

Systemic failures have led to inadequate oil reserves

The ongoing war in Iran has once again highlighted the grave systemic inadequacies. In 2018, it was decided that a 4-million tonne (mt) strategic oil reserve would be developed at an estimated cost of Rs 8,743 crore in the Dankari hill region near Chandikhol in Jajpur district, Odisha. The urgency of the project could scarcely be overemphasised: being strategic, it has implications for not just the economy but also national defence and security. And yet, the project could not take off because of a setback that cropped up—the land earmarked for it could not be acquired. Presumably, illegal stone quarrying was the major hindrance. At present, India has operational storage capacity of 5.33 mt underground crude oil at three lo-

cations: Visakhapatnam (1.33 mt) in Andhra Pradesh and Mangalore (1.5 mt) and Padur (2.5 mt) in Karnataka. The Central government also cleared 2.5-mt expansion at Padur. The three storages together can meet the country's crude oil requirement for 10 days. The new plan in Odisha and expansion at Padur will take the reserves to 21 days, if and when this happens. Unable to provide land, the Odisha government urged the Centre in 2022 to explore other sites in the State for a possible enhancement of the output. Two years later, although a new Bharatiya Janata Party-led government was formed, there has hardly been any further progress on this issue. One wonders whatever happened to the 'double-engine sarfar' that the

saffron party zealously peddled all over the country. The Centre earlier requested the original Chandikhol site be reconsidered by the state authorities. This should have made a difference because the project has the potential of generating around 4,000 construction jobs. Alas, red tape seldom loosens. At the heart of the issue is systemic sclerosis. Bureaucratic inertia tends to perpetuate itself. Officials often prefer procedural caution over decisive action because the risks of decision-making are immediate and personal, whereas the costs of delay are diffuse and collective. In this environment, the safest course is often to postpone decisions rather than resolve them. Illegal quarrying, which by the way is a national phenomenon, further

complicates the situation; and it surely exposes another malady in the system. More crucially, efforts are seldom made to stem the rot, which is the bane. One should note that if illegal activity can persist in a designated strategic zone, it means that the local administration has collapsed. Addressing such issues requires not only technical solutions but also a political will and institutional discipline. Moreover, the BJP must acknowledge the fact that it has to match the "double-engine governance" rhetoric with actual performance. Political alignment may ease coordination, but it cannot substitute for functional administrative systems. Without streamlined processes, clear accountability, and decisive leader-

ship within the bureaucracy, even politically aligned governments may struggle to deliver results. On that count, the Chandikhol oil reserve project is more than a delayed infrastructure initiative. It is a mirror reflecting the deeper structural weaknesses of the country's administrative machinery. If India is to safeguard its economic and strategic interests, it must confront this systemic sclerosis head-on. That means simplifying approval processes, strengthening regulatory enforcement, ensuring transparent land acquisition mechanisms, and creating institutional structures capable of fast-tracking projects of national importance. In fact, the country may find itself repeatedly unprepared and gasping when global crises strike.

LETTERS

Tollywood must promote TG's cultural heritage

THIS refers to the article "Paidi Jairaj: From a TG village to the pinnacle of Indian cinema" by Prof Madabhushi Sridhar Acharyulu (THI March 10). The piece is a timely reminder of the remarkable legacy of the Sircilla-born pioneer who rose to become one of Indian cinema's earliest action heroes and a recipient of the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1980. The article also rightly acknowledges the commendable efforts of journalist Ponnamb Ravichandra, whose documentary "The First Action Hero Paidi Jajraj Prasthanam" recently won the second-best documentary film in the Gaddar Film Awards 2025. Such initiatives play an important role in reviving forgotten chapters of cinema history and highlighting Telangana's contributions to the national film narrative. However, the region's vibrant cultural expressions, from Oggu Katha to Perini Sivatandavarn, its distinctive dialect and rural narratives, have often remained underrepresented or stereotyped on screen. It is truly saddening that a land so culturally rich has not received the proportionate space it deserves in the Telugu film industry.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanumanakonda

Dominance is ingrained in Team India

A propos "Invincible India shows why it is atop world cricket" (THI March 10). India's T20 World Cup triumph is less of a fairy tale and more a forensic case study in cricketing architecture. While rival nations scramble for explanations, India's blueprint has been hiding in plain sight: a conveyor belt of technically sound, mentally bullet-proof youngsters nurtured within a pressure-tested domestic system, married to world-class coaching and infrastructure that would make most boards weep with envy. Gautam Gambhir's arrival as coach proved that India does not rebuild, it simply reloads. When talent, temperament and institutional vision converge simultaneously, dominance stops being an accident and becomes, rather satisfyingly, a policy.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Focus should shift to 50-over format

DEPENDING the T20 World Cup title and claiming a third crown, which the Men in Blue achieved, is a remarkable feat by any measure. Credit is due across the board — players, support staff, and an administration that has clearly invested in building a system rather than chasing individual stars. What stands out is the depth. When first-choice players struggled, others stepped up without any visible drop in quality. That does not happen by accident. It is the result of consistent domestic infrastructure, talent pipelines, and a selection process that rewards performance over reputation. The one area still worth watching is the 50-over format.

A Myilsami, Coimbatore-641402

Sustain the winning momentum

THIS refers to the editorial "Invincible India shows why it is atop world cricket" (THI, March 10). The piece captures well the pride and momentum behind India's dominant run in white-ball cricket, from the women's T20 World Cup triumph to the men's cricket excellence across formats. The blend of young talent like Vaibhav Suryavanshi, seasoned performers, and a strong domestic structure has clearly paid off. That said, sustaining this level requires constant vigilance. The BCCI should keep investing in grassroots programmes, ensure balanced workloads to prevent burnout among fast bowlers, and maintain aggressive talent scouting beyond the metros. Equally important is nurturing mental resilience in players facing sudden fame. With these steps in place, India's position at the top can remain secure for years to come.

M Barathi, Bengaluru—76

BCCI must tap talent in smaller towns

A PROPOS "Invincible India shows why it is atop world cricket" (THI, March 10, 2026). The editorial rightly celebrates India's remarkable achievement in winning the T20 World Cup on home soil. Yet, beyond the joy of victory, the focus must remain on sustaining this success through consistent investment in grassroots cricket, transparent selection processes, and stronger domestic leagues. While the BCCI has built a robust structure, more attention is needed for player welfare, especially workload management. Expanding facilities in smaller towns will also deepen the talent pool.

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Govt takes steps to prevent drinking water shortage in rural areas

BENGALURU: The state government has initiated proactive measures to ensure that rural communities do not face drinking water shortages during the upcoming summer season, Karnataka Minister Priyanka Kharge said on Tuesday. The district administrations have been instructed to closely monitor the situation and take immediate measures, including hiring private borewells on a rental basis and supplying water through tankers wherever required. To strengthen water availability, dried borewells will be restored through flushing and deepening, while new borewells will be drilled in unavoidable cases based on technical recommendations from geologists, said Kharge, the Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, and Information Technology & Biotechnology. "Along with restoring dried borewells, we have directed Gram Panchayats to conduct water quality testing and ensure proper cleaning of overhead tanks so that safe drinking water is available to rural communities," he added. An official statement issued by the minister's office said that as several parts of the state experience dry conditions during summer, many existing rural water sources tend to run dry, leading to potential shortages. To address this, the government has put in place daily monitoring mechanisms and directed officials to take immediate action wherever shortages arise, it said.

Read more at
<https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Time to start efforts for stopping the ongoing war



RAVULAPATI SEETHARAMARAO

WHEN the US sank Iranian warship in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka on March 4, the Israel-Iran war widened. Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group, entered the conflict with rocket attacks into northern Israel — and even though the U.S. described those strikes as friendly fire, military analysts say the fighting had intensified.

There is no surprise that analysts called the sinking of a warship returning from an international fleet review in Visakhapatnam — an act that caused loss of life — a breach of the laws of war. However, in matters related to Donald Trump, there is a growing belief that anything carrying his stamp of approval should be considered legitimate warfare, and this is beginning to alter many established rules of engagement.

Iran's leader has made it clear that he, too, could not survive without his seal of approval, and with this rhetoric, definitions of democracy and national sovereignty are being contorted into an unfortunate new state. Autocratic tenden-

cies are taking on fresh visibility in American politics. Although Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu and America's Donald Trump have hoped that Khamenei's death would topple the Iranian government, there are no signs of anything happening like that. With the conflict expanding, shadows of fear and anxious concern are spreading across the globe.

Between Israel and Iran, amid their hostilities, Muslims — Palestinians — and Israeli Jews have been suffering, living and dying in anguish for many years. Any country that truly wants world peace would not let the sparks of conflict between them spread and set the whole world ablaze. Wealthy countries like America, whether for oil, further progress, or any other reason, might make tactical compromises and gain some advantages without being blamed. But if a nation behaves with an arrogant belief that all the world's riches and dominance belong to it alone — sneaking in like a mouse, then pouncing like a cat, pursuing everything under the pretext of progress, or any other reason, might make tactical compromises and gain some advantages without being blamed. But if a nation behaves with an arrogant belief that all the world's riches and dominance belong to it alone — sneaking in like a mouse, then pouncing like a cat, pursuing everything under the pretext of progress, or any other reason, might make tactical compromises and gain some advantages without being blamed. But if a nation behaves with an arrogant belief that all the world's riches and dominance belong to it alone — sneaking in like a mouse, then pouncing like a cat, pursuing everything under the pretext of progress, or any other reason, might make tactical compromises and gain some advantages without being blamed.

When President Trump theoretically threatens to use a devastating weapon as if to show off his might — imposing conditions that the Iranian people must accept his terms of peace — who would submit? Even though the Kashmir dispute has caused



At a time when some are rejoicing that the old "Cold War" is over, this "Wild War" makes no sense and serves no purpose. When even the most modern nations warn that dabbling carelessly in experiments with AI could turn it into a destructive force, why would we, for the sake of glory or domination, bring that destructive power down on our own heads through war? Mediating a settlement between Israel and Iran is not something beyond the world's capacities.

friction between India and Pakistan, most people there could live as Indian citizens, freely elect governments within a democratic framework, and lead dignified, prosperous lives, couldn't they? China, which tried in many ways to politically constrain India, is currently not in a strong position and has not become a friendly ally, has it? Political analysts around the world have observed that the hopes Pakistan's rulers placed on the Chinese have become disappointments. Neighboring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have learned politically that it is better to maintain friendly relations with India. Why nurture snakes only

to have them bite the very hand that fed them? Why can't we learn the moral lessons of history? Iran's leader Khamenei is not so great! It's not absurd for Trump to claim that his death would decide lives! At a time when some are rejoicing that the old "Cold War" is over, this "Wild War" makes no sense and serves no purpose. When even the most modern nations warn that dabbling carelessly in experiments with artificial intelligence could turn it into a destructive force, why would we, for the sake of glory or domination, bring that destructive power down on our own heads through war? Can't philosophers, scientists and political experts think that through? Mediating a settlement between Israel and Iran is not something beyond the world's capacities. The UN was sidelined for narrow interests — couldn't those same interests be set aside and the organization empowered to open talks and broker peace? If leading countries like the U.S., Russia and China chose to, it would take no time at all for them to step in and resolve conflicts instead of singing the swan song of war. Why, then, are these leading powers showing every day that they lack the basic will to do so?

Trump and his close ally Netanyahu presumed that the Iranian government would collapse with Khamenei gone. Now the outcome is apparent. Watching this war unfold like the Gulf War has stunned people. Yet no-

body on either side seems willing to back down. The U.S. Secretary says these clashes could continue for another eight weeks, which has left everyone disheartened. Larijani — Iran's defense official — saying he is not interested in talks has caused even more despair. With the conflict atmosphere as it is, U.S. leaders are being accused of trying to stir up Kurdish separatists in northern Iran and U.S. media are spreading stories that this could trigger civil wars inside Iran. This is undeniably very dangerous.

While leaders keep spreading a warlike mindset with no end in sight, some countries are now obliged, as part of their responsibilities, to genuinely attempt peace — otherwise the situation will only get worse. In the U.S., people have reached the point of rejecting Trump's erratic behavior and wars they don't want. His continued abuse of the authority of his office has pushed the public to the breaking point. India recently condemned the killing of Khamenei.

The reality that war has come so close is underlined by the U.S. sending an Iranian warship to the Hindu-majority maritime borders near Sri Lanka — an action that cannot be taken lightly. India may have to take a proactive step forward and urgently begin diplomatic efforts.

(The writer is a retired IPS officer, who has served as an Additional DGP of Andhra Pradesh)

War gone wrong: Oil at \$110 torpedoes Trump, triggers crisis in India

CHOLLETT

THE US-Israel war on Iran, now in its 10th day, was meant to crush Tehran's nuclear ambitions swiftly. Instead, relentless Iranian drone and missile strikes on US bases in the Gulf region have choked the Strait of Hormuz, sent oil prices soaring past \$100 a barrel, and sparked a global economic storm. Ordinary Indians are feeling the pinch already—higher fuel bills, stranded workers, and the supply chain in disarray, while Washington is renegeing its overconfidence.

Oil shockwaves rock global markets:

Stock futures plunged on Monday after West Texas Intermediate crude hit \$109.75, a 19 per cent daily jump and 35 per cent weekly surge, the biggest since 1983. Brent topped \$109, evoking 2022's Ukraine crisis when prices last crossed \$100. The Dow futures shed 806 points (1.7 per cent), S&P and Nasdaq each 1.5 per cent, capping Wall Street's worst week in a year.

Gulf giants' output slashed: Iran's southern fields dropped 70 per cent to 1.3 million barrels per day from 4.3 million; Kuwait cut production amid tanker fears, while UAE managed storage overflows. With 20

per cent of world oil transiting the Strait now blocked by Iranian threats, storage tanks filled up, and exports were halted.

US President Donald Trump calls it a "small price to pay" for nuking Iran's threat, but markets see a breaking point—prolonged \$100 oil risks US recession and worldwide slowdown.

BlackRock's Rick Riender notes jittery investors hedging risks amid uncertain war length. No quick fix: Energy Secretary Chris Wright promises Hormuz traffic in "weeks, not months," yet Iran attacks persist on bases from UAE to Kuwait.

US regrets-Battlefield strikes:

Trump has boasted that the war was "already won" but critics say it's stalled. Ali Khamenei's hardliner son Mojtaba Khamenei as their new supreme leader, indicating that surrender was no on the cards. Trump admitted he's "not happy" as diplomacy gets stalled even as a seventh US soldier dies. Iran's resilience stuns: Over 1,300 dead, yet drones continue to hit Israel, Gulf States cut US assets every day. There has been no regime change, just defiance. Washington's miscalculation — underestimating cheap Iranian weapons against depleted US stocks—



Indians in anguish: For India's 10 crore citizens, this is no distant drama. Fuel inflation bites are real-A \$20/barrel rise adds \$15,000 crore yearly import bill by Rs 20-30/litre. Amid truckers' protest, food prices climbed 10-15 per cent.

Gulf economies in free fall: US allies suffer most. UAE, Kuwait, Iraq—OPEC heavyweights—face output collapse and revenue evaporation. Over five million Indian expats in UAE and Saudi stare at loss of jobs as pumps and refineries come to a grinding halt. Remittances, which are especially vital for families from Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, could plunge 20-30 per cent if the chaos drags any longer.

Stranded tankers idle on shore ops limp: Gulf rulers, hosting US bases, now question the alliance as Iranian strikes expose the chunks in defence armour. Storage crises force "precautionary cuts," but prolonged blockade spells fiscal ruin for oil-dependent monarchies.

G7 eyes strategic reserves release, but that's a short-term measure. India stockpiles 10+ days' oil—wide, but war extension demands diversification to Russia/US shale, thereby risking rupee strain.

Remittances, which are especially vital for families from Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, could plunge 20-30 per cent if the chaos drags any longer. For India's 10 crore citizens, this is no distant drama. Fuel inflation bites are real-A \$20/barrel rise adds Rs 15,000 crore yearly import bill and hikes diesel/petrol by Rs 20-30/litre. Amid truckers' protest, food prices climbed 10-15 per cent.

Trump's bravado masks panic:

Trump's Truth Social rhetoric—"only fools think differently"—hides frustration. No victory parade; instead, they have to reckon with deaths of soldiers and market rout. Allies in Israel face daily hits and Gulf hosts renege basing US forces as blowback rains.

Hubris ignored Iran's asymmetric edge: Drones cost thousands, evade billion-dollar shields. The multipolar world bites back—China/Russia back Tehran quietly, BRICS gains traction as the dollar wobbles.

Lessons for India-Stay neutral, stock up:

India must watch warily, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's balanced ties—US

defence deals, Russian oil and Persian cultural links—pay off. Push quiet channels: avoid entanglement.

Citizens: Cut discretionary spends amid inflation; diversify savings beyond Gulf jobs.

Government: Accelerate green energy, refinery expansions.

This crisis underscores multi-polarity — superpowers falter, resilient neighbours endure. War's "cascading crisis" proves quick wins are illusory. US repentance grows as oil's fire spreads globally. For Indians, prudence trumps panic-secure supplies, protect workers, and bet on peace.

(The writer is with Chollet BlackRobe Chambers, Hyderabad)

The Statesman

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Naval Ripples

The torpedoing of the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean is a stark reminder that distant wars rarely remain distant for India...

Legally, New Delhi bears no responsibility for what happened on the Iranian ship left its shores. Yet geopolitics rarely stops at legal boundaries...

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has responded with studied restraint, emphasising dialogue and diplomacy without directly criticising either side...

Daughter's Return

In India, marriage has long been treated as a one-way journey for women. Her daughter leaves her parents' home in a wedding procession...

Instead of quietly bringing her back, he does something radical in its symbolism: he celebrates her return with the same pomp and music that once accompanied her wedding procession...

India does have laws designed to protect women, including the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 and provisions in the Indian Penal Code...

That is why the role of parents is so crucial. For generations, families have invested enormous emotional and financial resources in arranging marriages for their daughters...

India is changing rapidly in education, employment, and public life for women. Yet true social progress will be measured within the walls of the family...

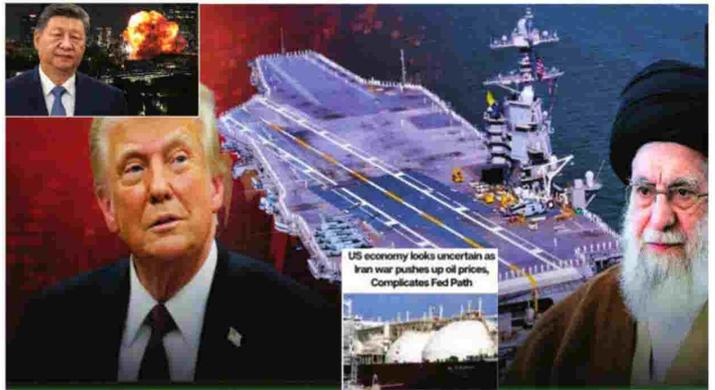
The wily Chinese

The drain on the US economy is bound to bleed its already stretched coffers and strained economy. The Chinese are yet again sitting out of the conflict militarily...

The Chinese famously play the long game. The high priest of diplomacy, Henry Kissinger, coldly noted, "China's leaders avoid direct confrontation and prefer to achieve their objectives indirectly..."

Besides the obvious human costs, Brown University estimated that the total financial cost to the USA was about \$8 trillion for only the post-9/11 wars - not including the very expensive ongoing war with Iran...

Today, the USA finds itself committed to yet another conflict in Iran, while China is the second biggest spender on the military behind the USA - the investments in the defence budgets of the USA are getting neutralized by the expenditure outflow incurred in participating in global conflicts...



The USA's longest (for twenty years) and most expensive (approx. \$2 trillion) war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) personifies this conundrum. Launched to remove the Taliban from ruling Afghanistan...

Meanwhile the wily Chinese, who share a physical border with Afghanistan (the 76-kilometer long Wakhan Corridor) connecting China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region with Afghanistan's Badakhshan Province...

At the end of twenty years, the Chinese have kept their embassy open in Kabul and accepted a Taliban-appointed Ambassador to Beijing, thereby signaling de facto normalcy with the Afghan Taliban government...

Today, the USA finds itself committed to yet another conflict in Iran, while China is

content to sit out and perhaps cut a few lucrative arms deals. In the first 24 hours of the Iran operation, the USA is believed to have spent \$779 million on air strikes, bombs, missiles and other operational and logistics costs...

This obviously does not weigh in other macro-economic impact like energy implications, trade disruptions, and breakdown of global supply chains...

Irrespective of the outcome, the drain on the US economy is bound to bleed its already stretched coffers and strained economy - the Chinese are yet again sitting out of the conflict militarily...

Meanwhile, Delhi remains awkwardly silent after having just concluded a badly timed Prime Ministerial visit to Israel, just days before the attack on Iran...

Continuing sanctions of Iran will make it even more reliant on China economically and diplomatically and open a big market for Chinese wares...

While the US economy remains structurally stronger than the Chinese, the Chinese are growing at 4-5 per cent, while the US is slower at 2-3 per cent...

On the critical innovation and technology front, the Chinese are regularly stunning the American with their advancements...

At the heart of this victory is a squad brimming with match winners, chief among them being the sensation Aaqub Nabi...

Jakarta Post

The long road to the US-Israeli war against Iran

The conflict with Iran reshapes global security assumptions and capabilities, without risking any damage to their military infrastructure...

Was it domestic politics, a desire to project strength, a miscalculation or something else? Such explanations may have merit, but they risk obscuring root causes...

By the time the bombs started falling, the decisive choices had already been made during years of strategic deliberation...

One of those choices was the first Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)...

It is true that his best efforts did not contribute to making the state an IT or manufacturing hub, with its youth still migrating to other states in large numbers for employment and livelihood...

kept the door open for further negotiated relief. But once the JCPOA was dead, sanctions operated without discernment, narrowing rather than expanding the potential for compromise...

As economic pressure intensified without producing capitulation or regime change, policymakers faced a narrowing set of credible options...

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Well done

Sir, Nitish Kumar's exit from Bihar politics, following his expressed nomination to the Rajya Sabha brings the curtains down on a remarkable journey in state politics...

It is to the credit of Nitish that during his two-decade rule, he restored the rule of law by empowering the police and expediting criminal cases, thereby significantly reducing the crime rate...

He also transformed the infrastructure, by building roads and bridges, improving connectivity and contributing to the state's GDP growth. He paid special attention to the empowerment of women...

connectivity and contributing to the state's GDP growth. He paid special attention to the empowerment of women and the Most Backward Classes (MBCs) through reservations...

It is true that his best efforts did not contribute to making the state an IT or manufacturing hub, with its youth still migrating to other states in large numbers for employment and livelihood...

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 7 March.

A tribute

Sir, Manas Kumar Das's article, 'Overdue Honour,' deserves high praise and immediate consideration by the concerned authorities...

to liberate India from over two centuries of British rule. Naming the cells of historical prisons after the freedom fighters who inhabited them would be a significant, albeit small, tribute to their majestic sacrifice...

Yours, etc., Brataji Misra, Malda, 7 March.

Look northwards

Sir, Your editorial, 'J&K's Triumph' is absolutely spot on. In a historic moment that has redefined the geographical expanse of cricket in the country...

PERSONAL

THANK YOU St. Jude for our Emyas protection. - Nikita.



JAMMU AND KASHMIR WIN MAIDEN RANJI TROPHY TITLE

look at the region. At the heart of this victory is a squad brimming with match winners, chief among them being the sensation Aaqub Nabi...

A syllabus and the pedagogy of trust

ANUSHUMAN KAR

School is not merely a site that produces future doctors, engineers, or professors. The making of future citizens also begins at schools. Young minds first develop their preliminary understanding of the state, society, and public institutions within the classroom. It is therefore not at all surprising that the inclusion of judicial corruption in the Class VIII textbook of the NCERT has sparked a nationwide debate. The controversy has actually raised a fundamental question: what kind of understanding should a democratic state impart to children about its own institutions? If corruption exists within these institutions, how should it be represented in school textbooks? And, more importantly, is it necessary at all to make adolescent learners aware of such corruption?

At first glance, one might argue that in a democracy no institution is above criticism, and therefore there is nothing inherently wrong in introducing discussions of judicial corruption in a middle-school textbook. Indeed, the health of a democracy depends on whether citizens are able to question and critique public institutions. Democratic institutions are accountable to the people, and such accountability ensures their responsibility. If corruption exists within the judicial system, citizens unquestionably have the right to criticise it. The real question, however, is whether presenting judicial corruption to school students through textbooks is necessary. The straightforward

answer, arguably, is no.

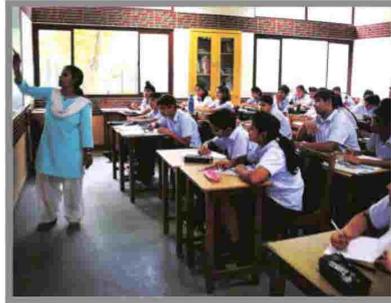
There is little reason to assume that schools are politically neutral or innocent spaces. The French philosopher Louis Althusser famously described schools as 'Ideological State Apparatuses'. Such institutions function not through coercion but through consent, shaping children's understanding of social values, norms, and morality. Unlike the police or the military, schools do not exercise overt repression; their ideological work therefore remains less visible. Yet, precisely through this silent functioning, schools participate in producing citizens who may internalise obedience to authority rather than cultivate a critical engagement with power. Because schools can shape future citizens' perceptions without the use of force, every ruling regime has historically sought to influence school curricula. Curriculum-making, in this sense, is inevitably political.

Indeed, school curricula play an active role in constructing the ideological relationship between citizens and the state. People in power often decide what should be taught, how subjects should be presented, what should be left out, and how the past should be rewritten. Changes to NCERT textbooks have produced a lot of criticism in recent years. Omission of the 2002 Gujarat riots, shortening of Mughal history, and dilution of the discussion on caste-based discrimination, have been severely criticized by academicians. Many observers have also argued that the ruling political party is propagating its ideological beliefs through NCERT textbooks.

Given this context, one might contend that the inclusion of criticism of a state institution such as the judiciary should be welcomed. If school textbooks can be politicised in matters relating to the Gujarat riots or Mughal history, why should judicial corruption be treated as untouchable? Introducing such discussions early, some may argue, could make future citizens more aware of the limitations and failures of India's democratic institutions. In fact, criticism of the Judiciary is nothing new in India. The role of the Judiciary during the emergency has been questioned. Charges of judicial misconduct, sexual harassment and corruption have also been brought against a few judges. But the question is should texts be exposed to all these controversies?

It is important to remember that courts don't just have power because of the Constitution or because they can force people to do things. In the end, the courts depend on the public's trust. People accept the power of the courts because they think that even if justice isn't perfect, it is still fair. This shared trust is what makes the judicial system legitimate. Inclusion of judicial corruption in school books could damage the foundational trust that future citizens need to have in democratic institutions. Such exposure at an early age may foster skepticism towards courts before students acquire the intellectual maturity necessary to understand how the Judiciary functions and on what grounds it should be critiqued.

If references to judicial corruption had appeared in the undergraduate



curriculum, there would not have been such a hue and cry. Undergraduate students possess a far more mature level of analytical ability and contextual understanding. Having attained the right to vote, these students also hold the democratic power to decide, through electoral processes, who will govern the country. At this stage, students also develop a reasonably sound grasp of certain foundational principles of democracy — such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and constitutional morality.

But such alertness is rare among the students of Class VIII. If they are exposed to institutional corruption without enough background information, they might end up becoming cynical citizens. They might lose faith in public institutions and trust in democracy. This would

not at all be good for the health of our state. Thus, the crux of the matter is this: when students have not yet developed the intellectual maturity required to distinguish between institutional criticism and anti-institutional sentiment, presenting judicial corruption to them through textbooks may foster a deep sense of distrust towards democracy in the minds of these future citizens. It must be remembered teaching students that institutions are accountable is not the same as instilling the belief that institutions are inherently corrupt. The former strengthens democracy; the latter weakens its very moral foundation.

(The writer is Professor, Department of English and Culture Studies and Director, Centre for Australian Studies, The University of Burdwan.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 11 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

MR. FENDER, the Surrey captain, has now explained that he had no intention of saying anything rude about the Australians. He has announced that they do play the game, which should be accepted as clear evidence in Australia that he had never said they do not. He believes they know a thing or two in tactics and strategy which English players do not know, but as he was careful to explain that these words have nothing to do with sportsmanship all should be well. How he differentiates strategy in cricket from tactics is not clear, for cricket is not a war but a series of battles, but the words sound well, and there is certainly a belief in England that the Australian cricketer takes his cricket more seriously and is more 'out to win' than English players, though few of these take it joyously. But cricket after all is a game and the less criticism there is of the visitors the better. It will not affect their efficiency and it may ruffle their tempers. The duty of English cricketers is to welcome them warmly and beat them soundly.

Will Iran's new leader bring any change?

MEHMET OZALP

The death of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, during the holy month of Ramadan marks one of the most consequential turning points in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

His successor, his son Mojtaba Khamenei, represents both continuity and contradiction in the revolutionary system established after the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

At stake is not only who leads Iran, but what the Islamic Republic has become, nearly half a century after the revolution that promised an end to dynastic rule.

Mojtaba Khamenei is a cleric who has spent most of his career outside public office but close to power, working within the Office of the Supreme Leader. He was often seen as a gatekeeper and powerbroker rather than a public political figure with a formal portfolio.

At 17, he briefly served in the Iran-Iraq war. He only began attracting public attention in the late 1990s, by which time his father's authority as supreme leader was firmly established. Over time, his reputation has centred on two key features. The first is a close relationship with Iran's security establishment, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and its hardline network. The second is a strong opposition to reformist politics and Western engagement.

Critics have linked him to the suppression of protests following the disputed 2009 presidential election. He is also believed to have wielded influence over Iran's state broadcasting organisation, giving him indirect control over parts of the country's information landscape and state narrative.

In 2019, the first Trump administration sanctioned Mojtaba, accusing him of acting in an official capacity on behalf of the supreme leader despite holding no formal government position.

Iran's constitution dictates that the Assembly of Experts (an 88-member clerical body) selects the supreme leader.

The assembly lists the religious, political and leadership qualifications of possible candidates. But in practice, it is not a neutral electoral body. Candidates for the assembly itself are vetted through institutions ultimately shaped by the supreme leader's orbit, and its deliberations are opaque.

This creates a familiar Iranian scenario—the constitution supplies the choreography, while the security-clerical establishment supplies the music.

That matters when assessing why Mojtaba is seen as a viable supreme leader amid critiques he lacks the senior religious standing traditionally associated with the office. A mid-ranking cleric, he was only given the title *ayatollah* in 2022. The title is necessary to become supreme leader, so the promotion signalled he was being groomed to take over from his ageing and ill father.

The revolution's founding myth was clearly anti-dynastic. After toppling the shah, the revolution's leaders rejected hereditary rule. To many Iranians, a son following his father as supreme leader looks like an ideological backslide. The regime appears more like a theocratic monarchy, less the famous 'guardianship of the jurist'.

Yet, it is also important to be precise. Mojtaba cannot inherit the position by bloodline alone. The assembly must select him.

Still, political systems can become dynastic without rewriting constitutions. Dynastic outcomes emerge when informal power networks, such as family ties, political patronage, security ties, and control over the media, can make one candidate appear more natural, safe or inevitable.

That has essentially been the Mojtaba story in Iran for years: a man who built influence not by winning elections, but by managing the gate to the most powerful office in the country.

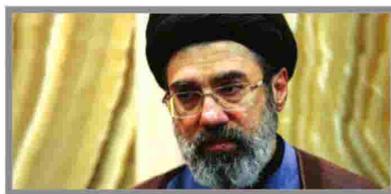
The circumstances of Ali Khamenei's death add another layer of significance and, ironically, legitimacy to Mojtaba's ascension. For many Shi'a Muslims, being killed during Ramadan carries deep symbolic resonance. The first imam of Shi'ism, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was assassinated during the dawn prayer in 661 CE. An event still commemorated each year by Shi'a Muslims.

Shi'a historical memory places strong emphasis on martyrdom. In particular, the death of Husayn ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at Karbala in 680 CE, symbolises the struggle between justice and oppression.

Because of this tradition, violent deaths of leaders in the past and today are framed within a broader narrative of sacrifice and resistance.

Iran's revolutionary ideology has long drawn on these themes. If the state presents Khamenei's death in this light, it could strengthen a narrative of martyrdom and defiance.

This, in turn, gives his son Mojtaba an aura of religious legitimacy that is very strong in the Shi'a Muslim psyche. This is the most consequential question for Iran. The answer is likely less different than many might expect. Ali Khamenei was a figure of the revolutionary generation.



His authority rested on ideological legitimacy, decades spent amassing, and consolidating power, and his ability to arbitrate between competing factions. Over time, he became the system's final referee.

Mojtaba Khamenei, by contrast, is often portrayed as a product of the security establishment, rather than a public theologian or statesman. He is known less for speeches or religious authority than for his influence and the networks he has built behind-the-scenes coordination.

If that assessment is correct, the shift would be from a leader who balanced institutions to one who may lean more heavily on the might of the IRGC. This would deepen an existing trend toward the securitisation of Iranian politics.

In a period of war and instability, regimes typically prioritise continuity and control. Mojtaba's appeal to the establishment, therefore, appears to rest on several factors:

- his close ties to the IRGC and intelligence networks
- his long experience inside the supreme leader's office
- his ideological alignment with hardline positions sceptical of reform and Western engagement.

A figure trusted by the most powerful security institutions also reduces the chance of power struggles

or fragmentation at the top. A new supreme leader rarely produces an abrupt ideological shift, especially during a military conflict. Continuity is the more likely outcome.

Mojtaba Khamenei's profile suggests a more security-centred style of leadership with three possible ways forward.

First, domestic control may harden. Given Mojtaba's reported ties to the security establishment, unrest is more likely to be met with swift repression rather than political accommodation.

Second, the IRGC could expand its influence in regional affairs, given how closely aligned Mojtaba is with the guards.

Third, any negotiations with the West would likely be tactical rather than transformative. They would be framed as a strategic necessity rather than an ideological shift.

And given the fact his father was killed in US-Israeli airstrikes, this will only reinforce a more hardline posture toward both countries.

In short, Iran under Mojtaba Khamenei would likely remain confrontational in rhetoric, but pragmatic when regime survival is at stake.

(The writer is Professor of Islamic Studies, Head of School, The Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University. This article was published on www.thecomversation.com)

News Items

RENEWAL OF CHINA FIGHTING

PEKING AND TIENSIN ISOLATED

PEKING, MAR.

OWING to warlike operations Peking and Tientsin have been practically isolated. All railways have been interrupted, and the Taku forts are firing indiscriminately at all craft attempting to navigate on the Pehlo river.

A Norwegian steamer yesterday dashed up the river and ran the gauntlet of guns, machine-guns, and rifles and reached Tientsin without being seriously injured; but a Japanese vessel emulating the adventure was compelled to turn back, and has since been mined. The harbour master has consequently closed the port of Tientsin.

An American cruiser is at present at Taku, and H. M. S. Foxglove is leaving for Taku from Tientsin.—Reuter.

ROYALTIES ON MUSIC

PUBLISHERS' ULTIMATUM TO B. B. C.

LONDON, MAR.

THE Music Publishers' Association of London decided to-day, to send an ultimatum to the British Broadcasting Company stating that unless the Company agree to pay royalties on popular music, which has been the subject of long discussion, they will withdraw permission to broadcast their copyright numbers immediately. It is stated that this will mean the immediate exclusion of all dance music from wireless programmes.

The publishers say they are not asking a higher fee, and have even agreed to accept lower fees than last year, but they could not afford to agree to the Company's proposed rates. It is declared that the Broadcasting Company have reduced the life of popular songs to a few weeks.—Reuter's Special Service.

SINGLE AUTHORITY

CO-ORDINATING FIGHTING SERVICES

THE proposal to reorganize the fighting services under the single authority of a Ministry of Defence continues to be widely canvassed in Parliamentary circles, and the matter was raised in last night's Commons debate by several members, who urged that such co-ordination would produce increased efficiency and economy.

Sir Samuel Hoare, in reply, conveyed an offer from the Prime Minister of an opportunity to discuss this important problem. Mr. Baldwin desired to hear the views of members and to put his own before them. Sir Samuel explained to the House the steps which were already being taken to secure the co-ordination of the Services and to reduce overlapping to a minimum.

Crossword | No. 293-400

ACROSS

1 Suitable to include Royal Society in describing this clue (5)

4 New opening for old Lancashire mill town creates competition (2,3)

7 Regularly in diary (5)

9 They succeeded Wrens in shake-up (7)

10 Codlike spirit of strange mountain? Not quite (7)

11 Shape of soap, dire, unfortunately (8)

12 Drooping English—at home with good keyboard skill (6)

14 1A 4A 9 having answer rewritten, to accommodate the German (9)

17 Clumsy writer going wrong way on Italian (5)

18 Chance introducing American water lily (3)

19 4A 9 in 2021, famous joke said (5)

20 Moral, reforming willingly in beginning in Bucks town from 1A 4A 7A (5)

22 Like net company associated with socialist, Sidney, in past (8)

27 4A 9 most often in military store (5)

28 Slight problem in Herts town from 1A 4A 7A (7)

29 It is briefly part of (5)

30 One dining getting going wrong way on attention, (5)

31 Starts to recall eagerly in Maidenhead, splendid bubbly place (5)

DOWN

1 Enthusiast, hugging wife with son, cringes to seek favour (5)

2 Managed Church farm (5)

3 Disturbing spectre enveloping man— leading to these? (3,6)

4 Ancient Roman calendar showing period without food on island (5)

5 With great care, search clubs mob organised (4)

6 Little money for gift (5)

7 Disadvantage of French river this person's admitted (5)

8 Child's turn? Yes, so freely (9)

9 Gossp is too much for former East German (6)

14 Source, average over time, becoming anxious to please (4-5)

15 Some lacking cover having trust as at outset new insurance arranged (9)

16 Evasive conclusion of article on cathedral city (4)

17 Drink knocked back first of December at sea maybe? (4,5)

21 Small amount at one time limiting university (5)

23 Parent's losing head— something else! (5)

24 Faith in Jedi, a habit brought up (5)

25 Americans' military vehicles' temperature turning to variable (5)

26 Uninteresting form of horse racing (4)

Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS

1 MUSEUM

4 MOUNTAIN

7 DIARY

9 WREN

10 MOUNTAIN

11 SOAP

12 DROOPING

14 1A 4A 9

17 ITALIAN

18 LILY

19 4A 9

20 MORAL

22 NET

27 4A 9

28 PROBLEM

DOWN

1 ENTHUSIAST

2 CHURCH

3 SPECTRE

4 ROMAN

5 CARE

6 MONEY

7 DISADVANTAGE

8 CHILD

9 GOSPEL

14 SOURCE

15 ANXIOUS

16 CONCLUSION

17 DRINK

21 AMOUNT

23 HEAD

24 HABIT

25 VEHICLES

26 HORSE RACING

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



Strategic blunder

The U.S. must pull back instead of tailing Israel in this reckless war

Picking Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei as the Supreme Leader, after the assassination of his father Ali Khamenei in a joint U.S.-Israeli strike on February 28, Iran has signalled defiance and continuity. Last week, U.S. President Donald Trump, who demanded Iran's "unconditional surrender", made it clear that the younger Khamenei was unacceptable to him. But Iran's Assembly of Experts, the 88-member clerical body, chose the 57-year-old ayatollah, who also lost other close family members in the February 28 strike, as the new "leader of the revolution". Having fought "on the frontlines" of the Iran-Iraq war and studied Islam in the seminaries of Qom, Mojtaba Khamenei has maintained close ties with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the clerical establishment. By elevating him, Tehran has sent an unmistakable message: the Islamic Republic stands firm despite the war. If Mr. Trump believed that his initial decapitation strike would lead to the Islamic state's collapse, he was mistaken. Instead, all branches of the state rallied behind the military and the clergy, while Iran regionalised the war by attacking U.S. bases and energy infrastructure in the Persian Gulf as well as Israel. Now, a new Khamenei is in power; the Iranian state is far from collapsing; energy prices are soaring and leaders in the U.S. and Israel are searching for exit strategies.

This was a wholly unnecessary war. Israel and the U.S. began attacking Iran hours after Oman, which mediated talks between Tehran and Washington, had said that a nuclear deal was within reach. After the war began, Mr. Trump kept shifting the goalposts. On day one, he said the overthrow of the Iranian state was his objective; by the fifth day, he said he wanted to be involved in selecting Iran's new leader, and by the eleventh day, he declared that America had already won and that the war would be over "soon", even as Iranian missiles continued to rain down on Israel and target U.S. bases in the region. To be sure, the U.S. and Israel possess immense air power and can continue to pound Iran. Independent investigations have found that American missiles struck a girls' school in Iran on February 28, claiming over 160 lives. Last week, Israeli strikes on Iran's oil storage facilities enveloped Tehran in thick smoke. But what is the point of continuing to bomb a people whom the Americans promised to "liberate" until a few days ago, without clearly achievable political goals? The Iranian state is not folding, it is fighting back. If Mr. Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu continue this war, the global economy will come under even greater stress. Whether they realise their grave miscalculation or not, the way forward is not more bombing. This war must be brought to an end immediately.

Catch them young

Increasing activity, eating healthy meals will help keep obesity away

The phrase "catch them young" has acquired a perverse slant in a world grappling with a galloping non-communicable diseases epidemic. The full gamut of conditions that comprise metabolic disorders, usually impacting people with advancing age, are affecting even children, studies show. The recently released World Obesity Atlas 2026 delivers a true shocker. As per the report, released on World Obesity Day (March 4), in 2025, there were 14.9 million children in the 5-9 years group and more than 26.4 million children in the 10-19 age group in India who were overweight or obese. About 41 million children had a high BMI rate. Further, estimates suggest that by 2040, 20 million children in India will be obese and 56 million will be overweight. The report also estimates that at least 120 million children of school-going age are expected to have early signs of chronic illnesses such as hypertension and cardiovascular disease due to weight, in 2040. While, globally, China leads both categories, with 62 million children with high BMI and 33 million with obesity, India comes second, and is tailed by the United States (27 million high BMI, 13 million obesity). With such high obesity figures, the attendant health statistics too are unacceptable. In India, children aged 5-9 years with disease indicators attributed to high BMI, including hypertension, diabetes, hyperglycaemia, high cholesterol, and metabolic dysfunction-associated steatotic liver disease (MASLD) are projected to rise substantially by 2040. The risk factors are similar to adult-onset metabolic conditions, broadly categorised as insufficient activity and consumption of unhealthy foods. Other aspects, mentioned as causes, include poor access to healthy school meals for primary and secondary grade children, and sub-optimal breast feeding for infants aged 1-5 months.

Clearly, not enough is being done to stem this tide of growing childhood obesity. The World Obesity Federation calls for greater action and emphasis on monitoring in terms of marketing restrictions and sugar levies on packaged food products. Experts have also called for restrictions on marketing packaged foods to children, sincere implementation of global physical activity recommendations for children, ensuring the mandatory breastfeeding period for infants, and healthier school food standards, besides integration of prevention and care into primary health systems. It is worrisome that obesity and overweight, once associated with higher-income countries, are now catching up rapidly in low- and middle-income countries. If nothing is done at this stage, the gains that the nation expects from its youth, even as it heads towards a grey path, will be hollowed out. The only way out is to catch them young, even before non-communicable diseases can.

Inside China, authority, conflict and strategic challenges

The progression from Mao Tse Tung/Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping in China reveals the nature of the power shifts that have occurred since the country became a communist nation in 1949. All three iconic leaders, in their own way, demonstrated what was essential to maintain and sustain power in a country that had managed to stage-off takeovers by foreign powers over the years.

Since 1949, when Mao Tse Tung led the Communist Party of China (CPC) to victory and took control, the three eponymous leaders wielded unquestioned authority over the party and the country. Between 1949 and 2026, there have, no doubt, been many other leaders who steered the country's fortunes, but it is Mao, Deng and Mr. Xi who left an indelible stamp on China's fortunes and progress.

The 'inner devils'

Across China, signs of Mr. Xi's authority are markedly evident. However, even as China has emerged as the second most powerful country, it faces its own 'inner devils'. Periodic purges at the highest levels of state institutions have led to conflicting interpretations as to the real state of affairs. While China outwardly appears to be a monolith, several purges have been intended to eliminate opposition to the leader of the time. This was also the case during the periods of Mao and Deng.

In the latest purge, Mr. Xi removed the highly placed general of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA), and vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, General Zhang Youxia, and another senior officer, Gen. Liu Zhenni, from the highest policymaking body of the CPC. The purge also claimed nine military law makers from China's Parliament including Ground Force Commander Li Qiaoming and Information Support Force Political Commissar Li Wei. It is worth examining whether this is merely another purge by Mr. Xi or an indication of the growing challenges to his leadership. A hint to this effect is the language used to describe Gen. Zhang in the People's Liberation Army Daily, viz. "a toxin that had to be incised". This could lead to an inference of inner party struggles at the top of the Chinese Communist pyramid. While by no means proven, it is still worth examining.

Even during Mao's lifetime, there was the infamous Liu Shaoyi episode, which though not acknowledged as a power struggle, is viewed by experts as having been an abortive challenge to Mao's supremacy. While Mr. Xi appears to have emerged successful, yet again, the fig leaf of another massive anti-corruption purge is beginning to wear thin. It merits a rethink of China today as a monolith, facing few internal challenges.



M.K. Narayanan

is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

Most prophets seem to flounder when it comes to making political predictions. While Mr. Xi may appear stronger on the surface following the recent purges, it is worth considering the nature of the 'inner devils' said to be hindering China's progress. Analysing China's future clearly demands better comprehension of where China stands today.

Over the years, the mask that China is a monolith has been wearing thin. Insightful analysis would seem to suggest that belief in the goals set by the leadership has been declining, producing a degree of 'trust deficit'. Together with a less than optimistic assessment of the state of the Chinese economy, and the problems faced by some of its political institutions, it may be presumed that inner tensions are increasing, and are beginning to impact the highest levels of the party. Dealing with such a situation would undoubtedly require drastic measures to retain control and 'snuff out' all opposition to the leadership, even at the highest party levels. This, rather than accusations of corruption against senior party functionaries, would seem a more plausible explanation for the periodic purges taking place.

Dents to global credibility

Exacerbating international tensions and China's apparent ineffectiveness in addressing challenges beyond its 'near abroad' — namely East and Southeast Asia — seem to have damaged its image as a global power, potentially intensifying tensions within the CPC leadership. Venezuela was a test case of China's global outreach in this respect at the beginning of 2026. China failed the test and could not counter United States President Donald Trump's assertions that the Western Hemisphere belonged to the U.S. and not one else. This despite China having invested a great deal in Venezuela in recent years. More recently, in West Asia, China again failed to demonstrate its ability to checkmate the U.S. and prevent an attack on Iran, leading to the death of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

The outcome in West Asia has, incidentally, prompted unfavourable comparisons between Chinese weaponry and that of the U.S. and the West, further harming China's reputation. China's conspicuous incapability to counter the U.S. both in the Western Hemisphere and in West Asia is undoubtedly having repercussions and may have possibly impacted China's image beyond repair. In China's eyes, it has, meanwhile, shattered a carefully contrived impression that China is more than equal to the West. It would be reasonable to surmise that this too would have led to re-evaluations at the highest levels of the party, even, perhaps, provoking a challenge to the ruling dispensation.

It is, however uncertain, as of now, whether

China is indeed undergoing a turmoil at the very highest levels of the CPC. What is discernible is that a normally belligerent China has, of late, been acting with far greater circumspection than usual in its dealings with the world at large, and with the U.S. in particular. This is even more surprising considering that China is riding a wave of turbocharged innovation in many areas such as electric vehicles, pharmaceuticals and logistics, and, of late, Artificial Intelligence. In all this, China appears well ahead of the curve.

A reticence

What is even more surprising is that — and with the exception of Taiwan — China, of late, has been disinclined to take a confrontational posture, vis-à-vis the U.S., even deferring to it on some issues. The journey of a Chinese cargo ship, in late 2025, from Asia to Europe, through the Arctic Ocean, that was completed in a fortnight as against the normal three weeks through the Suez Canal, would normally have been heralded by China as evidence of the emergence of a 'Polar Silk Road'. But China has preferred to play down this achievement, stating that this contributes to 'supply chain stability'.

Strategic experts are confounded by this display of reticence, and feel that it is intended to avoid ruffling the feathers of western powers at a time when China's economy is facing certain problems and Mr. Trump has warned of the threat posed to U.S. interests in Greenland by Chinese ships in the vicinity. Apart from this, China's unwillingness to press its claims to being a 'near Arctic State' requires a valid explanation. Most strategic experts seem to feel that problems at the highest levels of the CPC can be the only plausible explanation.

What also needs valid explanation is the general mood of pessimism that appears to be sweeping across China. No plausible explanation has emerged so far. Cracks in the Communist party monolith could possibly be one explanation. Or it might well be an aggravating fear — about 'the wind in the tower heralding a great storm'. All this might appear rather far-fetched for now, but is worthy of more detailed analysis, given the past history of Chinese politics.

Given China's position in the world, the prevailing situation in China deserves a better and more detailed understanding of what is taking place. Events in China cast a shadow not only over Asia but also over much of the world. What is happening in China needs better explanation and understanding. A more benign and less antagonistic China would be of great value to a world facing many crosscurrents. For India, a return to an earlier era of 'Hindi Chini' (Hindi Bhai (Indians and Chinese are brothers)) would be a gift worth savouring.

Given China's global position, the prevailing situation within the country demands closer and deeper understanding of events

AI and the national security calculus



Bharath Reddy

is an Associate Fellow with the Takshashila Institution

Anthropic, an American Artificial Intelligence (AI) lab, is asking for three Chinese AI labs (DeepSeek, MoonshotAI, and MiniMax) to be treated as national security threats. The AI models of Anthropic and other American labs have also reportedly been used by the U.S. military in the Iran attacks to fast-track the "kill chain" from target identification to legal approval and strike.

The Pentagon has labelled Anthropic a "supply chain" risk — a designation associated with foreign adversaries, for raising concerns about how its technology is being used in military operations. This decision is now being challenged in court. These developments over the course of a few weeks have serious implications for AI development and national security calculus worldwide.

The issue

The Chinese AI labs have been accused of distilling frontier models from American AI companies. In a nutshell, this involves taking a stronger AI model's outputs to teach a weaker model. The attacks were sophisticated and used deceptive techniques to mask the identity and intent of the distillers. Anthropic claims that this happened on an industrial scale — "16 million exchanges with Claude through approximately 24,000 fraudulent accounts, in violation of our terms of service and regional access restrictions".

Generative AI is often equated with nuclear technologies, with the aim of containing the proliferation of the technology. However, it is a dual-use general-purpose technology that is more comparable to semiconductors than nuclear weapons. Unlike nuclear technologies, where governments drive research and development efforts, cutting-edge AI research happens in the private sector for civilian applications. It just so happens that the same technology also has military applications.

Nuclear non-proliferation works because fissile

material is rare, controlled and traceable. The same is not true for mathematical AI models. The fact that DeepSeek was able to achieve a comparable performance of frontier models at a fraction of the cost after export controls were imposed is proof that restrictions are not effective. The nuclear narrative asks us to treat querying an AI model as equivalent to weapons proliferation.

Distilled models and guardrails

Anthropic's argument that a distilled model will be used less responsibly lies on weak foundations. Models from frontier American AI labs such as Anthropic, OpenAI, Google and xAI could be used by the U.S. military for applications such as surveillance, cyberwarfare and lethal autonomous weapons systems. In fact, when Anthropic recently raised concerns about the kinds of uses its models were put to, it faced the threat of being removed from defence systems and designated as "supply chain risks". Its rival, OpenAI, however, has accepted a permissive contract for military uses, highlighting a race to the bottom, given the competitive pressure to serve government clients. When their own models are being put to such uses, the argument that distilled models will not have guardrails collapses.

It is extremely hard to control the diffusion of such a technology for many reasons. Talent mobility is hard to restrict. Many of the researchers at Chinese labs were trained in U.S. universities or worked in U.S. companies. The restrictions on inputs such as semiconductors have been repeatedly circumvented and are now partially repealed. Now, distillation is one more vector that is even harder to restrict, as the Anthropic report acknowledges. Each time a restriction appears, workarounds find a way to bypass it. If distillation is seen as extremely risky, not allowing public access to it should be an option to consider.

In the language of national security, these restrictions do not make the world safer. They make it harder for rivals to compete with dominant U.S. companies even on civilian applications. Input-based restrictions are ineffective and only cause collateral damage to innovation, scientific collaboration and widespread economic development. They effectively consolidate power in the hands of a few U.S. companies.

Equating distillation to industrial-scale intellectual property theft also seems unfair, given that frontier AI models are trained on the creative and intellectual output of millions of people who were not compensated and did not consent. The process of asking a model millions of questions and learning from its answers is arguably no more extractive than training that model on billions of web pages written by people who never consented to it.

The companies whose models were distilled are right to claim that their terms of service have been violated by those distilling their models and can pursue measures to block such actors. However, they are also arguing for a coordinated response across the AI industry, cloud providers, and policymakers. This move further entrenches the market power of a handful of companies.

What is needed

As scary as it is, it seems inevitable that armed forces worldwide will integrate generative AI into military systems. The Anthropic episode demonstrates that corporate guardrails are not a substitute for governance: a company can be overridden, replaced, or pressured into compliance. What is needed instead are plurilateral commitments by states to responsible use, covering meaningful human control over lethal decisions, prohibitions on mass civilian surveillance, and auditable technical standards for such capabilities. These commitments must apply universally for them to be effective.

The controversy over AI integration in military systems highlights the need for plurilateral commitments by states to responsible use

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LPG supply crisis

I wish to draw urgent attention to a serious problem that households are facing in booking LPG (Indane) refills. There is a complete breakdown of the booking and delivery system. For several days now, consumers have been unable to book LPG refills through any available mode. The official booking numbers frequently remain

switched off, and even when calls do connect, no confirmation SMS or DAC (Delivery Authentication Code) is generated. Without this crucial DAC message, delivery personnel are refusing to provide the cylinder. The booking portal in many cases incorrectly shows that a cylinder has already been booked, thereby preventing consumers from placing a

new refill order — even when no such booking was made and no cylinder was delivered. Yesterday, when the LPG delivery vehicle arrived in our locality, several residents gathered hoping to receive their refill cylinders. However, the delivery staff stated that they had strict instructions to supply cylinders only upon presentation of the

DAC message. Interestingly, the delivery vehicles remained in the area for hours. Equally concerning is that attempts to contact the LPG distribution agency yielded no response.

