASA/JPL

## QUESTION CORNER

### How ants free fall without incident

**Q.** Ants don't get hurt when they fall. Why?

**A:** The fall of a body is controlled mainly by the gravitational attraction of the earth.

The strength of the gravitational force depends on the mass of the falling object. A heavier object is thus "attracted" more than a lighter object.

This attractive force is opposed by an upward thrust, or resistance, that is offered by air on the falling body.

The strength of the resistance depends among other things on the surface area of the object. If the surface area is greater, so is the resistance.

When any object falls through the air, these two forces compete with each other.

In the case of an ant, the force of gravity is almost completely balanced by the resistance offered by the air. Thus the ant is able to land safely.

In fact, if there is a wind blowing, the ants may just float away. But if a cluster of ants or a sufficiently large ant is forcibly hurled at the



The strength of the gravitational force depends on the mass of the falling object. DAVID HIGGINS/UNSPLASH

ground, they will get hurt. This is how much we know from the laws and theories of physics about how ants fall through the air. Whether the ant actually gets hurt is another question entirely — and probably one that hasn't been answered so far.

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# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**The growth in the United Kingdom's population since 2023**

**1.2** in million. According to Britain's Office for National Statistics, immigration is the key driver of this growth. It is the largest annual percentage and numerical increase since comparable data began in 1971. APR

**The death toll in the Gaza Strip since October 2023**

**41,965** The toll includes 56 deaths in the last 24 hours, as per the health ministry, which said 97,590 people were wounded in Gaza since the war began. APR

**Number of senior doctors of R.G. Kar Hospital who resigned**

**50** The doctors on Tuesday tendered their resignations in a mark of solidarity with medics who have been on a fast-unto-death demanding justice for the deceased woman doctor. PTI

**Number of drunk driving challans issued in Delhi this year**

**18,478** The number of drunk driving challans issued till September 15 was the highest in the last three years. Numbers were 16,235 in 2023 and 2,320 in 2022. PTI

**Share of parents who wish to restrict tech usage in education**

**28** According to the All India Parent Survey 2024, parents wish to restrict usage and set explicit limits in order to balance screen time and manage other risks. PTI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## What does USCIRF report say about India?

What is the mandate of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom? How does the USCIRF designate a country as a 'Country of Particular concern'? How has the Indian government reacted to the report?

## EXPLAINER

G. Sampath

## The story so far:

The Washington DC-based United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on October 2 released a country update on India, flagging "collapsing religious freedom conditions". Among other things, the report highlighted how throughout 2024, individuals from minority communities have been killed and lynched by vigilante groups, religious leaders have been arbitrarily arrested, and places of worship have been demolished. The Indian government has rejected the report as coming from a "biased organisation".

## What is the USCIRF?

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government agency created under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). It monitors the universal right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in countries other than the U.S. Its assessments of countries are based on international human rights standards, and in particular, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The USCIRF is distinct from the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF), which is part of the U.S. State Department. The IRF also releases annual reports on religious freedom. While the USCIRF's reports could have a bearing on a country's image, the IRF's stance is more consequential for bilateral relations.

## What does the USCIRF do?

As per its mandate under the IRFA, the



In protest: Activists burn a copy of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in Kolkata on March 12. APR

USCIRF monitors religious freedom conditions across the world through travel, research and meetings with representatives of international human rights groups, NGOs, victims of persecution, and foreign officials with the aim of putting out a report every year, listing the countries that meet the threshold for designation by the U.S. State Department as a "Country of Particular concern" (CPC). It also shares another list of countries that, in its assessment, ought to be included in the State Department's 'Special Watch List' (SWL).

Countries that "commit systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom" would be designated as a CPC. Countries "whose governments engage or tolerate in severe religious freedom violations, but do not rise to the CPC standard of 'systematic, ongoing,

and egregious" would be included in the SWL. If the U.S. State Department accepts the USCIRF's recommendation and designates a country as a CPC, then under the IRFA, it has a range of policy options, including sanctions, to address such kind of violations.

## What does USCIRF's country update on India state?

The report, authored by Sema Hasan, Senior Policy Analyst with the USCIRF, says that religious freedom in India in 2024 has been on a "deteriorating and concerning trajectory". It stated that the Indian government, through legislations such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 for which the rules were published in May this year, and "through the enforcement of discriminatory legislation like anti-conversion laws, cow slaughter

laws, and antiterrorism laws", continued to "repress and restrict" religious minorities. It also details how "Indian officials have repeatedly employed hateful and derogatory rhetoric and misinformation to perpetuate false narratives about religious minorities, inciting widespread violence, lynchings, and demolition of places of worship." In its 2024 annual report, the USCIRF designated India as a CPC.

## How did India respond?

Spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs Randhir Jaiswal rejected the report, stating, "Our views on the USCIRF are well known. It is a biased organisation with a political agenda. It continues to misrepresent facts and peddles a motivated narrative about India. We reject this malicious report, which only serves to discredit USCIRF further." He further added, "We would urge USCIRF to desist from such agenda-driven efforts."

## Is the USCIRF 'biased' and 'agenda-driven'?

Its reports are backed by research and numerous citations sourced from credible domestic and international media, besides direct testimonies. In the case of the country update on India, there is no evident instance of misrepresented facts, with every claim backed by publicly verifiable documentation. However, the timing of this update has raised eyebrows, and opened it up to concerns such as those voiced by the MEA, about the report being "agenda-driven".

The USCIRF, as a body that works with the U.S. government, and notwithstanding its 'independent' status, is considered by many countries as a tool of U.S. foreign policy.

## Are the USCIRF's recommendations binding?

No, they are not. It is up to the U.S. State Department whether or not to accept them, and typically, calculations related to bilateral relations and larger foreign policy goals come into play.

## THE GIST

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▼ FOR MORE: <https://thehindu.com/India/USCIRF-report-on-India>

▼ Spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs Randhir Jaiswal rejected the report, stating, "Our views on the USCIRF are well known. It is a biased organisation with a political agenda".

## Why is the textile industry struggling to perform better?

What caused the slump in the Indian textile sector in the last two financial years?

M. Soundariya Preetha

## The story so far:

Union Minister for Textiles Giriraj Singh recently said that the Indian textile and apparel sector is aiming for a total business of \$350 billion annually by 2030, which is to generate 3.5 crore jobs. However, the industry went through a tumultuous phase during the last two financial years, casting a shadow on the possibility for 10% CAGR.

## What is the status now?

The size of the Indian textile and apparel industry was estimated to be \$153 billion in 2021, with almost \$110 billion contributed by domestic business. In FY22, India was the third largest textile exporter globally, enjoying a 5.4% share. India is also said to have the second largest manufacturing capacity, with a robust capability across the value chain. The sector's contribution to GDP is close to 2.3% (FY20) and 10.6% of total

manufacturing Gross Value Added (GVA) in FY23. About 105 million people are employed by the textile and garment units, directly and indirectly. For an industry that has 80% of its capacity spread across MSMEs and is sensitive to international developments as it is strongly linked to global markets, FY2021-2022 saw tremendous growth with \$43.4 billion exports.

However, slowdown in demand that started in 2022-2023 only worsened in FY24 with a slump in exports and domestic demand. This impacted manufacturing clusters severely. For instance, Tamil Nadu, which has the largest spinning capacity in the country, saw the closure of nearly 500 textile mills in the last two years. In Tiruppur, which is a knitwear production destination, many units saw a 40% drop in business in FY23.

## Why did exports slump?

Geopolitical developments and a slump in demand in buying countries hit the exporting units. This was exacerbated by

high raw material prices of both, cotton and Man Made Fibres (MMF), and the growing import of fabrics and garments.

The imposition of a 10% import duty on cotton has made Indian cotton more expensive compared to international prices. In the case of MMF, introduction of quality control orders has disturbed raw material availability and price stability. The industry is repeatedly demanding removal of the import duty on cotton at least during the off-season months of April to October. "This is an industry in which the stakeholders compete in the international market with countries that heavily support their domestic production capabilities. So, India needs schemes that run for at least five years and boost investments. Raw material should be available for the domestic industry at internationally competitive prices," says a spokesperson of a leading industry association.

