Finding support

India must pressure Pakistan by sharing evidence of the terror trail

The international reaction to India's strikes on terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan has been one of concern, but muted and non-recriminatory, indicating that for most world capitals, India's actions in response to the Pahalgam attacks were more or less expected, and even understood. While there have been calls for restraint and resolution through dialogue and diplomacy, there has been little action taken by any country to bring about much pressure to avert the strikes. This can be chalked up to New Delhi's briefings to envoys, and calls by the Prime Minister, Ministers and the National Security Adviser to counterparts around the world through this crisis, that began with the Pahalgam terror attack on April 22. New Delhi's mature messaging has been that India is targeting terrorists that it hoped Pakistan would, especially after the "barbaric" nature of the Pahalgam attack. The Indian Air Force's operations on May 7, on targets identified with terror groups, were precisely planned, with India's assurance that no civil, economic or military locations would be hit. It was also impossible to escape the symbolism – details of the operations were delivered by two women officers of different faiths, sending out an image of progressive, pluralistic and resolute nation.

With further operations overnight, it is clear that tensions continue to rise. The U.K., the U.S., Russia, and the UN have reached out to New Delhi and Islamabad to try and defuse tensions, and the arrival of the Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers in India indicates some of those apprehensions. The government must be careful that its well-prepared response thus far is not derailed by an unplanned escalation, especially one provoked by Pakistan. While Pakistan has fewer friends, it is not without allies such as China, Türkiye and Malaysia, all of whom have backed its call for an "independent investigation", and the government would do well to keep its global message reasoned and rational. It could also offer to share evidence on the terror trail at the UN and other agencies in order to bring more pressure on Pakistan to act against the groups responsible. In doing so, New Delhi must avoid the pitfalls of being "hyphenated" with Pakistan, allowing bilateral matters to become internationalised, or needing mediation. To that end, the government may consider, if it has not already, opening a channel of communication, as the NSA had with Pakistani interlocutors, to de-escalate tensions after the misfiring of an Indian missile into Pakistan and to forge the LoC ceasefire agreement in 2021. While New Delhi's messaging, of fighting the scourge of terrorism, will always find it unequivocal support in every part of the world, an all-out war with Pakistan in an unstable neighbourhood is counter-productive and in no one's interest.

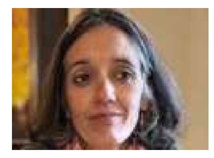
Caution and optimism

The FTA with the United Kingdom should not elbow out India's farmers

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the United Kingdom marks a strong step towards securing India's bilateral ties in an increasingly fragmented global trade environment. The key highlight for India is that 99% of its exports will attract no duties. Apart from being hailed by business leaders, industry associations representing sectors such as engineering goods, apparel, and gems and jewellery – each among the top Indian exports to the U.K. – have expressed strong optimism for future trade growth. Engineering exports, for example, are expected to nearly double to \$7.55 billion by 2029-30, according to the Engineering Exports Promotion Council of India. Overall bilateral trade is expected to double to \$120 billion by 2030. The other major win is that Indian workers temporarily working in the U.K. and their employers will be exempt from making social security contributions for three years. This is likely to ease the hiring of Indian workers in the U.K. The FTA also eases the movement of professionals and investors, which should go some way in reviving India's flagging foreign direct investment levels. On the flip side, India has agreed to cut its tariffs on 90% of the tariff lines imported from the U.K., with 85% of these to be reduced to zero tariff within a decade. While the reduction in automotive tariffs is unlikely to meaningfully change the price-conscious behaviour of Indians, the slashing of import duties on whiskey and gin will increase competition in India and perhaps slow the ongoing premiumisation trend.

Although the Modi government has been quick to criticise the FTAs signed by the UPA for putting India at a disadvantage, some of its own FTAs have faced the same issue. The India-UAE CEPA (2022), for example, has seen India's trade balance worsen over the years. The FTA with Australia, too, has not resulted in gains for Indian exports. Indian farmer organisations – opposed to the U.K. FTA since talks began – are up in arms over the reduced tariffs on lamb and salmon and other edible products. Here, too, the government must act to ensure that India's farmers, already in a low-income, low-margin situation, are not elbowed out. Then, there is the fact that trade experts agree that the India-U.K. FTA will be the template for future agreements with the EU and the U.S. India must be careful here. While the U.K. is a relatively small trading partner, the EU and the U.S. deals – when they happen – will have a more significant impact. India has already cut import duties on several food and auto products in line with U.S. demands. With a less than 2% contribution to global exports, Indian manufacturing needs to be helped, not undermined.

Eighty years on, 'never again' is sounding hollow



Priyanjali Malik

writes on politics and international relations

As conflict once again darkens horizons in the subcontinent, West Asia, North Africa and eastern Europe, Europeans are commemorating 80 years since the guns fell silent over Europe and the world's most destructive war began to wind down. On May 8, 1945, as news of Germany's surrender spread, crowds surged onto the streets of European cities in spontaneous gestures of thanksgiving and relief. In the decades that followed, that outpouring of relief has been commemorated as Victory in Europe (or VE) Day. Yet, Europe, though free, was shattered and bankrupt. After the war, the task of rebuilding Europe went hand in hand with efforts to prevent another war starting on the continent. 'Never again' was the watchword.

From dates to memory

Eighty years on, 'never again' is beginning to sound somewhat hollow. The contrast in the way that this major anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender is being commemorated in Russia and western Europe is telling. Indeed, the fact that the same event is celebrated on both sides of the former Iron Curtain on two different days suggests that the peace of May 1945 was tenuous. Tensions between the wartime allies of Britain, France and the United States on one side, and the Soviet Union on the other, meant that Stalin refused to accept the ceasefire signed by Germany in Reims on May 7 at the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (led by General Eisenhower). This was to come into force at 11.01 p.m. the following day. Stalin instead insisted on a second, grander, surrender in Berlin (then under Soviet control) the following evening, by which time President Harry Truman, General Charles de Gaulle and Prime Minister Winston Churchill had already formally announced Germany's surrender. When this document was signed in Berlin, it was already May 9 in Moscow. Hence the discrepancy in dates over essentially the same surrender.

As with the difference with dates, so too with memory. It is an article of faith in Russia that the USSR's contribution to defeating fascism is discounted by its former allies. Estimates vary, but Soviet casualties are thought to be 26 million, including 11 million military deaths in what Moscow calls the Great Patriotic War. This was 10% of the entire Soviet population. Stalin was also bitter about the delay in opening a second front in the fighting against Germany to draw away some German troops after Hitler's invasion in 1941. Less often acknowledged in these accounts is that Moscow changed sides halfway through the war, when Hitler double-crossed Stalin. Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact on August 23, 1939, which contained a secret protocol dividing Poland and the rest of eastern Europe between them. A week later, Hitler invaded Poland from the west and the Soviet army moved in on eastern Poland 16 days after that. The German and Soviet occupation of Poland was brutal, with mass transfers of population. It is estimated that Poland lost 20% of its pre-war population. Thereafter, the Red Army moved into the Baltics and Finland. In these circumstances, perhaps it is unsurprising that trust was thin on the ground.

The 80th anniversary of VE Day has passed, but, with it, the ghosts of war are returning to Europe

The commemorations

As with the history, so with the commemorations. Moscow's Victory Day (a national holiday) has grown into a massive military parade that celebrates Russia's latest weaponry – a great patriotic spectacle rather than an occasion of remembrance. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the parade has acquired additional significance, and this year will include troops from other countries. It will be attended by guests, including China's President Xi Jinping.

Russia's erstwhile allies of that war observed VE Day rather more sombrely, with the focus on thanksgiving and honouring the few remaining veterans who served in the war. And of course there is the spectre of conflict against Russia hanging over the continent – a continent that started two world wars and has enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace for 80 years.

After the Second World War ended, America underwrote Western Europe's renewal (eastern Europe being under Soviet influence) through the dual approach of the Marshall Plan for reconstruction and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for external defence. President Truman described the security and prosperity provided by both as 'two halves of the same walnut'. There was an expressly political element to the American financial support to industrialise in a way that pushed the 17 States of southern and western Europe into ever closer economic and political union. It is testament to the success of this political project that when Germany's Bundestag voted in March to remove limits on defence spending, the rest of Europe breathed a collective sigh of relief.

U.S. President Donald Trump's contradictory messaging on Ukraine and his refusal to reiterate full-throated support for NATO, including support for Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, has thrown Europe into a panic.

European leaders are in full agreement that Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has moved from being a threat to the world order to being a direct threat to Europe. In French President Emmanuel Macron's words, Mr. Putin is 'an imperialist who seeks to rewrite history'.

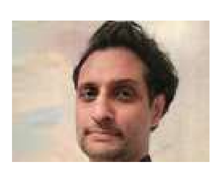
An air of insecurity

And so Europe is rearming. Key European NATO members including Britain, France and Germany, are preparing for an orderly American exit from NATO. The European Union has proposed a defence fund, relaxed curbs on defence spending and published its first ever defence strategy. Several member states have advised their citizens to stockpile emergency survival rations for 72 hours. Poland and the Baltic States (all bordering Russia) have withdrawn from the landmine treaty. Almost all states are raising defence spending.

This backdrop provides little room for celebration. The insecurity might also excuse to some extent the utter insularity of the commemorations in Western Europe – outsiders watching these might be forgiven for believing that the war was a purely European affair. Of course it was not. This was a war between empires: the fields of Europe and north Africa are soaked with the blood of people from Africa, Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the Caribbean as well as America and Europe. And so, we all have a stake in how Europe settles its differences.

As the shadows of conflicts darken different parts of the world, there is no room for complacency.

Remembering the war, reminiscing forgotten Indians



Raja Karthikeya

is currently working on a book about how individual decisions in the face of adversity impact communities

Eighty years ago, on May 8, 1945, the Second World War officially ended in Europe with the surrender of Nazi Germany in Reims and Berlin to the armies of the Allied powers. It is a day celebrated as Victory in Europe (VE) Day, but passes unnoticed in India where the war years (1939-1945) are largely remembered as the finale of the struggle for independence. Hence, it merits recalling that Indians never eschewed their responsibility to the world, neither in war nor in peace, as the lives of two unsung Indians testify.

Born in a poor family in Uyyuru in Andhra Pradesh in 1899, Kolachala Sitaramaiah's academic brilliance earned him a rare opportunity to study abroad. After paying his way to the United States as a coal stoker on a steamship, Sitaramayya earned Masters' degrees from Chicago and Yale universities in chemistry as well as three patents. However, the impact of the Great Depression in 1929 made him question the inequities of capitalist society. In a bold move, he migrated to the USSR in the 1930s and set out to work in petrochemical research.

From the frontlines to the laboratory

His life took a turn when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The naked ambition and racism in Nazi propaganda repulsed Sitaramaiah. Convinced that the USSR was literally what stood between the fast expanding tyranny of fascism and his motherland, India, he volunteered to move to the Soviet frontlines. He was however recognised and pulled out of the recruiting line by an officer who said Sitaramayya's brain "was needed as a weapon, not as a target".

Soviet tanks in the early days of the Second World War faced severe technical problems. Sitaramayya threw himself into research and to develop kerosene-based fuels and specialised lubricants for Soviet tanks which improved their manoeuvrability and performance in sub-zero conditions. In no small part due to his efforts, at the Battle of Kursk in 1943 – the deadliest tank battle in history – Soviet T-34 tanks took on and outperformed the much-feared Panzer and Tiger tanks of the Nazis. For the first time in the war, a ground offensive of the Nazi juggernaut was halted.

Victory in Europe Day is also a moment to recall the genius of scientists such as Kolachala Sitaramaiah and the heroism of soldiers such as Idris Hasan Latif during the Second World War

Embarking on a military career

Two hundred miles from Vuyyuru, a young man from an aristocratic family of Yemeni descent in Hyderabad left a life of privilege to join the Royal Indian Air Force in 1941. Indian pilots like Idris were initially assigned by the British to fly outdated biplanes on patrols along the restive North West Frontier. But after the Battle of Britain attrited the Royal Air Force, Indian pilots including Idris were moved to Britain to prepare for the counter offensive – the eventual D-Day landings in Normandy. By 1944, the German Luftwaffe lost control of Europe's skies. Idris was then deployed to Burma. He flew the Hawker Hurricane in humid skies under a merciless sun to strafe Japanese army columns and fend off lethal Japanese "Zero" fighters. Flying relentlessly out of short, muddy landing strips in damp mosquito-infested jungles, he fell gravely ill but would not leave his squadron.

At the end of the war, Sitaramaiah was awarded Soviet honours. His research into motor oils laid the foundation for chemmotology or tribochemistry – the field of science that deals with chemical changes induced in materials through mechanical energy. Based on his observation of incendiary munitions during the Second World War, he spent his later years researching the properties of the fourth state of matter, plasma, which were crucial to achieving controlled nuclear fusion. When he passed away in 1977, the then Indian Ambassador to the USSR (and later Prime Minister of India), I.K. Gujral said, "We bid goodbye to a great scientist. A great son of India...and a son of mankind."

Idris, the soft-spoken young pilot, received British accolades in the VE day celebrations in London in 1946. At the time of Partition, his brother decided to move to Pakistan and asked Idris to join him. Idris refused point blank, saying he would always stay in the land where his forefathers were buried. He brushed aside his brother's reasons for the move by saying, "what does religion have to do with nationality?".

A thorough professional, passionate flyer and a patriot, Air Chief Marshal Idris Hasan Latif, PVSM became the 10th Chief of the Indian Air Force in 1978. In the years that he mentored me, one of ACM Latif's fondest memories was of a visit to Normandy when he was India's Ambassador to France (1985-88).

The India-France defence relationship that is now celebrated with the Rafale fighter jet of the Indian Air Force owes no small part to the memories of the crucible that was the Second World War.

Every man to the wheel

Victory in Europe Day is not just a celebration for Europe. It is an occasion to pay homage to the millions across the world, including India, that suffered economic hardship and even famine, to enable that victory. It is a moment to recall the heroism of soldiers such as Idris Latif and the genius of scientists such as Kolachala Sitaramaiah who fought a brutal war for liberty without expecting glory or recompense. It is a time to remember that every individual, no matter how humble and no matter where they may live, can shape the course of all of history. In the words of SriSri, a contemporary poet that both these heroes may have read, "I too lent an insolent voice, to the roar that shook the heavens!"

The writer is the grand-nephew of Kolachala Sitaramaiah

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's operation

In India's Operation Sindoor, countless personnel and professionals have played their part: from intelligence analysts who have tracked targets for weeks, to drone pilots who have operated their missions under extreme stress, to the naval forces who maintained strategic positions off the coast, ready for escalation if necessary, to, finally, the Army and the Air Force too. To Pakistan, the message has been made clear: India's threshold for tolerance has shifted. Inaction is no longer the default. And to the world, this has been a reminder that India, when pushed, moves with calculated force, not chaos. It is not a celebration of war, but a celebration of deterrence — the kind born not from provocation, but preparation.

This is an operation that will go down in history as a mission carried out with iron resolve. To every armed forces personnel, this is your moment. And the nation thanks you.

K.J. Haroon Basha,
Vaniyambadi, Tamil Nadu

India has struck at terror bases inside Pakistan, but a real question that needs to be asked is whether India has really succeeded in hunting down those responsible for the Pahalgam attack. The operations so far have achieved their purpose — decimating certain terror camps that were detrimental to peace in Kashmir and India.

Prabhu Raj R.,
Bengaluru

The first step to minimise escalation is for both sides to avoid playing to the gallery or taking a position for political one-upmanship. Operation Sindoor has achieved its limited objectives from the Indian point of view. It is for Pakistan to accept that terror attacks emanate from its soil.

Wiser counsel should prevail upon India's neighbour. Pakistan needs to reflect upon what the Mahatma said: "An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

As expected, India's mobilisation of countermeasures following the massacre in Pahalgam has culminated in strong military action. This must serve as a lesson to Pakistan against nurturing terrorist elements on its soil, despite global pressure to take credible action against the UN-designated terrorists roaming free in that country. Pakistan's sympathisers would do well to educate that country about the new global situation and advise it to behave. Ratcheting up the rhetoric of war will not help anyone, and definitely not Pakistan which is facing economic distress and insurgency in some parts.

Gregory Fernandes,
Mumbai

Operation Sindoor not only signals a new chapter in India's counter-terrorism doctrine but also marks a strategic shift in India's military response to terrorism, combining surgical precision, multi-service coordination and symbolic messaging. This is diplomatic and tactful action taken by India to expose Pakistan's status as a rogue nation which actively promotes and patronises terrorism worldwide. India's assertive retribution to the Pahalgam attack is only a first salvo of a seemingly long-drawn-out battle.

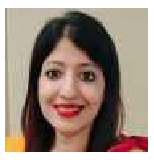
R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

It is time for Pakistan to cease its support for terrorism and understand that further aggression will lead to punishment. A strong message must be conveyed: India's patience is not weakness. We will take all measures to ensure our national security.

Lawrence Vadukut,
Thrissur, Kerala

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the postal address.

Is social media defining self-worth?



Meghna Singhal

Clinical psychotherapist from NIMHANS and parenting coach

Sannuthi Suresh

Programme co-ordinator, healing and support services, Tulir Centre for Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse

PARLEY

The recent death of a young entrepreneur, who reportedly took the extreme step after she lost followers on social media, is sufficient reason for us to pause and assess the role of social media in our lives.

There is no doubt that social media is here to stay and has a huge role to play in our lives. By holding up a world that seems perfect, and fickle with its devotion, social media can take a toll on mental health, particularly that of youngsters. On the other hand, the Netflix series *Adolescence* dragged us willy-nilly into a world of teenagers that adults thought they understood but were actually far off the mark from. So, is social media defining self-worth? Meghna Singhal and Sannuthi Suresh discuss the question with **Ramya Kannan**.

Do you think social media is changing how people form their identity? If so, in what ways?

Meghna Singhal: Yes, absolutely. I think social media is not just a platform anymore. It has become a mirror and, sometimes, like a magnifying glass, I think, which judges young people and the way they are seen and shaped and scrutinised. Identity formation is such an important process that happens at this stage, but the problem is that identity is no longer being formed in the quiet privacy of our bedrooms or classrooms. It is being performed, it is being edited, and it is being posted. The question that many young people are asking is not who I am, but what version of me will get the most approval. That is pretty tricky and scary because the lines between authentic self-expression and a very algorithm-driven self-curation are blurring.

Sannuthi Suresh: I agree. Additionally, we must know that for young people, these are not actually separate. The spheres they are navigating between social media and their own selves and their world, they are all one thing. Unlike for a lot of us who were born and started lives without social media being so inherent in our lives, it is melded into their daily existence. Of course, it is changing how they form an identity. They are basically being dunked into an arena where everything is about presenting yourself in a certain way, but there are no spaces to be able to reflect or think about what any of this means.So yeah, I worry a lot.

Social media influencers are usually accused of creating this plastic, happy world, where likes and a growing subscriber count are the primary gratification. Is this right?

MS: I think in many cases, yes, this is true. But I wouldn't say it's just the influencers who are guilty. I think the entire ecosystem rewards this performance, this show, and punishes vulnerability. A lot of the so-called influencers do play a very high-stakes game, and the algorithm does favour these glossy aesthetics over gritty truth. Even truth doesn't sell unless it's packaged right, and that is a very big distortion. So, yes and no – influencers are guilty, but I think it's the entire ecosystem, and influencers are just a symptom.

SS: There are also a lot of child influencers online now. There's this show right now on Netflix, *Bad Influence*, which talks of influencers who are children, in some ways, also pushed by their parents to put up different types of content online, including YouTube. Here, primary gratification can become follower count because it's connected to your parent feeling that if you're doing well online, it means that you have more followers. I feel it's even more dangerous when you have an adult who's using a child to become an influencer. I wouldn't say that influencers are the only ones guilty of doing this, but everyone is trying to create aspirational versions of the world.

How exactly do these online trends of perfect images influence body image or self-expression, particularly of children and youngsters?

SS: I remember this whole trend at one point where thigh gaps were a thing; basically, it was about having really shapely thighs, but also a gap between the two thighs, and this led to a lot of young people wanting to get the thigh gap. And then it moved to some other body feature flaunted by celebrities and influencers. It was scary for me to see, even when I was speaking to a young person who is a teen, the minuscule attention to their face and the fact that the left side doesn't match the right side, for instance.

> We as parents and educators need to learn their language, listen to the contexts they use it in, and we have to stop translating it into our own fears. A better question may be: What part of you feels most seen when you like a post, when you share your own post?
>
> MEGHNA SINGHAL

MS: I am reminded of all my adolescent clients, who have a very distorted body image, and they're in therapy because of it. This is also at the core of a whole lot of eating disorders. They tell me, logically, though they know this is an airbrushed kind of reality, it still influences them. There's a lot of internalised shame, and what starts off as inspiration becomes very shameful, you know, when they are not able to achieve it. Another trend that caught on was the 'girl morning routine', which took over Insta reels – promoting rigid schedules and criticised by psychiatrists because it was unrealistic.

Is it possible that children leverage their access to resources to push and achieve this ideal body image?

SS: How far will they go? I don't think anybody can answer that, but the whole point is that the ideal itself keeps shifting. Someday it's the thigh gap, and someday it's that punishing morning routine and someday it's fruit juice. A few years back, the blue whale challenge went viral, and it was all about completing a series of steps, which ultimately had the player taking their own life. A lot of people were succumbing to it. So, how far will we go? I don't think there's an answer to that.

MS: Blue Whale was one of those trends where it kept pushing you to prove that you could be daring, with no one discussing the underlying aspects of insecurity or pain or suffering. None of those were being discussed and are not being discussed. So children are encouraged to present themselves as alpha male or sigma male, and ultra sassy if you are a girl. There is no dialogue, no facilitation, no conversation around what it means to be that, and the implications of this trend.

Can parents keep tabs on the social media use of teens? More importantly, how do they make the right sense of what they're doing online?

SS: The truth is you can't really keep tabs on the social media use of a teenager. We need to accept that as parents or adults. You don't have control right now. In *Adolescence*, you can see the vacuum that these young people are in, with almost no adult conversation in their lives. How has that vacuum been built? I think that's an important question to ask. Young people are spending a lot of time online today, and I feel there has to be some way to close that vacuum of communication. We are also guilty of dumping young people into this sea of information without giving them any idea about what authoritative information is. It is about us taking the initiative to talk more, spend more time, and hang out with them in general.

MS: I don't think keeping tabs on the social media use of teens is such a good idea at all; it is a very surveillance kind of perspective. Whereas I think what we need to do is shift from surveillance to establishing a connection. Monitoring social media, when we do that as parents, it comes from a place of fear, and it actually backfires. What we need is parents coming at their children from a place of curiosity and trust because young people speak a very different language, as shown in *Adolescence.* Also, did you know children have Finsta accounts – fake Instagram accounts – that they keep hidden, we have no idea they use. So, we as parents and educators need to learn their language, listen to the contexts they use it in, and we have to stop translating it into our own fears. A better question to ask may be: What part of you feels most seen when you like a post, or when you share your own post? Having different conversations instead of seeing everything as rebellion is a definite starting point. I think we need to start seeing these young people from their own lens as well, only then will we be able to bridge the gap.

(Here is a list of helplines that can help people in emotional or mental distress: newsth.live/suicidehelplines)

To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

Cost of documenting people's stories of resilience, hope

From security guidelines to bureaucratic red tape to emotional toll, reporting the Pahalgam attack came with quite a few challenges

Peerzada Ashiq

Kashmir has remained a challenging beat for a reporter for over three decades now. The fact that over 20 local journalists lost their lives in the line of duty only indicates the danger of reporting from and about Kashmir. The recent Pahalgam terror attack once again posed multiple challenges to reporters on the ground, both physically and emotionally.

A day after the attack, our team left early in the morning for the attack site of Baisaran, located in Anantnag's picturesque Pahalgam, which was known more for Bollywood shoots. Multiple checkpoints were set up on the way to Pahalgam to search, frisk and check the identities of commuters. Alert security paraphernalia following any major incident is a norm in Kashmir, and reporters follow all the security guidelines as access is granted to the attack site.

However, there was a shift in the security forces' approach towards the Press this time. Around 42 km from Pahalgam, Press vehicles were stopped by the security forces at the Khanabal bridge, the only main surface link, over the Jhelum river, to the terror attack site. We were given one option: "return to Srinagar". There were clear directions that neither tourists nor journalists should be given access to Pahalgam. One can understand the decision to deny entry to tourists, but a bar order for journalists remains inexplicable.

Forced to leave behind our vehicle, we hitchhiked on a two-wheeler and decided to drive through village after village on dusty and dirt lanes to avoid the highway. However, we were again stopped at Yanier, 20 km from the attack site.

This time, the message was delivered to us more forcefully: journalists are not allowed to visit Pahalgam for the next two days. "Leave the spot as soon as possible," the security men guarding the main road said.

Adamant to cover and document people's stories of trauma, resilience and hope, we decided to stay back till evening. Instead of two-and-a-half hours, it took us 10 hours to reach Pahalgam and then arrange meetings with the saviours and first responders and document their stories of valour and courage.

It was never this difficult in Kashmir to cover the aftermath of an incident, especially where people and eyewitnesses joined hands to condemn the violence against unarmed civilians. Even after two weeks of the incident, there is no formal statement made by any Minister or the civil administration or the security agencies on how many civilians were killed or injured in the incident. It's with the official records accessed unofficially that the numbers could be reported on that day. It's this approach that gives rise to speculation, exaggeration, and even under-reporting of the magnitude of the event.

The hardest part of the reporting was documenting the harrowing details of how male tourists were asked to step aside by the terrorists and were shot from close range in front of their children, wives and family members, who were left wailing and crying for help. Penning each case emotionally drains a reporter. Many times, it benumbs. The incident may be over, but the statements of victims and the imagery it left behind keep haunting the minds of reporters for a long time.

Reporting from Kashmir has seen different phases since the 1990s. It was highly dangerous at the peak of militancy when several journalists died in targeted killings, were kidnapped and faced parcel bombs. While it has always been risky to report from the ground, after 2019, journalists' struggle is of a different kind: access to security officials for confirmation. Except for the elected political class that is available, top security officials and bureaucracy, reporting to the Raj Bhawan, remain reluctant to furnish the details the public has the right to know without any confusion or misrepresentation.

The more we create an information blackout, the greater the chances of misreporting. Reporters without official access to information cannot fight the menace of misinformation and disinformation.

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Bridge over water

People disembarking from a ferry use a bamboo bridge on the banks of the Brahmaputra river in Guwahati on Wednesday. The water level in the river has been rising following incessant rainfall in many parts of Assam and other neighbouring States in the past couple of days. RITU RAJ KONWAR

FROM THE ARCHIVES The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 9, 1975

Cambodians Moved from Cities to Work in Farms

BANGKOK. May 8. Millions of Cambodians have been shifted from Phnom Penh and other cities apparently to work in the fields to stave off a looming food crisis, according to foreigners stranded in the French Embassy for a fortnight.

Many of nearly 600 foreigners, who came to the Thai border last weekend after a gruelling four-day journey, said their most striking impression of the "new Cambodia" was its emptiness.

They also told harrowing tales of their time in the Embassy–of shortages of food, water, sanitary facilities, of families split up, of slaking thirst by drinking water from air-conditioners and stemming hunger by skinning and eating a cat.

But they had no information to support directly the U.S. intelligence reports that there had been mass killings since the liberation troops' take-over in Cambodia on April 17.

They said even hospital patients, including bed-ridden war victims, were pushed, wheeled and carried out of Phnom Penh following a Khmer Rouge order to evacuate the city soon after its capture.

The foreign evacuees said Phnom Penh was emptied in a matter of days. Other towns they drove through on the way to the Thai border were almost deserted. Saffron-robed monks were soon at work in the field.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 9, 1925

Colour Bar Bill

SECOND READING PASSED - AN ACRIMONIOUS DEBATE

CAPE TOWN. May 6. By a small majority of eleven votes, the Colour Bar Bill passed its second reading this afternoon after an acrimonious debate, and now goes to the Select Committee. In the course of his speech in summing up the debate, Mr. Bayers, the Minister for Mines, declared that he had no intention to offend Indians and, if the Committee could find a formula satisfactorily expressing the intention and meaning of the Bill without using the specific word "Asiaties," he would welcome such a formula.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Applications for registration of term 'Operation Sindoor'

6 After India's retaliation, Reliance India Ltd. was the first to file the trademark application for the term under trademark Class 41 which covers services like education and entertainment. Besides RIL, other applicants — Mukesh Chetram Agrawal, Group Captain (retired) Kamal Singh Oberh, Alok Kothari, Jayaraj T. and Uttam — have also sought registering the term. PTI

Number of UNRWA schools shut down in East Jerusalem

6 Israel permanently closed six U.N. schools in east Jerusalem on Thursday, forcing Palestinian students to leave early and throwing the education of over 800 others into question. The orders come after Israel banned UNRWA from operating on its soil earlier this year. UNRWA is the main provider of education and health care to Palestinian refugees across east Jerusalem. AP

India's foodgrain production target for the 2025-26 crop year

354.64 In million tonnes. India is targeting 354.64 million tonnes of foodgrain production in the 2025-26 crop year on the forecast of better monsoon rains. The government had set a target of 341.55 million tonnes for the current 2024-25 crop year. Data shows production has reached 330.92 million tonnes. PTI

Amount of annual health aid to Zambia to be cut by the U.S.

50 in $ million. The United States will cut $50 million in annual medical funding to Zambia over its weak response to the alleged theft and sale of donated drugs meant to be provided for free, its ambassador said on Thursday. The debt-ridden southern African nation of 21 million people is heavily reliant on foreign aid. AFP

Odisha discom notices for illegal constructions

1229 In a step towards ensuring public safety, TP Southern Odisha Distribution Limited issued 1,229 notices to individuals and establishments for alleged unauthorised constructions near overhead electricity distribution lines. The maximum number of notices of 655 were served in Ganjam. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Is academic freedom a made-up concept?

In the backdrop of Trump's moves on Ivy League institutions in America, a look at the scope and limitations of freedom on campus, and why it's not always easy with institutions being pulled in different directions

FULL CONTEXT

Atanu Biswas

In Satyajit Ray's 1980 satirical fantasy film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, literally "in the kingdom of the Diamond King", the Education Minister of the king dictates what should be taught in school. Finally, the Minister closes the school. Is the story a true reflection of the contemporary world, to some extent?

The nature of education and how it shapes society can be examined in a variety of contexts, from the fictional kingdom of the Diamond King to real-life Donald Trump's America. Given that Columbia, an Ivy League university, surrendered its academic freedom, and Harvard, the oldest and richest American university, has chosen to legally defend it, one would wonder what academic freedom is and what its scopes and limitations are.

When then President Pranab Mukherjee spoke at the "International Buddhist Conference" in Nalanda in 2017, he invoked Nalanda and Taxila, the ancient universities, to pitch for an atmosphere free from prejudice, anger, violence, and doctrines. "It must be conducive to free flow intellectual persuasions," he stated.

A difficult path

However, it's not so easy, always. Scholars who disagreed with church theology or behaved in ways the church deemed unacceptable risked persecution in medieval Europe. Then, philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt created a new university in Berlin in the early 19th century. The fundamental principles of academic freedom - freedom of scientific inquiry and the unification of research and teaching - were institutionalised in and diffused to other countries by the Humboldtian model of higher education. Today's seemingly made-up concept of academic freedom can be summed up as follows: students have the right to learn in

Loud voices: Protesters march against the Trump administration's policies and to demand 'liberty, solidarity and accountability' from their universities in New York, U.S. FILE PHOTO

an academic environment free from outside interference, and teachers have the right to instruct. The right of teachers to engage in social and political critique is another definition, though. In a 2022 paper published in the *Houston Law Review*, Yale Law School professor Keith E. Whittington stated that universities committed to truth-seeking and the advancement and dissemination of human knowledge essentially require "robust protections for academic freedom for scholars and instructors."