Aditya Das,

Bhowali, Uttarakhnad

It is unfortunate that the Centre could not anticipate the cooking gas shortage

arising out of the Iran-Israel-U.S. war. The way out is to look east and seek Brunei crude/gas to tide over the crisis.

Unless proactive actions are initiated on a war-footing, the situation will go out of control. There is already the threat of unemployment looming over gig workers and the hospitality sector.

A.V. Narayanan,

Chennai

K.N. Pannikar

In the passing of Professor K.N. Pannikar, the nation has lost a great intellectual and historian. His approachability with students and colleagues also made him a truly distinguished personality.

Balasarabhaniam Pavan,

Secunderabad

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

Reevaluating the office of the Speaker

The recent no-confidence motion moved by the Opposition against Om Birla has reignited the debate over the constitutional position and accountability of the office of the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. While such motions are rare, their significance lies not merely in the possibility of removal but in what they reveal about the functioning of parliamentary institutions and the evolving conventions surrounding the Speaker's office.



Ahmed Raza
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The office of the Speaker is one of the most critical pillars of India's parliamentary democracy. As the presiding officer of the Lok Sabha, the Speaker ensures orderly debate, enforces the rules of procedure, safeguards the rights of members, and maintains the balance between government authority and the voice of the Opposition. The Constitution establishes the Speaker as an impartial arbiter expected to rise above party politics once elected. Convention demands that the office be exercised with neutrality and fairness. The Speaker's authority extends to several crucial functions such as the recognition of members, interpretation of procedural rules, disciplinary powers, and the certification of Money Bills. These powers significantly shape legislative outcomes and parliamentary debates, and because of this influence, the constitutional framework provides strong protections to ensure that the Speaker cannot be removed easily for political reasons.

The process for removal
The procedure for the removal of the Speaker is deliberately stringent. According to Article 94(C) under the Constitution, the Speaker can be removed only through a resolution passed by a majority of all the members of the Lok Sabha, not merely those present and voting. This high threshold reflects the intent to safeguard the stability and dignity of the office. The process begins

when a member submits a written notice to the Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha seeking removal. At least 14 days' notice must be given before the motion can be taken up. Once admitted, the motion requires the support of at least 50 members to proceed for discussion in the House. The procedural framework governing this process is laid down in the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, specifically Rules 200 to 203. The rules mandate that the resolution must clearly state the charges against the Speaker. During the debate on such a motion, the Speaker may participate in the proceedings as a member of the House, and while the Speaker can vote on the resolution in the first instance, he/she cannot exercise their vote in case of a tie.

No-confidence motions against the Speaker have been extremely rare in India's parliamentary history. Only three such attempts have occurred — in 1954, against G. V. Mavalankar; in 1966, against Hukam Singh; and in 1987, against Balram Jakhar. In all three cases, the motions failed. These precedents demonstrate the political and procedural difficulty involved in removing a Speaker.

Larger impact
Although the present motion may not result in the Speaker's removal, it carries broader institutional significance. It reminds presiding officers that their authority derives from the collective confidence of the legislature. The Speaker's credibility depends heavily on the perception of impartiality. Allegations of partisan conduct can weaken public confidence in parliamentary processes.

While the high constitutional threshold ensures that the Speaker is not vulnerable to routine political pressure, it still allows a democratic mechanism for accountability.

However, several challenges affect the functioning of the Speaker's office. First, there is a

growing perception of politicisation. In recent years, decisions on matters such as disqualification of legislators under the anti-defection law or certification of Money Bills have often been viewed through a partisan lens. Second, frequent confrontations between the ruling party and the Opposition have led to procedural deadlocks in Parliament. When the neutrality of the presiding officer is questioned, trust between political actors erodes, making consensus-building more difficult. Third, parliamentary conventions — unwritten norms that once guided the impartial conduct of the Speaker — have gradually weakened. As political competition intensifies, these conventions risk being overshadowed by tactical considerations.

The way ahead
To preserve the credibility of Parliament and strengthen democratic governance, reforms and renewed commitment to parliamentary norms are necessary. Reinforcing institutional conventions should be the first step. Political parties must collectively reaffirm the tradition that the Speaker acts above party lines once elected. Enhancing transparency in procedural rulings can also improve trust. Clear explanations for major decisions — such as rejecting requests for discussion or certifying legislative bills — would reduce allegations of bias. Encouraging dialogue between the government and the Opposition is equally important. Structured consultations on parliamentary procedures and reforms could reduce confrontations and improve legislative productivity. Finally, codifying best practices regarding the Speaker's discretionary powers may help clarify ambiguities. While flexibility is essential in parliamentary procedure, clearer guidelines could reduce disputes over interpretation.

The crisis of unemployment in J&K

The lack of a diversified industry has limited job creation in the region



STATE OF PLAY

Bilal Gani
Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) is grappling with an unemployment crisis. In recent years, the unemployment rate in the region has soared to alarming levels. Such an increase has forced thousands of highly-qualified youth into low-paying jobs. In the Kashmir valley, hundreds of jobless youth have been struggling to find stable employment despite completing their education and acquiring various skills.

Myriad reasons

The unemployment rate of J&K is higher than the national average. In December 2025, Parliament said that J&K's unemployment rate was 6.1% in July-September 2025, higher than the national average of 5.2%. Urban areas have shown sharper gaps with an unemployment rate of 10.6%, compared with the rural unemployment rate of 5.1%. As per estimates, the region has approximately 3.6 lakh registered unemployed youth, with roughly two lakh in Kashmir and 1.5 lakh in Jammu. The unprecedented rise in the region's unemployment rate has been precipitated by its heavy reliance on the government sector in the absence of a robust private sector. Tourism and horticulture, traditional areas of the private sector, have been shrinking and are unable to absorb the growing educated workforce. The lack of a diversified industry has caused unemployment by limiting job creation in sectors beyond tourism and horticulture, leading to structural unemployment.

The delays in recruitment have further exacerbated this

crisis. Almost 80% of all recruitment exams announced by the J&K Services Selection Board (JKSSB) and the J&K Public Service Commission (JKPSC), two premier recruiting agencies, have been delayed or challenged in court. Thousands of posts now lie vacant across different departments like health, public works and education. The absence of a fair and transparent recruitment mechanism has worsened the situation. On December 15, the J&K government terminated 103 employees of the Fire and Emergency Services Department after large-scale irregularities were revealed in the recruitment process.

The region's economic unpredictability has turned entrepreneurship into survival ventures rather than growth engines. Moreover, the absence of a well-defined public employment policy has replaced regular recruitment with contractual hiring. J&K has more than one lakh daily wagers across different departments who continue to work without job security or benefits. Their regularisation has been overlooked for decades by successive governments. The job crisis in the region is particularly alarming among highly educated individuals who account for 23.9% of the total unemployment rate.

This situation reflects a serious mismatch between educational attainment and job

opportunities.

A swift response

J&K's job crisis demands urgent and effective government intervention. A strong start-up culture and a robust entrepreneurship ecosystem can effectively address unemployment in the region. Over the years, some local entrepreneurs have established successful start-ups and provided employment to hundreds of youths. Therefore, the Jammu and Kashmir Entrepreneurship Development Institute (JKEDI), the premier public institute supporting entrepreneurship development in the Union Territory (UT), should be fully funded to be an effective platform for encouraging entrepreneurs to build new start-ups.

However, the public sector remains the main employment generator in the region. There should be massive recruitment drives to fill vacant positions and curb the unemployment graph, which continues to rise year after year. The government should appoint a monitoring agency which can oversee the selection process of recruiting agencies in the UT, so as to ensure transparent and time-bound recruitment to various government positions. J&K's youth should be provided with equal employment opportunities in public and private sectors through fast-track recruitment, financial and logistics support, and market-oriented education with special focus on skill-based courses. Private investors should be encouraged to invest in the region's talented human capital which will be a critical driver of productivity, innovation and economic growth.

Bilal Gani is with the faculty of Political Studies, Government Degree College Beerwah, J&K

More women deleted from rolls in most States after SIR

Tamil Nadu is the only major State where the gender ratio improved slightly, despite the State recording one of the largest reductions in total electors

DATA POINT

Devvanshi Bhanji Srinivasan Ramani

The Election Commission of India's (EC) Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls — a large-scale exercise aimed at updating voter lists — is being carried out across 12 States and Union Territories (UTs) covering close to 51 crore voters. The enumeration phase of the exercise began in November 2025. Among these States and UTs, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, and Puducherry are scheduled to go to the polls in April 2026.

The first round of the clean-up exercise was carried out earlier in Bihar, where more than 65 lakh names were deleted from the electoral rolls and the gender ratio fell sharply from 907 women per 1,000 men to 892 women after the SIR.

The *Hindu* had found that the exclusions were higher in the 18-29 age category, with one of the primary reasons being that the women had 'permanently shifted'. The EC had then said in the Supreme Court that women's names would have been excluded as they had migrated to other States after marriage. Yet, *The Hindu's* data stories had shown that more men migrated for work than women who migrated for marriage, according to the Census and later surveys. This raises the question of whether similar patterns are visible in other States where the SIR exercise has been carried out.

Decline across States

Data from the 2024 Lok Sabha election rolls and the final SIR rolls show that while the drop in gender ratio is not as steep as in Bihar, all major States have recorded a decline in the proportion of women voters relative to men after the revision. Tamil Nadu is the notable exception, where the gender ratio improved, even though the State

witnessed one of the largest reductions in total electors following the exercise.

Uttar Pradesh has not been included in this analysis as the final electoral roll for the State is yet to be published. The EC has extended the revision schedule multiple times and the final roll is now expected to be released on April 10.

In West Bengal, the gender ratio fell from about 966 women per 1,000 men in the 2024 Lok Sabha rolls to around 956 after the SIR revision. The State also recorded one of the largest reductions in its electorate — a 8.06% decline.

Nearly 60 lakh people are still being adjudicated for "logical discrepancies" but are part of the rolls so far.

The gender ratio in Gujarat recorded a sharper shift as it fell from roughly 945 women to about 938 in the final SIR rolls. The total electorate declined from 5.08 crore to 4.4 crore, a reduction of 13.4% of the electorate.

Madhya Pradesh also saw a decline in the gender ratio after the revision, from 945 women to 934 in the final SIR rolls. The State's electorate shrank from about 5.74 crore voters before the SIR to 5.39 crore in the final rolls, a reduction of around 34.25 lakh electors (5.97%).

The number of women electors in Rajasthan fell from about 2.56 crore to 2.45 crore, while the number of male electors declined more modestly. The gender ratio dropped from 920 to 911. Overall, the State's electorate witnessed a 6.13% reduction.

In contrast, Tamil Nadu, one of the States where women form a majority on the electoral rolls, recorded an improvement in the gender ratio.

The ratio increased from 1,034 women per 1,000 men in the 2024 rolls to 1,044 in the final SIR rolls. But the total electorate in the State declined from 6.41 crore to 5.67 crore, a reduction of about 74 lakh electors, or 11.5% from the pre SIR rolls.

However, Kerala, another State with a higher number of women voters than men, saw a decline in the gender ratio after the revision. The ratio fell from 1,064 to 1,053 in the final SIR rolls, though women continue to remain more numerous than men on the electoral rolls. The total electorate also declined by about 3.2%.

Similarly, women continue to slightly outnumber men in Chhattisgarh although the ratio fell from 1,016 to 1,002 in the final SIR rolls. The total electorate declined by about 11.77%.

Goa is also among the States where women continue to outnumber men. But the State's electorate saw a significant contraction. The total number of voters saw a decline of around 10.7% of voters.

Status of Union Territories

Among Union Territories, Puducherry has historically seen higher women participation and representation on the rolls and has continued to show a strong female presence even after the revision. However, the total number of voters declined from about 10.2 lakh to 9.4 lakh, representing a 7.5% reduction.

In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the gender ratio rose from 919 to 979 after the revision. The number of female electors fell by a smaller margin compared with male electors, leading to an increase in the ratio even as the overall electorate dropped significantly. The rolls declined from 3.1 lakh to about 2.58 lakh voters, representing a reduction of 16.8%, the largest proportional declines among the regions analysed.

Lakshadweep, on the other hand, saw only a marginal increase in the gender ratio from 968 women voters to 971 in the final SIR rolls. The Union territory recorded almost no change in its electorate with just a 0.3% drop. *With inputs from Mohammed Iqbal, Sreeparna Chakrabarty, Mehul Malpani and Shubhomoy Sikdar.*

Gender gap among electors

The data for the charts were sourced from the Election Commission of India



Roll revision: A copy of the final electoral roll that was released after the SIR in Salem in Tamil Nadu on February 23. E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Table 1: Gender ratio (women per 1,000 men) in the Lok Sabha 2024 electoral rolls and final SIR rolls across States and Union Territories where SIR was held recently

State/UT	Gender ratio (LS election 2024)	Gender ratio (final SIR)
Andaman & Nicobar	919	979
Chhattisgarh	1,016	1,002
Goa	1,063	1,053
Gujarat	945	938
Lakshadweep	968	971
Madhya Pradesh	945	934
Puducherry	1,129	1,128
Tamil Nadu	1,034	1,044
West Bengal*	966	956
Rajasthan	920	911
Kerala	1,064	1,053

1 In Bihar, the gender ratio fell from 907 women per 1,000 men to 892 women after the SIR

2 All major States, except Tamil Nadu, have recorded a decline in the gender ratio

Darker blue indicates higher gender ratios and darker red indicates lower gender ratios. Lighter shades represent values closer to the middle range

Table 2: The percentage decline in electors across States and UTs, from the pre-SIR and Lok Sabha 2024 rolls to the final SIR rolls

State/UT	% change in electors (pre-SIR rolls to final SIR)	% change in electors (LS 2024 to final SIR)
Andaman & Nicobar	16.81	18.28
Chhattisgarh	11.77	9.42
Goa	10.76	10.35
Gujarat	13.40	8.29
Lakshadweep	0.36	0.60
Madhya Pradesh	5.97	4.74
Puducherry	7.57	7.79
Tamil Nadu	11.55	9.13
West Bengal*	8.06	7.44
Rajasthan	6.13	3.72
Kerala	3.22	3.07

Andaman recorded the largest proportional decline among the regions analysed

*In West Bengal, nearly 60 lakh people are still being adjudicated for "logical discrepancies" but are part of the rolls so far

Darker red represents larger percentage declines among electors and lighter shades indicate smaller reductions

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 11, 1976

STD on 8 routes inaugurated

New Delhi, March 10: The Posts and Telegraphs Department today introduced eight subscriber trunk dialling routes and 13 "no delay service routes", besides adding 12,500 lines to various telephone exchanges in the country to mark the centenary of the invention of telephone by Alexander Graham Bell.

The Union Minister of State for Industry and Civil Supplies, Mr. A.C. George, inaugurated STD between Delhi and Trivandrum by speaking to the Kerala Home Minister, Mr. K. Karunakaran. Mr. K.C. Pant, Union Minister for Energy, speaking to the Gujarat Governor, Mr. K.K. Viswanathan inaugurated STD between Delhi and Gandhinagar.

Besides, Mr. K. Raghuremiah, Union Minister for Works, Housing and Parliamentary Affairs, inaugurated extension of the Janpath IV exchange of Delhi telephones by 800 lines.

Presiding over the function, the Union Minister for Communications, Mr. Shankar Devul Sharma, said that a telex exchange at Jodhpur and a trunk automatic exchange at Ambala were also being commissioned to-day.

Mr. Sharma said that the establishment of STD between Delhi and Trivandrum and Delhi and Gandhinagar was part of the scheme to connect Delhi with all the State Capitals.

By the end of 1976, all the State Capitals, except the four in the eastern sector, would be connected to Delhi.

He also said that by the end of the current month, the P and T department proposed to provide 1.2 lakh new telephone connections. In the remaining years of the plan, it was proposed to provide over six lakh new telephone connections.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 11, 1926

Shakespeare theatre to be rebuilt

Rugby, March 9: It has been definitely decided to rebuild the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre on Stratford-on-Avon, which was destroyed by fire on Saturday. A fund raise £100,000 will probably be launched shortly. The destruction of the Theatre will not interfere with the holding of birthday and summer festivals at Shakespeare's birthplace.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Rise in China's exports to Russia in first two months of 2026

19.7 in per cent. China's exports to Russia surged in the first two months of 2026, Chinese customs data showed on Tuesday. In February alone, China's shipments to Russia soared 54.7% from the previous year. Russian crude oil shipments to China in January-February nearly doubled from a year ago, said Muyu Xu, a Kpler analyst. REUTERS

Number of women beneficiaries under Assam's govt's scheme

40 in lakh. Forty lakh families in Assam on Tuesday received ₹9,000 each under the State government's flagship 'Orunodoi' scheme, with Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma emphasising that it was a manifestation of the regime's compassionate approach. Under the Orunodoi scheme, one eligible woman beneficiary per family receives ₹1,250 per month. PTI

Number of people displaced in Lebanon as on March 10

6.67 in lakh. The United Nations said Tuesday that more than 100,000 people had been newly displaced within Lebanon in just 24 hours amid the war raging in West Asia. "As of today, more than 667,000 people in Lebanon have now registered on the (Lebanese) government's online platform as displaced," said a UN refugee agency's representative. APF

Number of MBBS seats approved for the academic year 2025-26

11,682 Minister of State for Health Anupriya Patel told the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday that 43 new medical colleges have been established across the country for the academic year 2025-26. The government has approved 11,682 MBBS seats and 8,967 postgraduate seats, across the country for the same academic year, she said. PTI

Number of alleged atrocities and crimes against SCs in 2023

57,789 More than 57,000 cases of alleged atrocities and crimes against Scheduled Castes were registered across the country in 2023, the government informed the Lok Sabha on Tuesday. It also said there is no proposal to amend the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. PTI

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'41%' illusion: a quiet re-engineering of India's fiscal federal landscape

16th Finance Commission retained States' share in the divisible pool at 41% even as the divisible pool as a proportion of gross tax revenues has shrunk; various grants have been discontinued; the gap between a State's entitlement and its actual receipt depends on its capacity to meet Central monitoring requirements

ECONOMIC NOTES

Deepanshu Mohan

An Explanatory Memorandum issued by the Ministry of Finance on February 1, 2026, is seen as a useful document, not only for what it states or approves but also for observing a pattern of what it does not.

The Union government accepted the Sixteenth Finance Commission's (FC's) recommendation to retain the States' share in the divisible pool at 41%. It also accepted the horizontal formula, the local body grants, and the disaster management corpus. However, it deferred everything structural, such as amending the Fiscal Responsibility Legislation, controlling off-budget borrowings, reforming power sector distribution companies, and rationalising subsidies.

This observed asymmetry is not bureaucratic caution. It became the settlement.

The headline number deserves scrutiny before the settlement does. A 41% share sounds like continuity. In nominal terms, it is. But the divisible pool is not gross tax revenues.

Cesses and surcharges, levied and retained entirely by the Union, sit outside the pool, and their share has been growing.

As the FC16 report documents, the divisible pool as a proportion of gross tax revenues averaged 89.2% during the FC13 period, fell to 82.1% during FC14, and dropped further to 78.3% during FC15.

The Commission acknowledges this trend, notes its undesirability, and declines to fix it. Hence, 41% of a shrinking base is not 41% of total collections.

FC16 has also discontinued revenue deficit grants, sector-specific grants, and State-specific grants, instruments that offered targeted fiscal relief to States. The Commission projects that combined general government debt will fall from 77.3% of GDP in 2026-27 to 73.1% by 2030-31.

The aggregate trajectory looks orderly. It is the disaggregated picture where the real argument begins.

Structural deferrals

FC16 was aware of the fault lines it chose not to repair. Its chapters on State finances, power sector losses, and subsidies name them directly. The Commission identified States with structurally unsustainable fiscal trajectories. It called for reforms. It attached no binding enforcement mechanism to achieve them.

The most consequential gap is the residual asymmetry left by the end of GST compensation in June 2022. States lost a guaranteed 14% annual growth in SGST revenues without a structural replacement.

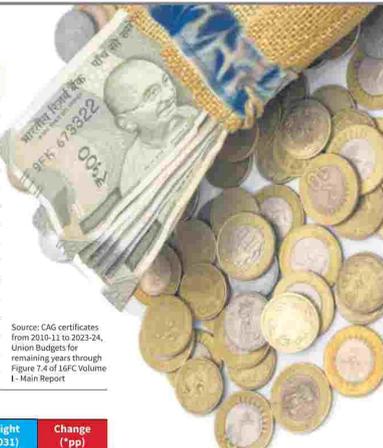
Tamil Nadu alone estimated a shortfall of nearly ₹20,000 crore in 2024-25. The Commission reads aggregate SGST buoyancy as evidence of recovery. The distributional stress has not followed.

The second deferral concerns off-budget borrowings and fiscal rules. FC16 documented how States borrow through government-controlled entities and service those liabilities from the budget, keeping them invisible in

Drop in shareable revenue

Divisible Pool as % of Gross Tax Revenue (GTR), from 2010-11 to 2025-26

Year	FC period	Divisible pool (% of GTR)	States' share in the divisible pool
2010-11	FC13	89	32%
2011-12	FC13	88.9	32%
2012-13	FC13	89.7	32%
2013-14	FC13	89.3	32%
2014-15	FC13	89.1	32%
2015-16	FC14	86.9	42%
2016-17	FC14	86.2	42%
2017-18	FC14	75.6	42%
2018-19	FC14	81.2	42%
2019-20	FC14	80.9	42%
2020-21	FC15	74	41%
2021-22	FC15	75.3	41%
2022-23	FC15	77.5	41%
2023-24	FC15	79.9	41%
2024-25 RE	FC15	81.9	41%
2025-26 BE	FC15	81.3	41%



Source: CAG certificates from 2010-11 to 2023-24, Union Budgets for remaining years through Figure 7 of LFC, Volume I - Main Report

Horizontal devolution formula of FC15 vs FC16

Criterion	FC15 weight (2021-2026)	FC16 weight (2026-2031)	Change (*pp)
Income distance (per capita GSDP)	45%	42.50%	-2.5
Population (2011 Census)	15%	17.50%	+2.5
Demographic performance	12.50%	10%	-2.5
Area	15%	10%	-5
Forest cover	10%	10%	—
Tax & fiscal effort	2.50%	Dropped	-2.5
Contribution to GDP	—	10% (New)	+10

*pp: Percentage points Source: Reports of the 15th and 16th Finance Commissions through PRS

THE GIST

▼ The Union government accepted the Sixteenth Finance Commission's (FC's) recommendation to retain the States' share in the divisible pool at 41%.

▼ A 41% share sounds like continuity. In nominal terms, it is. But the divisible pool is not gross tax revenues.

▼ Cesses and surcharges, levied and retained entirely by the Union, sit outside the pool, and their share has been growing.

The Union accepts what gives it budgetary predictability: the 41% share, the formula, and the grants. It defers what would require structural authority, fiscal rule reform, off-budget liability controls, and power sector restructuring

headline deficit figures.

It is recommended that States discontinue this practice and that the Fiscal Responsibility Legislation (FRL) frameworks be amended.

The Explanatory Memorandum accepted the quantum of borrowing ceilings in principle, then noted that off-budget controls, FRL amendments, and the Union's own fiscal deficit path would be examined separately. That phrase has a history in Indian fiscal federalism. It means not now.

The Commission's own inter-State comparison documents the backdrop. Punjab carried a debt-to-GSDP ratio of 42.9% in 2023-24 and a revenue deficit of 3.7% of GSDP, borrowing primarily to address revenue shortfalls rather than build capital assets.

Rajasthan's outstanding liabilities stood at 37.9% of GSDP, West Bengal's at 38.3%, and Andhra Pradesh's at 34.6%. Each operates under fiscal rules that, by the Commission's own assessment, are effectively unenforced. The recommendation to reform those rules was made. The Union noted it for later.

Rewarding the Centre's priorities

Two choices in FC16's transfer architecture repay close reading.

The first is the replacement of the tax and fiscal effort criterion in the horizontal devolution formula with a contribution to GDP criterion. Under FC15, States received a 2.5% weight based on their own tax revenue efficiency relative to economic capacity, rewarded for trying harder.

The new criterion, assigned a 10% weight, allocates resources in proportion to each State's contribution to national GDP, measured as the square root of its

GSDP relative to all States. Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Karnataka, large, high-GSDP States that already generate substantial own revenue, benefit structurally from this shift.

Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, which are States with lower per capita incomes and greater fiscal need, do not. This is not a technical adjustment. It is an inversion of equalisation logic: the previous criterion rewarded effort, the new one rewards wealth.

The shift from tax & fiscal effort (2.5%) to contribution to GDP (10%) is the defining structural change. The second is the conditionality architecture of the local body grants. The ₹79,149.3 crore recommended for rural and urban local bodies is divided into basic and performance components, with access contingent on entry-level conditions covering constituted bodies, audited accounts, and the timely constitution of State Finance Commissions.

Performance grants add further layers tied to own-source revenue benchmarks and Central database compliance. Each condition is defensible in isolation. Together, they construct a system in which the gap between a State's entitlement and its actual receipt depends on its capacity to meet Central monitoring requirements.

States with weaker governance infrastructure, which tend also to be States with greater fiscal need, face that gap most acutely. The FC15 period offers a precedent, where urban local body grants were released at only 62.6% of the recommended amount.

Read alongside the Commission's report, the Explanatory Memorandum reveals a consistent logic. The Union accepts what gives it budgetary

predictability: the 41% share, the formula, and the grants.

It defers what would require sharing structural authority, fiscal rule reform, off-budget liability controls, and power sector restructuring. Where FC16 diagnosed a problem and recommended a remedy, the Union took note. Where FC16 designed a flow and set an amount, the Union accepted it in full.

What makes the FC16 moment distinctive is that it arrives after years of documented State-level fiscal deterioration, the Commission's own data confirms.

Punjab borrows to pay salaries and service existing debt, not to build infrastructure. Andhra Pradesh carries reorganisation-era liabilities that no Finance Commission has resolved. Rajasthan's revenue deficit persists across multiple award periods. The Commission saw each of these. The Memorandum took note.

A federal structure whose transfers increasingly reward economic weight over fiscal need, whose structural stress is deferred cycle after cycle, and whose only reliable outcome is the perpetuation of Centre-State asymmetry is surely not a system in good health. It has somehow learned to look like it is - and that is deeply troubling and unsettling for the fiscal-federal character of India's constitutional republic which can result in long-term implications and an exacerbating civic divide.

Deepanshu Mohan is professor and dean, O.P. Jindal Global University, and Director, Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES). Nagappan Arun and Saksham Raj contributed to this column from Centre for New Economics Studies, O.P. Jindal Global University.

CACHE



Combined with another innovation — subscriber trunk dialling, or STD — the C-DOT digital switch dramatically improved telecom connectivity across the country. GETTY IMAGES

Lessons from C-DOT saga for technology development in India

The Centre for Development of Telematics heralded a communications revolution by developing indigenous rural telephone exchange technology; however, in the three months of K.P. Unnikrishnan as Minister for Communications, the project was derailed and a mass exodus of scientists began

Dinesh C. Sharma

Former Congress and socialist leader K.P. Unnikrishnan, who passed away at Kozhikode on March 3, was an elected Member of Parliament for six terms between 1971 and 1995. He will be remembered for his long political and parliamentary career spanning several decades and for his public life. Few, however, might recall the impact of his tenure as the Minister for Communications for about three months — from December 1989 to April 1990 — in the short-lived government of Prime Minister V.P. Singh. Unnikrishnan's brief stay in Sanchar Bhawan was marked by controversies that derailed one of the most successful technology development programmes of independent India — the Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT) — and ended the career of Sam Pitroda as a technology policymaker. Unnikrishnan's crackdown on the telecom R&D organisation, which heralded the communication revolution with its indigenously developed rural telephone exchange technology, was so severe that it could barely recover in later decades.

The communication scenario in India of the 1970s and 1980s was pathetic. Telephone connectivity was very poor. The national waiting list for getting a landline connection stood at 8.42 lakh in 1987, translating into a waiting period of three to four years. The connectivity in rural areas was worse, with just 3% of six lakh villages having a telephone connection. The quality of service was also poor, with high downtime.

The main reason was the dependence on imports for telecom equipment such as switches, transmission lines, and instruments. Multinational telecom companies determined the level and type of technology India needed. The imported analogue exchanges would often break down due to high temperatures and dust. They also could not handle high call volume in India.

In 1980, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi formed a committee to review the telecom infrastructure. An Indian technologist from the U.S. made a radical suggestion before this panel: that India should develop and manufacture a digital switch instead of importing, as favoured

by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT). Over the next few years, this idea crystallised and C-DOT was born in 1986, with Sam Pitroda as its chairman.

Pitroda did not want it to be another government R&D outfit on the lines of existing laboratories and national institutions administered by different ministries. It was formed as an autonomous society, funded by the government but with functional freedom, on the lines of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). The agency was given an assured budget and a tight deadline — ₹36 crore and 36 months — to develop an indigenous switch. The idea was to introduce the next level of technology and do so indigenously. The proposed digital switch was heavily software-based, unlike the prevailing crossbar exchanges.

New work culture

Young engineers and technologists were recruited. They worked as project teams in Bangalore and Delhi. A new work culture was promoted. One American industry analyst wrote, "Young blue-janed computer programmers pulling all-nighters, waltz peppered with PERT diagrams, weekend retreats, employee counselling programs, and performance-linked awards. But it is not Silicon Valley, it is India. It is not Apple Computer, it is C-DOT run by the government."

But at home, C-DOT and Pitroda faced a hostile bureaucracy and an uncooperative DoT. Questions were raised in Parliament and the press about the working of C-DOT. In response to allegations of financial irregularities and flouting of government rules, inter-governmental committees were quickly formed to review the working of C-DOT, but they did not report any financial wrongdoing.

As promised, C-DOT not only developed the digital rural exchange but also developed several other projects in the given timeframe, as well as novel ways of technology transfer and a base of Indian vendors. All this helped it break the stronghold of American and European telecom suppliers in India. Combined with another innovation — subscriber trunk dialling, or STD — the

C-DOT digital switch dramatically improved telecom connectivity across the country, heralding the communications revolution.

When Unnikrishnan took over as the Minister for Communications in December 1989, Pitroda and, because of his association, C-DOT were being targeted by top bureaucracy as well as the political opponents of Rajiv Gandhi. For Gandhi's political adversaries, including those from the Congress party, Pitroda had become an easy target as he was seen influencing key decisions as an important member of the informal group of "Computer Boys" who had direct access to the prime minister. Pitroda helmed Gandhi's pet programme, "Technology Missions". In addition, telecom MNCs had been perturbed by the success of C-DOT. All this placed Pitroda and C-DOT in a tight spot as Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress were voted out.

On the very first day of taking over as the minister, Unnikrishnan publicly humiliated Pitroda, purportedly for being late in receiving him when he arrived at Sanchar Bhawan. Within a week, he formed a high level expert committee headed by K.P.P. Nambiar, former chairman of Indian Telephone Industries, to investigate C-DOT. It included all eight members of the inter-departmental committee that had gone into the performance of C-DOT twice in 1986 and 1988 and cleared it. G.B. Meemansi, executive director of C-DOT, was also made a member. Nambiar then formed a one-man subcommittee specifically to review C-DOT's purchases.

"The deliberations, during the Expert Committee meetings, while reviewing the findings of the sub-committee, showed a planned witch-hunt instead of an honest review of the work put in by C-DOT. An air of gloom and uncertainty started hanging over 600 young C-DOTians," Meemansi later recalled in his memoirs. He and three other members of the committee gave a dissent note. Nambiar did not include the note in his final report and submitted it quickly to Unnikrishnan before the decided date. When the dissent note was submitted to Unnikrishnan, he called it a "parallel report" and refused to make it a part of the report submitted by Nambiar. The Nambiar report was also submitted

during the weekend. On the next working day, Unnikrishnan issued orders sacking from C-DOT two of the four members — Meemansi and D.R. Mahajan — who had written the dissenting note. Two weeks later, Unnikrishnan was divested of the communications portfolio and replaced by Janeshwar Mishra.

The three-month tenure of Unnikrishnan as the Communications Minister at a critical point in technology development and dissemination derailed the whole indigenisation project. Though C-DOT eventually delivered 10,000-line and 40,000-line exchanges as promised, the momentum it generated for innovation and product development was lost. Rattled by the shabby treatment of the founders and mentors like Pitroda and Meemansi, several young engineers marched to the Prime Minister's residence in Delhi, and staged a walkout when Unnikrishnan went to address them in Bangalore.

Mass exodus of scientists

Within a few months C-DOT reported a mass exodus of scientists and engineers, making it a classic case of brain drain. Many were readily recruited by multinational telecom firms, which made a comeback in the post-1991 liberalisation years, while others became entrepreneurs.

The episode has many lessons that are still relevant four decades later. Indigenous technology development needs unstinted support from the political as well as administrative apparatus, irrespective of a change in political dispensation. The development teams and organisations involved need functional autonomy and freedom from mundane bureaucratic restrictions. Technology development is risky business and cannot be tied down by traditional yardsticks of time and cost-overs as well as failures. Young talent is an essential raw material and it needs to be retained and nurtured in every way possible. Product development remains the holy grail of technology business in India, and there is a lot to learn from the history of technology development here.

Dinesh C. Sharma is a New Delhi-based journalist and author, and has written books on India's post-1947 science and technology journey.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"Is it time to celebrate? Did your client pay you well?"
"He paid me all right! He paid me a monkey's allowance."

"A monkey's allowance? I didn't know that monkeys got an allowance!"

"They do, sometimes. Tell me, what does a monkey get from its master once it has performed in front of an audience?"
"Nothing, as far as I know. Maybe the master gives the animal some peanuts."
"Exactly! He gives the poor animal something to eat. That's all. So when you say that you received a monkey's allowance from someone, it means that you got paid a trifling amount for the work that you did."

"I see. So, is it O.K. to say, I received a monkey's allowance for the job?"

"It certainly is. I was given a monkey's allowance for helping my uncle clean his garage."

"Most of us are usually given..."
"...Would you please stop monkeying around with the remote?"

"Monkeying around? Does it mean the same thing as fool around?"

"Very good. When you 'monkey around' with something, or someone, you fool around or play around with it/them. For example, the children were monkeying around with an old screwdriver."

"Some of my friends were monkeying around in the playground. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine. Stop monkeying around with the scooter and start doing your homework."

"Talking about scooters, what happened to yours? The seats are all torn up. And the..."

"...there are a lot of monkeys in the place where I work. And..."
"...of course there are. I am looking at one of the monkeys right now."

"Ha! Ha! Very funny. Only one monkey recognises another, by the way. Anyway, as I was telling you, there are real monkeys on campus. And they tore up the seat."

"I see. You have monkeys going about their business outside the office. I understand there is also monkey business going on in the office."

"Do you know what monkey business means?"

"Of course, I do. It means a mischievous or an illegal activity of some kind."

"That's right. The students have been awfully quiet for some time now. I have a feeling that there is some monkey business going on."

"Some people believe that there is some monkey business between your Chairman and the General Manager."

"It's not just the Chairman. A lot of people are..."
"...Sujatha's father believes..."

"...How is he, by the way? Is he, like Sujatha, still making a monkey out of you?"

"Making a monkey out of me? What do you mean?"

"When you make a monkey out of someone, you make a fool out of him/her. For example, Sreenivas got so drunk at the party that he made a monkey out of himself."

"At school, all my friends try and make a monkey out of Venkat."

"It doesn't take much to make a monkey out of poor Venkat."
Published in *The Hindu* on November 16, 1999

THE DAILY QUIZ

On this day in 2020, WHO declared COVID a pandemic. Here's a quiz on people who died during the outbreak

Srinivasan Ramanani

QUESTION 1

This person was to Satyajit Ray what Toshirō Mifune was to Akira Kurosawa and Robert De Niro was to Martin Scorsese. While his filmography is almost entirely in Bengali, he did direct the Hindi feature "Stree ki patra". Name him.

QUESTION 2

Name the Chinese ophthalmologist who was one of the first whistleblowers to warn about the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan.

QUESTION 3

This Olympian legend from India came from a difficult childhood and was even arrested for travelling ticketless in a train as a teenager. Thanks to his entry into

the army, he became a major athlete and one of India's pioneering post-independence achievers in sport. Name him.

QUESTION 4

Before dying due to COVID-19 related complications, this person sang a song called, "Bharath Bhoomi", composed by Ilaiyaraaja and dedicated to frontline workers such as healthcare professionals, police, nurses, etc. Name this legendary playback singer.

QUESTION 5

This cricketer was the first in Test cricket to have scored more than 2,000 runs without a century (highest of 97). Name this former opening batsman who also joined politics and later became a BJP MP and a state government minister?



This person will be forever remembered for lying to the U.N. Security Council about the presence of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq. Name him.

Questions and answers to the previous day's daily quiz on T20 World Cup:

- Besides Sanju Samson, which Indian won two player-of-the-match awards? **Ans: Hardik Pandya**
- Which country did Yuvraj Samra play for? **Ans: Canada**
- Apart from Samson, which other Indian got more than 300 runs? **Ans: Ishan Kishan**
- How did the Scots Matthew Cross, Michael Leask, and Oliver Davidson make news on February 7? **Ans: The three batters were the victims in West Indian Romario Shepherd's hat-trick, the only one of the tournament.**
- Name the lone Pakistani and West Indian in the ICC's Team of the tournament. **Ans: Sahibzada Farhan and Jason Holder respectively.**
- What was the prize money (in U.S. Dollars) that India took home for emerging the champion? **Ans: \$3 million**
- Which other teams, apart from New Zealand (2021 and 2026), have lost two summit clashes? **Ans: Pakistan (2007, 2022) and Sri Lanka (2009, 2012).**
- Name this American joint highest wicket-taker till the final where Varun and Bumrah went ahead by one wicket to tally 14 scalps. **Ans: Shadley Van Schalkwyk**
- Early Birds: Neha Mahendru| Shailimi Naaz| Varghese Joseph| Sadhan Panda

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

Word of the day

Fortuitous: occurring by happy chance

Synonyms: causeless, uncaused

Usage: It was a fortuitous meeting that led to a lifelong friendship.

Pronunciation: [newsthehindu.com/fortuitous](https://www.newsthehindu.com/fortuitous)

International Phonetic Alphabet: /fɔːtʃuːˈtʃuːtɪəs/

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

Scientists rewire bacteria to build 'designer' proteins on demand

By engineering a protein called a 'nutrient transporter', scientists have found a way to smuggle artificial amino acids into bacterial cells; the feat allows them to manufacture complex designer proteins that can carry drugs to precise locations inside the body or perform multiple different tasks at the same time

Joel P. Joseph
BENGALURU

Researchers have found a way to hijack the natural protein-making facilities of bacteria to manufacture specific proteins of interest. They did this by turning a 'nutrient gate' on a bacterial cell into a Trojan horse that could ferry artificial amino acids into cells to make these proteins.

The study, conducted by teams at ETH Zurich in Switzerland and the Technical University of Munich in Germany, was published in *Nature*.

All proteins are made of some combination of the 20 natural amino acids. In the lab, chemists can also synthesise thousands of artificial amino acids, many of which have completely new properties. For example, if an amino acid called p-azido-L-phenylalanine can be built into a protein, it would allow scientists to attach drugs to the protein at a precise spot, helping it treat some disease.

The challenge however has been to get cells' protein-making machines to use these artificial amino acids.

Idea and bottleneck

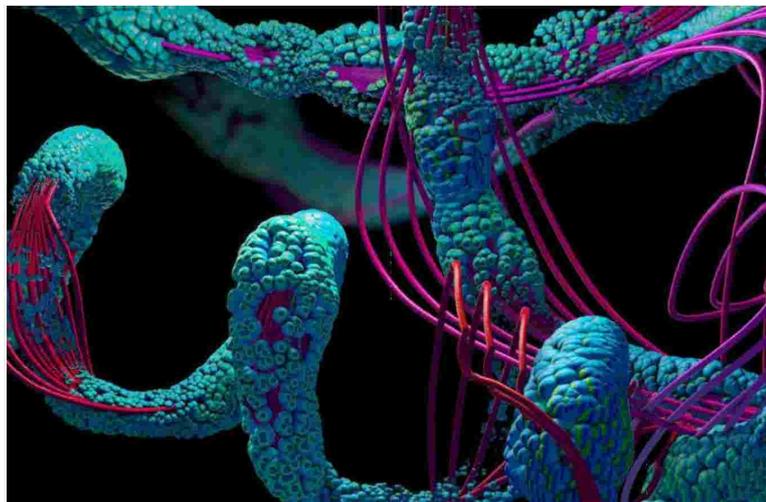
In the 1980s, Peter Schultz and his colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, laid the foundations of incorporating artificial amino acids into proteins at specific sites. Over the years, scientists have expanded this toolkit to incorporate artificial amino acids in proteins that cells make.

Yet one problem has persisted: the struggle to get enough artificial amino acids into the cell. Most lab-made amino acids struggle to cross the cell membrane and enter the cytoplasm, where the ribosomes synthesise proteins. This is because the side chains on artificial amino acids are very water-loving whereas the core of the cell-membrane is water-repelling.

To solve this problem, scientists have used one of three approaches in the past: (i) adding large concentrations of artificial amino acids in the medium so they passively cross the cell membrane; (ii) engineering membrane-binding proteins to smuggle small peptides (short chains of amino acids) across the cell membrane and break them down to amino acids once inside the cell; or (iii) engineering metabolic pathways within the cells to produce artificial amino acids inside the cells.

These methods showed some progress but they were still specific to certain amino acids. They couldn't be generalised.

In the new study, the researchers pinned down the exact molecule ferrying the peptides into the cell. In the absence of the transporter – the main bacterial system that normally imports small protein fragments as food – the cells



An illustration of a chain of amino acids. All proteins are made of some combination of the 20 natural amino acids. In the lab, chemists can also synthesise thousands of artificial amino acids, many of which have completely new properties. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

almost completely lost the ability to use the artificial amino acids bound to the peptides. That was a sign this specific molecule was the smuggler. Once the peptides were inside, the cell's own protein-cutting enzymes unpacked them.

The researchers were able to confirm this: when they removed the enzymes that normally cut peptides into individual amino acids, the cell's protein production dropped. Taken together, the transporter brought the cargo in, then ordinary enzymes freed the artificial amino acid so the cell's ribosome could use it.

Across the membrane

Kathrin Lang and her colleagues at ETH Zurich started from the same idea: by attaching the artificial amino acid to a short peptide. But this group pushed the idea further in the bacteria *Escherichia coli*.

Laasya Samhita, assistant professor of biology at Ashoka University in Sonapat, explained that the group engineered an ABC transporter, a specific membrane protein that imports other proteins into the cell, using directed evolution to take up peptides carrying artificial amino acids.

The ABC transporter normally transports tripeptides (i.e. three amino acids) and tetrapeptides (four amino acids) into the cell as sources of nutrients. Dr. Lang and co. designed tripeptides and tetrapeptides in which they hid an artificial amino acid between two natural

The recent study has also shown that the approach could deliver two different artificial amino acids, allowing a single protein to carry two engineered features at different positions

amino acids, thus causing the transporter to smuggle artificial amino acids into the cell. Once inside, the myriad peptide-cleaving enzymes inside the cell chopped them into individual amino acids, making artificial amino acids available for cells to make new proteins.

Unlike previous reports, this study engineered the transporter to alter a protein located in the space between the inner and the outer membranes of the bacterial cell. The researchers first identified residues that clamped onto the cargo. Then they prepared mutants of the transporter that would take up 10x more amounts of unmodified amino acids than an unmodified counterpart. This is double the efficiency in the uptake of artificial amino acids when compared to previous studies.

Easier to use

The findings matter because in many standard lab broths, there are already lots of natural peptides floating around, and they all compete for the same transporter, reducing how much of the cargo is smuggled inside the cell. So the

researchers evolved the transporter step by step to make sure it worked even in these crowded conditions, repeatedly selecting bacterial cells that imported the artificial amino acids' peptides best. Then they built the improved version into the bacteria's genomes. The resulting system, they reported, was easier to use to produce proteins in a routine way instead of having to carefully control the media (the broths) first.

As Maximilian Fottner, Senior Scientist in Lang's group and a lead author of the study, said in a press note, the study makes it "possible to produce designer proteins containing unnatural amino acids just as efficiently as their natural counterparts". These could be genuinely multifunctional proteins, such as an antibody that carries a drug at one engineered position.

The team also showed that its approach could deliver two different artificial amino acids, allowing a single protein to carry two engineered features at different positions.

Dr. Lang and colleagues are working on designing a similar system in human cells to produce artificial human-like proteins that could be suited for several therapeutic applications. The idea could extend to import molecules other than amino acids to produce complex chemical compounds, she added.

(Joel P. Joseph is a freelance science journalist and researcher. joelpjoseph2009@gmail.com)

THE GIST

▼ In the 1980s, Peter Schultz and his colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, laid the foundations of incorporating artificial amino acids into proteins at specific sites

▼ Over the years, scientists have expanded this toolkit to incorporate artificial amino acids in proteins that cells make

▼ Yet one problem has persisted: the struggle to get enough artificial amino acids into the cell

▼ The recent findings matter because in many standard lab broths, there are already lots of natural peptides floating around, and they all compete for the same transporter, reducing how much of the cargo is smuggled inside the cell

BIG SHOT



Slippery slope: An aerial photograph shows waves breaking on the shoreline at the bottom of a cliff damaged by winter storms triggering the fall of pine trees along the Atlantic Ocean in Soulac-sur-Mer, south-western France on March 4. Coastal erosion in the region has also triggered the retreat of the coastline by several meters. AFP

WHAT IS IT?

Asteroid YR4: no longer a threat

Vasudevan Mukunth

NASA has officially ruled out the possibility of asteroid 2024 YR4 colliding with the moon in 2032. This update settles concerns that first surfaced after the asteroid's discovery in late 2024. For several months, orbital models suggested a small but notable 3.8% to 4.3% chance that the rock would strike the lunar surface on December 22, 2032.

To resolve the uncertainty, experts from NASA's Centre for Near-Earth Object Studies used the James Webb Space Telescope to track the object. In February, the team made two important observations while the asteroid was extremely faint, a feat impossible for most other observatories. These new data points have reportedly allowed the scientists to refine the asteroid's trajectory with higher precision. The latest calculations show that 2024 YR4 will safely bypass the moon at a distance of around 21,200 km. This follows an earlier update regarding the earth: while data in early 2025 indicated a potential threat to our planet, subsequent analysis ruled out a terrestrial impact for the next century at least. Astronomers have said that these shifts in probability are a standard part of



An artist's impression of an asteroid that orbits closer to the sun than the earth's orbit, showing its dark side. NOIRLAB/J. DA SILVA

planetary defence. When scientists first discover a near-earth object, they must calculate its path using limited information, which often results in a wide range of possible outcomes. As they collect more data over time, they narrow those possibilities down. In the case of the 65-meter-wide 2024 YR4, the newest evidence confirms it is no longer a threat to the earth or its moon.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

Safety Net

Digital world should be safe for children to inhabit

The policy landscape around children's digital safety is finally getting due attention, with Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka exploring time-bound regulations to restrict social media access for minors. While their proactive stance is a welcome catalyst, fragmented state-level rules are unlikely to succeed in a digital ecosystem that operates across borders. For these efforts to be effective, they must serve as a blueprint for a coordinated national framework led by the Centre.



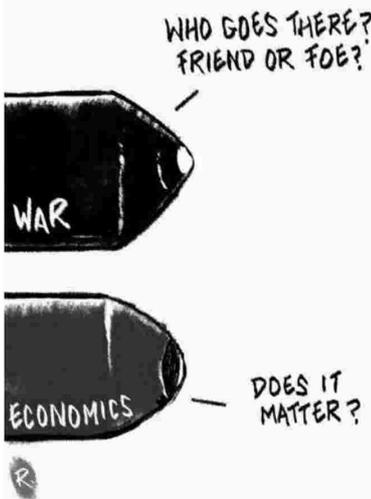
Social media has become deeply embedded in adolescents' lives, yet the platforms they inhabit are not neutral spaces. Features such as autoplay, endless scrolling, and algorithm-driven feeds are carefully engineered to maximise engagement by exploiting the psychological vulnerabilities of young users. For children whose self-regulation abilities are still developing, these tools frequently lead to compulsive usage and digital addiction. While researchers continue to debate the exact causal relationship between social media and deteriorating mental health, the cumulative evidence warrants precautionary regulation. The technology industry has had over a decade to address these concerns voluntarily, yet its response has been slow and largely cosmetic. Platforms continue to prioritise engagement metrics because they directly drive advertising revenue, at the expense of mitigating risks for their youngest users.

Economic Survey FY26 has pointed to a more sophisticated approach — of shifting the focus from simply restricting access to redesigning the architecture of the platforms. A robust regulatory framework should require mandatory teen-safe design features that disable addictive tools like autoplay by default. Verified youth modes with stronger privacy settings and tighter messaging controls should become the industry standard. Furthermore, platforms must face clearer liability obligations supported by transparency requirements that allow regulators to examine how algorithms operate. Regulation should not only determine who is allowed to enter social media platforms but also shape how these platforms are built. Without such structural changes, the enforcement of age-based bans alone may prove difficult. Critics rightly argue that strict prohibitions might push young users toward unregulated digital spaces or encourage them to circumvent the rules through technical loopholes. This risk is real, as social media has become an integral part of modern social life, and behavioural change will not happen overnight.

Australia's recent move to legislate a ban for children under 16 will provide an important case study for policymakers worldwide. Its implementation will add to a growing body of evidence regarding how social media shapes young minds. For India, the initiatives in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh should serve as the starting point for a national conversation. The goal is not to shut children out of the digital world, but to ensure that the world they inhabit is built with their safety in mind.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



PRITAM BANERJEE

India has been chipping away at the impediments to the trade process. But the trade process remains complex, and a single transaction can spawn more than 20 documents, digital or otherwise, passing through an army of intermediaries. But recent policy developments can potentially deliver a systemic overhaul. Building on the Modi government's earlier reforms on trade facilitation, the Digital Trade Facilitation Bill, 2026 can develop an integrated trade ecosystem that will allow seamless movement of trade consignment between factories or warehouses to and from the port wharf with no physical intrusion and minimum human interface.

The Digital Trade Facilitation Bill, 2026 grants legal equivalence to digital trade records. Crucially, it extends recognition to documents of title and negotiable instruments, equating digital control with physical possession. By ensuring that electronic documents carry the same legal weight as paper documents, the Bill facilitates real-time transfers of rights and obligations.

Furthermore, by establishing full evidentiary validity in judicial proceedings, it dismantles archaic paper requirements.

But true transformation will occur when this modern legal framework enabling seamless, paperless compliance converges with the full suite of facilitation measures under the National Trade Facilitation Action Plans (NTFAP).

Customs TURANT Facelless Assessment first introduced in 2020 facilitates anonymised, remote appraisal of import declarations by specialised officer clusters irrespective of port of operations.

The TURANT framework now encompasses the full export-import spectrum, notably through the 2026 introduction of Auto Let Export Orders (Auto LEO) ensuring a truly port-agnostic and contactless experience for all Indian traders. This will potentially dismantle the old, localised bottlenecks. But the next phase is even more ambitious.

A pilot programme in Nhava Sheva has automated factory-stuffed container registration by using high-frequency readers to verify e-seals and update customs systems directly, eliminating all manual data entry.

Once adopted across all Indian ports handling containers, this will eliminate several hours from the trade logistics



Paradigm shift in trade facilitation

EASE OF TRADE. Digital initiatives to free exports and imports from manual inspection will benefit thousands of entities

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

process and address congestion at port gates and approach roads.

BUDGET MEASURES
This Budget's 'Scan Every Container' initiative aims to eliminate manual container inspections, which currently often trigger significant delays and result in cargo damage. The objective is to deploy AI-driven scanners capable of real-time X-ray analysis to identify anomalies with a high degree of precision that surpasses human capacity.

The Customs Integrated System (CIS) will function as the foundational digital architecture underpinning this facilitation framework. The CIS is being designed as a single, scalable platform to integrate X-ray images, E-seal logs, and digital document trails into a single dashboard for risk-based clearance. If the system knows the document is authentic (via the 2026 Bill), the E-seal is intact (via automated logs), and the AI-driven scan is clear, then cargo can move across India's borders without a

The Budget's 'Scan Every Container' initiative aims to eliminate manual container inspections, which currently often trigger significant delays and result in cargo damage

human ever needing to break the container's seal.

Historically, benefits like Direct Port Delivery (DPD) and Direct Port Entry (DPE), that allow cargo to move directly between the factory and the ship was extended to large firms that typically qualified as higher order (tier 2 or tier 3) Authorized Economic Operators (AEO).

The expansion of the AEO programme benefits, specifically the creation of a broader 'Eligible Manufacturer' category in this year's Budget, is changing this. By lowering the threshold for trust, the government is effectively extending the 'port gate to the factory door' facilitation to thousands of more entities.

The expanded AEO benefits, the 2026 Customs reforms and the Digital Trade Facilitation Bill will empower manufacturer-exporters through factory self-sealing and e-seal auto-registration. As containers enter the port, automated sensors will read the e-seals, matching them against digital shipping bills for instant 'auto-gating' to the vessel stack.

For imports, TURANT will fast-track assessments, while AI-driven scans and Direct Port Delivery (DPD) protocols will accelerate handover. Furthermore, deferred duty payment facility for Tier 2/Tier 3 AEOs allow shipments to clear without payment delays, drastically reducing storage costs and demurrage.

Crucially, the 2026 Bill is designed with Technology Neutrality and Cross-border Recognition at its core.

By allowing for the recognition of foreign digital frameworks it enables India systems to "talk" to global ones. In addition, through mutual recognition, India's AEO programme is ensuring that India's trusted firms get green-channel treatment in major export markets.