## What are the other challenges?

Apart from policy issues, the industry is

also starting at disruptions in its traditional business systems. Direct retailing to customers through e-commerce is a trend that is catching on among garment and home textile manufacturers, with more startups entering this space. A report by Wazir Advisors notes that "(Foreign) brands are fast-tracking the adoption of ESG sustainability across the supply chain." They are defining their sustainability targets and want to source from vendors who will meet these targets. Further, there is a rise in comfort wear, loungewear, and athleisure as the emphasis on comfortable clothing has increased among consumers. "Even in the domestic market, much has changed in the way business is done. Customers in rural and semi-urban areas prefer to shop in multi-brand outlets or hyper markets. They do not want to step into outlets of less known brands," said Palanisamy, a basic garment producer in Tiruppur.

## What next?

The industry is looking at a \$100 billion investment across various segments of the value chain by 2030 to augment production capacities and meet the \$350 billion target. Labour constitutes roughly 10% of the production cost in the textile sector. The average daily wage of a trained textile worker is reported to be ₹550 a day. Unskilled workers earn about ₹450 a day. The industry has no option but to look at technology and skilling of its workforce to improve productivity and reduce wastages, say industry sources.

## THE GIST

▼ The size of the Indian textile and apparel industry was estimated to be \$153 billion in 2021, with almost \$110 billion contributed by domestic business.

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# 12 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE  
A VOTE IS LIKE A RIFLE; ITS USEFULNESS DEPENDS  
UPON THE CHARACTER OF THE USER.  
— THEODORE ROOSEVELT

## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Not a mandate foretold

Predictions of the BJP's slide after the setback of June 4 were greatly exaggerated



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

## TWO DECISIVE WINS, ONE SORE LOSER

BJP's historic third term makes its road to Maharashtra, Jharkhand a little less uphill. Congress should get back to drawing board instead of its outrageous conspiracy-theorising

THE ASSEMBLY polls in Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana took place together, but their outcomes are momentous in different ways. In J&K, there is a need to pause at the election itself before taking stock of the result. After all, this contest came after a decade of electionlessness in the erstwhile state and five years after it was stripped of its special status by the abrogation of Article 370 and split into two Union Territories. The Supreme Court laid down a deadline, the Centre respected it and the Election Commission stepped up to the challenge of holding an election, despite the surge of violence in the Jammu region. Now the National Conference's remarkable achievement — it has held together through great adversity and in alliance with the Congress, crossed the halfway mark — must take second place to the trust reposed in the power of the vote by the J&K electorate. Commendably, and in a constitutional democracy, hearteningly, the people of J&K have cast aside narratives of alienation and boycott politics and embraced a new consensus on political participation and electoral engagement.

In Haryana, the BJP has scored a historic third consecutive win in a state that is not a traditional bastion. Its victory, only months after the unambiguous setback in the Lok Sabha verdict in June, speaks of the party's ability to get back on its feet again and go for the win. For students of Indian politics, it is a cautionary tale — this country's politics retains its ability to surprise. But it seems that the story of the Haryana election is not yet over even after the votes have been counted — and therein lies a second cautionary tale.

THE CONGRESS party has taken a step that is as unprecedented as it is bizarre. It has become the first mainstream party to question an election result in an electoral system deservedly applauded for its streamlined machinery and impeccable credibility. That the Congress is imputing that the Haryana election was less than free and fair is outrageous. It speaks of a sore loser and, much more than that, an irresponsible stakeholder.

In a system in which candidates who have lost by narrow margins, or even by one vote, have not questioned the fairness of either the umpire or the electoral mechanisms, the Congress's unquestioned flailing is enormously disturbing and a huge self-goal. Rahul Gandhi's party needs to take a step back from its moment of defeat. It must ask itself if its extreme petulance is doing itself, and the people who vote for it, a grave disservice. As the leading Opposition party at the Centre, which also leads governments in three states, it belittles itself to refuse to respect the result just because it has gone against its ambitions and expectations. To make matters more absurd, two prominent Haryana Congress leaders, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, also the face of its campaign, and chief ministerial wannabe, Kurnari Selja, have conceded defeat, even as their party's central leadership challenges the result.

AS THE Congress conjures up spectres and focuses on conspiracy theories in Haryana, it risks losing sight of the task it shares with the National Conference in J&K. Here, the hard work of politics and governance lies ahead.

It will include arduous negotiations within the structural constraints. The Lieutenant Governor was given a role larger than the assembly by the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act 2019; recent amendments to the transaction rules have increased the already considerable powers of the Centre's nominee. Delhi, the only other UT with a legislature, has showcased the damage that can be wreaked by constant attrition between the elected government and the unelected constitutional functionary.

In an interview in August, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370, J&K L-G Manoj Sinha told this newspaper: "I will work towards achieving a fine balance with the elected government to achieve peace, prosperity and development... If this is the objective, then where is the possibility of a clash?" Omar Abdullah, who did well to change his mind on entering the electoral race — he had told this paper, also in August: "I have been... the CM of the (once) most empowered state. I can't see myself in a position where I would have to ask the L-G for appointing my peon" — will need to hold the L-G to his words. And as his ally, the Congress will need to help him to do that.

By giving in to its own worst instincts in Haryana, the Congress could be abdicating its opportunity in J&K, where sobriety and sagacity are demanded of it as a partner in the new government, which must contend with the people's high expectations even as it possesses truncated powers.

I MUST be hoped that the Congress will retrace its steps on the perilous path it set out on, on Tuesday. In Haryana, instead of quarrelling with the verdict, it needs to ask itself some tough questions. While the Lok Sabha verdict gave it hopes a leg-up, it may have overread it. It may have sought to counter the BJP's Hindutva appeal with a crude caste politics, that sought to draw us-and-them lines deeper, instead of building larger coalitions, and smudging identity politics, if not transcending it.

The Congress lost in Haryana, and has a chance to govern in J&K, and the sooner it gets down to its work in both states, the better for it. And for the BJP, the stunning Haryana triumph and the healthy showing in Jammu mean that the road ahead from the Lok Sabha verdict towards Maharashtra and Jharkhand suddenly looks less uphill.

## THE EXIT POLL SHOW

Come the next poll, be ready for the exit poll.  
Just remember it isn't the result

THE MESSENGER, ESPECIALLY when she has to deliver bad news to the powers that be, is used to dodging bullets. The soothsayer, for many, is an indulgence in the small hope that there is an order to life, luck and its fluctuations. The Indian pollster, in the light of his recent mixed record, has the worst of both worlds. Exit polls have had a poor showing this year. First, they got the largest vote in the world wrong — most of them predicted a clear victory for the BJP in the 2024 general election. Now, in the just-concluded assembly polls in which most pollsters predicted a comfortable win for the Congress in Haryana, the BJP's win has once again led to sheepish justifications from those who were confidently analysing their own projections as though they were final results.

Cauting political opinion is not an exact science. That doesn't mean, of course, that it's guesswork. Robust sampling, the right questionnaires and the sort of training interviewers receive can all have a huge impact on the accuracy of a predictive tool. And sometimes, despite the best intentions of pollsters, the voter can defy the a priori categorisation of their franchise. Even pollsters in the richest democracy in the world failed to predict Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016. In fact, given that exit poll results in India are usually declared between 36 and 72 hours before election results, it begs the question: Why go through the exercise at all?

The mixed results of exit polls haven't led to the exit of pollsters for a simple reason: They make for good TV. In election after election, "experts" treat the exit poll as a dress rehearsal for result day, analysing a tentative speculation as a final diagnosis, complete with prescriptions for the political players who ostensibly lost at the hustings. And the viewer laps it up — politics, after all, is as much a national pastime as cricket, and public memory is short. Come the next poll, be ready for the exit poll. Just remember it isn't the result.

HARYANA IS A small state. But the BJP's historic victory, for a third term, has significant consequences nationally. For one thing, this election is a massive shot in the arm for the BJP and a shock for Congress. There is a lot of local analysis to be done, and the mathematics of vote share-to-seat share conversion doubtless played a role in this election. Those kinds of tactical issues matter. But there is no getting away from a couple of large messages. The first is that predictions of the BJP's slide after the setback of June 4 were greatly exaggerated. Winning a third term in a state where the BJP does not have the kind of default cultural identification it has in Gujarat or Madhya Pradesh is no mean feat. It will give pause to those who were beginning to doubt the BJP's tactical acumen. To use Milan Vaishnav's phrase, the BJP-led Fourth Party System is still resilient.