At the UNESCO-organised International Conference in Nice in 1950, the Universities of the World pledged for "the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead." Academic freedom was then defined as "the freedom to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry, without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead" at the first annual Global Colloquium of University Presidents held at Columbia University in 2005. But is defining and accomplishing academic freedom really that straightforward?

Tenure, promotions, pay hikes, research funding, and academic honours are all intimately correlated with research publications in the current academic environment. Thus, today's scholars are driven by the peer pressure of publishing. And the interest of funding agencies has a significant impact on academicians' research. Nowadays, universities are also concerned with their international rankings, which are largely based on research papers.

'Publish or perish' culture

How serious is today's "publish or perish" culture? Quite a bit, indeed. One significant exception was 2013 Nobel laureate British physicist Peter Higgs, well known for the Higgs Boson. He stated that he became "an embarrassment to the department when they did research assessment exercises" and that he would have most likely been fired from his job at the University of Edinburgh if he had not been nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1980. However, he thought that because he would not be deemed "productive" enough in today's academic system, no university would hire him. Thus, today's academic system doesn't even permit a future Nobel winner to peacefully conduct his own research without regularly generating research papers.

Nowadays, there's little scope for leeway in a pre-scheduled framework of university curriculum. Furthermore, as American biologist Jerry Coyne put it, a geology teacher who casually informs his students that the earth is flat is not exercising academic freedom but rather is failing in his duties. Compared to general freedom of speech, academic freedom of speech is more limited. For instance, a non-academic can criticise the effectiveness of vaccines, but they can only do it with academic freedom if they have the necessary academic credentials.

And, importantly, academic freedom may be as much as a country's politics and society at the time would have desired to offer academic institutions. For instance, several fields of research, including sociology and genetics, were outlawed as "bourgeois pseudoscience" in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

What's the freedom of a flying kite, indeed? When a kite is flying high, it means that the person holding the spool has just let it soar. Without the monarchs' generous financing and allowing foreign scholars and students, would ancient Nalanda or Taxila have been able to exercise their academic freedom? What happens if that person believes the kite is behaving strangely? Of course, a democracy has checks and balances, such as the judiciary and periodic elections. Therefore, academic freedom and political interference in it are continually being redefined by changing sociopolitical dynamics.

Academic freedom certainly sets up a protective umbrella over scholars' activities; however, this protection is neither absolute nor guaranteed.

(Atanu Biswas is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata)

THE GIST

Today's seemingly made-up concept of academic freedom can be summed up as follows: students have the right to learn in an academic environment free from outside interference, and teachers have the right to instruct

Academic freedom was defined as "the freedom to conduct research, teach, speak, and publish, subject to the norms and standards of scholarly inquiry, without interference or penalty, wherever the search for truth and understanding may lead" at the first annual Global Colloquium of University Presidents in 2005

Tenure, promotions, pay hikes, research funding, and academic honours are all intimately correlated with research publications in the current academic environment

Do restaurants have the right to charge a service fee?

Is the service charge, typically ranging from 5% to 20% across restaurants, a legitimate business practice or an unfair burden on consumers? Why is the issue mired in litigation?

Soibam Rocky Singh

The story so far:

The legal tussle over the legitimacy of service charges in restaurants has been fiercely contested for three years in the Delhi High Court, with both the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA), representing consumer interests, and restaurant associations refusing to back down.

What is the issue?

At the heart of the issue is whether the service charge, typically ranging between 5% to 20% across restaurants, is a legitimate business practice or an unfair imposition on consumers.

Following a series of consumer complaints, the CCPA issued guidelines in July 2022 prohibiting restaurants from levying such charges by default. The National Restaurants Association of India (NRAI), with over 7,000 restaurant members in India, and the Federation of Hotels and Restaurants Association of India (FHRAI) representing the interests of 55,000 hotels and 5,00,000 restaurants, challenged the guidelines in court.

A customer typically decides to give a tip, or gratuity, only after the meal is completed, when they are in a position to assess the quality of food and service. However, service charges are pre-fixed percentages added to the bill regardless of the service experience.

As far back as 1958, the Hotel Standards and Rate Structure Committee, chaired by late MP Diwan Chaman Lall, took note of the then-growing practice in India of levying a "service charge" on hotel bills. The committee took a strong stand against the solicitation of tips, terming it "injurious to the dignity of the worker and management" and a source of harassment for the customer. It, however, said a satisfied customer should be free to offer a tip voluntarily.

What is the consumer perspective?

For consumers, a mandatory service charge, especially when not disclosed upfront, feels like an unfair burden.

Complaints to the National Consumer Helpline indicate that diners discover this when the final bill is presented. Moreover, attempts to have them removed are frequently met with resistance.

In December 2016, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs issued a letter to all States and Union Territories flagging that the National Consumer Helpline was receiving a number of complaints from consumers of hotels and restaurants charging service charges, in lieu of tips. The Ministry clarified that service charges are voluntary, and a consumer can have them waived. In July 2022, the CCPA issued more stringent guidelines banning hotels or restaurants from adding a service charge automatically or by default to the bill. The guidelines also banned the collection of service charges from consumers by any other name.

The NRAI and FHRAI argue that service charges have been an industry norm for over 80 years, and there exists no law that prohibits them from charging the same. They contend it forms part of wage negotiations with staff and ensures the fair distribution of tips among all staff.

What have the courts said so far?

When the initial pleas were filed against the CCPA guidelines, the High Court, in an interim order in July 2022, stayed the guidelines, provided restaurants prominently displayed the inclusion of a service charge on menus.

On March 28, this year, the High Court ruled that service charges or tips are a voluntary payment by the customer, and it cannot be made compulsory or mandatory by hotels and restaurants. A fresh appeal against this judgment has now been filed before the High Court.

THE GIST

A customer typically decides to give a tip, or gratuity, only after the meal is completed, when they are in a position to assess the quality of food and service

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IN THE LIMELIGHT

History reflected: The cast of *Andor A Star Wars Story* during *Star Wars Story* celebration in Tokyo, Japan. FILE PHOTO

From revolutionary Russia to modern-day Gaza, how *Andor* reflects history

Drawing from the blood and betrayal of history, Tony Gilroy hijacks the Star Wars *mythos to stage a searing political treatise of revolutions, past and present, and it's the clearest this galaxy, far, far away has ever been about ours*

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury

There's a scandalously radical something currently streaming on Disney+. It's a granular, more subversive vision that has been grounding the grandiose space operatics of that beloved galaxy far, far away. This is something about rebellion, yes, but also about its gestation. It's about the indignities, the betrayals, and the atrocities that make revolution inevitable and necessary. This brilliant something is Tony Gilroy's *Andor*.

Praxis before hope

Among the many surprises tucked into Gilroy's slow-burning espionage thriller masquerading as 'a *Star Wars* story', is how intimately the show understands the anatomy of rebellion. It's not surprising that he points to *The Battle of Algiers* as his biggest influence. Gillo Pontecorvo's Golden Lion-winner from 1966 is about ordinary people slowly learning how to push back, and the machinery that tries to crush them for it. *Andor* lifts from that idea to anatomise its rebellion. If *Star Wars* was once about hope, *Andor* is about praxis. That *Andor* has always felt the least like *Star Wars* has actually been the best thing about it. What it examines are the more combustible materials of history – bureaucracy, surveillance, police states, prison labour, and the everyday banality of evil that Hannah Arendt once named with terrifying clarity.

Take, for instance, the Russian Revolution. The workers' uprisings in the factories of Petrograd are mirrored in the communal defiance that brews in the working-class Ferrix, where we see people pushed to the brink by small humiliations. Like Lenin's early Bolsheviks, the citizens of Ferrix operate in coded signals and public silences.

Cassian Andor himself seems to echo a young Joseph Stalin – not yet the dictator, but the furtive conspirator, the romantic outlaw raised in hardship, slipping through borders, organising sabotage, and always ducking the eye of empire. Stalin, like Cassian, started out only with self-preservation in mind. Meanwhile, the seasoned Marxist-Leninist Luthen Rael – the one who delivers *that* speech about burning your life so someone else can feel the warmth of a distant dawn – embodies the belief that you must first seize power, often through the master's tools, to build anew. Reflections of a wise Lenin radicalising the impressionable Stalin during the Bolshevik Revolution are discernible in Luthen and Cassian's dynamic, and by the time Cassian leads a breakout from the sterile panopticon hell of the Narkina 5 labour camp, he's finally beginning to understand the contours of revolution.

Narkina 5 itself reads like a historical palimpsest. The white-on-white Imperial gulag conjures the sugar plantations of colonial Haiti. In a direct echo of Saint-Domingue under French rule, where enslaved Africans operated sugar mills in rotating teams, the prisoners at Narkina 5 are slaves in all but name. And in Kino Loy, the foreman-turned-martyr, we find shades of Toussaint Louverture – the Haitian general who began as a reformist and ended a revolutionary – caught in the middle as both victim and enforcer, who finally rises to liberate others even when he cannot liberate himself.

The Left eats itself

There's also a whisper of South Africa here – of the ANC and its covert networks, and of Mandela's long walk through compromise and confrontation. Mon Mothma embodies the internal fracturing of revolutionary thought. Like many liberal allies in apartheid-era South Africa, she hopes to work within the system and reform it gently, but Gilroy soon demonstrates the failure of soft resistance. Meanwhile, the privileged insurgent Vel recalls Patty Hearst – the heiress turned radical whose alliance with the Symbionese Liberation Army remains one of the more complicated chapters in America's revolutionary folklore. Like Hearst, Vel complicates ideas of ideological purity as both insider and class traitor, and she reminds us that revolutions often enlist allies from the very echelons they seek to dismantle.

Yet, Saw Gerrera is still by far the most fractured reflection in *Andor*'s mirror of revolution. Part Che Guevara, part Buenaventura Durruti, part Prabhakaran, part Malcolm X, he's the rebel forged from the fallout of real-world insurrections. Saw's furious roll call of rival rebel factions in Season 1 also mirrors the internecine rifts that have splintered leftist movements throughout history. The in-fighting among anarchists, communists, Trotskyists, and moderate republicans, who all opposed Francisco Franco's fascists during the Spanish Civil War, is perhaps the clearest parallel that a wounded and disillusioned George Orwell chronicled in *Homage to Catalonia*.

Though Gilroy has been explicit that *Andor* draws from a sweep of revolutionary history, there's a reason that Palestine rises so clearly from the subtext. It is, as he tacitly suggests, the most immediate and ongoing example of settler-colonialism, and the latest arc from its second season expands upon that in startling ways. In arguably *the* most harrowing hour in *Star Wars* history, *Andor* drops the veil of allegory to stare directly at modern atrocity. The incident in question may have unfolded a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, but the contours are unmistakably of our present – of Gaza, where, as of this writing, tens of thousands have been killed, starved, or buried beneath rubble by an occupying power. Gilroy and his writers sketch, with horrifying clarity, the step-by-step blueprint of that seemingly blasphemous 'g-word', too divisive to be uttered out loud, in the era of post-truth politics. And when Mon Mothma dares to name the crime, she's laughed at and jeered out of the Senate chamber. There's no way around it: this is the most politically audacious storytelling *Star Wars* has ever attempted and it's the clearest this galaxy has ever been about ours.

Every act of rebellion in *Andor* reminds us that revolution is a mosaic of singular efforts. By layering very real struggles into the architecture of *Star Wars* mythology, *Andor* further collapses that distance between fiction and reality.

The revolution *is* being televised, and the cosmic joke is that it's streaming on Disney+.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Russia is celebrating the 80th anniversary of the surrender of the Nazis to the Soviet Union in the Second World War today. A quiz on Victory Day

Vighnesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1
What was the legal document that effected the unconditional surrender of Nazi forces?

QUESTION 2
The Nazis had earlier signed another document of surrender, but the Soviet Union did not recognise it saying it must be signed from the German seat of power. Where was this document signed?

QUESTION 3
X, who had taken over after Adolf Hitler committed suicide, signed the surrender document for Germany. Name X.

QUESTION 4
What was the short-lived rump government of Nazi Germany under X called? Name X.

QUESTION 5
What was the meeting of the heads of the Soviet Union, the U.K. and the U.S., held in February 1945, to discuss post-war reorganisation of Germany called?

In this 2014 picture, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Mongolian counterpart Tsakhia Elbegdorj are paying tribute to a Marshal influential in the Soviet victory who later served as the country's Defence Minister. Name him. AFP

Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. In 1970, this final studio album of this famous rock band was released and this was not the last album they recorded before their break up. **Ans: Let It Be, Abbey Road and The Beatles'**
2. This person became the first woman to graduate from The Citadel. **Ans: Nancy Mace**
3. On 8 May 1980, the 33rd World Health Assembly officially declared that the world is free of this disease. **Ans: Smallpox**
4.Today, this carbonated drink is one of the largest companies in the U.S. **Ans: Coca-Cola**
5.This mountain erupted in 1902 killing approximately 15% of the island's population. **Ans: Mount Pelée**
Visual: Identify the painter and the painting. **Ans: Paul Gauguin and Bonjour, Monsieur Gauguin**

Early Birds
Siddhartha Viswanathan– Tamal Biswas – Tito Shiladitya – Sunil Madhavan – Arjun Debnath

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Did you manage to play any tennis yesterday?"

"No, Ganesh didn't turn up. He said he'd come till six o'clock, but he..."

"...you mean 'by six o'clock', don't you?"

"By six o'clock", till six o'clock, what difference does it make?"

"It makes a big difference! When somebody says he'll be there by six o'clock, it means that he will be there before six o'clock."

"I see. So, if my father tells me to be home by nine, does it mean I should be there before nine?"

"In a sense, yes. What he means is that you can't stay out after nine. You should be home before nine."

"O.K. I think I've understood that. What does 'till' mean?" "When somebody says 'I'll be in my office till six o'clock', it means he will leave office only after six." "Wait a minute! If I say I'll be in my office until six o'clock', doesn't it mean the same thing?"

"That's right, 'till' and 'until' mean the same thing."

"I see. The principal of our school arrives at seven thirty and stays till five o'clock."

"That's good example. So, if you want to see him..."

"... I must be in his office by five o'clock."

"It would be a good idea if you are there by four thirty. I doubt if he'd be very pleased if you walked into his office a few minutes before five."

"That's true. He'd probably be getting ready to leave. But when you want somebody to arrive at a particular time, then what do you say?"

"If you want to be specific, then use 'at'. Be in my office at four thirty."

"That means I should be there at exactly four thirty?"

"That's right. But if I say, be in my office by five thirty, it means..." ... be there before five thirty."

"Excellent! Are you going to play tennis tomorrow, then?"

"No. I won't probably play tennis."

"I probably won't play tennis. 'Probably' should come before the negative won't."

"Is that a rule?"

"Yes, it is. You see usually in a negative sentence, adverbials like 'probably', 'usually', 'generally', and 'finally' come before the verb and the negative that follows it. For example; my father usually doesn't watch cricket on TV."

"My mother generally doesn't take the bus to the market. Kambli always doesn't score runs."

"It should be, Kambli doesn't always score runs. You see, 'always' and 'ever' are exceptions to the rule. They come after the negative."

"I see. So, I have to say, Tendulkar doesn't always score a century."

"That's right. My boss isn't ever going to stop smoking."

"I'm never going to start smoking!" "Good for you!"

"An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes, which can be made, in a very narrow field," Neils Bohr.

Published in The Hindu on May 11, 1996.

Word of the day

Shibboleth:
A favourite saying of a group, organisation or individual

Synonyms: Catchword, motto, slogan

Usage: *Her use of slang was a shibboleth of youth culture.*

Pronunciation:
newsth.live/Shibbolethpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: ʃɪbəlɛθ

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

thehindubusinessline.
FRIDAY - MAY 9, 2025

Critical deal

Ukraine mineral wealth in US, Russia, EU control

The US and Ukraine, until recently at loggerheads, entered into an agreement on April 30. The agreement has been hailed respectively as an act of great statesmanship, a climb down by both sides and meaningless. In reality it is all of these. At its core lie two concessions, one by the US and one by Ukraine. The former has agreed not to insist that the latter treat the billions of dollars of military aid since 2022 as debt, to be repaid by Ukraine via rights granted to US companies to mine the mineral wealth of Ukraine (lithium, titanium, graphite, beryllium, copper, lead, zinc, among others).

The latter has agreed to let American companies mine for not just minerals but also oil and gas. And both have agreed to put up 50 per cent each into a fund that will finance all these mining operations. That's one part of the agreement. A second part relates to Europe which arguably has a greater political stake in Ukraine than the US. Ukraine wants to join the European Union and the EU won't mind it if they can get a shot at the minerals, oil and gas. The US has agreed not to get preferential treatment in this regard, so all is well for the moment. It has also agreed to let the EU invest in Ukraine. A third part is about the elephant in the room: US military assistance to Ukraine. Trump had refused to continue it, but has now agreed to provide it. The minerals deal was a precondition to this continuance. That said, the US can stop the assistance at any time, contingent presumably on Ukrainian good behaviour and other undisclosed conditions. It seems the Ukrainians insisted that for the first 10 years all profits would be reinvested in Ukraine. The US has agreed to this as well. But it's difficult to see how this will be implemented.

It is hard to deny that this is a triumph for Trump and a 'down, boy' moment for Volodomyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian president. His minor victory is limited to getting the US to agree to reduce Ukraine's share in the investment fund to 50 per cent, from 67 per cent. For the rest, the US has got what it wants, including the right to treat Ukraine as its 51st state. There is, of course, the big question of how the minerals deal will impact China as the prime supplier of critical minerals. Even as China's control has dropped since it throttled Japan's auto sector a few years back, China will be keenly watching how this deal plays out.

That leaves Russia. Trump's softness towards it will get tested now. With a few hundred billion dollars committed to investment in Ukraine he will have to persuade Putin to stop the war. Chances are Ukraine will have to cede the territory in the east now controlled by Russia. This is because there's not a chance in a month of Sundays that it can recover that area. It is not inconceivable that the US has already forced Russia and Ukraine to this outcome. The world need only await a formal agreement now wherein Russia and US get the winners' spoils and Ukraine is reminded of its place in the world.

Reprioritising issues in insurance sector

REFORMS NEEDED. There is need for a comprehensive pricing review for all insurance segments

GETTY IMAGES

MADHUSUDHAN PILLAI

The government plans to permit 100 per cent FDI in the insurance sector. Legislative intent since 1993 has been to boost competition, expand rural coverage, and fund infrastructure.

The number of insurers has grown significantly: from four to 34 in non-life/health and from a LIC monopoly to 26 life insurers. Premiums have surged — non-life from ₹11,808 crore in 2001-02 to ₹3.07 lakh crore in FY2025, and life from ₹56,000 crore to ₹9 lakh crore. Assets under management reached ₹67 lakh crore in 2024. However, insurance penetration remains low at 4 per cent of GDP versus the global average of 6.4 per cent. Coverage gaps persist, including high out-of-pocket medical costs and low disaster protection, indicating need for further reforms.

PROPOSED REFORMS

Capital requirements and FDI: When private insurance was reintroduced in 2000, capital requirements were set at ₹100 crore to ensure only serious, financially strong players entered the market. Adjusted for inflation, this figure would be ₹363 crore in FY 2024-25. FDI limits have gradually increased from 26 per cent in 2000 to 74 per cent by 2021.

Yet, actual FDI utilisation remains modest: 20.29 per cent in non-life, 35.23 per cent in life insurance and 34.68 per cent in standalone health as per the IRDAI Report 2023-24. Notably, only four life insurers have utilised the 74 per cent limit with none from non-life.

These figures suggest that while regulatory openness has increased, market interest has been selective. MNC insurers may also have seen the benefit of a local player to deal with distribution and regulatory management.

Permitting 100 per cent FDI could attract new players and present India as a fully liberalised insurance market on the global stage. However, it is not a definite route to insurance for all by 2047.

Composite licenses: Historically, insurers have not been encouraged to operate in both life and non-life segments under the same licence, to preserve solvency and maintain regulatory clarity. The proposed shift to composite licenses — allowing one company to offer both products — raises concerns.

Life and non-life products differ fundamentally in terms of contract length, risk profile, and asset-liability management. The risks far outweigh the perceived benefits for distribution typically for bank led insurers.

Separate legal entities under a group structure are preferred so that there is clear ring fencing of assets for the upcoming risk-based supervision. Hence this proposal has to be reviewed.

Operational efficiencies can still be achieved via shared services in technology, HR, and infrastructure without merging business lines.

Lower capital thresholds: Introducing a limited number of licenses with reduced capital requirements on a case-to-case basis could improve insurance access in rural or social sectors. However, the policy must avoid indiscriminate licensing that could lead to fragmentation and systemic risk due to undercapitalised firms.

> **Insurers should publish detailed expense management schedules and** cash flow metrics along with current disclosures to promote transparency

STRATEGIC AGENDA: 2025-2030

The IRDAI is taking steps towards a risk-based capital approach along with a risk-based supervision framework. Ease of doing business, operational flexibility, improving distribution efficiency and focus on tech led innovation have been regulatory priorities. However, following key issues remain.

Persistent losses, inadequate pricing and inefficiencies: The combined ratio (claims + expenses as a proportion of premium) across the industry remains over 100 per cent, indicating widespread underwriting losses and the need for better cost control. In FY 2023-24 the gross expenses of management of the non-life industry was ₹78,254 crore (26.65 per cent) and in life ₹1,40,567 crore (16.94 per cent) showing a potential for efficiencies.

Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) in non-life insurance have been losing approximately ₹15 crore per day since FY2020 considering the ₹17,250 crore in capital infusions. Over 90 per cent of capital erosion in the three PSU non-life insurers stems from underpriced group health policies.

Correcting this trend is essential, as also instituting a comprehensive pricing review for all insurance segments.

Retail investor trust and valuation concerns: Accessing public markets for capital is important for the industry.

Currently, per IRDAI's disclaimer they do not certify prospectus data accuracy in public issues and this does reduce retail investor confidence. Restated accounts just prior to public issue, and valuation asymmetries — particularly in IPOs and private placements-pose risks to retail investors. Addressing conflicts of interest, particularly in listing insurers' placements with intermediaries or their relatives, and vice versa, is vital to retaining retail investor trust. Misleading omissions are addressed only under Section 34 of the Companies Act.

Regulatory and interdepartmental coordination: Coordination among regulators is crucial. For instance, the RBI can monitor all payments to banks, NBFCs and associates from insurers.

The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) which sets the price for third party (TP) motor premium should know how much of this premium is retained by insurers after direct and indirect payments to motor insurance service providers and other intermediaries. SEBI can ensure that IPOs and PE rounds clearly disclose valuation bases and capital burn strategies.

Improved public disclosure: Insurers should publish detailed expense management schedules and cash flow metrics along with current disclosures to promote transparency. Additionally, transforming institutions like the Insurance Information Bureau into formal data utilities could improve stakeholder access to comprehensive insurance data.

Avoiding concentration of insurance power: Concentration of market power among private insurers and intermediaries is an emerging trend. Analysing business relationship, accounting and GST data can uncover any unhealthy dominance patterns, similar to what was revealed in the 2004 Eliot Spitzer investigation in the US.

Encouraging market entry: Given that India had 107 non-life insurers in 1971 and 243 life insurers in 1956, there is precedent and arguably a need-for more insurer licences today.

A diversified ecosystem encourages competition, innovation, and resilience.

Data-driven long-term planning: A comprehensive five-year insurance sector roadmap with clearly defined deliverables should be developed and monitored.

This should be complemented by a long-term strategy extending to up to 2047.

The writer is a senior insurance professional

State as an entrepreneurial investor in climate tech

Public investments can help cushion the initial high risks, and catalyse private sector finance as technologies mature

Labanya Prakash Jena
Prasad Ashok Thakur

India's pledge to achieve net zero by 2070 underscores the urgent need for economic transformation. Scaling up next-generation net-zero solutions is essential to attaining this goal. But often, such technology can run into an early-stage funding wall. To help promising new climate technologies overcome business and policy hurdles, a paradigm shift in the government's role is crucial. By going beyond policymaking and providing subsidies to act as a strategic, entrepreneurial investor, the government can serve as an enabler.

History is rife with cases where proactive state support catalysed path-breaking innovations/discoveries — be it pioneering sea voyages in the 1600s or the moonshot mission, marking the arrival of the space age. Recent examples include state-funded research and early-stage financial support for information and communication technology, and renewable energy. Although state support for these sectors was limited, the high impact it had in pushing the frontiers of human achievements cannot be overstated. Such policies, often a characteristic of an "entrepreneurial state", entail proactive identification and investments in relatively high-risk, high-reward technological areas, usually before the private sector is willing or able to.

A significant challenge lies in advancing nascent climate technologies from laboratory-proven potential to commercial viability at scale. Private finance typically chases low-risk business opportunities with clearer pathways to profitability in the short- to medium-term. They are discouraged by the inherent technological and business uncertainties of yet-to-be-proven innovations.

This void can be filled through strategic public capital. Beyond traditional instruments like grants for basic research, public investments can be structured to exhibit patient, risk-tolerant capital. By cushioning initial high risks, such investments not only provide a lifeline but also represent confidence, thereby catalysing or 'crowding in' private sector finance as technologies mature.

STRATEGIC RISK ALLOCATION

Concerns over taxpayer money being channelled into risky ventures often dominate the discussion on state investment. In the US, Solyndra, a solar company that went bankrupt despite state-backed guarantees, remains a case in point. However, such examples ignore the characteristics of innovation finance. In such ventures, failures are a feature, not an anomaly. They are an outcome of the larger diversification

CLIMATE TECH. Funding challenges
GETTY IMAGES

strategy. The same US Department of Energy programme provided a $465 million loan to Tesla at a critical juncture. This eventually led to the electric vehicle revolution.

Thus, prudent risk management through diversification, instead of zero exposure to risk, is the way to go. A portfolio-based strategy accommodates investments across the spectrum of promising climate technologies and start-ups. This approach opens doors to potentially high returns while cushioning the impact of any single failure. Such returns can be further ploughed back to future-proofing our planet, creating a virtuous innovation cycle.

Such a model is relevant for countries like India, as current venture capital flows into Indian climate technology while growing, which remains insufficient compared to the scale of the transition challenge. To invest in climate technology, one needs to effectively combine public resources with private capital. Diverse models are suited to different growth stages and risk profiles:

Strategic grants and subsidies can be key in driving innovation, especially in early-stage research, feasibility studies and prototyping.

Public equity capital provides direct investments as patient, risk-tolerant capital, creating breathing space for companies to achieve development milestones.

It signals large-scale value-creation potential for public and private interests.

Targeted risk mitigation entails providing state-backed insurance or guarantees designed to mitigate specific risks, such as technological failure in novel systems.

Creating a state-supported or co-managed venture fund focusing exclusively on climate technologies has shown promising outcomes in Finland, Estonia and New Zealand. It amalgamates expert portfolio management with tailored financing solutions for start-ups and scale-ups. Initiatives like "Make in India" can also benefit from such funding avenues.

Jena is a Sustainable Finance Specialist at Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA), and Thakur is an alumnus of IIT Bombay and IIM Ahmedabad

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Merz must recover from this rocky start

The election of Friedrich Merz as chancellor by German legislators on Tuesday morning was meant to end months of political instability, since the collapse of Olaf Scholz's government half a year ago – itself the result of bitter infighting at the top. Many fear that this could be the last chance to keep out the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). But the humiliating result of the first ballot – in which Mr Merz became the first chancellor designate to fail to secure the majority needed in the Bundestag since the second world war – was a bad beginning. It was supposed to be a straightforward confirmation; instead, he was hobbled by rebels from his own coalition. Only 310 of its 328 legislators backed him, short of the 316 required. He was approved by 325 in a hastily scheduled second vote, hours later. LONDON, MAY 7

讀賣新聞
THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Japan-U.S. Alliance: Correct Trump's Factual Error

If U.S. President Donald Trump continues to bloviate about his dissatisfaction with the Japan-U.S. security framework, it could have a negative influence on the alliance and its deterrent power could be diminished. While he may aim to get the upper hand in negotiations with Japan, Trump's assertion that "we pay hundreds of billions of dollars to defend them [Japan], but they don't pay anything" is clearly wrong. There is an urgent need to correct this factual error and deepen Japan-U.S. defense cooperation. Regarding the Japan-U.S. intergovernmental talks on U.S. tariff measures, Trump initially insisted that the cost of military assistance would also be a subject of negotiations. However, in the end the issue has been set aside. Nevertheless, the Trump administration's assertions that the United States is forced to shoulder many defense burdens for its allies are likely to continue. TOKYO, MAY 8

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

India strikes

The Editorial, 'Avenging Pahalgam', (May 8), analysing the precision strike serves as a tribute to the government's resolve and the prowess of our armed forces to measure up to the challenges and deliver on its mandate. The resonance of 'Sindoor' in Indian psyche cannot be overstated.
By demolishing some major hatcheries of terrorism, India is not only avenging its personal loss and grief, but doing the larger world a great service in the joint fight against terrorism. The choice of women officers for making the official briefing is a befitting display of the united stand India takes in the face of challenges to its progressive, pluralist identity. India has to remain on high alert, sharpen the intelligence, security apparatus and shore up diplomatic parleys to retain the global opinion in favour of action in self defence.

Jose Abraham
Kottayam (Kerala)

A message to the world

This refers to the news item 'In biggest aerial assault, India hits 21 terror camps, infrastructure in Pakistan, PoJK' (May 8).
India has sent a strong message to the entire world that it has got zero tolerance for terrorism. The combined operations of all the three Wings of the Indian Army have meticulously, precisely targeted the terrorist camps in the wee hours without any loss on the civilian side. Hats off to those brave men and women who executed the attack under 'Operation Sindoor'. No country has commented anything against India's activities except China which chose to non-committedly utter as "regrettable". With reports reaching from Pakistan that their own civilians do not prefer to fight with India given the country's weak economic situation, the obstinacy of the Pakistani army would cost their own civilians if the fight continues. Blockage of river water, export ban, shutting down air and naval space would crush Pakistan's economy and lead to bankruptcy. India must be firm for any ceasefire, till the last terrorist organisation in Pakistan and PoK are eliminated and crushed.

RV Baskaran
Chennai

Markets calm

Usually, any disturbance in the nation or at its borders has an adverse impact on the markets. Perhaps for the first time the operations carried out against the Pak-based terror groups inside Pakistan territory has had little or no impact on the stock markets.
There is a joy in the nation at the actions of the Indian army and people believe that Pakistani terror groups were served just desserts. However, this is not the end of the matter and India must be warned about the future attempts at retaliation. Mock drills are a good idea and must continue.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

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A transformational deal

UK-India FTA goes beyond trade and tariffs

Harsh Pati Singhania

THE FTA. Expected to streamline regulatory co-operation

The India-UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks a defining milestone in India's global economic journey and is aligned with vision of Viksit Bharat 2047. It is by far the most comprehensive deal India has signed with any major developed nation. For the UK, it is the biggest and the most economically significant deal post-Brexit.

For India, which is soon to become the world's third-largest economy, this deal positions us to integrate more deeply into global value chains while maintaining our commitment to inclusive and sustainable growth.

A WIN-WIN DEAL

The annual boost to UK GDP is projected to be £4.8 billion within the next 15 years and bilateral trade, currently at £42.8 billion, by £25.5 billion every year over the long run.

Indian businesses, especially in labour intensive sectors like textiles, processed foods, etc., will benefit from zero or reduced tariffs on a wide range of goods exported to the UK. For example, share of Indian textile exports to the UK is only 5 per cent *vis-a-vis* China (21 per cent) and Bangladesh (18 per cent). An increased share from reduced tariffs could significantly boost our exports by over $1 billion.