EXPANDING THE SCOPE
While creating the 'Eligible Manufacturer' category is a positive first step, the government should expand the AEO programme to include a wider base of firms. The government must look at extending automatic AEO Tier 1 status to all GST-registered manufacturers who have paid a combined ₹5 crore in indirect taxes (Customs/GST) on average over the previous three years, provided they have no pending prosecutions or arrests under relevant fiscal acts.

This would bring over 90 per cent of trade-active manufacturing units into the AEO ambit. The CBICs should also pilot deferred duty schemes for Tier 1 AEOs, with a view towards eventual universal implementation across the AEO programme.

True reform moves beyond 'scanning every container' toward intelligence-led, risk-based interventions. To achieve this, Customs requires a robust Risk Management System (RMS) capable of multi-criteria assessment.

The writer is Head, Centre for WTO Studies, IIFT, Views are personal

India braces for fuel crunch as war roils oil markets

Russian crude offers a short lifeline, but LPG and LNG shortages threaten restaurants and households across India

THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARANJAY BALAKRISHNAN

What's the one crucial figure to watch as missiles and drones fly across the Gulf? The answer may lie far from the battlefield: the rising price of petrol at US pumps.

When the war began, petrol was selling for \$3 a gallon. It has since climbed to \$3.40. That jump may not sound dramatic, but alarm bells are clanging in the Oval Office and at Mar-a-Lago, because rising fuel prices signal that public patience with an already unpopular war could evaporate quickly.

Is Donald Trump ready to call out the buglers and sound the retreat? Quite possibly. The petrol price jump and mounting economic toll may have spooked him. International markets increasingly are betting he may soon call it a day. Yet the larger question is what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will do next. "We're breaking their bones, and we're not done yet," Netanyahu says. His mission is to wipe out Iran or shatter it into a patchwork of squabbling factions too busy with their own shootouts and bombings to threaten Israel, which would then be master of all it surveys.

For the moment, the global mood can best be gauged by the Brent crude index,

the benchmark for global oil prices. Trading has been dizzying, with prices swinging wildly and touching \$120 a barrel on Monday after starting 2026 at \$60.

Amid reports that G7 nations were considering opening their strategic petroleum reserves, prices began sliding.

MARKETS CALMING DOWN
Markets calmed further after Trump declared the war is "very much complete", while warning of "worse strikes" if oil is not allowed to transit the crucial Strait of Hormuz. Iran, meanwhile, vows it will not allow "one litre of oil" to pass through Hormuz and is rejecting talk of a ceasefire. By Tuesday, crude had slipped back to about \$88 a barrel.

Giving the market an extra boost was confirmation that Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed easing overall sanctions on Russian oil to help relieve global shortages during a Monday call.

India, which imports 85 per cent of its oil and gas needs, will be in a tricky position if the war drags on. Strategic reserves hold enough crude for roughly 26 days.

Trump has handed New Delhi a small lifeline by greenlighting purchases of Russian crude until the first week of April without reimposing punitive tariffs. Indian refiners have since bought 30 million barrels, and trade intelligence firm Kpler estimates 130 million barrels



GAS SUPPLIES. Feeling the pinch

of Russian crude are moving across the world's seas.

India, though, will not be the only buyer. China and other major importers are likely to compete fiercely for those cargoes, and unlike the heavily discounted Russian barrels that have flowed into India since the Ukraine war began, these shipments will not come cheap.

GAS TROUBLE

Yet, the greater crisis is swirling around LPG and LNG, the fuels that power everything from household cooking cylinders to factories.

Several Indian companies, including Petronet, Gujarat Gas and GAIL, have invoked *force majeure* clauses to cope with supply disruptions. More importantly, QatarEnergy, which produces about 20 per cent of the

world's LNG, has also declared *force majeure* after an Iranian drone attack, warning it could take weeks to fully restart LNG production.

The consequences are already appearing on the ground. LPG shortages have forced some restaurants to shut temporarily or cut back on diners because they cannot secure enough cooking gas.

Even if the fighting ends within days, supply disruptions may linger.

Saudi Arabia's oil giant Aramco also suffered a blow when a drone strike forced it to shut operations at its Ras Tanura refinery. It expects to restore 70 per cent of supplies within days but warns of "catastrophic" global economic consequences if hostilities do not cease soon.

Perhaps Netanyahu, his Mossad agents and Trump might have benefited from a closer reading of Persian history. The Persians have been a formidable civilisation for millennia, as ancient as the Romans and Greeks.

Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid Empire around 550BC, building a vast realm stretching from India to Egypt.

In 480BC a smaller Greek fleet outwitted the Persian armada at the Battle of Salamis. Had the Greeks not triumphed, the course of European history might have been very different.

Now, more than 2,000 years later, another dramatic chapter in the Middle East's long and tangled history is being written.

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.

Oil jitters

Apropos the Editorial 'Ideas of March' (March 10), rise in crude oil prices is sending jitters to the global economy. Israel's bombing of Iran's oil wells worsened the situation destroying the structures and supply lines.

The closing of the Hormuz Strait is aggravating the situation. Retail prices of LPG for domestic and commercial consumers have gone up since last week. Curtailing the supply of natural gas to industrial consumers would have serious impacts on the economy.

Panic booking for refills by domestic consumers forced the oil companies to implement a three-week waiting time. Many hotels in Bengaluru and in TN have announced shutting down their outlets for two days in a week to tide over the situation. A small cut in excise duty on fuels would help in keeping the market price of fuel under control.

RV Baskaran
Pune

Farmers' woes

With reference to the article 'Focus area of farm reforms' (March 10),

despite numerous agricultural reforms, farmers, particularly small, marginal, and landless cultivators, are still in debt. Measures must be taken to step up farm productivity and also mitigate the impact of climate change. Farmers must be encouraged to cultivate soil-friendly and water-efficient crops. Consumers must be nudged to shift their food preference to pulses, nutritious millets and vegetables.

Chocconut oil preference

Apropos 'Centre mulls coconut oil...benefit farmers' (March

8), This does not look like a prudent idea for the main reason that coconut oil use is limited to few geographical areas.

Secondly, with rampant misuse of items distributed through ration shops, like rice, dal etc., coconut oil may face the same fate. Government must tighten norms so that PDS scheme is used only by the needy as rice meant for Anna Bhagya is seen sold in truck loads to bulk consumers. There are better ways to help coconut growers.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village, (Karnataka)

Canada calling

Tie-ups spanning energy and education hold promise

Jyoti Vij

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to India came at a time when global trade and geopolitics are being reshaped by strategic competition, supply chain realignments and energy transitions. In that context, the visit was not merely a diplomatic engagement but an attempt to reposition India-Canada ties for a more uncertain and multipolar economic landscape.



CANADIAN PM. Mark Carney has attempted to reposition ties

The visit produced a wide range of agreements across trade, energy, technology and education. Yet the real significance of these outcomes lies not in the number of memoranda signed but in the structural direction they signal for the bilateral relationship.

The most consequential step was the signing of the Terms of Reference (TOR) for the India-Canada Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). While trade negotiations between the two countries have been discussed for over a decade, the renewed push suggests a recognition on both sides that economic engagement needs a stronger institutional framework.

MODEST TRADE FIGURES

Bilateral trade currently stands at \$8.66 billion in 2024-25, a modest figure relative to the size of the two economies. The target of \$50 billion by 2030 therefore represents more than numerical ambition — it reflects the possibility of integrating supply chains between a major advanced economy rich in natural resources and a rapidly growing industrial economy seeking inputs for manufacturing and energy transition.

For India, a trade agreement with Canada could improve access to resources critical to industrial growth, including energy and minerals. For Canada, deeper economic engagement with India offers diversification away from over-dependence on a few traditional markets. In an era where countries are actively seeking trusted economic partners, CEPA has the potential to transform a relationship that has historically underperformed relative to its potential.

Energy cooperation illustrates this shift particularly well. The long-term uranium supply agreement between India's Department of Atomic Energy and Cameco, one of the world's largest uranium producers, is strategically significant. India has

set a target of achieving 100 GW of nuclear power capacity by 2047, and securing stable uranium supplies will be essential for that expansion. For Canada, one of the world's leading uranium exporters, the partnership provides a reliable long-term market. Equally important is the MoU on critical minerals cooperation, which reflects the growing centrality of minerals such as lithium, cobalt and rare earths to the global clean-energy economy. These materials underpin electric vehicles, battery storage and renewable technologies. By exploring cooperation in exploration, mining and processing, the two countries are positioning themselves within the emerging global race to secure critical mineral supply chains.

Talent mobility and education agreements are another pillar with long-term implications. The partnership between the All India Council for Technical Education and Mitacs to facilitate research internships for Indian students could strengthen academic collaboration and innovation ecosystems in both countries.

Agriculture cooperation also featured prominently, particularly through the proposal to establish a Pulse Protein Centre of Excellence at NIFTEM Kundli. Given that Canada is one of the world's largest producers of pulses and India is its largest consumer, this initiative could move the relationship beyond commodity trade towards food innovation, processing technologies and nutrition-focused research.

The decision to establish an India-Canada Defence Dialogue signals a recognition that economic and technological partnerships increasingly intersect with strategic considerations.

Taken together, the outcomes of the visit suggest a multi-dimensional strategic economic engagement.

The writer is Director General, FICCI



RAVI VARANASI

The Reserve Bank of India's proposal to allow banks to lend directly to Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) is a welcome and potentially transformative reform. It signals regulatory confidence in India's evolving real estate capital markets and recognises the growing importance of REITs as institutional financing vehicles.

However, the long-term success of this reform will depend less on the decision itself but more on how the lending framework is designed and supervised. Done well, this reform can accelerate capital formation and improve real estate governance. Done poorly, it risks recreating legacy real estate credit vulnerabilities that India has spent years trying to correct.

The opportunity is significant. So is the responsibility.

India's REIT ecosystem continues to lag global benchmarks in depth and scale. This gap persists despite significant expansion in modern logistics infrastructure, commercial office space and organised retail assets, sectors that typically anchor institutional real estate ownership worldwide.

One of the biggest structural constraints has been funding concentration.

Indian REITs have relied predominantly on capital market borrowing through equity issuance and listed debt. While this provides transparency and market discipline, it also introduces cyclicity. Fundraising windows depend heavily on market sentiment and interest rate cycles. Allowing bank lending introduces financing diversification. It provides REITs with stable credit channels, improves acquisition flexibility and lowers cost of capital.

Most importantly, it strengthens the asset recycling mechanism that allows developers to monetise stabilised assets and redeploy capital into new infrastructure creation.

From a macro perspective, this aligns well with India's urbanisation and infrastructure growth trajectory.

Historically, India's banking sector has faced stress primarily from lending



Bank credit may unlock REIT growth

THRUST AREA. Policy design must ensure bank lending to REITs is treated as an income-yield credit product rather than project finance

to real estate development projects rather than stabilised income-generating assets. REITs, by design, are fundamentally different from developers. They hold completed assets with rental cash flows, tenant diversification and disclosure standards. However, if lending frameworks fail to recognise these structural differences, banks may either overestimate or underestimate sector risks.

Policy design must therefore focus on ensuring that bank lending to REITs is treated as an income-yield credit product rather than project finance.

FIVE POLICY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Cash flow-based lending frameworks must be mandatory. Traditional real estate lending in India has been asset or collateral driven. REIT lending must instead prioritise cash flow underwriting. Banks should be required to evaluate: lease tenor stability; tenant concentration exposure; occupancy track records; rental escalation visibility; and weighted average lease maturity profiles.

Globally, REIT credit evaluation is

Allowing bank lending provides REITs with stable credit channels, improves acquisition flexibility and lowers cost of capital

driven by rental yield resilience rather than asset valuation alone. Adopting similar frameworks will reduce credit cyclicity.

Conservative leverage guardrails should be preserved: India's REIT regulations already prescribe leverage limits. Bank lending guidelines should align closely with these caps rather than creating parallel leverage build-up through layered debt structures. Prudential norms could consider: loan-to-value ceilings linked to stabilised asset valuations; debt service coverage ratio thresholds; and restrictions on refinancing that extends beyond underlying lease visibility

This would prevent excessive financial engineering while preserving capital discipline.

Exposure diversification norms for banks are essential: REIT assets are geographically and sectorally concentrated by nature. Bank exposure guidelines must therefore ensure diversification across: multiple REIT sponsors; different asset classes such as office, logistics and retail; and regional concentration risks

Concentration risk has historically amplified banking sector stress in real estate cycles. Preventing such clustering will be critical.

Encourage specialised real estate credit expertise within banks: One under-discussed challenge is the limited institutional experience Indian banks have in underwriting rental yield-based

real estate financing at scale. The RBI could consider encouraging: dedicated real estate credit verticals within banks; sector-specific risk modelling frameworks; and data-driven performance monitoring of REIT assets

Over time, this would help create specialised credit capability comparable to global real estate lending markets.

Align lending incentives with long-term stability: REIT lending should ideally favour stabilised assets rather than aggressive acquisition-driven leverage expansion. Policy incentives could encourage lending structures tied to operational asset performance rather than speculative growth.

This would reinforce the core purpose of REITs as yield vehicles rather than leveraged asset accumulation platforms.

THE WAY FORWARD

The RBI's move deserves strong support. It reflects regulatory pragmatism and confidence in India's maturing financial architecture.

The next phase must focus on designing a robust, forward-looking prudential framework that recognises the unique risk profile of REIT financing. Policymakers, banks and market participants should treat this reform as an opportunity to build a globally competitive real estate financing ecosystem rather than merely expanding credit availability.

The writer is Founding Partner, SPVR Consultants

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 11, 2006

Roll out CAS in metros: HC

Viewers in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata may soon have to buy set-top boxes (STBs) to watch their favourite family soaps sporting events on various pay channels. In a move that would pave the way for STBs in the three cities, the Delhi High Court on Friday directed the Centre to implement conditional access system (CAS) within four weeks.

Telekom Malaysia buys 49 pc in Spice for \$179 m

Telekom Malaysia (TM) has picked up a 49 per cent stake in Spice Communications Private Ltd for \$178.85 million. The deal will close in a month. The company has pipped rival Maxis Communications in clinching the deal. Spice operates in two circles, Punjab and Karnataka, with a total subscriber base of over 1.8 million.

Bajaj unveils investment plan

Bajaj Auto Ltd will spend ₹1,500 crore over the next three years for a range of projects, including enhancement of manufacturing capacity from the current 3.5 million vehicles per annum to 5.1 million. Financing would be from the company's own funds. Products for roll-out include a light cargo four-wheeler.

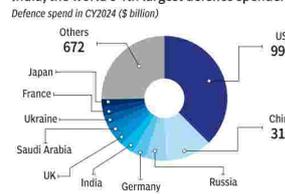
STATISTALK.

Compiled by Dhuarvel Gunasekaran | Graphics KS Gunasekar

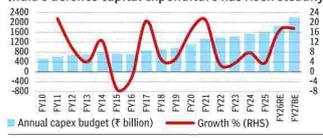
India's defence shift: Rising capex, falling imports

India stands today as the world's fourth-largest defence spender, according to an HSBC Securities report. The FY21 Union Budget allocated \$85 billion for defence, up 15% yoy, representing 15% of the Union Budget. India's defence capex has risen steadily in recent years, reflecting a policy shift towards military modernisation. Higher allocations signal sustained investment in aircraft, ships, drones and advanced technologies. Defence exports have expanded sharply over the past decade, rising more than thirty-four-fold since FY14. This growth reflects policy support, a broader product portfolio and increasing participation of private defence manufacturers. Meanwhile, India's defence imports declined 9.3% during 2020-24 compared with the previous five years, as import bans and domestic procurement mandates redirect billions towards local manufacturers

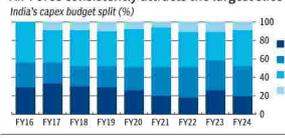
India, the world's 4th largest defence spender



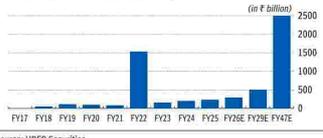
India's defence capital expenditure has risen steadily



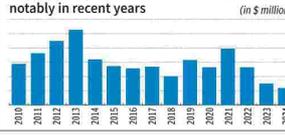
Air Force consistently attracts the largest slice



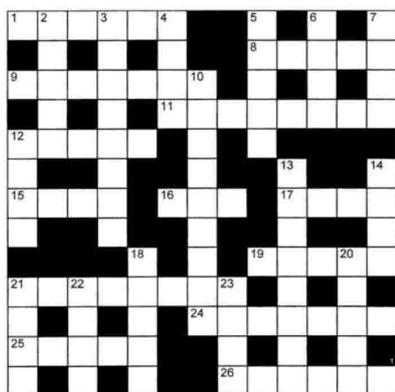
India's defence exports surged 34-fold in a decade



India pushing for self-reliance as imports decline notably in recent years



BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2634



EASY

- ACROSS**
- Junkie (6)
 - Paragon, finest example (5)
 - One believed to have committed crime (7)
 - Drift, inclination (8)
 - Awn (5)
 - Molten volcanic stream (4)
 - Use cars (3)
 - Wheel-pin (4)
 - Opium flower (5)
 - Flag, military symbol (8)
 - Felt earnest desire (7)
 - Guns of ship-of-war (5)
 - Food storage room (6)
- DOWN**
- Two in cards (5)
 - Tuft of hair on lower lip (8)
 - Adroitness in managing (4)
 - Black playing-card (5)
 - Grain store (4)
 - Be at sport (4)
 - Stop-gap (9)
 - Concave battle-axe (4)
 - Manual worker needing little skill (8)
 - Former paper size, roughly A2 (4)
 - In a curious way (5)
 - Part, portion (5)
 - Not different (4)
 - Legislative enactments (4)
 - Transact business (4)

NOT SO EASY

- ACROSS**
- In part of play, did get confused as to the one hooked (6)
 - Nacreous concretion right inside ring (5)
 - He is, one may think, the perpetrator (7)
 - Inclination to finish in letting agreement after an absence (8)
 - 5 Down may confront one face to face (5)
 - Etna's spillage will half-land on Virginia (4)
 - An argument as to how one will look to pull a boat (3)
 - Pin of beer taken around ten (4)
 - Form of music party first and last given, California variety (5)
 - Sort of rose to be the norm (8)
 - Was aching at end of day for it to be gained by Labour (7)
 - Surface of road - motorway - has let a change come about (5)
 - For storage of menu, it left desktop in the rear perhaps (6)
- DOWN**
- At cards, two could have been forty all (5)
 - Size of old paper - Mail - ripe for development (8)
 - Clever handling of situation by Tom returning on time (4)
 - One of a suit used in digs (5)
 - Advocates collectively go north for this sort of dance (4)
 - Drama on words provided by punster (4)
 - PM, a Tory, re-assembled it but it wasn't to last (9)
 - What one may be called on to pay the beak (4)
 - Workman joins the Socialist party with hesitation (8)
 - Size of old paper copy media held up (4)
 - Do up in a nonchalant way when one left in a curious manner (5)
 - Part and parcel being all of such as in chess (5)
 - Identical to the missile that faced the East (4)
 - Parts of 7 are in the Bible (4)
 - To be a hander-out of wood (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2633

ACROSS 7. Paraphernalia 8. Malfeasance 12. Lilies 14. Seraph 16. Varies 18. Marine 19. Eye for an eye 23. Disinterested

DOWN 1. Balm 2. Wall 3. Sheets 4. Crusts 5. Main 6. Wise 9. Allergy 10. Charity 11. Shoe 12. Live 13. Ere 15. Era 17. Shorts 18. Measure 19. Evil 20. Epic 21. Ease 22. Ever

OPINION

{ OUR TAKE }

Oil crisis looms as war drags on

Supply-shock-driven shutdown in the Indian economy has started. Things are likely to get worse before they improve

If a country of 1.5 billion people, which is also the world's fourth-largest economy, depends on imports for 80% of its energy supplies, it is bound to suffer when a global oil supply shock hits. The latest oil shock due to the ongoing war in West Asia is not the first in the history of modern capitalism, but it is the worst as far as Asian countries are concerned. This is because it is the first time that no oil or gas is moving through the critical chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz, which supplies an overwhelming share of crude oil, gas, and other critical inputs such as fertilisers to Asia, including India.

This also means that the current oil shock is not just a terms of trade question for the Indian economy, for which economists have an almost pre-ordained calculus — every \$10 rise in crude oil prices shaving off 0.25 basis points from GDP growth or adding 50 basis points to inflation and trade deficit or some such. One basis point is one-hundredth of a percentage point. If the war does not end soon, India might face a situation where critical economic inputs — starting with gas, then other crude oil distillates such as petrol, diesel, and ATF, and eventually, fertilisers — will simply not be available in the quantities required for normal production.

The longer the war lasts, the more difficult things will become. Given the damage to oil and gas-producing infrastructure in the region, the status quo ante, as far as normal production and supplies are concerned, will come with a significant time lag even after a ceasefire. The supply-shock-driven shutdown in the Indian economy seems to have already started in sectors such as industry and hotels/restaurants. Things are going to get much worse before they get better.

What should the government do? Rationing is, almost always, a zero-sum game. It is difficult to find fault with the priorities listed by the government in its new supply protocol for gas supplies. What should not be ignored, however, is the quick change in the government's narrative which went from there-is-no-reason-to-worry-about-supplies to invoking the most draconian rationing law in a matter of days. Clearly, strategic stocks were not as adequate as they were made out to be. This is unbecoming of a large country that aspires to become a global power and be treated as such.

A road journey to retain a party legacy

Bihar chief minister (CM) Nitish Kumar has set out on the final leg of the Samridhi Yatra in what seems to be a bid to introduce his son and heir, Nishant Kumar, to the electorate.

The JD(U) seems to believe that the only glue that can hold together the party is Kumar, who has run the state for much of the past two decades. His appeal is primarily his record in office — the claim he has restored the rule of law and policy initiatives that helped win the trust of women voters — and the party now wants to send out the message that the son can be trusted with his father's legacy of clean politics. This is problematic — while political dynasties are dime a dozen, and span parties, not all have been successful in electoral politics.

The JD(U)'s predicament is that it failed to grow beyond Kumar's persona despite holding office in Patna for a quarter century. Kumar is partly to blame — hyper-sensitive to potential competition, he did not encourage a second-run leadership. Nor did he build a grassroots organisation. The party's social justice inheritance has been reduced to smart electoral arithmetic, focused on the extremely backward castes and the non-Yadav OBCs. This social coalition was stitched around patronage and the political persona of Kumar. Over the last two elections, the JD(U)'s partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has become the political pole in Bihar, and the communities that once backed Kumar could shift their loyalty to it. In office — it is believed that the next CM will be from the BJP — the party could also make a claim to the development narrative owned solely by Kumar until now. As he begins his political journey, Nishant Kumar faces the enviable task of protecting his father's political capital even as he seeks to build his own.

The story of India's new GDP series tells us

India is growing at a stable 7%-plus level. Higher growth will come from private investment stepping up

Data nerds can spend all their time just looking at numbers and crafting stories that emerge out of the rows and columns. India's new gross domestic product (GDP) numbers were released on February 27. These numbers are based on many changes under the bonnet, making them far more significant than the regular quarterly GDP data print. The headline numbers have all been chewed over, but the underlying story of the Indian economy that this data tells has perhaps been missed.

The story, in short, is this: India is growing at a stable 7%-plus a year. This growth is led by manufacturing and services on the production side. Fueling this growth, on the expenditure side, are savings by households and government capital expenditure. India's growth is still driven by household consumption, but that is showing signs of sluggishness. Investment by private firms is lagging and needs to step up to get all the wheels turning together. Wage levels will go up as firms begin to invest more in business. That will raise household consumption and complete the circle of growth — this work ahead to achieve a sustained high level of growth.

Quarterly GDP numbers are announced four times a year, but this round of the third quarter for financial year 2025-26 is special because the base year has changed from 2011-12 to 2022-23. This is the ninth time that India has changed its base year — doing so is basic hygiene for reporting data the world over. Countries periodically update their base year to take into account structural changes in a country's economy. For example, quick delivery was not a thing 10 years ago and now it drives so much of household spending. Base year change also updates old data sources and incorporates new data sources.

This round of GDP data uses surveys such as the Survey of Mining and Allied Enterprises, Periodic Labour Force Survey, the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey — many of them are changes in the manner of data collection. To supplement the data from surveys, it also uses data from actual economic activity on the ground. For example, the GST estimates now capture GST data exhaustively. The Public Finance Management System (PFMS) to capture government expenditure, and other new sources such as e-Vahan, and rail and air transport data. While some of these old sources, changes have been made to even these data sources to make them reflect the current reality better.

One of the big changes in the double count of GDP is the inclusion of deflation in manufacturing. Double

deflation was used only in agriculture and not in other sectors. Put simply, if we are trying to see the real growth of a sector, we need to remove the impact of inflation. India used to only look at the final product price and deflate that. It did not deflate the price of inputs. For example, a cell phone price might have gone up by 10%, but the chip price inside the phone might have gone up 25%. The new methodology will use as many as 600 deflators, up from 180 deflators in the earlier series, giving a truer picture of real growth.

What is the impact of these changes? First, there has always been a data mismatch between the production side and expenditure side data, but with this new series, this difference will be eliminated, not just reduced — at least this is the contention of the government.

Second, this will give a better reflection of the true story of Indian growth. It is a good story, of course, but there is work to be done. The most significant work ahead is restarting the private investment cycle, not just in a few sectors but across the board. Domestic consumption needs to grow; it lagged GDP growth post Covid and the recovery needs to have deeper and wider roots. The only way this will happen is when households have more disposable income. Tax breaks have been given, now it is up to the animal spirits of the private sector to run with them. Can we trust this data? Every TV



Monika Halan



India's growth is still driven by household consumption, but that is showing signs of sluggishness.

debate disintegrates into a fight over the truth of this data. We need to distinguish between deliberate manipulation and the rules around data collection and calculation being less than optimal. To manipulate data across all the surveys will be an impossible task. To manipulate data exhausts from actual, on-ground data such as GST and e-Vahan is simply not possible.

The naysayers who mulishly refuse to believe this data and prefer to rest their arguments on anecdotes need to either come up with another data set that they can defend or let go of the illiterate my-ancient-is-better-than-your-ancient style of debating. The issues around sub-optimal methodologies and rules around data collection have been debated and corrected through a committee process that has gone on for years. Genuine critics must spend time looking at the work under the

bonnet before dismissing the entire exercise as a whitewash.

What does this mean for the individual non-nerd consumer of this debate? The Indian economy is growing at a stable, but not spectacular, rate. GDP growth is important to us in our everyday lives because it translates into higher wages and higher rates of return on our investments.

And the fact that in a terribly turbulent year with huge geopolitical bullying and risks, India has managed to pull off a 7.6% annual growth is commendable. We have all participated in this story as employees, entrepreneurs, tax-payers, investors and consumers — we should give ourselves a good pat on the back.

Monika Halan is the best-selling author of the Let's Talk series of books on money. The views expressed are personal

Impetus for science amidst a global churn

The relentless rise of technologies pervades every aspect of human life today, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) is its enforcer. From manufacturing to services, from nano-materials to space travel, from new chemistry to biotechnology, the pace of this rise is frenetic. There are two extreme ways — and a few in between — for countries to address this rise. The first is to resist user and platform markets, services, and exports of natural resources, including human talent. The second is to become a truly competitive player in this changing world, and to tilt the use of science and technology for our social and economic benefit. Budget allocations can help in pointing out the direction.

On the one hand, the 2026-2027 budget and the Economic Survey 2025-26 have collectively signalled a fundamental reorientation of national strategy, moving away from technology adoption alone. The fiscal framework for 2026-27 has tried to address this by concentrating resources in frontier domains such as semiconductors, AI, biotechnology, and space exploration, while addressing some bottlenecks that have impeded the translation of laboratory research.

On the other hand, effective change requires many other challenges that need to be overcome.

A pillar of the strategy as articulated, is the State driving entrepreneurship. The government has assumed the role of a "monetary shareholder" and a catalyst for high-risk innovation. This is most evident in the operationalisation of the ₹1 lakh crore Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) scheme and the launch of Biopharma SHAKTI, where the State provides long-term patient capital to bridge the gap between academic discovery and industrial commercialisation.

For 2026-27, the department of science and technology (DST) has been allocated about ₹28,000 crore, a significant increase, which is dedicated to the new RDI funding mechanisms and mega-science facilities. The 2026-27 budget marks the full operationalisation of the ₹1 lakh crore RDI scheme. For the current fiscal year, ₹20,000 crore has been specifically earmarked within the DST budget to provide long-term, low-interest funding for private-sector-led innovation. This intervention is designed to correct a persistent "market failure" in the Indian ecosystem — the historic risk-aversion of the private sector, which has traditionally preferred technology licensing or imports over original research.

The Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF) is aimed at the solution to what the Economic Survey has identified as the "binding constraint" of innovation — the building of State capacity. The ANRF has got off to a credible start. It aims to expand the footprint of quality research while strengthening current efforts. If this meets with success, it will further develop and strengthen fundamental research as well as stimulate technologies.

Interestingly, the budget provides a major boost to planetary sciences and astronomy, recognising these fields as critical for both human knowledge and technological spin-offs. The government has announced the establishment of major upgrading of four telescope infrastructure facilities: the National Large Solar Telescope (NLST), a facility dedicated to solar research and monitoring space weather, which is increasingly vital for satellite safety; the National Large Opti-

cal-Infrared Telescope (NLOIT), designed to expand observational capabilities into deep space; the Himalayan Chandra Telescope (HCT); and the COMETA-2 Planetary and Interstellar educational project aimed at fostering astrophysics interest among the youth, which is now being developed in Mysuru but will have clones elsewhere too. This is a substantial investment in what many would view as an esoteric fundamental research area. But, this is welcome.

A notable shift in the 2026-27 budget is the reduction in the allocation for the National Supercomputing Mission (NSM), which has been slashed to a newly launched Bharat Shiksha revised estimate of ₹355 crore in the previous year. This suggests a pivot away from the procurement of traditional high-performance computing hardware toward more frontier-oriented initiatives. Conversely, the National Quantum Mission (NQM) saw its funding increased by 50% to ₹900 crore, reflecting a commitment to achieving a leap in secure communications and next-generation computing.

Biotechnology is identified as one of the seven "strategic and frontier sectors" prioritised for rapid scale-up. The primary vehicle for this growth is the newly launched Bharat Shiksha Strategy for Healthcare Advancement through Knowledge, Technology and Innovation (SHAKTI) mission. This aims to transform India into a global hub for biopharmaceutical manufacturing, specifically targeting the domestic production of biologics and biomedicines. The scheme will establish three new National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPERs) and upgrade seven existing ones to strengthen the industry-academic link.

A nationwide single assembly of over 1,000 accredited clinical trial sites will be created to accelerate drug development timelines and enhance the credibility of Indian research. The budget provides for the strengthening of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) with a dedicated cadre of scientific reviewers and specialists to meet global standards. If the unshackling of clinical research and trials takes place, it will have an extraordinary all-round impact.

The mission of electronics and information technology is the primary driver of India's high-tech manufacturing ambitions. The India Semiconductor Mission (ISM) 2.0 has been launched with a massive projected outlay of ₹40,000 crore for electronics manufacturing. The goal is to move beyond simple assembly to the design of full-stack Indian IP and the fortification of domestic supply chains.

The budget has its intrinsic limitations: There is only so much to go around, and there are many demands. More money for science must come from industry investment, too. Within our current resources, two more changes are needed. First, more doing science easy. Our best national labs and universities are weighed down by red-tape processes and regulations. We should measure and demand outcomes and impact, not just how each rupee is spent. Second, our scientists also need to scale our ambitions. For this our labs, universities and industry must collaborate, get out of their silos, and be open to change. If this can happen, the promises of this budget can be realised.

K VijayRaghavan is chair, Science Advisory Council, Ashoka University, and former Principal Scientist, Advisor to the Government of India. The views expressed are personal

Advertisement for Donald Trump: { DONALD TRUMP } PRESIDENT, UNITED STATES. We're looking to keep the oil prices down. They went artificially up because of this excursion. On the increase in crude oil prices due to the conflict in West Asia.

Reading the tea leaves in the conflict in West Asia

The US under President Donald Trump deployed a formidable military armada across West Asia, on land and sea, and the tensions with Iran have now spilled over into a region-wide conflict. The killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the US and Israeli joint strike left Tehran's Islamic regime without its political and religious centre. Khamenei had been its anchor since 1989. While Ali Khamenei had not named his successor, his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, has been chosen as the third Ayatollah since 1979.

How success in the military action against Iran will be defined from an American perspective is largely unknown. Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and now, Trump have all chased drawing down the American role in the region as a foreign policy goal. But, today, the US is close to being entrenched in another protracted conflict.

Politically, Trump has been clear that Iran's nuclear programme is a nuclear weapon is not acceptable. However, he has also been consistent over the years that there will be no conventional ground invasions or military incursions into foreign territory. American planning thus rests on three assets — technology, supremacy in the skies, and clandestine operations inside Iran largely dependent on Israeli capabilities.

In the summer of 2025, the US bombed one of Iran's core nuclear facilities using its top tier technological and military products. Operation Midnight Hammer mobilised stealth B-2 bombers with their escorts entering and exiting Iran without any trouble. The aircraft deployed the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) bombs, exclusively in operation by the US military, and the only system globally available to target facilities deep inside the earth. However, even as the weapons landed on their intended targets, the debate of how effective they were in decommissioning the alleged nuclear programme continues even today.

The process the US seems to be banking on, considering it does not want another years-long military campaign, is one based around contained but consistent strikes leading to regime change. However, historically, such aims, whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere, have hardly been planned without on-ground military deployment in support of pre-existing opposition or other local political entities.

Expecting a swift political turnover in Iran using even the best technologies and tactics, from a distance, may well be a fictional endeavour. Anything beyond, will need American military presence on the ground.

The consequences of a military campaign, as massive as it may be, also need to be fleshed out. To begin with, equating any such adventurism in Iran to the success of the raid to capture Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela is a poor comparison. What may be a better example in comparison, despite the problems it comes with, is the 2003 Iraq war. Despite its fall out of which there are many, it's still seen by many in the US as a quasi-successful campaign where Saddam Hussein was replaced with a somewhat functional democratic process which sustains till today.

The ongoing situation is also giving fuel to the likes of AI Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS leader Khalid bin Mohammed last month released its first audio message in two years. Once again, tensions inside Syria between new president Ahmed Al Sharaa and Kurdish groups such as the SDF threaten to give more space to ISIS on the ground. AI Qaeda's more traditional jihadist structure can use attacks against Iran and the ongoing conflict between Taliban and Pakistan to galvanise fresh support.

Military power, no doubt, can sway outcomes. Overwhelming power, can shape theatre, bring entities to negotiating tables, and even at times cause defeat. But Iran, in all likelihood, is not such a case, considering its big population, vast geography, and entrenched civilisation history.

The idea that technological prowess with modern military power is enough to push political change has been disproven multiple times over the past decades. Even in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, technology, by itself, has not provided any political breakthroughs on the battle frontlines as conventional warfare met its match with cheap tech-enabled asymmetric warfare.

Trump may have to accept that the campaign against Iran may be long-term. But West Asia is now starting at total recalculation with no clarity on what lies at the end of the tunnel.

Kabir Taneja is executive director of the Observer Research Foundation, Middle East. The views expressed are personal

Waiver danger

Repeated farm loan bailouts must be avoided

When the Maharashtra state Budget was tabled in the Legislative Assembly last week, the government followed through on one of its poll promises. While normally this would warrant congratulations all around, on this occasion there is a complication: The poll promise in question is the offer of waiving agricultural loans. The Purnayashok Ahilyadevi Holkar Farmers Loan Waiver Scheme, as it will be called, is hardly unique in the state's history. In fact, it is the third farm-loan waiver that Maharashtra governments have introduced in the past decade. Under the terms of the scheme, eligible farmers with overdue crop loans on September 30, 2025, will have their debt up to ₹2 lakh waived. In addition, those who have made regular loan repayments will nevertheless receive payments of up to ₹50,000. Although Maharashtra's debt as a percentage of gross state domestic product (GSDP) is about 19 per cent and lower than the national average, the state must desist from such populist measures. It also has a popular cash-distribution scheme for women.

India has a great deal of history of farm-loan waivers. They massively worsened the fiscal balance while not appreciably increasing agricultural welfare in the longer term. They also have problems in terms of moral hazard — there is little incentive to repay if farmers or any other interest group can, instead, lobby the government for a loan waiver. In this case, the state administration clearly thinks it is addressing the moral hazard essentially by making payments also to those who have repaid. But unless such repayments are complete, this will not solve the problem. And it worsens the other issue associated with farm-loan waivers, which is the burden it places on the exchequer. As Maharashtra's own history shows, the question is not just moral hazard for individuals — it is moral hazard for the entire sector, incentivising debt-fueled expansion when there is every assumption that the risk will be subsequently socialised through government support. Given the nature of India's political economy, it is likely that such demands will also be made in other states.

The Reserve Bank of India, as the banking regulator, has warned precisely of this: Frequent farm-loan waivers driven by the political cycle have severely undermined the credit culture in the agricultural sector. In fact, it tends to affect the same group the government is trying to help. Banks and other financial institutions will be reluctant to lend to farmers because they have a clear incentive to default. Thus, it could end up affecting the flow of credit to farmers. The political links were made explicit by the RBI when it noted in 2019 that eight of the 10 such schemes declared over the previous five-year period had come within 90 days of elections.

The final point that must be considered is that such schemes ultimately do not end up helping the most vulnerable farmers. At most they reach about half the eligible beneficiaries, often far fewer, and those are usually the most privileged section. The larger question is why agricultural reform that allows for direct income support is still off the table. As long as agricultural subsidies at the level of the Union government are distorted, state politics will continue to revolve around such fiscally irresponsible policies. Besides, it is worth asking to what extent the new scheme can address the underlying structural issues if previous waivers did not resolve the problem.

Employment for growth

India needs a vibrant apprenticeship ecosystem

The NITI Aayog recently released a report titled "Revitalizing India's Apprenticeship Ecosystem", calling apprenticeship central to the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision. India's apprenticeship architecture is anchored in the Apprentices Act, 1961, operationalised through the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (Naps), under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, and the National Apprenticeship Training Scheme (Nats), under the Ministry of Education. The report notes that over 51,000 establishments were active under Naps as of FY25, but participation and completion vary sharply across states.

Despite recent expansion, India's apprenticeship ecosystem remains fragmented and uneven. In 2024-25, while 1.31 million candidates registered for apprenticeship, only 985,000 were engaged and barely 251,000 completed their training — exposing significant leakages between enrolment, engagement, and completion. There is also a stark asymmetry in industry participation: Medium and large enterprises constitute fewer than 30 per cent of active establishments but account for over 70 per cent of apprenticeship engagement, highlighting the limited contribution of smaller firms despite their dominance in overall employment. Weak linkages between educational institutions and industry further undermine programme effectiveness. Gender disparities also remain a major concern. Women account for only 18.2 per cent of the apprentice pool.

While the National Education Policy 2020 calls for integrating vocational education and "earning while learning", apprenticeships are not yet seamlessly embedded in higher education pathways. The apprenticeship-embedded degree programme is a step forward, but alignment with the national credit framework, stronger university participation, and clearer credit portability are required. To bridge these gaps, the report recommends establishing a consolidated national apprenticeship mission, which would serve as an umbrella framework for all apprenticeship initiatives. It envisions a single-window digital interface called the national apprenticeship portal, which integrates information on diverse apprenticeship programmes and provides streamlined access through one common platform. It recommends creating an apprenticeship-engagement index to benchmark state performance, standardising evaluation and assessment protocols, and empowering district skill committees as local anchors. To widen participation, it proposes introducing an apprenticeship-linked incentive scheme that provides financial incentives to both employers and apprentices, particularly targeting aspirational districts, the Northeast, and women apprentices.

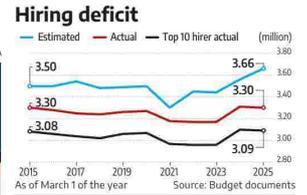
For industry, it suggests cluster-based consortia of micro, small, and medium enterprises, a startup apprenticeship programme, and expansion into gig and sunrise sectors such as electric mobility, green energy, and digital services. Targeted incentives for aspirational districts and women apprentices, alongside post-training support and social-security coverage, can be critical for improving retention and completion. Apprenticeships must move from being treated as a scheme to becoming a strategic pipeline for job-led growth. If effectively implemented, these reforms can strengthen India's education-to-employment bridge and help convert its demographic potential into sustained economic momentum.

Capacity constraints on hiring

The government must improve its ability to plan and execute hiring programmes



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Soon after the 2024 general elections and the formation of the new government in New Delhi, there was a lot of talk about the need to provide jobs and fill vacancies in different Union ministries and their departments. Perhaps this followed the ruling party's assessment that jobs were one of the factors behind its underwhelming electoral performance that did not let it form the government on the strength of its own majority.

Whatever the reasons, the first Union Budget after the elections did announce a few schemes, including an internship programme aimed at creating more jobs in the private sector. Simultaneously, the government decided to pay more attention to the need to offer jobs in its ministries and departments.

In July last year, Minister of State for Personnel Jitendra Singh told the Indian Parliament that the government had issued directives to all Union ministries and departments to take timely and advance action to fill vacant posts through direct recruitment. Rozgar Melas are being organised in 45-50 cities at regular intervals, which act as a catalyst for the time-bound filling of vacancies across central government ministries, departments, and organisations. Mr Singh stated in response to a Parliament question.

Indeed, as a Rozgar Melas organised in December 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had distributed over 71,000 appointment letters to newly recruited government employees. Earlier in October 2024, Mr Modi had distributed over 51,000 appointment letters for government jobs at another Rozgar Melas.

This was understandable also because the government's own data on jobs brought out a disturbing trend. The department of expenditures in the Union finance ministry had estimated that over 24 per cent of the total sanctioned posts in the Union government remained unutilised as of March 1, 2023. Against 4.04 million sanctioned posts, the number of persons employed was 3.06 million, implying that 0.98 million posts remained vacant.

Has that situation got better after the drive to fill vacancies in the government? Before attempting an answer to that question, it would be useful to take a

quick look at the performance of the Modi government on this front since it was formed in May 2014. Going by the Budget documents, as of March 1, 2015, the Union government had 3.3 million persons on its rolls in different ministries, departments, and Union Territories, excluding the armed forces. Just about 10 departments (the railways, atomic energy, space, police, health, audit, revenue, civil defence, posts and urban development) had employed 3.1 million persons, accounting for over 93 per cent of the total government workforce. Quite understandably, the share of the Indian Railways in this group (1.33 million employees) was at the highest at over 40 per cent.

About 10 years later, as of March 1, 2025, the total number of government employees remained virtually unchanged at 3.3 million. Even the share of these 10 departments in the total government workforce remained the same. Notably, however, the Indian Railways saw a decrease in its workforce to 1.21 million, accounting for about 37 per cent of the total employee strength. This was a drop of over 100,000 employees in a decade. It is not yet clear if this decrease is because of more jobs being performed by contractual workers, outsourcing, or technology.

In contrast, some departments saw their workforce go up significantly. These were the police, revenue, defence (civilian) and the postal department. In spite of the increasing use of technology, employees in the revenue department (including direct and indirect taxes) rose by 16 per cent, from about 96,500 to over 112,000 during this period. The number of civilian defence employees almost doubled, but the rise in the strength of the central police and postal employees was marginal in low single digits.

But there was an interesting change in the way the government started recruiting staff for its departments between 2023 and 2025, compared to how it had gone about its hiring between 2014 and 2023. In the first nine years of the Modi government, the number of government employees came down sharply from 3.3 million in 2014-15 to 3.1 million in 2023-23. But in the following two years, this number rose and, by March 2025, it was estimated at 3.3 million. In other words, the govern-

ment's focus on filling up vacancies in its ministries and departments did make a difference, though it implied an increase of only six per cent. Assuming that the number of sanctioned posts remained unchanged at 4.04 million, the vacancy level dropped from over 24 per cent to 18 per cent.

The government's Budget documents bring out yet another interesting trend regarding its staff strength. Every year, at the time of presenting the Budget, the finance ministry puts out an estimate of the government's staff strength at the start of March that year and the actual staff strength for the previous year on the same day. For instance, the Budget for 2025-26 presented the actual staff strength as of March 1, 2024, and an estimated staff strength as of March 1, 2025. However, when these estimates become actual numbers in the following year, it becomes clear that the government's ability to hire people as planned is woefully poor, or that its estimates are a little misleading.

Consider the following. In the Budget for 2025-26, the estimated staff strength as of March 1, 2025, was shown as 3.65 million, but the actuals revealed a year later in the Budget for 2026-27 placed the staff strength at 3.3 million. This is a long-standing trend and has been happening for many years, though the gap has widened of late. But it shows how the government's ability to hire people is either limited or its planning lacks the necessary teeth. Of course, the government saves some money by not being able to hire the workforce as per its plan. For instance, the revised estimate for pay, allowances and travel for these government employees during 2024-25 was ₹3.90 trillion. But the actual expenditure under this head was lower at ₹3.3 trillion.

These issues pertaining to the administrative ability to hire people gain salience at a time when the government is laying greater emphasis on hiring more staff in its ministries and departments. The debate is not just about whether the government should be hiring more people, but whether the a million sanctioned posts should be reviewed and whether ministries should be held accountable for presenting proposals for additional recruitment and for failing to meet those targets. Already, this year's Budget numbers reveal how the government's capacity to spend money is strained. It seems the capacity to even hire more people is equally limited.

Bank fraud: The blind spots of risk control

The recent ₹500-crore fraud in a private-sector bank is not merely another headline. It raises a deeper and more uncomfortable question: Why do such incidents continue despite sophisticated controls, advanced analytics and board-level oversight?

According to the latest Annual Report of the Reserve Bank of India, banks and financial institutions reported 23,983 frauds in 2024-25, involving ₹36,014 crore.

Nearly 92 per cent of the amount relates to advances. While there is no official break-up of employee-driven frauds, industry estimates suggest that 35-40 per cent of cases involve internal participation or collusion.

What makes these numbers worrying is that many such frauds continue for years before detection, suggesting that formal control frameworks often identify problems only after losses have already accumulated.

Public debate has largely centred on digital frauds — phishing, mule accounts, and cybersecurity breaches. Those risks are real and rising. Yet internal fraud at the branch level remains an under-examined vulnerability.

When branches became sales engines

The structural shift began in the early 2000s when new-generation private sector banks redefined the role of the branch. Branches increasingly became sales-focused outlets, while operations were centralised for efficiency and cost control. Central Processing Centres brought greater standardisation and scale. But this also created blind spots.

The depth of branch-level processes reduced. Operational ownership became diffused. Customer relationships grew more transactional and often non-face-to-face. In many branches, daily conversations now revolve around targets; process discipline is assumed to be embedded elsewhere in the system.

Compounding this is the high attrition at the front-line. Relationship officers and sales executives frequently move between institutions, chasing better incentives. Rapid churn weakens institutional memory and dilutes accountability. When ownership

is transient, supervision becomes episodic. Control thrives on continuity-attrition disrupts. Fraud rarely begins with a systems breakdown. It usually begins with human vulnerability.

Incentives and signal distortion

Another structural evolution in banking has been the growing dependence on fee income from third-party products such as insurance, mutual funds and wealth products. Cross-selling is less market- and commercially necessary. Diversified revenue streams strengthen banks.

However, when fee targets overshadow core banking metrics, behavioural distortions can emerge. Frontline staff is often evaluated as much on insurance premiums or mutual fund mobilisation as on deposit growth or credit quality.

Aggressive quarterly targets, combined with performance-linked incentives, can blur the line between suitability and salesmanship — and in extreme cases between compliance and circumvention.

The issue is not third-party distribution itself. It is distorted incentives. When revenue generation dominates the narrative, risk conversations inevitably recede. Risk dashboards capture historical anomalies; they rarely capture ethical stress building at the base of the organisation.

A question that risk management committees should ask after every such episode is this: Which dashboard predicted this? Institutions spend enormous effort tracking known risks. Far less time is spent anticipating behavioural risk created by incentive design, attrition and cultural dilution.

The controls that truly matter

Employee-driven fraud typically exposes foundational gaps. Are employee credit histories reviewed periodically, or only at the time of onboarding? Financial stress can be an early warning signal. Is staff rotation meaningful in sensitive roles? Does high attrition weaken maker-checker discipline? Does consequence management send a visible and

credible signal? In many institutions, disciplinary outcomes remain opaque, weakening the deterrent value that visible accountability is meant to create.

Beyond Know Your Customer, do banks practise "Know Your Colleague"? Branches are visited by cluster heads, business heads, risk teams and auditors. But how often do these visits go beyond reviewing targets, cross-sell numbers and tick-box compliance? How frequently do leaders ask uncomfortable questions about staff pressure, process shortcuts or ethical grey zones?

Conduct risk cannot be embedded through e-learning modules alone. It requires visible supervision, engagement and example.

Culture is the real control

We often hear that "tone at the top" matters. It does. But tone without transmission is ineffective. If the message from leadership does not translate into behaviour at the branch corner, it remains rhetoric. The real first line of defence is not the risk department. It is the operating staff — branch staff, call centre teams and sourcing executives. If they do not internalise risk ownership, no amount of capital can protect reputation. Financial losses can be absorbed. Reputational erosion cannot be recognised.

There is a tendency to optimise processes primarily to satisfy regulatory expectations. Compliance should be the starting point, not the destination. Controls designed merely to "meet regulatory requirements" become checklists. Controls designed out of institutional conviction become culture.

Technology will grow sharper. Artificial intelligence will detect anomalies faster. But fraud prevention will still depend on hiring discipline, rational incentive structures, frontline stability, credible supervision and visible consequence management.

If well-capitalised, technologically sophisticated banks continue to witness internal fraud, the problem is not capital. It is culture. And culture does not sit on a dashboard. It sits at the branch corner — defined by what the incentive sheet rewards.

The author is member of RBI's Advisory Group on Regulation, and founder and designated director, Duvvuru & Reddy LLP.

Manipur's serial institutional failures



ADITI PHADNIS

Manipur is no stranger to violence. It is the state in India that has seen the maximum number of spells of President's Rule. It is almost as if the people of Manipur — the tribal Kuki-Zomi-Mizo and the Naga communities that live in the hills and the majority Meiteis — consider democracy their primary enemy. How can anyone blame them? The institutions that run the Indian state — the bureaucracy, the police, the Central and the state governments, sections of the

media and in many cases, even the judiciary — have failed them repeatedly and comprehensively. The last instance was the "selection" of a new government headed by Yumnam Khechhand Singh, a Meitei who was given a Kuki deputy chief minister who had to be sworn in virtually because it was not "safe" for her to travel to the capital, Imphal.

This institutional failure is the message of a book that will make every Indian squirm. For the author Hoihnu Hauzel, the book is another way of catharsis. As someone who has witnessed the horrors that she has, the rage, helplessness and sense of injustice come bubbling up to the surface periodically in the book, especially her social media campaign #ModiSpeakUpForManipur. She reports the tolling she encountered.

Ms Hauzel writes unapologetically from the perspective of a Kuki-Zomi-Mizo tribal. In Manipur, you get the

impression that political parties — the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress, etc — are just names. She is neither excruciating nor accusatory about the political stance these parties have taken in the upheavals in Manipur over the years. For her, none of the groups comes to the court with clean hands. Rather, she analyses problems from the perspective of tribal politics, religion and society.

And land. That's what it's always about. Land. Ms Hauzel has selected a tight timeframe for her analysis. But she book-marks three sets of dates: 1972, when the Manipur government said no areas would be declared reserved forest without the permission of the Hill Committees; 1997, when 187.50 km of land in south Manipur was declared a wildlife sanctuary (meaning people couldn't live there) and 2023, when a settlement of Kuki-Zomi tribals was evicted and their

dwellings razed to the ground because they had encroached.

There were other provocations. In 2023, in Imphal East, three important churches were demolished on the grounds that they stood on "government-owned land". In 2011, following a Supreme Court directive, 188 structures were deemed to have been regularised even if the provenance of the land holding could not be proved. Not one was a church. More than 60 per cent of Manipur's population is Christian; most among them are tribals. So the tribals felt they were being singled out, all together, all at once.

Ms Hauzel says relations between Meiteis and Kuki-Zomi-Naga were never especially warm. But they were not estranged communities and lived alongside each other — except when they started attacking each other. Shorn of adjectives and verbiage, Ms Hauzel

describes the attacks that occurred on Kuki-Zomi communities starting in 2023. Her own home was not just vandalised but burnt to the ground. Her mother's carefully laid gardens, her father's lovingly tended tea trees, his library, his typewriter, the piano around which the family spent many happy hours... every thing was gone along with the property owned by her tribal neighbours. For easier identification, properties were marked with a red X. Because Manipur is a small place, an aunt recognised her attacker, a Meitei. When asked why he was doing this, he replied, "We have to do what we have to do". Ms Hauzel says badly that the attacks were led by a Meitei vigilante organisation, the Arambal Tengsol.

There are horrific stories based on eyewitness accounts. Some escaped. Others could not and were decapitated,



Stories the Fire Could Not Burn: A Personal Account of the Manipur Crisis: 2023-25 by Hoihnu Hauzel Published by Speaking Tiger Books 231 pages ₹499

burnt alive or shot. Worse, victims of a decapitation and the rape of two women were all over social media. Ms Hauzel describes the government-sanctioned and -led systematic demolition of churches, and what the pastors and the followers felt and thought. "The state had failed its people," she writes. The account of the tribal camps where these proud people were led to and lodged in, is even more depressing. "The only gap — if it is that — in the book is that it does not explain the intra-tribal tensions that came to the surface when Nagas and Meiteis clashed in Ukhrul earlier this year. Maybe that is for another book. Ms Hauzel strives to be fair but the hurt and the sorrow, the loss of the life that there was no place called "home," calls out to you through the pages. All Indians must read this haunting book.