By the same token, this defeat is a shock for the Congress. There has not been an other state election where it has, in principle, had as clear a path to power as in Haryana. There was momentum behind it. Even the BJP was conceding to challenges on a number of fronts: Corruption, unemployment, agrarian distress and urban dysfunction. To fritter this opportunity will hurt; it changes the momentum of Indian politics. It strengthens Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was beginning to look very shaky, and is indicative still of a large residual resistance to accepting Rahul Gandhi. It is a little unfair to make these judgements on every election. But confidence in the Congress's tactical judgements will be dented. Its impressive vote share suggests that Congress has the potential to consolidate anti-BJP sentiment behind itself. But its internal rivalries are still too close to the surface. Its two attempted master narratives, one on caste and the other on farmers, are not enough to consolidate an electoral strategy, and may even backfire under some circumstances. This is because both narratives fall prey to social determinism. They quite simply underestimate the churn in rural India. Both caste and class identities are more complicated. It is an unmistakable trend that communities can now vote for different parties. They also underestimate the new contradictions this

There is real agrarian distress. But the politics of those who claim to represent farmers has become a politics of preserving the status quo privileges of dominant farmers. In fact, insofar as there is a caste dimension in these results, the BJP has played the politics better, consolidating more anti-Jat votes. Congress cannot pretend that it can be the old Lok Dal, BSP and Congress all at once, without recognising that the material contradictions within the OBC and other marginalised communities are stronger. In the case of Haryana, perhaps, it conjured up the image merely of restoring the status quo ante in the form of the rule of the Hoodas, whereas the BJP reminded people of its promising early work in the Khattar administration.

It also has to be said, somewhat depressingly, that the election is also a vindication of the claim that Hindutva is consolidating as an identity for a significant number of voters: there is no penalty for communalising or censoring politics. This was a campaign in which Yogi Adityanath's shadow was present, as was the growing undercurrent of communalism. They may have not won because of this, but it is not a deal breaker. How much of a factor Gurmeet

social churn produces.

It is harder to build broad social coalitions, when your pitch on farmers still operates within a paradigm that privileges old dominant castes over others. There is real agrarian distress. But the politics of those who claim to represent farmers has become a politics of preserving the status quo privileges of dominant farmers.

In fact, insofar as there is a caste dimension in these results, the BJP has played the politics better, consolidating more anti-Jat votes. Congress cannot pretend that it can be the old Lok Dal, BSP and Congress all at once, without recognising that the material contradictions within the OBC and other marginalised communities are stronger. In the case of Haryana, perhaps, it conjured up the image merely of restoring the status quo ante in the form of the rule of the Hoodas, whereas the BJP reminded people of its promising early work in the Khattar administration. There is also another lesson: That leaders like Hooda who stake their claim largely on one caste will always be more vulnerable than leaders who transcend their social base.

The Congress has to ask whether merely banking on the distribution of constrained state resources, like public sector jobs or reconfiguring reservations, creates more non-zero-sum conflict than help forge broad coalitions. The BJP's logic of religious division is dangerous. But it will not be countered by sharpening other social divisions, without a forward-looking agenda. In effect, while people see that the BJP has not quite tackled agrarian distress or unemployment or corruption, a crude focus on caste is equally untenable. The logic of social movements can translate into agitational politics where there is a clear focal point. It is not sufficient to build a claim to rule.

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Ram Rahim Singh's release was, in the final analysis, is an open question. Clearly the BJP thought it would be important. But it is illustrative of the fact that a convicted criminal can both have a large welfare function and create social identities. How do conventional governance metrics, law and order, caste and class, economic measures, deal with this kind of complex social reality? It also makes drawing any simplistic conclusions from any election more difficult. But one thing is clear. This election will unfortunately only embolden Hindutva. It will be denying reality not to see this consequence.

The elections in Kashmir are a triumph in the sense that they happened. It is also a political triumph for the National Conference, a political party whose staying power is quite remarkable in the long and troubled arc of Kashmir. The questions that the election raises are forward-looking. First, when will statehood be restored? Without that restoration, there is a real danger of a Delhi-like situation. The proximities of the BJP do not give reassurance on this score. The second is whether the political divide between Kashmir Valley and Jammu can be bridged, given the near-total concentration of the Opposition in Jammu. The third question is whether the new administration can make a break with the past and write a new administrative chapter in Kashmir. It is not going to be easy, because lots of forces will be arrayed against its success. From a national point of view, the Centre should invest in the success of a National Conference administration; it can turn a sullen acceptance of the post-Article 370 situation into a genuine normalisation, which will be measured by a full restoration of civil liberties. But from a political point of view, the BJP will play spoiler, making governance difficult. If statehood is restored and this administration is even moderately successful, it will be a riposte to militancy and external interference in the state. So the stakes are incredibly high. But the only abiding lesson is: Never presume to understand the complexities of Indian democracy.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA

## READING THE HARYANA WIND

PM Modi's appeal trumps farmers and wrestlers' protests and other discontents

SECURING AN UNPRECEDENTED third term in a state that appeared increasingly discontented, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has achieved a victory that even the party itself may not have fully anticipated. For once, most pollsters seemed on the same page as they predicted a Congress win in Haryana, a sentiment echoed by some within the BJP itself. However, the BJP not only defied these predictions, but also posted its best ever result with 48 seats.

The win marks the first time a party will form a government for three consecutive terms in Haryana. It also signals a significant shift with the appointment of an OBC Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini, in a state long known as "Jatland." Saini, representing the 40 per cent OBC electorate, was elevated to the top seat ahead of the elections in March and led the party as its CM face.

Coming so soon after the Lok Sabha results, the win is a shot in the arm for the BJP, which had to form alliances to retain power at the Centre. It's also a testament to the party's robust poll strategy and machinery. Starting in January, the BJP started its campaign with "Modi Ki Guarantee" vans visiting villages to highlight welfare schemes and address grievances.

The win marks the first time a party will form a government for three consecutive terms in Haryana. It also signals a significant shift with the appointment of an OBC Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini, in a state long known as "Jatland." Saini, representing the 40 per cent OBC electorate, was elevated to the top seat ahead of the elections in March and led the party as its CM face.

Aware of the anti-incumbency faced, the BJP restructured its leadership, replacing Manohar Lal Khattar, a close aide of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with Saini, an MP and the first OBC to lead Haryana. This was part of the BJP's longstanding strategy to consolidate non-Jat voters, who form over 70 per cent of the electorate. The groundwork was laid in 2014 when the party surged from four seats in the 2009 assembly elections to 47, driven by the Modi wave, and appointed a Punjab khat as the CM.

The party remained on course despite a challenging performance in 2019, when it had to join forces with the newly-formed Jannayak Janta Party (JJYP) to form the government. This time, the BJP took a clinical approach, fielding 60 new faces for the 90 assembly seats to counter anti-incumbency. The strategy succeeded in landing BJP a windfall. The win also highlights Prime Minister Modi's enduring appeal in the state, where he retains strong loyalty despite the farmer agitation, the women wrestlers' protest and the Agni path scheme.

In hindsight, Congress, which drew its strength from these very issues and made

them central to its campaign, appears to have misjudged its strategy. The party continued to rely on its veteran leader and two-time CM Bhupinder Singh Hooda. A delayed ticket distribution process saw Hooda's camp securing over 70 of the 90 seats, causing discontent among those left out. The party remained divided, with Kurnari Selja, a key Dalit leader and MP, joining the campaign only in the last minute, largely limiting her role to her stronghold of Sirsa. Although Rahul Gandhi drew large crowds, his heavy focus on the corporate versus farmers narrative may not have resonated with the trading community and other upwardly mobile voters.

The results offer little succour to regional parties as well. While the Indian National Lok Dal-BSP alliance secured two seats, the BJP failed to win any. The Aam Aadmi Party, which had long eyed Haryana after its success in Punjab, also couldn't open its account. In the end, it won't be wrong to say that the Opposition failed to read the pulse of the people. And while slogans like "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan, Jai Pehalwan" stirred emotions, they failed to translate into votes.

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## OCTOBER 9, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### KERALA LANDSLIDES

AS MANY AS 15 persons, including three women and four children, were killed in landslides and floods in different parts of Kozhikode district. Landslides claimed eight lives near Koorachundu in Qailandy taluk, four near Kaviambara in Badagara taluk and two near Talavadi in Qailandy taluk. One woman was washed off by the flood waters of Kalkodi river near Mavelikkadu.

### RAM BHOOMI MARCH

A 130-KM LONG march by Hindu devotees started from Ayodhya to Lucknow to demand

from the government liberation of Ram Jammu Bhoomi, (birthplace of Lord Rama) after his last alleged pledge on the bank of river Sarayu to accomplish his mission whatever may be the cost. However, Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama and an ancient town of great antiquity remained apathetic to the oath-taking congregation.