Similarly, India's footwear exports to the UK are expected to more than double to over $550 million, aided by tariff reduction. At the same time, Indian consumers will enjoy greater access to high-quality UK goods, from automobiles to beverages, cosmetics, and medical devices. Importantly, Indian firms will also gain unprecedented access to UK government procurement — a market worth billions.

For manufactured goods tariffs will be significantly reduced or eliminated including automotive components, industrial machinery, optical instruments, processed foods and more. The deal is expected to streamline regulatory cooperation to allow faster market access for Indian generics and UK medical innovations. It would encourage investments in bilateral value chains, including in defence and aerospace, renewables and mobility solutions.

Equally vital is the FTA's support for digital trade and innovation. It sets the ground for future cooperation in e-commerce, cybersecurity, and AI – critical for emerging tech sectors. The inclusion of a dedicated Innovation Working Group signals a shared commitment to co-develop next-generation solutions in clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and agri-tech.

This agreement incorporates India's strongest commitments on sustainability — facilitating trade in green technologies and cooperating on climate resilience.

The FTA also includes provisions on labour rights, anti-corruption, gender equality, and fair competition. The inclusion of a dedicated chapter on SMEs is particularly welcome.

Another highlight is the facilitation of professional mobility. Indian professionals and service providers — especially in sectors like IT, architecture, accountancy, and management — will now find it easier to temporarily work and collaborate in the UK.

Similarly, British professionals will benefit from streamlined visa and mobility norms when working in India. The reciprocal Double Contributions Convention (DCC) further supports this movement by ensuring professionals are not burdened by double social security payments.

Over 60,000 employees are expected to benefit from the IT sector alone and lead to savings of about 20 per cent of employee salaries. Additionally, access to UK's advanced technologies and funding opportunities would be advantageous for Indian start-ups and universities.

This agreement goes beyond trade and tariffs — it's about forging deeper people-to-people, platform-based, and strategic partnerships. It supports India's ambition to become both the world's factory and its innovation hub and for the UK, it offers access to the fastest growing consumer market.

The writer is CMD, JK Paper Ltd

A NARAYANAMOORTHY

PTI

Will the new paddy reform plan work?

CROP SHIFT. Higher paddy yield under reduced acreage is possible using tech. But getting farmers to grow oilseeds/pulses on the freed land hinges on assured procurement, fair returns

After releasing the world's first genome-edited paddy varieties at a meet organised by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research on May 4, 2025, the Union Agriculture Minister announced a new "-5, +10" plan signalling a bold policy shift in paddy cultivation; reduce 5 million hectares of area under paddy cultivation and increase its output by 10 million tonnes from the remaining area. The rationale is to use the land freed from paddy for growing oilseeds and pulses, in which India has long remained import-dependent. In theory, it promises a win-win; higher productivity, resource conservation and reduced reliance on costly imports. However, the feasibility of this strategy rests on a crucial question: Will farmers shift to crops that currently offer poor economic returns?

India is the world's largest importer of edible oils. In 2022-23, the country imported about 157.5 lakh tonnes of edible oils, spending over ₹1.67 lakh crore. Pulses also tell a similar story. Despite being the largest producer and consumer, India continues to import around 2.5 million tonnes of pulses annually. The government's plan rightly aims to address this chronic dependence. But the solution goes beyond just making land available. Farmers will only make the switch if the alternative crops promise profitability at par with paddy.

PADDY SYNDROME

Paddy remains a preferred crop for millions of farmers, not merely due to tradition or water availability, but because of the near-certain procurement under Minimum Support Price (MSP) operations. About 40 per cent of India's paddy is procured by government agencies, especially from States like Punjab, Haryana, Chhattisgarh and Telangana, ensuring a reliable income for farmers. In contrast, despite being on the MSP list, pulses and oilseeds suffer from negligible procurement.

In 2023-24, while over 55 million tonnes of paddy were procured, MSP procurement for pulses and oilseeds barely touched a few lakh tonnes. In many markets, procurement is delayed or simply absent and prices often fall below MSP. Therefore, farmers bear the full burden of market risk. Even when prices rise above MSP, as with *chana* or mustard occasionally, the volatility discourages long-term planning or investment.

The Minister's expectation that enhanced productivity in paddy will compensate for reduced area is technically sound. India's average paddy productivity stands at around 2.8 tonnes per hectare, whereas countries like China average over 4 tonnes. Raising productivity to 3.5 tonnes/ha on 35 million hectares of paddy could indeed yield the desired 10 million tonnes boost. But while technological solutions may help meet paddy targets, the policy's larger goals of cropping diversification require financial assurance for farmers.

> **Paddy remains a preferred crop for millions of farmers, not merely due to tradition** or water availability, but because of the near-certain procurement under MSP operations

NEED ASSURED RETURN

Without assured procurement and fair returns, the shift to pulses and oilseeds is unlikely to be embraced widely. In eastern India, where water tables are still high and paddy cultivation less efficient, the policy might have some influence. But across large parts of the Indo-Gangetic plains and southern States, farmers are unlikely to gamble with low-margin crops.

Fixing this will require not just expansion of procurement, but deeper reforms. The Centre's PM-AASHA scheme, which includes the Price Support Scheme (PSS), Price Deficiency Payment Scheme (PDPS) and Private Procurement initiatives, was a step in the right direction. Yet its implementation has been inconsistent and underfunded. In many States, procurement agencies lack the capacity to buy at scale and payment delays further erode farmer trust. For any crop to compete with paddy, it must have not only a declared MSP but also a functioning procurement and market linkage system with it. The private sector too must be drawn in with incentives to purchase pulses and oilseeds directly from farmers at MSP. At the same time, investment in storage, processing and logistics for non-cereal crops must increase. A consistent national policy on crop diversification linked to climate resilience and nutritional security is overdue.

To conclude, in principle, the "-5, +10" vision is bold and timely. India cannot afford to continue its current cereal-centric agriculture indefinitely, which depletes aquifers, balloons import bills and increases nutritional imbalances.

But farmers will not shift to oilseeds and pulses merely because the government wants them. They will only shift when the new pathway is more rewarding or at least equally secure as the old one. Unless procurement mechanisms are fixed, the "-5" may happen, but the "+10" and the diversification goals may remain elusive.

The writer is former full-time Member (Official), Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

Challenges in amalgamating regional rural banks

Manas R Das

The 'One State-One RRB' (OS-OR) plan has been rolled out in 10 States and one Union Territory (UT). This is the fourth phase of the consolidation programme for regional rural banks (RRBs) that was initiated in 2005-06. Twenty-six RRBs were amalgamated into 11 RRBs in 11 States/UT.

In the post-1991 reform era, the Central Government in consultation with the RBI and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (Nabard) decided to recapitalise the weak RRBs to improve their finances.

However, at March-end 2005, 42 per cent of the RRBs still reported accumulated losses. Therefore, the government initiated a consolidation programme in 2005-06 to enhance their operational viability and capitalise on economies of scale. In the first phase (2005-10), the RRBs belonging to the same sponsor bank within a State were amalgamated; in the second phase (2012-14), RRBs across sponsor banks within a State were amalgamated.

The third phase began in 2018-19 on the OS-OR principle in smaller States and reduction in the number of RRBs in larger States. Consequently, the number of RRBs reduced from 196 in 2005 to 43 at March-end 2021. Per an RBI analysis, these efforts improved the RRBs' profitability, capital position, asset quality and business.

THE ISSUES

The reduction in the number of RRBs under OS-OR makes economic sense, as India has a lot of banks of various genres, and this necessitates consolidation. OS-OR will likely assuage recurrent recapitalisation and accumulated losses of the RRBs. However, consolidation attempts should consider a State's economy, demography, geography, etc.

Over time, the rural/semi-urban financial landscape has changed considerably. Not only have new players like self-help groups, micro-lending institutions and fintech companies come into the picture, but the credit demand from secondary and tertiary activities is also fast increasing. There's added focus on rural infrastructure, renewable energy, housing, etc. Hence, each RRB in each State should be urged to harness its scale and scope economies to meet these challenges. During 2023-24, for the 43 RRBs together, the cost (excluding provisions and contingencies)/income ratio stood at 77.4 per cent and wages/operating expenses ratio at 72 per cent, which were obviously high. Therefore, cost optimisation is necessary, which, however, hinges on whether each RRB in each State can manage with the existing combined branch network as well as staff of the amalgamated banks. Some consolidation of the branch network is inevitable; however, rationalisation on the staff front may call for face frictions.

MERGERS. Increases concentration risk

Despite the foray of technology, 'personal touch' with villagers still matters due to low level of financial inclusion and financial literacy. Addressing these concerns would weigh on operating expenses of the RRBs. Synchronisation of technology platforms of the amalgamating RRBs, adoption of new technologies for operations including cyber security measures would necessitate substantial investment.

OS-OR potentially increases the 'concentration' risk of the RRBs. For instance, if in a year, the agriculture sector in a State fails, the sole RRB in that State will bear the entire brunt, unlike previously when all the RRBs there would have shared the risks. Under OS-OR, any reprieve from the *inter se* competition for business between the sponsor bank and the RRB isn't expected.

Three owners (Central and State governments, and sponsor bank) and two regulators/supervisors (RBI and Nabard) of the RRBs stifle their functioning and, therefore, require rebalancing.

Does OS-OR imply that the next action will be the merger of all RRBs back with their sponsor banks? If yes, that would make better economic sense.

The writer is a former Assistant General Manager (Economist), SBI. Views expressed are personal

thehindu**businessline.**

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 9, 2005

Public issues fail to bring cheer

After raking in the moolah on public issues last year, investors are finding the going tough in the current fiscal as the trend so far has not been not so good, with the returns figuring either on the negative side and if at all on the positive, only marginally so.

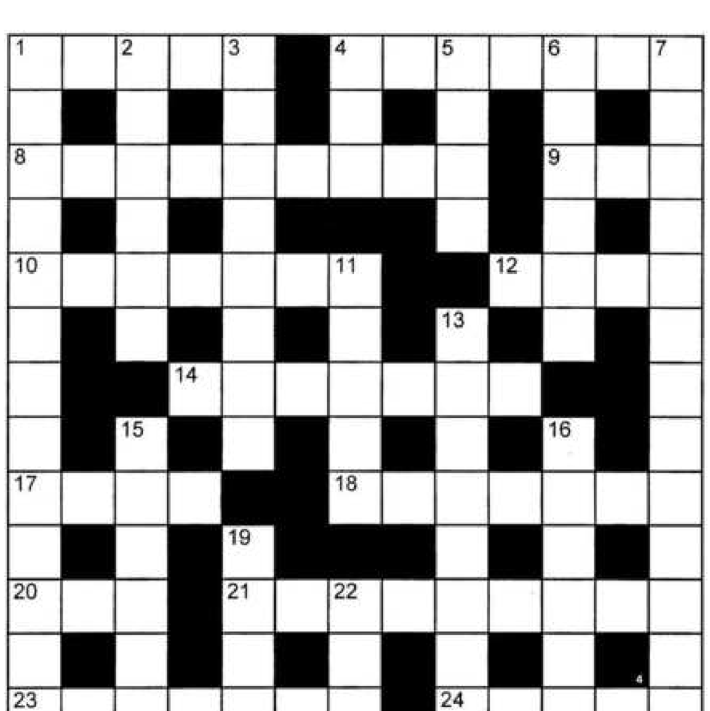
Kingfisher takes on Jet, IA with lower fares

Kingfisher Airlines on Sunday announced its fares for the Bangalore-Mumbai sector, which are at least 35 per cent lower than those of Indian Airlines and Jet Airways. The new fares, which are expected to kick-start a fresh round of fare wars among the domestic airlines, will be about 40 per cent lower than Kingfisher Airlines' competitors in the Bangalore-Delhi sector. The airline will operate on this sector from next month.

Power producers: Winds of change impart volatility

The momentum seen in profit growth of power producers in 2003-04 has slackened. Changes such as the revamp of the legal framework, securitisation of dues and progress towards open access in distribution had contributed to the momentum leading to an increase in investment interest in the sector.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2692



EASY

ACROSS

1. Spouses (5)
4. Dairy roundsman (7)
8. Got in touch (9)
9. Not strict in discipline (3)
10. Flags; officers (7)
12. Fluent, plausible (4)
14. Provide new accommodation (7)
17. Want what another has (4)
18. Keep on doggedly (7)
20. Lug (3)
21. Fruit biscuit (9)
23. Imparted direction (7)
24. Bony part of neck (5)

DOWN

1. Cricketers behind the stumps (6-7)
2. Disappear (6)
3. Spotted, as with stars (8)
4. Protective pad (3)
5. Youngsters (4)
6. In a gentle manner (6)
7. Second choice (4,4,5)
11. Plunge to the attack (5)
13. Assigns, attributes (8)
15. Disinclined (6)
16. Column (6)
19. Prince of Russian opera (4)
22. Embarrassed-looking (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Ribs the merry inhabitants of Windsor (5)
4. One with a lot of bottle doing the rounds? (7)
8. Got through to one with tact needed by CD (9)
9. Is it true Linum lost head? Not strictly so (3)
10. They carry the colours and write their name in three ways (7)
12. Hefty reversal when about fifty, but quite plausible (4)
14. Provide new quarters for Engineers who lose head employment (7)
17. Nothing dropped by diplomatic minister but a deadly sin (4)
18. Obstinately continue quietly to resist change (7)
20. The Queen has a heart, giving it in audience (3)
21. Note change of air: hairless one was Italian patriot (9)
23. Re-entered in mount, was at the wheel (7)
24. Little credit given in returning fuel, so get it in the neck (5)

DOWN

1. Janitors at side entrances seen to the rear of bats? (6-7)
2. Army front leads to his confusion, but it will disappear (6)
3. Spotted a feeling of hunger when in a snow-vehicle (8)
4. A floor covering that may be without lustre (3)
5. Term for boys that is dropped by women (4)
6. Large number idly take in fifty without severity (6)
7. Immediately after leading article is one's second choice (4,4,5)
11. Headlong rush: one fell first – disaster! (5)
13. Assigns a writer to the Sedan initially (8)
15. A piece of writing that rhymes one is reluctant to accept (6)
16. Column turned everything up in brief epitaph (6)
19. One go right at the end for operatic Prince (4)
22. One at snooker, embarrassed-looking (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2691

ACROSS 2. Anger 5. Pope 7. Link 8. Outlying 9. Discreet 11. Crew 12. One-way streets 15. Spur 17. Prompted 19. Alarmist 21. Will 22. Mean 23. Germs

DOWN 1. Opinion 2. Auk 3. Grove 4. Rat-a-tat 5. Pry 6. Pence 10. Cower 11. Cheap 13. Yapping 14. Trellis 16. Pulse 18. Otter 20. Run 21. Was

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Agenda-setting FTA with the UK

It gives Delhi some edge in negotiating similar free trade agreements with the US and the EU

India and UK have finally signed the much-awaited free trade agreement. This marks the culmination of a long-drawn-out process which was put on hold last year on account of elections in both countries. While the trade deal is important on its own merits— it hopes to double the current value of bilateral trade of about 60 billion dollars by 2030—what makes the agreement even more significant is the tectonic change in the global geoeconomic order since Donald Trump's re-election as the US president.

Given Trump's move to levy reciprocal tariffs on partner countries—subsequently put on hold to negotiate deals—bilateral trade agreements between countries are going to be the norm rather than the exception to global trade going forward. By clinching a deal with an important country in the advanced economy cohort, which offers it a large export market on no or negligible duties, India has clinched not just an important deal with the UK but also an important psychological edge in the ongoing negotiations with the US and the EU.

The broad contours of the deal seem to be a significant reduction if not outright elimination of tariffs on goods imports by the UK and India and regulatory concessions to service providers in both countries. The most important among these is the agreement to exempt them from social security contributions in both countries, which will significantly bring down costs for companies and, therefore, boost competitiveness. There is enough in the deal to please people and businesses in both countries. Indians can look forward to cheaper liquor and luxury cars from the UK and the British can buy cheaper prawns and textiles from India.

But will the deal also have a significant macroeconomic impact on both countries? The answer to this question is slightly more important for Britain than India. Keir Starmer's government is under immense pressure to deliver on growth in the context of the UK's precarious public finances and the squeeze they are putting on its welfare spending. The results of recently held local body polls in the UK underline the growing traction for the populist anti-immigrant politics of Reform UK. The Labour government is really banking on the trade deals—the UK also signed one with the US today—to boost growth and mass incomes in the country. India should make the most of this urgency by intelligently leveraging its luxury market with our competitive advantage in mass produced goods.

For Team India, a Rohit Sharma shaped hole

That Rohit Sharma has been struggling in tests has been clear for some time: The statistics (619 runs in 14 Tests at an average of 24.76 in 2024) speak for themselves. Then, in India, once you acquire the standing in cricket Sharma did, it is players who take the call on retirement—unlike in many other countries where selectors decide this. On Wednesday, the 38-year-old Sharma called time on a Test career that never quite lived up to its potential. There were moments, none greater than his performance during the Pataudi Trophy in England in 2021/22 when he scored 368 runs at an average of 52.57. But for the most part, the disparity between his home record (2,535 runs @ 51.73) and his away record (1,644 runs @ 31.01) showcased a weakness in technique and perhaps the mind too.

India may not miss Rohit the batter, especially on away tours, but Rohit the captain will be missed. His calm and laid-back approach seemed to bring the best out of many young cricketers. India's tour of England begins in June, which means his successor will have little time to get into the swing of things. England tours have never been easy for India: They have won only three series there—in 1971/72, 1986 and 2007. There has been talk that 25-year-old Shubman Gill might get the top job but his troubles against the moving ball are well documented and he averages just 35.05 in Test cricket. Another option would be the maverick wicket-keeper Rishabh Pant, but the selectors would need to consider his workload (and ignore his horrendous IPL season, as both captain and player). The best choice would have been Jasprit Bumrah but given that he keeps breaking down, the selectors are wary of picking him. Then, there is KL Rahul who was once being groomed for the job, but does not seem to be in the mix of things now.

The selectors are going to have to take a bet on someone—and hope he comes good.

India-UK FTA template for other trade deals

India's understanding with the UK on the latter's carbon tax on heavy-emission-footprint imports could become a template for its talks with the EU, which also has a similar impost

Prabhash Ranjan

The conclusion of negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the UK has been met with resounding optimism in both nations. This pivotal moment marks a significant leap forward in the bilateral relationship, representing a robust commitment to enhancing trade and economic integration. Furthermore, the finalisation of this FTA amidst the turmoil affecting the multilateral trading system — driven mainly by the erratic tariff policies of the US—underscores its importance. The India-UK FTA is a crucial countermeasure to the uncertainties in global trade. It also confirms the broader trend that other bilateral and regional sites are opening up rapidly as the World Trade Organization (WTO) struggles to live up to its reputation as the chief site for global rulemaking in international trade. At least for the foreseeable future, the bulk of rulemaking on international trade might occur through such FTAs.

While a comprehensive analysis of the FTA will only be possible once the treaty text is published, several critical issues deserve attention. Primarily, it seems that both parties have made significant gains in terms of market access for goods. India is poised to reduce its tariff rates on whiskey and gin from 150% to 75%, eventually reaching 40% over the next decade. Tariff reductions are also on the horizon for automobiles. In return, Indian textiles, footwear, leather products, and gems and jewellery will enjoy preferential access to the UK market.

At a time when India's exports to the US face substantial obstacles, this preferential access to the UK market presents a valuable opportunity for Indian businesses. While the UK market may be smaller than the American one, this arrangement will bolster Indian exports and mitigate some of the setbacks caused by the Trumpian tariffs. Additionally, India stands to gain in the realm of services as the UK commits to liberalising its labour market, facilitating easier access for Indian professionals seeking opportunities in the UK.

As highlighted in the UK government's press release, the inclusion of non-trade issues such as labour rights, gender, anti-corruption measures, and development is a pivotal aspect of the FTA. While the depth of India's commitments on these fronts can be determined only when the text becomes available, the decision to incorporate these non-trade elements into the FTA is noteworthy.

Take labour, for instance. Historically, New Delhi has resisted the introduction of labour issues into economic treaties, holding the position that trade agreements should not serve as mechanisms for policing a nation's adherence to labour laws. There has also been a valid concern that developed nations might exploit labour standards as a pretext for protectionism. However, India's recent trend in FTA negotiations signals a significant shift in perspective regarding the linkage between trade and labour rights.

India's acceptance of labour-related provisions in its FTA with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) last year and its commitments under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) supply chain agreement illustrate a departure from its longstanding opposition. The inclusion of labour standards in the FTA with the UK marks yet another decisive step for India, showcasing its evolution towards embracing a stance that integrates trade and labour rights. Likewise, India has accepted obligations on government procurement, which it has traditionally kept out of FTAs.

Interestingly, the press releases issued by the two countries do not mention the elephant in the room — the UK's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, or CBAM, which would impose a tax on India's carbon-intensive products such as steel, aluminium, and cement. This has been a sticky issue between the two sides because India believes it puts its products at a competitive disadvantage. It is unclear whether the two sides have resolved their differences or if this issue has been dropped from the FTA. The CBAM issue is equally pertinent in India's FTA negotiations with the EU. What India has agreed with the UK on CBAM might become a template in its talks with the EU.

Foreign investment protection remains absent from the FTA. The two countries need to secure a bilateral investment treaty soon. SHUTTERSTOCK

Foreign investment protection remains absent from the FTA as the two parties negotiate a separate Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT), which was initially intended to be finalised alongside the FTA. In an era dominated by intricate global supply chains, trade and investment are inextricably linked. Thus, securing a BIT with the UK is equally important as it will safeguard British investments in India under international law and vice versa. Unfortunately, updates on the BIT have been sparse, and finalisation appears to be pending.

India's unilateral termination of the 1994 BIT between the two sides in 2017 raised concerns among foreign investors. While the terminated BIT protects investments made before the termination for 15 years, that is till 2032, any investments made after the termination are excluded from international legal protections. This uncertainty has understandably caused anxiety among foreign investors.

The BIT negotiations must conclude quickly, especially considering India's intention to revise its 2015 Model BIT, indicating a readiness to adopt more flexible terms. Finalising this agreement is vital for boosting investor confidence and fully realising the benefits of the India-UK FTA.

A key question is when the treaty is expected to come into force. That will take some time. Before ratifying the treaty, the UK, in accordance with its Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, will place the treaty on the floor of its parliament for scrutiny. The UK followed this trend for its recent FTAs with Australia and New Zealand. There is no institutionalised mechanism in India for parliamentary scrutiny of a treaty before its ratification.

In sum, the India-UK FTA is a key milestone and one of the few trade agreements India has signed with a developed economy. It will provide a template for India's future FTA engagements, especially on trade issues, and the EU and others will rely on it to strike a deal with India.

Prabhash Ranjan is professor and vice-dean (research), Jindal Global Law School, O P Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal

After Pahalgam, what next for Islamabad?

Tara Kartha

The drums of war are rising in crescendo, as India launched attacks against terrorist camps in not only Pakistan occupied Kashmir, but for the first time since 1971 against Pakistan itself, and that too in the heart of Punjab. There is a huge potential for escalation, especially since it seems that Pakistan army chief General Asim Munir, has put his reputation on the line by climbing onto a tank at an army exercise and declaring that any Indian "military misadventure" would be met by a "swift notch up response".

But are attacks by India in fact a military misadventure? By any analysis point, it is not. It is a calculated, extremely precise counterterrorism attack: Foreign secretary Vikram Misri said they were "non-escalatory... measured... and did not hit any military target". The message was clear. It was up to Pakistan to decide whether it wanted to hit civilians and the Indian army. After all, there are no terrorist camps here.

There was another type of signalling a day earlier. The ministry of home affairs ordered civil defence drills in 244 districts, indicating that India was readying itself for a complete war. Again, however, this was a defensive measure mobilising only voluntary organisations like the National Cadet Corps, or the National Service Scheme.

Against all these carefully modulated efforts, the question is what Pakistan can gainfully do. Of General Munir's aggression, there can be little doubt. His fiery speech on April 18, on the two-nation theory, that preceded a terrorist attack of a cruelly deliberate communal colour by four days seemed to indicate a determination to goad India to action. That Munir is under severe stress is evident. Terrorist activity in Pakistan has gone up by some 66%, to a nine-year high. The establishment has jailed former Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan, who has a huge following. It has also jailed a former ISI chief, Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, and at least another clutch of senior officers including a general who refused to fire upon his own people. It's not just that Munir may have made himself hugely unpopular. What is apparent is the humiliation of having been pushed out unceremoniously as DG ISI by an irate Imran Khan obviously went deep, and he wielded the whip, waiting a long time for the right opportunity. In the present crisis, therefore, don't expect the earlier carefully calibrated Pakistan air response to Balakot, when the Air Force saved national pride but hit nothing very much, is going to be repeated. That was under General Bajwa, a man of an entirely different calibre and someone who wanted to create trade links with India. General Munir wants to make a statement to beef up his image. Unless he is prevailed upon to exercise better sense by outside actors. But that is a problem.

The problem is that the so-called international community is badly bogged down.

THE ULTIMATE IRONY WOULD BE IF BEIJING TURNS OUT TO BE THE DE-ESCALATOR, GIVEN ITS CLOUT WITH PAKISTAN

Once a Pakistani or even Indian PM could talk to Washington and be assured of action. For instance, President Donald Trump, in his first term, claimed to have got the captured fighter pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan released, leading to a quick drawn down of tensions. Then there was the dressing down given to Nawaz Sharif after Kargil by President Bill Clinton. This time round, the White House itself is in rotation mode with NSA Mike Waltz shifted out, controversy around defence secretary Peter Hegseth, six staffers removed from the National Security Council, and a spate of resignations. President Trump's statement of a 'thousand year' conflict on Kashmir shows serious lack of knowledge. Vice President JD Vance's advice to India to not provoke a "broader regional conflict', may mean a warning that China may step in, or it may mean nothing at all. The chaos at the top is unprecedented.

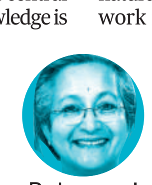
To the east, Moscow is in even worse straits. After President Vladimir Putin offered unqualified support, that stance was revised to offer mediation, a position that the Kremlin knows is anathema to Delhi. The sending of a plane load of missiles was heartening, but a Russian military shoulder is now probably unavailable. Then there's the European Union's statement on restraint, at a time when it is struggling with an economic meltdown, and severe infighting. Israel, while actively and strongly sympathising with India, has little space given the mess in Gaza. In sum, the world simply doesn't care. Too many are dying in messy wars for an India-Pakistan jostling to make much difference. This is the most dangerous part of this series of events. The ultimate irony would be if the de-escalator turns out to be Beijing. It's clout with Pakistan is unquestionable. Besides, it would probably find itself funding the Pakistani war, given that financial institutions will draw back. But nations seldom act rationally. There is an equal chance it could go the other way, a danger that Delhi is fully aware of.

There is hope, however. An unacknowledged truth is India and Pakistan have been far more mature in their actions than many Western nations. Neither of the three wars saw large scale bombing of civilian targets; when an India missile went off course to hit Pakistan, the army response was comparatively mild. As of now, the directors general of military operations on both sides are talking. That's one hopeful sign. So is the fact that Lieutenant General Muhammad Asim Malik, director general of the Inter-Service Intelligence has been appointed Pakistan's national security advisor. If the two intelligence chiefs decide to talk, it matters. A civilian NSA would never have been taken seriously.

Both countries could announce a joint initiative towards a verifiable elimination of terrorism from the subcontinent, a not so impossible event given the repetition *ad nauseam* of how Pakistan faces the worst terrorism in the world. The over the horizon prospect is the opening of trade and industry. In the extremely likely option that this doesn't sell, the only option is hit everything linked to terror including the hidden actors. It is risky. But the bottom lesson is this. You have to fight your own battles. Operation Sindoor just demonstrated that.

Tara Kartha is director (research), Centre for Land Warfare Studies. The views expressed are personal

Birthday wishes & a request to Sir David Attenborough



Rajeswari S Raina

Sir David Attenborough, who turned 99 on Wednesday, is no stranger to the wild and the unusual. This birthday greeting is a plea from the desolate landscape of higher education and for the planet he loves—save the social sciences and humanities! Help them learn and communicate about our beautiful planet. Attenborough's work brings to us the interconnectedness and the delicate balance of Life on Earth. These television series, books, lectures and documentary films reveal our Planet Earth, igniting in us a spirit of oneness with nature, a sense of awe and humility, and a combination of deep respect, love and valour. They amplify our need to know how different we are as a species. Our exosomatic urges of accumulation and control that build our social systems contradict and steadily destroy the endosomatic needs and expressions of diverse life forms, the dynamic earth systems that shape and co-evolve within this Living Planet.

Knowledge and the act of knowing is central to all life on Earth. Cultivating that knowledge is not just a necessity for survival but also for the larger well-being, sustainability, diversity and justice for all. Through this birthday greeting we acknowledge and celebrate the social sciences and humanities that are somewhat unappreciated today in the modern university system. All living beings know freshwater systems. In the paternal guard for a baby lily-trotter, courtship of the elegant Clark's grebe, the cool trap constructed by an alligator, or the alarm among scientists who note that only a third of the planet's rivers reach the ocean, we see life. We watch and listen carefully when Attenborough's films show freshwater life. Attenborough's passionate communication raises a toast to knowledge; to the expertise vested with academics, experiential knowledge cherished and validated by indigenous people, and the multiple forms of knowledge.

Despite this passionate communication, critics point out how Attenborough downplays the massive negative impact that we, as one species, have wrought on our planet's health and sustainability. George Monbiot accused Attenborough of generating complacency, ignorance and confusion about our environmental challenges. A concern that Attenborough has since addressed, telling us how the climate crisis is caused and how our planet matters.

Our need to know more about the social systems that interact with nature has never been so acute. Attenborough's forceful narratives of nature's principles, interactions and processes pay scant attention to the institutions or rules that govern social systems and economies. The exposé on planetary systems reveal no "natural capital" in these systems. How did we shift from being a part of nature to becoming masters of nature, enslaving and extracting, plundering and dumping, and now, starting to re-engineer the very biophysical foundations of life ?

Our social systems built on the institutions of private property and wealth, measured not in healthy, happy communities but in monetary value, are at loggerheads with natural systems. Attenborough shows us indigenous people and animals sharing, exchanging, co-evolving in specific ecosystems. Deeper social science investigations are necessary on our understanding of productive resources, on why we ignore the commons, and govern both inappropriately. Global commons like the atmosphere and the oceans, stretched to their limits with emissions and waste, demand that we revisit fundamental concepts like externality and profit. Every extractive industry that ends life and destroys habitats pushes us to revise our notions of crime and justice.

Attenborough's communication about the natural world brings awareness and hope. This work makes it eminently clear that it is not enough to communicate simple and politically cleansed messages to policymakers about catastrophic warming. At the planetary level, all of us struggle with heat stress, forest fires, floods, other extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, and poor national capacities for adaptation and mitigation. We need the social sciences to research how governments and corporates devise ways to maintain their dynamic stability without losing control over the creation and concentration of wealth. Fundamental inquiry and learning about entangled social and natural systems must be promoted.

Ecological economists conceptualise the economy embedded in society, which, in turn, is a sub-set of the environment. Their studies of complex relations between human households and nature's households need the power and appeal of the humanities to effect change. There are terrains where the poor are forced into extractive industries, poaching and encroachment of wildlife habitats. Political ecology scholarship needs to engage with international trade and rich countries that consume such extracted, high-value products. The voice of the social sciences and humanities are crucial for learning about and communicating our planetary stress. Sociology, history, political science, linguistics, and behavioural sciences inform Attenborough's stories , even as the social sciences and humanities are being financially whittled down in universities . Your voice, Sir David, in support of the social sciences and humanities will go a long way to conserve life on Earth.