OUR VIEW

GUEST VIEW



Indian kitchens need to quit gas and go electric

The Iran war spotlights our import dependence for energy. Let's switch from gas to induction stoves for cooking. A few reforms could pave the way for a climate-friendly electric transition

The war in West Asia that has blocked supplies of crude oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and refinery products from the Gulf serves India a reality check on the soundness of relying on imported hydrocarbons for cooking food. It is high time we began to wean our kitchens off liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and piped natural gas (PNG); while LPG is essentially a mixture of propane and butane, PNG is mostly methane, like the compressed natural gas (CNG) that is used by vehicles as a low-carbon substitute for petrol and diesel. We should cook, instead, on electric stoves that run on power generated from domestic coal and renewables. Since we have our own coal, its supply cannot be disrupted by a war abroad. Nor is its price subject to geopolitical flux. Now that electrification has covered even remote areas, with homes linked to power grids—some of them local networks fed by small hydel or renewable projects—the only challenge is reliability in terms of supply continuity and voltage stability. If political pricing is taken out of the power sector's loop, cut-offs depriving us of dinner would not be a worry. Politics also constrains the selection of merchant miners to get our abundant reserves of coal overground. This is also amenable to reform.

Ideally, cooking should be done on induction stoves, not on heating coils that snake around in their grooves on a ceramic disc. The latter works pretty much like a stove with a gas flame does; it heats the outside of a cooking vessel, which conducts this heat to the food held within it, while losing a lot of radiant heat. In contrast, induction creates an electromagnetic field above the stovetop that generates multiple small eddies of current in the wall of

the vessel placed on it (provided it is of the right material), and the vessel's resistance to this electron flow heats it up and cooks the food. While induction stoves can be costlier, given their need of special utensils, those who can afford them must look at the upside. They convert 85-90% of their electrical energy into thermal energy, while the efficiency of gas stoves is only about 40%. Let's also count the energy used by the delivery of LPG in cylinders filled at bottling plants and ferried by trucks. Urban PNG networks entail costs too. But what about the carbon exhaust of extra electricity demand? True, our older power plants have thermal efficiencies below 40%, while newer plants deliver thermal efficiency up to 44%. Every point gain in efficiency means a 2-3% reduction in fuel use and carbon dioxide emissions. Gas turbines, if run in combination with a steam cycle, can achieve efficiencies well above 50%—up to 64%. Ideally, coal should be gasified and this gas used to generate electricity via such dual-cycle gas turbines.

How will electric cooking square with India's climate-action agenda? As living standards improve, inevitably, our per capita consumption of electricity will go up from half the global average, as it currently is. We will use more power for mobility and indoor climate control. Kitchens going all-electric will raise overall power usage only modestly. The challenge is to generate this power with efficiency and minimal wastage while managing demand responsibly. We must combine our power capacity build-up with a big push for carbon capture and re-use. Captured carbon can be converted into materials that range from diamonds, graphene and carbon fibre to sand substitutes and long-chain polymers. This is the way to go.

Equal opportunities for women can result in economic wonders

Well crafted and implemented laws that empower women can easily lift an economy's performance



INDERMIT GILL & TEA TRUMBIC are, respectively, chief economist and senior vice president, development economics, at the World Bank; and lead of the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law project.

In 2012, facing a shrinking labour force and economic stagnation, then-Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo bet on women. To encourage more women to work, his government rolled out a series of reforms, including expanded childcare, enhanced parental leave and tax incentives for firms that promoted women. By 2019, 2.5 million additional women were employed, female labour-force participation reached 67% and job placement for graduates was nearly universal. The conclusion: When barriers to women's workforce participation are removed, economic outcomes improve.

Today, developing economies face the opposite challenge: a massive youth bulge. Over the next 10-15 years, 1.2 billion young people will enter the labour market in these economies, which are expected to generate only about 400 million jobs over that period, implying an unprecedented jobs deficit. Ensuring that young women have the same opportunities as men to participate fully in the economy will be crucial to turbocharging growth and employment. As more women join the workforce on equal terms, they will increasingly start businesses and create jobs. Research shows that in most countries, closing the opportunity gap could boost GDP by as much as 20%.

In recent decades, dozens of coun-

tries have taken the first step towards supporting women's economic participation by reforming family, labour and financial laws. As a result, women today have about two-thirds of the legal rights that men enjoy, up from barely half at the turn of the century.

But too many countries fail to take the next step. The World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report shows that even where protections exist on paper, fewer than half the policies and services needed to implement them are in place. And a new enforcement index reveals that these laws are applied only about half the time, creating a gap between legal rights and lived reality.

Today, only 4% of women worldwide live in countries that recognize nearly full legal equality, while none of the 190 countries covered by the *Women, Business and the Law 2026* report provides women with the same legal environment as men across all 10 assessed areas.

The biggest gap is in safety. Limited and inconsistent protection from gender-related violence prevents women from joining and remaining in the workforce. Similarly, laws against sexual harassment vary considerably depending on the environment: 143 countries ban it at work, but only 90 address it online, 63 in education and just 36 in public spaces.

Another weak area is entrepreneurship. Women can legally start businesses in most countries, but they still face obstacles to securing funding. Only about half of all countries support equal access to credit. The lack of diversity in leadership is another barrier to entrepreneurship, as just 40 countries require minimum representation of women on corporate boards.

Childcare is the third-weakest area, with the lack of affordable and high-quality services keeping too many women out of paid work. While 146 countries regulate childcare services for children under the age of three, fewer than half (66) set comprehensive quality standards, like caregiver-to-child ratios,

group-size limits, education or training requirements and mandatory periodic inspections. And only 78 offer financial or tax support to families.

These deficiencies depress labour-force participation rates, reduce hours worked and slow formal employment and firm creation, all of which are vital to long-run growth, tax revenues and economic resilience.

The good news is that governments have started to address the most problematic areas over the last few years; 22 economies, many in Latin America and the Caribbean, enacted reforms to improve women's safety. Six of them—Belize, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Peru, Suriname and Zambia—raised the legal minimum age for marriage or removed the parental-consent exception, closing a loophole that enabled child marriage. Seven economies—Argentina, Brazil, Mali, San Marino, Sri Lanka, the UK and Uruguay—introduced or strengthened cyber harassment laws.

Some progress has also been made on building supportive frameworks for entrepreneurship, with 21 reforms across 89 economies. Suriname's Trade Register Act allows women to register businesses in the same way men do, removing a long-standing structural barrier. Ecuador's Organic Law to Promote the Economy of Ecuadorian Women Entrepreneurs bans gender-based discrimination in credit evaluation, adds oversight and introduces sanctions for non-compliance. Thirteen economies strengthened women's representation on corporate boards. But overall, implementation has been uneven.

For governments seeking more jobs and growth, the question isn't if they can afford to close the opportunity gap for women, but how they can afford not to. By aligning laws that empower women with systemic changes, enforcement mechanisms and public reporting standards, policymakers can track results, adjust strategies and show that gender equality delivers measurable economic returns. **©2025/PROJECT SYNDICATE**

THEIR VIEW

Subsidy raj: Why an ancient grain dole should haunt us

ADITYA SINHA



is a public policy professional.

In 123 BCE, Gaius Gracchus passed the *Lex frumentaria*, a law mandating that the Roman state sell grain to citizens at a fixed below-market price. The aim was modest: stabilize food prices, protect the poor. Within two generations, it had become free distribution. By the Augustus era, 200,000 Romans were on the rolls; by the Aurelian, 600,000, and pork had been added to the ration. Historians still argue whether his generosity strengthened Roman cohesion or hastened the ruin of its treasury. It was probably both.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in a study commissioned by the 16th Finance Commission (FC), has added up India's subsidies and transfers with unusual thoroughness. The numbers are not reassuring. Start with their scale. The Union government spent ₹6.33 trillion on subsidies and transfers in 2023-24, up from ₹2.76 trillion in 2018-19, a compounded annual growth rate of 21%. This is before one adjusts for what governments prefer not to report. The ADB

study found that official figures undercount actual subsidy expenditure by about ₹3 trillion at the state level alone; dozens of schemes, pensions, loan waivers, investment promotion subsidies and electricity shortfalls are simply not classified as subsidies. Now add off-budget borrowings. For instance, Andhra Pradesh has parked ₹35,100 crore of food subsidy liabilities in its Civil Supplies Corporation and has ₹26,466 crore in power discom debt. Kerala has quietly accumulated ₹11,733 crore in off-budget social security pension liabilities through a corporation created for that purpose. The numbers that governments report and what they owe rarely match.

The 16th FC notes that state unconditional transfers have grown at 28.8% annually since 2018-19 and are projected to reach ₹4.14 trillion in 2025-26. Large-group cash transfer schemes grew 53.6% over the same period. In 2018-19, only Telangana allocated more than 10% of its revenue expenditure to unconditional transfers. By 2025-26 budget estimates, nine states are at that level. The composition of what India calls a subsidy has shifted too. Unconditional cash transfers, which accounted for 16% of state subsidy spending in 2018-19, are projected to account for 47.4% by 2025-26.

The pendulum has swung from subsidized food to cash handouts, which distort the economy less but are no less fiscally treacherous if done without close targeting.

This matters because money is finite. The 16th FC found an astoundingly significant negative relationship between subsidy expenditure and capital outlay. Every rupee that goes into an unconditional transfer is, at the margin, a rupee that does not build a road, school or a hospital.

Six of India's nine states spending over 5% of revenue expenditure on unconditional transfers have a revenue deficit. In effect, they are borrowing to give money away.

Now consider what the money actually buys. In Tamil Nadu, 89.5% of all households receive free electricity, 85.2% of the wealthiest quintile included. In Punjab, 75.1% of the richest households get free power. The 16th FC calls this "somewhat regressive." These states are spending thousands of crores subsidizing electricity for people who can comfortably pay for it, while

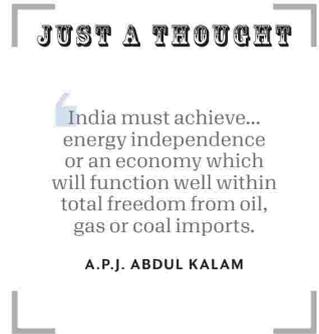
pleading fiscal stress when it comes to settling their electricity discom dues. Punjab's power subsidy consumed 15.5% of its total revenue expenditure in 2023-24. Across all Indian states, the total electricity subsidy bill reached ₹2,600 trillion, more than double the ₹1,299 trillion figure of 2018-19.

The power sector deserves a special mention because it illustrates how the same problem haunts us even after repeated discom bailouts, revealing perfect institutional memory and little institutional learning. The Centre restructured discom debt in 2001. It restructured it again in 2012 via the Financial Restructuring Plan, which only seven states signed up for and none met its improvement conditions. It restructured it once more in 2015 through Uday, under which states issued ₹2.32 trillion in bonds. Total discom debt today stands at ₹7.42 trillion, up from ₹4.71 trillion in 2018-19.

We have seen three bailouts in 25 years. The 16th FC diplomatically calls this a "loss-

India must achieve... energy independence or an economy which will function well within total freedom from oil, gas or coal imports.

A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM





MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

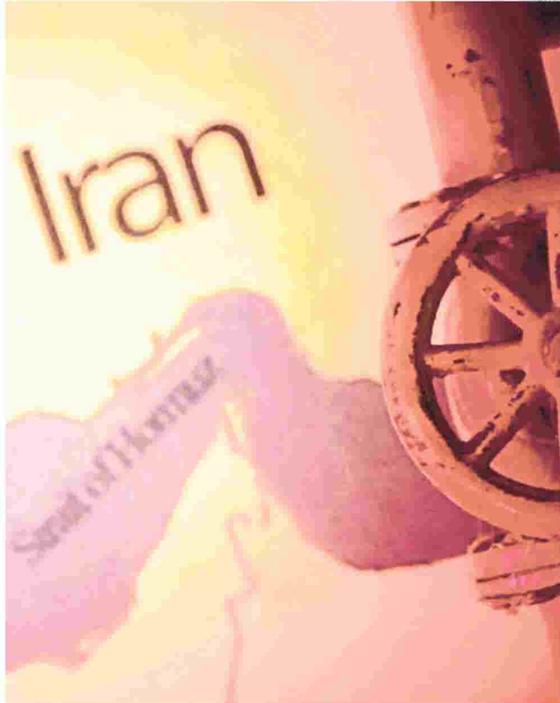
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Hormuz and other chokepoints are forcing big shifts in strategy

The Cold War-style weaponization of supply bottlenecks is leaving nations with strategic options that India is familiar with



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The closure of the narrow shipping lane that runs through the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted the flow of crude oil from Gulf producers to countries around the world. Energy prices have spiked. Iran closed this route in response to the bombing of its territory by the US and Israel. The ongoing episode is a reminder of the importance of chokepoints in an interdependent world, or bottlenecks that countries can use for strategic leverage in uncertain times.

The Strait of Hormuz is a chokepoint created by geography, but there are many other types as well—financial, technological and mineral, for example. The denial of advanced semiconductors to one country or rare earth minerals to another are two examples of chokepoints that have been used in recent years by the US and China, respectively.

Chokepoints only matter in an interdependent world. However, their overuse is likely to push countries at the receiving end to reduce the same interdependence. So those in control of them must perform a delicate balancing act between weaponizing interdependence and maintaining it at the same time. It is a conceit to think that anyone at all knows where this delicate balance lies. The result is endemic uncertainty.

In his 2025 book *Chokepoints: How Economic Warfare Is Changing the World*, Edward Fishman has proposed a useful analytical framework to think about the problem. He writes about “an impossible trinity of economic interdependence, economic security and geopolitical competition.” The world can have only two of these three at any one point of time and never all three together. He then uses this framework to look at what happened in the world after 1945.

The Cold War era was marked by geopolitical competition between two blocs. Countries in each bloc secured economic stability by reducing interdependence with countries in the rival bloc. Then came the era of globalization after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of geopolitical competition allowed countries to expand interdependence even as they achieved economic security.

The world we are in has brought back geopolitical competition. Countries will have to choose between interdependence and economic security. It is a tough choice, given the realities of global supply chains as well as challenges such as climate change that need close international cooperation. “The Age of Economic Warfare will likely end when the chokepoints upon which it depends no longer squeeze so tight,” predicts Fishman, though he adds that this will only play out over a decade or so.

The uneven distribution of chokepoints means that only a few countries can use them for leverage over others. Some chokepoints emerge from network effects such as printing the global currency or controlling global technology standards. These

are sticky. However, this does not mean that the rest have to only sit back to suffer in silence. Or become vassal states. They too have options that can provide them with some degree of freedom in a world of bullies.

Three options are worth mentioning here. First, the most straightforward response is reducing reliance on any single chokepoint by diversifying trade routes, currency reserves, technology suppliers and diplomatic partnerships.

Second, smaller states individually have little leverage over more powerful countries, but they can work together in a coordinated way.

Third, some smaller states have managed exposure not by reducing connections, but by carefully managing their position across competing networks through strategic ambiguity or maintaining ties to rival blocs so that no single power can credibly threaten full exclusion.

In the case of India, the sheer size of its internal market and growth potential is a negotiating chip that is not available to smaller countries. The size of the market is not just in terms of goods, but also the information that Indian consumers give to global technology platforms, some of which is used to train algorithms. That is an advantage.

The brave new world of renewed geopolitical

competition—and the weaponization of interdependence—will necessarily make countries pursue economic security. However, this shift will not be a costless affair. This column has earlier noted that the quest for economic resilience in the face of global uncertainty in effect means that stocks will be prioritized over flows, and governments, companies and consumers will either directly or indirectly have to pay the costs of these risk buffers. (See ‘Resilience isn’t costless but even the private sector is in need of it’, [bit.ly/As4FGOQ](#))

Fishman has written in his book that the world could be moving back to the Cold War era of geopolitical competition in which economic security grows in importance. That was one reason why the newly independent Indian nation chose to focus on the production of key intermediate goods such as steel and capital goods such as machine tools as well as on building a network of research institutes. Both Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel—despite their disagreements on economic policy—saw the need to build industrial depth in a dangerous world. After some initial success, that strategy eventually led to neither resilience nor economic efficiency.

The intent as well as hard lessons from that era are still relevant to our times.

A budget MacBook? A market gap and chip crunch explain it

Apple is premium but needs a sales boost amid a shortage of chips



DAVE LEE
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Consumer market and supply dynamics have shaped Apple's strategy. **BLOOMBERG**

Budget-friendly isn't typically a descriptor you find next to “MacBook.” But priced at \$599–\$499 with a student discount—Apple's new MacBook Neo is the least expensive laptop it has ever offered. Expect its four colourful variants to start gracing college campuses and coffee shops very soon.

Apple's strategy seems straightforward: A cheaper laptop puts it in direct competition with Google's Chromebook, now a mainstay of classrooms globally, plus a whole universe of Windows-powered laptops. It could lock in the next generation of Apple laptop users.

Yet Apple could have justifiably made that kind of move at any point in the Chromebook's almost 15 years on the market. Instead, Apple stayed firmly dedicated to its premium reputation and price point. A confluence of reasons made 2026 the right time for a cheaper MacBook.

The Mac product line, which missed analysts' expectations last quarter, needs a sales boost. Increasingly, as more Americans worry about affordability, Apple is competing with itself. The market for refurbished Apple products is booming. Back Market, a leading marketplace that puts Apple products front and centre, reported last month that gross merchandise value rose 32% in 2025 compared with the previous year. The market for old smartphones is growing faster than the one for new models and Apple products make up more than half of that demand.

With belts tightened, what many consumers are saying is that they don't mind using hardware that's a little behind the curve. So now Apple is putting its older hardware into new products: The MacBook Neo runs on the A18 Pro chip first used in 2024's iPhones. That's not a slight—it's a capable chip, but it also means Apple can squeeze the cost savings needed to bring the Neo into budget territory.

It's also an interesting bet by Apple that demand for serious-on-device AI use—such as those clever agents we're hearing so much about—is and will remain for a while a niche and nerdy pursuit of little interest to the casual MacBook buyer.

Like the Chromebook, the MacBook Neo will offload much heavy lifting to the cloud, among other compromises. “The keyboard is a bit flimsy,” according to one first impression. The base model has just 256GB of storage and 8GB of RAM, compared with 512GB and 16GB for the base MacBook Air. A refurbished old MacBook Air might be a better deal. *The Verge* argues, if you can get one.

Which brings us to the next reason the MacBook Neo exists: shortages. Just as Apple was announcing the new products, Intel's chief financial officer was on a different stage at a Morgan Stanley event warning that memory chip supply issues would persist through 2027. AI companies—as has been covered extensively—have seen up much of the production capacity of the few makers of memory chips in the world, driving up the cost of components for everyday electronics.

For this reason, IDC estimates the global market for smartphones will decline 12.9% in 2026 year on year, while laptop shipments will be down 11.3%. The brunt of this will be felt by more budget brands, like Lenovo, or manufacturers of cost-conscious Android devices. Apple is now ready to swoop in for those consumers who will browse the aisles at Best Buy and quickly realize that dropping \$500 on a Windows laptop doesn't go as far as it did last year. “The MacBook Neo will reshape the entry-level laptop segment,” IDC analyst Francisco Jeronimo said.

Is Apple immune to those cost pressures? No, and there's not for the MacBook Neo, the headlines on the company's product lineup might be more focused on the across-the-board price increases for its premium laptops in the face of global economic turbulence and that memory crunch. The base price for the new MacBook Air, for both 13- and 15-inch models, has increased \$100. MacBook Pro models with the more powerful M5 Pro chip start \$200 higher than the previous generation, while the cheapest configuration for the most powerful M5 Max chip begins \$400 higher.

Given the computers' performance upgrades, customers likely won't see that as a bad deal. An extra hundred bucks is easier to swallow for those with budgets stretching beyond \$1,000, and even \$1400 won't seem prohibitive for customers who require the computing power those components offer. Like an airline cranking up the price of business class to keep economy seats affordable to the masses, Apple is leaning on its premium customers to eat the costs that make a budget MacBook possible. Taxing the rich to help tackle the affordability crisis, say you? **NO BLOOMBERG** compelling idea.

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

India must leverage its data for access to top AI models

RAHUL MATTHAN



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Last week, I wrote about how frontier artificial intelligence (AI) has begun to improve exponentially—to the point where it is not just introducing linear improvements in functionality, but literally augmenting capabilities. Personally, this became evident when I realized I could code anything I could imagine, allowing me to create various applications and programs to eliminate micro-frustrations in my workflow. I am sure that those in other domains are experiencing similar capability uplifts.

According to scaling laws, a model's performance will improve so long as increasingly large amounts of compute power and data are used to train it. For many years now, leading AI labs in the US have been proving that thesis at an eye-watering scale. It feels like those investments have begun to pay off, particularly over the past six months. Across the board, frontier models have begun to demonstrate dramatic improvements—both in the quality and accuracy of their outputs and in what they can do.

For countries like India, advanced AI that not only reduces friction but also unlocks brand new capabilities presents exponential opportunities for advancement. By blurring the boundaries between domains and professions, it can expand the scope of what is possible, allowing those who use it to do far more than before. This makes brand-new pathways available through which the potential of AI can be harnessed across all domains—from healthcare and education to governance.

But just as these exponential capabilities of AI open up new opportunities to transform our industries and markets, they also expose us to new vulnerabilities. At present, the transformative capabilities of AI are only available in frontier models offered by top American AI companies. Open-source AI, which countries like India have relied on so far, seems to be slowly falling behind the cutting edge of what is possible, and while we have made tremendous strides with our own foundation models, they are still behind the state of the art on several key parameters.

Today, access to leading AI models is only available through application programming interfaces (APIs), which would not have been a problem had it not been for the geopolitical uncertainty of the current moment. Any

country whose AI future depends on API access to solutions from leading AI labs risks having the core infrastructure on which it depends pulled out from under it should geopolitical winds shift—much like access to the Swift financial network was weaponized during the conflict in Ukraine. When core national capabilities depend on access to technology under foreign control, our sovereignty will only last as long as remote servers remain accessible.

So, how does India navigate its way ahead? History has shown that strategic conceptions can be extracted from technology providers seeking market access. When the Brazilian Air Force acquired advanced military aircraft in the 1960s and 70s, the government, through state-owned enterprise Embraer, required that foreign suppliers transfer manufacturing know-how to Brazilian engineers and facilities. As a result, Embraer grew from a military supplier into one of the world's most successful commercial aircraft makers,

competing globally with Boeing and Airbus in the regional jet category. When Samsung licensed early DRAM technology from Micron, it invested aggressively in manufacturing scale and process improvements to the point that it eventually outcompeted its licensor. The massive electronics supply chain that grew out of this is now one of the world's most sophisticated. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China made market access explicitly conditional on foreign companies forging joint ventures with Chinese partners and enforcing technology transfer under the terms of those agreements. This is how China developed the process expertise it currently has across a range of sectors, allowing it to dominate the global industrial value chain.

The question of the moment is this: What leverage does India have to achieve its goals in the AI race?

As the largest user base for AI technology outside the US, India generates enormous volumes of behavioural, transactional and social data. This is exactly the kind of real-world interaction data that AI companies need to improve their models. India also possesses vast repositories of traditional knowledge, cultural information and community practices that could provide AI models with much-needed context.

In a paper that I presented as chair of the Expert Engagement Group on the New Deal for Data under the India AI Summit, I argued that one option available to a country like India is to make access to this data conditional on AI companies depositing the weights of all AI models enriched by Indian data in Indian facilities under a model escrow arrangement. This would ensure that, if for any reason AI access is cut off, Indian companies can continue to access the AI models they need locally. This would let India safeguard its AI sovereignty by strategically deploying one of its most valuable assets—its data. If successful, India could become the first country to leverage data as a strategic currency in the AI era.

If we are to do this, we must act swiftly. Once AI models approach human-level performance across domains, any data advantage we currently have will disappear. And with it, the leverage we need to secure our technological sovereignty.

Time is running out to strike deals with AI majors that minimize the geopolitical risk of AI denial

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

To end the war, it will take three

THE JOINT strikes by the US and Israel may have severely degraded Iran's military since the war began on February 28. But in the face of US President Donald Trump's constantly shifting aims — from regime change to unconditional surrender — Mojtaba Khamenei, son of the assassinated Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, assuming his father's mantle signals an assertion of defiance by Tehran. If Trump's plan was to replicate the Venezuela model in Iran, it does not appear to be working. There is no sign of a Dely Rodriguez waiting in the wings, and Trump saying that "most of the people we had in mind are dead" can be read as an admission that the prospect of installing a leader acceptable to Washington looks distant. Instead of forcing the regime to change course, the war appears to be handing Iran a strategic advantage.

Regime change, or a variation of it, does not materialise in Iran, Washington will start thinking about the timing and terms for the war to end. A prolonged war that leads to American casualties is hardly compatible with an "America First" presidency. The enormous costs of war include its severe economic consequences. As oil prices briefly surged close to \$120 a barrel on Monday, Trump said the war was "very complete, pretty much" and would end "very soon". Yet if the unilateralism and arbitrariness with which he weaponised tariffs across the world are any sign of things to come, his assurances cannot be taken at face value. For the rest of the world, second-guessing Trump is risky and can prove costly.

Ending the war would require circling back to questions that lay at its beginning and finding answers in diplomacy — questions around Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and its patronage of proxy militias across the region, and the nature of constraints, if any, on them. Another challenge will be persuading Israel, which appears to view the war as its best chance to resolve the Iranian threat once and for all. Operation Roaring Lion has temporarily united the country after two years of conflict and the long wait for hostages in Gaza. For Netanyahu, facing a reckoning for his government's failure to prevent Hamas's terror attack, the war with Iran in an election year further delays accountability at home. Iran's regime, too, while desperately clinging to power, will not want its military and economy battered beyond repair. The war, then, is likely to end when all three principal players, from their different vantage points, recognise the necessity of an off-ramp. The sooner they do so, the better.

Facing down the spectre of energy crisis

THE ONGOING conflict in the Middle East has caused significant dislocation in energy markets, and sharp price gyrations. On Monday, Brent crude was surging to nearly \$120 per barrel. Prices softened thereafter, with reports suggesting discussions between the G7 countries over the release of oil from their strategic reserves (the group is yet to take a decision on the matter) and US President Donald Trump's comments that the war could come to an end "very soon". Crude is currently hovering around \$87 per barrel. The dislocation can also be seen in the gas markets, where prices have surged as roughly a fifth of global LNG flows through the Strait of Hormuz. As much of India's imports — about 80 per cent — depend on 60 per cent of its total natural gas requirements and over 60 per cent of its LPG demand — are also from this region, the demand-supply mismatches are now showing.

As per a report in this paper, shortages are affecting industrial users of LNG and LPG, be it tile and ceramic makers in Gujarat, or commercial users of cooking gas such as restaurants in cities like Bengaluru and Mumbai. The government has moved quickly. It has invoked the Essential Commodities Act to ensure supply of natural gas to priority sectors. The top priority has been given to piped natural gas for household consumption, compressed natural gas for transport and LPG production — segments that directly impact millions of households. The second category is fertiliser units (they will receive 70 per cent of their average consumption of the last six months), followed by tea industries, manufacturing and other industrial consumers, and commercial and industrial consumers of gas distribution companies.

There is little clarity on how soon this conflict will come to an end. India's heavy dependence on the Gulf region for meeting its energy requirements increases its vulnerability. The costs imposed by higher energy prices will have to be borne. An extended conflict and closure of the Strait of Hormuz will have implications for inflation, the growth momentum and twin deficits. The ripple effects of the conflict are also being felt in other segments of the economy. This situation requires deft economic management. The government must carefully navigate this challenging period as it tries to absorb and balance multiple pulls and pressures.

Thou shalt not cross the cat

ONE MAY anger critics, fans, or even the venerable Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but the one can only anger cat lovers at one's peril. A now-viral anecdote by Jessie Buckley, widely tipped for Oscar glory for playing Shakespeare's wife Agnes in *Chloë Zhao's Hamnet*, has led to a belated digital inquisition against the Irish actor. On the *Happy Sad Confused* podcast in November, Buckley recalled giving her then-boyfriend — now husband — an ultimatum over his pets, one of whom seemed to have taken an irrational dislike to her: "It's me or the cats." The cats lost the tug of war. That single act of heartlessness might, the cat brigade has pointed out, lead to the 36-year-old losing out on the Oscars as feline retribution.

Buckley has since issued a public apology, explaining that she not only once auditioned for the 2019 musical *Cats*, but also, in fact, remains a committed cat lover. Unfortunately, the court of public opinion is rarely moved by belated declarations of allegiance — evidence is considered only insofar as it confirms guilt or prejudice. Or, to put it in Shakespeare's words, "The lady doth protest too much."

The fandom of cats, of course, is not a modern phenomenon. In ancient Egypt, cats were associated with the goddess Bastet, protector of hearth and home. Killing a cat, even by accident, was punishable by death. Owners shaved their eyebrows as a mark of grief when a family cat died, ending the mourning period only when their eyebrows grew back. When it comes to cats, not much has changed except raised brows replacing shaved ones. Cats, after all, enjoy the ultimate tencpole advantage: Nine lives and an audience predisposed to root for them. That leaves the human on the decidedly shakier footing.

Taking sides in conflict: Delhi's past record tells a complicated story



RAJA MANDALA
 BY C RAJA MOHAN

ONE OF the more surprising elements of the unfolding Indian debate on the war in the Middle East is the concern — if not anguish — that India has "tilted to one side" in the current Gulf war. For a section of the commentator, the essence of Indian foreign policy is, and ought to be, a refusal to take sides in conflicts between other states.

That idea aligns with the traditional notion of neutrality. In the early decades after Independence, however, Delhi was at pains to argue that its doctrine of non-alignment was not neutrality. India did not avoid taking positions; rather, it claimed the right to form them on the merits of each issue — based on independent judgement rather than bloc loyalty.

In practice, India's record tells a more complicated story. Delhi has often taken sides — sometimes vehemently, sometimes defensively, and sometimes only implicitly. There have also been moments when India simply flip-flopped as governments changed.

It has been relatively easy for India's political and intellectual establishment to adopt strong moral positions when the offender was the United States or the West. This habit was part of what Shashi Tharoor once described as India's tradition of offering a "running moral commentary" on world affairs.

The anti-Western reflex had deeper

roots. Part of it reflected the lingering residue of anti-colonial sentiment. Part of it was grounded in Delhi's genuine Cold War contradictions with Washington — over Pakistan, Kashmir, and nuclear non-proliferation.

India's moral clarity, however, tended to blur when Moscow transgressed norms that India supported. That ambivalence was visible in Delhi's muted responses to the Soviet invasions of Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979), as well as to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its occupation of eastern Ukraine after 2022.

Many would call this hypocrisy. Yet double standards are a universal feature of international life. India's reluctance to criticise Moscow was rooted in the strategic value Delhi attached to the Russian connection in managing its security challenges.

There were, however, brief moments of deviation. When Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, the Chanakya government took a critical line. That position was consistent with the Janata Party's long-standing critique that Congress foreign policy, while professing non-alignment, was in practice tilted towards Moscow. But within weeks, Indira Gandhi returned to power in January 1980 and proved the point. She instructed India's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Brajesh Mishra, to abstain on the resolution condemning the Soviet Union.

More tellingly, Indian diplomacy soon began arguing that the Soviet intervention had not been necessitated by external interference against the communist government in Kabul. The echo of this reasoning in the widespread refrain in Delhi after 2022 — that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had not been "provoked" by the West — is hard to miss.

The transition from Janata to Congress also altered India's posi-

tion on Cambodia. The Janata government had held back from recognising the government installed in Phnom Penh after Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Congress reversed that position in 1980, justifying it as part of an effort to balance China in Southeast Asia by supporting Vietnam. Ironically, Cambodia eventually became one of China's strongest Asian partners.

Both choices carried costs. India's reluctance to criticise Soviet actions in Afghanistan damaged its standing in the Islamic world. Endorsing the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia provoked backlash across Southeast Asia. There was an earlier precedent, too.

In 1950, Indian diplomacy actively sought to prevent the United Nations from condemning China's military intervention in the Korean War. Jawaharlal Nehru was then investing heavily in building a partnership with Beijing to construct a new Asian order. That "tilt" towards China in the 1950s also carried costs.

In 1990, Delhi struggled to articulate a credible response to Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait. India avoided condemning the Iraqi action, partly because Saddam was viewed as a "secular" leader in the Middle East who often supported India on issues involving Pakistan. Iraq was also an important source of oil.

Foreign Minister I K Gujral travelled to Baghdad after the invasion to secure Iraq's cooperation in evacuating thousands of Indians stranded in Kuwait. If India's reluctance to defend Kuwait's sovereignty might have lacked a moral basis, it could nonetheless be explained in terms of India's significant equities in Iraq.

For decades, India framed its Middle East policy around two broad contradictions: The US versus the Arabs, and Israel versus the Arabs. But Indian debates paid far less attention to the region's internal rivalries

between Arabia and Persia and between conservative monarchies and republican forces (both seen as Islamic in the Arab world).

Over the decades, those internal contradictions, for example between Gulf Arabs and Iran, have become more consequential. The Gulf Arab states' reliance on the US for security against various forms of radicalism, and the gradual normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab countries, have altered the regional picture. India's debate, though, appears stuck in the mental maps of the past.

India's current approach to the unfolding war in the Gulf is shaped by the scale of its stakes in the Arabian Peninsula. India today has roughly \$200 billion in trade with the Gulf, depends heavily on the region for energy supplies, and has nearly nine million citizens living and working across the Arab Gulf states. Protecting these interests has become the overriding concern for Delhi in the present crisis. This is not an unreasonable calculation.

Looking ahead, Delhi must operate on the basis of a simple strategic reality: The security and prosperity of India and Arabia are now indivisible. Political support for Arabs was an important principle articulated at the very outset of independent India's foreign policy. Eight turbulent decades later in the Middle East, it has acquired a new meaning — in the form of a deepening interdependence between India and the Gulf Arab states. The current nightmare in the Gulf will eventually end, but managing India's deep interdependence with the Arab Gulf will remain one of Delhi's enduring challenges.

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Panikkar was a Marxist historian with a difference



SALLIL MISRA

THE DEATH of K N Panikkar is a great loss to all those who believe in the importance of authentic history writing for Indian society. He was a distinguished member of the community of historians who were committed to producing valid and genuine history. But even within that community, he stood out in a variety of ways. At a time when history writing was dominated by economic and political dimensions, Panikkar highlighted the importance of culture.

Panikkar introduced culture as an important variable in the understanding of historical phenomena. He also defined culture in innovative ways — for him, it was not a residual category subtracted from economy and politics. It was also not "high culture", consisting of literature and scholasticism. Culture was a mental universe that connected peoples' thoughts with their actions. Therefore, an understanding of culture was crucial not just in itself, but also as a clue to understand large political phenomena involving popular action. Panikkar drilled into his students the idea that all big political movements were preceded by cultural movements. The latter inevitably cast their shadows on the trajectories of the political movements.

He rescued culture from isolationism by demonstrating its connections with other domains of society. He also looked upon culture as a terrain that was a site of major contests and struggles. Scratch any major political and economic upheaval, he would argue, and you would find traces of culture there. Culture was the soil that nourished the plant of political and economic history. Panikkar was a historian of culture par excellence.

Panikkar's second major contribution was to highlight the seminal place of ideas in human life. A trained Marxist, he nonetheless believed that the world of ideas was not simply an extension of material life. Ideas had autonomy and a life of their own. At the Centre for Historical Studies (CHS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he taught modern Indian history for over two decades, Panikkar put together a course on the history of ideas in India. In that course, he assembled

a large repository of ideas that were important and influential during the 19th century. His approach was to construct a dynamic ledger book of ideas in which deletions, additions and modifications were constantly happening. The ledger book also contained ideas that were mutually contradictory. Nonetheless, there was a long, seamless chain of important ideas — from Rammohan Roy to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, from Vivekananda to Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandari — that shaped peoples' beliefs and actions. There were other courses in the Master's programme dealing with economic and political structures. It was left to students to connect the threads.

KN, as he was known to his friends and admirers, was a committed teacher who always encouraged his students to disagree with him and offer contrary formulations. It was widely believed among his students that he was more likely to reward dissenting ideas with higher grades than ideas that simply conformed to his own views.

After retiring from JNU in 2001, Panikkar shifted to his hometown, Kerala, where he made important contributions to the building of academic institutions. He was the founder president of the Kerala History Congress. He was also the editor of the historical project, *Towards Freedom*, sponsored by the ICHR.

Panikkar was a public intellectual who remained uncompromisingly opposed to communalism and committed to the vision of a secular and democratic India. He never tired of reminding his readers about the dangers that communalism posed to the future of society. It was the communal fissure, much more than any other divide based on caste or language, that was capable of tearing apart the fabric of Indian society. His Marxism always nourished and nurtured his nationalism rather than losing it in its way. In his death, India has lost one of its towering social scientists, Indian history has lost one of its most distinguished practitioners, and cultural history has lost one of its most ardent advocates.

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For South Asia, Iran is not a faraway conflict



SYED MUNIR KHIASRU

THE WEST Asia conflict may be unfolding thousands of miles away, but for South Asia, its economic consequences are uncomfortably close. The region's internal stability is deeply intertwined with West Asia through two structural lifelines: Remittances and energy. The scale of this "dual dependency" can hardly be over-emphasised. India received a record \$15 billion in remittances in FY 2024-25, maintaining its position as the world's largest remittance recipient. Roughly 38 per cent of these inflows originate from GCC economies. Bangladesh received over \$30 billion in remittances in 2025, nearly half from the region. Pakistan received about \$31.2 billion. Sri Lanka, still stabilising after its recent economic crisis, recorded an all-time high of \$8.076 billion in 2025.

Remittances act as a financial shock absorber. They support household consumption, provide foreign exchange, and help stabilise balance-of-payments positions. Yet this stabilising role also masks vulnerability: If instability in the Gulf slows investment, construction, or labour demand, the effects could quickly reach South Asian economies. Then there is the reliance on imported energy. India sources around half of its crude oil from Gulf countries, while Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka too depend on petroleum products and LNG from the region. The Strait of Hormuz carries roughly one-fifth of globally traded oil and LNG. Even perceived disruptions can trigger volatility in global energy prices.

Energy markets often respond as much to geopolitical risks as to actual supply disruptions. An International Energy Agency analysis showed that insurance premiums, freight rates, and shipping delays tend to rise well before physical supply constraints emerge, pushing up import costs for energy-dependent economies like those in South Asia. A \$10 increase in crude oil prices can widen India's current account deficit by around 0.3 per cent of GDP, while reducing growth by roughly 0.5 per cent through higher inflation and rising import costs. Smaller economies with tighter fiscal margins, such as Pakistan or Sri Lanka, face greater vulnerability as rising fuel costs increase subsidy burdens and place additional strain on public finances. Export-oriented economies like Bangladesh, where the ready-made garment sector accounts for over 80 per cent of export earnings, could see competitiveness erode as freight costs rise and transit times lengthen. India may face similar pressures, with over \$75 billion in annual exports to the EU relying heavily on stable shipping routes.

The crisis also underscores the urgency of diversifying across South Asia. Expanding renewable energy and diversifying LNG suppliers could reduce exposure to supply disruptions. India has set a target of 500 GW of non-fossil fuel power capacity by 2030, while Bangladesh and Pakistan are gradually increasing investments in solar and wind energy. Reducing dependence on imported energy, strengthening reserves, and diversifying supply chains will be critical to building greater resilience against future geopolitical shocks.

The writer is senior director of the international think tank IPAG India

40 YEARS AGO

March 11, 1986



Opposition demands J&K probe

THE OPPOSITION in the Rajya Sabha sought a judicial inquiry into the incidents of Jammu and Kashmir and a firm time limit for ending Governor's rule in the state. Leaders of various groups warned the government that keeping the Assembly in suspended animation would prompt more horse-trading.

Jayewardene's invitation

PRESIDENT JULIUS Jayewardene has renewed an earlier invitation to the foreign secretary, Romesh Bhandari, to visit Co-

lombo for talks on the island's communal conflict. Bhandari has visited the island four times previously but postponed a fifth trip last month.

39 cr new taxes in Punjab

ADDITIONAL LEVIES, including an increase in sales tax, water rates, passenger tax, electricity and other levies, along with entertainment duty on films exhibited through video parlours, are proposed to the extent of Rs 39 crore. The Finance Minister, Balwant Singh, also announced a fiscal concession of Rs 6 crore by way of abolition of

the Bangladesh levy, reduction in the flat rate of agriculture power tariff by 15 per cent BHP, decrease in commercial tax on certain categories of motor vehicles and a cut in the sales tax on dry fruits.

Attendance rules relaxed

THE ACADEMIC council of Delhi University, in its meeting on Monday, decided to relax the attendance rules for students appearing for their final year examination this year. No student otherwise eligible for appearing in the examination will be debarred from taking the examination.



With a legal cloud over Trump's tariffs, countries must rethink trade deals



AJAY SRIVASTAVA

LAST MONTH, the United States and India signed a joint statement outlining a trade deal under which Washington was expected to cut reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods from 25 per cent to 18 per cent within about two weeks, while India was to submit a detailed, product-wise concession list by mid-March. Before that could happen, the US Supreme Court struck down the legal basis for those tariffs, eliminating the leverage Washington had used to secure concessions. This signalled the onset of CALM — collapse of America's leverage mechanism.

Seeking an immediate alternative, within hours of the ruling the Trump administration imposed a uniform 10 per cent tariff under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974, replacing targeted pressure with a flat duty applied equally to all trading partners. With the tariff threat gone, the incentive behind America's recent and ongoing trade deals has largely disappeared, leaving many countries to question the value of agreements meant to avoid duties that no longer exist.

Over the past year, Washington used the threat of steep "reciprocal tariffs" to push trading partners into rapid agreements, securing market access, procurement commitments and strategic alignment in exchange for lower duties. Negotiated rates were about 15 per cent for the European Union, Japan and South Korea; 20 per cent for Vietnam and Taiwan; 19 per cent for Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

The Supreme Court ruling and the new 10 per cent tariff create a threefold dilemma for US trading partners, including India. The rate is lower than most negotiated levels, the uniform levy wipes out any competitive advantage those countries enjoyed in the US market, and there is little reason to offer tariff cuts, investment pledges or procurement commitments when the same access to the US market is available without a deal.

The European Commission says new conditions are not conducive to a "fair, balanced, and mutually beneficial" deal and

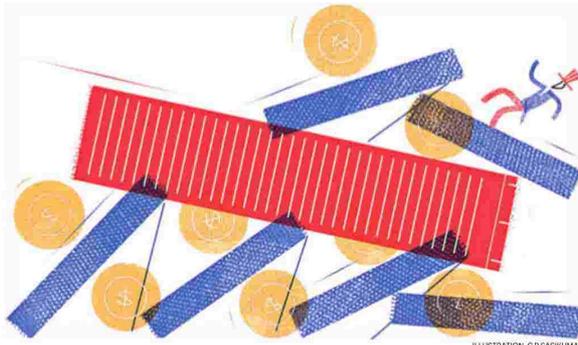


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SAKSHI/MAR

has sought clarification from Washington. Australia's trade minister called the new tariffs unjustified and said all options were under review, and Canada warned that a flat duty commitments must rest on legally durable foundations.

Across capitals, the immediate priority is to understand the durability of US tariff policy before deepening commitments or proceeding with deal ratification.

The legal arsenal shrinks. With the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) of the table, Washington's tariff options have narrowed considerably. Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 has become the US administration's immediate fallback. It permits temporary tariffs of up to 15 per cent on a global basis, but only for 150 days without congressional approval and without discrimination among countries.

Yet, this authority rests on a weak legal footing. Section 122 was crafted to address balance of payments distress — a condition the US has not faced since the dollar began floating in 1973. For that reason, tariffs imposed under this provision are likely to face legal challenges.

Other available tools are narrower and more procedurally constrained. Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 allows tariffs on national security grounds.

It is already used to impose high duties — such as 50 per cent on steel and aluminium — and could soon be extended to more products. However, these tariffs must apply uniformly to all countries, limiting leverage over specific partners.

Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 has long been a preferred tool because it permits country-specific action against unfair trade practices. But it requires detailed investigations, proof of harm and remedies proportionate to the violation. It is currently used against China and has been invoked against India over issues such as the digital tax, patent regime and medical device regulations. More countries, including India, could soon face Section 301 investigations. The likely grounds for such probes are outlined in the USTR's National Trade Estimate Report 2025.

Neither Section 232 nor Section 301 can match the speed or breadth of the discarded reciprocal tariff regime. The era of rapid, country-targeted tariff escalation is now subject to significant legal limits.

The domestic pushback is also growing. Even before the Supreme Court's February 20 ruling, US lawmakers signalled discomfort. On February 18, the US House of Representatives blocked new tariffs on Canadian goods tied to a dispute

After the ruling, all countries — whether they struck a deal or not — now face a uniform tariff. If the same tariff applies without making sweeping concessions, the rationale for such a deal disappears

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's stakes

OPERATION EPIC Fury has ignited a conflagration whose flames are now nearing India ("National interest is not at odds with core values. Recalibrate foreign policy", *IE*, March 10). The country risks energy shortages, a widening current account deficit, and rising inflation due to this impetuous war. The Indian leadership's strategic restraint appears nothing short of an abdication of its core principles. A nation that once positioned itself as a leading proponent of a rules-based world order and non-alignment now seems to have tacitly acquiesced to the whims and fancies of the American president.

Anirudh Parashar, Chandigarh

Fertility decline

AS A policy student, I found S Y Qureshi's article insightful in shifting attention beyond the economic costs of childbirth ("When the state pays for babies: Some lessons from Sikkim", *IE*, March 10). Policies that attempt to address declining fertility primarily through financial incentives risk overlooking the broader ecosystem. Parenthood today is shaped by urban pressures, gender inequality and the lived experiences of a generation that has witnessed the struggles of their own parents. Policies must therefore support parental wellbeing, shared caregiving and work-life balance.

Nandini Khurana, New Delhi

T20 Gautam Gambhir

WHAT GAUTAM Gambhir has built deserves recognition precisely because it goes against the grain of how Indian cricket has traditionally operated ("A team that is the sum of its parts", *IE*, March 10). Stars were always bigger than systems. This time, the system held firm even when the stars stepped back. Building institutions that outlast individuals is the hardest task. Indian cricket may have finally cracked it.

S.M. Jeeva, Chennai



SHIVANI SIBAL

NOTHING COULD ever happen here, right? I look at my husband for reassurance on an evening walk, just a couple of minutes before the first missiles are intercepted in Dubai on the last day of February.

A few steps later, we hear a loud bang. Something has crashed into the Palm, a few kilometres away. Our children are in our apartment, high above. I break into a run, asking my husband to call our teenage daughter and wait for them in case they rush downstairs. I reach our apartment and there is no one. The television is still playing *Gabby's Dollhouse*, my seven-year-old daughter's favourite. Her snack lies half eaten. A thick black plume of smoke is visible from the balcony. I wonder what my kids saw, where they are. My husband texts to say they are downstairs, the older one shepherding the younger to safety. I head back down the elevator, and it stops at every floor, full of people trying to evacuate. They are respectful of each other, bound not by a common language or nationality but an implicit trust in their best country.

"Dubai: The best city in India" goes the saying. It has always felt less "phoren" than anywhere else to us. The image of a glitzy billionaire city is superficial. Millions of hard-working people of all nationalities call it

The confidence and preparedness the UAE has displayed during an unprecedented situation should be studied as a model

In Dubai, missiles overhead, calm on ground

home, making a better life for their families. Pharmacists. Security guards. Nurses. Hotel staff. Many have escaped unsafe situations in their home countries. I will never forget the teenage Ukrainian boy in the elevator, sobbing when others were shellshocked. He has heard these things before.

Along with a couple of stranded friends, we take shelter with a family who live in a less crowded area. My children need reassurance. My friends call their families frantically. We find that deliveries are still running. A forgotten charger, toothbrushes, medicines, all reach us at our doorstep. Exhausted, we spend a full night pierced by siren-like emergency phone alerts.

The confidence and preparedness the UAE has displayed during an unprecedented situation should be studied as a model. There is calm and order on the ground. The leadership is visible in public places and text alerts arrive regularly. Videos circulate explaining to people what the loud booms in the air are, and there is a sense of care for all residents and tourists.

A routine sets in almost immediately, my housemates and I recall the early days of Covid. Walks in the neighbourhood. Searching the news. A visit to the park with my younger daughter, where children inform each other authori-

oratively about when and where the next missile interception will be. A birthday celebration for my stranded friend at a restaurant. Reassuring family.

Some friends begin to leave, though an equal number elect to remain. One of my dearest childhood buddies (20 years in Dubai, a successful business built from scratch) chooses to stay, along with his French wife and three young children. I ask him why. He says his work continues as usual, and that he distinguished between fear and danger in making that decision. For many nationalities, the UAE continues to be a safe haven. A Syrian friend worries about his family stranded in Lebanon, moving from village to village for safety every night.

A few days later, flights restart and we return. A ghost airport, yet somehow completely operational. The phone siren rings. An incoming missile threat. We are at the gate with hundreds waiting to board. Another alert arrives, just 30 minutes later, reassuring all that they are safe. The entire routine resumes in aplomb. Back in Delhi, we try to settle back into a routine. I walk in Lodi Gardens, jumping out of my skin when a balloon bursts at a birthday picnic, and I try to remind myself once again of the difference between fear and danger.

Sibal is the author of Equations (2021)

The killing of children in war tests the moral order



MANOJ JHA

THEY MUST have had nicknames and favourite foods. They must have hummed songs without knowing the meaning of the words. They were put to bed with stories and lullabies. Now their small bodies lie in rows in the earth. The images of scores of children killed in a targeted bombing of an Iranian school by Israel and the US show that it was decided in a cold calculation that children were acceptable losses. Our grief at witnessing this violence, if it is real, must become something harder than tears.

When children are killed in an armed conflict, whether in Iran, Gaza, or any other troubled geography, the immediate response is grief. Then there is outrage, followed by a philosophical question: What does all this mean for a world that claims to be governed by law? But international law is not silent on the protection of children. The Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols clearly state that civilians cannot be targeted. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces this protection. During armed conflict, states are obligated to respect international humanitarian law applicable to children. The Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court, defines the intentional targeting of civilians and attacks against buildings dedicated to education as war crimes. It moves beyond abstract state responsibility and has provisions that require individuals be held criminally liable for these crimes.

The standards and norms are set, but acceptance by the parties involved and the political will to execute these norms are challenging tasks. International humanitarian law rests upon a moral assumption that even in war, there are limits — violence cannot be unbounded. The protection of children is central to this understanding.

Yet we are confronted with a recurring pattern wherein schools, hospitals, and families are being attacked without moral compunction or legal consequence. Governments across the world speak of concerns. They call for restraint on all sides but very often cowardice wears the garb of diplomacy.

From a realist perspective in international relations, law is secondary to power. States act primarily to secure survival and advance national interests. Under such hardened, amoral security doctrines, civilian casualties, including those of children, have come to be accepted as tragic yet predictable outcomes. Critics say it is naive to expect that law alone can restrain major powers, but liberal institutionalism offers a more optimistic reading, which argues that norms matter, even when repeatedly violated — conventions, courts, and monitoring mechanisms should shape state behaviour.

Civil society organisations that document, name and shame, and work towards the possibility of prosecution, however remote, do so with a conviction that they are contributing to a gradual internalisation of standards. Even powerful states must publicly justify their actions in the language of law.

It is true that all this has not always amounted to adequate redress. However, it also testifies to the moral authority of humanitarian law. But in the last few years, Western powers have lost moral authority because of their hypocrisy and insistence for selective enforcement. When certain regions are subjected to intense scrutiny while others are shielded, the universality of humanitarian law is compromised.

Ultimately, the protection of children in armed conflict serves as a litmus test for international order. Law alone cannot transform geopolitics, but it provides a moral vocabulary against which actions are judged. The death of children in the Iranian school shows that such limits exist only in letters.

The international system need not become utopian to be ethical. It requires consistency and an acknowledgement that the protection of children is not negotiable. The question, then, is not whether the law has failed us but whether the international community possesses the will to apply it evenly.

We know that history will not be kind to this moment. It will note who had the faculties to comprehend what is unjust and immoral but chose to stay quiet. However, children cannot wait for history's verdict.

It's time for world leaders to give up diplomatic ambiguity. They need to recognise that the people of the world refuse such cold calculations. We demand that international humanitarian law mean what it says. We wrote it for moments like this. For all its failures, it is still the only language we have built together.

The writer is Rajya Sabha MP from the Rashtriya Janata Dal



MAHAK SHARMA

IHAD heard that if women learned to read, they would become widows."

This is how Rassundari Devi begins her remembrance of the world that shaped her life in *Amar Jiban* (My Life), written in 1876. It sounds almost like folklore now, a superstition whispered in the corridors of a 19th-century Bengali household. But behind that sentence lies a social fear: That of a woman who could read.

Long before feminism in India became a vocabulary of movements and manifestos, it existed in quieter forms, in the small, interior rebellions of women who lived within the boundaries of the

household. Rassundari Devi did not march into public life. Instead, she narrated a life that unfolded among kitchens, courtyards, children, and prayers. Yet within that domestic world, something radical was happening: A woman was teaching herself to read.

The hunger for literacy appears in her writing almost like a secret longing. "My heart longed to learn to read," she recalls, "but how could I? Who would teach me?" The question carries the weight of an entire social order where knowledge belonged to men, and women were expected to remain outside its doors.

Marriage did not change this world. Rassundari entered a large household where the rhythm of life was set by endless domestic work, by cooking, cleaning, childcare. The home, often imagined as a

place of comfort, appears in her narrative instead as a space of vigilance. "I was always frightened," she writes, "wondering whether I had done something wrong". In this confession, the household reveals itself as a structure of discipline.

Yet resistance sometimes begins in the smallest gestures. For Rassundari Devi, it began with a page. At night, when the house slept, she would secretly keep a

'My heart longed to learn to read; she recalls, 'but how could I? Who would teach me?' The question carries the weight of an entire social order where knowledge belonged to men

fragment of a book and attempt to decipher its letters. "I secretly kept a page from a book and tried to learn it while cooking," she remembers. The kitchen, the symbol of women's confinement, slowly becomes a classroom.

Unlike many modern narratives of rebellion, Rassundari Devi's story does not present learning as a defiance of religion. On the contrary, she often describes her journey toward literacy as a blessing granted by God. Faith, which was frequently used to reinforce women's obedience, becomes in her narrative a source of courage. This is perhaps what makes *Amar Jiban* such an unusual document in the history of Indian writing. The everyday becomes the archive of experience. What earlier literary traditions dismissed as trivial begin to appear,

through her narrative, as the very material of history.