### TEMPLE HANDOVER

THE PROCESS OF handing over the Gurum Dass Sarai, Tej Singh Samundari Hall and the Gurum Nanak Nigah to the SGPC will be completed today. R V Subramanian, Senior Advisor to the Punjab Governor, N N Vohra,

Home Secretary and the local officials had a meeting with four of the five head priests and senior functionaries of the SGPC.

### IAF UPGRADES

THE CHIEF OF Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal L M Katre said that with the induction of sophisticated aircraft into the country, the Indian Air Force (IAF) had a greater responsibility to ensure maximum utilisation of advanced and expensive hardware. Addressing a ceremonial parade on the 52nd anniversary of the IAF, he assured the nation that the Air Force was fully prepared to meet any challenge.



# THE IDEAS PAGE

## The victor's task

Apart from forming the government, which is the easy part, the National Conference needs to regain the political power to be able to once again set the narrative



HASEEB A DRABU

THE MANDATE OF the just concluded elections is decisive for the National Conference as a political party, could pose difficulties for it as it runs the government and is potentially disruptive for the politics of Jammu and Kashmir. J&K is a complex region whose politics has just become more complicated. Apart from the historical alienation of the Valley from the Union, politics within the erstwhile state seems to have become completely polarised.

The mandate is virtually along communal lines, which cannot augur well for either the state or the country. This election will go down in the electoral history of J&K as the one in which Muslims of J&K, who have never been a political category, have been made one. With Pir Panjal (Rajouri and Poonch) and Chenab Valley (Doda and Baramulla), administratively a part of Jammu province, voting largely for NC, the 75-year-old Dixon plan of dividing the state along the Chenab seems to have been resuscitated.

With the elected representatives of the entire region of the Jammu plains not being in government, it should not come as a surprise if the demand for a separate statehood for Jammu, which is often raised, becomes strident. Post 2019, for all practical purposes, Jammu has been virtually bifurcated from Kashmir, administratively. The geographical split mandate has distanced the two politically. This has only added to the fissures between Jammu and Kashmir, which at the best of times have been adversarial, if not antagonistic to each other. The two now share little else than a troubled past, having nothing in common; geographically, linguistically, culturally, ethnically and economically or in terms of religion.

The only option going forward is for the National Conference to once again become the pan-J&K party which it was till 1996. The last five years have shown that NC is a mass based, strong and rooted party even if it has a leadership that is centralised, and familial. It is inclusive party with a support base cutting across sunnis, shias, gujjars, pahadis and pandits. It goes to their credit that despite a grave situation, the National Conference has not lost a single leader to other parties. The Peoples Democratic Party, on the other hand, was decimated with its almost entire leadership deserting it. The sole seat of Ramban in Jammu plains that the National Conference has won should give them some hope and direction.

The BJP has, of course, not won; it hasn't lost either. It has consolidated its base in Jammu valley beyond what was expected. This despite the business community of Jammu, a very powerful stakeholder, having borne the brunt of abrogation of Article 370 in terms of loss of business; from rice milling to liquor business, their interests have been badly hurt. In this context, the Congress Party's political wisdom and electoral strategy is simply baffling. They were best placed to give BJP a run for their money and even beat them in Jammu. Indeed, till a couple of months ago,



C.R. Sankar

BJP was clearly struggling in Jammu. Yet they did not go for the kill. Rahul Gandhi chose to campaign in the safe seats in the Valley but not in Jammu.

On the contrary, the BJP put all the heavy political artillery to good use. Where the BJP's electoral strategy has failed is in trying to fragment the votes in the Valley. The big lesson for them from the election is that it is difficult to convert a demographic majority into a political minority. They must also go to the drawing board in light of the fact that in this election, in the Valley, it was not only relevant who people voted for but also who they voted against. The vote in the Valley was decisively anti-BJP. Organisations like Apni Party, Awami Ittehad Party and many others including independents have been decimated for being perceived as proxies goes to show precisely that.

Having suffered a shocking defeat in the parliamentary elections, Omar Abdullah must be relieved to have won both the seats he contested and delighted that his party has registered a resounding victory. But he must not be looking forward to being a titular Chief Minister with the elected cabinet playing second fiddle to an unelected appointee.

With its mandate, the National Conference with its elective cadres across the Valley will be expected to soothe and satisfy the "collec-

Omar Abdullah must be relieved to have won both the seats he contested and delighted that his party has registered a resounding victory. But he must not be looking forward to being a titular Chief Minister with the elected cabinet playing second fiddle to an unelected appointee.

tive conscience of Kashmiris". This can be done only by reasserting the primacy of the legislature and restoring or redefining the power of elected representatives. It is a first step in the journey for restoration of statehood, reaffirming the social identity and rebalancing the asymmetric federal relations that J&K had. A very tall order, indeed.

Apart from forming the government, which is the easy part, the National Conference needs to regain the political power to be able to once again set the narrative across the state. It might be worthwhile for them to ponder if a return to the past is the best way to the future. The contours of a new compact relevant to today's time merits collective social thinking.

The politics of Kashmir is, what historian Primo Levi once described, in the "grey zone". Situations in which individuals and institutions strive to survive through a mixture of weakness, compromise and hesitation, as well as with public displays of moral courage and dignity. This election has been about the latter. For the last five years, the majority has had its way — in the Parliament and in other institutions. In the just concluded elections, the minority has had its say, not meekly but loud and clear.

The writer is former finance minister of Jammu & Kashmir

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"With Israel showing no signs of heeding the countless warnings by the United Nations or the International Court of Justice, the onus really lies on Israel's Western allies to stop its forever war. They have delayed action for too long."

—THE DAILY STAR

## Divide and lose

Congress, NC tried to play identity politics. Modi government's performance, growing democratic consciousness, ensured that it did not work



RAKESH SINHA

THE ELECTION RESULTS of Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir tell two different stories and defy narratives. The reason is obvious. The assembly polls were held in two major elections after the Lok Sabha polls in which the BJP's tally was reduced. Since then, opposition parties, primarily Congress and its leader Rahul Gandhi, have spread propaganda against the BJP with great vigour. Yet, they do not have anything concrete with which to sway the people against the ruling dispensation. Propaganda can't change reality.

The Haryana election result is undoubtedly not a verdict for Manohar Lal Khattar or Bhupinder Singh Hooda. They may have been the primary actors, but the election was about far more. Had the BJP been defeated, it would not only have emboldened the Opposition parties but also encouraged them to initiate a fresh campaign against the BJP in general, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in particular. Although Haryana is a small state, it is a litmus test. The Opposition's delusions of a victory foretold proved to be a boon for the BJP. There is no doubt that the Haryana election was a referendum on Modi's popularity and the impact of the BJP's socio-economic programmes.

Four factors led to the BJP's victory. One, the nationalisation of the election diverted voters' attention from local leaders and factors. The massive welfare programmes created a strong, silent vote bank for the BJP, especially among the marginalised classes. They remain unmoved by the caste and religious appeals of local leaders. Women and youth are also among the beneficiaries of Modiomics.

Second, the social philosophy of the Congress has not evolved. The party has been unable to gauge either the sentiment or the impact of Hindutva on the Indian mind. Rahul Gandhi has been trying, with dedication, to resurrect an old version of secularism. The Congress is mired in a lack of clarity as far as culture, religion and the legacies of the nation are concerned. There is now no one in the party — like Sampurnanand or K.M. Munshi — to engage and debate with Rahul Gandhi on vital social and cultural issues. He is both an ideologue and a leader. This was not the case with Jawahar Nehru or Indira Gandhi.

Third, the centre of the Congress campaign was the home of its leader, Hooda. The BJP, on the other hand, works — literally and symbolically — through the

party. The message is clear. In a democracy, people can't be hostages to a dynasty. Literacy is growing, and so is democratic consciousness.

Fourth, as a result of its politics, Congress has become the party of a particular caste in Haryana. The BJP's outreach and ideology is more holistic. Moreover, Congress failed to reorganise or recruit its workers at the grassroots. Its success depends on fragmentation in society. Therefore, it allies with leaders and forces who galvanise caste, communal and regional politics. This is the Congress's folly. The BJP used constructive social programmes to enhance its social support base.