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Signals from HDI ranking

Public delivery of social infrastructure is key weakness

India's progress three notches up the latest Human Development Index (HDI) offers only modest cause for satisfaction. That is because the country remains in the bottom half of the table of 193 countries, moving from rank 133 in 2022 to 130 in 2023. As the report notes, India remains in the medium human-development category. There are upsides to this story. With its HDI value improving from 0.676 in 2022 to 0.685 in 2023, the report points out that India is on the threshold for high human development, for which the HDI value is at or greater than 0.700. The report also notes that India's HDI value has increased by over 53 per cent since 1990, growing faster than both the global and South Asian averages. This latter observation offers pointers to how India can make a leap up the HDI value chain by delivering better socioeconomic outcomes for the majority of its population.

The key area in which India has recorded progress is life expectancy, which jumped from 58.6 years in 1990 to 72 years in 2023. This improvement has been attributed to such programmes as the National Health Mission, Ayushman Bharat, and Poshan Abhiyaan. Mean duration of schooling has also improved, with children likely to stay in school for 13 years, as against 8.2 years in 1990, thanks to national education programmes. The reduction in multidimensional poverty has been one of the most noticeable achievements of the post-reform years, with some 135 million Indians escaping from this trap between 2015-16 and 2019-21. Yet India remains an HDI laggard in the neighbourhood. China, the world's second-largest economy, ranks 75th, and even smaller economies such as Sri Lanka (78) and Bhutan (127) rank above India, while Bangladesh, at 130, is on a par. Only Nepal (145), Myanmar (149), and Pakistan (168), all facing deep political turmoil, weigh in below India. According to the report, growing inequality and gender disparities are dragging India down the HDI scale. In fact, inequality has reduced India's HDI by 30.7 per cent, among the highest losses in the region.

The signals from the HDI report, then, are clear and unambiguous. India urgently needs to step up expenditure on the delivery of public social infrastructure so that more citizens down the income ladder have the necessary access to quality education and health care to bootstrap them into the ranks of the prosperous. Programmes such as the National Health Insurance Scheme and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, focused on educating the girl child, have undoubtedly helped. But India's expenditure on health and education remains grossly inadequate to serve as game changers in the HDI and economic growth in the way it has done in Southeast Asia and the Tiger economies. Health expenditure has hovered between 4 per cent and 3.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) — among the lowest in the world. The increasing abdication of the government from health care leaves the Indian population vulnerable to a mostly unregulated private sector. Likewise, public spending on education has been 3-4 per cent of GDP, inadequate by any measure and well behind China's 6.13 per cent. These are well-known deficiencies, and the central and state governments have to find suitable policy responses or the fiscal space to bridge this yawning socioeconomic gap.

Increasing productivity

Genome-edited rice varieties will boost yields

India's recent release of two genome-edited rice varieties marks a significant milestone in agricultural innovation. Developed by using Site Directed Nuclease 1 (SDN1) genome-editing technology, DRR Dhan 100 (Kamala) and Pusa DST Rice 1 not only promise yield increases of up to 30 per cent but also offer a response to the country's intertwined challenges of food security, environmental degradation, and regional agricultural imbalances. Both the rice strains promise results better than their parent varieties, Samba Mahsuri (BPT 5204) and Cottondora Sannalu (MTU-1010), respectively. What makes these genome-edited rice varieties particularly attractive is the host of agronomic advantages they offer. Requiring 15-20 days less to mature than conventional varieties, they enable quicker crop rotation and more efficient use of land.

More importantly, their reduced water requirement and higher nitrogen-use efficiency can potentially address one of the most pressing environmental concerns in Indian agriculture — unsustainable groundwater extraction, especially in Punjab and Haryana. These two states, while being major rice producers in the country, are also among the worst-affected by the depletion of underground aquifers, driven by decades of water-intensive paddy cultivation. By offering resilience to drought, salinity, and degraded soils, gene-edited rice varieties can be a game changer for eastern Uttar Pradesh, coastal West Bengal, and parts of Odisha and Maharashtra — the regions that have historically underperformed in rice productivity due to challenging soil and climatic conditions. Encouraging cultivation in these underutilised areas can diversify the geographical expanse of rice production, reduce ecological stress in overburdened regions, and contribute to a more equitable agricultural economy.

Critically, gene-editing technologies like SDN1 do not introduce foreign deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), distinguishing them from traditional genetically modified (GM) organisms. This means fewer regulatory and ethical hurdles, greater public acceptance, and faster adoption. At the same time, policy mechanisms need to evolve alongside science. State procurement agencies must recognise these varieties and integrate them in procurement and public distribution. Extension activities to train farmers and clear guidelines governing field-level deployment can mitigate biosafety concerns.

Given India's needs, the country should also revisit its stance on genetically modified (GM) crops. Earlier, in 2022, the government approved the GM mustard hybrid, DMH-11. It was a landmark move away from previous ambivalence towards a more supportive stance on GM crops. With proper regulation and scientific transparency, GM varieties can boost productivity, improve resistance to biotic stress, and reduce input costs. The Union government was also directed by the Supreme Court to draft a national policy on GM crops for research, cultivation, and trade & commerce. The government must explore the possibilities. Further, to harness the potential of biotechnology, India should scale up investment in agricultural research & development, build institutional support for biotechnology deployment, and integrate climate resilience into its food-security strategies. The current budgetary allocation for agricultural research & development expenditure is only ₹10,466 crore, and needs to increase within the next 2-3 years. Agricultural biotechnology is now indispensable for ensuring food and nutritional security in the long term.

No, the global economy isn't falling apart

Despite warnings of a meltdown, Trump's policies have barely dented global growth forecasts


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Since April 2 — the day President Donald Trump declared as "Liberation Day" — we have been told that the world economy is headed for a massive setback and markets for a meltdown.

Mr Trump announced reciprocal tariffs on some 180 countries and territories. On April 9, he declared a 90-day pause on these tariffs for all countries except China. Since then, he has raised tariffs on Chinese imports to 145 per cent. The Chinese have retaliated with a 125 per cent tariff on imports from the US.

President Trump is confident that tariffs with all countries, including China, will be suitably negotiated. But nobody knows by what date and at what levels the tariffs will settle. In early April, experts warned that prolonged uncertainty caused by Mr Trump's tariff war would result in economic chaos.


FINGER ON THE PULSE
T T RAM MOHAN

A month on, the picture is nowhere near as grim as experts made it out to be. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) sees global economic growth slowing from 3.3 per cent last year to 2.8 per cent this year — a deceleration of 0.5 percentage points. The US economy is expected to slow from 2.8 per cent in 2024 to 1.8 per cent in 2025. That seems sharp, except that US growth in recent years has been powered by heavy government borrowings. The long-term trend growth rate for the US is 2 per cent; 1.8 per cent is not very far from the trend.

China is projected to slow down from 5 per cent to 4 per cent, which is better than the 3 per cent many commentators had predicted even without the Trump tariffs. The Indian economy will grow at 6.2 per cent instead of 6.5 per cent. So, yes, the Trump tariffs will adversely impact growth worldwide. However, the IMF projections hardly point to an economic collapse.

To judge how big the tariff shock is, just look at the impact of two major shocks of the past, the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 and the Covid crisis of 2020. The GFC caused world economic growth to fall from 2.7 per cent in 2008 to minus 0.4 per cent in 2009, a decline of 3.1 percentage points. The Covid crisis saw global growth fall from 2.9 per cent in 2019 to minus 2.7 per cent in 2020, a drop of 5.6 percentage points. The drop in global growth of 0.5 percentage points projected on account of the tariff shock seems piffling in comparison.

Some commentators believe an economic crisis will emanate, not from the real economy, but from the financial sector. The yield on US 10-year government bonds rose from 4.19 per cent on April 2 to 4.39 per cent on April 9, when Mr Trump announced the 90-day pause in what was seen as an attempt to calm the bond market. The S&P 500 sank by 12 per cent between April 2 and April 8. The US dollar index, which measures the value of the dollar with respect to six currencies, has fallen by nearly 4 per cent up to May 6 with respect to the level on April 2.

Many commentators saw the events between April 2 and April 9 as a vote of no confidence on the part of investors in the Trump administration and the US economy. They said investors were reacting to the prospect of low growth, rising inflation, and the erosion of the rule of law in the US — and were exiting American bonds and equities.

US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent was quick to scotch the interpretation. Mr Bessent observed that the selloff in US bonds in the first week of April was a story he had seen several times in his career. Mr Bessent said, "There's one of these deleveraging convulsions that's going on right now in the markets. It's in the fixed-income market. There are some very large leverage players who are experiencing losses and are having to deleverage." Mr Bessent, a legendary hedge fund manager, would know a thing or two about financial markets.

Hedge funds borrow in the repo market to take bets on US government bonds using various trades. They use government bonds as collateral for their borrowings. When the value of government bonds falls, they get "margin calls" from the lenders — that is, they are asked to provide more cash towards meeting margin requirements.

Hedge funds may sell government bonds they hold in order to generate cash to pay for higher margins. Or they may "unwind" their trading positions — that is, sell bonds and use the proceeds to repay lenders or "deleverage". In either case, bond yields would move up. They may also sell equities to raise cash, which would explain why bond and stock prices fall simultaneously in such episodes.

These episodes can lead to a crisis if bank exposure to hedge funds is excessive. Or if banks themselves are taking large trading positions similar to those of hedge funds, which would require them to sell bonds and incur mark-to-market losses when bond yields move against them. Neither possibility is high today.

Following the collapse of the hedge fund Long Term Capital Management (LTCM) in 1998, bank exposure to Highly Leveraged Institutions came to be closely monitored. Bank ownership of hedge funds in the US is severely restricted by the Volcker Rule. Proprietary trading by banks has been dis-incentivised by higher capital requirements for such trading. Banks are much better capitalised today than during the GFC of 2008. The chances of hedge funds blowing up the banking system and causing a financial meltdown are much lower today.

Mr Bessent's reading of the convulsions in the US bond market after Liberation Day has turned out to be correct. The yield on US government bonds dropped to 4.32 per cent on May 12 from 4.49 per cent on April 11, and several US government bond auctions since then have gone through smoothly. The US stock market too has recovered smartly.

The Economist, which is among the most strident critics of Mr Trump's economic policies, admits that US stocks "are not pricing in a recession, let alone a trade catastrophe" (April 30, 2025). It believes the market is being myopic; it certainly didn't think the market was being myopic when yields on US government bonds surged in early April! Analysts believe that US stocks are still overvalued. It makes sense for foreign investors to exit US equities, and that could be one of many reasons for the dollar index to fall. To construe a fall in the dollar index as a lack of faith in the US economy seems far-fetched.

Mr Trump has said repeatedly that his attempts to remake the US economy would entail transition costs. As he put it, American kids will have "two dolls instead of 30 dolls" and the two dolls would cost a "couple of bucks more". The remarks enraged his critics. His critics miss the point. Mr Trump accepts there will be short-term pain, but he doesn't think his policies will result in economic apocalypse. It appears for now that the IMF and the financial markets think he's right.

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Civil-military synergy: More urgent than ever

Both the civil and military arms of a nation are crucial to governance, with jointness — collaboration among services — and integration, which involves alignment between civil and military institutions, as key aspects.

Civil-military coordination varies across political systems — authoritarian regimes see military dominance, while democracies emphasise civilian control. Post-colonial India has had to consciously evolve its civil-military relationship, shifting from a command-driven structure to one based on democratic norms and institutional synergy. Samuel Huntington's 1957 all-time classic on civil-military relations advocates military autonomy under civilian control. Echoing this, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his first Combined Commanders' Conference in 2014 stressed the need for a professional military operating within the framework of civilian supremacy. Of the 100-plus countries gaining independence after World War II, more than 70 experienced military rule. In contrast, India has upheld democratic governance and civilian control, achieving success in civil-military coordination despite challenges.


OFF THE GRID
AJAY KUMAR

When it comes to providing aid to civil authorities — whether in times of disaster or for maintaining law and order — civil-military coordination in India has been notably successful. Their support is marked by speed, discipline, and unique capabilities such as CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) emergency response, heli-lift, and underwater rescue. Their role extends beyond borders, evacuating Indians during crises and serving as "first responders" in regional humanitarian efforts.

Despite a shared commitment to national security, there are differences between the civil and military wings. Military officers, trained in a command-and-control system, value hierarchy, speed, and uniformity — irrespective of personal views — which is unlike the civil services. Short-tenures in the military limit continuity, while civil services enjoy longer tenures, creating asymmetry in institutional memory. Differences arise in areas like procurement—where the military prioritises operational performance, but the ministry insists on lowest bidder selection; and modernisation, where rigid military standard operating procedures can delay technology adoption.

Natural assets like land, spectrum, and airspace are also contested: The military sees them as vital for preparedness, while civilian authorities view them as national resources for broader development. Duplication in logistics, training, and infrastructure across the three services reflects a lack of joint planning and is viewed as inefficiency by the civil side. All this has resulted in a deep trust deficit in civil-military relations over the years.

The 1999 Kargil War exposed serious coordination gaps. In its aftermath, the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was established to enable joint planning, along with the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) for improved intelligence sharing, and India's first tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command. Although the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was proposed, it was not implemented at the time.

Strategic policymaking was strengthened with the appointment of a National Security Advisor and the empowerment of the National Security Council, while the National Technical Research Organisation boosted technical intelligence capabilities. A Department of Border Management was created to reverse the earlier approach of keeping border areas underdeveloped, and a new defence procurement procedure (DPP) was introduced to better address the unique requirements of the armed forces.

These reforms marked a shift in India's security approach. They emphasised modernisation, tech adoption, and border development. However, they overlooked civil-military trust deficits and optimal dual-use resource use. However, the IDS, DIA, and the Andaman and Nicobar Command — fell short of expectations due to weak statutory backing and limited operational impact. Similarly, the DPP did not succeed in significantly accelerating defence acquisitions.

The 2019 creation of the CDS and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) marked the second-generation reforms in civil-military relationship. The CDS, as DMA secretary and principal military advisor to the defence minister, oversees tri-service agencies and promotes jointness in operations, logistics, training, and support. The formation of the DMA marked a smooth transfer of functions from the Department of Defence. In 2023, jointness gained statutory backing through the Inter-Services Organisations Act, which empowered theatre commanders with authority comparable to that of Army General Officers Commanding in matters of command, control, and discipline across the services.

The 2019 reforms significantly advanced jointness, especially in training and logistics. Theatre commands are under active discussion, signalling further transformation. The creation of DMA also improved civil-military coordination, resolving long-pending issues with significant dual-use implications.

In 2021, policies related to geospatial data and drones eased long-standing defence restrictions. The exclusive economic zone was opened up for oil exploration. Border infrastructure development was accelerated, defence-controlled airspace was made accessible, and dual-use of defence airfields was enabled — without compromising military needs. Land transfers are now resolved more swiftly. Cultural alignment, digitisation (such as the SPARSH system), and the expanded export role of defence attachés reflect broader institutional change. Capital expenditure has risen, signalling a renewed focus on modernisation. Recruitment and training reform through the Agniveer scheme has also been implemented. Though still unfolding, these second-generation reforms are already making a lasting impact.

Modern warfare's blurred civil-military lines demand third-generation reforms aimed at deeper integration. Hybrid threats — such as cyberattacks, disinformation, and proxy wars — necessitate joint civilian-military responses. Rapid advances in dual-use technologies like artificial intelligence, drones, and space systems require co-development with civilian innovators, especially in an era of global tech sanctions and supply chain vulnerabilities.

Lawfare—using legal tools as strategic weapons—is increasingly employed by states exploiting loopholes in international agreements (particularly in the maritime domain) or legal vacuums in emerging areas like AI and drones, allowing them to gain advantages without direct conflict. Grey-zone warfare now spans nearly all domains, including the weaponisation of soft power, energy, health, and education.

A quick review of today's most serious security threats—Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, the growing Russia-China axis, erosion of globalisation, critical mineral concentration, cyberattacks, or the weakening of nuclear deterrence — all underscore the inadequacy of siloed responses. These complex 21st-century threats demand a whole-of-society approach and unprecedented synergy between civil and military institutions, making a strong case for third-generation reforms in civil-military relationship.

The author is a former defence secretary and currently a distinguished visiting professor at IIT Kanpur

The subtleties of failure

BOOK REVIEW
AKANKSHYA ABISMRUTA

Literary Activism is a project that began in 2014 with a series of annual symposia. The project aims to create a space for creative and critical discussions and intervention beyond commercial publishing, literary festivals and traditional academia. It brings together numerous national and international poets, novelists, translators, artists, journalists, scholars, filmmakers and publishers. *On Failing*, edited by Amit Chaudhuri, is a collection of eight essays and one short story presented at the fifth symposium in February 2020.

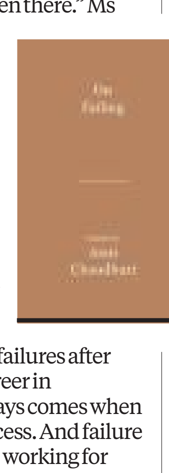
On Failing, as is evident from its title, explores the concept of failure and the space (or the lack thereof) it occupies today. In the mission statement, Mr Chaudhuri describes the relationship between creative practice and the necessity of failure. He writes, "...we might conspire to succeed only to a degree that's necessary for us to fail: because we know that it's only by failing that we can produce viable work, and only by succeeding to some extent we can have the freedom to be non-viable. Failure has not only no dignity in the post-free market world we inhabit; it has no legitimacy, no vocabulary for self-appraisal." The contributors include Tiffany Atkinson, Michel Chaouli, Ranajit Das, Amit Chaudhuri, Sunetra Gupta, Anurag Kashyap, and Lydia Davis. The essays are neither academic nor commercial. They are likely to interest the reader on account of the writers' creative approaches to locate failures.

The collection begins with an immersive essay by Chancy Martin, "Suicide a Sort of Failure". Mr Martin narrates the experience of waking up in a hospital after a failed suicide attempt. He uses *Suicide*, a novel by the French writer and photographer Édouard Levé to explore the self-irony and self-mockery of a suicidal person, the selfishness of the act, and cowardice at committing and failing at it. Without judgement, he holds space for suicidal people to be seen and understood.

In "Description of a Poet's Failure", the Sahitya Akademi winner Ranajit Das humorously explores the lack of fame in his long poetic career. He says, "...any long-standing obscurity of a poet gradually becomes a kind of fame in itself — a very stubborn, cultish, underground fame, which is always dreaded by celebrity-poets! Because this kind of clandestine fame is rumoured to have a direct link with immortality of art."

Tiffany Atkinson, Sunetra Gupta and Anurag Kashyap reflect on their experiences of failure. Ms Atkinson, giving a new spin to a cliche in her essay titled "One Door Closes, Another Door Shuts", notes, "...between the door that closes and the door that shuts there is time and space, an impasse, where forward momentum, the narrative of the meaning of one's life is momentarily suspended. In this space perhaps the feelings of failings can at least be detached from the pragmatic, and I am wondering what can happen there." Ms Gupta looks at a similar space as pure failure, something that's not allowed today in these free-market times when not only self-help books but the higher education institutions seek "to guarantee success and inure you to the various (minor) failures you might meet along the way."

Mr Kashyap talks lucidly about the cycles of failures after success throughout his career in filmmaking. "Success always comes when you're not working for success. And failure always comes when you're working for success," he says. In a similar vein, Sumana Roy explores the concept in Satyajit Ray's essays on his filmmaking in which he reiterates that failure, always unexpected, leads to something better than what was planned. She does so by focusing on one of the most important requirements of filmmaking — light.



ON FAILING
Editor: Amit Chaudhuri
Publisher: Westland
Pages: 124
Price: ₹399

In a lyrical story written in the second person "Learning to Sing", where the "you" wants to learn singing but often cannot find the perfect tone and pitch and is often critical of herself, Lydia Davis beautifully showcases the relationship between childhood, criticism, and seeking perfection as an adult. Her essay highlights that being bold enough to pursue what you like, despite being bad at it, often attracts people's admiration.

In the concluding essay "Failing and Falling", Michel Chaouli explores Johann Gottlieb Fichte's intriguing theories on the difference between animals, who move by necessity, and humans, who move by choice, to explore the concept of falling. Fichte posits that a human toddler aspires to walk on two feet by falling multiple times despite being adept on all fours but animals don't experience such a choice. From this comparison in the physiology between animals and humans, Mr Chaouli notes, "The ignorant may regard that fall as a failure when in fact it is an index of your achievement."

On Failing creates space for failure to exist without the intent to impose life lessons down anyone's throat. Ranging from the subjects of suicide to physiology, it provides an eclectic collection of essays that will invigorate the readers' mind. Today, when tech-bro podcasts ring loud on every platform on the internet with guaranteed mantras for success, these distinct voices provide respite for people in creative practice, allowing them to sit with their failures for a while. Or as Amit Chaudhuri, in "The Intimacy of Failing", suggests, "One doesn't joke about success in this silly way because we don't own it, success rules over us from a distance. Failure is ours, it will never desert us."

The reviewer is a creative writer based in Sambalpur

OUR VIEW

REUTERS

India-UK: A hard-won convergence on trade

The free trade agreement thrashed out by New Delhi and London is historic in multiple ways. Special interests should not be allowed to pose hurdles in its path to finalization

History has a strange way of playing out old patterns in new forms by taking into account exigencies of the time. India and the UK concluded talks on a free trade agreement (FTA) on 6 May. Historically, the relationship between both countries has been predicated on trade, with the passage of time determining the necessary changes required to reflect shifting terms of trade. After East India Company lost its trade monopoly 17-18 decades ago, British exporters had easy access to the Indian market, while we faced barriers; the power equation has changed dramatically since 1947. The new trade pact, a clear win-win, is a historic achievement for both nations, especially the speed with which it was concluded after the leaders of both met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in November 2024 and agreed to accelerate talks. Negotiations had been stretched out over many years, with multiple switches of UK leadership, but this agreement is unique because it finally took a left-of-centre government in London and rightist one in New Delhi to clinch a deal. This urgency could perhaps be attributed to the uncertainty created by US President Donald Trump's dismantling of global trade; in fact, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer commented that, post-Brexit, the India-UK FTA was London's most significant trade deal.

The FTA seems designed to push the envelope without harming large pockets of special interests. Apart from tariff cuts on a wide swathe of goods on both sides, London also seems to be offering India concessions for accessing the UK job market. On its part, New Delhi has promised to halve duties on whisky and gin to 75%, a rate slated to drop further to 40% by 2035. Tariffs on high-end cars, similarly, will be slashed from 100% to 10%, subject to a quota. Duties will be slashed across a range of products: from cosmetics to medical devices and from advanced machinery to lamb. In return, the FTA will see India gain from the UK's elimination of import duties on 99% of its tariff lines, covering almost all the trade value. In addition, the FTA is designed to benefit Indian exporters from labour- and technology-intensive sectors—such as textiles, leather, gems and jewellery, engineering products, auto parts and organic chemicals. A critical component is a UK commitment on trade in services and the movement of professionals. The cherry on top is that Indians working in the UK for Indian employers won't have to pay for its national insurance; social security has long been a contentious point with the US too.

The FTA is expected to double India-UK trade, placed at around $54 billion last year, by 2030. The FTA is also being touted as a model for future FTAs. However, gaps between the draft agreement and the final text could still arise. First, both sides have to finalize its legal text, which can present some challenges. Thereafter, the pact will be put under the scrutiny of multiple authorities in the UK, such as its independent Trade and Agriculture Commission; the legal text will then need to be ratified by the parliaments of both nations. Here is an example of what could pose a hurdle: a technical note of the UK government estimates that its exports will increase by nearly 60%, while its imports from India will rise by 25%. But this is a preliminary and imprecise estimate, probably designed to assuage domestic pressure groups. The FTA is in everybody's interest and should not be held hostage by any interest group.

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Buffett may retire but the lessons he leaves us will remain valuable

Behind his humour lies a genius for investment that has as much to do with emotions as numbers

RAHUL JACOB
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Asked a question about Berkshire Hathaway's earnings power over the past financial year by a London-based economics professor at the company's annual gathering of shareholders on 3 May, Warren Buffett conjured a soliloquy worthy of a Shakespearean comedy. His voice, as he approaches his 95th birthday on 30 August, sounded croaky. But he replied with a quick reference to problems at the utility business Berkshire owns and embarked on a riff about the foundation of the company's success: "We will make our best deals when people are most pessimistic." This principle has guided Berkshire over the decades, including during the financial crisis of 2008-09, when Buffett threw a lifeline to Goldman Sachs by investing $5 billion in its preferred shares with a 10% yield.

Then, in a segue that was vintage Buffett, he pointed out that his strategy had been useful since the Great Depression of 1929-1933. "I was born in 1930 and things got much more attractive in the next two years and apparently I didn't do anything about it. That was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I blew it." Buffett, the son of a stockbroker father he adored whose desk he still uses in the company's headquarters in Omaha, observed that while he was fearful of a lot of things, a drop of 50% in Berkshire's share price "wouldn't bother me in the least." "Most people react differently. I don't have emotions about the prices of stocks."

This ability to dispense investment advice with dollops of self-deprecating humour is an underappreciated aspect of why people buy Berkshire shares and keep them for their children to inherit. This will be hard for Greg Abel to emulate when he takes over as CEO after Buffett retires this year-end. Speaking to the *Financial Times* (*FT*) in 2019 about his absurdly modest comment that owning Berkshire was not too different from buying a US index fund, he qualified it by adding that investors would likely learn more by owning Berkshire. The nearly 20,000 people who attended last week's shareholders' meeting was ample proof.

I have hero-worshipped Buffett since hearing him speak as a cub reporter in my twenties at *Fortune* magazine in New York. The speaker before Buffett, the CEO of a credit card company, had advised us to answer the phone within three rings. This was to project an impression of efficiency, but hardly a yardstick of journalistic excellence. Buffett, by contrast, came across as a stand-up comedian who just happened to be a genius stock picker.

I have never fallen for a public figure so instantly, except perhaps for Roger Federer whose ballet disguised as tennis I had watched long before I interviewed him. In the next couple of years, Buffett would sometimes be in the company cafeteria having a chicken salad sandwich with Carol Loomis, a *Fortune* writer who happened to be a friend of his. News of his presence would send me scurrying down for lunch while discreetly gawking. He once called back to patiently explain a witticism of his for an article I was fact-checking. And I would wistfully check the price of Berkshire shares, but its class A shares, the only ones available then and now priced at $768,000, were unaffordable for someone who had just started working. (A second class of shares for small investors came later, in 1996.)

Berkshire always had the advantage of patient capital, thanks partly to its insurance arms. As an *FT* profile observed, "What sinks many investors who use leverage is a margin call from a lender. Insurance customers don't make margin calls."

Often overlooked is how Buffett and his long-time colleague, the late Charlie Munger, kept their hands off the management of acquired businesses. Back in 1988, a prescient article by Loomis pointed out that if the seven companies Berkshire owned in 1987—a Scrabble board of less-known businesses—were clubbed together, they would have "employed $175 million in equity capital... and earned, after taxes, $100 million." These included a newspaper, a regional furniture company started by a Russian immigrant woman and See's Candies.

I may admire Buffett, but lack the financial acumen and nerve to consistently follow his maxims. I once made a windfall selling as the dotcom bubble peaked, guided by his often-quoted advice to "be fearful when others are greedy." Last month, however, reacting emotionally to share prices whipsawing after the Trump tariff announcements, I sold a chunk of shares, despite a voice in my head warning me that this was the opposite of what Buffett would do.

QUICK READ

Great deals arise when people are mostly pessimistic, the 1930-born Buffett has long held, once joking that he "blew" the chance of a lifetime as a toddler during the Great Depression.

How Buffett kept his hands off the management of acquired businesses is often overlooked but his advice on holding one's nerve in trying times can be particularly hard to follow.

10 YEARS AGO


mint
Lower costs, prices push up HUL profit
It is hard work to be diplomatic: Housing.com's Rahul Yadav

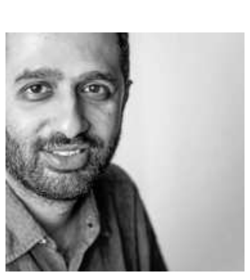
JUST A THOUGHT

It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently.

WARREN BUFFETT

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

Operation Sindoor: A new normal for India's strategy



NITIN PAI
is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy

In response to last month's terrorist attack on Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir, India conducted Operation Sindoor in the early hours of 7 May, carefully targeting terrorist-related infrastructure not only in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, but also in the heartland of Punjab province deep in its mainland territory. Pakistan claims that its forces downed five Indian Air Force aircraft on the Indian side of the boundary, though India has not confirmed any such event and no evidence has been presented. Indian strikes continued on Thursday, targeting Pakistani air defence installations in several locations. Pakistan also claims shooting down 25 drones. Again, this claim has not been verified.

Where do we go from here? The ball is in Pakistan's court. After the first night, many expected Islamabad to use its unverified claims to declare victory and refrain from further escalation. Now it is not clear.

In any event, the strategic significance of Operation Sindoor is that it establishes a new normal: that India will respond to Pakistani-sponsored terrorism with military force. Uri, Balakot and Sindoor are the three dots that confirm this straight line. This is a watershed development, for it undermines the decades-old Pakistani strategy of using its nuclear weapons as a cover to undertake a proxy war of terrorism against India.

The fear that any military retaliation would result in a rapid escalation to nuclear war dissuaded Indian leaders—under pressure from Western capitals—from authorizing 'hot pursuit' and punitive strikes across the boundary. It was for this reason that Indian forces were ordered not to cross the Line of Control during the Kargil War.

After Sindoor, that impunity is gone. Striking Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba strongholds in Bahawalpur and Muridke, respectively, warns such groups that their old havens are no longer safe.

This does not mean, as some analysts claim, that "deterrence has been re-established." There was none to start with.

Deterrence is practically impossible because it would require promising a prohibitively high punishment, which is limited by the nuclear overhang. So, the Pakistani military-jihadist complex will not abandon terrorism as an instrument of politics.

Rather, Operation Sindoor has raised the military, political and economic costs for the Pakistani establishment to a level that should severely discourage it from using terrorism for some period of time. Pakistanis might put on a brave face now, but this episode makes Pakistan's multiple domestic crises more difficult to solve, not least because few foreign countries would want to associate with it.

As for India, as I wrote in my previous column, preventing "cross-border terrorism is therefore a multi-dimensional, perennial, round-the-clock activity that India must doggedly persist in over the long term."

New Delhi did not reveal details of its evidence to prove that the Pahalgam terrorists had Pakistani origins. This departure from the absurd hope that any proof would convince the Pakistani authorities of their own complicity in terrorism also sets a new norm. Only a cursory attempt was made to persuade the international community.

This approach is indicative both of India's greater power in world politics as well as the erosion of the rules-based global order of the decades since the end of World War II.

The new normal also commits New Delhi to the use of military force in response to a terror attack that is at least as serious as the one in Pahalgam. This can be both a good and bad thing. The military and bureaucratic establishment in New Delhi will not have to guess whether the political leadership might authorize the use of force. Such decisions will be politically easier in the future.

On the flip side, it will be politically harder not to use the military option if the situation so demands. After the 26/11 attacks on Mumbai, for instance, I argued that India should not play into Rawalpindi's hands by launching military strikes. Pakistan was at that time forced to deploy its troops along its western border, where it was getting hammered by Pashtun militants. A war with India would have given the Pakistani army a pretext to get out of that jam. There are times when it is wiser not to hit back and India's leadership should be free to exercise the best option.

Military preparedness, both in India and Pakistan, will change to reflect the new normal. As they review their actions in Operation Sindoor, India's armed forces will seek to improve effectiveness, efficiency and turnaround times for punitive cross-border operations based on the lessons learnt.