There is also something striking about the voice in Rassundari Devi's story: It does not dramatise her struggle. Her writing moves gently, almost hesitantly, through memory. But within that modest tone lies a profound shift — she is telling her own. In that sense, *Amar Jiban* anticipates what we now call "own voices" — the insistence that lived experience must speak for itself.

Seen from this perspective, Rassundari Devi's autobiography marks an important turning point. The story of Indian feminism does not begin only in public debates or political movements. Sometimes it begins in a kitchen, with a woman slowly learning the alphabet of her own voice.

Sharma is a book editor and freelance writer

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• POLITY

Impeaching the CEC: The law, and the process



Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar. ANI

Damini Nath
New Delhi, March 10

WITH THE Opposition this week working on a motion to impeach Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar for alleged "biased conduct", the process that is expected to be followed will be the same as the one for removing a judge. He was appointed as Election Commissioner on March 15, 2024 and took over as CEC on February 19, 2025. His tenure is till January 2026.

The Opposition's contention

Initiated by the Trinamool Congress, the Opposition has drafted the impeachment motion against Kumar and is in the process of collecting the required number of signatures from MPs, sources say. One of the grounds against him, as per sources, will be his "completely biased conduct". The TMC has accused the Election Commission of targeting West Bengal during the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, in which it deployed micro-observers to verify the decisions taken by the statutory authority only in the state.

Process for removal

As per Article 324 (5) of the Constitution, the "Chief Election Commissioner shall not be removed from his office except in like manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court". It also says that Election Commissioners can only be removed on the CEC's recommendation, and that the process is "subject to provisions of any law made by Parliament" on the matter.

In December 2023, Parliament passed the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023. Section 11 provides for the resignation and removal process, the same as mentioned in the Constitution.

• THE 2023 ACT

Section 11 of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, provides for the resignation and removal process.

It says: "The Chief Election Commissioner shall not be removed from his office except in like manner and on the like grounds as a Judge of the Supreme Court."

of the members of that House present and voting has been presented to the President in the same session for such removal on the ground of proved misbehaviour or incapacity."

The next clause adds that Parliament may pass a law to regulate the procedure for presenting such an address and investigation and proof of "misbehaviour or incapacity" of a Judge. As per Section 3 of the Judges (Inquiry) Act, a motion for presenting an address to the President for removal of a Judge must be signed by at least 100 members in the case of the Lok Sabha or 50 members in the Rajya Sabha. The Speaker of the Lok Sabha or the Chairman of the Council of States or Rajya Sabha can decide to admit or refuse the motion. In the case of the motion being accepted, the Speaker or Chairman has to set up a three-member committee to investigate. The members of the committee have to include one Judge of the Supreme Court, one Chief Justice of a High Court, and a distinguished jurist.

The report of the committee is then to be submitted to the Speaker or Chairman. In case the committee finds the Judge guilty of misbehaviour or suffering from incapacity, the motion will be taken up by the House or Houses in which it is pending, the Act says. If passed, the address to remove the Judge is sent to the President.

• CULTURE

Jhumka, Ralph Lauren, and the dangling question of patenting heritage crafts

Rinku Ghosh
New Delhi, March 10

WHEN RALPH LAUREN models strutted out in a corporate dandy attire at the Paris Fashion Week wearing *jhumkas* — Indian half-dome earrings in oxidised metal — it didn't matter if they were picked up from the Bareilly bazaar. Delhi's jewellery and silver jewellers of Jaipur. As the fashion label tagged it as another "authentic vintage accessory" instead of crediting Indian craftsmanship, it seemed a perfunctory nod to heritage and all about cultural misappropriation.

Despite the continued backlash on social media over Prada poaching on the cultural legacy of Kollari chappals, global brands are clearly not collaborating with or recognising local artisans.

What's the origin of *jhumka*?

The *jhumka* has endured since 300 BC, with origins that can be traced back to ancient temple sculptures and royal adorn-

ment across South India and the Deccan. "This was particularly endorsed by the Chola dynasty," says Pratiksha Prashant, CEO of Kishandas & Co, a 150-year-old jewellery house from Hyderabad that recreated Chola-era jewellery for *Pomellato's* *Sevan 2*.

"Over centuries, it travelled across regions, evolving through Mughal, temple and courtly influences while retaining its signature bell-like form. In Hyderabad and across India, *jhumkas* became an essential part of bridal and festive jewellery," she says.

However, jewellery specialist Preeti Agarwal credits the *jhumka's* origins to tribal accessorisation. "Rather than a definitive geography, it could have come from our earliest accessories made of cowries and fruit shells. By the time metallurgy developed and reached its pinnacle in the Chola dynasty, bell-shaped earrings became iconic," she says.

What makes a *jhumka* different from other earrings?

"That would have to be its unmistakable



A Ralph Lauren model wears *jhumkas* during the Paris Fashion Week. INSTAGRAM

bell-shaped silhouette and the sense of movement it carries. Unlike most danglers that are linear or flat, a *jhumka* has a sculptural, three-dimensional dome that sways beautifully with every step. It traditionally begins with an ear stud that flows into the dome," says Prashant. The design is often

finished with pearls or gemstone drops, sometimes in layers.

Why is it difficult to patent heritage crafts?

According to intellectual property (IP) lawyer Safi Anand, traditional cultural expressions like *jhumkas*, *bandhani*, *chikan-kumari* or *kolhapuri* often fall into a grey area in IP law. "Copyright protects original works, not centuries-old designs. Design law protects new designs, not traditional ones. Trademarks protect brands, not cultural motifs. So, heritage sits in a legal vacuum. Culture is valuable, but legally under-protected," says the senior partner and head of Trademarks, Commercial & Contractual IP at Anand and Anand. So no case can be made out about compensation.

Since luxury fashion thrives on borrowing aesthetics from around the world, brands have been drawing inspiration from the developing world with weak protection laws. "That's why Moroccan embroidery, Mexican textiles, native American bread-

work, Indian jewellery and craft have become globalised fashion motifs, often stripped of their cultural narrative," he adds.

Besides, unlike art or academia, fashion has no strong tradition of citation. "That absence of attribution is what fuels cultural appropriation debates. From a policy perspective, heritage gets diluted because craft travels without context. I often say it is de-contextualisation as the design survives, but the story does not," says Anand.

What then can be done to protect our heritage?

Global brands could adopt a norms similar to museum attribution, a scholarly process of determining the creator, origin, date and authenticity of an artwork or artefact, often establishing it as the work of a specific artist or culture. This costs nothing but is only a cultural acknowledgement. Brands could co-create with local artisans and validate their originality this way.

"Media outreach is a way to grab attention, but not a solution. We need to focus on pro-

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

'Religious ideals will live on in Iran, not Islamism'



EXPERT EXPLAINS
FAISSAL DEVIJI
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, OXFORD

WITH THE war waged by the US and Israel on Iran entering its twelfth day, Faissal Devji, a professor of global and imperial history at Balliol College, University of Oxford, reflects on the response by the Muslim world to the war, and on the likely future now of the political project that was begun by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. He spoke to **Monojit Majumdar**.

The West has perpetuated a narrative that the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is an opportunity for Iranians to break out of the clutches of murderous authoritarianism. However, soon after the assassination at the beginning of the war, the mood in the Iranian street seemed to be more of grief and outrage than joy and relief. Why?

Like many societies around the world today, Iran's is deeply polarised. Expressions of joy at Khamenei's assassination on the streets of Tehran were more than matched by those of mourning soon after. Different classes of people have different experiences and views of their government, with those benefiting from it, both among state-created elites and the poor who depend on what remains of its welfare, more likely to be loyal.

But the scale and continuing pace of the US-Israeli attacks on the country may well invite a large number of people behind its government if only to maintain some measure of civil order in the chaos. Recall that the bombing of Gaza was also meant to destroy all support for Hamas but was unable to do so, probably for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons.

How important a force could the Shia Islamic concepts of martyrdom and resistance, along with Iranian



A billboard in Tehran from January 2026 showing Iran's late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (left), and his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (right). THE NEW YORK TIMES

nationalism, be in shaping the Iranian people's response to this ongoing humiliation?

Khamenei seems to have wanted to die a martyr, refusing to leave his house or hide in a bunker, and in doing so, managing in the end to gain some redemption from his otherwise disastrous career.

While this kind of sacrifice is certainly linked to religious ideals, it also has a more general and universal meaning, with the martyr refusing to become a mere victim and thus able to inspire heroism and pride rather than anger and despair. This was Mahatma Gandhi's view of sacrifice as well, and he often cited the Shia Imam Hussain (who was killed in Karbala in 680 CE) as its model. Martyrdom is a manifestation not of suicide, but of fearlessness, and in attempting to embody this virtue, Khamenei probably sought in his last moments to attach them to the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which had established this ideal as its own.

Based on your understanding of how Islamic ideology can manifest as political identity, what is next for Iran and its people over the next few years? Could Islam as a political force continue to shape the post-

Place in the Muslim world

Most Muslim countries are deeply against the war, and may think of it as being anti-Muslim, without having to invoke Islam in rejecting it.

Iran remains a political actor with a strategy of its own.

Khamenei transition?

I think Islamism has been a dead project politically for some two decades now. It was founded after World War II in a global context defined by new political ideologies like communism and fascism. Modelled on the former in particular, Islamism's glory days were not accidentally during the Cold War.

But Islamism had been founded by lay intellectuals, like the Indian Islamic ideologue and philosopher Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979), and it was only much later, when already in decline, that clerics in places like Iran and Afghanistan adopted it. The end of the Cold War and with it the battle of ideological states as we had known, put Islamism on notice — and today it only enjoys power in a couple of countries, one of them being Iran.

While religious vocabularies and ideals will survive there as elsewhere, I doubt if Islamism or its domination by clerics will. It is even possible we shall see Iran taken over by the military initially and by laymen subsequently.

At this moment, Iran appears to be largely isolated in the Muslim world. Is there a moral or sectarian dimension to this isolation?

• LEGAL

Across BJP-ruled states, anti-conversion laws mirror each other

Vineet Bhalla
New Delhi, March 10

THE MAHARASHTRA Cabinet last week cleared the Dharma Swatantrya Adhinyam, 2026, a Bill proposing rigorous imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of Rs 5 lakh for unlawful religious conversions. It is the latest in a series of similar state laws enacted by BJP governments over the last eight years. They often have the stated goal of curbing the alleged forcible conversion and marriage of Hindu women, termed "love jihad".

Since 2017, nine states have passed laws on religious conversion — Jharkhand (2017), Uttarakhand (2018), Himachal Pradesh (2019), Uttar Pradesh (2020), Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh (2021), Haryana and Karnataka (2022), and Rajasthan (2025).

The statutes' stated objective is to prohibit conversion by force, fraud or inducement, and they follow a shared legal template. A batch of petitions challenging these laws is listed for hearing today by a three-judge SC bench, comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joyymalya Bagchi and Vipul M Panchohi.

Similar legislation

The structural similarities across these

laws begin with how they define the crime. The laws in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Haryana define "allurement" or "inducement" to convert to include not just cash or employment but also intangible benefits such as a "better lifestyle" or "divine pleasure". The Rajasthan law expands this to the digital realm, criminalising conversion through "online solicitation" and the dissemination of "propaganda" via social media.

A distinct feature of the laws in Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana and Rajasthan is the criminalisation of conversion for marriage, declaring any such marriage as legally void.

The laws also require state sanction before an individual can change their faith. In Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh, individuals must submit a declaration to the district magistrate (DM) at least 30 days in advance. This timeline was extended in later laws. UP and MP mandate a 60-day notice, while Rajasthan's Act requires 90 days.

In most states, the DM is empowered to conduct a police inquiry to ascertain the "intention" for conversion. Failure to provide this information may invite criminal liability for the individual and the priest conducting the ceremony.

Similar template, now under challenge

Recent laws across many states have mandated bureaucratic permissions to change faith.

They have also reversed the burden of proof in criminal trials for unlawful religious conversion. The laws have faced legal challenges for infringing upon personal liberties.

These laws flip the general principle of criminal justice — innocent until proven guilty — by placing the burden of proof on the accused. The person charged with causing or facilitating illegal conversion must prove that it was not effected through misrepresentation, force, coercion or allurement.

The quantum of punishment has also seen a sharp upward trajectory. While the Jharkhand law of 2017 prescribed imprisonment of up to three years, the UP law amended in 2024 raised imprisonment to up to 14 years in cases involving minors, women or SC/STs or in "mass conversions".

Across states, the offence of unlawful conversion is cognisable (allowing police to arrest without a warrant) and non-bailable (where bail is not a matter of right).

Judicial pushback

In August 2021, the Gujarat High Court stayed sections of the state's amended anti-conversion law that assumed religious conversions for marriage were fraudulent or forced. The court's rationale was "to protect the parties solemnising marriage inter-faith from being unnecessarily harassed".

In November 2022, the Madhya Pradesh HC struck down a section of the Freedom of

While there may well be a sectarian dimension in the lack of support Iran has received from other Muslim countries, more important, I think, is the fact that with the decline of Islamism and the widespread repudiation of the globalised forms of militancy that had briefly succeeded it, Islam no longer provides the primary language to express support and solidarity.

Leaving aside the Gulf states, most Muslim countries are deeply concerned by and against the war, whether it is governments or their citizens we are talking about. They may well think of the war as being anti-Muslim, but without having to invoke Islam in rejecting it.

This indicates a hugely significant and global shift in the role of Islam in contemporary politics. But again, we have already seen this happen in similar Muslim responses to the Gaza war, which cannot be attributed to sectarianism.

The state that emerged after the 1979 Islamic Revolution has suffered grievous physical injury, and its overseas proxies have been all but dismantled over the past couple of years. The future of the Iranian model of Shia religious politics beyond Iran's borders?

Unlike the Gaza war, which gave rise to a few, and for the most part, politically insignificant protests in the Muslim world, the attack on Iran and Khamenei's assassination has already led to massive demonstrations in parts of Pakistan and India. These seem to have been largely Shia, and so made use of the mourning rituals familiar to that tradition.

In my view, the relative dearth of protests during the Gaza war signalled not any lack of support for the Palestinians but the fact that there seemed to be no viable political party or cause to support, just a legalistic and humanitarian one dominated by the West. Neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority have any authority or legitimacy in the Muslim world as a whole, not least because they are seen as lacking a political vision and abilities.

The Palestinians were certainly sympathised with but seen more as victims than political actors, just as the Uyghur (in China) and Rohingya (in Myanmar) have been. The same is not true of Iran, which remains a political actor with a strategy of its own.

Religion Act, which required a 60-day prior declaration to the DM before converting. The court held that compelling a citizen to disclose their intimate religious choices to the government violated the fundamental right to privacy.

In Karnataka, the HC quashed an FIR last July under the state's anti-conversion law against individuals distributing pamphlets about Islam, stating that the mere distribution of literature did not constitute an offence under the 2022 Act.

Petitions challenging the Constitutional validity of these laws have been pending before the Supreme Court since 2020. Last September, the apex court transferred such petitions pending before different High Courts to itself and tagged them together.

The petitioners include the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, and some individuals. They have argued that these statutes are vague, over-broad and grant excessive discretion to the police, leading to harassment of interfaith couples and minority communities.

They contend that the laws violate the fundamental rights to life and personal liberty and the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Constitution by subjecting personal choices to state scrutiny.

Can the *jhumka* be credited as uniquely Indian?

Since it appears to originate from the Indian subcontinent, it merits attribution. "Because the *jhumka* has a traditional form and a ritualistic and cultural history, technically, it cannot be identified as just another dangler," clarifies Anand.

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2026

A new beginning

India must ensure that Nepal has a stake in our growth story

IN NEPAL'S GENERAL elections, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) with a 35-year-old rapper-turned-politician as its prime ministerial face has secured a majority of the 165 directly elected seats and is likely to do so for the 110 seats based on proportional representation as well in the country's 275-member Lower House. The decimation of the traditional political parties augurs well for transformative change—as the RSP successfully campaigned on a platform of better governance and anti-corruption. Nepal has seen 14 governments since it became a democracy 18 years ago, and virtually every senior political leader—including KP Sharma Oli and five other former prime ministers—faces serious corruption charges.

Regime changes in an unstable region can do present challenges for India's engagement with its neighbourhood. Besides the growing role of China, there is the need to address the desire of neighbours to seek more strategic autonomy in their relationship with India. However, the ongoing political revolution that convulsed Nepal, when a Gen Z-led uprising toppled the government headed by PM Oli last September, holds out promise for India to reset its relations with its Himalayan neighbour. PM Narendra Modi has congratulated the leadership of RSP and expressed hope that joint endeavours India-Nepal relations will scale new heights. The challenge for India, however, is to step up economic engagement—with more trade due to better connectivity—with the new regime in Nepal while dispelling the perception of being an overbearing big brother. India must engage on the basis of mutual interests and reciprocal sensitivity and develop economic interdependencies so that this Himalayan nation with a population of 30 million acquires a greater stake in our growth story.

That said, there is indeed much to look forward to as the rapper-turned-politician, Balendra Shah, will also be the first person to hold high office from the Madhesi community that inhabits the southern Terai plains in Nepal and has strong cultural and linguistic ties with India. Without appearing intrusive, there is much that we can contribute as the new regime seeks to fulfil its ambitious electoral promises of generating 1.2 million jobs in five years and reducing foreign migration as Gen Z is extremely frustrated by the lack of jobs. Unemployment of those between 15 and 24 years of age is as high as 22.7%, forcing most of them to migrate abroad.

While India definitely looks forward to improved ties with Nepal's new regime, the major imponderable of course is the growing footprint of the dragon. The previous Oli-led dispensation had a penchant for turning to Beijing, which irked India. There is little that India can do if neighbours choose to further their ambitions on economic development by engaging with China. The regime change in Nepal, however, could entail a different strategy in this regard as Shah has expressed reservations about China's growing influence in the country. The RSP's decisive triumph in the general elections is clearly not the script Beijing expected. The party, for its part, seeks to change Nepal from being a "buffer state" between China and India to a "bridge" promoting "trilateral economic partnership and connectivity" between all the three Himalayan countries, according to the Financial Times. How this putative strategy actually works out in practice bears watching in the months ahead as India comes to terms with the political change in Nepal.

Anthropic is bringing something new to AI

FOR YEARS TECHNOLOGY has been defined by the unstoppable growth of a handful of companies. Big Tech's consolidation of power seemed a foregone conclusion even as Sam Altman's OpenAI sparked an artificial intelligence boom with ChatGPT. Having promised to build AI for humanity, Altman became a proxy for Microsoft Corp., just as his rival in the race to construct utopia, Demis Hassabis, now ships product for Google.

But the last two months of market upheaval—and standoffs with the Pentagon over how this tech might be militarised—have shown a company breaking that mold. Anthropic's PBC has no single Big Tech backer it can call a proxy (not yet anyway) and it has shunned the Silicon Valley "bills clearing" mantra of shipping fast to dominate a market and patch problems on the fly. Its Chief Executive Officer Dan Amodei has said "no" to many of the things Altman rushed into.

However, disingenuous Amodei may one day turn out to be about safety—particularly if his products destroy jobs—an encouraging picture is emerging of its impact on the industry. Anthropic is a serious competitor to tech's established order and is shaking things up in an AI business that has itself been wildly disrupting entire corporate sectors, or at least their share prices. That is a healthy outcome for a tech market that was becoming far too entrenched.

In the three years since ChatGPT sparked the generative AI boom, the market capitalisations of the Magnificent Seven tech stocks have increased by \$1.2 trillion, their total value (about \$2.0 trillion) now on par with the gross domestic product of China. Some of those giants like Microsoft and Alphabet are behind today's most popular chatbots. And while a cluster of promising startups might once have loosened their stranglehold, the upstarts have mostly been hoovered up by the big incumbents through stealth acquisitions.

Anthropic has somehow avoided that fate. The company, whose flagship chatbot Claude is beloved by software engineers and startup founders in Silicon Valley, has significant financial backing from Big Tech that has yet to translate to operational influence. Amazon is thought to hold between 15% and 20% of the company and Alphabet's Google has 14%.

Though Microsoft's 27% of OpenAI is not a much bigger stake, it comes with deep product integration. Microsoft's Azure is OpenAI's cloud provider, and Microsoft's Copilot chatbot is built on OpenAI's models (on Monday Microsoft said it would incorporate Claude CoWork, too). The two companies' commercial fates are intertwined in a way that Anthropic's and Amazon's are not.

Anthropic's Amodei has also taken a more focused approach to product development. Claude, for instance, does not generate images, limiting the risks around users producing deepfakes. And, unlike OpenAI, the company has zeroed in on business customers rather than consumers, meaning it avoids paying the hefty computing costs of supporting a vast user base and is on course to generate almost \$20 billion in annual revenue.

That's a very different approach to Altman, who's become the "Yes Man" of AI in his manner of rushing to embrace every available opportunity. OpenAI introduced a shopping feature for ChatGPT last year, and has walked back those plans in the last few weeks. Altman was opportunistic again when he struck a deal with the Pentagon, taking advantage of its fallout with the Anthropic, but later admitting that his own deal was "sloppy." Amodei's commercial success is what gave such weight to his "no" to the Pentagon over guarantees to not use Claude for autonomous weapons or spying on Americans. A struggling startup wouldn't have commanded the same attention and sparked the same public debate as one worth \$380 billion.

That is one thing genuine competition can offer beyond pricing pressure: a greater chance of breaking the ideological gripthink of established players and forcing hard questions that monopolists rarely have to answer. It's hard to see Microsoft, Google, or OpenAI rebuffing the Defense Department in quite the same way. With any luck, that principle will extend into areas like consumer safety and terms of service for customers, shaping what AI becomes and adding some friction to the "move fast, break things" strategy that has fuelled the boom. Competition is essential to healthy markets and, for the present in AI, there might be enough of it to make a difference.



PARMY OLSON
Bloomberg



WAR TALK

US President Donald Trump

I think the war is very complete, pretty much. They have no navy, no communications, they've got no air force

NIHILISTIC WAR

AS IRAN FIGHTS AGAINST ISRAEL-US, EXPECT STRATEGIC & ECONOMIC UNCERTAINTIES TO CAUSE MORE DISRUPTION

A dangerous turn for the world

TOGETHER WITH BENYAMIN Netanyahu's Israel, Donald Trump's America has committed aggression against Iran. His Operation Epic Fury, which harked Israel's assassination of Iran's leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has signalled that Washington has joined Jerusalem in violating international law. Vowing "death and destruction from the sky, all day long," Washington's dubious explanation that it feared that Iran might use its missiles against the US because of the unprovoked Israeli attack on Iran in June 2025 does not stand up to scrutiny.

Khamenei headed a repressive and unpopular dictatorship. As street demonstrations took place last January in Iran, Trump encouraged dissidents to "keep protesting" because "help is on the way". But he has shown no signs of deploying US troops to substantiate this claim or of helping Iranians wanting constitutional reform. Even reformists calling for constitutional change have condemned the invasion. They have included former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and former Parliamentary Speaker Mehdi Karubi.

At another level, within the US, the war lacks both consent and goals by which its success can be gauged. True to form, Trump has failed to justify his administration's breaking of international law. At least the Bush administration tried to win international and domestic support for his disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq before launching it.

The only demand Trump made was that Iran should confirm that it was not building a nuclear arsenal. Claiming that "we haven't heard those secret words: 'We will never have a nuclear weapon'", he blatantly avoided mentioning Iran's disavowal of any intention to develop them. This is another example of Trump's famous propensity to do



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what he wants without restraint or justification. His assertion that time is running out and deployment of the US navy in waters near Iran created the image of a war of choice. There was no sign of any impending Iranian pre-emptive action. Trump's diplomacy with Iran has been a deception tactic. Negotiations for resolving differences with Iran were reportedly going well. Just two days before the US and Israel attacked, American and Iranian negotiators held parleys in Geneva. Oman's foreign minister mediated and was optimistic that significant progress had been made. More talks were envisaged, raising hopes that enough progress had been made to start drafting an agreement. For the US, however, the negotiations were a deception tactic aimed at covering

and Road Initiative and it is involved in their development projects. The weaker any Iranian regime becomes—whether from American or Israeli military strikes or domestic unrest—the more Iran will become dependent on China diplomatically, economically, and technologically. If China is unable to contain the conflict, its influence across the developing world could be deflated, though not more than that of the US, which by abolishing USAID and bullying its allies, has lost international goodwill. China is sending a diplomatic envoy to Iran's neighbouring countries. Chinese

Regional turmoil
The Israeli-American strikes on Iran have profound implications for global energy markets. In retaliation, Iran has closed the Strait of Hormuz and put the world's oil supplies and prices at risk. This lesson has not been lost on China, which has stopped exporting refined oil to foreign countries.



Foreign Minister Wang Yi has held phone talks with his counterparts from Russia, Iran, Oman, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, emphasising the need to uphold the UN Charter. Wang has pointed out that military operations must be stopped immediately to return to dialogue and negotiation, and further escalation of tensions and spillover of conflicts must be avoided. Wang has also urged the Gulf countries, often divided between themselves, to unite against external interference to "keep their future and destiny in their own hands"—a clear reference to China's wish that they should not be led by the US.

In contrast to China, which quickly denounced the assassination of Khamenei and the US's violation of international law, India belatedly condemned the former and has yet to ensure the violation of the UN Charter. India is hardly looking like the global power it claims to be. The Iranian frigate sunk by a US submarine on March 4 in the Indian Ocean was returning home after joining naval drills at India's invitation. Delhi's argument that the ship was sunk far from India's maritime territory only makes India appear small-minded and unconcerned about the maintenance of international law. What reward will it get from the US in return? Will Washington's permission for India to buy Russian oil for 30 days give Delhi satisfaction?

True to form, Trump has failed to justify his administration's breaking of international law
work. In return, Beijing has become Tehran's largest trading partner and its best source of technology and security cooperation, empowering Iran's ability to withstand Western pressure. China is also concerned about its interests in West Asia. West Asian states have joined its Belt and Road Initiative and it is involved in their development projects. The weaker any Iranian regime becomes—whether from American or Israeli military strikes or domestic unrest—the more Iran will become dependent on China diplomatically, economically, and technologically. If China is unable to contain the conflict, its influence across the developing world could be deflated, though not more than that of the US, which by abolishing USAID and bullying its allies, has lost international goodwill. China is sending a diplomatic envoy to Iran's neighbouring countries. Chinese

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Outlook
The US and Israel lack a grand strategy to rebuild Iran after the war or to stabilise West Asia. Their callous leaders have no concern for the suffering of ordinary Iranians. It is even uncertain how long they will remain united against Iran. As Iran fights against chaotic Israeli and American dominance, expect the strategic and economic uncertainties to cause further disruption worldwide.

UGC equity rules are excessive



Respectively Chairman, Aarin Capital, and management consultant

TV MOHANDAS PAI VENKATARAMANAN K

They pre-judge the "oppressed" and "oppressed" categories. Such a framework ignores basic safeguards, due process, and balance

THE UNIVERSITY GRANTS Commission (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, have ignited a fierce debate across India's academia since their notification on January 13. Though the Supreme Court has granted a temporary stay, the regulations are not yet rolled back. Public outrage has centred largely on the definition of caste discrimination, which singles out general category individuals as oppressors while excluding them from protective coverage.

The new rules seem like a knee-jerk reaction to intense media coverage of isolated cases, rather than evidence of widespread caste discrimination. The 2022-23 (provisional) AISHE report shows 60,380 higher educational institutions with 4.38 crore students. Of this, 2.66 crore (61%) are SC/ST/OBCs. Yet UGC data records only 378 complaints of caste-linked discrimination—roughly 0.00087% of enrolled students.

The UGC provides no details of these complaints (nature, seriousness, evidence, outcomes, or background of the accused), making it impossible to gauge their scale or seriousness. Despite the negligible rate, the UGC introduced sweeping new rules without public consultation. This disproportionate response risks creating caste conflicts, social disorder, and over-regulation of campuses based on rare cases instead of balanced, data-driven policy.

Under Section 5(6), each equity committee must include at least three senior professors, besides staff, student, and civil society representatives. Section 8(c) requires the panel to meet within 24 hours of

a complaint to take "appropriate action", while Section 8(d) mandates recommendations within 15 days.

In top-tier STEM institutions, where faculty face heavy teaching loads and intense research pressure for publications, rankings, career progression, and funding, these tight timelines create a disruption and a culture of fear. Without any preliminary screening or prima facie validity check, senior professors risk being frequently pulled into caste-related conflicts, mandatory meetings, and investigations.

The 24-hour and 15-day clauses also invite misuse against students—a strategically timed complaint could force the accused into immediate proceedings, disrupting preparation and performance in a highly competitive environment. Moreover, the undefined term "appropriate action" grants the committee broad, unchecked powers, increasing the risk of abuse.

Sections 6(3), 7(b) and 8(a) permit the complainant's identity to remain anonymous. This is highly prejudicial to the accused, who must be given the right to confront and cross-examine the complainant—a right rendered impossible by the anonymity. Moreover, the rules prescribe no procedure for issuing notice, granting an opportunity of hearing, or providing any procedural safeguards to the accused. This violates the principles of natural justice and the

constitutional guarantee of justice to all.

Under Section 8(d), a copy of the equity report should be sent to the head of the institution and the aggrieved person. No provision is made to supply the report to the accused, which is manifestly arbitrary. This reduces the process to a kangaroo court where one is denied any scope of defence. The accused has a fundamental right to know the allegations and any findings made by any administrative or quasi-judicial authority which may have civil or penal consequences against him or her.

Therefore, it contravenes Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution.

Section 3.1(e) says discrimination could be implicit and Section 5.10(h) gives arbitrary powers to every institution to create its own discrimination list without any uniform national standards or objective basis. The open-ended approach risks labelling routine academic or social interactions as implicit discrimination—such as a faculty member delaying email replies, excluding someone from a project group, team selection in sports, or a casual remark. Without clear boundaries, students, faculty, and staff become vulnerable to highly subjective complaints, fostering an atmosphere of fear, disorder, potential blackmail, and harassment.

Section 5(6) requires the equity committee to include two civil society representatives with "relevant experience", but

fails to define what qualifies as such experience. This is problematic because such academic bodies have no stake in the institution's members' performance or reputation. Unlike faculty or staff, they are neither academic experts nor law-enforcement authorities. Many civil society organisations in India are ideologically aligned (often left-leaning), heavily politicised, foreign-funded, and agenda-driven. Many have shown little regard for institutional reputation and would be more than eager to amplify complaints for their own interests. Including NGOs in equity panels risks rendering educational institutions hostage to external groups with no stake.

In response to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha on March 27, 2023, the ministry of education revealed that general category students accounted for 50% of all suicides in IITs, NITs, and IIMs. Yet, the new equity regulations overlook this reality, focusing protections and mechanisms primarily on other categories.

The UGC rules stand as a classic example of a regulator succumbing to woke activism that has blown up a largely isolated problem through relentless media campaigns. The rules pre-judge the "oppressor" and "oppressed" categories. Such a framework ignores basic safeguards, due process, and balance, risking misuse and turning India's diverse higher education campuses into a fear-based war zone. The rules must be rolled back and replaced with new regulations adhering to the principles of justice and equality—inclusive of all categories of students, faculty, and staff.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Brace for uncertainty

Apropos of "Crude reality" (FE, March 10), as the war in West Asia prolongs, India must brace for energy uncertainty with rising crude prices and supply disruptions likely threatening inflation, growth, and rupee stability. India must diversify crude imports, strengthen and prudently use strategic petroleum reserves, and intensify diplomatic outreach to major producers to prevent shortages, especially when

Russian oil cargoes are stranded at sea. Policy support for refiners and oil companies is crucial to manage volatile prices, while calibrated fuel pricing and targeted LPG subsidies can balance the interests of energy firms and consumers. At the same time, faster expansion of renewable energy, domestic exploration, and prudent fiscal management can reduce dependence on imported crude and help safeguard the economy. —PV Prakash, Mumbai

Principle-based rules

Apropos of "Beyond consolidation" (FE, March 10), the point about over-prescription deserves attention. A regulator buried under 22,000 words of rules isn't necessarily strong. When compliance becomes an end in itself, the main objective, market integrity, can get lost. The case for principle-based regulation is practical, not ideological. Broad, clearly stated principles allow Sebi to respond to new

forms of market abuse without waiting for fresh legislation. The US manages securities regulation with a fraction of India's rule count. That gap must prompt reflection. Structural separation of Sebi's functions is equally overdue. Consolidating laws is a good first step. Building an institution that is genuinely ring-fenced and future-ready is the harder, more critical task. —M Barathi, Bangalore

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com

The Rashomon War, Clash of News Genres

New outlets vs established Western ones

Almost a fortnight into it, the war in West Asia is no longer just geographic, but epistemic — relating to how we perceive things. Opinion is polarised to the point of caricature. But more striking is how information — news — itself has become 'genre-specific'. News consumers no longer merely agree or disagree on interpretation, but as war-junkies, they select their preferred narrative architecture, occasionally stepping out to encounter the 'other' narrative, if at all. For some, the war is a heroic defence of civilisation, reported in the register of epic (Herculean) drama. For others, it's a grim tale of imperial overreach, narrated in tragic or defiant tones. Each side produces and consumes not facts but 'stories' as reportage, tailored to taste.

Western outlets — from which most of Indian media imports international news owing to a relative absence of 'boots on the ground' — long accustomed to setting the global frame, now find their monopoly challenged. This has as much to do with the plethora of unsubstantiated social media content, as it has to do with fragmentation of trust giving renewed visibility to non-Western mainstream media pipelines like Al Jazeera. Earlier dismissed as 'regional perspectives', or 'propaganda', in the era of Fox, etc, they now elicit audiences eager for alternatives to the familiar Anglo-American script.

This 'war of genres' has consequences. Policy debates shaped not by shared baselines of fact but by competing dramaturgies. A ceasefire proposal is framed as magnanimity in one outlet, capitulation in another. Civilian casualties are tragic inevitabilities, or deliberate atrocities, depending on the channel/social media feed. If the First Iraq War gave us the first near-real-time 'television war', and made CNN a household name for us, the current crisis is the first 'Rashomon war' — after the 1950 Kurosawa film in which the same events are described in contradictory, self-serving ways by different people — which is consumed depending on which side in the 'audio-visual game' you prefer to be on.

Local Sourcing Key to Weapons 'Autonomy'

India has remained the world's second-largest arms buyer despite a strong indigenisation drive. Finds Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri). The top buyer is Ukraine, a country at war. So, effectively, India is the preeminent arms importer and is likely to retain this status for a while. That does not, however, detract from its efforts to make more of its weapons systems at home. India is the fastest-growing major economy and defence expenditure — so goes the general calculus — must keep up. Which translates into higher imports as well as local sourcing. Since indigenisation is starting off from a small base, imports will have to fill in domestic capacity is achieved.

Import substitution in military hardware has a nuanced relationship with combat-readiness. As a country imports more to be battle-ready, it can keep raising the localisation bar with foreign arms suppliers. This is easier to achieve in a competitive arms market. India's lowering its dependence on Russia as its principal arms supplier. In the bargain, it's shopping around more on its terms as the world's major arms buyer. Its strategic orientation allows it to cast a wide net, which should come in handy for local vendor development. Yet, there remain issues with domestic delivery timelines the military factors into its purchase decisions.

Combat-readiness also has to incorporate the changing nature of warfare. The indigenisation drive evolves in accordance. It may be easier to acquire domestic capability in areas like AI and cyber warfare, where India has a large enough talent pool and easier access to tech. A broad reading of the country's arms imports may not provide sufficient insights into the emerging local capabilities for tomorrow's wars.



When it's both 'very complete' and 'just the beginning'

Dialectic Don Joins The Paradox Stars

In the world of Western pop culture, there have been the Beatles' Polythene Pam, David Bowie's Major Tom, and T Rex's Telegram Sam. Joining the group is Dialectic Don. Asked on Monday whether the US-Israel war against Iran was 'very complete' as he had earlier stated, or 'just the beginning' as US secretary Pete 'This Is SPARTA!' Hegseth had said, Don-to-Dusk replied with the koan, 'You could say both.' And, thus, ladies and gentlemen, the dialectic has been reborn — not in the dusty halls of Hegel's study but in the fluorescent glare of Mar-a-Lago.

Plato gave us the cave. Heraclitus gave us the river. Trump gave us the war that's simultaneously over and not yet begun. Literalists in Pentagon may insist on linear timelines, but America's C-in-C insists on simultaneity. He is not bound by the tyranny of 'either/or'. He is the crusader of 'yes/and'. This is not contradiction but transcendence. To say 'both' is to liberate language not just from the shackles of meaning but also the throttle of single (read: unpalatable) consequences. Trump joins the great pantheon of paradox-mongers: Zeno with his arrows that when released never move, Laozi with his nameless 'Tao' (the Jedi's 'Force'), and now Dialectic Don with his quantum war. The press corps may scoff. But we philosophers in disguise know exactly the 'rubbish' he's talking about.

The Trump regime may have bitten off more than it can chew — now for a ramp-off on Israel?

DC, WE HAVE A PROBLEM



Seema Sirohi

It's Week 2 in the US-Israel war against Iran. The air is toxic in Tehran and Washington. But the poisons are different. Apocalyptic scenes of bellying fires and black, oil-drenched rain are terrible images for a war advertised to save the Iranian people from an oppressive regime. Incendiary rhetoric and unhinged belligerence from American actors are no better.

Neoccons once again are in the forefront, finding new ways to justify the war. Donald Trump is shocked the Iran war didn't follow the Venezuela model, worried it may last longer than he wants, and upset that his aura is burning in real time. Oil and stock markets are warning signs, and he may seriously be looking to 'declare victory' and get out.

Monday was a day of conflicting signals. Trump announced the war 'very complete, pretty much', and the markets responded. But within hours, he found the 'winning' not quite 'enough' and talked of ultimate victory to end 'this long-running danger once and for all'.

The flip-flopping isn't without reason. Support for the war among Americans averages only 38%.

And the longer the conflict goes, the worse it will



Going once, going twice... sold, to that gentleman in Middle-Eastern headgear

get. He has also lost support on immigration and border control issues, thanks to the excesses by ICE agents. The political war at home is entering the danger zone. Israel's decision to hit Iranian fuel depots last Saturday resulting in hellish flames didn't go down well with the White House. Even the war-blind could see it hurt the people and oil markets. Trump disapproved because somewhere he understands the cost of overkill.

Who can change the psychology of war upon whom it's being wrought. They may despise the regime, but still shudder at bombing raining on their capital, Tomahawks landing on a school, lifelong damage from burning oil depots and at casual destruction about 'breaking' Iran. They may recalculate their anger, if temporarily.

So, can Trump force an off-ramp on Israel? In the ever-changing endgame, Marco Rubio defined the latest US goals: 'destroy Iran's missiles and launchers, destroy factories that ma-

ke them, and destroy their navy. That's considerable shrinking of goals, and US neoccons are in agreement.

Senator Lindsey Graham, war-monger-in-chief, has been beating the drums since last year as a vital part of the Netanyahu-Trump intelligence loop. He coached both sides to prepare the ground for the attacks. Graham has supported every US war since the 2003 attack against Iraq and revelled in them. He has been itching to punish Iran for decades. He called for preemptive strikes in 2010 and for air strikes in 2015.

Now that he's got his wish, he can't contain himself. 'We're going to blow the hell out of those people... this regime is in death throes, it is going to be on its knees.' Graham wants Saudi Arabia and the UAE to 'get in the fight' because they have the weapons.

Trump's base is not amused. Many believe they were sold a false bill of goods. Anti-war MAGA voices have failed to repeat conservative activist Charlie Kirk's warning last year before he was assassinated — that a regime-change war in Iran would be 'catastrophic' and 'could easily become a calamity'. Test the thesis at your peril.

Iran has steadily expanded the war, showing its capacity to sustain and control. The US talking heads are shocked Russia is helping Tehran with targeting info — what a scandal! The regime's naming of Mojtaba Khamenei, son of Ali Khamenei who was killed in the 'decapitation strike', as the new ayatollah is a defiant message of continuity. A Khamenei for a Khamenei for \$10 bn in nine days reminds cynics of Afghanistan: Taliban for Taliban in 20 years after trillions spent, and thousands of lives lost.

Khamenei Jr begins with a target on his back. US and Israeli analysts have declared him a hard-liner. The new Iranian leader won't go 'unconditional surrender' and 'cry uncle', as Trump wants. The endgame may shift with political religious and military rivalries. Delhi prematurely showed its hand with a high-level visit that never Netanayahu in the moment more than Modi. Gulf countries, which host US losses and Indian workers in large numbers, were watching. They pushed hard to avoid this war, but failed. India could have said and done more.

again. But the Trump regime has also faced a theocracy backed by security forces, dispersed and tried to persevere in the worst scenarios. The mission however it's defined to be accomplished cleanly. India must brace for impact and go beyond reluctant statements made under pressure. In a region dripping with political religious and military rivalries, Delhi prematurely showed its hand with a high-level visit that never Netanayahu in the moment more than Modi. Gulf countries, which host US losses and Indian workers in large numbers, were watching. They pushed hard to avoid this war, but failed. India could have said and done more.

Keep Is Out of Hormuz Harms His Way

Karambir Singh

India's closure of the Hormuz Strait is a matter of critical importance to Iran, given that a significant portion of our oil and LNG is sourced from the Persian Gulf. An overwhelming majority of its hydrocarbon requirements are met by sea — over 5 million barrels of crude oil a day, accounting for more than 85% of domestic consumption. Of this, over 1.5 million barrels a day originate from producers located west of the strait, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait and the UAE.

India's dependence on LPG and LNG from the Gulf is even more pronounced. LNG imports amount to about 22 million tonnes annually, with Qatar alone supplying 8.9 million tonnes a year under long-term contracts, accounting for almost 40% of LNG imports. The country consumes roughly 30 million tonnes of LPG annually, of which over 60% is imported.

It's not just about naval-gazing

unfolds progressively. Cargoes delayed by days because shortages measured in weeks. Supply chains calibrated to precision begin to strain. So, a visible commitment to maritime security is inescapable, and would represent not escalation but prudence.

India's own maritime commerce were to require external protection in a theatre so closely linked to its national interests, it would raise uncomfortable questions about the extent to which India is prepared to shoulder responsibilities. The perception that others must safeguard India's trade would sit uneasily alongside our aspirations of strategic autonomy. So, it's appropriate that India consider proactive measures to secure its maritime interests in the Persian Gulf and across the Strait of Hormuz.

The writer is former chief of naval staff, Indian Navy



THE SPEAKING TREE

A Nobody? Good for You!

NARAYANI GANESH

Anybody who is somebody figures multiple times, in the Jeffrey Epstein case. The latest name to hit the fan is that of New Jersey Deepak Chopra, closely following His Holiness, The Dalai Lama. The office of the Tibetan spiritual leader has issued a formal statement that he has never met Epstein nor arranged for anyone to meet him. And a central minister, too, is caught in this vortex, although he has said that these were formal, routine meetings. Former French culture minister Jack Lang and his daughter Caroline are being accused of laundering money in cahoots with Epstein. Heads are expected to roll. Not mine, though. As a nobody, it is unlikely that I would ever get close to the uber rich, the promiscuous or even the super powerful and the famous. Should I say thank goodness for that? Everyone who is anyone is busy with his or her own life. Justifications or going into hiding while just consume this high drama. But, no, I would certainly not want to be close to the cost of selling my soul or having to prove my innocence against all odds. The majority of humans are non-entities, at least in the public gaze. You may be the apple of your parents' eyes, or your children's hero, but you are 'nobody' in the public arena. Good for you. You don't get to enter that space where fame turns into notoriety; trust becomes mistrust, and material riches become 'golden handcuffs' — the means to cruel, exploitative ends. Fame is never enough. Wanting and getting more become all-consuming passions, leading to runaway hedonism.

PEAS IN A PODCAST

Riding the Trade Winds

Trade is everywhere in the news right now. But beyond tariffs and policy debates, trade family is a humongous — would be in keeping with well-established practices among re-established naval powers. Such measures are neutral, non-escalatory and are designed to ensure that commerce continues to flow safely through international waters. In light of the Iranian government stating it would not allow ships to pass through the strait, and Trump supporting naval escort operations, Sloce approaches to the Hormuz Strait, focused on safeguarding Indian shipping and energy flows, would represent not only prudent risk management but a reaffirmation of India's maritime responsibility.

The writer is former chief of naval staff, Indian Navy

Can Cricket Industrialise Kashmir?



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

J&K's stunning Ranji Trophy win last month should elicit more than just cheers. Can cricket become a new force to industrialise the Union territory where all else has failed? The potential is astonishingly high.

Industrialisation is essential to create jobs and reduce youth alienation. But conventional attempts through subsidies and public sector investments have achieved little, while breeding corruption and waste. Kashmir lacks conventional industrial raw materials. It lies in a remote corner of India with no market to its north, west or east. Connections with consumer markets to its south with the rest of India are dismal. Industrialists and J&K because of risks of terrorism, wars with Pakistan and political uncertainties.

Yet, Kashmir possesses one natural advantage: it's the only place in the world, save England, that grows the variety of willow trees needed for cricket bats. English willow is the best in quality. So, English bats are very expensive and unavailable for the millions of people playing cricket in developing countries. That leaves bulk of the market to India. Britain's Gunn & Moore sells bats online for \$285. By contrast, bats made from Kashmir willow can be

dirty cheap. One online offering is for just ₹120. Kashmir can hugely increase its value addition by ensuring quality.

Kashmir's natural willow stands have been shrinking ominously to meet rising demand. Farm forestry is possible. But willows take up to 30 yrs to mature. So, farm foresters prefer to grow shorter, faster-growing poplar. Kashmir's forest management is notoriously corrupt and incompetent. The region has ample wetlands and riverbanks suitable for willow cultivation.

Go! must launch a scheme in mission mode, with private sector partnership. That will increase willow supplies sufficiently to increase bat production 10x on a sustainable basis. Demand for bats is rising with rising incomes increasing the number of households that can afford to buy a Kashmir willow bat.

Kashmir's production of willow clef for bats has reportedly increased from 3 lakh to 30 lakh in the last decade. The vast majority of clefs are converted into bats in two small towns, Jalandhar in Punjab and Meerut in UP.

profitability. This means Kashmir will be an unsuitable market for bats at any rate, for a new initiative. But Jammu has stable conditions and good transport infra and can become a manufacturing hub.

Rise of lucrative T20 leagues has made cricket very attractive to young players, offering enormous financial rewards and global visibility. This has spurred the proliferation of cricketing academies and coaching centres, now a significant service industry.

Jalandhar and Meerut have shown that once a cricket bat manufacturing cluster emerges, a wide range of ancillaries will follow. Cricket balls are hand-stitched, requiring skilled labour that's very expensive in England but inexpensive in India. Protective gear such as pads, gloves and helmets are important ancillaries. So are stumps, cricket shoes and training equipment.

The potential global market is enormous. The sport is spreading to new countries as shown by their participation in this year's T20 World Cup. South Asian diaspora in US has the maximum potential. In India as well as Pakistan, manufacturing hubs for one sport lead in time to manufacturing in other sports for multiple sports. Sialkot began with hand-stitched footballs and gradually expanded into equipment for cricket and other sports. Cities in J&K can do the same. The task will take time and effort. But Kashmir's unique raw material advantage in willow must become the launch pad for its emergence as a global quality sports equipment producer that employs millions.

Chat Room

Usual Chirping Of Crickets

Apropos 'Hat Tip' to Brian T20 WC Win' by C K Subramaniam (Chat Room, Mar 10), the country has gone mad for cricket again over the 2020 T20 World Cup win. And we beat New Zealand — a country of 6m. They have beaten us many times in 100 matches. And we, 1.45m can produce only one team? Back in 1950s-60s, Bombay (pop. 6.8m) had 8 players in the first team. How many from Mumbai today? If Gann Kivis can also be world class in hockey and rugby why can't each Indian state, or even each of the Dileep Trophy zones, produce a team that rivals other 'test-playing nations in any format'? Why does BCCI not let ICC that we want to enter 5 teams in ODI and T20 WCs? One team was into the main draw and the rest will play with other associate members to qualify. Only this will demonstrate our cricketing prowess and depth.

T.R. Ramaswami, Mumbai

CONTRAPUNTO

In order to get elected, @BarackObama will start a war with Iran - DONALD TRUMP, NOV 30, 2011

Don't Let Panic Grow

Right now, gas supply isn't a crisis. GOI should communicate smartly

Markets are fickle, but on Tuesday they seemed confident Iran war will end soon. Their optimism stems from Trump, who's now calling his war a "short-term excursion", one that is "very complete, pretty much". When war ends, oil and gas supplies through Strait of Hormuz will resume. Prices, and economic activity, will return to normal. Trump's one-hour chat with Putin on Monday, followed by his hint of easing oil and gas sanctions on Russia, bolsters this hope. Russia, after all, is world's second major oil exporter, and has the largest natural gas reserves.

And gas is the bigger problem right now, after 11 days of fighting. As we said in an earlier edit - tinyurl.com/479yashk - India meets about 60% of its LPG, and half of natural gas, requirements through imports. Mostly from Qatar and other West Asian countries, which can't send tankers now. Because gas is costlier to store than oil - it needs extreme cooling - we don't have many weeks' stock. Hence, GOI's decision on Tuesday, to regulate gas distribution to different sectors until normal supply resumes.

Ordinarily, biggest share of gas goes to fertiliser factories. But now, PNG for kitchens and CNG for transport will be prioritised, followed by fertiliser and other industries, "subject to availability". Likewise, LPG for households. While this is pragmatic, essential and non-essential uses shouldn't be decided on old assumptions. Yes, people need food, so fuel for cooking has first claim on country's gas stock. But, does everyone eat at home? Think about workers eating in factory canteens, truckers eating at dhabas, many people in small eateries. "Commercial" kitchens are as much a necessity as domestic kitchens. Without gas, a whole ecosystem of canteens, restaurants and lakhs of workers, can grind to a halt for days, or even weeks. So, distribution between domestic and commercial uses must not be too skewed against the latter.

Most important, GOI should make sure there's no popular perception of a crisis; there isn't a crisis. Because of information asymmetry between gas sellers and the consuming public, perception of crisis can cause artificial shortages and price gouging. It's govts' job to ensure this doesn't happen. Perhaps, now is the best time to preach energy conservation - cooking with a lid on, using microwaves and induction cookers. Govt offices in Philippines have been told to run ACs at 24°C while the hot office lasts. And long-term, we absolutely must reduce dependence on imported gas by expanding biogas production. India has enough compostable biomass to meet 100% of gas needs. And compost can replace fertilisers. That's billions of dollars saved every year.

Escapism Done Right

Feed your brain fine things, the result will be resilience. Feed it junk, you'll grow sillier by the minute

Dalgonia coffee. Sourdough bread. Craftcoke. Retro bingeing Malgudi Days and Mad Men. Rereading Ghalib and Premchand, Austen and Shakespeare. These were some of the ways we sought distraction during Covid. Today, there is a war going on in West Asia, which is not as scary as Covid, not yet. But life was already full of worries, so how is one to cope with this added stress? Escapism, hello, we are embracing you, once again. But are you a friend or frenemy?

That, actually, depends entirely on our own intentionality. Neil Postman's 1985 volume, Amusing Ourselves to Death, remains the helpful classic on this subject. He describes people drowning in a sea of diversions, which make them sillier, by the minute. This is a peek-a-boo world, where content pops into view for a moment, then vanishes. We are not able to recollect the story, the tune, the message, anything at all, the next day, let alone the next year. And some of these diversions, like content consumption, does even worse things to us. It makes us more anxious, more tribal, less trusting of science, and less capable of sitting quietly by ourselves. Just like we give a good diet to our body, our brain needs to be fed fine things. What happens when we feed it only junk? Brain rot.

I faut cultiver notre jardin - we must cultivate our garden. This is Voltaire's advice in an even earlier classic - Candide, first published in 1759. It suggests that the antidote when faced with ennu, or evil, is making something, tending something, pursuing concrete, productive engagement. What's really encouraging is that, where once neuroplasticity was thought of the gift of childhood alone, research has now shown it continues throughout the human lifespan. Our brain is happy to learn, relearn, and absorb new ideas, if that's our intention. When we do interesting work to improve our critical thinking, there is also a big unconscious bonus. In sleep, those neural connections grow strong magically. Do escapism right, and it makes you more resilient.

Thook de, India!

On lending a splash of post-colonial colour to London

Jug Suraiya

London was in a pother, and the legendary British stiff upper lip was noticeably squawker. The causes of this disquiet were great blood-spatters appearing everywhere, on the walls of buildings, on pavements, in parks. What were they, and what caused them? Were they blood stains, and who was responsible for them? Was there a sudden outbreak of vampirism, a possible side effect of the Covid pandemic, manifesting itself as a symptom of the bug making a comeback? Was it a case of the Ripper on the prowl? Scotland Yard was called in to investigate. Samples of the red substance were collected, and sent for forensic analysis.

The results revealed that the ominous splashes and globs were not blood stains, but the products of human salivary glands, stimulated by the chewing of the leaves of the Piper Betel climbing vine, which, stuffed with chopped areca nuts, and liberally smeared with katha paste (Acacia catechu), was used by the Indian digestive aid-cum-mouth fresher known as paan.

However, while the mastication of paan did induce the production of copious amounts of saliva that required ejection, the question arose whether the practice of paan chomping caused spitting, or whether the determination to spit created the paan. What lay behind the spitting image of India?

Social anthropologists shed light on the matter, tracing the origins of this oral practice to the large signs displayed in Indian post offices, in 1950s and 1960s. Do Not Affix Stamps With Spittle. This official proscription provoked the innate respect of swaraj, so characteristic of the Indian ethos - not permitted to affix spittle on stamps, the populace began to affix spittle on all and sundry: else streets, trees, offices, vehicles, parked or passing.

As the Culture Correspondent of The Guardian newspaper, Anne Arky noted in an article titled 'Great Expectations', this free-spirited expression of individual independence was exported to UK, and to London, as an ongoing extension of the Freedom Movement, against 250 years of colonial rule, and the expropriation of the Kohinoor, without so much as a by-your-leave, and was a legitimate statement, worthy of the Turner Prize for Installation Art.