The verdict in Jammu and Kashmir is unfavourable to the BJP — but the result is also about a less obvious narrative. This was the first election after the abrogation of Article 370. The abrogation heralded a new era in the state. In the last six years, the state has experienced much-desired development. More than two crore tourists visited J&K in 2023. More than 70 lakh beneficiaries received Rs 6,000 crore through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). The enrolment of 1,80,000 children in pre-primary schools shows that the days of stone-pelting have ended. The empowerment of panchayats and local leadership is visible in the state.

Nevertheless, a lesson for the BJP is that it has rejected the BJP. The onus is not on the saffron party. Its policies and programmes remain non-discriminatory. The larger question is about the impact of religion on voting. Diversity is not only essential to cultural and social life — it is in politics too. Segmentation along caste or community lines can make democracy stagnant.

Political modernity requires thinking in terms of development and non-sectarian policies. The BJP's outreach to Muslims is a part of the democratic process but more important is Muslims' outreach to the Hindus in general and RSS in particular. For the last hundred years, the process has been one-sided.

The arrival of more and more people from outside the state — in diverse roles and professions, including business, government workers, etc. — was missed as a political issue by the National Conference. The importance of safeguarding against such a threat is a lesson for the BJP.

Haryana and J&K have demonstrated that the people are now at the centre stage — an elitist politics has no purchase. Every election adds a new dimension to Indian democracy. The biggest challenge beyond the verdict is to liberate parties from a narrow, divisive approach, which undermines the values of liberal democracy. The BJP's strength is its organisation and workers. The same is not true for the Opposition. Both in Haryana and J&K, Congress depended on dynasts and caste and communal polarisation. Will it learn or continue on a failed path?

The writer is a former BJP Rajya Sabha MP



SANJAY JHA

## Don't forget the voter

The BJP made that mistake in Kashmir, Congress in Haryana

I WATCHED WITH amusement and an indescribable Schadenfreude the palpable discomfiture of the BJP spokesperson as he tried to valiantly rationalise the predicted debacle of his party in the Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir assembly election results. Doing it is not easy. I should know. I have been there a thousand times before. But this was till about 9.30 am on October 8, 2024. Shortly afterwards, the unthinkable happened in Haryana. In a remarkable reversal of counting trends, the BJP suddenly accelerated ahead of its archrival Congress. The celebrated Indian voter, once again embarrassed all exit poll psephologists and gave a knock-out punch to the grand old party in Haryana. Jammu and Kashmir voted the National Conference-Congress in, after a 10-year electoral hiatus. Instead of a double whammy for the BJP, it ended up even sterner. But the Congress successfully completed its kamikaze mission.

The October 8 election verdict could have provided the reinvigorated opposition, led by an unusually resolute Congress, the second booster shot after a determined fightback in the Lok Sabha elections. But it turned out to be a mirage. Will the BJP see a potential crack, a cleavage that could lead to its potential resurrection after a dreary run? That is the billion-dollar question. We have now entered into a most fascinating phase of Indian politics after a 10-year stranglehold by a seemingly invincible Narendra Modi. The voter is becoming increasingly unpredictable.

A few broad strokes will best explain (the

granular analysis of the numbers will be in several pie-charts in every news medium anyway) how India, always a tricky conundrum, has surprised itself.

For one, PM Modi must be hopelessly nonplussed; his two big trump cards, the Ram temple construction and the abrogation of Art 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, which were permanent fixtures in the BJP manifesto for decades, have made negligible impact on the party's political fortunes. BJP lost the Faizabad seat (Ayodhya is located in this constituency), which has 78 per cent Hindu population; his two big trump cards, the Ram temple construction and the abrogation of Art 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, which were permanent fixtures in the BJP manifesto for decades, have made negligible impact on the party's political fortunes. BJP lost the Faizabad seat (Ayodhya is located in this constituency), which has 78 per cent Hindu population; his two big trump cards, the Ram temple construction and the abrogation of Art 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, which were permanent fixtures in the BJP manifesto for decades, have made negligible impact on the party's political fortunes. 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Opinion

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2024

A year after in Gaza

Sadly, a cessation of hostilities that can prevent a wider regional conflict is not in prospect

THE GAZA WAR that was triggered by the incursion of Hamas forces into Israel killing 1,200 people and taking 250 hostages on October 7, 2023, still rages. Normally, such anniversaries are sombre affairs marked by remembrances of one's lost and renewed hopes of getting the surviving hostages back home. Sadly, however, the occasion was marked by intensified bombing by Israel in Gaza adding to the tally of 42,000 Palestinians already killed, mostly women and children. Nearly all the 2.3 million people have been displaced. Gaza has been reduced to a dystopian, rubble-strewn wasteland due to the relentless bombing over a year. The war threatens full-blown famine conditions and a humanitarian disaster as aid inflows are down to a trickle. The only silver lining has been a temporary pause to allow polio vaccination for children. While Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to continue the battle till Hamas is "totally destroyed", he has opened a new front in Lebanon targeting Hezbollah, besides gearing up for a punitive strike on Iran for launching precision ballistic missiles on Israel.

Wars do not end unless the parties involved feel the need to silence their guns as they cannot achieve their military objectives. Alas, this does not seem to be the case at present although the top leadership of Hamas, barring the military and political head, Yahya Sinwar, has been taken out and most of the militant group's 24 battalions, each about 1,000 strong, have been dismantled by Israeli forces. Much of Hamas's vast tunnel infrastructure in Gaza has also been destroyed. Despite Israel's military gains over the last year — which resulted in a sharp shift in international opinion including protests in US campuses — Netanyahu has expressed limited interest in a ceasefire deal that would allow the exchange of 100-plus surviving Israeli hostages in Gaza for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. The prospects of a ceasefire are elusive as there is also no clarity whatsoever on who will administer and rebuild Gaza if and when the war ends. Netanyahu, who is politically backed by ultranationalists and religious extremists, has no appetite for a two-state solution in which Israelis and Palestinians will coexist peacefully.

The Israel-Hamas conflict will therefore continue unabated amidst dangerous portents of a full-blown regional war in which the US — with presidential elections less a month away — might be forced to be involved in. The US is not exactly a disinterested peacemaker in Gaza given its ironclad commitment to support Israel's right to defend itself by providing billions of dollars of weaponry. But the fact remains that the Gaza war could have ended earlier if America used its leverage over Tel Aviv to implement its three-phase ceasefire proposal in May. Taking its support for granted, Israel instead violated every red line that the US indicated — like desisting from invading Rafah — to minimise civilian casualties. Israel added fresh conditions while Hamas sought a permanent ceasefire and a higher number of Palestinian prisoners for every Israeli hostage released that scuppered the US deal. Netanyahu reportedly plans to force civilians out of northern Gaza and put Hamas militants who remain in the area under siege in order to force the release of hostages. The upshot is that the intensification of the year-long conflict is bad news for Gazans, who have been collectively punished for what Hamas did last October, and the anxious relatives of surviving Israeli hostages.

Tencent bid for Assassin's Creed needs a leap of faith

ONE OF the highlights of Ubisoft Entertainment SA's Assassin's Creed game series is the "leap of faith", where the hooded main character takes a stomach-churning dive from the rooftops and always lands safely in a conveniently placed hay bale. That appears to be what Ubisoft's long-suffering shareholders are being promised as the Guillemot founding family and Tencent Holdings Ltd. consider options including a potential buyout, after an 80% share-price meltdown in five years. But a safe exit is far from assured.

It's clear that something here is needed from the Guillemots, who began a partnership with Tencent in 2018 as a way to consolidate their grip and fend off predators like Vivendi SA. A lot has gone wrong since, with Ubisoft's enterprise value relative to underlying earnings dropping to the lowest among peers after a recent profit warning. Several game cancellations, flops, and the disappointment of *Star Wars Outlaws* show the firm struggling to keep up in a market where game development is prohibitively expensive and the fight for customer attention is getting tougher. The decision to delay the next instalment of *Assassin's Creed* to 2025 shows panic seeping into its most bankable property, which is suffering heavily at the Paris Olympics alongside other soft-power icons such as VMH SE.

A takeover or take-private would, in theory, allow Ubisoft the time and space needed to squeeze more money out of its classic franchises and cut costs; on a per-employee basis, it makes a fraction of the revenue of Nintendo Co. or Grand Theft Auto maker Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. But Tencent is no ordinary bidder in an increasingly protectionist world less willing to wade through cross-border deals, as Bloomberg Intelligence's Nathan Naidu notes. Tencent rival NetEase Inc. did manage to buy French video game studio Quantic Dream that year, but at a fraction of the value of a Ubisoft takeover and with less visibility. As Europe tries to narrow a tech gap with the US and China, Ubisoft may be viewed as a strategic player.