Pakistan will do likewise, and in the process, deepen its dependence on Chinese and perhaps Turkish technology. This, in turn, will become a factor in New Delhi's relations with Beijing and Ankara.

Indeed, Turkey's signalling during this conflict is an intrusion of an outside player into subcontinental politics, which New Delhi will have to manage both by engaging Ankara as well as deepening ties with Turkish rivals Armenia, Greece and Russia.

Let me conclude by drawing attention to the big picture: India is prevailing in the long conflict with Pakistan because of our focus on growth, development, democracy and, when required, the astute use of military force. We should stay the course.

QUICK READ

India's response to the terror attack in Pahalgam has created a new normal. India will respond with hard military force to such violence and won't let overblown concern over nukes get in its way.

We must not veer off a success path that focuses on economic growth, development and democracy. It's principally why India is sure to prevail over Pakistan in the long game.

THEIR VIEW

The India-UK free trade pact is a game-changer for trade relations

It will boost bilateral trade but could also serve as a template for future agreements that India is negotiating with others

CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE
is director general, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

REUTERS

The finalization of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the United Kingdom marks a historic step towards strengthening bilateral trade and investment relations. Businesses on both sides have welcomed the conclusion of trade talks that began in 2022 and were fast-tracked by successive UK governments.

The agreement promises to enhance economic engagement and reshape global value chains. Indian industry contributes extensively to the UK's economy. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry's (CII) *India meets Britain Tracker 2024* report, the number of Indian companies in the UK was estimated at more than 970, contributing about £1.17 billion to the UK's corporation tax collections. These organizations were found to employ around 1.1 million people, supporting local economies and livelihoods.

The agreement is poised to build on this strong foundation, offering businesses fresh momentum in both countries to strengthen partnerships, scale up operations and drive mutual growth.

Geopolitical context: The agreement comes amid global trade uncertainty. With many developed countries around the world looking to diversify their trade and investment partnerships, there is a growing search for reliable and resilient partners. India is positioning itself as a reliable partner through domestic reforms and efforts to emerge as a global manufacturing hub for exports. The trade agreement further signals India's commitment to stability in trade policy. Also, India is negotiating agreements with other developed markets such as the US and EU that are expected to be equally comprehensive. This agreement may serve as a template.

Coverage of goods and services: The FTA's 'Trade in Goods' chapter reflects India's strategic approach to tariff liberalization and supply chain integration. India has committed itself to reducing or eliminating tariffs on 90% of UK goods, including phased cuts on key imports like whisky and automobiles, while the UK will eliminate tariffs on 99% of Indian exports, benefiting labour intensive sectors like textiles, food and jewellery. This liberalization will not only enhance our competitiveness and consumer choice, but also encourage investment in downstream industries. By easing access to advanced UK components and machinery, the FTA will support the modernization of Indian manufacturing and promote its integration with global supply chains. Additionally, streamlined customs procedures, digital documentation and harmonized standards are expected to reduce friction at borders, improving the efficiency of trade flows.

With service exports being India's area of strength and the UK being a services-driven economy, the FTA's inclusion of a dedicated chapter on services should further strengthen India's position in the UK. The importance of digitally delivered services will increase. India's exports of these increased from $92.48 billion in 2015 to $268.96 billion in 2024. Such products or services are relatively less affected by supply chain disruptions and geopolitical tensions. The FTA secures significant commitments on digitally delivered services for Indian service suppliers, especially in professional services such as architecture, engineering, computer-related services, fintech, healthcare and telecom services.

A comprehensive agreement: This is India's most comprehensive trade agreement yet, as it goes beyond bilateral trade in goods and services. As a first, it has chapters on issues like consumer protection, tackling corruption, good regulatory practices, labour, trade and gender equality, and innovation. These additions open new avenues for mutual cooperation. There is also a chapter on the environment to boost trade in clean energy and promote recycling for a circular economy. Its chapter on government procurement should please Indian suppliers, which will be able to access public tender opportunities without discriminatory barriers. A significant announcement for Indian professionals working for short durations in the UK is their exemption under the Double Contribution Convention from making social security contributions there for three years. This will raise the competitiveness of our service providers. It also shows India's openness to finding common ground on issues beyond tariffs. This part, however, requires more industry consultations.

Possible roadmap: The India-UK FTA can serve as a model for future trade negotiations involving comprehensive commitments. India has been cautious in its approach to issues other than tariffs. Therefore, it is important for India to analyse the agreement's impact, especially in the context of trade and gender, labour, sustainability, government procurement and other issues. Experience with this agreement could be the basis for deciding India's future commitments, especially for a deal with the EU. Negotiators must also address the concerns of Indian industry arising from the EU's unilateral trade and sustainability measures such as its Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, deforestation regulations and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

Given today's global focus on the geopolitically important Indo-Pacific region and the adoption of China-plus-one manufacturing strategies by many countries, this trade pact with the UK could be leveraged to build resilient supply chains in India, especially in high-tech and high-value segments. India is a member of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the UK has joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. This offers opportunities for complementary business arrangements as 'friend-shoring' gains strength amid fast-evolving global trade dynamics.

QUICK READ

The India-UK trade agreement marks a major step forward in boosting trade between the two countries and it being a comprehensive deal lends it special importance.

Not only does this FTA go beyond goods and services, it's structured in a way that's well attuned to global trade dynamics and could aid India's integration with international supply chains.

MINT CURATOR

Is it a non-profit or for-profit? OpenAI's choice is not a relief

Sam Altman seems keen to have it both ways and that's a problem

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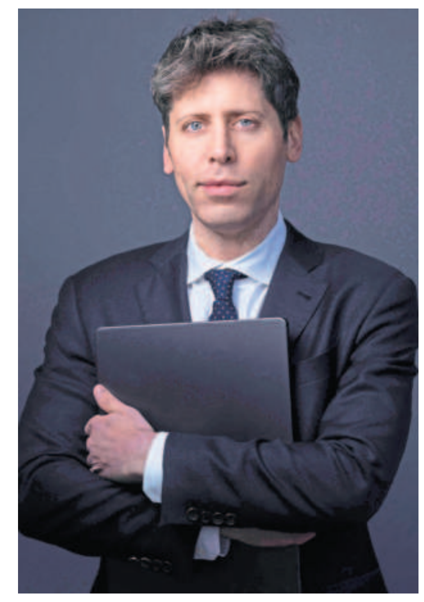

Altman said OpenAI will remain a non-profit but then why lift its profit cap? AFP

Sam Altman's reputation for spin was out in full force this week in a published 'letter to employees' saying that he was abandoning plans to turn OpenAI into a for-profit company. Instead, it will "continue to be overseen and controlled" by its non-profit board.

Hooray for humans, you might think, since that board has a unique fiduciary duty to all people, with a mission to "advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity as a whole." But his investors may be cheering the most, as OpenAI also appears to be removing its 100x cap on profits. In a Monday blog post, the company stated:

"Instead of our current complex capped-profit structure—which made sense when it looked like there might be one dominant AGI effort but doesn't in a world of many great AGI companies—we are moving to a normal capital structure where everyone has stock. This is not a sale, but a change of structure to something simpler."

A 'normal capital structure' almost certainly refers to one where investors can get unlimited returns. This is the promise that drives so many of the big swings in Silicon Valley. If OpenAI could one day become a trillion-dollar company to rival the Magnificent Seven, then its investors are unlikely to want their returns capped at 100x (the company's latest valuation of $300 billion may well put some of its earliest investors within throwing distance of that limit).

They'll want to echo the success of other venture capital investors who hit the jackpot in the past, like Lightspeed Ventures Partners, which saw its $8 million early investment in Snap [parent company of Snapchat] grow to $2 billion (a 250x return) when the social media company went public in 2017.

OpenAI has long aimed to build artificial general intelligence (AGI), a theoretical threshold beyond which AI can surpass humans in their ability to show generalized intelligence, and Altman has said that will create "trillions" of dollars of new wealth for the world (and presumably for the company too).

One investor who has embraced that vision is Softbank Group CEO Masayoshi Son, whose late entry to OpenAI in March at a high valuation makes it harder to see him getting a 100x return on the $30 billion he's investing in the company. Yet Son, whose ambitions rank among the most galactic of tech billionaires, is likely holding out hope for magnificent returns. In an interview with *Bloomberg Television* late last year, Son said that four companies—the "new GAFA" [Google, Apple, Facebook (now Meta) and Amazon]—were going to produce trillion-dollar profits from AI. And he wanted some of it.

Early investors like Khosla Ventures, Infosys and Peter Thiel stand to benefit even more from OpenAI's lifted cap if it can significantly grow its profits. Microsoft, one of OpenAI's earliest and biggest investors, has yet to publicly give its blessing to OpenAI's restructuring plans, but would be an obvious beneficiary too.

Altman did not mention Elon Musk in his letter, but OpenAI's estranged billionaire co-founder was probably a background force in Altman's decision. Musk has sued OpenAI over its transition away from being a non-profit organization, which he originally named with Altman to act as a counterweight to DeepMind and to carry out independent AI research for the public good. Musk feared that DeepMind was building AGI that would be controlled by Google.

OpenAI has said that Musk, who tried to buy OpenAI earlier this year for $97.4 billion, was trying to slow its progress for the benefit of his own startup, xAI. Musk's lead lawyer for the lawsuit called OpenAI's latest announcement a "transparent dodge" that skirted the core issue of transferring charitable assets "for the benefit of private persons," since OpenAI's original benefactors had made donations to the company and not invested in it.

Musk may have been motivated by hubris, but he's also right. Altman's company has stepped away from its original non-profit mission, first by proposing to restructure it as a capped-profit company and now by lifting the cap on what investors can earn so that it is far more heavily incentivized to maximize profits.

There's nothing wrong with the latter, but there is something distasteful about pursuing it under the guise of being a non-profit organization. It will be much harder now to prioritize "benefitting all of humanity" over shareholder returns. There's every reason now for OpenAI, under the pressure of investor expectations, to deploy AI systems more quickly and without the due caution for safety, security and fairness that such technology deserves. Altman has changed the lipstick, but the pig looks the same.

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MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Gen Z has taught us the joy of silent communication

SRINATH SRIDHARAN

is a corporate advisor and author of 'Family and Dhanda'.

There was a time not long ago when a ringing phone meant something. A call meant urgency. Importance. Now, try calling your Gen Z child and you'll hear the dial tone fade into oblivion before the call is quietly cut. No call back. Just a crisp text in three words at most.

"Everything okay?"

"Am busy. Text?"

And that's that.

As parents, we're left clutching our phones like confused boomers in a meme. The natural instinct is to roll our eyes, sigh like dramatic 80s cinema parents, and say something that starts with "In our time..." and ends with a lecture on human connection and invariably 'gratitude'.

But here's the twist. What began as parental exasperation has now turned into grudging admiration. And now, full-blown adoption. Gen Z may not pick up calls, but they've cracked something we Gen Xers took decades to figure out. Most communication isn't worth the noise. And frankly, most people aren't worth the effort of a voice conversation. If I don't enjoy speaking to you, or if what I have to say doesn't need vocal cords, why not text?

Now, I'm a convert. I type what needs to be said and move on. No drawn-out pleasantries. No forced phone conversations with people I wouldn't willingly share a meal with. No more, "Hey, just calling to check in..." before awkwardly circling to the point.

You want something? Message me. Need a decision? Message. Just saying 'Hi'? Even better—message.

A much younger friend once said, "Calls are like weddings. Too many guests. Too much small talk. Exhausting." At the time, I laughed. Now, I quote it.

There's clarity in the way the young operate. Speak when you must. Speak when you genuinely enjoy it. Anything else is logistics. And that's better typed, time-stamped and delivered silently to a phone screen.

Now, I understand the joy. The discipline. The sanity.

The read-receipt revolution: Gen Z has embraced 'seen and not replied' as a perfectly acceptable form of interaction. It's not rude—it's marvellously realistic. They're masters at ignoring the guilt trip of blue ticks. If it wasn't urgent, it can wait. And if it was urgent, well—you should've texted better.

Emojis as emotional intelligence: Who needs a paragraph when a single emoji will do? A skull emoji can mean 'I'm laughing,' 'I'm dead tired,' or 'That's tragic,' depending on the context. They've condensed emotional nuance into symbols with more efficiency than our long voice notes ever could.

Group chats over group calls: Gone are the days of painfully coordinating everyone's availability for a 45-minute team call that could've been an email. Gen Z runs tight operations in group chats. Polls, memes, screenshots—they run entire social lives and projects without a single voice being heard.

Mental health by design: Think about it. They're not ducking your calls out of laziness. It's intentional. Calls can be intrusive, performative, even anxiety-inducing. Texting offers a buffer, a breather and a choice. It's a boundary disguised as convenience—and we all need it.

Notification Zen: While our generation still jumps at every ding like Pavlov's dog, Gen Z's phone etiquette is savvier. They glance, assess and swipe away. They're curators of their attention, not slaves to it. And that is liberation. We oldies need to learn.

The politeness of precision: Gen Z's brevity is often mistaken for brusqueness. It's not. They're not wasting your time. Every word is deliberate. They've traded niceties for honesty, and I, for one, am impressed.

No fear of missing calls: Missed a call? They won't follow up with panic. They'll just text. The world hasn't ended and your life hasn't collapsed. They've de-dramatized communication. Asynchronous is the new normal—and it's refreshing.

The voice note conundrum: Voice notes are a curious halfway house. Gen Z sends them, but not like we do. While we treat them like miniature podcasts—meandering and self-important—they keep theirs tight and purposeful. Under 30 seconds. No rambling, no context-setting, no backstory from 2007. Just the message, delivered like verbal Morse Code.

Performative niceness is passe: They've abandoned that old-world ritual of forced niceties. No "Hope you're doing well" if they don't mean it. No fake smiles when they're not feeling up to it. Their interactions may be brief, but they're sincere. In a world that hides behind performative politeness, Gen Z's brutal honesty is oddly refreshing.

Silence as a signal: Perhaps most striking of all, Gen Z recognizes that silence is also a form of communication. No reply doesn't mean they're ignoring you. It might mean your message didn't require a response. Or they're thinking. Or they've chosen not to engage. It forces us, awkwardly, to become better senders. If you want a reply, make it worthy of one.

So yes, I still call my children sometimes. But mostly, I text. And now when I get a two-word response, I smile. I've made peace with the pause. I'm learning their language. But I know they'll *never* listen to it.

QUICK READ

What started as exasperation over Gen Z not answering phone calls has turned into grudging admiration, even full-blown adoption. They have cracked the communication code.

Performative niceness is passe. Silence also works. No reply doesn't mean you're being ignored. It might mean various things. The good news? It pushes us to become better senders.

WORDLY WISE

SOLITUDE IS THE PROFOUNDEST FACT OF THE HUMAN CONDITION. MAN IS THE ONLY BEING WHO KNOWS HE IS ALONE. — OCTAVIO PAZ

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A LONGER PAUSE

As Trump's tariff policies play out, the US Fed holds rates steady. Next steps remain uncertain

ACTIONS OF CENTRAL banks around the world are increasingly diverging from those of the US Federal Reserve. In April, the European Central Bank had cut interest rates as it noted that "the outlook for growth has deteriorated owing to rising trade tensions". A few days prior to that, the RBI's monetary policy committee had lowered rates in India. And on Thursday, the Bank of England also reduced interest rates. In comparison, in its May meeting, the US Fed has kept rates unchanged for the third straight time, maintaining the federal funds rate in the 4.25-4.5 per cent range, as it noted that the risks of higher unemployment and inflation have risen.

The implications of US President Donald Trump's tariffs, which are "significantly larger than anticipated", are clear. As Fed Chairman Jerome Powell noted, "if the large increases in tariffs announced are sustained, they are likely to generate a rise in inflation, a slowdown in economic growth and an increase in unemployment". But, at the current juncture, the Fed's next steps are difficult to predict. In fact, Powell has also acknowledged that, saying that "it's really not at all clear what it is we should do". US GDP contracted by 0.3 per cent at an annualised rate in the first quarter of 2025 as imports surged by 41.3 per cent with consumers and firms trying to get ahead of Trump's tariffs. Inflation, though, has remained in the 2.5 per cent to 3 per cent range for several months now — the personal consumption expenditures price index was at 2.3 per cent in March, down from 2.7 per cent in February. The labour market also remains healthy. As per the US Bureau of Labor, non-farm payroll rose by 1,77,000 in April, surpassing expectations. The unemployment rate remained unchanged at 4.2 per cent. Powell has also noted that the US economy appeared healthy, and has said that (the effect) "just hasn't shown up yet". This provides the central bank the space to wait.

Higher tariffs will derail the economic momentum. There are already some indications of a souring of sentiment. Much will now depend on if, how quickly and to what extent trade deals are struck and tariffs are rolled back. On Thursday, Trump announced on a social media platform that the US and UK had reached an agreement on a trade deal, with "many other deals, which are in serious stages of negotiation, to follow". However, Trump is also reported to have said that he would not consider lowering tariffs on China ahead of talks — US and Chinese officials are slated to meet this week. In the weeks and months ahead, the incoming data will reveal the full extent of the impact of tariffs on the US economy.

ROHIT'S RETREAT

There was always a semi-tragic streak to his Test career. It did not do justice to his dazzling gifts

ONCE NEW ZEALAND clean-swept India in the Test series in October, the first team to achieve the feat on home soil, Rohit Sharma's days as captain in the format seemed numbered. A loss of personal form hastened his goodbye from the format. He is an undisputed genius in the shorter version, a king of the 50-over format, a nawab of T20s, but in red ball, he was a commoner. 4,301 runs in 110 outings, an average of 40.57 and 12 hundreds — for someone with his dazzling gifts, determination and commitment, the figures capture the fits-and-starts nature of his long-form career.

When he burst forth onto the global stage, in white-ball cricket, he was touted as the new torchbearer of the Mumbai school of batting, the inheritor of a heritage polished by Vijay Merchant and Vijay Manjrekar, Sunil Gavaskar and Sachin Tendulkar. But he fell short of embellishing their lineage. There was always a semi-tragic streak to his Test career, from a much-deferred debut owing to injuries. Had he utilised his breaks after his sensational entry into Tests, he could have ended up with far more glittering numbers and enriched batsmanship in the format, as he had in the white-ball arena. He possessed the most classic of strokes, a repertoire that most batsmen could only dream of, serenity that is the hallmark of legendary players, a bonus second to judge the length of the delivery, and the capacity to transcend playing conditions. A late dazzle did redeem his career to an extent, but his talents largely remained unfulfilled.

Similar was his captaincy record in Tests. Whereas he would be hailed as one of the greatest in the white-ball sphere — he moulded the team into an exhilarating bunch that reclaimed the T20 crown after 27 years and reached the 2023 World Cup final without losing a game — his leadership in Tests had its flaws. He won exactly half of the 24 Tests he led — the twin peaks being the series wins over England and Australia in India — but couldn't inspire his team to overseas series wins, like his predecessor Virat Kohli. The brand of captaincy was different — Kohli was all raging fire, Rohit had ice in his veins, the former wore his emotions on his sleeve, the latter resorted to one-liners and disenchanted shrugs. The Kohli comparisons were inevitable, and nowhere is the chasm deeper than in Test cricket. Whereas Kohli gritted his teeth and made his way to scale the peaks of batting, Rohit retreated to the foothills midway through the trek.

AN ESCAPE PLAN

Applicants for a job on the Scottish isle of Colonsay must remember: Paradise might be an island, but hell is other people

IS THERE ANYTHING more thrilling and romantic than living on an island? The multitudes from around the world currently applying for a position on the Scottish isle of Colonsay would likely agree that nothing beats it. They are, after all, clamouring to take over the Colonsay Smokery, ownership of which is being offered for free by Richard Irvine, the current proprietor who wishes to move back to the mainland. Irvine, who set up his fish smoking business two-and-a-half years ago, reports that recent coverage of his offer has brought in such an avalanche of applications that it will be midsummer before he is able to make a choice.

Not that it's hard to see the appeal of the Hebridean island: About 10 miles long and two miles wide, Colonsay has an undeniable charm of the rocky, wind-blown variety. Home to several colonies of seabirds, seals, otters and 125 human beings, with a tiny primary school, one hotel, a general store and a post office, the island's sandy beaches, craggy cliffs and thick, green woods retain an unspoiled beauty that is getting harder to find elsewhere. In a world teetering on the brink of chaos, it is not surprising that those who feel overwhelmed might view this island — where, in 2012, its first-ever burglar was stranded for two days because the ferry to the mainland didn't come — as a much-needed refuge.

But remoteness and isolation are only temporary salves, and it takes very little for a refuge to turn into a holding cell. Those spoiled by modern conveniences like fully equipped hospitals, libraries, cinemas, museums and malls might find that island life has its fair share of downsides, primary among them being the sight of the same 125 people every single day. Because paradise might be an island, but hell is other people.

A just payback

Operation Sindoor may have put paid to the brazen existence of terror centres overground in Pakistan

SHARAT SABHARWAL

THE PUBLIC OUTRAGE following the barbaric Pahalgam terror attack and the kinetic punitive action taken by India after the Uri and Pulwama attacks had made such action inevitable this time. In the event, Operation Sindoor turned out to be qualitatively different from the shallow surgical strikes of 2016 and the Balakot strike of 2019. The latter was aimed at a single target and the lack of evidence of the damage caused had resulted in some doubts about India's narrative. Operation Sindoor, on the other hand, hit nine terror targets, including the nerve centres of Pakistani terror — the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) headquarters in Muridke and Bahawalpur — both in the Punjabi heartland. India produced ample proof of the damage caused, which Pakistan has largely acknowledged. The operation also demonstrated India's capability to carry out precision strikes deep inside Pakistan. The LeT and JeM headquarters had stood all these years in full public view as a symbol of Pakistan cocking a snook at the international community's counter-terror campaign. Operation Sindoor was a just payback not only for Pahalgam but also for the countless innocent lives lost in earlier Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks.

As in the official statement after Balakot, India asserted this time, too, its right to preempt any terror attacks planned from Pakistani soil. It described Operation Sindoor as "measured, non-escalatory, proportionate and responsible", adding that no Pakistani military facilities were targeted. It reiterated that any attack on military targets in India would invite a suitable response.

Pakistan has resorted to heavy cross-LoC firing, causing civilian casualties. On May 7, their National Security Committee — a top civil-military body — said that Pakistan reserved the right to respond to the Indian strikes. Subsequent Pakistani media reports quoted Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister, Ishaq Dar, as saying that the NSAs of the two countries had spoken after the Indian strikes. However, in a sign of continued military activity, India has said that on the night between May 7 and 8, it neutralised Pakistan's attempt to engage several military targets in northern and western India; on the morning of May 8, the Indian Armed Forces targeted air defence radars and systems in a number of Pakistani locations. One can only hope that the two countries find an off-ramp early to get off the escalation ladder.

> Pakistan is not about to give up the instrumentality of terror. So, our counter-terror grid should always remain in top gear. Further, our security forces cannot prevent the adversary from slipping through our defence lines occasionally. Therefore, the goal of zero terror is unrealistic. There is no end in sight to the Pakistan army's stranglehold on the state and its institutional interest in keeping the India bogey alive. This rules out a major shift in Pakistan's posture towards us. The role of diplomacy in our relationship with Pakistan eroded progressively after the Mumbai terror attack and is practically nonexistent today. This leaves both sides dependent on deterrence and coercion to manage the relationship.

It would be premature to assess the full strategic implications of Operation Sindoor in the presence of continued military activity. However, some trends have been clear.

First, as in the case of earlier egregious terror attacks, there was widespread condemnation of the Pahalgam attack and expressions of sympathy by international partners. However, the international community remains averse to the two nuclear-armed neighbours moving up the escalation ladder. It is equally clear that Pakistan's major partners are not about to abandon it because of our terror concerns. However, within these limitations, there is scope to work with our partners and build pressure on Pakistan to change its behaviour by, inter alia, trying to bring it again under greater scrutiny of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

Second, though not a party to the post-Pahalgam standoff, China has been a constant presence on the sidelines. It has supported Pakistan's right to defend its sovereignty and legitimate security interests and its diversionary proposal for an "impartial" international probe. It has expressed regret at the Indian strikes. Around 80 per cent of Pakistan's major arms imports come from China and interoperability between their armed forces has grown. The Chinese presence could become more direct in a future standoff if our military actions are seen as harming their China-Pakistan Economic Corridor assets.

Despite India successfully hitting nine terror targets, we may find ourselves no closer to our goal of zero terror and, much less, a resolution of our larger Pakistan problem once the curtain falls on the ongoing crisis.

Pakistani terror against us has gone down significantly from its heyday. Operation Sindoor may put paid to the brazen existence of terror centres overground and result in some restraint on Pakistan's terror machine. However, Pakistan is not about to give up the instrumentality of terror. So, our counter-terror grid should always remain in top gear. Further, our security forces cannot prevent the adversary from slipping through our defence lines occasionally. Therefore, the goal of zero terror is unrealistic. There is no end in sight to the Pakistan army's stranglehold on the state and its institutional interest in keeping the India bogey alive. This rules out a major shift in Pakistan's posture towards us.

The role of diplomacy in our relationship with Pakistan eroded progressively after the Mumbai terror attack and is practically nonexistent today. This leaves both sides dependent on deterrence and coercion to manage the relationship. A belief had also taken hold in sections of our strategic community in recent years that an internally preoccupied Pakistan was a diminished threat, best left alone. The ongoing crisis has shown that Pakistan needs to be managed with all the instrumentalities at our disposal to reduce the volatility of the relationship.

Already beset with serious internal challenges, Pakistan is in a messier situation after the Pahalgam attack, its terror face exposed starkly to the world, a military confrontation with India ongoing and its water security in jeopardy. We, too, have this mess on our doorstep with no way forward other than a long journey of coercion with the volatility it entails. The LoC ceasefire has all but collapsed. We may again be in for a prolonged period of heightened volatility on our western frontier.

Sabharwal is a former high commissioner to Pakistan and author of India's Pakistan Conundrum: Managing a Complex Relationship

CALL WORKERS BY THEIR NAME

BluSmart drivers' strike highlights need for safeguards in platform-based sector

GAYATRI NAIR

THE PLATFORM ECONOMY is beset by a crisis. Strikes, protests and termination of workers have become a frequent feature of the sector: Urban Company terminated the services of many of its workers in 2023, and Blinkit workers went on strike in Varanasi last month demanding better pay and cotton uniforms. However, the dispersed nature of these actions across cities has prevented them from becoming a national conversation. This is at odds with the recent public discussion over the closure of BluSmart in April. It has taken a protest by BluSmart drivers to draw attention to what failure has meant for those who make a platform — its workers.

The drivers are protesting the sudden loss of work, and the absence of severance pay or alternate jobs. Much like BluSmart drivers, platform workers across sectors remain without minimal guarantees of due process either when platforms shut down or in cases of termination. BluSmart drivers have also raised a demand for state intervention in the sector.

The relationship between the state and platforms in India has been built on an alignment in their views on jobs and empowerment. Constructed around the ideals of "self-reliance" and entrepreneurship, both consider platform-based work to be a desirable move away from traditional employment forms that tie employers and employees into a legal relationship. Platforms champion the idea that their workers are not employees but independent "partners" who enter into a business rather than an employment arrangement. Such a view enables platforms to offer services through the labour of workers while demanding compliance with rules including wearing a uniform, following time schedules for deliveries, and even determining when and how they can cancel a job. Termed "partners", workers must bear numerous costs, such as paying for their vehicles, purchasing equipment for use in home service platforms, and attendant costs of phones and data, all while paying high commission rates to platforms. They receive little protection from religious or caste-based discrimination, and there are hardly any attempts to address women's access to safe public spaces and toilets.

> Tackling this requires significant interventions in how platforms currently operate, which will upturn the current platform model. At present, neither can workers exercise real choice in their work conditions as an entrepreneur does nor do they have safeguards. In considering platform workers as 'partners', both platforms and the state are not only misclassifying, but effectively considering the platform worker as on the same footing as the owner of a platform.

BluSmart was unique: The platform owned the cars, undertook training programmes for women drivers, and even offered minimum guaranteed incomes to its workers. Yet when the crisis hit, drivers were left without protection. The state and political parties' response has taken two forms: A legal framework for recognising social security rights of platform workers (bills have been passed in Rajasthan and cleared in Karnataka, while Telangana has prepared a draft bill), and an alternative cooperative platform model, which passes on earnings in their entirety to workers without charging a commission.

These alternatives address important needs. What remains missing is a focus on everyday work conditions. Many platforms have impossibly high standards that they expect workers to maintain (a rating of 4.7 out of 5), failing which they are either dismissed or must pay the platform to be trained again for the same job. Long hours of work have become the norm, with workers across platforms reporting 12-hour-plus work days. Coupled with exposure to extreme weather, the impact on physical and mental health has been significant. Platforms have claimed that workers are well paid, with the freedom to decide when to work and for how long — but with rates decided by platforms, how many hours must one work to secure minimum or living wages? Severe restrictions on cancelling jobs, even if due to poor health, an injury, a family crisis or when it is not remunerative, means workers have little choice in how they work. Such restrictions make it evident that platforms do what any other employer does — only through apps and algorithms.

Tackling this requires significant interventions in how platforms currently operate, which will upturn the current platform model. At present, neither can workers exercise real choice in their work conditions as an entrepreneur does nor do they have safeguards. In considering platform workers as "partners", both platforms and the state are not only misclassifying, but effectively considering the platform worker to be on the same footing as the owner of a platform. The BluSmart crisis makes it evident that this is not the case. The state needs to hold platforms accountable to existing laws, within which there is established precedent to consider platforms as employers, especially since they remain competitive through the control of a large and poorly paid labour force rather than through technological innovation.

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MAY 9, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

GURDASPUR CURFEW

A 24-HOUR CURFEW was clamped on the Gurdaspur district headquarters town in Punjab. The curfew in Dhariwal was extended as tension continued following the shootout by extremists in Fajurpura village, which left two dead and one injured. Educational institutions throughout Gurdaspur district were closed, as patrolling by the security forces and the police intensified.

PM ON AKALI MEET

THERE WAS CONSENSUS at the opposition leaders' meeting with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that the outcome of the Akalis' May 17 meeting should be awaited before moving towards defusing the Punjab situation. The PM felt that no public pronouncement should be made about the Akalis' internal matters and had conveyed this to his colleagues.

NEW BONDS SCHEME

A NEW BONDS scheme by selected public sector undertakings in high-priority areas, particularly telecommunications and power, is proposed to be introduced by the government. Union Finance Minister V P Singh said this measure was proposed to be undertaken as the government "recognises the crucial role played by the public sector in our economic development and the imperative need to provide additional resources for its growth".

PHANTOM COACH

AN AIR-CONDITIONED COACH attached to the Jayanti Janata Express, running between Nizamuddin and Mangalore five days a week, has been leaving Delhi empty ever since its introduction on May 4. The coach, introduced with great fanfare, has been running empty despite repeated requests for reservations. "We have no information about the introduction of the air-conditioned coach," is the stock reply given by personnel concerned in Delhi.

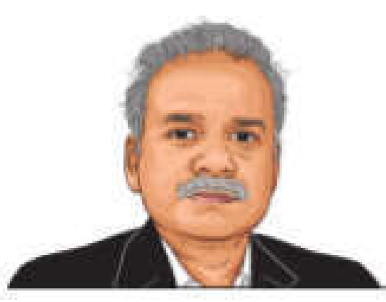
WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Both India and Pakistan believe they are treading carefully, but without intercession, the military clash following the murder of Hindu tourists in Kashmir could escalate."