World's Newest Beijing Problem

China is investing & producing, in huge numbers, to goose the economy. That's leading to Chinese goods being exported, at cut-price rates, around the world, harming industry everywhere. It's also not a good strategy for China, because it is accumulating debt

Ruchir Sharma

China is famous for zealously pushing growth. So much was made of its recent decision to lower its GDP target to between 4.5% and 5%. But this was a marginal change. China's irrational hopes for growth are an increasingly big problem for the world.

The target is not based on economics. It's a political goal that reflects Beijing's ambition to surpass US and become a developed economy by 2035. In pursuit of that aim, Beijing has been overinvesting for years, but lately, it has been dumping the excess output it can't sell at home. In the past, China's export volumes rose with prices; this decade, Beijing has dropped export prices nearly 20%, producing a 40% surge in volume.

Booming exports, along with weak imports, increased China's trade surplus, last year, by 20%, to a record \$1.2tn. Net exports accounted for a third of its 2025 GDP growth, which is a bloated share, even by China's standards. As a share of global GDP, no nation has ever had a larger trade surplus, and that includes Japan during its 1980s heyday, as an export power.

China's dumping offensive is de-industrialising rival exporters the world over, hitting factories in Thailand and steel plants in Indonesia. Across Asia, nations where Chinese imports are rising fastest, also tend to have the weakest job growth. India has been particularly hard hit recently, and has suffered a sharper decline in its share of global manufacturing, than many Asian nations. Influx of cheap Chinese imports has taken significant chunks - of markets for plastic products, computers, machinery and other goods - from Indian factories. It's pushing down prices in industries from textiles to steel, squeezing profits, and drove up India's trade deficit with China by nearly 15% just last year.

A reaction is underway. Among world's top 70 economies, 50, including India, have taken steps to

defend themselves against Chinese dumping. Leaders of France and Germany have complained directly to Xi about Beijing's trade practices. But worldwide, policy aimed at more protective measures slowed last year - as many nations turned their attention to attacks from US.

Across Europe, West Asia and Asia, policymakers in several countries said they can't fight a two-front global trade war. So, they have focused on managing the more volatile threat of Trump tariffs. This makes it easier for Beijing to keep dumping its surplus production.

Root of the problem is the country's growth target.

Lately China has been moving in the opposite direction. Productivity growth includes contributions from labour, capital, and a critical 'total factor', which aims to capture how much growth labour is squeezing out of the investment. Think tank Conference Board estimates that this key third factor has fallen to near zero this decade, implying China is generating growth only by investing more heavily.

China keeps pumping out credit to fund more investment, but mostly it's getting a bigger debt pile. To generate \$1 of GDP growth in China, it now takes \$6 of new debt, up from \$1 two decades ago.

Beijing is counting on investment in new technologies, including AI, to boost productivity, but it's highly unlikely that boost will be big enough to sustain productivity growth near 5%. China's real potential productivity rate is probably 2-3%.

For decades, outsiders have told Beijing it could generate steadier growth and mollify trade partners in one stroke. Just shift focus from exports to domestic consumption. True, consumption is a relatively small share of China's economy, but not because it has been suppressed, as received wisdom would have.

Despite the recent weakening, consumer spending has grown at an annual pace of 5% this decade - faster than in any other major economy. While Chinese consumers have increased their savings rate in recent years, this is more a reaction to their high debt burden and losses in property market than a sign that they have ample room to raise their spending.

The real problem is not weak consumption growth, but that investment is growing faster, compelling China to flood the world with excess production. Chinese exports, now \$3.8tn a year, recently surpassed US imports for the first time, and the gap is growing.

If Team Trump believes US is being "ripped off" in global trade, it should focus less on battling its partners and more on China's export offensive and the inspiration behind it: the growth target. That target is completely unrealistic, damaging for the world and self-destructive for China.

Five Ways The Iran War Can End

Iranian regime may survive or collapse, that's obvious. But either outcome can, in turn, have multiple results, from confrontation to accommodation, or many things in between. Some scenarios

Jane Kimminott



Columnist based in London

Over the past few days, Trump has said there are "no time limits" on the war he initiated with Iran. Meanwhile, Iran's leaders want to convey the message that they can endure the attacks. They hope US attention span will prove short. Israel's leadership is committed to changing the Iranian regime, even if this means the collapse of the Iranian state.

US - which is more distant from the region, and out of range of Iran's missiles - has already suggested that a "Venezuela scenario" could be acceptable. Gulf countries are also pushing for quick de-escalation, to limit the damage being done to the region's economies. So, what is most likely?

Regime survival scenarios Iran's political regime survives under its new leadership, but is militarily weakened by US-Israeli attacks. So far, Iranian political system has survived, and it looks like the internal balance of power is tilting more towards Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), rather than the presidency, the clerical establishment, or the regular military. The most significant signal is that Mojtaba Khamenei has now succeeded his father, Ayatollah Khamenei, as the country's top authority.

● **Regime survival + continued conflict with US** Mojtaba is not the most senior cleric in Iran, in terms of religious qualifications. Rather, his power is from his close association with IRGC, and intelligence services. Under him, if the system survives, it will be profoundly isolated from its neighbours, heavily sanctioned (think Iraq after 1991), and most likely seeking ways to get revenge on US, and Israel, through asymmetric means.

● **Regime survival + an accommodation with US** The continuing war is costly for all, whatever the defiant rhetoric. It's likely that a combination of Arab and Islamic

states (such as Oman, Indonesia, and perhaps Pakistan) will seek to mediate, firstly, to prevent the conflict from spreading, and secondly, to explore off-ramps for US and Iran, to wind down the intense phase of the war.

If the Iranian system survives, there could be scope for pragmatic accommodation, short of total surrender, where US would essentially declare victory, and walk away - concluding that Iran's military capabilities had not destroyed, so the country would not be a significant threat outside its borders. A key question here is, the location of the highly enriched uranium that Iran has stockpiled.

However, conflict could well recur in the future, with its causes unresolved.



Regime fragmentation or collapse There are multiple possible scenarios for the Iranian political system to fragment, or fall apart.

● **Multiple power centres emerge** There are likely to be some differences of opinion within the system, and many are watching for signs of explicit fractures. In Dec, former president Rouhani said some Iranian decision-makers were badly miscalculating their ability to deter, or defend, against an attack by US and Israel. He seems to have been right.

There will be others who think IRGC has mishandled the country's core security interests, and destroyed its

future economic prospects.

Fragmentation may lead to a breakdown of the system, or could mean that decision-making becomes more difficult. This could make a stable accommodation with US harder to reach.

● **Organised transition to new constitution, or eventual democracy**

There may still be some reformists within Iran's system. They would like to see leadership restoring the social contract, making an alliance with anti-war elements. This is surely worth exploring for Iran's domestic opposition groups. But, with IRGC effectively in charge, this is unlikely.

Large-scale protests are impossible while Iran is under bombardment, and protests in Jan were met with extreme violence. But, given that there have been mass uprisings every few years, there could be large-scale protests later, seeking to push for political change. If the regime is fragmenting, the political dynamics could be different from what they were during the last round of protests.

● **Civil war** US has recently suggested it could arm uprisings inside Iran, including from Kurdish factions. Türkiye has objected strongly. There are already various armed groups, from Kurdish and Azeri, to Baloch ethnic minorities, operating inside Iran. They could potentially scale up their opposition, with US and Israeli support.

Iran's diaspora opposition leaders are mostly opposed to such policies, but have no control over US and Israeli decision-making. There are also risks that ISIS might step up its attacks. Current attacks on state infra mean a new leadership will struggle to wield power effectively, regardless of its degree of authoritarianism, or its relations with US.

Last, the issue of foreign intervention has been very divisive for Iranians. US may not look like liberator to many Iranians. That complicates matters even more for those opposed to the Ayatollah regime.

The writer is a West Asia expert

Calvin & Hobbes



Chanakya

Sacred Space

At the time of the pralaya (universal destruction) the oceans are to exceed their limits and seek to change, but a saintly man never changes.

Chanakya

Apocalyptic Imagery And Promise Of Peace

AK Merchant

Recent reports suggesting that 'Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' is advanced. This can include upheavals, collapse of old orders and events that 'disintegrate' existing structures to make way for the establishment of a new global order. Baha'i understand these as alternating cycles of integration and disintegration that would ultimately lead towards a world commonwealth and spiritual unity.

God's Major Plan may use 'both the mighty and lowly as means' in bringing about world-shaping changes. This parallels the Minor Plan, which concerns spiritual regeneration of humanity and is largely carried out through collective services of believers; teaching, institution-building, social action, and moral transformation that concretely implement the vision of unity in diversity. Baha'is are urged to concentrate on constructive service.

forming communities, schools, and consultative institutions, because these are means by which the promises implicit in prophetic language are to be realised. From time to time, the Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing council of the Baha'i Faith, urges humankind to stay focused on activities for betterment of society rather than being overly concerned about catastrophes. Because interpreting the Cosmic Will as licence for fatalism or panic undermines the emerging Golden Era. Humanity is not lacking in creativity, positive initiative, or even resources; millions of people of goodwill are contributing to halting and reversing destructive tendencies, remaining ever hopeful, galvanised by vision of prosperity, and awakening to possibilities of spiritual and material well-being.

Yet grave dangers announced by the Doomsday Clock Statement should not be ignored. "Hard-won global understandings

are collapsing, accelerating a winter-takes-all great power competition and undermining the international cooperation critical to reducing risks of nuclear war climate change, misuse of biotechnology, potential threat of AI, and other apocalyptic dangers." As the world we know passes away and a new one struggles to be born, Baha'is, some eight million strong, stand together in shaping humankind's collective destiny, greatly energised by the most genuine guidance from the Universal House of Justice: "Looking back over one's life, there can be no greater joy and comfort than to know that it was spent in acute awareness of the divine remedy; that no effort was spared to proffer that remedy to receptive souls; and that during those fleeting years when opportunity was at hand, even in the midst of difficulties, every chance was seized to respond to humanity's intense need..."

The writer is a member of the Baha'i community of India. Views are personal



THE SPEAKING TREE



Editor's TAKE

A generational shift in Nepal's democracy

As a new leadership emerges in Kathmandu, New Delhi faces a critical moment to rethink its engagement with its Himalayan neighbour

It was a landmark election in Nepal, not one which just changes the regime but one that decimates the old order and heralds a new era. Though it is premature to assume that a death blow has been handed to the traditional political parties and that KP Sharma Oli has given way to the new generation, it is certain that Nepal has given a chance to its new generation. Unlike Bangladesh, where Gen Z could not consolidate its position despite its huge appeal during the uprising, Nepal's youth Gen Z has moved with caution. Nepal has indeed given wholehearted support to Balendra Shah and the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). His decisive victory over former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli in his own parliamentary constituency is a strong signal - the old guard must go and give way to the new generation to decide the destiny of the nation. The rise of Shah, a rapper and a civil engineer who first gained national prominence after winning the Kathmandu mayoral election in 2022, built his reputation as an outsider willing to challenge the status quo. His decision to align with the Rastriya Swatantra Party, led by Rabi Lamichhane, helped convert personal popularity into a broader political movement focused on governance reform, anti-corruption measures, and administrative transparency. Shah carries on his shoulders the hope of millions of young voters whose expectations he must fulfil. He must provide political stability, economic turnaround, and steer the nation clear of outside pressure while balancing India and China without caving in to their pressure. The old leaders played a vital role in ushering in democracy in the country - overseeing the end of the monarchy and the drafting of a new constitution - but went wayward and increasingly faced criticism for governance failures, corruption allegations, and political instability. One early test for Shah would be the handling of the Gauri Bahadur Karki Commission report, which investigated the use of force against protesters. Whether the new government pursues accountability while maintaining political stability will be closely watched.

One of the biggest challenges before Shah will be to address and remove the longstanding irritants in Nepal's relationship with its neighbour, India. For India, the developments in Nepal are significant. New Delhi will have to tread a cautious path, not getting overzealous and aspirational in weaning Nepal away from Chinese influence. The emergence of a new generation of leaders means that India must now recalibrate its diplomatic engagement. One plus point for India is that, unlike Bangladesh, the election campaign in Nepal was notably free of anti-India rhetoric, though New Delhi is still seen as a big brother by many. Another noteworthy signal was Shah's decision not to emphasise the China-backed industrial park linked to the Belt and Road Initiative in his election manifesto. Given the project's proximity to India's sensitive Siliguri Corridor, this omission may indicate a cautious balancing of geopolitical sensitivities. For India and Nepal, if managed wisely, this transition could usher in a more pragmatic and forward-looking phase in bilateral relations.

IRIS Dena: The fragile order of the Indian Ocean

The sinking of Iranian freight IRIS Dena underscores a troubling reality: the world's oceans - arteries of global trade and security - remain dangerously vulnerable without a strong, universally respected rule-based order



SANTHOSH MATTHEW

"Whoever rules the waves rules the world" - Alfred Thayer Mahan

The sinking of the Iranian freighter IRIS Dena near Sri Lanka has sent ripples far beyond the Indian Ocean. It is not merely a military incident; it is a stark reminder that the world's oceans urgently require a stronger rule-based order. When warships clash near busy maritime corridors, the stakes extend beyond geopolitics to global trade, maritime security and international law. On 4 March 2026, the Iranian warship was torpedoed by a US submarine in waters close to Sri Lanka while returning from naval exercises hosted by India. The vessel had recently participated in a multinational naval event and was sailing back when the attack occurred roughly 40 nautical miles off the Sri Lankan coast. Rescue operations by Sri Lanka recovered dozens of bodies and saved several survivors, while many sailors remained missing.

Strategically, the incident is historic. It is the first time since the Second World War that an American submarine has sunk an enemy warship in combat. The Indian Ocean, long seen as a theatre of strategic competition among global powers, has suddenly become a site of direct naval confrontation. But beyond the tragedy and geopolitics lies a deeper question: who governs the oceans?

For centuries, the seas were treated as open highways of commerce and power. In the early twentieth century, US President Woodrow Wilson articulated the idea that the seas should belong to all humanity, not just to naval powers. The principle of freedom of the seas became a cornerstone of international diplomacy. However, freedom without rules often leads to confrontation.

The modern attempt to create a legal framework for maritime governance is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), adopted in 1982. The convention establishes the legal order of the oceans, defining maritime zones such as territorial waters, exclusive economic zones, and the high seas. It sets rules for navigation, resource use, environmental protection, and dispute settlement. In essence, UNCLOS functions as a constitution for the world's oceans. It provides the backbone for maritime governance and establishes the rights and responsibilities of states in ocean space.

Yet the irony is glaring: the very country that often champions a "rules-based international order," the United States, has never ratified UNCLOS. Although Washington generally follows many of its provisions, it remains outside the



THE TRAGEDY NEAR SRI LANKA SHOULD THEREFORE SERVE AS A WAKE-UP CALL WHEN WARSHIPS SINK WITHIN SIGHT OF BUSY SEA LANES, THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR: WITHOUT ROBUST GLOBAL RULES, THE OCEANS COULD ONCE AGAIN BECOME THEATRES OF UNRESTRAINED POWER POLITICS

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treaty framework. This contradiction weakens the global maritime legal architecture and complicates enforcement.

The sinking of IRIS Dena illustrates precisely why global maritime rules matter. The waters around Sri Lanka and India are among the most strategic sea lanes in the world. Nearly one-third of global shipping passes through the Indian Ocean. Energy flows from the Persian Gulf to East Asia, container traffic moves between Europe and Asia, and naval forces from multiple powers operate in the region.

When armed confrontation occurs in such waters, it creates legal and diplomatic ambiguities. Was the strike carried out in international waters? Did it violate the exclusive economic zone of a coastal state? What rights do neutral countries have when military actions take place close to their shores?

UNCLOS attempts to answer these questions through clear legal frameworks. It distinguishes between territorial seas, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and the high seas. Within these zones, states have specific rights and responsibilities regarding navigation, security, and resource exploitation. Without such a framework, maritime power risks reverting to what scholars once described as "gunboat diplomacy."

The relevance of maritime law is even more apparent when we consider recent developments in the Indian Ocean. Reports have surfaced about American vessels approaching sensitive zones near India's Lakshadweep region in earlier episodes, raising questions about maritime jurisdiction and freedom of navigation. These incidents demonstrate how fragile maritime stability can be in a region where multiple naval powers operate simultaneously. History offers an important lesson. Maritime dominance has long shaped global power.

Mahan famously argued that sea power determines the fate of nations. Control of sea lanes once defined the rise of empires from Britain to the United States. Today, the same principle continues to shape the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Yet in the twenty-first century, sea power must coexist with sea governance.

The oceans are not merely arenas for naval competition; they are lifelines of global civilisation. Nearly 90 per cent of world trade travels by sea. Fisheries feed billions. Undersea cables carry the internet that connects our digital world. Maritime conflict therefore threatens not just states but the functioning of the global economy.

This is why strengthening UNCLOS and the broader rule-based maritime order has become essential. The treaty provides mechanisms for dispute resolution through institutions such as the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. It also promotes peaceful navigation and cooperation among states. In a world where strategic rivalry is intensifying from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean-legal norms must act as stabilising anchors.

The tragedy near Sri Lanka should therefore serve as a wake-up call. When warships sink within sight of busy sea lanes, the message is clear: without robust global rules, the oceans could once again become theatres of unrestrained power politics.

And if the twenty-first century is indeed the century of the Indo-Pacific, then the future of international stability may well depend on whether humanity can transform the oceans from arenas of rivalry into spaces governed by law. As Mahan reminded the world more than a century ago, those who control the seas shape history. In our time, however, the greater challenge is not merely controlling the seas - but governing them.



PICTALK

A squirrel rests on a silk cotton tree, also known as Bombax ceiba tree. PHOTO: PFI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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WEST ASIAN SHOCKWAVES THROUGH GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

The United States-Israeli military campaign against Iran has done what most regional conflicts eventually do: it has moved beyond the battlefield and into the global economy. Oil prices have risen sharply since hostilities escalated, with Brent crude climbing as shipping through the Strait of Hormuz faces growing uncertainty. This narrow waterway carries roughly one-fifth of the world's traded oil, and any disruption is quickly felt across global markets. For India, the timing is particularly difficult. The country imports nearly ninety per cent of its crude oil requirements, and higher energy costs quickly translate into rising inflation, transportation charges and manufacturing expenses. Liquefied petroleum gas prices have already increased, and

petrol and diesel may follow. Meanwhile, Indian stock markets have reacted with predictable nervousness, as rate-sensitive and energy-dependent sectors bear the brunt of the sell-off. Compounding matters is uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's shifting tariff stance. Indian exporters, especially in textiles, pharmaceuticals and electronics, find it increasingly difficult to plan when trade rules appear subject to sudden change. There is no reason for panic, but there is a clear need for preparation. Diversifying energy sources, expanding strategic petroleum reserves and accelerating trade agreements with stable partners would help cushion future shocks.

A MYLSAMI | COMBATORE

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When 'likes' replace real happiness

RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJJI

2ND OPINION

According to the World Health Organisation, around 280-330 million people worldwide live with depression, affecting roughly 4.5 per cent of the global population, and it remains one of the leading causes of disability globally. As per the American Psychiatric Association (APA), major depressive disorder (MDD) is a condition characterised by episodes of pervasive low mood accompanied by low self-esteem and a loss of interest or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities. Nowadays most people use social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to share their thoughts and opinions with their contacts. As such, social media provides a means of capturing behavioural attributes that are relevant to an individual's thinking, mood, communication, activities and socialisation. The emotions and language used in social media postings may indicate feelings of worthlessness, guilt, helplessness and self-hatred that characterise major depression. This happens with many of us who regularly use social media on a daily basis. Few people would deny that they have experienced feelings of envy when they see the fun their friends appear to be having online. This might especially be the case if you are sitting at home feeling bored while others seem to be partying or enjoying a comfortable holiday in the sun. For most of us, it may appear obvious and natural to feel like that. However, the question arises: could these feelings be the beginning of something more serious, such as depression? Does it make sense that social media use might actually contribute to depressive feelings?

A recent study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), USA, identified a strong and significant association between social media use and depression. The study found that levels of depression among youth increased with the total amount of time they spent using social media and the number of visits they made to social media sites each week. There are likely to be many complex reasons why social media use might be associated with depression. For instance, people who are already feeling depressed may rely more on social media rather than face-to-face interactions, meaning that increased social media use could be a symptom rather than a cause of depression. We also know that 'likes' have become a kind of currency on social media. People with low self-esteem may seek validation through likes and comments as a way of boosting their confidence, turning social media into a form of popularity contest. According to psychiatrists, social networking relationships can sometimes have positive emotional effects. Several studies indicate that social media can benefit people who struggle with social anxiety or depression by helping them stay connected with others. However, it is important to understand our own reasons for using these platforms and to adjust our expectations accordingly. If we often feel left out, inadequate or jealous after viewing others' posts, it may indicate that online interactions are not fulfilling our emotional needs. Maintaining a balanced perspective and realistic expectations about social media can help prevent feelings of jealousy, inadequacy and unhealthy comparisons. It is also important to assess the quality of our real-life relationships and the time we spend with people who truly matter, as genuine human connections cannot be replaced by virtual interactions. The Bhagavad Gita reminds us that a person can be his own best friend or his own worst enemy. To become our own best friend, we must spend time understanding ourselves and observing our thoughts. Positive thinking and letting go of negativity help guide the mind in the right direction, but it requires regular effort and practice.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and a popular columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Silence weakens India's strategic voice

There is an important difference between strategic neutrality and strategic silence, and India appears increasingly inclined toward the latter. While both positions may appear similar on the surface, they carry very different implications for a nation that has long projected itself as an independent voice in global affairs. India's relationship with Iran is rooted in tangible national interests. The Chabahar port project, connectivity to Central Asia, and critical energy supply routes all underline the strategic depth of this partnership. When a United States submarine reportedly sank an Iranian naval vessel in waters not far from India's maritime neighbourhood, the absence of a clear response from New Delhi inevitably drew attention. This is not about choosing sides in a volatile geopolitical confrontation. Rather, it concerns maintaining consistency in foreign policy principles. India rightly spoke out when its commercial vessels faced threats in the Red Sea. India's relations with Washington, Tehran, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi give it a unique diplomatic advantage to promote de-escalation, but continued silence risks weakening its credibility and influence.

SM JEEVA | CHENNAI

India navigates complex oil diplomacy

Recent developments surrounding global oil supplies highlight the delicate balance India must maintain in its energy diplomacy. The ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has disrupted shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, a route that carries nearly forty per cent of India's crude oil imports. In response to the emerging supply risks, the U.S. Treasury Department has permitted India to continue purchasing Russian oil, though only for a limited thirty-day period. Earlier this year, US President Donald Trump announced that the United States would reinstate oil sanctions goods would remain linked to India's commitment to reduce or halt Russian oil imports. The proposed trade framework also encouraged India to expand energy purchases from the United States and potentially from Venezuela. This situation illustrates the growing influence of geopolitical pressures on India's energy choices. Venezuelan oil imports were suspended in 2019 following US sanctions, briefly resumed in 2023, and again halted after renewed restrictions in early 2024. Similarly, India had earlier ended crude imports from Iran under American pressure.

HARIDASAN RAJAN | KERALA

Banks must answer NPA discrepancies

The report titled "Big Corporates and Banks Conniving to Leak Public Money" highlights a disturbing attempt to conceal the growing crisis of non-performing assets (NPAs) in India's banking sector. While the Government and the Reserve Bank of India claim that NPAs have fallen to a decade-low of 2.15 per cent, the figures regarding large defaulters tell a very different story. Borrowers owing more than ₹1 crore and facing civil proceedings together account for nearly ₹29 lakh crore. Such a wide discrepancy between official claims and ground realities raises serious questions about transparency and accountability. The situation also exposes the troubling nexus that appears to exist between powerful borrowers, bank officials, and political influence. Credit appraisal processes that should protect public money seem to have been weakened or bypassed. The one-time settlement (OTS) mechanism allows influential defaulters to repay only a fraction of their dues, with banks often writing off the remaining loans due to flawed or fraudulent collateral valuations. Such concessions rarely apply to ordinary borrowers, highlighting the urgent need to end political interference and ensure accountability beyond junior officials.

V JAYARAMAN | CHENNAI



RSS centenary: Service, influence and the road ahead

As the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) marks its centenary, the organisation stands at a historic moment — an occasion not only to reflect on its vast contributions across social service, education, culture and politics, but also to reassess its role in meeting the aspirations of a rapidly changing India

FIRST Column



VK BAHUGUNA

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), established in 1925 by Dr Keshab Baliram Hedgewar, is now celebrating its centenary, and in the process, the RSS Chief, Shri Mohan Bhagwat, during the last two months has visited different parts of the country and is engaged in reaching out to different sections of society. This outreach is essential considering the fact that the RSS today stands at a historic vantage point, because what began in 1925 as a small gathering of volunteers has evolved into a vast canopy of social, political and cultural influence spread over more than 73,100 shakhas across the country and still growing in numbers. The RSS Chief's dialogues with cross-sections of people attract public attention because it has become the world's largest non-governmental organisation and a fountainhead of Indian cultural nationalism. Its influence stretches across India's social, cultural, educational and political landscapes and hence in modern India the organisation remains in intense debate. While it is frequently viewed through a political lens due to its ideological proximity to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its primary contribution to Indian society lies in its sprawling network of social service, education, and disaster relief. However, the RSS Sarsangchalak on more than one occasion has reiterated that his organisation's primary motto is to build the character of people in an apolitical manner and that RSS volunteers are free to join any political party. Let us discuss what the RSS has contributed to our country and the world and what changes it needs.

The core philosophy of the RSS is Manav Nirman, or the building of the ideal human shakha. It emphasises discipline, physical fitness, and a sense of duty towards the nation rather than the self. One of the most significant contributions of the RSS is in the field of education, specifically through its educational wing, Vidya Bharti. Vidya Bharti operates one of the largest private school networks in India, known as Saraswati Vidya Mandirs. These schools provide a blend of modern curriculum with Indian values. They work to reach the fringe forest villages



RSS, IN A NUTSHELL, ACTS AS A MASSIVE SOCIAL SAFETY NET AND A CULTURAL NATIONALIST CATALYST

in tribal areas where state infrastructure often falters; the RSS runs Ekal Vidyalayas. These schools provide basic literacy and healthcare awareness to millions of children in forest-dwelling communities through its Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. The RSS is often the first responder in natural calamities regardless of one's political stance; the organisation is widely recognised for its efficiency during national crises. When natural disasters strike, swayamsevak are often the first on the ground, sometimes arriving before government agencies. A few examples are the Orissa cyclone, the Bhuj earthquake of 2001, the Uttarakhand floods of 2013, Seva Bharti during the 2025 Kashmir floods, and during the COVID-19 pandemic it distributed millions of food packets, managed oxygen helplines, and assisted in cremation services when systems were overwhelmed.

The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), founded in 1952, is one of the most successful yet quietest wings of the RSS. Its primary objective is to bridge the gap between "mainstream" urban India and the forest dwellers through educational

empowerment as they operate thousands of hostels for tribal children, allowing them to gain formal education while staying connected to their roots. Further, in areas where government doctors are scarce, VKA volunteers run mobile dispensaries. They focus heavily on tackling sickle-cell anaemia and malaria, which are prevalent in tribal belts. A core work of VKA is the protection of tribal faith and traditions, as tribal identity is an integral part of the broader Hindu cultural fabric, and they work to prevent what they term "predatory proselytisation" by offering social support systems. This writer has been associated with them informally on government affairs, observing their work style. Long before Atmanirbhar Bharat became a government programme, the RSS had been promoting campaigns for the consumption of local goods. Seva Bharti runs over 150,000 service projects across India, ranging from free hospitals and blood banks to vocational training centres for women in urban slums. Many years

before yoga became a global phenomenon, the RSS was promoting it through its daily physical drills. It continues to advocate the integration of traditional Indian medicine with modern practices.

Through the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, the RSS promotes sustainable, cow-based organic farming techniques to reduce farmers' dependence on expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The Bharat Vikas Parishad organises national-level patriotic competitions for students, promotes Indian culture, supports the differently abled, provides health check-ups, and executes rural development projects. The contribution of the RSS to Indian society is thus multifaceted. Its definition of "Hindu" is cultural and geographical-encompassing everyone who lives in India and respects its heritage—rather than strictly religious. Its outreach to Muslims is through its Muslim Rashtriya Manch.

The RSS, in a nutshell, acts as a massive social safety net and a cultural nationalist catalyst. While its ideological goals remain a point of discussion in the larger

context of India's democratic discourse, its on-the-ground impact from building schools in tribal areas to providing relief in the wake of natural disasters is an undeniable part of India's modern history. For the RSS, the goal is not just to change the government, but to change the "national character" through grassroots service. This is what is needed today in Indian society.

However, no organisation can live on its laurels alone and must reflect the aspirations of a changing society. The leadership of the RSS could implement on a more stringent scrutiny for new volunteers. Currently, like any other social outfit, the organisation risks an influx of opportunistic individuals who join solely for personal gain or political leverage rather than a genuine commitment to the Sangh's core values.

This trend is particularly damaging as it fosters a culture that marginalises the dedicated workers who have long served as the backbone of the movement. To preserve the ideological sanctity of the organisation, it is vital to distinguish between those seeking a platform for their own ambitions and those truly dedicated to selfless service.

Secondly, frequent dialogues should continue with cross-sections of society, and the all-pervasive culture of crony capitalism among the powers that needs to be banished from India's political and bureaucratic sphere, for which the RSS can do a lot as part of its character-building core value. Notwithstanding the fact of its significant impact on the social and cultural discourse in India, as a constructive reformer it could consider broadening its outlook on leadership and merit.

At times, social organisations and political leaders appear to place disproportionate admiration on elite positions such as Administrative Service officers and members of the Judiciary of India, which may unintentionally leave sizeable sections of talent overlooked. A more progressive outlook could recognise and promote talent, innovation and excellence across diverse fields. By valuing multiple talents in nation-building rather than primarily focusing on elite roles, the RSS could do a great service in managing the changing aspirations of a dynamic and diverse modern India. Whatever people perceive as the RSS's raison d'être continues to be the preservation of the cultural identity of Bharat.

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Experiential learning reshaping villages



N MANIKANDAN **T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN**

India is marching towards becoming the skill and innovation capital of the globe, thereby enabling our nation to achieve self-reliant and inclusive growth. India remembers and realises the powerful and vibrant mantra of Bharat Ratna and former Prime Minister of India, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee: "I have a vision, of an India free of hunger and fear, an India free of illiteracy and want."

The launch of the National Education Policy 2020, Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan, Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL), and the Skill Mission are slowly, strongly, steadily, and swiftly transforming the youth of India to achieve the highest excellence. The spectrum of students' hackathons is making a paradigm shift among the youth to explore experiential learning and frugal innovations for a variety of problem ideas existing in our nation. Indian education systems integrated with community-based learning such as RuTAG, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan and MY Bharat are addressing several challenges in both rural and urban communities across the nation. These form the epicentres for the growth of local communities across PAN India. The Government of India, especially the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, and Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, has initiated several schemes which meet the objectives of transforming rural and urban areas into a Smart India.

The best and classical examples of community-based learning and innovation are the initiatives by the Office of the Principal Scientific Officer, Government of India, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports such as RuTAG (Rural Technology Action Group), Unnat Bharat Abhiyan and MY Bharat (Meera Yuva Bharat). India acknowledges the vision and vibrant mantra of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi - "Gram Swaraaj" and "Atmanirbhar Village", thereby empowering rural villages to function as hubs and centres leading to making villages strong and self-reliant.

RuTAG realises this vision by strengthening rural communities through science and technology intervention systems. It connects academic institutions, Self-Help Groups, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), the Government of India,

local societies, innovators, analytical people, start-ups, incubators, and accelerators on a single platform. It has primary thematic areas such as bridging emerging technology gaps, thereby developing prototype, sustainable and scalable solutions; implementing technologies to address various issues in rural societies; water resource management and developing regional and local priorities. The key areas of national and regional importance under this programme are agriculture, handicrafts and pottery, animal husbandry, post-harvest management, clean energy, and water purification.

The RuTAG centres are spread across PAN India such as IIT Guwahati, SKUAST-Kashmir, IIT Delhi, IIT Bombay, IIT Roorkee, ICAR-NAARM Hyderabad, and IIT Madras, which work closely in partnership with local communities, government, and industries. It also facilitates and promotes rural entrepreneurship across different segments.

Unnat Bharat Abhiyan (UBA), an initiative of the Ministry of Education, Government of India in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi, aims to transform rural villages into technologically advanced and developed regions. It helps academic institutions connect with local district administrations and gram panchayats, enabling students and faculty members to undertake grassroots field research while empowering marginal farmers, artisans and Women Self-Help Groups.

UBA realises Mahatma Gandhi's vision of self-sufficient "village republics" by utilising public infrastructure and locally available resources and promoting sustainable, eco-friendly digital technologies for rural communities.

The programme also enables higher educational institutions to adopt nearby village clusters and implement sustainable and advanced technologies addressing local needs. Its key focus areas include sustainable agriculture, water resource management, renewable energy, weather monitoring, healthcare, sanitation and digital infrastructure, while also supporting the livelihood and upliftment of rural artisans.

UBA holistically enhances the growth of rural villages and communities through an in-depth knowledge base and harnessing the potential of digital transformation technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT) and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles for the benefit of communities and societies. UBA forms an icon of India by providing simple, easy-to-use and advanced technologies for the growth of villages and creating enormous employment opportunities for the youth of India. It also encourages and motivates academic institutions to participate in Gram Sabha programmes conducted by the local administration.

The Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed University), Dayalbagh, Agra has designed and developed a MOOC online course on "Community Engagement and Social Responsibility", which is recognised by Unnat Bharat Abhiyan and available on the SWAYAM / NPTEL platform for young

minds and learners. The course enables youth and learners across different streams to fetch two credits, which consist of one credit for theory and one credit for fieldwork. The theory covers ethics and best practices of community engagement. It is mandatory for learners to perform fieldwork for 30 hours either in rural or urban areas by connecting with gram panchayats and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) respectively to earn one credit. Students can connect with NSS and NCC of their respective institutions, thereby performing community-based fieldwork and providing hand-holding support for illiterates, orphanages, elderly citizens, and Self-Help Groups, among others. UBA also addresses issues of environment and climate resilience through technology-driven systems.

The implementation of UBA by higher educational institutions is a mandatory requirement and mandate of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), Ministry of Education, Government of India, for extension approval of all undergraduate programmes.

Meera Yuva Bharat is an academic experiential learning platform that empowers youth through practical framework models. It gives enriching real-world experience by engaging them with local communities through district administrations across PAN India. It not only connects the dots between theoretical knowledge and practical execution but also gives enormous importance to an in-depth understanding and knowledge of society and community. This helps young students develop curiosity-based learning and problem-solving skills. Additionally, it provides hands-on exposure for learners to develop holistic personality enhancement, thereby leading to thoughtful leaders of the nation. The programme is eligible for undergraduate students across different streams like engineering, science and technology, education, arts, commerce, social science, and many more. The activities have academic credits added to the Academic Bank of Credits, thereby earning academic scores for their regular graduation programme. It leverages the skills of youth to build a vibrant India leading to achieving the Amrit Kaal and Viksit Bharat@2047.

The Government of India initiatives such as RuTAG, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan and MY Bharat are the need of the hour for the youth and make them socially responsible to drive and transform rural and local communities through various impactful activities, thereby transforming India into a New Vibrant Bharat.

Additionally, India has emerged as a universal responsible nation to guide global communities as a Vishwa Guru, Vishwa Sewak, Vishwa Suraksha, Vishwa Rakshak and Vishwa Mitra.

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Bringing the North East onto India's Buddhist Map



LALKHOLEN KIPGEN **URVASHI PRASAD**

The North East holds one of India's most compelling untold stories in Buddhist tourism — if only pilgrims could reach it. Every year, nearly three lakh Indian pilgrims travel to Lumbini in Nepal — to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha, to light incense, to sit in silence. They cross a border to do something India has not yet made easy to do at home. Meanwhile, a few hours' flight away, in the hills of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, ancient monasteries sit above the clouds, their prayer flags snapping in the wind, largely unseen by the world.

This is the paradox at the heart of India's Buddhist tourism story. The country that gave Buddhism to the world — where Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment at Bodhi Gaya, delivered his first sermon at Samath, and passed away at Kushinagar — has not yet connected its eastern Himalayan inheritance to that sacred map. The Finance Minister's announcement in the Union Budget this February, proposing a Buddhist Circuit for the North East spanning six states, is a chance to finally do that — but only if it is done right. The North East is not a footnote to India's Buddhist heritage. It is a living chapter. Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh, one of the largest Buddhist monasteries in Asia, has been a centre of Mahayana learning for centuries. The Golden Pagoda near the Myanmar border is among the most striking religious structures in the country. Pema Yangtse in Sikkim and Mahamuni Pagoda in Tripura — these are not ruins or museum pieces. They have ritual calendars, resident monks, and festivals that draw local communities across generations. Tourism here would not just be sightseeing; it would be participation in something still alive.

Nepal's experience is instructive — and cautionary. After it launched a national policy to develop Lumbini as a world-class pilgrimage destination in 2020, visitor numbers climbed steadily, recovering from the pandemic and surpassing earlier records by 2024. Of the 3.9 lakh visitors to Lumbini that year, the vast majority were Indian. Chinese visitors rose nearly five-fold over the same period. The lesson is clear: faith-based travel from Asia is a large and growing market. But Nepal's experience also shows that football alone does not create local prosperity. Keeping visitors

longer, spreading them beyond a single site, and translating arrivals into jobs remain hard problems. The North East would do well to study Nepal's stumbles, not just its successes.

The proposed circuit also has genuine strategic logic. India's Act East policy has long sought deeper ties with Southeast Asian nations — countries where Buddhism is not a historical curiosity but a living faith. Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, and Sri Lanka are precisely the markets that the Kushinagar international airport is being built to attract. A North East circuit, connected to the existing pilgrim trail across Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, would extend India's spiritual geography eastward — and open a culturally resonant conversation with neighbours that no trade agreement alone can achieve. None of this will happen by announcing the circuit alone. Three obstacles have historically hobbled tourism in this region, and the scheme must confront them directly. First, distances between sites are large and roads are often poor — a pilgrim cannot easily travel from Tawang to Tripura in any reasonable time. Second, many of the most significant sites sit near international borders, where travel permits for foreign visitors can be cumbersome and unclear. A Japanese Buddhist scholar who wants to spend a month in Arunachal Pradesh should not have to navigate a labyrinth of overlapping regulations. Third, air and rail links are limited. Without reliable connections, the "circuit" risks becoming a scattered collection of hard-to-reach points rather than a coherent journey.

A well-designed circuit would do three things. It would build the physical connections — roads, regional air routes, and rest stops — that turn a map into a walkable path. It would simplify travel rules for pilgrims on defined routes, in coordination with the Home Ministry and state governments. And it would anchor development in local communities, ensuring that the monasteries themselves, and the villages around them, are stewards of the experience rather than backdrops to it. Tourism that does not benefit local people does not last.

India still lacks a unified national policy linking Buddhist tourism circuits in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with those in Odisha, Maharashtra and the North East. A single coordinating framework could integrate preservation, visitor experience and market development nationwide. Other pilgrim economies, from Saudi Arabia to Japan, already follow such models. With serious investment, easier access and community-centred planning, the North East can become one of the most memorable chapters of India's Buddhist trail. Pilgrims are already travelling; the real question is whether India is ready to welcome them.

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The Free Press Journal Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Whom to trust, EAM or FM?

The escalation of tensions in the Gulf is beginning to ripple far beyond the battlefield, and for India the consequences are already visible in markets, policy debates, and diplomatic messaging. Three developments on Monday captured the scale of the challenge facing Asia's third-largest economy.

First, oil markets surged past the psychologically significant \$100-a-barrel mark, following reports that Iran had shooed Mojtaba Khamenei to succeed his slain father, Ali Khamenei, as supreme leader. The signal of global markets was clear: the confrontation between Iran and the United States is unlikely to end quickly, and the world needs to brace for a prolonged phase of geopolitical risk that could repeatedly disrupt energy flows.

Second, India's finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, seeking to calm domestic anxieties, argued in Parliament that India's current inflation levels sit near the lower end of the tolerance band set by the Reserve Bank of India, suggesting that the economy may be able to absorb some of the shock from rising crude prices.

Third, India's external affairs minister, Subrahmanya Jaishankar, acknowledged that the Gulf conflict poses a serious risk to India's supply chains.

A full blockade of the Strait of Hormuz could drive global crude prices to \$130 a barrel or higher.

The region remains critical not only for India's energy supplies but also for trade and the employment of millions of Indian nationals. Together, these developments highlight the uncomfortable reality confronting India. The country's economic stability remains deeply entwined with events in the Gulf. For India, the vulnerability is structural. The country imports the vast majority of its oil, consuming roughly 2.5 to 2.7 million barrels of crude per day, from overseas suppliers. Much of that supply moves through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow maritime corridor connecting the Gulf to global energy markets, which today has effectively become a geopolitical fault line. Financial markets have already begun to register the stress. The BSE Sensex has dropped nearly 3,000 points over the past five trading sessions, reflecting investor fears of prolonged instability. Meanwhile, the Indian rupee has weakened by nearly 92 to the dollar, pressured by foreign investor outflows and rising import costs. Currency depreciation risks feeding into inflation by making energy and other imports more expensive, a dynamic that policymakers are eager to avoid. India's strategic petroleum reserves provide a limited cushion, roughly 74 days of coverage under current consumption patterns. But reserves are a temporary buffer, not a long-term solution. The worst-case scenario is not difficult to imagine. A full blockade of the Strait of Hormuz could drive global crude prices to \$130 a barrel or higher. For India's macroeconomic balance, the arithmetic is unflinching. Every \$10 increase in crude prices adds roughly \$13 billion to \$14 billion to the country's annual import bill. One can only hope that the finance minister was right in her assessment delivered so boldly from the floor of Parliament.

A war without any purpose

In war, truth is often the first casualty. Yet, even by the grim standards of modern conflict, the claim made by Donald Trump regarding the tragic bombing of a school in southern Iran on February 28 was astonishing. Instead of acknowledging the possibility of a mistake, the American president insinuated that Iran itself had bombed the school to tarnish the reputation of the US. Such an allegation was made without presenting any credible evidence. The tragedy itself is horrifying. A devastating strike destroyed the Shajarah Tayyebah elementary school in Minab, killing about 175 people, most of them children. Photographs of mangled missile fragments collected from the site reportedly bear the markings of a Tomahawk cruise missile, a weapon used by American forces. The debris strongly suggests that the fatal strike came from a missile fired by the US as part of the ongoing American-Israeli war against Iran. Instead of expressing remorse or launching an immediate and transparent investigation, President Trump chose mockery. He even made fun of Iranian missiles going astray.

What makes this tragedy even more disturbing is the absence of any clearly stated purpose behind the war itself. Neither President Trump nor Benjamin Netanyahu has convincingly explained what they hope to achieve through the conflict. At one moment, Trump suggests the war is meant to support Iranians aspiring for freedom; at another, he speaks openly of regime change in Tehran. Shifting goalsposts cannot be the hallmark of a serious geopolitical undertaking. Wars, like chess, require a clearly thought-out endgame. Yet, the American president appears to change his narrative almost by the hour. In the morning he declares the war will be over "very soon"; in the afternoon he insists the US will "go further"; and by evening he claims the campaign is already "very complete". He has also boasted that Iran's navy, air force, and other capabilities have even effectively destroyed. If that were indeed the case, one must ask why the war continues.

Far from weakening the Iranian regime, the war appears to have strengthened hardline sentiment within the country. The election of the son of Ali Khamenei—widely regarded as an even more uncompromising figure—suggests that external military pressure has produced the opposite of its intended effect. The whole world is anxiously waiting for the guns to fall silent. Wars fought without clear objectives rarely produce victory. More often, they produce tragedy, instability, and unintended consequences. The bombing of a school and the deaths of so many innocent children stand as a stark reminder of that truth. When leaders wage wars without purpose or clarity, it is the powerless who pay the price. And the world is left to grapple with the consequences of decisions taken in haste, arrogance, and confusion.



Bird's Eye View

MANISHA PANDE

In her address at the UN Security Council recently, First Lady Melania Trump talked about making education accessible for all. The Security Council's presidency rotates each month. This month it was the US's turn to head the proceedings where Mrs Trump spoke earnestly about bringing peace through education in today's strife-torn world. While the idea appears noble, it is the intent that leaves much to be desired. Though the First Lady's intent is "rooted in the concept of democratising knowledge for everyone in this 'age of imagination'".

It is a noble thought indeed, but one that is fraught with many contradictions. To start with, for a country that projects itself as the protector of children's rights, there has hardly been any concrete step taken by the US under Trump to end the genocide in Gaza. In fact, early last year, he promoted the idea that Palestinians should relocate to other areas permanently and had declared to all and sundry that America would take over the Gaza Strip and "do a real job with it". He shared his vision of the Gaza Strip at a joint press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White

House.

That the number of children killed or maimed in Gaza by October 2025 had reached a staggering 64,000, according to a statement by the UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell, seemed of little or no consequence to Mr and Mrs Trump, who have stayed mum on the issue. Neither did the duo condemn Israel's recent attack on the Shajarah Tayyebah girls' school in Minab in the ongoing war with Iran, which killed 180 people, most of whom were girls aged between 7 and 12. Initially, both the Trump administration and the Israel Defence Forces claimed ignorance in the matter, a claim that offered a rather weak defence for the technically advanced nations. But then on the morning of March 10, in the face of mounting protests over the attack, the president made a baseless claim that it was done by "someone else" or the Iranians themselves.

Another contradiction that surfaces in the speech is the understanding of the term "intelligence". In her speech, Melania Trump stated that "Children raised in a culture rooted in intelligence develop confidence, innovate, build, compete, and maintain a deep value system... But children raised

in a culture rooted in ignorance are surrounded by disorder, and sometimes even conflict. These societies are filled with rigid thinkers who embrace prejudice and shun human dignity."

Strictly speaking, "intelligence" is a subjective as well as an objective term, depending on the context it is used in, and varies across societies and cultures. It is often region-specific too and is reflected in the food choices one makes or the way he/she dresses. For example, it makes good sense to wear an abaya when in a desert country, as it protects one from extreme heat or sandstorms. When Melania Trump spoke about the "culture rooted in ignorance", she was referring to states that are not as yet technology-friendly or digitally savvy.

Judging a society as culturally ignorant shows the limited knowledge the Trumps possess. A tribe residing deep in the forests of the Congo Basin in Africa may be ignorant of the new age world, yet it is intelligent enough to have survived in harsh conditions without depending on modern-day technology. In fact, when it comes to understanding the region, their intelligence far exceeds ours. Yes, when talking about cognitive functions, intelligence does become ob-

jective. But that is a ridiculously narrow look at a term that encompasses all aspects of life.

In essence what it means is that a civilisation that has survived for thousands of years cannot lack in intelligence. And by that definition, America has a history extending to a mere 250 years in the past. So, when Mrs Trump talks of the "culture rooted in intelligence" and the "culture rooted in ignorance", she seems to be talking about the measurable aspects of the terms, which makes them objective in nature.

She is right in saying that when a nation restricts thought, it restricts its own future. But then it is a two-way street. The US of A, the most technologically advanced, democratic, and supposedly liberal nation in the world, a superpower that has been the fulcrum of the world economy since World War II and has extended its influence over the rest of the world culturally as well, has been rather wanting in its understanding of the various cultures that co-habit planet Earth.

According to a 2022 report by the Johns Hopkins University on gun violence in the United States, gun deaths among children in the age group of 1 to 17 have increased by 106 per cent since 2013 and have

been the leading cause of death among this group since 2020. This year, so far there have been six incidents of school shootings in the US, as per a CNN report.

The First Lady's observation that the "path to peace depends on us taking responsibility to empower our children through education and technology" is crucial. But equally crucial is understanding that all conflicts are not a result of ignorance; some originate due to greed, such as Israel's greed for a Greater Israel or America's greed for the oil. Unless that greed is tackled, the observation remains a talking point on paper only.

For the past few years, talks of an apocalypse have gained momentum; they have become a subject of the mainstream discourse. The end of the world as we see it, coupled with the dominance of machines, has generated great concern among the masses, and their response to it has been as varied as the belief in the cause leading to it and its timing. However, one thing is decidedly certain: when children start becoming the target in a war, it is a sure-shot sign of the beginning of the end.

Manisha Pande is an author and consulting editor with the FPJ.



Learning Curve

VRIJUENDRA

One persistent and normalising aspect of Indian society at all levels is its caste hierarchy and the graded respect and humiliation that it forces people to accept down the hierarchy. Not surprisingly, our higher education institutions (HEIs) are also not immune from these practices on their campuses.

To deal with caste-based and other similar harassment of students from marginalised backgrounds, for the first time, the UGC issued the Promotion of Equity in Higher Educational Institutions Regulations in 2012. The regulations defined discrimination in a wide-ranging manner: any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education in particular, depriving a student or a group of students on the basis of caste, creed, religion, language, ethnicity, gender or disability of access to education of any type or at any level.

The regulations prohibited discrimination against students from marginalised groups in admission and unfair evaluation and their harassment on campus. It barred labelling of students by caste/community, their segregation in hostels and other facilities, and publicising names of reserved cat-

egory students. Further, HEIs were required to set up an equal opportunity cell to ensure equal access and opportunities for all students. All complaints of harassment and discrimination were required to be resolved within 60 days. These regulations applied to all HEIs in India.

However, these regulations lacked two key provisions: no penalties for non-compliance and a much weaker mechanism to implement these regulations compared to those covering ragging and sexual harassment complaints. As a result, the 2012 regulations were largely ignored by colleges and universities under the UGC.

In 2019, two mothers—Radhika Vemula, mother of Rohith Vemula (a PhD student who had committed suicide in January 2016 at the University of Hyderabad after facing months of harassment from the administration for protesting against caste-based discrimination on the campus), and Abeda, mother of Payal Tadi (a post-graduate student and junior resident at the BYL Nair Hospital, Mumbai, who was found hanging by the ceiling fan in her hostel room in May 2019 on account of persistent caste-based harassment and humiliation by her seniors)—filed a petition in the Supreme Court, asking the Court to intervene and strengthen the mechanism for the strict implementation of the Regulations, 2012. In January 2025, the Supreme Court directed the UGC to prepare a more rigorous institutional framework against caste-based discrimination to ensure accountability.

On January 13 this year, the University Grants Commission issued the landmark "Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026", replacing the Regulations, 2012. The 2026 regulations mandate strict, time-bound measures to ensure zero caste-based discrimination in Indian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). According to these regulations, each HEI must establish an Equal Opportunity Centre and an Equity Committee with representation from the SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, women and persons with disabilities to monitor and report incidents of any identity-based discrimination. Further, the HEIs must appoint equity ambassadors and equity squads to patrol 'vulnerable spots' on the campus and to ensure that students from disadvantaged groups are not harassed or excluded from academic and extracurricular activities.

All complaints must be acknowledged within 24 hours and must be resolved within 15 working days. The HEIs are required to submit an annual report to the UGC, giving details of complaints received and actions taken during the period. Those failing to comply with these regulations will face penalties, including the loss of accreditation, and will be debarred from offering degrees and denied participation in UGC schemes. These regulations would govern all central, state, private and deemed universities.

Though these regulations are an important step forward, they are also flawed. While these regulations make it compulsory that the 10 member equity committees must have representation from marginalised groups of students, it does not clarify either the mechanism of representation or the number of representatives. Similarly, Regulations, 2026, fail to clearly define caste-based discrimination, which was, in fact, clearly spelt out in the Regulations, 2012.

Also, the regulations exclude several technical and medical institutions, such as the IITs, the IIMs and the All India Institutes of Medical Sciences. In fact, these prestigious institutions of national importance are places where caste-based and other discriminations are practised quite intensely by both the students and the staff. These regulations also don't provide any framework to hold the faculty and the administration accountable for numerous forms of discrimination practised by them,

especially for the hiring and promotion of faculty from the SC, ST and OBC groups.

However, in a stark reflection of the complex caste dynamics of the country and its HEIs, as the details of the UGC Regulations, 2026, spread, protests by upper-caste students and groups swiftly erupted in several districts of Uttar Pradesh, who demanded an immediate roll back of these regulations. They also began a sustained online campaign against them. They also filed a petition in the Supreme Court against these regulations, claiming that the caste-based hostility on campuses is not unidirectional and the general category students also face 'discrimination'. Further, the petitioner claimed that the regulations could be used to frame general category students under false charges.

On January 29, the Supreme Court bench led by CJI Surya Kant stayed the Regulations, 2026, asking the UGC to continue with the Regulations, 2012, till further orders and directing the UGC to get the Regulations, 2026, re-examined by a committee of experts. We have to wait and watch how the case unfolds in the Supreme Court.

Vrijuendra taught in a Mumbai college for more than 30 years and has been associated with democratic rights groups in the city.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Israel-Iran war

The US-Israeli attack on Iran has thrown the world into chaos and confusion. The world has been disturbed, but the aggressors do not seem to be perturbed. US President Donald Trump is trying to put up a brave face. He feels that "people in Iran are sick, mentally sick". Well, let the world decide that. Meanwhile, it seems like we are heading towards the Third World War. We can only hope to pray that wiser counsel prevails.

Melville X. D'Souza, Mumbai

Deserving win

India's emphatic victory over New Zealand in the final of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup marks a defining moment in modern cricket. Retaining the crown with such authority not only highlights India's dominance in the shortest format of the game but also signals the arrival of a team that has mastered

the art of aggressive yet disciplined T20 cricket.

Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

Change in Nepal

The recent elections in Nepal have created a significant political moment. In September 2025, widespread protests led by Gen Z voiced strong anger against corruption, unemployment, and dynastic politics. The energy of this youth movement was reflected in the election results, where a new political force associated with Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah secured overwhelming public support, weakening the long-dominant traditional parties.