Another hurdle for shareholders being asked to place their faith in a potential takeover is price: What is this business really worth when so many headwinds seem to be structural as well as cyclical? The current market capitalisation of €1.8 billion (\$1.98 billion) seems seriously undervalued. Ubisoft's stable of brands: Taken together, *Assassin's Creed*, *Rainbow Six*, *The Division*, and *Far Cry* could be worth more than €2.5 billion, according to analysts at Barclays Plc. But there's a fair chunk of debt too, taking the firm's current enterprise value to €3.1 billion.

Hopes for a bidding war may run into the reality of a games market that is stagnating and a track record of poor management at Ubisoft, from costly delays and workplace issues to ill-advised NFT experiments. Ubisoft's concentrated shareholder structure may also be an obstacle: The Guillemot family held about 20.5% of net voting rights at the end of April, with Tencent controlling 9.2%.

As takeover speculation builds, the risk is that the Guillemots fail to close the credibility gap after years of value destruction. The message in their latest statement is that their focus is firmly on delivering open-world adventures and "games-as-a-service". But considering recent performance, that doesn't leave much room for error, and only racks up pressure to cut costs. *Assassin's Creed Shadows* faces a tough new release date next year with another samurai game due out around the same time; Ubisoft's live-service game *XDefiant* could itself struggle to survive as a new *Call of Duty* game approaches, according to JP Morgan Chase & Co. analysts.

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom. There's upside for Ubisoft if it manages to restructure in a changing industry that's targeting the top 1% of players with more premium products, reckons NYU Stern School of Business professor Joost van Dreunen. "When properly managed, intellectual property can last generations," he says. "We've seen turnarounds in gaming before, like CD Projekt SA's *Cyberpunk 2077*."

But investor frustrations haven't disappeared, and execution risk is high. In the real world, a leap of faith doesn't always hit the hay bale.



LIONEL LAURENT

Bloomberg

INDIA JOB MARKET

Union labour & employment minister Mansukh Mandaviya

When compared to its peers, India stands much better today, thanks to a series of government steps taken over the years

● CLOSE RACE

CAN TRUMP PULL OFF ONE OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR COMEBACKS OR WILL HARRIS CREATE HISTORY?

A historic US election

Politically speaking, it's still a close race overall. Numerous polls show that the difference between support for Trump and Harris is largely within the customary 3% margin of error. Also, in the US electoral college system, where a state is won as a whole, it makes little difference if one leads by one or two percentage points nationally. Ask Hillary Clinton; she would vouch for it.

As everyone knows, the US presidential elections are truly won or lost by a small number of swing states, or battlegrounds, where the candidates are separated by as little as one or two percentage points. In 2024, Pennsylvania, Nevada, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Michigan, and Wisconsin are such swing states.

Again, opinion polls frequently yield inaccurate evaluations of the outcome. Polls grossly misrepresented the popular vote at any point in the election year in 1948, 1980, 1992, and 2012. Moreover, polls underestimated Trump's support in both the 2016 and 2020 elections. Additionally, the error margin of 3% is stated, assuming that the sample consists of red and blue balls selected from an infinite population. However, humans don't behave, in any event, like balls. The majority of individuals never answer surveys. Additionally, respondents may lie to pollsters or alter their preferences. And pollsters must make educated guesses about the likely voters in their sample.

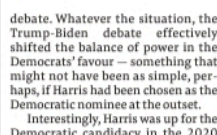
During his final hours as president in January 2021, Trump told his supporters, "So just a goodbye. We love you. We will be back in some form," perhaps in the vein of the Frank Sinatra classic "My Way." Can he pull off one of the most spectacular political comebacks in history, or will Harris create history? The contest is still open to anyone.

EVERY ELECTION is distinct and noteworthy. The US presidential elections are no exception. But the 2024 election will be the unique. In fact, Kamala Harris is the first woman of colour, second person of colour (after Barack Obama), and second woman (after Hillary Clinton) to be a major party nominee for President. Clearly, more significant history will be made if Harris prevails in the election. However, there are numerous more unique characteristics of the 2024 race. The manner in which Harris replaced President Joe Biden as the Democratic Party's nominee is a story worthy of a political thriller. Biden was increasingly trailing Republican nominee Donald Trump in the race between the two elderly men. Then came the historic June 27 Trump-Biden presidential debate in Atlanta, in which Biden had an abject performance that turned the race upside down and ultimately led to his decision to withdraw from consideration for re-election. A few minutes into the debate, in fact, there was a deep, wide, and extremely aggressive panic in the Democratic Party, and some within the party started demanding for President Biden to withdraw from the presidential campaign right then.

Though incredibly unexpected, Biden's withdrawal was a landmark moment in US history. As many experts claim, the consequences of presidential debates are generally negligible. Whatever the case, there has never been a presidential debate in American history that has been as significant as this one, perhaps. But one would wonder how Biden, arguably one of the most seasoned politicians alive, could perform so poorly in a prescheduled presidential debate. Whatever the reason, it is unique in that nearly every delegate chosen to support Biden in the primaries is now supporting Harris, even though she was not included on any primary ballot. It's possible that Harris was also fortunate in that she didn't have to undergo a party nomination to succeed Biden, as other

debate. Whatever the situation, the Trump-Biden debate effectively shifted the balance of power in the Democrats' favour — something that might not have been as simple, perhaps, if Harris had been chosen as the Democratic nominee at the outset. Interestingly, Harris was up for the Democratic candidacy in the 2020 election. But even before the primaries, on December 3, 2019, she pulled out of the contest. A few candidates competed in the brief Democratic primaries in 2024, but Harris was not among them. Therefore, one can question what Harris' chances of winning the Democratic nomination would have been in the event of a full-fledged primary, as there was in 2020. And what would have been the outcome of the opinion polls on her chances if she had won a regular Democratic primary?

This year, however, is unique in that nearly every delegate chosen to support Biden in the primaries is now supporting Harris, even though she was not included on any primary ballot. It's possible that Harris was also fortunate in that she didn't have to undergo a party nomination to succeed Biden, as other



ATANU BISWAS

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contenders swiftly jumped at the chance to support her before the Democratic National Convention. That elevated Harris to the status of a formidable contender who might win the race in the end. Perhaps this wouldn't have been the case if Biden's extremely dramatic exit had not occurred during the nomination process.

And then there is Trump, who can never withdraw despite having been impeached twice and being found guilty of 34 felonies. Currently, he is facing multiple legal cases and is being accused of lying on numerous occasions. But even after losing the 2020 election, he retained firm control over the Republican Party. It should be remembered that he enjoys the support of almost half of the US, regardless of the results of the November 5 election.

In fact, as many believe, Trump may benefit if the election is taken to court. Currently, six of the nine justices on the US Supreme Court were chosen by Republican presidents. Furthermore, it's widely discussed in American society how local judges are to the president and the party that appointed them.

The Trump-Biden debate effectively shifted the balance of power to the Democrats—something that might not have been as simple if Kamala Harris had been chosen as the nominee

New beginnings and old complexities

President Muizzu's India visit will likely pave the way for more cooperation. But for all pragmatic purposes, the Maldives will continue to balance India and China



HARSH V PANT

Vice-president for studies and foreign policy, ORF, Delhi

A YEAR AFTER being elected President of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu is on his first official state visit to India. From his early days, the Muizzu administration was keen on reducing dependence on India, diversifying relations with others, and expanding cooperation with China. Muizzu also went on to call India a "bully" and for long defended his party cadres who hurled racist remarks against India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In this regard, the visit aims to infuse some fresh energy into bilateral relations. It has offered mutual benefits for both countries, with the Maldives receiving much-needed financial relief and India making further inroads into the country. This visit will likely pave the way for more cooperation between both nations. That said, for all pragmatic purposes, the Maldives will continue to balance India and China.