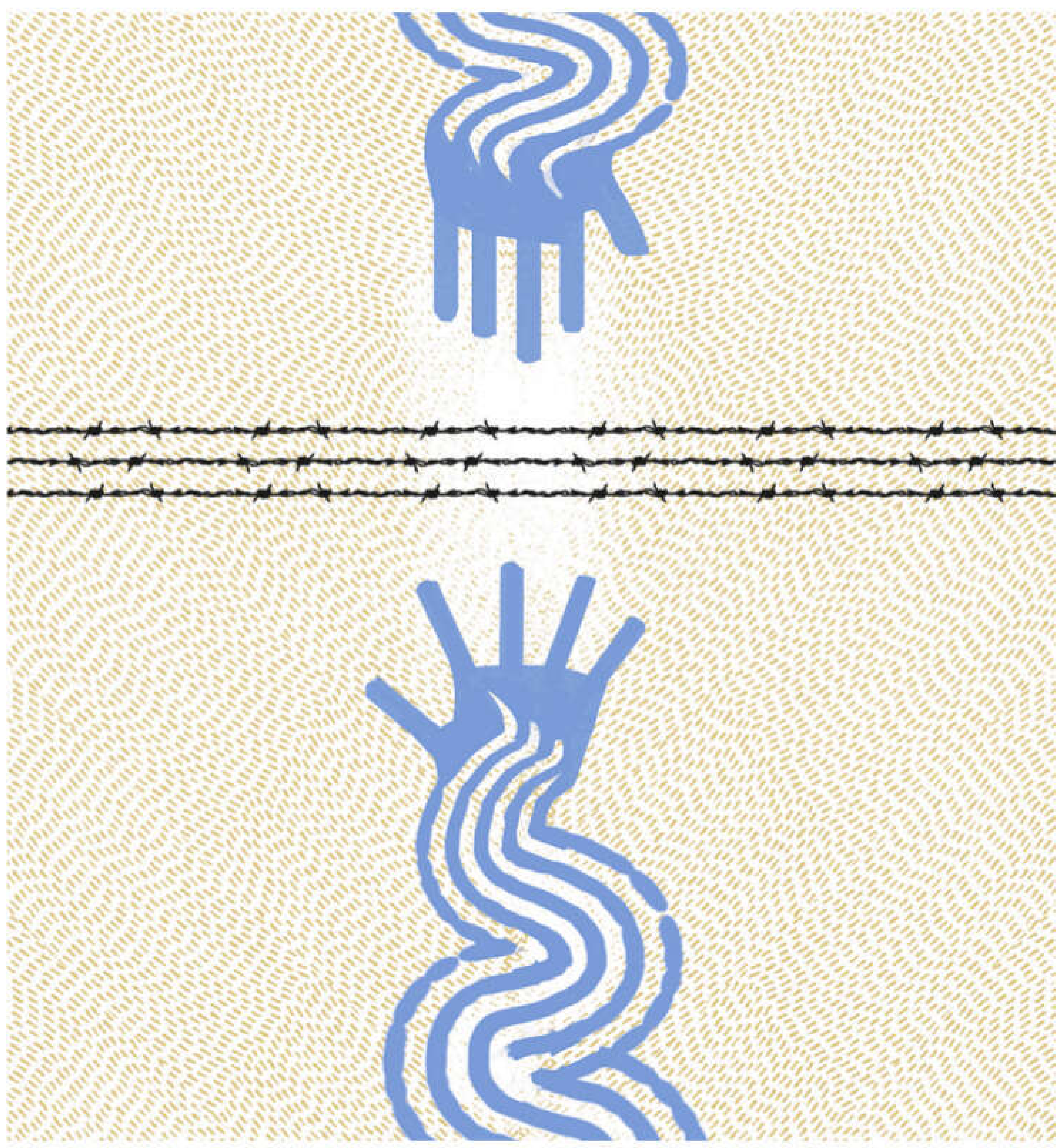
— THE GUARDIAN

Hollowing of a treaty

Pakistan's self-defeating projects of subterfuge and terrorism have squandered the goodwill upon which the Indus Waters Treaty stood



SRINIVAS CHOKKAKULA



C R Sasikumar

TRANSBOUNDARY WATER SHARING can be a source of resilient cooperation or trenchant conflict. The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) has been celebrated globally as the most resilient water sharing treaty, remaining strong even when India and Pakistan engaged in wars. But this time, the horrific terrorist attack in Pahalgam has pushed the needle too far. Can putting the IWT in abeyance get Pakistan, in the words of our Cabinet Committee on Security, to "credibly and irrevocably abjure its support for cross-border terrorism"?

Despite its celebrated resilience, the IWT has been under strain in recent times. It is fair to say that all parties involved contributed to this, including the third party with a limited role, the World Bank.

In a unique way, the IWT provides for the geographic division of waters in the Indus river system. India has rights to the unrestricted use of waters in the eastern rivers — the Ravi, Beas and Sutlej; and Pakistan in a similar way over the western rivers: The Indus, Jhelum, and Chenab. Driven again by geography, India has rights over domestic use, non-consumptive use (navigation, flood control, etc), run-of-river hydropower generation, and some limited rights for irrigation in the western rivers. Conversely, Pakistan, too, has rights over limited domestic and non-consumptive use in the eastern rivers.

In exercising its rights, India has pursued run-of-river hydropower projects like Salal, Baglihar, Kishanganga and Ratle. Pakistan has objected to all these projects. The early Salal was resolved bilaterally. The others led to disputes, with the treaty's provisions for resolution through a Neutral Expert (NE) or the Court of Arbitration (CoA) being invoked. The disputes delayed the projects, although in most cases, India's stance was eventually vindicated. While the resolution tested the treaty provisions with some novel issues and advances in technology, it contributed to the treaty's evolution and advanced the interests of both parties. For instance, the NE's decision on Baglihar supported India's designs accommodating advances in sedimentation engineering, with a nuanced interpretation of the provisions. In other instances, like Kishanganga, the CoA's decision allowed India's design but required minimal flows to Pakistan to be maintained. The IWT became resilient through such antagonistic but productive contestations.

In recent times, this has changed. Pakistan increasingly met India's proposed projects with litigious strategies, often involving subterfuge. India firmly resisted its recent escalation of the settled differences over Kishanganga and the Ratle projects, disagreed with Pakistan's initiation of parallel CoA proceedings and chose not to participate. Such actions, combined with Pakistan's assessed support to cross-border terrorism, have led to India's growing distrust of Pakistan and disenchantment with the IWT. The World Bank's passive approach has not helped either.

This regressive turn, away from building resilience, fundamentally contradicts the spirit of the treaty and defeats its aspirations of cooperation for optimal development of the Indus rivers. Cooperation is crucial and critical for both countries, not only for development but also to cope with emerging risks such as climate change. Pakistan's petty and ultimately self-defeating projects of subterfuge and terrorism have squandered the spirit of goodwill and friendship upon which the treaty was founded. The terrorist attacks in Uri, Pulwama and Pahalgam serve as stark evidence of Pakistan's failure to reciprocate the spirit of the IWT.

India's decision to put the IWT in abeyance can be seen as the culmination of its deepening dissatisfaction with it, and growing frustration with Pakistan's actions. The specifics of what India means to do remain to be seen and there is good strategic reason to maintain a degree of constructive ambiguity. At the least, it would mean suspending the institutional processes of coordination and dispute resolution under the Permanent Indus Commission, which comprises one commissioner each of the two governments. The commission is the core of the treaty's resilience. The institutional processes include annual meetings, exchange of hydrological data, periodic inspection of each other's projects, etc.

> As an upstream state, India will be free to pursue its development interests on the western rivers, limiting Pakistan's ability to have its concerns addressed. While some of the current rhetoric in India can be seen as empty, critics fail to recognise that the continued suspension of the IWT provides India the required time and means to build infrastructure to affect flows substantively and accumulate irrevocable leverage.

Further, as an upstream state, India will be free to pursue its development interests on the western rivers, limiting Pakistan's ability to have its concerns addressed. While some of the current rhetoric in India can be seen as empty, critics fail to recognise that the continued suspension of the IWT provides India the required time and means to build infrastructure to affect flows substantively and accumulate irrevocable leverage.

Those familiar with the complex and intricate dynamics of transboundary water sharing will understand that India does not need to build the infrastructure for there to be an immediate impact on Pakistan. The absence of data and means to resolve differences by themselves can exacerbate uncertainties and vulnerabilities downstream, adversely impacting the economy and livelihoods in the Punjab region of Pakistan. It is entirely up to Pakistan whether it wants to risk the slide of the IWT from its current state of mutual benefit to greater benefits for India.

The writer is president and chief executive, Centre for Policy Research

The Subcontinent's challenge

It is in the interest of both India and Pakistan, and South Asia, that the current hostilities do not escalate into a full-scale military conflagration

SANJAYA BARU

INDIA HAS DEFINED how it would respond to cross-border terror attacks emanating from Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). It will hit back. The Indian Air Force accomplished the missions it was tasked to undertake across different targets in Pakistan. In response to the dastardly, tragic and bigoted terror attacks in Pahalgam, India has upped the ante by not only hitting terror camps in PoK but also in Pakistan, and taking a series of non-kinetic measures aimed at exerting pressure on Pakistan. Whether all this will dissuade the Pakistani elites from continuing to pursue the lost cause of claiming all of Kashmir, or of trying to destabilise India's economic growth process, remains to be seen.

While Pakistan has begun its response to the air strikes on May 7, India will counter whatever action it takes. This is now the bottom line, and there is unity on this across the broad political spectrum.

However, it should also be clear to all sides that neither India nor Pakistan can undertake and sustain an all-out military campaign without seriously hurting themselves. The losers in an India-Pakistan war will, in fact, be the people of India and Pakistan. It is now established that India and Pakistan will engage in tit-for-tat hits every time one side suspects the hand of the other. Pakistan has explained away the Pahalgam terror attack by referring to the attack on the Jaffar Express in which 25 men were killed. The response of the international community suggests that few countries are willing to believe the version of only one side. While there have been more takers for the Indian version of events, Pakistan has also been able to find supporters.

The challenge before the two nations, indeed the challenge across the Indian Subcontinent, is for the many nations that have come into being over the past century to find leaderships that can usher in a new era of regional and domestic peace and development across the Subcontinent. Regrettably, there is a short supply of such political leadership in South Asia. The region has been held back since its liberation from colonialism by its internal struggles with its own history, geography and the ghosts of the past.

The South Asian tragedy is the belief among many in most countries of the region that they can somehow hitch their wagon to the rest of the world and pursue development without improving relations with their own neighbours. India's creditable economic performance over the past quarter-century led many to believe that India could continue to rise without settling its disputes with its neighbours. To an extent, that has been possible. However, if India is pulled into a long-drawn war it will be hurt economically.

This may well be the desperate aim of a declining Pakistan. In the past, India-Pakistan wars have been brief, and international efforts ensured early declaration of a ceasefire. In the present global and regional environment, and at this stage in India's rise, it is not clear whether adequate pressure would be and could be exerted by outside powers for a full-scale war to be quickly terminated. It is in the interest of both countries and the region as a whole that the current phase of hostilities does not escalate into a full-scale military conflagration.

Once the dust settles and both countries emerge from the "fog of war", the political leadership in both countries must take a longer view of what constitutes regional security and defines a regional environment for sustained economic development. Whose interests are served by continued disputes about territory? Who benefits from communal and regional divides within each nation and across the region?

For all the wisdom of grand strategists on both sides of the border, neither side is today able to define a new framework for regional peace and security. The last time an effort was made, howsoever tentative and limited in scope, was in the period 2000-2007 under the leaderships of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Pakistan's President, Pervez Musharraf, went along with their initiative for a while but he was soon ousted. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government have since rejected the so-called "Manmohan-Musharraf" formula for peace and security.

Today one would be mocked for even mentioning that formula. However, mention it one must. The Indian economy is on the verge of emerging as the fourth-largest economy after the United States, China and Germany. It has just overtaken Japan. Despite all the challenges it faces at home and all the inadequacies of the Indian growth process, India has the opportunity to continue to rise and engage the world on favourable terms.

To imagine that India can do so without securing its own neighbourhood is a fantasy of many contemporary analysts and strategists. What India's neighbours — Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka — are trying to tell India is that they can raise the costs of growth if they are unable to secure any benefits from it. The Indian policy of the last decade, which has come to be identified with the Modi government, of imposing costs on difficult neighbours, may deliver short-term benefits but is impossing costs, too.

The Indian political bravado that we will reclaim PoK helps match the Pakistani rhetoric about getting hold of Kashmir, but neither will ever happen. That was the point of the Simla Agreement, the Lahore Declaration and the Manmohan-Musharraf formula. All the major powers — the US, Russia and China — have backed the idea that the Line of Control is, in fact, the international border. Hotheads in both countries today reject such a solution. However, realists on all sides know that there is no escaping from the reality on the ground and that this reality can only be altered at high cost to all.

The writer is founder-trustee, Centre for Air Power Studies and distinguished fellow, United Service Institution of India

Give back their childhood

The law on child labour is not the problem, its enforcement is

ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

LONG BEFORE I started asking quiz questions or delivering speeches in Parliament, I spent eight years in advertising, in an agency that we often fondly called Ogilvy University. The most memorable four days of those eight years was when, as a junior copywriter, I hung around with the "father of advertising", David Ogilvy, when he visited India. Precious. Of all Mr Ogilvy's (he insisted we all call him David) maxims, my favourite was: "Big ideas are usually simple ideas."

In the hurdy gurdy ride of politics, marketing and communication still remain favourite subjects. On May Day this year, there was a brilliant advertisement that appeared in print. The communication was created by Ogilvy India. The intriguing headline screamed, "This Labour Day, 7.8 million workers should be laid off." And then the magical twist in the subhead: "In a country with 35.6 million unemployed adults, there are 7.8 million children working. Let the adults do the work and let the children go to school". A Big Idea communicated in a simple, powerful way.

Today, the reality of child labour is grim. An analysis of the Union government's Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018-19 by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed that the number of children in child labour in India ranged from 18 lakh (using the national definition), to 33 lakh (using the international definition). Almost half of all working children work within their own family. The agricultural sector engages the most children, followed by the industrial sector, including manufacturing and construction.

Worst forms of labour: The most harmful forms of child labour involve work in dangerous industries or occupations. Children from disadvantaged religious or caste backgrounds, as well as those from impoverished households, are more likely to be involved in hazardous work. Abuse and mistreatment by employers, especially in factories, is widely reported. This includes physical and verbal abuse, low wages, and a lack of access to health services, even when children suffer accidents or injuries. Lack of proper hygiene, sanitation and clean water leads to children becoming easily susceptible to infectious diseases. Working with toxic materials causes long-lasting, sometimes irreversible, illnesses. Sectors that require urgent attention to address the worst forms of child labour include the production of matches and fireworks, glass, and leather products, as well as work in brick kilns, coal mines, and construction, among others.

Child labour and poverty: As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO), "child labour is both a cause and consequence of poverty". Household poverty pushes children into the workforce to earn money. Some take up work to help support the family income, while many others are forced to do so just for survival. This needs to be seen in conjunction with the fact that every one out of two of the world's wasted (low weight for height) children live in India.

Government apathy: Two years ago, your columnist had asked a pointed two-part question to the Minister of Women and Child Development in Parliament: (a) What is the number of working children between the ages of five and 14; and (b) The number of rural and urban working children, gender-wise? The minister replied to the first part by stating that there were 613 cases registered under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 in 2021. The second part of the question went unanswered. The last Census was carried out 14 years ago in 2011. With the 2021 Census seemingly still in cold storage, it is impossible to know exactly how many child labourers there are in the country. Without understanding the magnitude of the problem, it is difficult to find a meaningful solution.

Need for stricter enforcement: Article 24 of the Constitution of India prohibits the employment of any child below the age of 14 years to work in any factory, mine, or any other hazardous employment. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 defined working conditions more clearly. The law is not the problem, enforcement is. Last year, 58 children, including 20 girls, were rescued from a distillery in Madhya Pradesh. They were made to work 11-hour shifts every day, hardly paid wages, and the palms of their hands were burnt from working with chemicals.

I started on a personal note. Let me end on one. In 2012, as part of the Indian delegation to the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, I made a statement on "Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children". Here is what was said: "The eradication of child labour is a priority for the Government of India. We are strictly enforcing the ban on the employment of children under the age of 14 years. At the same time, in recognition of the fact that this problem cannot be separated from its socio-economic circumstances, we are also implementing measures to improve the access to education, health and nutrition for children". Thirteen years on, there is still much work to be done.

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha). Research credit: Ayashman Dey

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ROOT OUT TERROR

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'With nine strikes, India underlines its new message to Pakistan' (IE, May 8). Unlike past Pakistan-promoted terrorist attacks in Jammu & Kashmir and India's limited responseunder the present government, the present strategy aims at rooting out the source of terrorism itself. This is the only way to save innocent Indian citizens from Pakistan'd vicious design to wage a perpetual low-cost war against India. If the international community is interested in stopping the conflict, it should not only dissuade the Pakistan army from further military escalation but also push it to negotiate with India instead of relying on terrorist attacks.

Y G Chouksey, *Pune*

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'With nine strikes, India underlines new message to Pak' (IE, May 8). Operation Sindoor is the best possible way to claim victory after the barbaric Pahalgam attack. Upholding international laws, India has focused solely on terror infrastructure to defend its sovereignty, sending a strong message across borders that it won't tolerate cross-border terrorism and those involved in such conspiracies will be held accountable. India's precision while undertaking this attack demonstrates its maturity and large-scale capabilities in defending the lives of its citizens. Now the onus to maintain peace is on Pakistan, as if it escalates the matter by counter-strikes, it has to bear all the ill-perceived consequences resulting from such a move.

Vaibhav Goyal, *Chandigarh*

INDIA'S MESSAGE

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Justice served' (IE, May 8). Operation Sindoor has sent an unambiguous message that terrorism will not be tolerated on Indian soil, and any attempt to destroy the peace of the country will be met with equal measure. That said, the Indian authorities ought not to let their guard down and must remain poised for any retaliatory actions.

Aanya Singhal, *Noida*

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Justice served' (IE, May 8). Operation Sindoor, carried out by our armed forces in response to the terrorist killing of innocent Hindu tourists in Pahalgam, has destroyed the terror-breeding bases and hideouts operating from Pakistan and PoK with utmost precision, without any civilian casualties or harming Pakistan military installations. It reminds one of Guru Gobind Singh *ji*'s words, "When all other means have failed, it is but lawful to take to the sword." It is not for conquest or vengeance but to defend righteousness and act responsibly against injustice.

L R Murmu, *Delhi*

Opinion

FRIDAY, MAY 9, 2025

TEST OF PATIENCE

Union defence minister Rajnath Singh

If anyone tries to take advantage of our patience, then they will have to be fully prepared to face quality action like yesterday

Escalating tensions

Operation Sindoor result of Pakistan's failure to contain terror, efforts now must be made to end conflict early

INDIA'S RESPONSE TO the dastardly killing of 26 Indian civilians in Pahalgam, Kashmir, on April 22, via Operation Sindoor, was sensitive, restrained, and measured and sent out the right message to Pakistan, namely that India will not brook the killing of innocents by terrorists. At the same time, there should be no doubt that military attacks would be met with a firm response. While the retaliatory action was anticipated given the heinous and brutal nature of the killing of tourists, the government did well to take its time to plan out the action. In the early hours of Wednesday, the country's armed forces carried out strikes targeting nine terrorist camps in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan. Neither military facilities or Pakistani civilians nor religious sites were targeted. As the government reiterated on Thursday, it is not India's intention to escalate the situation but to target terrorist infrastructure in a considered, precise, and controlled manner. Defence minister Rajnath Singh underlined India's moral clarity in combat, saying only those who killed "our innocents" had been struck. The government has also countered allegations that any dams in Pakistan were targeted.

Indeed, New Delhi has been compelled to exercise its right to act since the Pakistan government failed to step in to contain the terrorist menace, even though there was evidence of cross-border involvement. The military action followed other measures such as putting in abeyance the Indus Water Treaty. That again was justified given how India has honoured the treaty despite the adversarial situation, and how it has been calling for a reassessment but Pakistan has not responded to India's request. While India has won the backing of the global community, several world leaders have called for restraint after Wednesday's action. UN chief Antonio Guterres and US President Donald Trump called on India and Pakistan to exercise restraint and hoped the hostilities would end "very quickly". British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the UK was engaging with both India and Pakistan to push for dialogue and de-escalation. India would do well to use this goodwill and make a case before the United Nations (UN) Security Council; foreign secretary Vikram Misri has said the UN would be updated.

The hostilities continued Thursday as Pakistan escalated its efforts, with the air force, the army, and the navy all remaining on high alert. Pakistan attempted to engage 15 military targets using drones and missiles in northern and western India, including Srinagar, Jammu, Pathankot, Bhatinda, and Jalandhar, a defence ministry official said. The Indian response was as intense as Pakistan's and an air defence system in Lahore was neutralised.

Ideally, the strife should end quickly without more casualties and damage. Some past conflicts between India and Pakistan have wound down after negotiations, but it is unclear how long it will be before this one is resolved. While the Indian forces must respond to any action by the Pakistani forces, in the air or on the ground, communication channels must remain open and efforts made to end this conflict at the earliest. Operation Sindoor has been successful and the armed forces have proved their mettle. Now, an easing of geopolitical tensions and cessation of hostilities is in the country's best interests. For Pakistan, in particular, the cost of continued military warfare could be debilitating; its economy is in poor shape and it is looking for financial support. Immediate de-escalation, therefore, is its only logical and humane choice.

Saudi Arabia goes whistling past Kazakh oil graveyard

THE FOUR MOST dangerous words in finance are "this time is different". History suggests when Saudi Arabia launches a price war against one of its OPEC+ allies, it ultimately succeeds — but this time really will be different.

Saudi efforts to bludgeon Kazakhstan into compliance with its OPEC+ oil production quota are doomed to fail. Ostensibly, Riyadh is trying to reestablish discipline among rogue producers; Kazakhstan and several others are cheating on their output targets. To force them to relent, the kingdom is voting at OPEC+ meetings to raise group production faster than previously expected, hoping that the ensuing price decline forces the troublemakers into line.

To be sure, the kingdom's oil policy is multidimensional: It appears to be trying to recoup market share, probably from US shale producers, and is simultaneously using cheap crude as a tool in diplomatic talks with President Donald Trump. The strategy of pumping more oil — two consecutive monthly increases of 411,000 barrels a day for the eight main OPEC+ nations — is working as one would expect. Brent crude earlier this week touched a four-year low of just above $60 a barrel. Brent is down 15% this year, and many observers anticipate further declines as Saudi production, at just above 9 million barrels a day, heads higher.

Kazakhstan, though, isn't cutting production to meet its OPEC+ quota. It has two strong motivations to keep pumping; it needs the revenue, and it's in negotiations with international oil firms about investment plans that will determine the country's economic development.

First, the math. Thanks to the $48-billion expansion of its Tengiz mega-oilfield, Kazakhstan will pump on average 300,000 barrels a day more in 2025 than in 2024, with annual crude output averaging 1.8 million barrels a day this year. Those extra barrels can offset a large price decline. According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations, if Brent remains around its current level of $62 a barrel for the remainder of the year, Kazakhstan's gross oil revenue would decline just 2% compared with last year; a drop to $60 would trim it by 4%. Even if Brent traded at $50 until December, the accompanying 12% decline in annual revenue isn't enough to persuade the government in Astana to change course.

JAVIER BLAS

Bloomberg

Much lower crude prices of, say, $40 through the end of this year may inflict enough of a hit to prompt Kazakhstan to reconsider its production policy — but that would put extraordinary pressure on the Saudi budget, too. So far, there's little indication that the kingdom, which was taking on increased debt even before the recent decline in crude prices, is prepared to crash the market sufficiently to bring Kazakhstan to heel.

The second reason why Kazakhstan isn't budging is its relationship with Big Oil. The nation has relied on Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Shell, TotalEnergies, and ENI to build the three mega oilfields that are the backbone of its petroleum industry. If Astana forced them to pump less, they would probably baulk at further investments. But Kazakhstan needs that spending to further expand production.

The rest of the Kazakh industry is dominated by state-owned KazMunayGas, along with Chinese, Russian, and domestic privately owned groups. They mostly operate smaller fields that are significantly older. Cutting production there is complicated by vested local interests and the fact that output cuts may be impossible to reverse due to the age of the oilfields.

The pressure from Saudi Arabia comes at a delicate moment for Astana. The contracts that govern the three megaprojects will come up for renewal relatively soon and both sides have started to explore extensions. Oil majors typically prefer to try to prolong agreements long before expiry, often as many as five years before the deadline is reached.

Tengiz is at the centre of the current dispute between the Saudis and the Kazakhs. Forcing project leader Chevron and the other international oil companies involved to reduce production now would further complicate those extension talks.

So the most Kazakhstan is likely to do is to pay lip service to the OPEC+ targets. Expect more platitudes from Astana, reiterating in public its disposition to cooperate with the cartel while privately doing the opposite by pumping way more than its quota. For the Saudis, this time may truly turn out differently.

INDO-PAK CONFRONTATION

INDIA'S ALLIES SUPPORT ITS FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM, BUT UNLIKELY TO TAKE SIDES IF IT COMES TO A WAR

Friends not for war

ANITA INDER SINGH

Founding professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, New Delhi

FOR RUSSIA, WHICH Delhi has often lauded as a friend that has never hurt India's interests, and China, with which it has a border dispute and also its second-largest trade relationship (after the US), it is vital that India and Pakistan avoid war because of the chain of events following the Pakistan-instigated terrorist attack on Pahalgam. India has retaliated with missile attacks in Operation Sindoor.

Together with the other three permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council they have condemned the terrorist assault and grilled Pakistan, currently a non-permanent member of the Council, on its role in launching or aiding the attack.

But what can India expect from Russia, China, and the US at a stronger individual level? Russia and China are its partners in BRICS. America is not always an obliging friend. Pakistan and India are members of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is silent on their ongoing conflict: Beijing itself has taken the diplomatic lead.

There are good reasons for the stances of China, Russia, and the US. China has on occasion blamed Pakistani-trained extremists in its northwestern Xinjiang province. Russia has feared that extremists could destabilise its Central Asian neighbourhood. The US experienced a terrorist attack on 9/11 in 2001.

The UN holds that targeting civilians is unacceptable and those responsible must be brought to justice through credible and lawful means. A military confrontation must be avoided. If the dispute comes to decision-making in the UN Security Council, China will veto any resolution against Pakistan, while Britain and France might veto a resolution against India. The stance of President Donald Trump's America remains unpredictable, given that he thinks both countries have been at daggers drawn for more than 1,000 years.

All of them want de-escalation of the conflict, as India revokes the Indus Waters Treaty (1960), which allocated 80% of the rivers' waters to Pakistan. Reacting strongly, Pakistan told the UN Security Council that this was an act of war because water is life, not a weapon. Islamabad claims that these rivers sustain over 240 million Pakistanis.

Russia has stressed a settlement on the basis of the 1972 Simla Agreement, in which India and Pakistan agreed to settle their disputes through negotiations, and the 1999 Lahore Declaration which entreated both countries to avoid the use of nuclear weapons. Moscow, like Beijing and Washington, hopes for de-escalation.

Beijing is on one side playing the peace-loving diplomat by affirming that India and Pakistan are, and will always remain, each other's neighbours and China's neighbours. So, it has urged both sides to act in the larger interests of peace and stability.

While China has advocated an independent investigation into the Pahalgam attack and its suspects, it has also proclaimed that it will help Pakistan to uphold its sovereignty and security interests. Probably to show support for its all-weather friend, Pakistan, China has moved troops in its side of Ladakh, to what it calls Aksai Chin. This area comprises the territory of the Chinese-administered sector of Kashmir that is claimed by India as part of its Ladakh Union Territory. Consequently, the Indo-Pakistani conflict has worrisome strategic aspects if it sparks war. If it comes to a war crunch India may find itself confronting both Pakistan and China.

> **Delhi should remember that the US has been selling the F-16 aircraft to Pakistan for years and that Trump has stressed his very good personal ties with the leaders of both countries**

Beijing's support for Islamabad is strengthened by Pakistan's membership of China's Belt and Road Initiative since 2015. China has poured $46 billion of investment into Pakistan via Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. It has connected Pakistan's deep-sea ports of Gwadar in Balochistan and Karachi in Sindh to its Xinjiang Uighur region by overland routes. Thousands of miles of roads and railways have been built, and Pakistan's capacity for power generation has also increased dramatically.

Pakistan is indebted to China but it simultaneously buys more than 81% of its military supplies from China. They include submarines and fighter jets, which illustrate some of the ways in which China has been able to create a shift in regional security dynamics. All the more so since it is also the largest arms retailer to India's neighbours Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. China is also the top trading partner of all three countries and given its superior economic and military strength, a tough competitor to India, even in the latter's immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood.

The US supports India's right to defend itself. But Trump has advised India and Pakistan to sort out what he has labelled as their 1,500-year-old problem, adding that it could probably be "longer than that". He has reiterated the strong support of the US government to India's fight against terrorism. However, Delhi should remember that the US has been selling the F-16 aircraft to Pakistan for several years and that Trump has stressed his very good personal ties with the leaders of both countries. Grappling with the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Trump's reluctance to engage America in South Asia is clear from his advice that India and Pakistan should "figure it out" themselves.

India has perceived Russia as its reliable friend since they signed their treaty of friendship in 1971. But Russian and Pakistani companies are building a gas pipeline which will be called Pakistan Stream gas project, or the North-South gas pipeline. The strategically important pipeline will extend from Karachi on the Arabian Sea coast to power plants in the northeastern province of Punjab.

All told, India's friends support its fight against terrorism, but their national interests are unlikely to dictate taking sides if it comes to a war between India and Pakistan.

How to enjoy volatility

JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial
www.mecklai.com

As always, and more than ever right now, anything can happen. Be more conservative than ever, use a structured hedging approach, and ***follow it with discipline***

IT CAN'T BE repeated enough but the market is like the ocean — nobody can truly comprehend it and, from time to time, it can throw up sudden squalls that send volatility shooting higher. This programme can turn self-sustaining for at least some time, as people who are caught wrong-footed have to unwind positions and take losses.

Over the last three months, rupee volatility (historic 100-day) has shot higher (to nearly 6%) from its 20-year low of around 1%, reached in November 2024. In the process, the rupee has bounced around wildly, hitting a low of nearly 88, recovering to 85, falling again to near 87 and then strengthening above 84 to the dollar, and is around 84.50 today.

While importers are shell-shocked, most exporters too were frozen in their tracks as decision-making in such a volatile environment became virtually impossible. Having been in the market for many decades, we understand this, which is why we have developed a structured programme for hedging based on simple rules. First, start with an initial hedge — no going into the market unsecured. Second, set a risk limit (RL), and if it is ever breached, hedge all exposures open at the time. Third, set a series of take profits (TPs) and hedge increasing amounts as each take profit is reached. The key, of course, is to ***follow the process with discipline*** without any reference to anybody's market views. This is very difficult at the best of times, and close to impossible when the market is so volatile that all anyone can talk about is what's going on with the rupee.

A CASE FOR HEDGING

Trigger	Rate	Hedge action
Risk limit	85.16	Balance open
Initial hedge	86.90	20% w fwds
TP1	87.34	10% w fwds
TP2	87.77	15% w fwds
TP3	88.21	20% w fwds
TP4	88.64	25% w fwds

Date (2025)	Market rate	Programme (%)	Actual (%)
January 1	86.90	20	20
January 13	87.44	10	10
February 2	88.05	15	—
February 6	88.35	20	—
February 10	88.70	25	—
May 2	84.13	20	—
Hedge ratio	100	30	—
Realisation or MTM	87.59	85.02	—

We have a client who has been following this programme for several years, has been complying with the rules reasonably well, and is quite pleased with the results so far. In January, when spot was 85.66 and the forward for June was 86.90, we set the RL for his June exports at 85.15 (his budget rate was 84, as I recall). He took an initial hedge of 20% and we had set accelerating TPs at 0.5% intervals. On January 13, by when the rupee had started to fall, the first TP (forward rate [fwd] of 87.34) was broken and he hedged a further 10% at 87.44.