Tushar A. Rahatgaonkar, Mumbai

Women at bar

The International Day for Women Judges is observed on March 10. In Indian High Courts, there are 116 women judges out of a total working strength

of 781. In the Supreme Court, Justice BV Nagarathna is the sole woman on the bench among the 33 judges. No woman has been appointed to the top court after 2021. Women are well equipped to find solutions through dialogue, and they are hugely sensitive to human rights and relations, and women judges bring with them diverse approaches, varied outlooks and fresh thought processes.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Ensuring safety

CCTV cameras must be made mandatory for all school vehicles, as they will create fear among those committing crimes, including sexual assault on children. Crimes against school-going children are on the rise, and technology when available should be used to safeguard children at every possible point and parameter. Trackers can spot the exact location of the

person. They can be fitted into the ID cards of the students. This additional layer of safety will reduce crimes in the city!

S.N. Kabra, Mumbai

WB governor

Former Tamil Nadu governor RN Ravi has been appointed as the new Governor of West Bengal. The appointment comes at a politically sensitive time, with the state heading into Assembly elections in 2026. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has already raised objections, alleging that the centre bypassed federal norms in taking the decision. Ravi's tenure in TN was marked by repeated friction with the state government, and many expect a similarly turbulent dynamic in Bengal. Institutional credibility, especially ahead of elections, is too important to be sacrificed for short-term political signalling.

Abbharna Barathi, Chennai



Better surveillance needed

A report published on March 9 about the rise in street crimes in Pune is deeply worrying. Frequent incidents of chain-snatching, mobile thefts, and vehicle robberies have led to growing anxiety among residents. What is most alarming is that many of these crimes occur in busy areas, sometimes even during the daytime. Such incidents highlight the gaps in surveillance, inadequate patrolling, and poor monitoring of crime-prone areas. A city like Pune, which has expanded rapidly in recent years, requires stronger policing and better preventive measures.

Aditi Sawarkar, Pune



DECCAN HERALD

ESTABLISHED 1948

A playbook for the longgame

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's decision to relinquish his position and head to the Rajya Sabha signals the culmination of coalition politics practised in the state over the last many years. It is not known what role Nitish himself had in this move because he has not been keeping good health in the past few months. It is ironic that the Janata Dal (U) stalwart, one of the sharpest minds in contemporary politics, is now seen as having a limited say on his own position. The alleged waning of his faculties may, therefore, be seen as a reflection of the weakening of his politics. Both the leader and his party stand diminished in the state in relation to their coalition partner, the BJP.

The BJP has pursued a strategy of alliances with regional parties in states where it did not have the strength to form governments or even a significant Opposition. Bihar extends the party's template for coalition governments, first experimented with at the Centre in the late 1990s. In the states, this strategy helped the BJP encroach on regional parties' space by appropriating their support base and weakening or splitting them. There is a recent example in Maharashtra, where both the Shiv Sena and the NCP now stand fractured. The Sena, once the leader of the alliance, has since ceded control to the BJP, which is now the state's prime political force. In Bihar, the BJP was the JD(U)'s junior partner until the 2025 election, when the former took decisive steps to emerge as the larger force.

The elections were fought under the nominal leadership of Nitish Kumar, though the BJP was initially hesitant to announce him as the Chief Ministerial candidate. However, there were no doubts about the party pushing for the chief ministership. The move has come sooner rather than later, perhaps hastened by Nitish's declining health. The veteran leader's son, Nishant Kumar, is being reported as a likely Deputy Chief Minister candidate. Neither Nishant Kumar, who is new to politics, nor any other leader of the JD(U) has the acumen or experience to hold together the party's core support base, which is a social coalition of the Most Backward Castes and women. The BJP and the other parties, including the RJD led by Tejashwi Yadav, will try to make inroads into this base. While the BJP does not yet have a strong regional face to lead the party, its expertise in social engineering and continued alliance with the JD(U) may prove the difference in this race.

Nitish Kumar's retreat alters Bihar's politics, validating the BJP's formula of power through partners

Excise reform is a test of intent

Karnataka's proposed new excise policy, announced by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in his budget speech, signals a long-overdue attempt to modernise a regulatory framework that has remained largely unchanged for over six decades. The reform is welcome because the existing structure, rooted in another era, has struggled to keep pace with a rapidly evolving alcohol industry, changing consumption patterns, and the need for greater transparency. The most significant shift in the proposed framework is the move towards an Alcohol-In-Beverage (AIB)-based taxation system, widely regarded as the international gold standard for alcohol taxation. By linking excise duty to the alcohol content of a beverage, the system seeks to tax the component responsible for social harm. The transition, to be phased over three to four years, in theory, encourages a gradual shift towards lower-alcohol beverages. The policy also introduces structural reforms aimed at improving the ease of doing business. Pricing slabs will be reduced from 16 to eight, and the system of government-administered price fixation will gradually be deregulated, giving producers more freedom to align with market conditions. Simplified licensing procedures and greater digitisation have been proposed. Even the long-criticised transfer system has been partly addressed, with transfers of key field staff now conducted through digital counselling. Another notable feature is the attempt to integrate the excise sector with tourism by allowing distilleries and breweries to conduct tasting sessions and guided tours.

Karnataka must balance its commendable modernisation efforts with revenue growth and public health

However, the policy also carries significant risks. Excise is the second largest component of Karnataka's own tax revenue, contributing 20%, second only to commercial taxes, which account for 57%. With collections already reaching Rs 36,492 crore up to February in 2025-26, the government has set an ambitious target of Rs 45,000 crore for the coming fiscal year. The human cost of such targets must not be overlooked. Excise enforcement has historically placed immense pressure on field officials to maximise collections, which often translates into encouraging higher consumption. The Chief Minister has assured that the health department will undertake public interventions, including de-addiction and rehabilitation initiatives. However, such assurances have often remained largely on paper. There are also concerns that steep taxation linked to alcohol content could push price-sensitive consumers towards illicit liquor if the transition is not managed carefully.

The attempt to overhaul the excise policy is a step in the right direction, but it must proceed with caution. When a sector that generates tens of thousands of crores in revenue is reshaped, reform must balance fiscal goals, industry growth, and public health with equal care.

A POLLUTION BLIND SPOT

Clean air goals cannot ignore the present

India must prioritise protection from the immediate harms through a multi-layered public health defence system

VIJAY KANURU

India's pollution policy knows how to react. It does not yet know how to protect. For most of the year, our cities live under a permanent haze. Barring the brief mercy of the monsoon, toxic air is the inescapable backdrop of urban Indian life. The response to this crisis follows a rhythm recognised by exhaustion: odd-even schemes, construction bans, and emergency advisories. This is not a strategy; it is a ritual of reaction.

What is absent from this cycle is not ambition. India has no shortage of emission targets, regulatory frameworks, or court-mandated deadlines. What is absent is a parallel commitment to protecting people from pollution while the longer work of eliminating it continues. These are fundamentally different tasks, and conflating them has left over a billion citizens exposed — not because policy has failed to act, but because it has consistently asked only one question: how do we clean the air? The harder question, and the more urgent one, is this: how do we defend people from the air they are breathing right now?

India's air pollution response is built almost entirely around source control — reducing emissions from vehicles, industry, crop burning and construction. This is necessary work. But it operates on timelines measured in decades, and offers nothing to the child walking to school through PM2.5 levels four times the national standard, or the elderly woman in Patna whose lungs have absorbed twenty winters of particulate matter while regulators debated compliance schedules.

The structural blind spot is this: emission reduction protects future air. It does not protect present lungs. Modern public health has always understood this distinction. Seatbelts did not fix dangerous roads. Vaccines did not eradicate pathogens overnight. Water treatment did not eliminate contamination at the source. But each built a protective layer that saved lives while the underlying problem was being addressed. India has applied this logic to road safety, immunisation, and sanitation. It has not applied this to air pollution, and the disease burden reflects that omission. Cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory illness, lung cancer among lifelong non-smokers are

rising in India's most polluted cities. The reactive cycle has not bent those curves.

A different framework is needed — one designed not to replace emission-reduction efforts, but to run alongside them. A public health defence system would operate through three complementary layers, each targeting a different point in the exposure pathway: the body, the individual, and the immediate environment.

Layer One: Strengthen the body's defences. Air pollution's damage depends heavily on the body's capacity to manage oxidative stress and inflammation.



Urban particulate matter, which carries heavy metals, microplastics, and toxic hydrocarbons, penetrates deeply into the lungs and bloodstream. Multi-city research studies consistently find that long-term PM2.5 exposure produces the steepest decline in lung function among people with low dietary antioxidant intake — a finding with a direct policy implication. Community nutritional supplementation programmes targeting Vitamins C, D, E, and Omega, delivered through existing Ayushman Bharat primary care infrastructure, can reduce the inflammatory burden of chronic exposure at modest cost. Paired with lung function screening in high-pollution districts — modelled on cardiac screening already embedded in urban health missions — this layer identifies the most vulnerable early and intervenes before damage becomes irreversible. The infrastructure exists. The mandate does not.

Layer Two: Reduce what enters the lungs. Advances in nano-fibre filtration now enable masks that capture pollutants at the nanoscale — precisely the fraction that penetrates deepest into lung tissue. Wearable pollution monitors allow individuals to make informed, real-time decisions about outdoor exposure. These technologies exist and are improving rapidly. What India lacks is a system that makes them accessible and standardised across income groups.

The Ministry of Health and the Bureau of Indian Standards have the standing to set performance requirements, certify products, and drive down costs through procurement scale. A seatbelt that only the wealthy can afford is not a safety system. It is a privilege.

Layer Three: Clean the air where people are. While national atmospheric cleanup remains a long-term objective, cities can deploy targeted interventions in the highest-exposure zones now. Building façades can incorporate filtration surfaces. Traffic corridors can carry localised air-cleaning systems. Urban planning can introduce ventilation corridors and green buffers to break up stagnant pollution pockets around schools, hospitals, and dense residential neighbourhoods.

Implementing this framework requires four specific steps: a designated mandate within the Ministry of Health for air-pollution health defence, distinct from the Ministry of Environment's emission-reduction work; national certification standards for personal air-protection equipment with affordability built in; integration of respiratory resilience programmes into primary healthcare in India's most polluted districts; and a formal urban defence pilot across five to ten cities — Bengaluru, Delhi, Pune, Patna, and Hyderabad among the candidates — with independent health outcome monitoring from the outset. Indian institutions have delivered exactly this kind of coordinated action before, when the mandate was clear.

The framing is now clear. Pollution control is a goal. Protecting people from pollution is an obligation — and obligations do not wait for goals to be met. India has spent a generation treating these as the same task. They are not. Emission reduction determines the future. Exposure control determines what happens to people in the present. Both matter. But only one is receiving serious institutional attention.

Somewhere in Bengaluru today, a child is walking to school through air that will leave a permanent mark on her lungs. She is not waiting for a compliance deadline. She is not interested in emission trajectories. She needs protection that exists, works, and reaches her — now. That is not a complex ask. It is the most basic one a state can receive. India has the institutions, the science, and the resources to answer it. The only thing missing is the decision to try.

(The writer serves as a Global Entrepreneur in Residence at the Massachusetts Venture Development Centre in Boston, USA. He is a Gates Cambridge Scholar, a Helmholtz Research Fellow, and a Lowry Prize winner)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A date with Nessie

The mystery remains 'loch-ed' in the deep waters

SOMNATH SARKAR

I would like to think I narrowly missed seeing Nessie, the Loch Ness monster, on a recent trip. After all, I had travelled thousands of miles to be within a "drive-and-dive" distance of the beast — variously imagined as a serpent, a dragon or a lone dinosaur that somehow escaped extinction. Of unknown gender, the legendary creature said to prowl the expansive waters of Loch Ness in the Scottish highlands had loomed large in my childhood imagination. Given this nostalgic pull, I scheduled my visit to Loch Ness in 2023 to coincide with a two-day global hunt for Nessie.

According to folklore, Nessie was first spotted by an Irish priest, St Columba, in 565 AD. The story goes that the creature had killed a swimmer and was preparing to attack another when the priest intervened. Making a sign of the cross, he admonished the mammoth beast and

commanded it to retreat into the loch (Scottish for 'lake') and remain there. Nessie complied, slipping back under the waters without further ado.

Since then, the monster has been sighted from time to time, usually in fragments, by visitors to the eponymous lake. Reported glimpses have included a slender neck, a green tail and twin humps. Curiously, the pieced-together descriptions make Nessie sound like a hybrid — somewhere between the long-extinct Plesiosaur and an oversized eel. Evidence of the Loch Ness monster's existence, however, has remained anecdotal, resting largely on sightings and disputed photographs.

Against this backdrop, the global hunt organised by the Loch Ness Centre of Scotland in late August 2023 — with volunteer researchers, including naturalists and zoologists from several countries — was billed as the most systematic search for the aquatic mystery since 1972. Boats, thermal-imaging drones and other high-tech gadgets, including sonar and hydrophones, were deployed across the loch. Webcam trained on the waters provided live streams to viewers worldwide, inviting them to spot the elusive monster if it made a fleeting appearance.

Nessie, however, did not oblige and its mystery remained "loch-ed" in the 22-mile-long and 760-foot-deep waters. Earlier, a submarine crew reported sighting unusually large eels that roughly matched the monster's supposed profile — albeit on a smaller scale. With an odd eel reportedly touching three metres in length, the theory that Nessie might simply be a gigantic eel has gained some traction.

Perhaps, as someone remarked, the only foolproof way to establish Nessie's existence would be to empty the 7,500 million cubic metres of water in Loch Ness. But since that would mean draining more water than all the lakes of England and Wales combined, it is easier said than done. Till a more viable way emerges to unravel the mystery, it makes economic sense to keep the myth alive. The annual influx of thousands of visitors from around the world brings significant revenue to the local economy.

The brand of Loch Ness, besides promoting tourism and allied industries, also has a multiplier effect. Garments, toys and handicrafts featuring Nessie fill shop shelves, eagerly lapped up by tourists hoping to take home a little bit of Nessie.

SPEAK OUT

Everyone has the right to express their view. They say they (the DMK) will win, but from our side we are confident that we will win.



Nainar Nagendran,
BJP President, Tamil Nadu

Words empty as the wind are best left unaided.
Homer

TO BE PRECISE

COOK LESS.
EAT LESS.
SAYS TRUMP!



IN PERSPECTIVE

Youth steers Nepal's new turn

The election result emphatically underlines the people's call for reform. Can the new guard deliver its promise?

ANAND KUMAR

Nepal has once again entered a decisive phase in its democratic journey. The general elections held on March 5, 2026, triggered one of the country's most significant political transformations since the end of the monarchy. The sweeping victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and the emergence of Balendra Shah — popularly known as Balen — as the likely prime minister represent far more than a routine electoral change. The results point to a deeper generational shift in Nepal's politics, reflecting widespread frustration with the country's traditional political elites and a growing demand for new leadership.

The elections were held in an extraordinary political context after the government led by K P Sharma Oli collapsed in September 2025, following widespread youth-led protests. Initially sparked by a temporary ban on social media, the demonstrations quickly expanded into a nationwide movement against corruption, poor governance, and entrenched patronage politics, forcing Oli to resign. An interim administration headed by former Chief Justice Sushila Karki was formed to stabilise the country and organise fresh elections. Nearly 18.9 million voters were eligible to elect members to the 275-seat House of Representatives — 165 through direct voting and 110 through proportional representation — with turnout estimated at around 60% despite Nepal's difficult terrain.

The election results produced one of the most dramatic upsets in Nepal's recent political history. The RSP, founded only a few years ago by media personality Rabi Lamichhane, surged ahead of established political forces and secured a decisive mandate, winning around 124 of the 165 directly contested seats and forming a strong majority in the proportional vote. The victory dealt a major blow to traditional parties such as the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist).

At the centre of this political shift is Balendra Shah, a 35-year-old leader who represents a new generation of Nepali politicians. A former rapper and social media personality, Shah first gained national attention after winning the Kathmandu mayoral election in 2022 as an independent candidate. In the 2026 parliamentary elections, he defeated former prime minister K P Oli in the high-profile Jhapa-5 constituency, symbolising a broader public rejection of entrenched political elites.

If confirmed as prime minister, Balendra Shah would become the youngest head of government in the parliamentary history of Nepal's youth, especially after last year's Gen-Z protests created a space for new political voices. Young and urban voters played a crucial role in the election, with the party gaining strong support in cities, particularly the Kathmandu Valley, where many see the new leadership as a more reform-oriented and accountable alternative to established parties. The elections also exposed the growing weakness of Nepal's traditional parties. The Nepali Congress won only a limited number of seats, while the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) performed even poorly, with several senior leaders suffering defeats amid the strong anti-incumbency sentiment. However, former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as Prachanda, retained his seat in Rukum East, indicating that elements of the old political order still survive.

The success of the RSP is closely tied to the aspirations of Nepal's youth, especially after last year's Gen-Z protests created a space for new political voices. Young and urban voters played a crucial role in the election, with the party gaining strong support in cities, particularly the Kathmandu Valley, where many see the new leadership as a more reform-oriented and accountable alternative to established parties. The elections also exposed the growing weakness of Nepal's traditional parties. The Nepali Congress won only a limited number of seats, while the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) performed even poorly, with several senior leaders suffering defeats amid the strong anti-incumbency sentiment. However, former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as Prachanda, retained his seat in Rukum East, indicating that elements of the old political order still survive.

The elections have also drawn international attention as Nepal occupies a strategic position between India and China. India has expressed interest in a stable government in Kathmandu, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulating the Nepali people on the successful conduct of the polls.

Domestically, expectations from the incoming government are extremely high. The protests that triggered the political transformation were rooted in deep public frustration over corruption, unemployment, and ineffective governance. Addressing these issues will require not only strong political commitment but also institutional reforms and effective policy implementation. Nepal also faces major economic challenges, including slow industrial growth, heavy dependence on remittances, and limited employment opportunities for its youth.

The 2026 elections represent both an opportunity and a test for Nepal. The emergence of a new political leadership demonstrates that the country's democratic institutions remain capable of responding to popular demands for change. Whether this shift will translate into lasting political stability and meaningful governance reforms remains uncertain. For now, the message from Nepal's electorate is unmistakable: the public has chosen change and expects it to deliver a more transparent, accountable, and responsive political future.

(The writer is an associate fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Safeguard constitutional institutions

Recent discussions about a possible no-confidence motion against CEC Gyanesh Kumar highlight growing tensions between the opposition and constitutional institutions. While scrutiny of electoral authorities is a legitimate democratic practice, such actions must be guided by strong evidence and institutional respect. The EC plays a crucial role in safeguarding India's democracy, and repeated

political confrontations risk eroding public trust. The opposition's concerns about voter roll revisions deserve transparent explanation and open debate. Democracy thrives when accountability and institutional independence coexist. Rather than escalating confrontations, Parliament should prioritise constructive dialogue.

Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

Address shortcomings

I refer to Minister Madhu Bangarappa's appeal to lawmakers in the Legislative Council to join the drive to increase enrolment at government schools. While his concern is understandable, the approach is misplaced. Private unaided schools have expanded in rural areas, often at the expense of government schools. Parents are not enthused by free uniforms and

midday meals when teaching staff are scarce. The government must address these shortcomings.

TV Pandarinarath Naidu, Kudige

Flawed stance

I refer to India's position on war underwhelming (Mar 9). Strategic silence may not be an effective response to wars in the neighbourhood. India should be central to diplomatic

efforts to de-escalate this crisis. Instead, through ill-timed diplomacy and visible alignment, India has rendered itself a spectator. The defence after the killing of Iran's Supreme Leader and others is damning.

S S Paul, Nadia (WB)

Our readers are welcome to email letters to letters@deccanherald.com (only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

Why boys should learn to cook and girls to fight

SHUKLA BOSE

In most Indian homes, cooking is still introduced to girls as duty, tradition, and destiny. Boys, by contrast, encounter the kitchen largely by accident—when they move out, live alone, or discover that hunger is a powerful teacher. This imbalance is so deeply normalised that we rarely question it. Yet teaching boys to cook may be one of the most powerful educational, social, and moral interventions we can make. Cooking is not merely a domestic chore. It is applied science in its most delicious form. Every kitchen is a laboratory: heat transfer explains why bread browns and milk boils over; chemistry governs fermentation, emulsions, and caramelisation; biology determines how yeast rises, how bacteria transform curd, and why food spoils. Measurements sharpen mathematical thinking, timing teaches precision, and experimentation builds curiosity. When children cook, they do not just feed them-

selves—they learn how the world works. If this is true, then cooking is not a "soft" skill. It is a core life skill, as fundamental as reading, writing, or basic arithmetic. And like these, it should belong to every child, regardless of gender. In India, however, the kitchen remains one of the earliest classrooms where inequality is taught. Girls learn responsibility early—planning meals, managing budgets, and serving others before themselves. Boys often grow up assuming that meals appear magically, prepared by mothers, sisters, or wives. This silent division does more than assign tasks—it shapes attitudes. It teaches entitlement on one side and invisible labour on the other. Getting boys into the kitchen and girls out on the streets sends a powerful message: no domain belongs to any one gender. Kitchens and streets, care and courage, nourishment and protection—these are human responsibilities, not gendered territories. When children repeatedly see boys

cooking and girls practising self-defence, the boundaries that society has drawn for centuries begin to soften. Roles become fluid. Possibilities widen. What was once "unthinkable" slowly becomes normal. This gender divide, however, was not always so rigid. In many early agrarian and hunter-gatherer societies, survival depended on shared labour. Historical records and anthropological studies show that women farmed, traded, and worked outside the home, while men cooked, cared for children, and participated in domestic life when needed. The sharp separation between the "public male world" and the "private female home" emerged much later. It was during the rise of settled agriculture, property ownership, and especially the Industrial Revolution that this divide hardened. As men moved into factories and formal wage labour, women were increasingly confined to unpaid domestic work. The 19th-century ideal of the man as breadwinner and the woman as homemaker spread

through colonial administration, education systems, and social reform movements—including in India. What began as an economic arrangement slowly transformed into a cultural rule, then into a moral expectation, and finally into a tradition. Over generations, schools, textbooks, advertisements, films, and even toys reinforced this division. The result is not only unequal workloads at home but also unequal confidence in public life and unequal preparation for independence. Philosopher Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain why these divisions are so durable. Butler argues that gender is not something we are born with, but something we repeatedly do—through everyday acts, expectations, and social rewards and punishments. When girls are praised for cooking and boys are excused from it, and when boys are encouraged to roam freely while girls are cautioned to stay safe, society is not merely reflecting difference; it is

actively producing it. When boys learn to cook, something subtle but profound happens. They begin to understand effort: the standing, the chopping, the waiting, the cleaning, the thinking ahead. They experience what it takes to keep a household running, meal after meal, day after day. This knowledge builds respect—not the abstract kind preached in speeches, but the lived respect that comes from doing the work yourself. Teaching boys to cook is therefore not only about food. It is about empathy. It is about partnership. It is about raising men who do not see domestic labour as women's work but as human work. And if boys must learn to cook, then girls must learn to fight. By this, I do not mean violence, but strength—martial arts, self-defence, physical confidence, and the right to occupy space without fear. For generations, girls have been trained to be careful, quiet, and accommodating. Teaching them martial

arts rewrites this lesson. It tells them: your body is strong, your presence is valid, and your safety matters. Imagine a generation where boys can prepare meals with competence and pride, and girls can walk with confidence and physical courage. Imagine classrooms where cooking is taught alongside physics and self-defence alongside literature. This is not social engineering; it is social correction. Education is meant to prepare children for life, not merely for exams. Lifedemands nourishment, cooperation, resilience, and mutual respect. A curriculum that teaches boys to cook and girls to fight does more than break stereotypes—it builds balanced human beings. Perhaps then our homes will no longer run on invisible sacrifice, and our children will grow up knowing that dignity lies not in whorship, but in knowing how to care—for oneself and for others. (The writer is founder-CEO, Parikrma Humanity Foundation)

Since the American-Israeli attack on Iran began, at least 12 civilians have been killed in oil-rich Gulf countries. All but one of them were foreign nationals

ZIA UR-REHMAN, VIVIAN NEREIM AND AIE BALAGTAS SEE

Murib Zaman worked as a driver in the United Arab Emirates for two decades, living more than 1,000 miles away from his family in northwestern Pakistan and sending home \$300 each month. The manured city of Abu Dhabi, the Emirati capital, seemed much safer than his remote village, where Pakistani Taliban militants roamed. So when his family received word that he had been killed in a faraway war—struck by debris that fell from an intercepted Iranian missile, according to a statement by the UAE—they were shocked. "Every family wants to send its youth to the Middle East because there are no jobs here, and the security situation is difficult," Zaman's cousin, Farman Khan, said in a phone interview. "But now it appears that even those countries are no longer safe. Tens of millions of men and women like Zaman, who was in his 40s, form the backbone of the economy in the Gulf states, oil and natural gas-rich countries that depend heavily on foreign workers. Since the US-Israeli assault on Iran began, Iran has fired hundreds of missiles and drones in retaliation at Gulf countries. It is migrants who are paying the highest price. At least 11 civilians have been killed in attacks across the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain, according to a *New York Times* tally of official sources. All of them were foreign nationals.



Tens of millions of men and women form the backbone of the economy in the Gulf states—oil and natural gas-rich countries—that depend heavily on foreign workers. ISTOCK IMAGES

As war comes to the Gulf, migrant workers pay the price

ed housing with insufficient exit routes, putting them at greater risk if explosions or fires occur. And they are more likely to hold essential jobs, as grocery store cashiers, sanitation workers and delivery drivers, that require them to continue working as usual while many citizens and wealthier foreign residents can take shelter. "For more than a week, whenever there is a blast or a missile interception, we rush outside our labour camps or workplaces to try to save ourselves, but we don't know what to do or where to hide," said Majid Ali, 34, a Pakistani worker employed by a private dairy company in Dubai. On February 28, the day the war began, Ali said, he saw police officers gathered around debris that had fallen in the area where he lives. "Since then, we have been hearing explosions almost every day," he said. "We fear the debris could fall on us and kill us."

help with stiff shoulders from long hours at a desk. Often, alerts of incoming attacks sounded in the middle of a session. She continued her work. "There is a strong sense that the authorities are committed to our safety," Aman said. "Even in times of uncertainty, you know there is someone looking out for you." On Saturday afternoon, as an emergency alert flashed across phones urging residents to shelter in places as interceptors targeted Iranian missiles, the Dubai Hills Mall carried on with its weekend rituals. Families queued for lunch, and children shrieked with laughter in soft play areas. At a Pilates studio, the waitlist stretched into the afternoon. Every so often, a distant boom cut through the hum of the mall. People glanced down at the alert on their phones, and then, more often than not, returned to their conversations. Later that night, when debris struck a vehicle and killed a Pakistani driver in the city, Basudev Das, a Nepali who also works as a driver, was at home less than four miles away. "My first reaction was concern," he said. "Still, Dubai has always been a place where I feel safe, because authorities respond quickly to ensure security."

those who decided to stay in Dubai, despite her fears. When the attacks began, Tan, 38, did not know whether to rush home and start packing for the Philippines or stay put, she said in a phone interview. The attacks jolted her family awake at ungodly hours, sending them scrambling to the basement, she said. She had their emergency bags packed, but did not know where they would go. "As a parent, you also try to stay calm for your children," Tan said. Relatives in Manila have urged her to come home, Tan said, but she hesitates. Even now, Dubai offers more than what she had back home. "Simply put, I feel more secure here, particularly when it comes to safety and health care," she said. For Tan, the war has changed even the smallest family routines. Her husband used to go to the grocery alone. Now the family of four goes together, in case something happens. They keep their passports on them at all times. The children mostly stay indoors, and Tan has begun teaching her eldest daughter what to do when the next alert of an attack sounds. "Take your sister to the hallway," she tells her, "and stay away from the windows." Leaving is a choice that is typically not available to the lowest-paid migrants, who are bound by employment contracts, debts or family obligations. And whatever the risks they face in the Gulf countries—more common than war is abuse and exploitation—they keep coming, because the remittances they send home are a lifeline. The *New York Times*

While much public attention has focused on travellers and workers from the US and Europe trying to leave the region, most migrants to the Gulf come from the rest of the world—Africa, Asia and other countries in the Middle East. Undoubtedly, one reason that all of the civilians killed have been foreign nationals is that they make up the majority of the region's population. In Saudi Arabia, foreign residents are roughly one-third of the population; in the Emirates and Qatar, the proportion is an estimated 80% to 90%. But low-paid migrant workers are also uniquely vulnerable as the conflict widens. They are more likely to live in overcrowd-

ed housing with insufficient exit routes, putting them at greater risk if explosions or fires occur. And they are more likely to hold essential jobs, as grocery store cashiers, sanitation workers and delivery drivers, that require them to continue working as usual while many citizens and wealthier foreign residents can take shelter. "For more than a week, whenever there is a blast or a missile interception, we rush outside our labour camps or workplaces to try to save ourselves, but we don't know what to do or where to hide," said Majid Ali, 34, a Pakistani worker employed by a private dairy company in Dubai. On February 28, the day the war began, Ali said, he saw police officers gathered around debris that had fallen in the area where he lives. "Since then, we have been hearing explosions almost every day," he said. "We fear the debris could fall on us and kill us."

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OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976
Charges on rail freight, passengers spared
New Delhi, March 10
Passenger fares remain unchanged but supplementary charges on freight traffic, which are expected to yield Rs. 87.35 crore, enabled Railway Minister Kamalapati Tripathi to present a Rs. 93.96 crore surplus in the Budget for 1976-77 to the Lok Sabha today. He assured the House that during 1976-77, the railway's earnest endeavour would be to consolidate gains made in the current year, attain greater heights of performance efficiency and make the railways financially viable.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001
T.M.C. Congdmk agreement with AIADMK for TN
Chennai, March 10
Tamil Maanila Congress President G.K. Moopanar today announced an agreement with the AIADMK on behalf of the T.M.C. and the Congress under which the two together will contest 47 of the 234 seats in Tamil Nadu as part of the AIADMK-led secular front in the coming elections. Addressing a press conference at Sathyamoorthi Bhavan after signing an agreement, Mr. Moopanar said this alliance was confined to Tamil Nadu and the Congress would take a decision later on Pondicherry.

OASIS | JAYANTI CHANDRASEKARAN

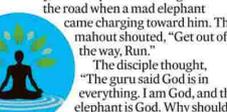
Finding God in ordinary moments

It's not unusual for us, spiritual seekers, to look for God in sanctified spaces—temples filled with incense or prayer halls resonant with chants. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa lived and taught simply, that God is not elsewhere; He is here, in everything. He permeates every aspect of life, waiting to be recognised in moments that are often dismissed as ordinary. A central theme in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is the role of the mind. He compared it to a needle that must be magnetised to feel the pull of God. The Divine is always present, yet the restless mind fails to perceive it. Sri Ramakrishna perceived the same

Divine power in a clong of grass as in the vast sky. The rain nourishing the earth, a sparrow chatting in the puddle, birds caring for their young, or plants emerging through hard ground, all reveal a sustaining presence at work. This Nature, too, speaks of God without sermons. He had a gift for taking profound Vedantic truths and turning them into spiritual parables that anyone could understand. One such story, perhaps his most famous teaching, dwells on the balance between spiritual truth and common

sense. A guru taught his disciple that "Everything is God" (Narayana). One day, the disciple was walking down the road when a mad elephant came charging toward him. The mahout shouted, "Get out of the way, Run!" The disciple thought, "The guru said God is everything, I am God, and the elephant is God. Why should God run away from God?" He stood still. The elephant picked him up with its trunk and tossed him into a ditch, leaving him bruised and broken. When he was recuperating the Guru visited him. The disciple complained,

"You said everything is God, but look what the elephant did to me!" The guru smiled and said, "It is true the elephant is Narayana. But why did you not listen to the Mahout Narayana, who was warning you to get out of the way?" While God is in everything, we must still respect the "Laws of the world" and use our discrimination. Sri Ramakrishna's core message is the realisation that God is not just found in meditation with eyes closed, but is the very substance of everything we see with our eyes open. It does not remove life's complexities, but it deepens its meaning and makes it richer.



The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

CBI under scrutiny

Ram Rahim's acquittal raises disturbing questions

THE acquittal of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh in the Ram Chander Chhatrapati murder case is a huge setback not only to the slain journalist's family but also to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The Punjab and Haryana High Court ruled that the prosecution failed to prove the case against Ram Rahim beyond a reasonable doubt, even as it upheld the conviction of three other accused. The verdict, which came seven years after a special CBI court convicted the Dera Sacha Sauda head and others for the 2002 killing and sentenced them to life imprisonment, has exposed gaping holes in the probe.

The high court sharply criticised the handling of evidence by the investigating agency, particularly the reliance on the testimony of a key witness who, in the HC's words, "kept on tossing from one side to the other like a ping-pong ball." Such observations are troubling because they point to deeper flaws in the methods adopted by investigators in high-profile cases. Chhatrapati's murder was widely believed to be linked to his newspaper's publication of an anonymous letter which alleged that women followers were sexually exploited on the dera's premises. The all-important question was whether Ram Rahim had ordered the revenge killing. The trial court ruled in 2019 that he was guilty, but now it's back to the drawing board for the prosecutors. In May 2024, the HC had overturned another special CBI court order and acquitted Ram Rahim in the 2002 case of murder of the sect's ex-manager, Ranjit Singh.

At stake is the credibility of the CBI, which is already on a sticky wicket after a Delhi court discharged Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia in the excise police case. Justice depends heavily on the integrity and competence of probe officials. Even a seemingly open-and-shut case has to be backed by irrefutable evidence. Accountability must be fixed especially when serious charges against public figures fall flat in the courtroom.

Energy tightrope

India prioritises gas amid West Asia tensions

INDIA's decision to rejig domestic natural gas allocation amid disruptions triggered by the escalating West Asia conflict reflects the difficult balancing act between energy security and economic stability. With liquefied natural gas supplies under strain, the government has prioritised LNG production, piped natural gas for households and CNG for transport. In doing so, it has placed the protection of household energy needs above industrial demand — a prudent choice in a moment of uncertainty. The Centre's move to invoke the Essential Commodities Act highlights the gravity of the situation. Refineries have been instructed to divert key hydrocarbon streams such as propane and butane away from petrochemicals and towards LPG production. Fertiliser plants will receive only 70% of their previous gas supply, while several manufacturing sectors must adjust to 80% per cent of past consumption. Though such rationing may strain parts of the economy, it is a necessary measure to prevent a shortage of cooking fuel. Reports of commercial LPG scarcity in some metro cities underline the vulnerability of urban supply chains. Hotels and restaurants may feel the pinch first, but the government's intervention seeks to ensure that domestic consumers remain insulated.

At the same time, India is quietly reinforcing its crude oil supply lines. Private refiner Reliance Industries has reportedly purchased around six million barrels of Russian Urals crude for March delivery, while policymakers have reiterated that the country requires no external permission to source oil from Russia. This pragmatic approach reflects New Delhi's emphasis on strategic autonomy in energy procurement.

The lesson from the present turmoil is unmistakable. India's dependence on imports routed through critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz leaves it exposed to distant conflicts. The deeper challenge lies in diversifying supply sources, strengthening domestic production and accelerating the shift to cleaner, more resilient energy systems.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 1926

The walkout and after

THE magnificent speech made by Pandit Motilal Nehru in the Legislative Assembly on Monday before he and his party walked out of the House made out a clear, full and conclusive case both in favour of that historic step and against the policy of the government in obstinately refusing the national demand. It was, indeed, at once a masterly survey of the whole body of circumstances leading to the present position, and a complete and final answer to the absurd plea that the next step in the evolution of the reforms cannot be taken because India has not sufficiently cooperated with the government in the working of the present Constitution. Nehru had no difficulty in showing that the country, including his own party, had gone as far in the direction of cooperating with the government as it could possibly have done, and that so far from the government fulfilling its own part of the contract and giving India what she wanted and had every right to expect, it had only poured ridicule upon her representatives and treated the national demand with unmitigated contempt. No one can deny that a policy like this called for the severest condemnation which it was possible for the country to pass upon it. We are only sorry, as we said yesterday, that the Independents and the Liberals, who feel as strongly on the subject as the Swarajists, did not and were not asked to join in this condemnation. But we are by no means certain that the policy and programme which the Swarajists propose to follow after the walkout are all that they could be.

West Asia crisis roils oil, gas markets

India needs to contain inflationary impact by keeping fuel prices stable in the medium term

SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

OL is at the heart of the economic crisis that has engulfed the world after the US and Israel attacked Iran. This is the fossil fuel that continues to be the planet's dominant energy source despite efforts to move towards renewables. West Asia accounts for as much as 50 per cent of the global proven oil reserves and supplies 30 per cent of the world's oil needs.

A spike in petroleum prices had been expected since the onset of the war. Even so, the jump to \$100-plus per barrel on March 9 took most analysts by surprise. Prices rose to over \$119, raising worries over a potential peak of \$150 in case hostilities do not cease soon. There was a retreat to \$89 after US President Donald Trump signalled that the war would end soon, but this is still 30 per cent higher than earlier.

To put the situation in perspective, oil prices have been in bear territory for the past year. They have averaged about \$69 per barrel and even dipped to \$55 last December, despite continuing geopolitical tensions. Prices began inching upwards last month and were around \$72 per barrel for the Brent benchmark crude just before the attacks on Iran began on February 28. It thus took only 10 days for the prices to cross the psychological \$100 barrier. The last time prices touched such heights was after the Ukraine war began in 2022.

The impetus for the sudden hardening in oil markets was the decision of several West Asian countries to cut output, including the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Iraq. This followed Iran's attacks on energy facilities in the region as well as Israel's air raids on Iran's oil infrastructure.

The immediate impact of these developments has been stock market volatility around the globe, stretching from the US to Europe to Asia. The Group of Seven (G7) — comprising advanced economies — has offered to release stocks from their huge petroleum reserves, prompting a moderation in the price spike. But this is likely to have only a temporary effect on oil markets. With energy facilities continuing to be targeted and crucial sea passages blocked by Iran, a price surge is not likely to ease anytime soon.

What is of equal concern is that natural gas prices have also shot up. The European benchmark prices of liquefied natural gas (LNG) have risen by as much as 40-60 per cent. This is largely due to output difficulties in Qatar, which accounts for about 20 per cent of the world's total LNG supplies. Much of this natural gas moves through the world's most sensitive petroleum chokepoint, the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow corridor which connects the Gulf of Oman to the Persian



PETROLEUM STOCKS : India has managed to avert a short-term availability crisis. ISTOCK

shot up in many countries. India faces many challenges, especially at a time when the economy seemed to be moving towards a consistently high growth path. After 7.1 per cent in 2024-25, growth is projected to touch 7.6 per cent in 2025-26. The scenario, however, has altered dramatically with the Iran war. On energy, a short-term availability crisis has been averted as the country has petroleum stocks of up to eight weeks' requirements. This includes reserves in underground storages created on the western and eastern coasts as well as inventories with refineries.

Yet there is a question mark over the availability of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). As much as 85 per cent of LPG imports move through the blockaded Strait of Hormuz. Domestic refineries have already been directed to step up LPG output, while priority is being given to cooking gas consumers. The issue of fertiliser imports from West Asian countries is another concern as shipments remain disrupted. A prolonged conflict could eventually affect availability, though stocks are reported to be adequate for the

The skyrocketing international oil prices have the potential to create a perfect storm for the global economy.

Gulf. As much as 30 per cent of global oil supplies and 20 per cent of natural gas shipments move through this route.

At the global level, the spurt in prices and the logjam created by the inability to move cargo ships and tankers through normal sea routes has created multiple crises. Insurance covers have been withdrawn as ships are being targeted, export cargoes are held up at ports, air travel has become expensive and energy prices have already

coming kharif season.

The inflationary impact of the sudden rise in oil and gas prices has to be factored into the projections for economic growth in the upcoming financial year (2026-27). If global oil prices continue to stay at high levels, the rise in the costs of imported raw material and intermediates will lead to a corresponding rise in the cost of finished goods. This could, in turn, impact GDP growth. According to the Reserve Bank of India, a 10 per cent rise in crude prices could reduce real GDP growth by up to 15 basis points.

The question is, what can India do to insulate itself from the global crisis? The first step is to continue with the policy of diversifying sources of oil supply that has served it well till now. Despite US objections (prior to the 30-day "waiver") to India's oil purchases from Russia, these still comprise 30 per cent of the total imports. They are now set to expand further to avoid reliance on crude supplies from the Gulf region.

The second is to contain the inflationary impact by ensuring that petrol and diesel prices are kept stable in the medium term. Oil marketing companies have been able to build up a cushion of resources over the past year marked by relatively low global oil prices. This should enable them to absorb the latest oil shock. January data shows that inflation has been well within the central bank's acceptable range at 2.75 per cent. External headwinds, however, may deepen inflationary pressures in the coming days.

The skyrocketing international oil prices have the potential to create a perfect storm for the economy. But India is not alone in facing this crisis. The entire world has to tackle the consequences of a war that has engulfed the oil-rich nations of West Asia. One can only hope that better sense prevails sooner rather than later to end a conflict that can only have disastrous outcomes for the global economy.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Arabs may have the oil, but we have the matches. —Ariel Sharon

Back from the abyss

LT GEN PRADEEP BALI (RETI)

HAVING witnessed the death of comrades at close quarters in intense counter-insurgency operations, I felt that I had seen it all. But I was wrong.

One fateful morning in September last year, a young Major serving with the Rashtriya Rifles left his company up a thickly wooded slope, hunting down a group of heavily armed foreign militants. He had a brief exchange of fire with a terrorist who emerged from the forest. While the terrorist stumbled downhill to his death, two bullets hit the officer, one of them tearing away a piece of the intestine before getting lodged in the vertebrae. The second left a big gaping wound. Bleeding profusely, he was evacuated by helicopter to the Base Hospital at Srinagar.

Unaware of these developments, I returned home from a game of golf to see my wife watching the news, with worry clouding her face. The ticker mentioned an encounter between the security forces and terrorists in Kashmir. Just then the phone started buzzing with calls and messages, for that Major was our son, who had recently volunteered for a posting with the Rashtriya Rifles.

I managed to get through to the Hospital Commandant, who was operating upon him. All he could tell me was that the Major had multiple injuries and was very critical. After a dreadful wait of four hours, he rang up to inform me that life-saving damage control surgery had been done; the officer was on a ventilator in induced coma and his condition was being stabilised for further evaluation.

In a comatose state, he was flown to Delhi accompanied by a trauma team and taken to the Intensive Care Unit of the Army Research and Referral Hospital. The gastrointestinal surgery team led by a brilliant professional, now took charge for the second of multiple operational procedures which he was to undergo. A few weeks later, the young officer was ready for a very major neurosurgery done by another outstanding surgeon and his dedicated team. The battle for recovery was but far from over and it was more than six months since that gun-battle in the mountains of south Kashmir, that the Major was ready for discharge from the hospital. A long period of recuperation and recovery lies ahead of him.

Prompt evacuation, diligent medical care and the good fortune of being in the hands of the best doctors not only in the Army but anywhere have given the Major a new lease of life. No one can play God, but we can applaud the supporting actors who don white coats over their uniform. Watching our son walk out of the hospital, a pale shadow of the strong youth who had chosen a posting in an insurgency-infested area, we realised that they had helped him come back from the abyss.

I reflected poignantly that there were many who were less fortunate and it was only memories that they left behind, giving everything for the nation while wearing the Army uniform. The writer served as General Officer Commanding, 33 Corps

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Firm, responsible diplomacy

Refer to 'Time for India to stand firm'; New Delhi stands at a critical juncture in global politics. As its economic and strategic influence grows, so do expectations from its diplomacy. Though partnerships with powers like the US are important, India's foreign policy tradition has emphasised independence, balance and respect for sovereignty. In an increasingly polarised world, New Delhi must engage with all sides, while retaining the confidence to voice its position on issues of conflict, sovereignty and international norms. A firm yet responsible diplomatic stance would strengthen India's credibility as a mature global power. Upholding its principles while safeguarding national interests will ensure that India continues to play a constructive role in shaping the evolving global order.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

Morality must guide policy

Apropos of 'Time for India to stand firm', in the current West Asia conflict, the world's perception of our unclear stand must be guided by moral, constitutional and civilisational ethics. Taking a firm stand without appearing partisan is the need of the hour. American pressure must never be allowed to guide, dictate or determine our course of action. To be seen as a leader, we must exhibit a world vision rather than muted responses. While our national interest lies in saving millions of Indians working abroad, international pressure must not bog us down.

ABHYAM SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Need IPL-like ecosystem

With reference to 'Lessons from T20 for Ministry of Sports', the article offers a timely reminder that India's sporting success depends not merely on talent, but on systems. The IPL model demonstrates how professional management, financial security and exposure to global competition nurture confidence and performance. Sports in India still suffers from bureaucratic control and weak governance. Encouraging corporate investment, transparent administration and sportsperson-centric policies could transform our wide sporting ecosystem.

PARVINDER SINGH, MOHALI

Champions are not accidental

Apropos of 'T20 kings', I am not able to get over how beautifully Axar Patel dismissed England Captain Harry Brook off Jasprit Bumrah by taking a magnificent catch. Bumrah's slower ball was a skier and Axar ran back to point, all the while, keeping his eyes on the ball. It was in the air for eternity it seemed and the moment it looked like falling out of his reach, Axar timed his dive perfectly to pluck the catch. This is the stuff legends are made up of. This proves that champions are not accidental; they are carved out by creating ecosystems that encourage competition through professionalism. The powers-that-be should not allow *babudom*, politics or nepotism come in the way.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

Intellectual giants

Refer to 'Abdus Salam and Punjab's shared scientific legacy'; the article is highly informative and drenched in nostalgia. Unlike today's colleges and universities that have become centres of mass production of graduates and postgraduates, Government College, Lahore and Panjab University, Chandigarh, gave eminent scientists to the world. I had the honour of meeting Dr Har Gobind Khorana at Delhi; Prof Yash Pal was my teacher in a summer school at Panjab University in 1966. Dr RP Bambah used to be part of interview committees at YPS, Patiala. We are lucky to have had such intellectual giants around us in our lifetime.

SURIENDRA LAL, PATIALA

Meeting Dr Abdus Salam

Apropos of 'Abdus Salam and Punjab's shared scientific legacy'; during his visit to India in 1981, Dr Salam travelled to Qadian. He was given a warm and a befitting welcome. People lined both sides of the road to greet him. He shook hands with every person, including me. The next day, he addressed a gathering at a school where I was a student of Class VII. Dr Salam delivered his lecture in chaste Punjabi. My father got his autograph on a pocket dictionary, which I still cherish like a treasure.

BILAL AHMAD SHAMIM, ANDAMAN ISLANDS

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribune.com

Why Hali should be read today



SY QURAIISHI
FORMER CEC INDIA & AUTHOR
OF THREE BOOKS ON HALI

EACH year, International Women's Day brings a wave of tributes, speeches and solemn promises about gender equality. Yet the deeper question remains unchanged. How seriously do societies measure their progress by the dignity, education and status of women?

Nearly a century and a half ago, an Urdu poet from Panipat in present-day Haryana asked precisely that question. Before recalling his words on women, it is worth remembering the intensity with which he loved his homeland. In one of his verses, Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914) wrote: *'Teri ek musht-e-khaak ke badle loon na hargi, agar bahisht mile'* (For a single handful of your soil, I would never barter, even if heaven itself were offered in return).

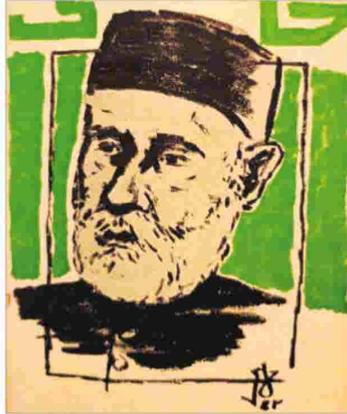
Few lines capture devotion to the motherland with such emotional clarity. Yet patriot-

ism was only one dimension of Hali's legacy. What makes him strikingly relevant today is that nearly 150 years ago, he spoke with unusual clarity about the status, dignity and education of women, long before such concerns became a part of the public discourse in the form we recognise today.

Hali is remembered as a disciple of Mirza Ghalib and the author of *'Muqaddama-e-Sher-o-Shairi'*, often regarded as the first modern work of literary criticism in Urdu. But far less attention is given to another aspect of his thought: his sustained concern for women and the moral health of society.

My awareness of this goes back to 1972, when I was posted as assistant commissioner (under training) in Karnal, with Panipat being a part of the administrative landscape. It struck me even then that the town remembered primarily for its historic battles had also produced a poet whose reflections on society, especially on women, were remarkably ahead of his time. Yet outside literary circles, that dimension of Hali's work seemed curiously neglected.

When I compiled a commemorative volume on Hali, bringing together essays by some of the most eminent scholars and writers of the time on different facets of his personality as poet, critic, prose writer and social reformer, I requested celebrat-



Nearly 150 years ago, the literary gem spoke with unusual clarity about the status, dignity and education of women.

PANIPAT'S POET: Portrait of Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali by celebrated artist MF Husain. COURTESY: AUTHOR

ed artist MF Husain to contribute a portrait of the great poet. He graciously obliged with a striking sketch of Hali. That portrait, reproduced with this article, is a reminder that Hali's legacy continues to inspire not only scholars but artists as well.

Nothing illustrates Hali's thinking more clearly than the famous lines: *'Ae maan, behno, betiyon, duniya ki izzat tum se hai; Mulkon ki basti ho tumhi, quamon ki izzat tum se hai'* (O mothers, sisters, daughters,

the honour of the world rests with you. The life of nations and the dignity of communities depend on you).

These lines are often quoted for their lyrical beauty, but their deeper meaning is far more serious. Hali was making a civilisational argument. The standing of a nation can be judged by the standing of its women.

A society that denies women education, dignity and agency cannot claim to be progressive, no matter how loudly it

celebrates its achievements. Hali's concern for women was not confined to poetic praise. It found expression in two remarkable works, *'Majalis-un-Nisa'* (Assemblies of Women) and *'Munajat-e-Bewa'* (A Widow's Prayer). In *'Majalis-un-Nisa'*, written in 1874, nearly 150 years ago, Hali addressed women's lives with striking directness. Through engaging conversations, he discussed girls' education, moral upbringing, child-rearing, household man-

agement and the need to free women from ignorance and harmful social customs. It was practical reform literature. Hali argued that genuine social progress required women to be educated, respected and intellectually engaged members of society.

More than a century later, the relevance of that argument is unmistakable. Female literacy in India, though greatly improved, still lags behind male literacy. Millions of women still face barriers in access to education and opportunity. Hali's plea for women's education, thus, reads less like a historical curiosity and more like a continuing reminder of unfinished work.

If *'Majalis-un-Nisa'* addressed women's condition through reformist prose, *'Munajat-e-Bewa'* did so through the poetry of deep empathy. In that poem, Hali gives voice to the sorrow and vulnerability of a widow. The poem reveals not only her grief but also her social isolation and insecurity. For a nineteenth-century poet to imagine the inner world of a widow with such sensitivity was extraordinary. Hali did not treat the widow merely as an object of sympathy. He allowed her voice to emerge with dignity and humanity.

Even today, many women continue to face economic and social insecurity after widow-

Propaganda, social media and the fog of war



SHYAM BHATIA
LONDON CORRESPONDENT,
THE TRIBUNE

WITHIN hours of the first exchanges of strikes between Iran and Israel, dramatic videos began circulating online, claiming to show fighter jets shot down and cities reduced to rubble. Several were quickly exposed as fiction. Some clips have turned out to be images from video games. Others appear to have been generated using artificial intelligence — material convincing enough to circulate globally before journalists have time to verify it.

In one widely shared example, a clip claiming to show a US warship shooting down an Iranian aircraft was later identified as footage from the video game *War Thunder*. The video accumulated millions of views online and was even shared by Greg Abbott before being deleted after fact-checkers exposed it as game footage. Observers quickly noted that the weapons visible in the footage were obsolete Second World War-era systems, revealing the clip as fiction.

In another case, a viral video appearing to show Tel Aviv devastated by Iranian missile strikes was later identified by

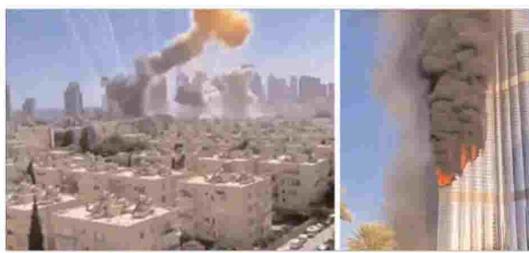
analysts as AI-generated imagery. By the time the manipulation was exposed, the clip had already been viewed by millions. The material spreads rapidly across social media platforms, often reaching vast audiences before corrections appear.

The episode illustrates a wider problem in modern war coverage. The earliest battlefield claims are often the least reliable, yet in the digital age they can spread globally before journalists have time to verify them. While listening to a discussion of Iran-Israel conflict on LBC, London's talk radio station, I recently heard a presenter speculate that Iran's Revolutionary Guards might offer a bounty to anyone killing a protester. No evidence was offered, yet the remark was delivered in the tone of reporting.

More than a century ago, American senator Hiram Johnson observed: "The first casualty when war comes is truth." The phrase has become almost a cliché. Yet the torrent of claims surrounding the current confrontation suggests it remains as relevant as ever.

The deeper question, however, is why the conflict is being reported so unevenly compared with other wars unfolding today. During Russia's invasion of Ukraine, western television networks and newspapers deployed large teams of correspondents close to the front lines. Continuous reporting from Kyiv, Kharkiv and the battlefield allowed journalists to test official claims against observation on the ground.

The confrontation involving Iran looks very different. Few western reporters operate inside Iran, while Israeli



DIGITAL AGE: Battlefield claims spread globally before journalists have time to verify them. SOCIAL MEDIA/X

military censorship restricts the reporting of certain operational details. As a result, much of the information circulating about missile strikes, casualties and military damage originates not with reporters but with governments, military spokesmen and social media posts.

In West Asia, regional broadcasters such as *Al Jazeera* now often provide more sustained coverage than many western outlets whose foreign bureaux across the region have steadily contracted over the past two decades. The result is a war widely discussed but surprisingly thinly observed by independent reporting.