When President Muizzu got elected to power after his party's prolonged "India Out" campaign, his administration had hoped that China would offer new loans, restructure existing ones, and help fulfil their campaign promises through funds and investments. In January, when Muizzu visited China for his first state visit, he signed 20 MoUs and upgraded the relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership. He also joined the Global Security Initiative and agreed to revive the free trade agreement (FTA) and the Belt and Road Initiative projects. In the following weeks, he signed a defence pact and permitted the docking of a spy vessel in Malé. He also let China establish an agricultural zone on the

Uthuru Thila Falhu Island where India is building a naval harbour, and also contracted a Chinese firm to upgrade the Kaddhoo airport where Indian technicians are operating a helicopter. The reason, apart from ideological leanings, was that the Maldives' economy was already in a bad state. Even in its initial meetings, Muizzu had requested Indian and Chinese envoys to restructure debts. Structural issues, maturing debts from private creditors and China, Muizzu's initial investment promises, and subsequent political appointments exacerbated the crisis. As of March, the Maldives debt-to-GDP ratio was 110%, and as of September the foreign reserves were \$360 million (worth a month's import). But despite economic hardships and the continuous wooing of China, Beijing is hesitant to offer new loans and slow in debt restructuring. Today, the Maldives owes around \$1.1 billion (of \$8 billion total debt) to China.

On the other hand, India's response and accommodative policy like high-level engagements, replacing military personnel with technicians, increased development assistance, and revised export quotas, motivated Malé to approach India again. The visit of Moosa Zameer, the then Maldivian foreign minister, in May indicated the rethink. The momentum was sustained with back-to-back high-level visits, followed

by India rolling over two treasury bills worth \$100 million. India also offered over \$29 million in loans in early 2024, despite difficulties in the relationship. Furthermore, with 65% of Indian loans yet to be disbursed the Maldives saw engagement with India as an imperative, paving the way for the ongoing visit.

The visit has been mutually beneficial, especially with the signing/renewal of MoUs, adapting the Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership vision, and India's offer of financial assistance. Directed by the vision document, both nations will increase political engagements, development partnerships, capacity-building, people-to-people relations, business engagements, and digital connectivity.

For the economically struggling Maldives, India's currency swap of \$750 million (\$400 million and \$300 billion) is a huge relief. On the Maldives' request, India has also agreed to negotiate the FTA and discuss trading in local currencies. With India being one of the top sources of exports to the Maldives, the FTA is likely to benefit the latter the most. Furthermore, the possibility of trading in local currency with India's credit line and the FTA will make trade easier and cheaper for the Maldives. It will also reduce the burden of generating and using foreign reserves.

For India, the visit has created additional leverage. It has managed to

Delhi has managed to retrieve several initiatives, sectors, and projects that Muizzu wanted to use to move away from India

retrieve several initiatives, sectors, and projects that Muizzu wanted to use to move away from India. For instance, India will be helping the Maldives with health cooperation, defence platforms, surveillance capacities, information-sharing, and hydrographic surveying. Similarly, India has expressed interest in developing Thilafushi port, investing in the economic gateway project, and extending the Greater Male Connectivity bridge. India will also now have a consulate in Addu — the southernmost atoll of the Maldives — which will be crucial for development and strategic purposes. This initiative was also highly politicised by Muizzu's party when in opposition.

In this regard, the visit has put India-Maldives relations on the right track. India's timely assistance has generated an image of being a first responder and a reliable partner, and this will compel Muizzu to be more sensitive to India's concerns and interests, thereby paving the way for more cooperation. That said, the Maldives will continue to exercise agency to further its security, strategic, and economic interests. It realises that China has a potential to invest, and their restructuring will be crucial for the Maldives to escape a crisis. As a result, realpolitik and agency will be at the heart of the Maldives' foreign policy — and as India-China competition intensifies, it will explore ways to maximise its benefits and interests from both countries.

Co-authored with Aditiya G Shivamurthy, associate fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Illusory growth**  
India's per capita income has seen substantial growth, reaching \$2,730 in 2024, with projections of an additional \$2,000 increase over the next five years, as announced by a Union Minister. However, while these figures may seem encouraging, they mask deeper concerns such as the nation's persistent economic inequality and the neglect of human development indicators. Data from the World Bank shows that India's per capita income rose from \$711 in 2005 to \$1,351 by 2010, and continued to grow. Despite these gains, India's global ranking remains low at 136th in per capita income. The World Bank's analysis also highlights the long road ahead for India to catch up with developed nations. It estimates that at the current growth rate, India will take 75 years to reach just a quarter of the United States' income level. While India's leadership aims to transform the country into a developed economy, replicating the rapid growth of countries like South Korea remains a formidable task. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

**Losing out on FDI**  
Apropos of "Foreign capital for growth" (FE, October 7), the decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) over the past few years bodes ill for India's economic growth and makes the 7.2% GDP growth number unsustainable. Instead of constantly patting itself on the back, the government must try to find out why India is losing out on FDI despite the many advantages, and take measures to plug the deficiencies in attracting foreign inflows. There is something on the minds of foreign investors that prevents them from investing in India. The sooner we find out, the better. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra



THE ASIAN AGE

9 OCTOBER 2024

Subhani

Complacency, factionalism in Cong aided BJP Haryana win

The decisive victory of the BJP in the Haryana elections hitting a hat-trick points to the ability of the saffron party to quickly reorganise itself even in the face of adversity and come up tops while that of the INDIA alliance in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir once again proves why it is important to put up a united front against a powerful opponent, especially on an uneven playground.

The BJP had sensed the trouble anti-incumbency could bring to its electoral fortunes as it had been in power for two consecutive terms. Knowing this, it decided to change its chief minister midway in the second term. There is nothing new in this as the party has experimented with the efficacy of this strategy in several states and found successful. Credit must be given to Mr Nayab Singh Saini as chief minister who has turned the tables on a re-emergent Congress after the Lok Sabha election. That Mr Saini was able to bring together all the non-Jat sections of the population and make them side with his party irrespective of the serious issues that plague their lives has been the factor that helped the BJP coast to victory.

The Congress has, over a long period of time, perfected the art of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, and Haryana proved to be just another example. The ground was perfectly prepared for an Opposition party to have a good harvest given the people's disagreement with the ruling party owing to unemployment,

price rise, farmers' unrest and the governments' actions which made pockets of the population turn against the party which included the treatment of wrestlers who hailed from the state. Every single vote they had pointed to an unequalled Congress victory in the election.

However, a complacent party leadership in the state began to play its favourite game — that of factionalism. The party high command was either blissfully ignorant of what was going on in the state even if it is not far from the Central headquarters or was plainly incapable of comprehending its potential impact. It is time the Congress leadership realised that politics is a 24x7 affair.

An interesting takeaway from the election was the people's disenchantment with smaller players, such as the INLD, JJP and even the new entrant AAP, which have practically been decimated. An interesting takeaway from the election was the people's disenchantment with smaller players, such as the INLD, Jannayak Janta Party and even the new entrant AAP, which have practically been decimated. This, along with the fact that the difference in vote share between the BJP and the Congress is less than one per cent, points to the fact that Haryana has returned to a two-party system which prevailed in the state for long ruled as it had been by either the Congress or a non-Congress party. Also, that the BJP has replaced all other players and has firmly rooted itself in the state's polity.

The result in Jammu and Kashmir Assembly elections, the first after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution, has been on predicted lines. The National Conference and the Congress will be in a position to form government on the strength of popular support in Kashmir Valley while the BJP has proved once again that it has been able to perch itself comfortably in Jammu division. The INDIA bloc can, at least for the time being, feel comfortable even if the BJP can add another five members to its tally through the nomination route, effectively taking the number needed to run the government to 46 in a 96-member house. That the PDP has offered to support the NC-Congress combine if required can ward off any immediate threat.

Now that the people have spoken their mind, the remaining agenda for the Union Territory is the restoration of its statehood. The Indian State owes it to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and there is no justification in delaying it further. It is time to let them be part of the Union of India with all the rights and privileges of the citizens of the republic.

Cong fatal flaws exposed by Haryana shock defeat



Shikha Mukerjee

The Congress, by handing the BJP a walkover in Haryana with a third term in power and the status of representing the vulnerable Hindus in Jammu as well as in Kashmir, has given the Narendra Modi-led party the morale booster it needed after the shock of the 2024 Lok Sabha election. In doing so, the Congress has been irresponsible and failed in fulfilling its role as the leader and biggest stakeholder of the anti-BJP Opposition and its Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance.

As the challenger, the Congress has not failed to disappoint, succeeding in snatching defeat from victory in the Jammu and Kashmir, the National Conference, winning 42 seats in both parts of the Union territory, securing the seat of the largest single party, means it is mandated to represent the people as a whole. It undermines to an extent the BJP's claims to be the guardian angel of Jammu, though not its championship of the Hindu minority in its relentless drive to advocate divisive majoritarian politics.