The rupee continued to fall and he began to regret his hedge, and when the second TP (fwd of 87.77) was broken in early February, he decided to hold back. And sure enough, the rupee kept falling, and he congratulated himself.

But, when the rupee bounced back to nearly 85, he remained frozen, his discipline broken. He kept watching the market and, even when he got another opportunity near 87, he kept waiting for the nearly 88 spot level he had seen. And even now, when the market has obviously turned and his stop loss was hit, he remains frozen, stuck with only 30% hedged to date.

The tables show the programme parameters and the performance details. The programme would have had the exposure fully hedged at a rate of 87.59, 69 paise (0.8%) better than the zero risk value of 86.90. While it was 1.11 (1.27%) worse than the best rate that prevailed till date, it was a huge 2.95% better than the actual mark to market (MTM) that he was holding on to. And, while that is still ahead of his budget rate, he has not only lost a huge amount of opportunity but has also, no doubt, suffered a lot of tension trying to second-guess the market.

Going forward, the market remains hugely uncertain. The shocking sudden strengthening of the rupee last week was (apparently) triggered by huge stop losses being hit when the rupee inched above 85; this suggests that the equally shocking fall in the rupee prior to that was driven, at least to some extent, by large short rupee position-taking in the non-deliverable forward (NDF) market. On the other hand, global markets appear to be recovering from their Trump trauma (likely because he has walked back a lot on his tariff bluster), which, together with the Reserve Bank of India's stern holding the line when the rupee climbed above 84(!), suggests that things may calm down a bit. Again, while rupee volatility has shot up in a straight line, historic comparisons suggest that the volatility surge may be exhausting itself.

In other words — and, as always, and more than ever right now — anything can happen. Be more conservative than ever, use a structured hedging approach, and ***follow it with discipline***.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fortifying trade

Apropos of "Win-win for India, UK" (*FE*, May 8), India and the UK have finalised a landmark free trade agreement (FTA) seen as more comprehensive than India's past trade deals. It offers Indian firms near tariff-free access to UK markets as well as reduced duties on British exports to India, notably on high-end engineering goods, automobiles, and food products like Scotch whisky. The FTA also opens public procurement markets and is expected to boost the UK's GDP and bilateral trade. While it eases professional mobility, it stops short of broader visa liberalisation. The agreement was clinched after political compromises and high-level diplomacy. It is a major step, but not the final one. India's commerce ministry must now focus on preventing the return of US tariffs, securing a trade deal by fall, and concluding a broader agreement with the European Union by year-end.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

A historic deal

The India–UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks a promising milestone in global cooperation. Described as "historic" by *Al Jazeera*, the deal reflects significant economic ambition—reducing tariffs and expanding market access, particularly in services and skilled labour. While new opportunities arise for Indian professionals, political concerns remain. It is crucial that the agreement is implemented with fairness, ensuring that benefits reach workers, small businesses, and consumers—not just major industries. Long-term success lies in inclusive, transparent execution, aiming at growth for everyone.

—Mohammad Hasnain, Mumbai

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Anybody can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time—that is not within everybody's power

Aristotle

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
— Ramnath Goenka

CHINA'S SILENCE ON PAK'S USE OF TERROR AS POLICY SPEAKS VOLUMES

INDIA'S recent precision strikes on terror hubs in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir were not acts of provocation—they were acts of self-defence. The April 22 Pahalgam terror attack, which killed 26 innocent civilians, was traced to cross-border terror infrastructure, and India exercised its sovereign right to defend its citizens. The nine targeted sites were not civilian zones, but bases linked to known terrorist organisations. There is not even a shadow of doubt about that—informal acknowledgments from within Pakistan match fairly open intelligence. For China to call this military action "regrettable" is, therefore, is a curious lapse of wisdom.

Beijing's formal response—urging "restraint" and "peace"—has statesmanlike gravitas on the surface, but only there. Inside, it is without substance. Despite claiming to oppose "all forms of terrorism", China has consistently shielded Pakistan-based actors from global scrutiny. From blocking UN terror designations to sugarcoating Islamabad's duplicity, China has long used its diplomatic clout to preserve its "iron brother" alliance—even at the cost of its own self-interest. In the 21st century, even it has stakes in a pacified Pakistan. If it chooses not to exert itself to bring that about when it clearly has the capacity, one must ask why.

Operation Sindoor was not an act of escalation—it was a precise, proportionate and necessary strike against terror. This zero-tolerance approach is not bluster, but a doctrinal outcome of decades marked by bloodshed and futile attempts at dialogue, even in the face of Pakistan's use of terrorism as a tool of state policy. China's reaction, on the other hand, smells of strategic hypocrisy. Its calls for "fair investigations" ring hollow while it approvingly accepts Pakistan's "resolute" actions against terror at face value—these have always been performative rituals, papering over denialism. Beijing's refusal to name perpetrators or support global terror designations, including for 26/11-accused Sajid Mir, exposes its not-so-secret partisanship. Peace is not the absence of action, but the presence of justice. Equating aggressor and victim in the name of balance distorts the very foundation of international norms.

This is not neutrality. This is its opposite, dressed up in diplomatese. Let alone global acceptance as a credible superpower. If China seeks leadership in the Global South, it must do better. Align its words with actions, for one. At present, its regret over India's defensive strikes rings hollow and its silence on terrorism speaks volumes.

TRADE BOOST FOR MOST, WORRIES FOR A FEW

WAR strategist Sun Tzu had said, 'In the midst of chaos, there is also opportunity.' Perhaps this is what Indian and British negotiators had in mind amid the chaos of Donald Trump's tariffs as they hastened to clinch a far-reaching free trade agreement (FTA). The deal is expected to boost bilateral trade between the two countries, which is currently at $56 billion, by another $34 billion by 2040. With that promise, it gives both countries more options in dealing with the US's tariff regime. The agreement should translate into substantial gains for Indian exporters as Britain will reduce its already-low tariffs, leaving 99 percent of Indian goods facing zero duties. Textiles and apparels, a huge employer in India, should be a big beneficiary, while gems and jewellery, marine products and auto parts would also receive a boost.

The India-UK deal also has a much-awaited 'double contribution convention'. This will exempt temporary Indian workers in Britain from making social security contributions for 3 years. Britain's commitments will also ease mobility of professionals, for both entry and placement. This comes as a shot in the arm for India's information technology sector. The UK said this was the "biggest and most economically significant" bilateral trade agreement it had signed since leaving the European Union in 2020. India, on its part, will reduce duties on 90 percent of British imports ranging from whisky and medical devices to machinery and lamb. The target is to make 85 percent of British goods tariff-free over the next decade.

Some of this is great news for middle class consumers. For car buyers, a fleet of British models will be far cheaper now with automotive tariffs going down to 10 percent for a punishing 100 percent. On the other hand, spirits manufacturers as well as car makers in India, who have benefited from a protected environment, will find the going tough. There are other downsides, too. FTAs have often led to a higher growth in imports than in exports, creating a massive trade deficit. While it is time that tariff protections are removed from some industries, on the products of farms and smaller enterprises, which are still struggling to sustain their businesses, a phased tariff protection is still a necessity.

QUICK TAKE

GEM OF A MISSION

A threat of legal action by the Indian government has forced Sotheby's to postpone the auction of hundreds of sacred jewels linked to the Buddha's remains. The 'gem relics', which include amethysts, pearls, carnelians and embossed gold sheets, were set to be sold in Hong Kong on Wednesday. India's action is in line with two missions it has undertaken vigorously in recent years—the return of looted antiques and promotion of the Buddhist tourism circuit. The relics are said to have been 'found' by a colonial-era engineer in Uttar Pradesh's Piprahwa village. The Indian government, which has called the relics "inalienable religious and cultural heritage of India", must explore all options for their return.

As jihadi terrorism and fascism share some traits, it's helpful to see how the world allied to tackle that menace to examine how India can spearhead the battle at hand

WORLD'S SCOURGE: FASCISM THEN, TERRORISM NOW

COMMODORE CHITRAPU UDAY BHASKAR (RETD)

Director, Society for Policy Studies, New Delhi

SOURAV ROY

TODAY, the 80th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Allied forces will be celebrated in Russia as a major historical punctuation. This epochal event marked the end of the diabolical Hitler era and the ideology of fascism, which together threatened the normative principles of freedom and liberty.

In the eight decades since, the world has transformed with many ironic twists on the road. Today, some of the old allies are pitted against each other and the biggest concern for a number of nations isn't fascism, but *jihadi* terrorism. It's instructive to look at how world powers came together in different eras to mobilise against the biggest scourges of the times to examine how the new fight against terrorism can be spearheaded.

Today's military parade in Moscow offers a snapshot of the present. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the list of world leaders who will be present will signal an endorsement of his leadership—and by extension, the war that he has initiated against Ukraine, one that is still festering. Among the major powers, presidents Xi Jinping of China and Lula da Silva of Brazil will be in Moscow along with leaders from 27 other nations. Predictably, the US and the EU will not be present.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is considered to have a special personal relationship with President Putin, will not be there, for he is leading his nation in the fight against terrorism under the banner of Operation Sindoor and the India-Pakistan military tension is simmering.

The parade unfolds against a complex set of anomalies, ironies and open-ended questions about ideology and politics around the world. May 1945 defined the end of the war where the US, USSR, UK and France collectively resisted the Fascist ideology and territorial annexation that had been brutally pursued by Germany, Italy and Japan. The mass killings of those defeated or annexed by Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia are tragic testimonies. Ironically, the world is currently a silent witness to another genocide, in Palestine, with the 1945 victims as perpetrators.

Fascism is broadly defined as an ideology that espouses a range of characteristics including extreme right-wing political orientation, authoritarianism, ultra-nationalism, dictatorial leadership and suppression of domestic dissent. In states where right-wing groups are socio-politically ascendant, governance is often accompanied by an intense prioritisation of majority rule and vigilantism over individual rights, and the 'othering' of vulnerable minorities and foreign immigrants.

Currently, while there is no pure Fascist-led nation in the Hitlerian mould, many countries that are not authoritarian or communist—such as Russia, China, Vietnam and North Korea—are exhibiting some of these traits. Paradoxically, Russia, with an authoritarian leader at the helm, is projecting itself as the lone defender standing up against fascism, while Putin is perceived in the US-led West as a malignant force that threatens stability in Europe. The war in Ukraine is held up as irrefutable evidence of such territorial violation and the trampling of laws and treaties.

Among the anomalies that abound, Russia is now ranged against its 1945 allies—the US, UK and France, with only China unambiguously in its camp. Germany, Japan and Italy have distanced themselves from Moscow and are formal military allies of their erstwhile enemy, the US, though this is tenuous given the current Trump-led uncertainty about NATO.

Furthermore, in an ironic turn of events, post-war Germany, that had resolutely denounced its Nazi past, has recently seen the rise of a right-wing constituency in its domestic politics. Anti-immigrant sentiment with a visible anti-Muslim bias has been the trigger for support to right-wing parties—a pattern discernible in other parts of Europe, too. Apart from Germany, Italy, France and now the UK are also witnessing similar trends.

The 80-year trajectory from 1945 to 2025 has seen two major geopolitical punctuations. The Cold War began soon after the end of the Second World War and the West identified the containment of the Soviet Union as the new strategic challenge to the 'free world' and fascism was replaced by communism.

This reorientation saw the US and NATO pitted against the former USSR and a fledgling communist China. In the latter phase of the Cold War, with the Nixon-Mao rapprochement, China was co-opted by the US, and the Soviet Union partnered with India. Clearly, communism was neither the adhesive nor the abhorrent ideology it was projected to be.

The Cold War ended in December 1991 with the USSR disintegrating and a liberal democratic ethos underpinned by free trade and globalisation was the flavour of the decade. This was short-lived as 9/11 ushered in the ill-fated US-led 'global war on terror' and an anti-Muslim anxiety began to spread.

It is instructive that *jihadi* terrorism and fascism share some traits, but aren't identical. The former is supranational in scope, while the latter is state-centric. However, both can involve authoritarianism, ideological extremism, rabid intolerance of the 'other' and a willingness to use violence to impose their vision.

The arrival of Donald Trump and his ideology in US politics and the enormity of January 6, 2021—the attack on the US Capitol by Trump supporters—sowed the seeds of what some critics have labelled the American variant of fascism.

Will the growth of right-wing political parties weaken the normative principles of freedom and democracy that were so zealously and triumphantly defended in May 1945? This is an open-ended question with no easy binary answer. The antidote will have to come from active and discerning citizen partnership.

Can the fight against *jihadi* terrorism currently being spearheaded by India become the new ideological factor that will compel the major powers to arrive at a tentative consensus on quarantining this scourge? The US, Russia, major EU nations and India have all been differently scarred by this virus.

China is a key to finding this consensus. Hopefully, the next Xi-Putin-Modi meeting would allow for a preliminary assessment of the emerging global ideological threats and the contours of the collective response.

(Views are personal)

INDIA NEEDS A HEATWAVE POLICY

THAMIZHACHI THANGAPANDIAN

MP from South Chennai and a member of the Consultative Committee for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

AS India confronts yet another punishing summer, the realities of climate change are no longer abstract. The first nationwide heatwave alert of 2025 was issued as early as April 8, and large parts of the country are already experiencing temperatures soaring past historical norms. Yet, in the face of increasing fatalities, productivity loss and public health strain, the Union government continues to treat heatwaves as a seasonal nuisance rather than the climate emergency they are.

The UN secretary-general's 'Call to Action on Extreme Heat' warns that heat is now the deadliest of all climate hazards. For India, where 90 percent of the workforce is informal, healthcare systems are uneven, and urban heat islands are rapidly expanding, this danger is existential. But while states scramble to prepare, no overarching national heatwave policy offers coordination, funding or technical guidance.

The result? A patchwork of uneven responses. Some states like Delhi and Jammu & Kashmir have introduced heat action plans with hydration points and early warnings. Others are still in the planning phase. These fragmented efforts often kick in after disaster strikes, leaving the most vulnerable—daily-wage labourers, the elderly and children—at the mercy of extreme temperatures. There's no national framework to set standards, enforce accountability, or ensure that mitigation matches adaptation.

In this scenario, Tamil Nadu stands as a striking counter-example. Under the leadership of Chief Minister M K Stalin, the state has taken a proactive, institutionalised approach to climate resilience. The Tamil Nadu Climate Change Mission and the Green Tamil Nadu Mission are governance tools integrated into urban design, agriculture, public health and education. The state's preparedness isn't seasonal; it is systemic. It has built green cover in urban areas to lower ambient temperatures, promoted cool roofs in government buildings and low-income housing, and ensured that district administrations have clear, locally-adaptable guidelines to address heat stress. Schools are instructed to alter timings and ensure hydration, hospitals are equipped for heat stroke emergencies, and public awareness campaigns precede—not follow—peak summer.

Tamil Nadu's anticipatory approach is in direct contrast to the Union government's delayed, ad hoc advisories. A single advisory issued in March 2025 simply asked states to "prepare"—without guidelines, resources or measurable indicators. The Union government's inaction amounts to a dangerous abdication of responsibility in a crisis that is growing more frequent and severe with each passing year.

The economic toll is just as stark. Heatwaves have already begun to impact national productivity. A recent study from the Global Heat Health Information Network links prolonged heat

AFP

Heat is now the biggest climate hazard and Indians are especially vulnerable. There is urgent need for a national policy setting standards, enforcing accountability and ensuring mitigation across the country. Tamil Nadu's anticipatory approach can be a starting point

exposure with an 8-10 percent reduction in outdoor labour output, especially in construction and agriculture—sectors that form the backbone of India's employment. Yet, there is no national compensation framework for wage loss due to extreme heat, nor a safety net for workers forced off jobs because conditions are life-threatening.

Global best practices offer a clear direction. France operates a national heatwave plan with tiered alerts, welfare checks and legally mandated cooling zones. The US promotes urban cooling through green infrastructure, public health preparedness and building design. WHO's ClimaHealth platform recommends integrated planning between climate and health ministries. All of these approaches share one thing in common: national leadership and coordination.

That is exactly what India lacks. A national heatwave policy must mandate every state to draft and regularly update its heat actions plan, back it with central funding and develop a national heat surveillance system. It must also move beyond urban centres to cover rural and peri-urban zones—where resilience is low and mortality often underreported. It must protect the informal worker, ensure health systems can respond in real time, and embed cooling into housing, transport and employment policies.

Heat resilience is also about justice. Vulnerable groups suffer disproportionately: slum dwellers without insulation, gig workers with no rest breaks, women who cook over open fires in poorly ventilated homes and elderly citizens without access to cooling spaces. Tamil Nadu is addressing these intersections through targeted welfare schemes and smart urban planning, but without support from the Union government, such isolated successes can only go so far.

The Union government must step up by owning the climate mandate. That includes developing an enforceable policy under the Disaster Management Act, funding heat-resilient infrastructure through schemes like Smart Cities and AMRUT, and ensuring that climate justice is not left to the vision of a few progressive states. Tamil Nadu has demonstrated that heatwaves are neither unpredictable nor unmanageable. With foresight, planning, and political will, lives can be protected and systems strengthened.

If the Union government continues to see heatwaves as an annual inconvenience rather than a structural threat, the costs will only multiply—both in human and economic terms. India doesn't need to wait for more headlines, more deaths or more advisories. What it needs is a national heatwave policy that is as bold, urgent and structured as the threat itself. Tamil Nadu has shown the way—the Union must now catch up.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Targeted approach

Ref: *Operation Sindoor: The message in opting for precision, not in scale* (May 8). India's accuracy in targeting terrorist locations is truly praiseworthy. They demonstrated a non-escalatory and targeted approach. The autonomy granted by the central government was evident. The courageous actions of the soldiers instilled immense pride in every Indian. This appropriate response is a mark of honour for all Indians.

Vinod Vetarady, Payyanur

Hunt terrorists

India's aim was crystal clear—the actions were measured and non-escalatory. The general reaction of the Pahalgam victims' relatives was jubilation over the destruction of terrorist camps. But we need to remember the perpetrators at Pahalgam have not been brought before justice yet.

D Sethuraman, Chennai

Military history

With due respect to all married women who choose not to apply sindoor, the word took on an entirely different meaning when the Indian forces struck at the foreheads of terrorists. One hopes the name of this operation secures its place in military history, not on election posters or in political speeches.

N Nagarajan, Secunderabad

Befitting reply

Ref: *The options on the table post Pahalgam* (May 7). The article was really insightful on the reasons for the attack. Thanks to Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain for the engaging read. At the time of writing this, India has already given a befitting reply with Operation Sindoor. Kudos to the Indian army and government.

Sriram S, Puducherry

Seizing Gaza

Ref: *Strikes across Gaza kill 59* (May 8). Israel's real plan is to permanently occupy Gaza. It wants to seize land and confine and destabilise the Palestinians. The role of the US and Arab countries has been weak. Gaza is not just a piece of land, it's also a sensitive issue. Occupation will not bring peace. Israel should reconsider this plan.

Mohammad Asad, Mumbai

Rohit's test

Ref: *End of Test innings* (May 8). Rohit Sharma may have considered continuing as a specialist batsman, but retirement is a subjective assessment of form, fitness and the priorities ahead. As he leaves Test cricket, he carries with him a legacy marked by early promise, a dramatic comeback as an opener, and a captaincy that ebbed and flowed.

R Sivakumar, Chennai

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A thought for today

Weapons are like money; no one knows the meaning of enough

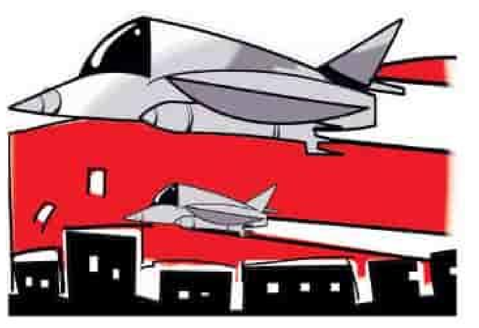
MARTIN AMIS

Stand Down, 'Pindi

Pak generals should know that a far better-resourced India will respond to every escalation

The generals in Rawalpindi GHQ are leading Pakistan down a dangerous path of escalation. After Operation Sindoor successfully targeted multiple terrorist bases inside Pakistan, there were signs that Pakistan's civilian govt was willing to de-escalate. But Pak army swatted such notions aside, vowed retaliation and forced the civilian dispensation to fall in line. This is the real tragedy of Pakistan where the civilian govt has been reduced to a mere rubber stamp by military generals. But the generals must know that in the current round of escalation, cessation of hostilities must come from Pakistan. India has and will respond forcefully to every provocation from across the border. This *is* the new normal. It needs reminding that the escalation was initiated by Pakistan with the April 22 Pahalgam attack. India only responded with a measured, high-precision operation against the terrorists and their handlers.

Yet, Pak generals chose to further increase provocations by trying to target multiple Indian military installations with drones and missiles on the intervening night of May 7-8. That all of them were intercepted and shot down by India's Integrated Counter UAS Grid and Air Defence systems, which included the top-of-the-line S-400, highlights New Delhi's superiority in this regard. In fact, since Balakot 2019, India has spent considerable resources on getting a state-of-the-art air defence grid up and running.



Pakistan, which again tried to breach Indian defences at various points along IB yesterday, clearly has nothing comparable. Indian forces, in response to Pakistan's failed targeting of military installations, pierced Pakistani air defence systems with Israeli-origin Harop and Harpy drones, knocking out the air defence system in Lahore. Drones are another area where India punches way above Pakistan. While New Delhi is marching towards becoming a drone manufacturing hub, Islamabad has no comparable industrial depth and can only perhaps rely on Turkish and Chinese drones.

Given these metrics, Islamabad can ill afford to carry out a long-drawn conflict with New Delhi. It simply doesn't have the resources. It's actually likely to run out of ammo if it chooses an escalatory matrix. India's solid ordnance base ensures no such concerns. Note also that Pakistan's iron-brother China has been very careful not to get dragged into the conflict. Thus, Pakistan's playing a losing game here. India's economic size, ability to absorb the fallout of conflict, and far greater conventional military depth give it a clear edge. India's consistently stuck to the de-escalatory paradigm. Pak generals should get off the suicide track and stand down now.

Keep It Flowing

Modi's meeting with GOI secys underlines the critical role of supply chain in these times

India launched Op Sindoor as a measured crackdown on Pakistan-sponsored terrorists, but if Pakistan wants a long conflict, India is comfortably placed economically and logistically. Forex reserves are enough to cover about 30 months of oil and gas imports – or a year of *all* imports. They are also roughly twice as much as Pakistan's *GDP*. On the food front, wheat and paddy stocks are way above govt's comfort level. There's a strong and diversified manufacturing base. Growth rate remains high, inflation is under control. Altogether, India is in a good place.

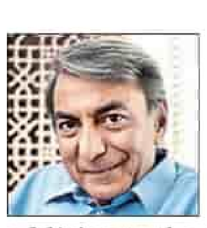
But this is no time to be complacent. India's air defences proved their worth on Thursday by intercepting almost all incoming Pakistani drones and missiles. But we should budget for all eventualities in a conflict. That means keeping a close eye on critical infra. So, contingency plans are important. Underlining the importance of supply chain management, Modi reviewed national preparedness in a meeting with secretaries of various ministries on Thursday. He asked them to work together, not in departmental silos, to ensure there are no disruptions in case of a larger conflict.

This is something govt will need to monitor continuously. Since the private sector mainly runs supply lines, coordination with it will be key. Indians are not short of a sense of national purpose, but channelling it can be a challenge. That's why govt did well to start with mock drills on Wednesday. Besides physical supply chains, the security of digital systems also needs to be ensured. Cyberattacks have increased since the Pahalgam attack on April 22, and BSE and NSE have already curbed website access for foreign entities. Cert-In and other agencies must ensure Indian telecoms and payment systems remain safe. There should be no weak link in India's chain fence.

Snobspeak doubletalk

On arty-crafty terms replacing old-fashioned words

Jug Suraiya



An Australian friend has sent me an article from a local newspaper which says that the Down Under continent is being 'uplifted'. Is the land of Oz levitating to the top of the world? Not quite.

'Uplifted' doesn't have anything to do with geology. Or with such gravity-defying, cosmetic surgery procedures like tummy tucks and double chin eliminations, but is the latest addition to the argot of the hospitality industry.

If a hotel offers to change the standard room you booked for a superior room, you are being uplifted. What's wrong with an old-fashioned upgrade? Upgrade has been downgraded and replaced by the presumably more uplifting 'uplifted'. Want an extra dollop of cheese on your pizza? By all means. Get uplifted.

Oral snobbery, or snobspeak, which is reinventing language seeks to poshify everyday vocabulary. In the mid-50s, British novelist Nancy Mitford distinguished between U and non-U language, in which U stood for upper class and non-U for non-upper. For example, U-speakers would say scent, whereas non-U speakers would say perfume; a U-speaker would use the loo, while a non-U speaker would go to the toilet.

jugular*vein*

In today's snobspeak, a restaurant menu or an art gallery exhibition is invariably curated. This does not mean getting hold of a cleric called a curate to preside over the proceedings. Curated merely means 'put together', but put together is verbal vanilla, oral plain Jane, while curated sounds glam and arty-crafty.

Like 'artisanal'. Artisanal should evoke the image of a workman, an artisan, sweat beading the brow, sleeves rolled up on brawny arms, wielding an implement of arcane use.

But artisanal now refers to small-batch food items that aren't mass-produced, like ice cream, or cheese, or cupcakes, or 'hand-cut' sandwiches, as distinct, presumably, from 'foot-cut' sandwiches, with or without benefit of boots.

'Bespoke' is the artisanal word for custom-made, or made to order. Being more hoity, not to mention toity, bespoke is snobspeak for customised.

But even as snobspeak invents new buzzwords for its lexicon, it runs the risk of being told to shove a bespoke uplifted into your artisanal.

Munir's Mad, Bad Doctrine

Pak army chief, wannabe heir of Zia and Jinnah, is a toxic version of his idols. His need to manufacture external threats to consolidate internal control is what's escalating conflict with India

Ajay Bisaria

A regressive and incendiary worldview has been unveiled by Pakistan's de facto ruler, Gen Asim Munir. It has provoked renewed hostilities with India – and threatens far worse.

On Wednesday, Pakistan's army escalated hostilities, overriding its civilian leadership's advice to de-escalate, launching attacks on Indian military positions instead. The decision, made after Pakistan's floundering defence minister offered an olive branch, highlights how the current crisis has been sparked by one man's strategic miscalculation. Late Thursday evening, Pakistan's attempts to breach Indian defences at various points across the International Border were largely thwarted. Clearly, Islamabad's dilemma – to escalate further or seek an off ramp – is sharpening.

So why did Gen Munir, Pakistan's army chief since 2022, choose this moment to provoke a conflict with India with a terror strike and then recklessly intensify the conflict?

The answer can be traced to a pattern as old as the Republic itself: Pakistan's army chiefs tend to develop a three-year legacy itch, when the army's propaganda machine, ISPR, spins dogma into doctrine, conjuring up a vision of the future – often repackaging the past. Mostly, it is a harmless rebranding of a uniformed official as a visionary leader. This time though, the makeover has had dangerous consequences for the world.

Munir had already secured himself an extended term in office without having to go through the trouble of staging a coup. With schoolboyish declamation he articulated a worldview to select audiences – including overseas Pakistanis – that, while not officially labelled a doctrine, functions unmistakably as one. And it is perilous.

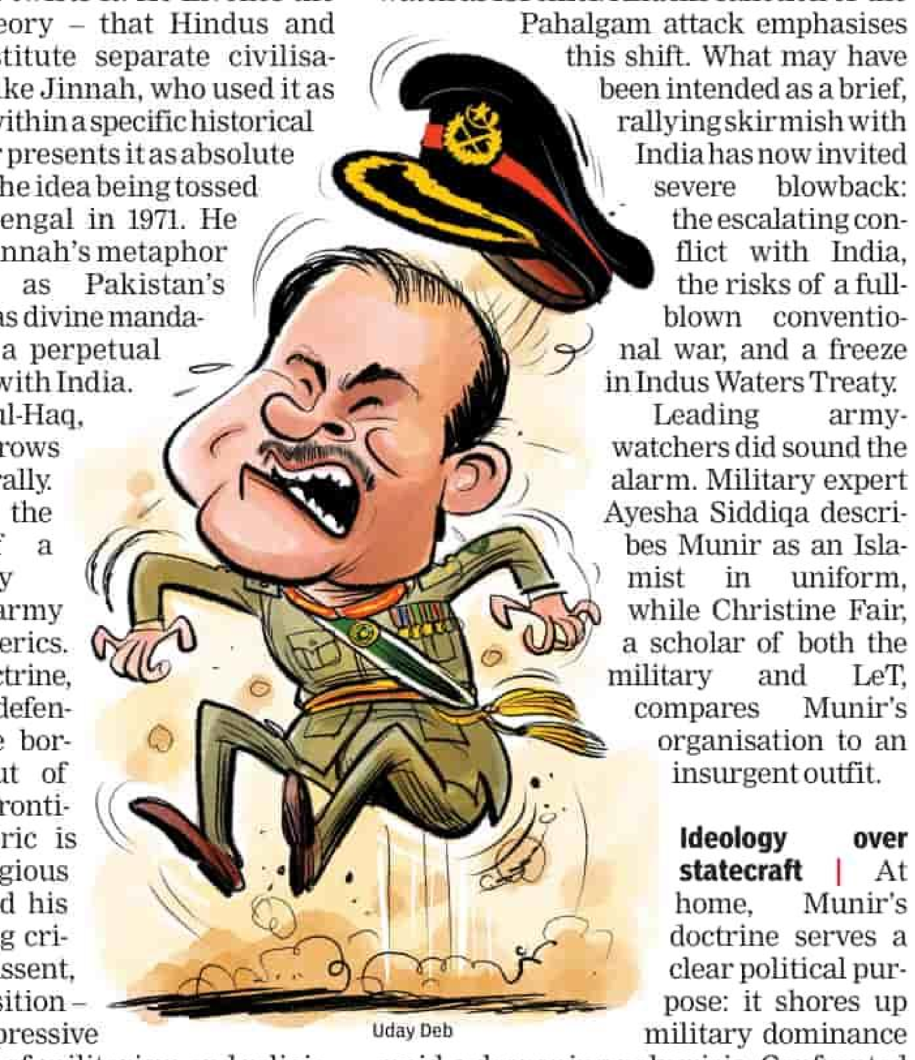
Munir's spring epiphany has less in common with the strategic thought of modern generals and more with a yearning for a mythologised past. Unlike some predecessors who at least gestured toward reform in their later years, Munir has marched the country backward.

Misreading Jinnah, mimicry of Zia | Munir draws from Pakistan's foundational mythology but twists it. He invokes the two-nation theory – that Hindus and Muslims constitute separate civilisations – but unlike Jinnah, who used it as a political tool within a specific historical context, Munir presents it as absolute truth, despite the idea being tossed into Bay of Bengal in 1971. He reinterprets Jinnah's metaphor of Kashmir as Pakistan's "jugular vein" as divine mandate, sustaining a perpetual confrontation with India.

From Zia-ul-Haq, Munir borrows even more literally. He revives the framework of a mullah-military alliance, an army supported by clerics. Under his doctrine, the military is defender of not the borders alone but of ideological frontiers. His rhetoric is steeped in religious symbolism, and his actions – jailing critics, purging dissent, crushing opposition – mirror Zia's repressive regime. Fusion of militarism and religious orthodoxy is once again state policy.