The Congress' abysmal performance, which confirms that there are fatal flaws in its organisation and leadership that, going forward, could have disastrous consequences in Maharashtra and in Jharkhand, where Assembly elections will be held soon. The seat-sharing discussions that seemed to have reached the finalisation stage in Maharashtra between the Congress, the Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress and the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena will have to be renegotiated.

A weaker Congress after its shocking defeat in Haryana means that it can't push as hard as it should to pin the Modi government down on making good on the promise to restore statehood to J&K

shocking defeat in Haryana means that it cannot push as hard as it should to pin the Narendra Modi government down on making good on the promise to restore statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP's win, on the contrary, enables it to push forward with its agenda of unravelling a Uniform Civil Code, as its governments in Uttar Pradesh and Assam have promised to do at the earliest. It emboldens the BJP to float the Supreme Court's orders banning bulldozer politics as a form of punishment on vulnerable communities, targeting the Muslim minority. It allows the Modi government to go ahead with the communal divide by the National Register of Citizens by making it an issue in the Jharkhand election by raking up fears among tribals of being swamped by illegal Muslim Rohingia immigrants. It enables the Centre to backstab on its promises to the farmer community on Minimum Support Prices that was a fundamental demand of the farmers' protest, it allows the Modi government to divert attention through the newly unveiled schemes for improving the farm and animal husbandry sectors. The list is just the starters in a much larger menu of changes that the BJP would like to implement to advance its hegemonist agenda.

A more confident Narendra Modi and an aggressive BJP will be a much tougher proposition for the INDIA bloc, of which the Congress is the biggest stakeholder. The party has to decide if it has the appetite and the stamina to carry on a no-holds-barred fight up to the 2029 Lok Sabha elections.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist in Kolkata

After the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress' failure to add to the tally of the INDIA bloc by winning in Haryana and doing well in Jammu and Kashmir equals weakening the collective capacity of the bloc to make the BJP bleed in Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi and Bihar, where elections are due. The Congress by its actions has proved that it is neither a strong challenger to the BJP on its own nor a dependable partner in an electoral coalition with regional parties at the state level.

At stake are issues critical to the idea of India's democracy, its secularism and the dislocation of its trajectory of pro-poor policies and overall development. For starters, a weaker Congress after its

LETTERS  
AVOIDABLE TRAGEDY

We definitely appreciate the sincerity of Tamil Nadu CM M.K. Stalin's anguish over the death of spectators at Marina Beach during the air show on Sunday the 6th, but at the same time, being a senior leader, he should have foreseen the tragedy. Since the deaths were caused due to dehydration, the state government should have arranged for water booths at many points. Moreover, this event was planned at a most inappropriate time, when the sun is at its acme. Like in 2003, it should take place around 4 pm. The Southern Railways, too, goofed up by not running more trains from Velachery and back, as they did during cricket matches.

Narayanan Mahadevan  
Chennai

EXIT POLLS WRONG

THE CONTEST in Haryana seems to have gone differently from what the exit polls predicted. The BJP has maintained a significant lead since the counting of EVMs began, and continued to lead on 49 seats for the last five hours of counting. The exit polls had predicted a majority for the Congress. The BJP having managed a historic third straight win in Haryana, it is a vindication of its tried and tested electoral arithmetic, consolidating all non-Jat votes.

Sankar Paul  
Chakdaha, West Bengal

REFORM AGRI POLICY

A STUDY by the Reserve Bank of India reveals that when the prices of onions, tomatoes, and potatoes increase by one rupee, farmers receive only 36, 33, and 37 paise, respectively, highlighting inefficiencies in agricultural marketing. The RBI has urged the government to strengthen agricultural marketing, promote e-commerce, and support private markets, as rising food prices are driving inflation. In contrast, pulses like gram, moong, and arhar give farmers a larger share, between 65 to 75 paise per rupee increase, due to lower maintenance costs. A similar pattern is seen in the dairy sector, where cooperative organisations allow milk farmers to earn 65-70 paise per rupee increase. These findings underscore the need for better cold chain infrastructure and policy adjustments to ensure fair returns for farmers.

Amarnjeet Kumar  
Hazratnagar

THE ASIAN AGE

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The Middle East is precariously poised on the brink of a full-blown regional war that has been widely feared for months. Israel's assassination of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders and an Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander as well as its invasion of Lebanon put Iran in a bind, leaving it with little choice but to respond. And respond it did by raining a barrage of missiles over Israel. The aim was to send a clear message that it had the capability and reach to punish Israel for its murderous actions and re-establish a level of deterrence. It was also designed to push the US to rein in Israel.

Tehran's hand was forced by Israel's unrelenting aggressive actions even though Iranian leaders repeatedly stated they had no interest in entering conflict which they saw as a trap by Tel Aviv to widen the war. Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated this after the missile attack. At a press conference in Dubai, he declared Iran did not seek a war. It had shown patience but that emboldened Israel to act with greater impunity.

In remarks to a Cabinet meeting, he disclosed that Western powers had urged Tehran to exercise restraint after the assassination of Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh, holding out the promise of a ceasefire in Gaza. The truth didn't happen while Israel's continuing military offensive in Gaza was met by silence by those calling for restraint. He warned of a

tougher response if Israel attacked Iran but stressed the need to prevent the crisis from escalating. Israel of course threatened retaliation for Iran's ballistic missile attack with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying Tehran made a big mistake and will "pay for it". While Tel Aviv is reported to be assessing several military options, the region is on a knife-edge. This dangerous situation prompted UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to call for efforts to prevent an all-out war, which would have "profound and devastating consequences" for the region. He held an emergency UN Security Council meeting that "the raging fires in the Middle East were fast becoming an inferno".

Can a full-scale conflict be averted in the Middle East? One scenario is that tit-for-tat actions between Iran and Israel take place in a measured way while the international community weighs in decisively to ensure that confrontations between the two foes remains limited. There is indication such efforts are underway. The role of the US is obviously crucial. Although Washington has declared its backing for Israel's right to militarily respond to Tehran's attack and said it is considering sanctions against Iran, President Joe Biden is urging Tel Aviv to "respond in proportion".

The US and its G7 allies have cautioned Mr Netanyahu against an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, which would mark a major escalation. Mr

Biden has made it clear he will not support an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites. As for Israel targeting Iran's oil facilities, Mr Biden first said he had discussed that possibility. But later he claimed he had advised Israel to consider "other alternatives" to oilfield strikes.

Such an attack would shake the global energy market and trigger an oil price surge. Prices have already started rising especially after Mr Biden's earlier remarks. Would Washington really want American consumers to face higher oil prices at election time in the US? Disruption in oil supplies would have global repercussions. Half of China's oil imports, for example, come from the Middle East, including from Iran.

The other scenario is of a massive attack by Israel followed by equally strong retaliation by Iran, which descends into a no-holds-barred military conflict. It is possible that Israel's "proportionality" from its Western benefactors including a lame-duck Biden administration are spurred by the Israeli leadership. Emboldened by assassinations of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders and "weakening" of the axis of resistance, Israel may now want to deliver a "decisive blow".

For its part, Tehran has reportedly conveyed to the US that while it doesn't seek war, "the phase of unilateral self-restraint" is over. An Israeli strike would be met by an "unconventional response" that

could include targeting Israeli infrastructure. Iran's armed allies in the axis of resistance are already threatening to intensify their operations against Israel. In the worst-case scenario, a full-blown war could erupt with unpredictable consequences for the region.

While the region and the world wait to see how the Israel-Iran confrontation will play out, Israel has continued its fierce military campaign in Gaza, bombing schools, refugee camps and an orphanage, with the death toll now exceeding 41,000. It has carried out a ground invasion of Lebanon despite US objections, with over 2,000 people killed in Israeli attacks. Israeli air strikes continue to pound Beirut. No condemnations are heard from Western governments of Israel's aggressive actions on multiple fronts.

Meanwhile, the Western media still reports these developments from an extremely biased lens. Interviews with freed hostages and killings of Israeli soldiers receive prominent coverage, while the carnage and killings of thousands of innocent people in Gaza are mostly ignored.

The fate of the Middle East hangs in the balance. The coming weeks will determine if a wider war can be avoided or whether the region will descend into a deadly conflagration.

—By arrangement with Dawn

Maleeha Lodhi

As Israel's offensive rein up in Gaza, Lebanon; full-scale Mideast war may be weeks away



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