From geo-economics to jihadism | Munir has also reversed the tentative shifts toward economic pragmatism pursued by his immediate predecessor. General Bajwa promoted "geo-economics" over geopolitical adventurism, distancing the army from jihadist proxies and seeking regional stability. Even Musharraf, for all his flaws, advocated post-9/11 pragmatism, floated a four-point Kashmir formula, and pursued détente.

Munir has discarded all that. He has reignited ideological hostility and re-embraced proxy warfare. The Pulwama attack of 2019 was mounted under his watch as ISI chief. And his sanction of the Pahalgam attack emphasises this shift. What may have been intended as a brief, rallying skirmish with India has now invited severe blowback: the escalating conflict with India, the risks of a full-blown conventional war, and a freeze in Indus Waters Treaty.



Uday Deb

Leading army-watchers did sound the alarm. Military expert Ayesha Siddiqa describes Munir as an Islamist in uniform, while Christine Fair, a scholar of both the military and LeT, compares Munir's organisation to an insurgent outfit.

Ideology over statecraft | At home, Munir's doctrine serves a clear political purpose: it shores up military dominance amid a deepening polycrisis. Confronted with a failing economy, multiple insurgencies, and a jailed yet wildly popular Imran Khan, Munir has chosen military theatrics over reform. He's manufacturing external threats to consolidate internal control.

This is not unprecedented. Pakistan's military has long positioned itself as the guardian of ideology and territory. But Munir's spin gives that role a theocratic overtone, casting the army as divinely sanctioned. The result: a reckless security establishment pushing the region toward war.

Strategic folly for tactical gain | Strategically, the Munir Doctrine is shortsighted. Its aim – domestic consolidation – comes at enormous international cost. Pakistan is more isolated than ever. Once tolerated for its geopolitical utility, it is now seen globally as a terrorism sponsor.

Beijing is cautious. Washington is impatient. The Pahalgam incident only sharpened these perceptions, with the international community recognising India's right to respond and urging Pakistan to back down.

A doctrine of decay | The Munir Doctrine is dangerous not just for what it proposes but for what it ignores. It offers no economic roadmap, no vision for technological progress, and no aspiration for regional integration. It recycles myths of victimhood, territorial irredentism, and religious nationalism. It emphasises Pakistan's identity as a wronged Other of India, destined to fight the larger state. This may help Munir tighten his grip, but it imperils Pakistan's viability as a modern nation-state.

For Pakistan's long-suffering people, it spells continued stagnation. Munir offers a warped identity politics in place of economic policy, and a theology of warfare instead of diplomacy. His doctrine doesn't prepare Pakistan for the 21st century – it traps it in the 20th.

Ultimately, the Munir Doctrine is a dead end. It substitutes belligerence for strategic thinking. It indulges the military's worst instincts. In trying to cast himself as heir to Jinnah and Zia, Munir is embalming a vision of Pakistan that no longer serves its people – and driving it toward becoming a reckless, war-making garrison state.

The writer is former high commissioner to Pakistan

Why Is Pakistan Losing The Battle Of Narratives?

Many reasons. No one believes it on terrorism. Its key players often contradict each other. Pak army has lost domestic standing. And India's communication skills are better

Vivek Chadha

Colonel (Retd)

Between Kargil and Pahalgam, Pakistan continues to weave a hackneyed narrative that beggars all credibility. There is something stunningly cavalier about its blatant falsehoods. And then there are the contradictory positions expressed by different key stakeholders. Let's consider the three core fundamentals of its narrative building today, and these all echo back 25 years.

- First, Pakistan continues to say it is not responsible for terrorism inside Jammu and Kashmir. Since no one believes this any longer, reality is being churned through a fresh spin cycle. It goes like this: Pakistan did promote jihadi elements in the past, but this was only at the behest of Western powers, it no longer employs terrorism as state policy, indeed Pakistan itself is a victim of terrorism.

The world is clearly unconvinced. More and more of it now echoes UK minister Hamish Falconer in saying, "They must do more to tackle that threat…India is right to feel outrage at this terrible attack on April 22."

- Secondly, there continues to be high dissonance in Pakistan's narrative. PM Shehbaz Sharif spoke of "a strong response indeed being given". Defence minister Khawaja Asif spoke of being ready to "wrap up" tensions. But even as the civilian leadership appeared amenable to de-escalation, the real decision-making seems to have been ceded to the armed forces. And Pak army chief Munir is walking in an altogether different direction.

- Thirdly, Pakistan has not got over its nuclear self-amplification, despite its bluff having been called repeatedly. In the current spin cycle, its ambassador in Russia, Muhammad Khalid Jamali, for example, is talking up the use of the "the full spectrum of power, both conventional and nuclear".

In contrast, India has maintained precision and clarity in its messaging. This was evident during the joint press briefings by foreign secretary Vikram Misri and the armed forces representatives both on Wednesday and Thursday. When their statements are read in conjunction with similar communications after the strikes in 2016 and 2019, a distinct narrative can be discerned that has credibility and vindicates Indian actions.

The briefings have presented *justification* for India's response, related to terrorist actions emanating from Pakistan and the likelihood of renewed acts of terrorism. The Indian response has been *proportional* to the provocation, with no intent to escalate the situation. This indicated the willingness to punish the adversary and yet maintain the maturity of the response. India's actions ensured *distinction* between terrorists, Pak forces and civilians.

On Wednesday, it was stressed that the operation was aimed at terror infra. India also announced the successful accomplishment of the action, thereby simultaneously indicating the path to *de-escalation*. Finally, there was unanimity in govt statement of intent through its *determination* to respond if Pakistan chose to escalate the situation, which is exactly what Pakistan attempted on the night of May 7/8.

Indian military targets were engaged in northern and western India, from Awantipura till Bhuj, using drones and missiles. India neutralised the attempt using the counter-unmanned aerial systems grid and air defence systems. Pak air defence systems were also targeted. In particular, the Lahore-based radar was rendered ineffective.

There is a profound qualitative contrast between the two countries' narratives. Pakistan continues to rely on bluff, bluster and bombast. India's approach is best seen in a steely determination to safeguard the nation's interests through a justifiable, judicious and proportionate response.

To turn the clock a bit, in a 2020 interview with *Dawn*, the Pak Inter-Services PR chief indicated the ways to counter India's information campaign. This included "transparency…not leaving information voids…passing on credible information". Evidently, the Pak 'establishment' finds it easier to articulate the fundamentals of building successful narratives than to implement these.

This is also a contributing factor to the Pak army's domestic standing taking a big hit. Look at its inability to deal with the Imran Khan 'reverse swing yorker' that almost bowled out his once benefactor.

As Pakistan loses the battle of narratives internally as much as to India, the contrast between their callowness and our sophistication has widened dramatically. During the Kargil conflict, even as Pak govt was claiming that their army was not involved in the infiltration of Kargil, Pak press was proudly reporting that their troops had captured Indian posts in Kargil. The blatant falsehoods became deniable both internally and internationally.

Just like then, Pak lies are getting exposed by the contradictions between the different stakeholders. Back then, there was an embarrassing climbdown from a stance of having no control over the "freedom fighters" on the Kargil heights, to Nawaz Sharif meekly accepting the pullback of his forces. As Pak columnist Ayaz Amir has said, "The possession of nuclear weapons does not confer immunity from taking stupid decisions."

The writer is a Senior Fellow at Manohar Parrikar IDSA. Views are personal

Calvin & Hobbes

Sacred*space*

Every action of theirs, that seems to them an act of their own free will is in the historical sense not free at all but is bound up with the whole course of history and preordained from all eternity.

Leo Tolstoy

Territorial Wars Ruin Relationships

Narayani Ganesh

There are innumerable instances of territory, country, house – and other such designated places that real estate is made up of – taking precedence over human relationships that thrive on love, sacrifice, familial bonding and compassion rather than on materialistic greed. Even gods were not immune to this emotion, as per stories in puranas and epics that tell stories of greed, jealousy, rivalry, conflict and killings.

The Mahabharat is essentially the story of dynastic struggle between two sets of cousins of the Kuru family, the Kauravs and Pandavs, for the kingdom of Hastinapur. Father of the Kauravs, the visually challenged King Dhritarashtra inherits the throne, whereas the Pandavs, who are ethical and righteous, are denied their rights. Should dharm be the baseline to determine inheritance rights to the Kuru kingdom or is seniority the criterion, despite the Kauravs being unjust and unethical? Seething with jealousy and betrayal, the familial conflict leads the two parties to the battlefield at Kurukshetra, with the two armies arrayed on opposite sides. And this is where, Krishn spouts the Bhagwad Gita to Arjun, the Pandav brother who is anguished about fighting relatives.

The other epic, Ramayan, is essentially also about inheritance – Kaikeyi, one of the wives of King Dasharath, wants the King-designate, Prince Ram, to be exiled to the forest so that her own son Bharat, can ascend the throne. Since Ram was pacific, he quietly left for the forest instead of fighting his brother and stepmother.

THE SPEAKING TREE

The same story plays out, when you look at the inheritance war for the throne of Ayodhya, between the two sons of King Rishabhanath. Bharat, the ambitious son who wished to conquer the world and Bahubali, fought over their inheritance, and though Bahubali was stronger, he realised the futility of warring with his brother and opted for a life of renunciation, leaving his share of the kingdom to his brother. In fact their father, too, had taken to a life of renunciation, and became the first Jain tirthankar.

Wars over territory have been going on since time immemorial, in all parts of the world, and India and Pakistan – essentially people in both places are part of the same large family of the subcontinent – have been conflicted over inheritance of Jammu and Kashmir territory. Independent India has never been known to invade another people or country or carry out acts of terror on neighbouring or other countries. So when there is infiltration, killing and attacks by the neighbour, what does one do? Stay quiet, or retaliate in order to protect its own people and territory?

When Arjun asked this of Krishn, why he should fight his relatives, Krishn advised him to do his duty. Sages say that when you forgive someone for wrongdoing, that does not mean he is above the law; the legal system needs to follow due process and bring the criminal to book and mete out justice. Anger and greed singe both perpetrator and victim.

The same holds true for nationalism and extreme manifestations of aggressive patriotism that lead to bloodshed. Borders are somethings that only humans feel the need for, for security and protection. Other species, like birds, animals and viruses, have free passage all over the world. George Nathan, author, points out that patriotism is often an arbitrary veneration of real estate above principles.

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Trade Game Begins, First Moves on Board

China rate cut gambit may not avert growth stall

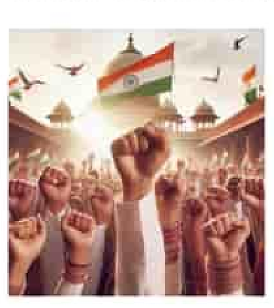
People's Bank of China (PBOC) cut interest rates this week ahead of tariff negotiations with the US. Monetary easing on its own, however, does not provide China extra bargaining power. This is because its impact on pumping up consumption or investment demand is uncertain. Chinese households have cut back on consumption after their savings were eroded by a housing bust. Chinese companies are unlikely to borrow more so long as the US market for their goods stays off limits. The rate cut does signal the central bank's intention of keeping monetary police loose to meet the current year's growth target. However, unless aided by other stimulus for domestic consumption, it may not be enough. High-frequency indicators are pointing to a slowdown after a quarter of strong exports to beat the US tariff deadline.

US Fed held interest rates this week over concerns that Donald Trump's tariffs had increased the risk of inflation. Jerome Powell is resisting pressure from the White House to cut rates as employment remains resilient. US monetary policy is effectively neutralised till the tariff picture becomes clear. US negotiators will, thus, be going into talks with their Chinese counterparts with a slight advantage. The economic impact of tariffs is more pronounced in China.

Tariff negotiations between the US and China are expected to be a lengthy process. As central bank action this week indicates, slowdown is the imminent risk for the Chinese economy while inflation remains the immediate concern for the US. Progress in trade talks will be determined by the pace of deterioration of these two data sets. Monetary policy will be impaired because US inflation is being driven by the supply side, while in China it has a low impact on demand revival. Both countries will have to turn to fiscal measures eventually. At that point, it would become easier to reach a settlement.

India Utd, All for One, One for All

There is something deeply reassuring — empowering, actually — to find a country united as one. And, by united, one doesn't mean in some abstract, nebulous way in front of the tricolour on one of the national days. Even before Thursday's all-party meeting in which opposition parties were briefed on 'Operation Sindoor', India's parliamentary parties across the political spectrum had, without prompting or conditions, aired their full support of GoI's and the armed forces' handling of India's calibrated, outcome-specific response to the Pahalgam terrorist attacks. Rajnath Singh summed up this unified state when he said that 'we don't indulge in politics just to form a government, but we do it to build a country'. That remarkable cohesion has been on display since April 22.



When a strident opposition leader like AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi stated last Sunday, 'Whatever action the government takes, we are with them,' one can be sure that politics can cut through the usual 'tu-tu, mein-mein' chase and put up a unified front when the nation is under threat. An ardent critic of the government — and the prime minister — Mamata Banerjee's post on X, 'Jai Hind! Jai India!' on the day India conducted airstrikes, tells its own spirited message. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's statement that his party 'has categorically stood with the armed forces and the government to take any decisive action against cross-border terror' tells us that this is no politically motivated homily, but a genuine, ardent call to stand behind those in charge of protecting the state against a common adversary.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. They also put aside their political, ideological, even personal differences, to ensure that such timely toughness is maximised by unflinching support across India's long political table.

JUST IN JEST

Comrade Kosmos-482 is coming (back) to a planet near you it won't recognise

Return of the 53-yr AWOL Space Can

Like that retired bureaucrat last promoted during the Third Front government, Kosmos-482 never got the memo. Launched in March 1972 — Indira Gandhi was PM, and Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather had just hit the screens — this Soviet spacecraft was supposed to reach Venus. It failed. But like that chap who went to vanvaas, it's crashing back to Earth this weekend, uninvited, and with no clear landing spot.

53 years hanging out in space thanks to a botched rocket stage, it never left Earth's orbit. Instead, it was 'out of town' missing out on the end of the Cold War, the collapse of its 'home', the Soviet Union, and never got to enjoy the whole punk, disco, hip-hop, grunge or EDM era. Now, gravity has had enough, and Kosmos-482 — which also has no clue about acronymic cousins like C3PO and R2D2 — is making its final descent — at speeds of up to 242 km/h. There's one hitch, though. Like the returning relative who had gone AWOL, no one knows where it will land. Experts predict it could touch down anywhere between 52° north and 52° south latitude — in other words, that includes most of the populated world. Built to withstand Venus' brutal atmosphere, 482 may well survive re-entry. So, if you see the half-century-old past hurtling towards you this weekend, don't panic. Get nostalgic. And follow the mock drill you've been practising this week.

Pakistan's army won't change — its low-cost proxy war can be nixed by defence innovation

CRIME SCENE PAKISTAN

Impose Costs On Rawalpindi

Indrani Bagchi

For Indians waking up to 'Operation Sindoor' on Wednesday, there was no greater satisfaction than watching visuals of India hitting LeT headquarters in Muridke or JeM's 'capital' in Bahawalpur: 'Can't we hit Muridke?' used to be on top of India's wishlist. And it just did. That's the only message the world should internalise today.

India has travelled a long way — from putting Maulana Masood Azhar on a flight from a Kashmir prison to Kandahar in Afghanistan on December 31, 1999, to obliterating his terror factory in Bahawalpur in 2025. It has been a painful journey, losing too many lives along the way. With Balakot and now the latest airstrikes, India has demonstrated capability for deep strikes inside the heart of Pakistan, as well as the resilience to pay the cost needed.

Most importantly, it has demonstrated political will — to challenge Pakistan's calculations on its 'operating threshold' — between conventional and nuclear.

Terrorism is a low-cost proxy war that's literally a key aspect of Pakistan's defence strategy. India has significantly raised costs of that strategy. Interestingly, across Pakistan's western border, Rawalpindi's former partners, Taliban, are also raising costs for Pakistan, although for different reasons. When needed, Iranians have also been known to strike inside Pakistan.

Pakistan does not do introspection. That's for others to do. So, we are not likely to see significant material change in its strategy towards India. Pakistan also has almost no external incentive to change strategy, or national trajectory either. For starters, it believes its nuclear arsenal is a big cushion against any pressure.

Pakistan has spent decades perfecting its 'Après moi, le déluge' policy. Every successive army chief plumbs new depths, but the world is persuaded that he must be supported somehow to keep the nation from going under. During the current conflict, too, India is often depicted as the risk-happy one, striking 'terror camps' inside Pakistan, while Pakistan's claim of downing Indian aircraft is treated as disinformation-free and 'proof' that Chinese tech is better than French tech.

So, let's not kid ourselves, the world has a lot of space for Pakistan-sponsored terror against India. There is virtually no outrage against the fact that such large terror camps actually exist there. Or, that senior army officers are attending funerals of terrorists whose bodies are wrapped in the national flag.

China will continue to keep Pakistan supplied with military equipment and tech, which are, admittedly, getting better by the day. It's a low-cost option for keeping India in check. These are old calculations. The point is, nothing has changed. The US, even under Trump, is 'friendly'. Russia would happily play with Pakistan the day India matters less to the Kremlin. We, in India, often find this difficult to digest. But Pakistan's 'rogue actor' persona is strangely attractive and useful to many parts of the world.

Which leaves India. Its larger objective should be the systematic degrading of Pakistan, while keeping itself above sectarianism and religious bigotry that is so much a part of Pakistan's personality and is only amplified by mirroring. (It gladdened Indian hearts to see Col Sofiya Qureshi and Wg Cdr Vyomika Singh as the public face of the armed forces in Wednesday's GoI press conference.)

India will never be able to do what Israel is doing in Gaza — nor would it want to do it. But we're already seeing a strategy that has taken shape in India:

❶ Terrorism equals military aggression, and will be responded in the same manner. On Thursday, India reportedly took out Pakistan's air defence systems after Pakistan attacked several civilian and military centres overnight. Which means 'Op Sindoor' remains an ongoing campaign.

❷ India is learning from mistakes of its past. Defence procurements are more coherent, and with more definite battle plans in mind. Joint action of the three services in the current conflict is a welcome sign that more integrated defence forces are being organically grown. While keeping global diplomacy in play, India is scaling up intelligence gathering from inside Pakistan. Covert action — of all shades — is now within the realm of possibility.

❸ India has reaped enormous benefits by opening up its space sector to private companies. It is beginning to do the same in bringing in AI to surveillance systems and border control. Tech that is affordable and replaceable — remember the LoC gets swamped by snow every winter — will soon become a part of our defence strategies.

It's time for India to tap into the tremendous well of innovation and tech development happening inside the country for defence and national security purposes. Defence innovation is the only way India will stay ahead of Pakistan. The future of warfare is here, and we can shape it to India's unique security environment.

❹ India must retain control of the Indus waters entering Pakistan. Rawalpindi needs to understand that its terror adventurism comes with costs, and India is now ready to impose those costs.

The world is persuaded that every successive army chief must be supported somehow to keep the nation from going under

Bottomline: To keep India's growth trajectory upward, New Delhi will be stepping out of the shadows to build its security and defence. The policy is not without its risks. But as security drills sweep across the country, we know it's worth it.

The writer is CEO, Ananta Centre

Now, play by the rules

AP

Their Generals Fear Peace

Vikram Sood

'Operation Sindoor' has been a measured, non-escalatory response to the April 22 Pahalgam killings — in stark contrast to Pakistan's cowardice in the Baisaran meadow, where trained Islamist terrorists murdered unarmed tourists in front of their families. The retaliatory measures — IAF hit nine terror sites on May 7, and neutralised Pakistani air defence radars and systems at a number of locations, including in Lahore, on May 8 — have come just as a growing sense of impatience was building up in India for some action against Pakistan. On Thursday, Rajnath Singh said at least 100 terrorists were killed in the strikes.

For far too long, Pakistan has been allowed to get away with terrorism. And, far too often, India let it pass, clinging, without reason, to the hope that Pakistani authorities, led by the military and Islamists, would eventually see the futility of attacking India. Even after Kargil (1999), hijacking of IC-814 (1999), attack on Parliament (2001), serial blasts on Mumbai trains (2006), and the 3-day assault on Mumbai (2008), New Delhi failed to grasp this war on India by other means.

For a moment after the Pahalgam attacks, there was silence, as Indians grappled with the horror of a world where humans first seek a victim's religious identity before shooting him dead. It takes a special kind of depravity to commit such acts. Imagine the mindset of those who trained these terrorists, and of those who willingly absorbed such hatred.

Then, across the country, silence gave way to anger. GoI did not react in the heat of the moment. Its response was coldly calibrated — first, to show Pakistan the cost of failing to be a good neighbour. The decision to hold the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) in abeyance jolted Pakistan's complacent Punjabi elite, with fears of drought, flooding and drinking-water shortages sending a clear message across Punjab and Sindh — though Sindh, as ever, remains a distant concern for Pakistan's Punjabi establishment.

Pakistan has vowed to retaliate, with the government on Wednesday pledging to respond 'at a time, place and manner of its choosing to avenge the loss of innocent Pakistani lives and blatant violation of its sovereignty'. This response will be orchestrated from GHQ Rawalpindi, now headed by a new kind of army chief, Asim Munir. Munir is a rabid Hindu-hater and a staunch Islamist, determined to apply the Quran's strictest interpretations in dealing with the 'kafir'.

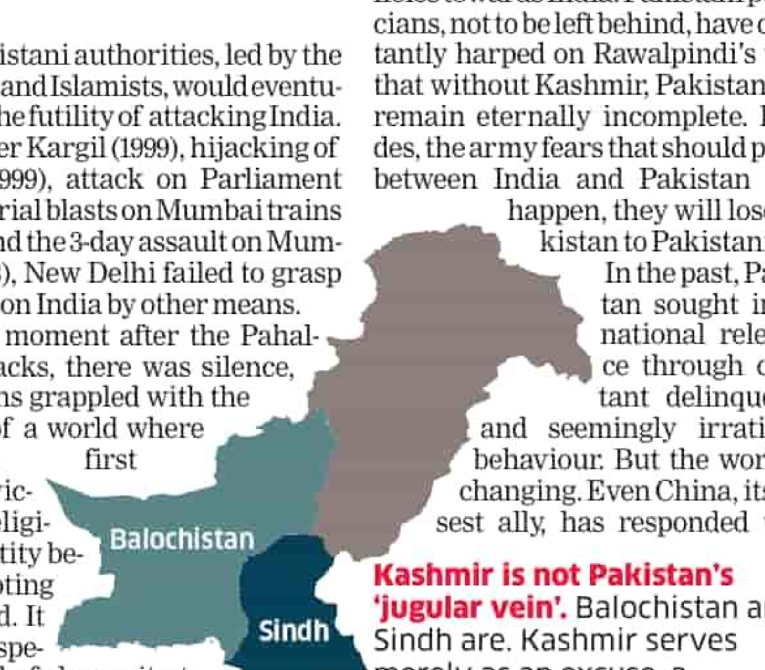
India must also remember that Kashmir is *not* Pakistan's 'jugular vein', as Munir and his colleagues would have everyone believe. Balochistan and Sindh are. Kashmir serves merely as an excuse, a narrative to preserve military supremacy at home.

Munir, who became army chief in November 2022, is eyeing an extension beyond November 2025, just as many of his predecessors secured for themselves. A quick, limited war with India, or a major terror attack, might well be his chosen route to achieve that.

Long ago, the Pakistani army appropriated the role of guardian of both the nation's territory and its ideology. Sustaining animosity with India — and fuelling the Hindu-vs-Muslim narrative — became essential to maintaining its primacy in an increasingly Islamised country. So, when Munir declared that the two cannot coexist, he was echoing a long-standing doctrine. The army will continue to use jihad as a low-cost policy tool against India.

Pakistani political leaders and the army made India the target of their unipolar enmity long ago. Over time, the army not only spoke of 'crushing' India but also crafted a perverse logic: that even defeat at India's hands could be spun as a victory, a sign of standing up to so-called 'Indian hegemony'.

Having announced that Kashmir is Pakistan's 'jugular vein', the army cannot now take a U-turn with its policies towards India. Pakistani politicians, not to be left behind, have constantly harped on Rawalpindi's tune that without Kashmir, Pakistan will remain eternally incomplete. Besides, the army fears that should peace between India and Pakistan ever happen, they will lose Pakistan to Pakistanis.



Kashmir is not Pakistan's 'jugular vein'. Balochistan and Sindh are. Kashmir serves merely as an excuse, a narrative to preserve military supremacy at home

In the past, Pakistan sought international relevance through constant delinquency and seemingly irrational behaviour. But the world is changing. Even China, its closest ally, has responded with only a lukewarm statement, offering little comfort.

By its own rules, Pakistan's strategy once made sense: bluff, bravado and even threats of self-destruction to grab Western attention. This was mirrored by India's misplaced rationality — a perpetual pursuit of conciliation driven by hope, while Pakistan played a game of pure opportunism. Today, the dynamics have shifted.

We must not be overwhelmed by the argument that war is not an option for India, while Pakistan retains the option to wage jihad under a nuclear cover. Since we cannot reform Pakistan, the wiser course is to largely ignore it for now, and focus on steadily strengthening our capabilities until the day Pakistan is ready to deal with India and the world as a normal nation.

The writer is former head, R&AW

THE SPEAKING TREE

Duty Above Everything

SANDHYA VASUDEV

When Arjun floundered in confusion and agony over fighting his teachers and brethren to win the Kurukshetra war, the foundation for the Bhagwad Gita was laid.

Arjun turned to his cousin, friend and charioteer Krishn, declared that he could not fight, and laid down his bow. Krishn then assumed a new role and became a mentor and guide for his distraught cousin Arjun. He went on to explain the importance of performing one's duty, explaining that it is better to do one's ordained duties in an insignificant way than to carry out responsibilities of another excellently.

He dismissed Arjun's lamentation that he would rather take refuge in the forest than decimate his people, sending scores of women into widowhood with further devastating consequences.

Krishn reminded Arjun that as a warrior, his duty was to fight the righteous war, and since he would do so under Krishn's bidding, he would not have to bear the taint of consequences. Krishn advised Arjun to give up the ego that brings attachment towards objects and people.

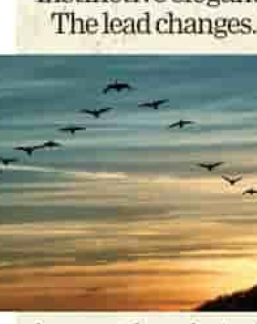
He displayed his frightening Virat form, where Arjun saw all enemies in the battlefield being devoured by Krishn. Arjun realised he was only an instrument, and it behoved him to fight in the Mahabharat and trust Krishn's magnificence. One should perform one's prescribed duties, trust the Divine, and understand that whatever follows is for the best.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Watching Birds Fly in Formation

Simply sit still. Still enough to watch birds in flight, not in haste but in harmony. As they move in graceful formation, not for glory or gain, but that's just nature — *their* nature.

With the sky as backdrop, they float purposefully in no hurry. The scene unfolds like poetry without punctuation. Wings trace calligraphy in the air — loops, lines, arcs of instinctive elegance.



The lead changes. But there's no vote, no voices raised, no feathers ruffled. Just rhythm. Clouds become brushstrokes, and the birds, music.

You feel a synchronicity humming softly, perhaps a song from nowhere, from childhood, from some hidden top shelf of the soul. The mind, often restless, is suddenly feather-light. Not flying but floating, just like the unflappable birds. Not racing but resting in the sky, effortlessly in the moment.

You see before you how leadership can be fluid. Cohesion need not come from command. And harmony comes not from being identical, but from sensing and facing the wind together. The birds, flying in changing formations as if after intense planning and preparation, are just doing their sky ballet. Their beings are simply taking shape.

Chat Room

Time to Triumf Over Terror

Apropos the Edit, 'Taking Out Terrorist Infrastructure, Day 1' (May 8), Indian armed forces have demonstrated, through Operation Sindoor, their prowess at hitting even long-range targets with deadly precision and catching the enemy completely by surprise. India has been ramping up its air offence capability over the years with an array of drones and missiles, including the supersonic Brahmos whose advanced versions have longer range and can be launched from air, sea and land. However, it now needs to focus on building a world-class multilayered air defence infrastructure comparable to Israel's 'iron dome', which can offer protection against multiple attacks from state and non-state actors. This will require significant investments over the decades, but is a prerequisite to build credible deterrence and achieve 'peace through strength' with an ever-troublesome neighbour.

Chander Shekhar Dogra
Jalandhar

More Bang for Their Renminbi?

Sumita Dawra

Earlier this week, Chinese authorities announced a raft of stimulus measures, including interest rate cuts and a major liquidity injection, as Beijing stepped up efforts to soften the economic damage caused by the trade war with the US. But even before the announcement, China reported a growth of 5.4% in Q1 2025, with GDP reaching $4.4 tn. This is a surprise, given the challenges posed by Trump's tariff war.

The growth is attributed to a surge in exports, supported by expansion in manufacturing, hi-tech industry, strong retail sector and services. A closer, sector-wise analysis reveals the early impact of escalating trade tensions, and threat of domestic challenges.

▶ China's exports grew by 6.9% y-o-y in Q1 2025, reaching $834.4 bn, with a notable 13.5% surge in March, largely attributed to a pre-tariff rush. Sustainability of this momentum through the year could be difficult. Export growth in early 2025 shows signs of deceleration compared to above 10% growth in December 2024, suggesting an early onset of uncertainty.

▶ Manufacturing output and investment also registered growth of 5.9% during this period. Contributing $1.5 tn to Q1 GDP, the sector's expansion was led by equipment manufacturing and the hi-tech industry. While the growth trend from Q4 2024 continued, it is also moderating when one sees the December 2024 industrial output growth of 6.2%.

▶ Services sector grew 5.3%, contributing $2.7 tn to Q1 GDP, with IT services, leasing and business services, transport, warehousing, postal services, hospitality and catering, retail, and wholesale leading the sector's growth.

▶ Retail sales were strong, supported by government incentives like the 'old-for-new' policy, which encouraged upgrades of cars, white goods and furniture through subsidies.

But will the vitamin intake help?

REUTERS

However, experts remain cautious, citing subdued household demand and weak consumption trends. World Bank data reveals household consumption accounted for 39% of China's GDP in 2023, well below 60% in India, and 68% in the US. This highlights China's continued reliance on investment and exports rather than domestic consumption, underlining the need for rebalancing the economy.

China's weak domestic demand stems from lower incomes, a fragile social security net that drives higher savings for education and healthcare, and limited alternative investments due to an underdeveloped stock market. These have pushed households to invest heavily in real estate.

A strained property market remains a major drag on China's economy, with housing inventories exceeding two years of demand. As real estate prices fall, households are diverting more income to mortgages, eroding wealth and fuelling higher savings, further delaying domestic consumption from becoming a growth driver.

China also faces excess capacities in the manufacturing sector, such as steel, automobiles and electronics. With uncertain global markets, it would be timely for the $19 tn-plus, export-oriented Chinese economy to strengthen domestic demand and absorb the excess capacities.

IMF and other global institutions have lowered China's growth estimates. However, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) remains committed to its targeted GDP growth rate of 5% in 2025, which experts think will be difficult to achieve. Q1 data has shown steady trade with traditional partners in the EU and Europe, while it has grown faster with BRI partners in Asean and Central Asia.

Xi Jinping's April 29 visit to Shanghai signalled China's push to tap development opportunities in the 'global south', focusing on infrastructure lending and technology leadership. His visit to New Development Bank (NDB) underscored efforts to expand business abroad, supported by the broader strategy of renminbi internationalisation to boost overseas investments and bilateral trade.

On the domestic front, the focus will be on attracting foreign investors, boosting inward tourism, and strengthening innovation and technology. How far this will be productive for an economy crying to be rebalanced and restructured remains to be seen.

The writer is a former secretary, labour and employment ministry, GoI