Consider the reporting of missile attacks and air-raid warnings. During recent exchanges between Iran and Israel, reports suggested that air-raid sirens were sounding frequently in Jerusalem. If accurate, that would indicate sustained missile penetration of Israel's air-defence system and a level of bombardment rarely seen in the city.

Yet consistent confirmation from reporters actually on the

ground has remained elusive. Some missile alerts in central Israel have been documented. But the narrative of repeated sirens in Jerusalem has been thinly reported by correspondents present in the region.

Casualty figures present a similar problem. Iranian officials report large civilian losses from Israeli strikes. Israeli officials emphasise the elimination of senior Iranian commanders and damage to military facilities. Independent verification, however, is scarce. Iran has periodically restricted internet access during the conflict, while Israel maintains tight military censorship over some operational details.

As a result, many of the numbers circulating in headlines ultimately originate with the governments fighting the war. History suggests caution. Before the 2003 Iraq War, western governments asserted with great confidence that Saddam Hussein possessed active weapons of mass destruction programmes. The claim was repeated across the global media landscape and shaped diplomatic debate far beyond

studies of propaganda show what a powerful weapon it is... it is essential to control thought."

Earlier still, during the 1991 Gulf War, television viewers were shown dramatic footage of "smart bombs" striking Iraqi targets with apparent pinpoint accuracy. The impression created was of near-perfect precision. Later studies showed that only a minority of the munitions used in the conflict were actually precision-guided.

The pattern is familiar: the earliest battlefield claims are often the least reliable and in the digital age, misinformation spreads faster than ever before. Meanwhile, governments continue to shape their own narratives. Iranian state media emphasises resilience and military success. Israeli officials highlight the precision and effectiveness of their operations. Western leaders frequently describe strikes as decisive even when the long-term strategic consequences remain uncertain.

Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer has referred to some military actions as "defensive strikes". It is a contradictory phrase that acknowledges the use of force while presenting it as protection rather than escalation. Such formulations can also help establish the political vocabulary through which deeper involvement in a conflict may later be explained. None of this would surprise the late Philip Knightley, veteran reporter and media historian whose influential book *'The First Casualty'* examined the long history of propaganda in war reporting. Knightley argued that governments have always sought to manage information during wartime: "All

studies of propaganda show what a powerful weapon it is... it is essential to control thought."

What has changed is the weakening of the system that once challenged official narratives. For much of the twentieth century, major newspapers maintained networks of foreign correspondents across West Asia. These reporters travelled, interviewed witnesses and compared competing claims. They could challenge official statements with observations from the ground.

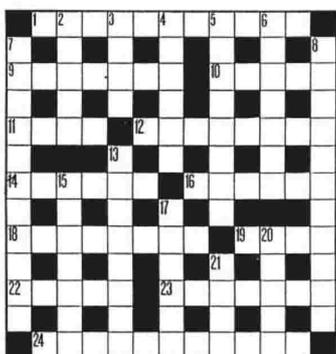
Today, many of those bureaux have disappeared. Coverage emerges from studio discussions, social media feeds and official briefings rather than first-hand reporting. The result is a paradox. Never before has so much information about a war been available in real time. Yet rarely has it been harder to determine what is actually happening.

For India, the stakes in understanding such conflicts are considerable. New Delhi has pursued a policy of strategic autonomy in West Asia, maintaining working relationships with Iran, Israel and the Arab Gulf states simultaneously. When information about a conflict is clouded by propaganda, speculation and digital fabrication, it becomes harder for both journalists and policymakers to judge events clearly.

Propaganda has always accompanied war. But when speculation, digital fabrication and official messaging converge, the line between fact and narrative becomes dangerously blurred. Johnson's warning still echoes across a century. When war begins, truth may indeed become the first casualty.

In one widely shared example, a clip claiming to show a US warship shooting down an Iranian aircraft was later identified as footage from the video game *War Thunder*.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Past one's prime (4,3,4)
 - Continuing (7)
 - Constant outflow (5)
 - Expression of agreement (4)
 - Obsession (8)
 - Consumers' desire for a product (6)
 - Objective aimed at (6)
 - Not obligatory (8)
 - An expectant silence (4)
 - Follow to its origins (5)
 - Melodious (7)
 - Rectify (3,2,6)
- DOWN**
- Ill-defined (5)
 - To rant (4)
 - Traditional Scottish dish (6)
 - Secret refuge (8)
 - Consumers' desire for a product (6)
 - Rules of behaviour (3,3,5)
 - Using very few words (2,1,8)
 - Lazy (8)
 - An odourous inflammable gas (7)
 - Gain control over (6)
 - Out of condition (5)
 - Warm and comfortable (4)

Yesterday's Solution
Across: 1 Coddle, 4 Scot-free, 9 Mostly, 10 Outright, 12 Dull, 13 Mirth, 14 Burn, 17 With open arms, 20 Pat on the back, 23 Able, 24 Foray, 25 Mill, 28 Rosemary, 29 Potent, 30 Latitudo, 31 Soften.
Down: 1 Comedown, 2 Desolate, 3 Lull, 5 Court martial, 6 Turf, 7 Rigour, 8 Extant, 11 Time-honoured, 15 Vocal, 16 Impel, 18 Manifest, 19 Skeleton, 21 Laurel, 22 Closet, 26 Omic, 27 Dodo.

SU DO KU

1	5	9					7
		6	7		1	5	4
		2	1		3	4	
		1	6		2	7	
9	4	8		5	6		
2							
8						9	1

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

7	3	1	9	4	2	5	6	8
9	4	2	8	6	5	3	1	7
8	5	6	7	1	3	9	2	4
4	6	3	5	2	7	8	9	1
2	1	8	3	9	4	7	5	6
5	7	9	6	8	1	2	4	3
3	9	5	1	7	6	4	8	2
1	2	7	4	5	8	6	3	9
6	8	4	2	3	9	1	7	5

CALENDAR

- MARCH 11, 2026, WEDNESDAY**
- Shaka Sarvat 1947
 - Phalgun Shaka 20
 - Phalgun Parvatisht 28
 - Hijari 1447
 - Krishna Paksha Tithi 8, up to 4:20 am
 - Vajra Yoga up to 9:12 am
 - Jyesthina Nakshatra up to 10:00 pm
 - Moon enters Sagittarius sign 10:00 pm

FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	19
New Delhi	37	18
Amritsar	29	20
Bathinda	32	17
Jalandhar	29	20
Ludhiana	33	19
Bhivani	35	19
Hisar	35	16
Sirsa	33	17
Dharamsala	20	09
Manali	18	09
Shimla	19	15
Srinagar	18	10
Jammu	28	20
Kargil	13	02
Loh	12	01
Delhradun	33	18
Mussoorie	25	15

quick BITES

INDICATORS %
Sensex 78,205.98 0.82
Nifty 50 24,261.60 0.97
Dollar (\$) 91.87 -0.51
Pound Sterling (£) 123.66 0.41
Euro (€) 106.98 0.29
Gold (10gm) (₹) 163,324.3,025 1.89
Brent crude (\$/bbl) 89.89 -9.17
IN 10-Yr bond yield 6.671 -0.77
US 10-Yr T-bill yield 4.136 0.002

Minda, Turmtide to offer power trains solutions

The Nashik Municipal Corporation (NMC) listed its maiden 'NMC Clean Godavari' municipal bonds worth ₹200 crore on National Stock Exchange (NSE), aiming to utilise for infrastructure projects. With a base issue size of ₹100 crore and a green-shoe option of ₹100 crore, the private placement received an overwhelming subscription of over 3.95 times the base issue size from institutional investors.



Hotels to halt services as cylinders turn scarce

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, MARCH 10

Hotels and restaurants across the country are likely to stop their services in a few days as the oil distribution companies have halted supply of LPG cylinders for commercial operations following a government notification to prioritise domestic supply.

Meanwhile, the government in a notification has increased the minimum waiting period for billing cylinders for domestic consumers to 25 days. 'Most of the restaurants across the country have fuel stocks that would last for two-three days. If the government does not resume the supply, restaurants and hotels will have shut their operations,' said Pradeep Shetty, president, FHRAL.

'We have been trying to meet to inform the ministry about our situation,' he adds.

According to him, there are millions of people who rely on restaurants for their daily food. Further, hotels have guests who need to be fed.

India consumes some 31.3 million tonnes of LPG annually and of this major portion goes to households.

LOWER SUPPLY

GOVT INCREASES WAITING PERIOD FOR BILLING CYLINDERS FOR DOMESTIC CONSUMERS TO 25 DAYS.

CYLINDER distributors stopped supplying to hotels, restaurants as govt prioritises domestic supply.

PRICE OF 19 KG cylinder in Chennai went up to ₹2,043 as of March 7 from ₹1,929 on March 1.

PRICES ARE LIKELY TO further increase if the crude prices continue to go up.

than usual. Last week, the companies had increased the LPG prices by ₹60 per cylinder for domestic consumers. Non-subsidised LPG for households was raised to ₹928 per 14.2 kg cylinder in Chennai as against ₹868 previously.

regulatory actions. Co-founder and managing director Rahul Bhatia will manage the affairs of IndiGo on an interim basis until a new person is appointed. The resignation of Elbers, who has been at the helm of IndiGo as CEO since Sept. 6, 2022, has come abruptly, and

while citing personal reasons for the decision 'With immediate effect, Pieter Elbers will be stepping down as InterGlobe Aviation (IndiGo) CEO,' InterGlobe Aviation said in a release.

The resignation comes three months after IndiGo faced massive operational disruptions. 'We are committed to ensure uninterrupted supply of affordable energy to our domestic consumers,' petroleum minister Hardeep Singh Puri said in a social media post, adding there was 'no reason to panic'.

Aramco chief warns oil markets of catastrophe

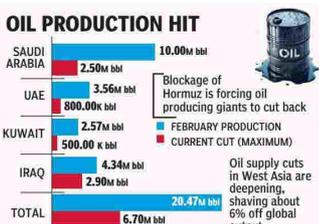
Current disruption by far biggest crisis in region: CEO Amin Nasser

Dhahran (Saudi Arabia), March 10: Saudi Aramco's chief executive officer Amin Nasser warned the impact on global oil markets will be 'catastrophic' the longer the disruption from the Iran war drags on.

In his first public comments since the conflict choked West Asia energy shipments, the head of the region's largest oil producer said Aramco can divert more crude to an alternative route that avoids Strait of Hormuz. Still the company can't export its normal quantities because of capacity constraints.

Saudi Arabia is reducing output by as much as 2.5 million barrels a day, joining United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Kuwait in deepening cuts. Nasser declined to disclose production levels, but said on a conference call that Aramco was 'not utilising for the time being' some of its heavier oil grades.

'There would be catastrophic consequences for the world's oil market the longer the disruption goes on, and the more drastic the consequences for the global economy,' Nasser said. 'While we have faced disruptions in past, this one by far is the biggest crisis the region's oil and gas industry has faced.'



While we have faced disruptions in the past, this one by far is the biggest crisis the region's oil and gas industry has faced. - AMIN NASSER, CEO, Saudi Aramco

INDIA NEEDS TO STOP PETROLEUM EXPORTS: GTRI

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, MARCH 10

To tide over fuel crisis, India should temporarily stop exports of petroleum products and enter into a long-term supply contract with Russia, finds GTRI.

'The government can invoke national energy security provisions to prioritise domestic fuel availability. Redirecting refinery output toward domestic markets would help build fuel reserves cushion inflation and ensure uninterrupted supply for transport, agriculture and industry if disruptions in Gulf oil flows intensify,' said Ajay Srivastava, founder, GTRI.

India exported 64.7 MT of petroleum products.

IndiGo CEO Pieter Elbers quits

New Delhi, March 10: IndiGo chief executive officer (CEO) Pieter Elbers resigned on Tuesday, citing personal reasons, and airline has relieved him with immediate effect.

The development comes three months after massive operational disruptions triggered widespread public outrage and

regulatory actions. Co-founder and managing director Rahul Bhatia will manage the affairs of IndiGo on an interim basis until a new person is appointed.

The resignation of Elbers, who has been at the helm of IndiGo as CEO since Sept. 6, 2022, has come abruptly, and while citing personal reasons for the decision 'With immediate effect, Pieter Elbers will be stepping down as InterGlobe Aviation (IndiGo) CEO,' InterGlobe Aviation said in a release.

Affordable energy supply assured: Puri

From page 1

'We are committed to ensure uninterrupted supply of affordable energy to our domestic consumers,' petroleum minister Hardeep Singh Puri said in a social media post, adding there was 'no reason to panic'.

LNG accounted for an equal share in India's gas consumption of 188 million cubic metres per day in 2025. India has around 332 mn active LPG users.

Under the revised allocation, the fertiliser sector has been listed at the second place, which will get

at least 70 per cent of past six months' demand. Tea industries, manufacturing and other industrial consumers - placed at third slot - will get 80 per cent of the past six-month average gas consumption.

GAMES

SHORT TAKES

Smriti retains top spot in ODIs

Dubai: Swashbuckling Indian batter Smriti Mandhana retained the top spot in the latest women's ODI batting ranking released here on Tuesday. Mandhana was joined by her captain Harmanpreet Kaur who remained static on eighth spot.

A host of New Zealand's best white-ball stars have been the big winners on the latest update. The White Ferns have been in superb form at home having opened up an unassailable 2-0 lead over Zimbabwe in the three-match ODI series and new skipper Melie Kerr is leading the way with both bat and ball.

Hayden is Titans batting coach

Ahmedabad: Former Australian opener Matthew Hayden has been named as the batting coach of Gujarat Titans for the upcoming IPL season, the franchise announced on Tuesday. A two-time ODI World Cup winner and one of the most dominant opening batters of his era, Hayden joins the Titans set-up with an illustrious international career and expertise in modern-day T20 batting dynamics.

Commenting on the appointment, Director of Cricket, Vikram Solanki said: 'Matthew's appointment comes at a pivotal phase in our journey.' - PTI

KLAR! BCCI ANNOUNCES ₹131 CR REWARD FOR T20 WORLD CUP CHAMPIONS

Surya on cloud 9 after joining elite company of Rohit, Dhoni

Mumbai, March 10: Two days after captaining India to a T20 World Cup title, Suryakumar Yadav is slowly taking in the enormity of the achievement that has put him in august company of Kapil Dev, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Rohit Sharma, who too helped the team lift ICC trophies.

Soon after returning from Ahmedabad, where India won a record third Sunday World Cup title on Sunday, Suryakumar reflected on the side's successful campaign and the road ahead.

'The next target is to win the Olympic gold in 2028. The team has a good momentum. If India wins the T20 World Cup in the same year, it will be great,' he added.

On being compared to the likes of Rohit and Dhoni, he added: 'It feels good to join that elite company and help India win more trophies.'

Rohit was the captain when India ended an ICC trophy drought with the win in Barbados back in June 2024. Dhoni led India to victories in 2007 T20 World Cup and 2011 ODI World Cup.

'I had met him (M. S. Dhoni) before the tournament and he told me how to approach an ICC tournament. He told me that we have a good team, we just have to be courageous and we will definitely win. His reaction after the win was amazing,' said the skipper.

'I wish I could share everything what we have done on that night after being world champions but then we had a good time we were awake till 8 AM in the morning,' Suryakumar said.

He is now looking forward to the Indian Premier League beginning March 28. - PTI



Captain Suryakumar Yadav speaks to the media after arriving at his residence in Mumbai on Tuesday following India's victory in the T20 World Cup. - PTI



Indian T20 World Cup winning team member Ishan Khatena meets his family upon his arrival at the airport in Patna on Tuesday. - PTI

New Delhi, March 10: The BCCI on Tuesday announced a cash reward of ₹131 crore for the entire Indian squad following their third T20 World Cup victory. The amount covers 15 players, coaching staff, other support staff.

'The amount is an increment of ₹6 crore from the ₹125 crore that Rohit Sharma's team was awarded back in 2024. As per sources, each of the 15 players will receive ₹6 crore each while remaining ₹41 crore will be distributed among entire support staff.'

'The Board congratulates the players, support staff and selectors once again on this historic achievement and wishes them continued success in the future,' BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia said in a statement.

India successfully defended the title and became the first team in the history of the tournament to retain the Men's T20 World Cup. With this victory, India also became the first team to win the ICC Men's T20 World Cup three times, further cementing its place among the most successful teams in the history of the format. - PTI

ICC books flights for Windies & SA

Kolkata, March 10: The ICC on Tuesday booked separate commercial flights for the stranded West Indies and South Africa teams after their charter flight scheduled to take off from Kolkata 'was cancelled due to logistical issues.'

'All the West Indies and South African players have been booked on individual commercial airline flights. Obviously, all can't be booked on same airline but ICC has taken care of individual bookings. ICC chairman Jay Shah has personally spoken and assured players of a safe journey back home,' an ICC source privy to the development said on conditions of anonymity.

The two teams that played their final games in Kolkata (West Indies in Super 8s on March 1 and South Africa in semifinal on March 4) have not been able to fly out due to the disruption caused by international airspace restrictions.

The situation has forced multiple airlines to avoid routes through the Gulf region. ICC's airline partner Emirates and they are unable to operate due to shutdown of Dubai airspace.

The two teams that played their final games in Kolkata (West Indies in Super 8s on March 1 and South Africa in semifinal on March 4) have not been able to fly out due to the disruption caused by international airspace restrictions.

The restrictions severely complicated outbound travel from India towards the Caribbean and Africa, forcing cricket authorities to explore alternative routes and charter arrangements. - PTI

ARSHDEEP FINED FOR HITTING MITCHELL WITH BALL IN FINAL

Dubai, March 10: India pacer Arshdeep Singh has been added to his match fee for throwing the ball 'aggressively and inappropriately' at New Zealand batter Daryl Mitchell during the final of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup in Ahmedabad.

In addition, one demerit point has been added to Arshdeep's disciplinary record, for whom it was the first offence in a 24-month period.

Arshdeep was found to have breached Article 2.9 of the ICC Code of Conduct for Players and Player Support Personnel, which relates to 'throwing a ball (or any other item of cricket equipment) at or near a player in an inappropriate and/or dangerous manner during an International Match,' an ICC media release stated on Tuesday.

Bumrah will now focus on one-dayers

New Delhi, March 10: India's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is likely to play more 50-over games instead of T20I bilateral series and the next 18 months to ensure his preparations for the 2027 ODI World Cup remain on track.

T20Is will be a low priority leading up to October-November 2027, despite a heavy schedule of bilateral series and the Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, where Suryakumar

Yadav is expected to lead the side. It is understood that Bumrah, like many senior Indian players, is very keen on playing the Los Angeles Olympics in 2028, which will be held in the T20 format, but ODIs will be his primary white ball format till the 2027 World Cup.

India's ODI World Cup preparation will start in earnest after a gruelling two months of Indian Premier League where Bumrah is set to headline the Mumbai Indians pace attack. By the end of IPL, it is understood that the national selection committee, the Centre of Excellence headed by VVS Laxman and the team management represented by Gautam Gambhir and Shubman Gill, will prepare the blue-print for the next phase, and the most important aspect will be Bumrah's workload management.

It is understood that World Test Championship (WTC) matches are non-negotiable for the 32-year-old and it is believed that his workload management will be somewhat similar to the 2023-2026 phase during which he didn't play a single ODI.

'Obviously Bumrah's fitness is key hence the Indian team management will have to be very careful and prioritise the formats. Arshdeep was found to have breached Article 2.9 of the ICC Code of Conduct for Players and Player Support Personnel, which relates to 'throwing a ball (or any other item of cricket equipment) at or near a player in an inappropriate and/or dangerous manner during an International Match,' an ICC media release stated on Tuesday.

INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



OPINION

How the Iran War Ends



GLOBAL VIEW
By Walter Russell Mead

War is the teacher of kings. As President Trump is discovering, it is also a tough grader. So far, air superiority, even supremacy, hasn't prevented Iran from putting massive political and economic pressure on Washington by choking off the Middle East's oil flow to the world. There are no signs yet of a popular rebellion capable of toppling the regime. And waves of attacks against Iran's strongholds and assets haven't yet enabled any surviving pragmatists to steer the regime away from its radical approach.

As surging energy prices and declining stock markets worldwide drove a vibe shift, many analysts and foreign leaders concluded that Iran's strategies were working, and that the U.S. would have to choose between ending the war well short of victory or committing large numbers of ground troops to another Middle East quagmire in the making.

The pessimism is likely premature. Vibe shifts are common in war as fear, hope and rage swirl together. The lesson so far is that Iran's threat to America is both

greater than many Iran doves understood and more difficult to address than many Iran hawks thought. With missile and drone attacks, Tehran has succeeded in at least temporarily blocking nearly all traffic in and out of the Strait of Hormuz and has forced some Gulf countries to curtail oil and gas production. If the waterway remains largely closed, we can expect what analysts call the greatest energy shock since the 1970s.

The Gulf is more than fossil fuels. As the Gulf Cooperation Council countries have sought to reduce their dependence on oil and gas exports, they have built up energy-intensive industries like data centers and aluminum smelters. These are vulnerable to Iranian missile and drone attacks. Additionally, exports of helium—vital for South Korean semiconductor production—have been blocked. The Gulf is also an important center for fertilizer production. The White House and Congress can expect calls from frantic farmers as costs shoot up, and poor countries may be priced out of the fertilizer market.

Since World War II, U.S. presidents of both parties believed in preventing any hostile country from blackmailing the rest of the world by blocking exports from the Gulf was a vital national interest. Unless checked, Iran

lobbying, has been the driving force behind American Middle East policy. The war shocks rattling global markets show how important this factor remains. This Iran pressures the U.S. to end the war before it can break the blockade and cripple Tehran's ability to impose new blockades down the road, the mullahs will hold an acknowledged veto power over

The likeliest scenario is that the U.S. largely clears the Gulf but the regime survives.

the ability of their Gulf neighbors to trade with the world. The Iranian regime could then threaten a global economic crisis at will and would build up the weapons and war chests that will make its position unassailable.

The current war holds another lesson. Tehran's nuclear-weapons program is an important element of the threat to the region, but nukes are only one of the weapons Iran could use to block trade there. Already Iran's missiles and drones have blocked the Gulf, at least temporarily; this capability would only grow in time as the mullahs replenish their arsenals. Unless checked, Iran

could soon deter attacks on its nuclear program by threatening to close the Gulf.

The war looks set to end in one of three ways. One would be a clear and damaging American defeat. If a mix of global pressure and domestic opposition forces the Trump administration to end the conflict before full trade is restored through the Gulf, a battered Iran will emerge having demonstrated its ability to close the Gulf against everything the world's greatest military power can throw at it. America's power and prestige, not to mention Mr. Trump's, would struggle to recover from such a fiasco.

Alternatively, the Americans could reopen the Gulf as a new Iranian government more focused on developing the country than on dominating its neighbors emerges. This would be a major victory for the Trump administration. Most likely is an in-between scenario in which the U.S. largely clears the Gulf but the current regime survives. Operation Epic Fury would in that case be remembered as the Mother of All Lawnmowers, solving nothing fundamental but preserving a fragile balance of power in a vital part of the world.

Mr. Trump was never much of a student, but the school of war has set him an exam that he can't afford to fail. Let us hope he manages to pass.

BOOKSHELF | By Matt Gallagher

Diaries From Desert Storm

If I Don't Return: A Father's Wartime Journal

By Mark Hertling
Ballast, 350 pages, \$32.99

In late 1990 the U.S. military awaited orders in the Middle East. What we know now—that the ground phase of the Gulf War proved a 100-hour testament to American martial prowess—was no foregone conclusion. Saddam Hussein commanded the world's fourth-largest army. He had invaded Kuwait because he both wanted and needed its oil. The Pentagon forecast heavy casualties and judged it possible that Saddam would use chemical weapons on U.S. troops, as he had done against thousands of Kurds during the Halabja massacre in 1988.

Among the U.S. servicemembers massed near the border between Saudi Arabia and Iraq was Mark Hertling, a pensive Army major on his first combat deployment. Like many around him during those months of buildup and aerial bombardment, Mr. Hertling was keenly aware of the fact that he might die. To organize his thoughts, he started a journal. Its entries—written before, during and after Operation Desert Storm—now serve as the foundation of his terrific memoir, "If I Don't Return."

Mr. Hertling served as the operations officer of a cavalry squadron spearheading the advance into Iraq. Were he to die, he wanted to leave behind a record of what he valued and experienced for his two young sons back home. While Mr. Hertling believed "that what we're being asked to do is so important, so overwhelming, that if successful, peace will be with our country for some time," he also didn't want his sons to know "the fear I felt prior to coming here."

"If I Don't Return" has a simple but effective structure. Mr. Hertling shares his decades-old journal logs and then follows each with a contemporary reflection. The book's passages spiral out from the exhausted major's days in the Arabian Desert to traverse the duration of his lengthy and accomplished military career. (He retired from the Army in 2013 as a lieutenant general.) The wandering narrative works because Mr. Hertling's journal holds firm as the book's center and essence.

Mr. Hertling captures the on-the-ground reality of Operation Desert Storm. One evening, he and his team got in position to engage two enemy tanks: "We fired several 25mm rounds in the hull—we thought that would scare the tankers into surrendering. Much to our surprise the 25mm rounds penetrated the tank turrets, and they began burning. We engaged the second tank in the same way and then shot High Explosive rounds at a nearby building that looked like some type of headquarters."

A few hours later, "all hell broke loose. Canisters began popping overhead, and hundreds of small bomblets were falling all over our position." It was an artillery attack, friendly fire, "a roar of sound and senses and light." Many soldiers suffered injuries from the incident but luckily none was killed.

"If I Don't Return" mostly steers clear of platitudes, a professional hazard for any career military officer. Nor does it offer the prescriptive guidance found in the ever-swelling genre of self-help books peddled by former special operators. The wisdom in Mr. Hertling's book is quiet, understated, intentionally crafted as paternal counsel.

Mark Hertling was on his first combat deployment. Were he to die, he wanted to leave a record of what he valued and experienced.

Both of Mr. Hertling's sons grew up to become Army officers, deploying multiple times to Iraq and elsewhere. (I belonged to the same ROTC battalion as Mr. Hertling's eldest; he once spent a long afternoon teaching me how to march.) Military service in 21st-century America has increasingly become a family trade—according to Pew, 70% of new recruits report a family member serving before them, one factor among many in a widening civilian-military divide.

Mr. Hertling would return to the Middle East repeatedly over the course of the terror wars, living firsthand the "pendulum swing between expeditionary and enduring" that would dog the U.S. armed forces across two decades. "From cavalry major to deputy commander to division general, I didn't just fight in Iraq—I grew up there," he reflects.

In one of the book's most striking entries, Mr. Hertling admits to lying in his journal. Days after the friendly fire mishap, he and his unit were tasked with clearing bunkers on foot. They believed the war was over and got sloppy. Left by himself, Mr. Hertling stumbled across a forgotten enemy soldier in hiding. In the journal, Mr. Hertling was able to detain the man. In reality, he killed him as the Iraqi was raising his weapon. The lie about what happened was for his family and perhaps for himself as well.

"That single act," Mr. Hertling writes, "the only time I killed another human being at such close range—haunted me in ways the destruction of Iraqi tanks, brigades, or divisions never did. . . . This was not distant. This was intimate, visceral, and undeniable."

Mr. Hertling didn't immediately return home after Saddam's defeat in 1991. In the liminal space after combat, Mr. Hertling played volleyball with Iraqi deserters. A group of American soldiers found rotting corpses in the desert that had been left there for weeks. They buried them as no one else was around to do it. Returning from war is never clean nor quick.

Mr. Hertling hoped after the Gulf War "that Iraq was behind us." History unraveled otherwise. Of course. Regardless, Operation Desert Storm was a decisive victory, in part thanks to resolute and thoughtful leaders such as Mr. Hertling. Such triumphs are rare in modern warfare. It is worth remembering that even victories come burdened with the drag of unforeseen consequences.

Mr. Gallagher served as an armored cavalry officer in Iraq and is the author of the novel "Daybreak."

Homilies Won't Liberate Iran



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

If Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping had set out to diminish the moral witness of the papacy, they couldn't have inflicted more damage than the Vatican can itself caused in the past week. Rome's blinkered position on war didn't originate with Pope Leo XIV. But unless this pope steers the Catholic Church back to its own teachings on this fraught topic, it risks being dismissed even by sympathizers.

At the moment the Vatican is almost guaranteeing its wisdom will be ignored by those who need it most. "The net result of the churches' concessions to the political left has been to take religious leaders out of serious conversation

Pope Leo seems to abandon the church's own teaching on war.

with policymakers on matters of war and peace, leaving them to lob minatory rhetorical grenades from the bleachers." Catholic theologian George Weigel wrote in 2024. Nearly 40 years ago Mr. Weigel wrote his book "Tranquillitas Ordinis," arguing that the real goal of war is an order rooted in justice and freedom.

This may sound harsh, but it's necessary to say. The Catholic Church and its last few popes have understood only the destructive force of war. They appear to have

given little thought to the terrible consequences for innocent people when soft words are offered as a substitute for tough but necessary action.

On Sunday, after praying the Angelus with thousands of pilgrims gathered on St. Peter's Square, Pope Leo noted the "violence and devastation" across the Middle East. He cited Lebanon, once a refuge for Christians across the region with a capital city known as the Paris of the Middle East. Today the Christian population has shrunk to about a third, and Hezbollah's forces are (or until recently were) more powerful than the Lebanese army. Various forces were undercutting peace in Lebanon well before President Trump came on the scene.

Pope Leo left no doubt where he stands on Mr. Trump's use of force. In a March 1 tweet, the Holy Father put it this way: "I am following with deep concern what is happening in the Middle East and in Iran during this tumultuous time. Stability and peace are not achieved through mutual threats, nor through the use of weapons, which sow destruction, suffering, and death, but only through reasonable, sincere, and responsible dialogue."

Really? Stability and peace are achieved only through dialogue? Is that what history tells us? It seems more accurate to say that the kind of rightly ordered world the



Pope Leo XIV

pope desires can't be built by armies alone—but can almost never be built without armies and without the threat of force. Most often it is force or the threat of it that makes dialogue possible.

For centuries Catholic teaching on war was grounded in the reality of man's fallen human nature. In the Vatican's fog of war, official church pronouncements appear to have abandoned this rich legacy. Instead we have a functional pacifism. Such is the resulting confusion that the official spokesman for Pope John Paul II, a man who helped bring down the Soviet Union, at one point felt it necessary to clarify that the pope was not a pacifist.

Just-war teaching covers many areas, but it starts with two common-sense questions. First, a two-parter, is there a legitimate reason to go to war and is it the proper authorities who are declaring war?

The second asks whether a war is prosecuted in a just

manner. Directly and deliberately targeting civilians, for instance, is forbidden. Just-war distinctions on how war is to be fought separate the noble profession of soldier from the terrorist.

Even so, within the just-war tradition, people of good will can reach opposite conclusions—as Pope John Paul II and President George W. Bush did over the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Much depends on how different criteria are weighed. The idea that just-war teaching is no more than a collection of pie-in-the-sky platitudes is a dangerous oversimplification, however much it may seem that way from some of the religious commentary on war. The Vatican's failure (over several decades) to ground its criticisms in hard realities creates many such problems.

The ironies abound. Pope Leo belongs to the Augustinian order of priests, named for the great saint from Roman Africa who is the father of the just-war tradition. In mid-April, the pope plans to visit Hippo, where Augustine served as bishop, in what is today Algeria.

The pope could use the occasion to revive the West's tradition of moral reasoning on war. That tradition provides something more fundamental than simple answers to issues the war on Iran has raised. That tradition teaches us which questions to ask.

Write to megurn@wsj.com.

March 2020: The Day the Earth Stood Still

By Mary Julia Koch

Each generation remembers the historical moments of its time, and unmuting to "raise one's hand." When everything changed. For baby boomers, the assassination of John F. Kennedy. For Generation X, the fall of the Berlin Wall. Millennials have 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis.

For Gen Z, it's the Covid pandemic. A freshman at Harvard awoke on March 10, 2020, to an email telling undergraduates to vacate campus. Courses would be taught on a platform called Zoom. A few students celebrated by popping Corona beers, fittingly. But as my classmates and I headed home across the quad, a storm was brewing.

The pandemic has largely receded from mind. Few films or TV shows have been made about the period. Who wants to remember social distancing and N-95 masks?

But for those beginning

adulthood when the virus hit, Covid is impossible to forget. I spent 17 months of college at home, enduring a blur of camera-off Zoom classes and unmuting to "raise one's hand." When I returned in fall 2021 for my junior year, Harvard allowed no more than 10 people to socialize in a dorm room at

My generation's 9/11, our moon landing, our financial crisis.

once, despite mandatory vaccination, weekly testing and 10 days of isolation in a hotel room if we got sick. We had to wear masks at all times, including in the dining halls. It was harder to recognize people, communicate with friends and understand lectures.

It didn't help that my college and a slew of others launched anonymous hotlines for students to report Covid

rule violations. Most students shrugged off the mask mandate, but some stared daggers if your mask wasn't perfectly fitted—or if you flashed a bare face on a walk outdoors. Campus inched closer to a surveillance state than a college community.

Then Harvard announced a scaled-down version of Housing Day, one of the university's storied traditions, when sophomores, juniors and seniors storm freshman dorms to celebrate which of the 12 "houses" first-year students will live in for the next three years. The prior two Housing Days had taken place on our computers, celebrations reduced to clapping emojis. The student body collectively sighed "Aha, this too," but then mumbled the dorms anyway, cheering and hugging fearlessly with unmasked smiles.

Only at the end of my junior year did campus begin to feel normal. With no time to waste, I cherished every din-

ing-hall dinner, picnic by the river, and serendipitous encounter. I wish I could relive that last good year. Because there was only one good year. Covid swallowed the rest.

"The Day Everything Changed," as I wrote melodramatically in my journal, was six years ago. While we pressed play on our lives, lingering like a bad taste are the things we lost: graduation ceremonies, job interviews, jobs delayed, friends we didn't make. The pandemic left a bitter suspicion that what we cherish can be ripped away by "experts" without notice. It's no wonder distrust of leadership extends across political parties, with a record-high 56% of young adults viewing themselves as independents.

For my generation, Covid marked a hinge point: a before and an after.

Ms. Koch is an associate editor at WSJ Opinion's Free Expression.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Iran Isn't Winning This War

It is time for President Trump to call off the bombing and declare victory in Iran? You'd think so judging by the panic in Washington as the price of oil spikes. That certainly is the fondest wish of the ayatollahs, who know they're losing.

The reality inside Iran and the region is that the U.S. and Israel continue to make progress. The regime loses more of its military each day, along with the ability to hurt its neighbors. The Israelis estimate 70% to 75% of Iran's missile launchers have been destroyed, and the U.S. has destroyed at least 43 Iranian ships.

On Monday the United Arab Emirates received only 18 drones, down from 126 a day over the past week. We'll soon see if that was a blip or a meaningful decline. Central Command's Adm. Brad Cooper said last week that Iran's missile and drone volumes were down 90% and 83%, respectively. Attacks on Iran's internal security institutions are intensifying.

At 10 days in, the war can hardly be considered prolonged, and there's nothing gradual about U.S. or Israeli strategy. Instead there is a race: Can Iran do enough damage to global energy markets with its remaining missiles and drones before it loses them or must come to terms?

The regime for now thinks it can outlast the U.S. On Sunday it chose Mojtaba Khamenei as its new Supreme Leader, succeeding his father. The younger Mr. Khamenei sends a message of no compromise—to Iran's own citizens or Mr. Trump. He is close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is the dominant power inside the country. With even weaker religious credentials than his father, Mr. Khamenei owes his accession to the hereditary principle despised by the 1979 revolution.

We're also learning that Russia is aiding Iran's regime in return for its drone production for the war in Ukraine. News reports say Russian intelligence is helping Iran target U.S. forces and radars, with one possible hit at a base in Jordan. The reinforces the point that the U.S. is fighting a larger axis. Iran also sought Chinese antiship missiles to sink U.S. carriers. Mr. Trump should tell the public how the wars in Ukraine and Iran are linked.

As for the spike in oil prices, the traffic stoppage in the Strait of Hormuz isn't unexpected; it's one reason past Presidents were

deterred from confronting Iran's nuclear program. The oil spike—to above \$115 before falling back down below \$90 on Monday—will hurt consumers in the West. But blocking the Strait of Hormuz is also costly for Iran, which relies on oil exports for its financing.

The U.S. in particular has ample oil and gas supplies. Mr. Trump is also right that the disruption is likely to stop when the war does and it is a "small price to pay" for major security advances. We've weathered worse. Adjusted for inflation at \$100 a barrel today, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine sent the price of oil to \$143, and in 2008 it hit \$217. G-7 nations have declined for now to release oil reserves, but that can change if needed.

The clamoring for Mr. Trump to end the war will likely increase, including from Republicans who fear gasoline prices going into November's midterms. How long to keep going is a judgment call, but both U.S. and Israeli officials speak about weeks rather than months. Mr. Trump said Monday that the U.S. has "already won in many ways, but we haven't won enough."

Both allies agree on the need to end the threat from Iran's regime, which can be done by removing it or, second-best, its capabilities. That's where differences may emerge, but for now the regime still has capabilities to destroy. There's no daylight on that.

It would make no sense to leave so many loose ends, from missiles and production facilities to nuclear sites at Pickaxe Mountain and the Isfahan tunnels. There's also little reason to leave standing any IRGC or *basij* bases. Even if the regime survives the bombing, it's in the U.S. security interest to give Iranians the best chance to retake their country.

Mr. Trump doesn't need the regime to fail to call Operation Epic Fury a success. But stopping now amid some short-term economic discomfort would be a victory for the mullers. They can't be allowed to conclude that shutting down oil flows is their passport to survival now and in the future.

A Strategic Petroleum Red Herring

Could Democrats be more cynical? Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and others are criticizing President Trump for not tapping the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve to tamp down rising gasoline prices. The problem is that Joe Biden's enormous drawdown from the reserve to mitigate a political backlash over inflation has made this harder to do.

"When wars and global crises disrupt energy markets, the United States has the ability to act, but President Trump and his administration are refusing to do so," Mr. Schumer thundered on Monday. Allow us to distill some relevant facts that he omits.

Congress established the Strategic Petroleum Reserve in 1975 after the Arab oil embargo to mitigate supply disruptions in emergencies. Before the Biden Presidency, the reserve had been tapped during three oil shocks: the first Gulf War in 1991 (17 million barrels), Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (11 million) and the Libya unrest in 2011 (30 million).

As energy prices rose with inflation, Mr. Biden in November 2021 announced a release of 50 million barrels. Gasoline prices were not especially high at the time (\$3.40 a gallon), but the Biden crowd's goal was to ease public fury over rising costs while they pursued policies to restrict domestic oil and gas production.

After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Biden team in March 2022 approved release of another 180

million barrels over six months. "The scale of this release is unprecedented: the world has never had a release of oil reserves at this one million per day rate for this length of time," Mr. Biden declared.

He was right, though it didn't do much to curb gasoline prices, which hit \$5 a gallon in June 2022. All told, the Biden team drew down 284 million barrels between 2021 and 2023. Mr. Biden could have eased prices by encouraging more domestic production and not snubbing the Saudis, which had excess capacity. He didn't.

The rapid drawdown caused damage to the geologic sites around the Gulf Coast where the oil is stored. Democrats slam the Trump Administration for not refilling the reserve, but the storage facilities require extensive repairs before they can be refilled. Last summer's budget bill appropriated \$218 million for maintenance and repairs, which weren't a priority for the Biden team.

Another rapid drawdown risks more damage. It would also take two weeks for oil in storage to enter the U.S. market. The Administration aims by that time to restore traffic that has ground to a halt in the Strait of Hormuz—the cause of surging oil prices—and has said the Navy will escort tankers if necessary.

Rising prices are painful, but the U.S. and Israel strikes will prevent Iran from inflicting more havoc and pain down the road.

The N.Y. Terrorist Attack and DHS Funding

Federal prosecutors in New York on Monday charged two men for ISIS-inspired Islamist terrorism, after they tried to detonate shrapnel bombs at a small far-right protest near Gracie Mansion on Saturday. The explosive devices fizzled. But perhaps New York Sen. Chuck Schumer can find it in his instinct for political self-preservation to restore funding to the Department of Homeland Security.

Emir Balat, age 18, and Ibrahim Kayumi, 19, are accused of coming to New York from Pennsylvania to conduct the attack, and Mr. Balat told investigators his goal was to kill more people than the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, which ended three lives.

"These were not hoax devices nor smoke-bombs," New York Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch said Monday. "They were improvised explosive devices that could have caused serious injury or death."

Ms. Tisch said there isn't yet any indication of a connection to President Trump's war in Iran, but "we have been in a heightened state of alert in New York City since the start of hostilities." That includes heavy weaponry and other resources at the ready. For years Tehran exported terror under its late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and it isn't likely to stop under its new Supreme Leader, his son.

Yet the Department of Homeland Security continues to operate in shutdown mode, more than three weeks after its funding lapsed, with thou-

sands of federal employees not getting the paychecks they're owed. Democrats, led by Mr. Schumer, refuse to reopen DHS because they want to pick a fight over President Trump's push for "mass deportation." They've said they won't restore funding unless Republicans agree to dramatic changes at Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Inflicting pain on the public is a bad negotiating tactic, and the DHS shutdown is being felt acutely at the nation's airports, as the Transportation Security Administration deals with employees calling out of work. The main airport in New Orleans warned Monday that TSA lines might be two hours. In Houston the checkpoint hit three hours. Travelers who miss a flight, and maybe a wedding or a funeral, can send regards to Mr. Schumer.

The bigger worry, though, is that there might be a security lapse that makes this failure to fund DHS look in retrospect like the height of partisan recklessness. In addition to airport security screeners, DHS includes the Coast Guard (which has personnel who support the U.S. Navy in Bahrain), the Secret Service, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Democrats insist they won't restore DHS funding without an overhaul of ICE, but they are running a big risk if there is a successful terror attack. After the attempt in Manhattan, the wisest move for Mr. Schumer would be to quit posturing and pass the bill.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

How to Protect Ukraine and the Middle East

Your editorial "Ukraine Is Iran's Drone Training Range" (March 6), highlighting the deadly new threat of the Moscow-Tehran axis to U.S. service members, is a welcome wake-up call. You did a public service by reminding President Trump that "America has a vital security stake in Ukraine's survival as part of the coalition fighting the Moscow-Tehran axis."

When asked to help the U.S. prosecute the president's unilateral war of choice in Iran now engulfing the entire Middle East, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy responded immediately that he would help the U.S. counter Russian-Iranian drones given Ukraine's deep expertise defending against Russia's illegal aggression in Europe.

President Trump could solidify the "vital security stake in Ukraine's survival" by issuing a legal executive order to seize all immobilized Russian sovereign assets within U.S. jurisdiction and transfer them to Ukraine to be used to buy U.S.-made or sourced military

weapons to defend its country and citizens from war criminal Vladimir Putin's nightly terror campaign. A minimum of \$5 billion and likely much more according to expert estimates could be made available in a matter of days by the president's order.

To seal the deal, Mr. Trump should tell House Speaker Mike Johnson to put the Peace Act on the House floor for a vote. That bill passed the House Financial Services Committee by a vote of 53-1, and it contains an amendment to current law to permit Ukraine to use transferred Russian funds to buy "defense articles."

The president needs to act now to not only help Ukraine at no cost to U.S. taxpayers but also to protect U.S. troops and civilians in the new war zone he created in the Middle East.

GREG WILSON
Estero, Fla.

Mr. Wilson was a deputy assistant secretary at the Treasury Department, 1986-89.

Britain Can't Count on Uncle Sam Anymore

In "Why Britain Is a Bad Ally to the U.S." (Political Economics, March 6) Joseph Sternberg inexcusably fails to mention the British Commonwealth servicemembers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, when the U.K. and its allies swiftly came to the aid of the U.S. after we were attacked on Sept. 11, 2001.

American servicemembers who fought alongside these brave men and women gratefully remember their sacrifices on our behalf. Mr. Sternberg ought to, in fairness, acknowledge the post-9/11 service of British—and Australian, Canadian and New Zealand—forces when evaluating the U.K.'s qualities as an ally of the U.S.

Forgetting help given to us by friends in our time of need, or worse, publicly denigrating their wartime contributions as President Trump and Pete Hegseth have recently done, isn't simply bad man-

ners. It's strategically foolish. America could surely use more "bad" allies like the Brits.

COL. KEVIN T. CARROLL
U.S. Army Reserve (Ret.)
Alexandria, Va.

Mr. Sternberg makes the argument that Britain and Prime Minister Keir Starmer are "bad allies" to the U.S. because of a tepid response to Mr. Trump's Iran war, and for a litany of other political and governance issues. Making such a statement, however, can't be made in a vacuum outside the realities of U.S.-British relations over the past 12 months. Mr. Trump has launched a tariff war against Britain, interfered with its politics and insulted the country in a variety of ways. You could as easily argue the U.S. is a bad ally to Britain. Bullying and insulting allies have consequences.

KURT HAGEMEISTER
Ann Arbor, Mich.

Women Take a Stand for Strong Bone Health

Regarding "What's All the Fuss About Bone Density?" (Review, Feb. 28), I'll suggest a do: Start by respecting the legitimate concerns of women working to improve their bone health. Osteoporosis is a painful, dangerous and common condition that affects some 8 million American women. One in two women over 50 will suffer an osteoporotic fracture in their lifetime. And if that fracture is a hip fracture, most of those women will die within the year.

It's not a fuss when men and the medical world pay attention to prostate cancer or when people get their colonoscopies. And it is definitely not a fuss when women take

initiative to prevent osteoporosis. My mother was diagnosed with osteoporosis at 47. My DEXA at 38 revealed low bone density. I know how painful breaking bones can be. I don't want crutches. I don't want a boot. And I definitely don't want to treat women's bone health with anything less than the seriousness it deserves.

ADRIENNE BITAR, Ph.D.
Ithaca, N.Y.

I am a retired family physician and geriatrician. The article misses the most important message regarding prevention of osteoporosis in women. Females build most of their bone density in their teens, so calcium and exercise need to start early. If women want to prevent the need for treatment in their 60s, they need to be told to start prevention in their teens.

MICHAEL RAAB, M.D.
Sanibel, Fla.

Locked Up and Left Illiterate

Regarding John D. Sailer's "Mellon's Radical Prisoner Education" (op-ed, March 5): The Mellon Foundation's tens of millions poured into prisoner education probably does little for the inmates. The politically progressive line of programs that Mr. Sailer, cites—materials that focus on abolishing incarceration altogether—surely fosters resentment while downplaying personal responsibility.

Estimates are that between 60% and 75% of Americans in prison have been labeled "functionally illiterate." Their reading is no better than that of students in fourth through sixth grade. Are the people kind of money to promote progressive thinking, or are they simply misguided about what's really needed most among those in jail?

BILL APPLE
New York

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Stimulant or depressant?"

OPINION

Monarchy Makes a Comeback in Iran

By Reuel Marc Gerecht
And Ray Takeyh

For the third time in its history, the Islamic Republic of Iran has chosen a *rahbar*, or supreme leader. The father of the revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979-89), was known for his provocative theological erudition and charismatic authority. His successor, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (1989-2026), compensated for his lackluster religious standing with experience in government and a mastery of detail.

Khamenei's son and successor, the Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, 56, has neither his father's experience nor Khomeini's pedigree. His ascent marks the collapse of the last egalitarian pillar of the revolution,

out of favor with Ali Khamenei and the clerical establishment.

Mojtaba is part of the reactionary wing of Iranian politics. He belongs to the so-called war generation—men who didn't lead the revolution but tested their mettle in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. By volunteering in the latter years of the conflict, he checked an important box for would-be leaders of the divine republic.

Persian sources are thin and probably unreliable about his war service, including whether he actually saw combat in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Nonetheless, it's a reasonable guess that his time spent with the guards formed lifelong friendships and gave him a network that he nurtured and used. The guards, and his father, likely instilled in him a militant worldview that has lasted.

We often think of the 1990s in Iran as a time when clerical reformers and intellectuals were trying to reconcile faith and reason, to create a left-wing hybrid of Islam and democracy. But many who served in the front lines maintained their revolutionary zeal, becoming more determined to sustain the regime Khomeini bequeathed to them. They staffed the unelected institutions of the state such as the supreme leader's office, which grew rapidly in the late 1990s; they honed their knowledge in the more radical seminaries and their own universities. They dominated the middle ranks of the Revolutionary Guards. Their essential mission: to uphold religious norms, especially when it came to military and political attempts to alter the regime through democracy, increasingly seen as incompatible with righteousness.



Supreme Leaders Ali Khamenei (1939-2026) and son Mojtaba.

As the regime matured, they developed a taste for material wealth. Corruption came as easily to them as piety did. One of the hardest things Westerners—and Westernized Iranians—have to absorb about the Islamic Republic, and Islamic history in general, is that the friction between faith and worldly acquisitiveness is less than one might expect. Unlike Christianity, Islam didn't begin as a faith for the downtrodden. The VIPs in the IRGC and the clergy are usually well-heeled. Mojtaba Khamenei is a wealthy man.

In the turbulent politics of the Islamic Republic, violence and terror have always been a means of political control. But Mojtaba's generation of militants has faced more popular insurrections as the revolution has lost much of its luster. Even in the context of Iran's ruthless politics, this generation shows a particular attachment to terrorism. Violence is the mandatory response to those seeking to undermine the regime. The recent uprising demon-

strated the lengths to which this generation will go to preserve God's will manifested.

Mojtaba will continue his father's search for foreign devils. America and Israel have always loomed large in the hard-liners' narrative. At first, and always for Ali Khamenei, cultural seduction was the Westerners' preferred means of subverting the Islamic Republic. Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu have made those fears much more mundane. They have greatly degraded Iran's proxies. Israel and America set in motion the cataclysmic events in Syria, where the allied Assad dynasty fell and the integrity of the theocracy's "Shiite arc" across the Middle East collapsed. Messrs. Trump and Netanyahu buried the clerical regime's nuclear program in rubble and killed crucial scientists, engineers and generals who will be hard to replace. They now bomb the country with relish and seeming impunity. Mojtaba's ideological antipathy to America and Israel isn't going

to evanesce—and it is personal. The Feb. 28 airstrike that claimed his father also killed Mojtaba's mother, wife, son and a sister.

Iran's theocracy hasn't undergone such stress since the last year of the Iran-Iraq war, when the Iranian front line collapsed. In the face of adversity, an inexperienced leader will lean on those who share his grievances and worldview. He will need time to consolidate his power, as even his bureaucratically agile father took several years to establish his political hegemony. In Western parlance, civil-military relations will change, giving the Revolutionary Guards, the last backbone of the regime, an even greater say than they enjoyed under Ali Khamenei. Mojtaba's father held the guards back when many of them probably wanted to cross the nuclear threshold; the son will surely be more indulgent—assuming they figure out how to put the nuclear-weapons program back together.

If the Islamic Republic survives, it will be even more radical. Assured of their verities by the fact of their survival, the ruling elite will repress Iranians with even more gusto and—a much harder task—work to export militancy and arms to those who can kill Americans, Israelis and Jews in general. Mojtaba Khamenei has taken the helm at perhaps its most precarious moment. Should he preserve his inheritance, he will rightfully be recognized as his father's son and successor.

Mr. Gerecht is a resident scholar at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Mr. Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Islamic Republic chooses a new supreme leader and turns itself into a family business.

namely that the mullahs, unlike decadent Persian shahs, don't do dynastic succession. With Mojtaba, the revolution has come full circle. Even without regime change, monarchy has returned to Iran.

Not much is known of the younger Mr. Khamenei as he has confined himself to the backrooms of the Islamic Republic. Mehdi Karubi—a perennial presidential candidate and an intrepid cleric who spent decades under house arrest—was the first to out the supreme leader's son, complaining in both 2005 and 2009 about Mojtaba Khamenei's role in manipulating the presidential elections on behalf of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a firebrand populist who eventually fell

In a War of Words, Trump Always Defeats Himself



EDITOR AT LARGE
By Gerard Baker

It was said of Winston Churchill that he mobilized the English language and sent it into battle. Donald Trump's trick with the mother tongue is to douse it in gasoline, set it on fire and drop it in a dumpster in the middle of his own parade ground.

Whatever you think of the wisdom or efficacy of the president's policies, their effectiveness is almost always vitiated by an inability to articulate and communicate goals in a way that helps make them achievable. The U.S. war on Iran is a near perfect microcosm of this presidential mismanagement.

Words matter. They don't merely persuade and inspire. They give meaning and shape to abstract ideas and values. They are the union by which mere deeds become noble. But this is about more than the importance of this president's words. It is about the entire affect and style of this administration's leadership; the form that attends the substance of governing. It is about a leader's ability to represent to ourselves and the

world the kind of people we are and what we want to be. And this is where the president fails.

While it is early days and there are reasons for caution, so far at least the execution of the war has been mostly effective.

As many of us have argued, and contrary to the cavilling critics at home and abroad, this is a just war. Successive presidents have quibbled and vacillated as a vicious regime has waged war on us for almost half a century. Given an opportunity to inflict massive damage on that enemy, the president boldly seized it.

We can be broadly satisfied too with the professional way in which the U.S. military, and our Israeli allies, has gone about the task. There is plenty of carping here as well, the usual cold shower of premature defeatism from much of the media as yet another generation of journalists impatiently waits to know when they can join their forebears covering every war we have fought recently and call it a quagmire. No doubt there will be setbacks and more losses, like those of the fallen we already mourn. And we shouldn't discount the risks—surging energy prices are a familiar reminder of the uncertainties of Middle Eastern turbulence.

But the results so far—from regime decapitation to degrading Iran's military hardware—are impressive.

But good statecraft consists not only of bold decision-making and efficient execution. It also requires an ability to explain and convince—at home and overseas. The administration is losing that war.

The public started out opposing the conflict in Iran. That will be a problem if things go south.

First there was the lack of a coherent argument for the conflict in the first place. It is no surprise that, for the first time at the start of any recent conflict, large numbers of Americans are against it. Mr. Trump spent almost no time explaining why war was needed. The familiar but still shockingly shameless surrender of their constitutional responsibilities by Republicans in Congress compounded the problem. Any legislator with a shred of dignity would have at least requested a full accounting of the reasons for going to war.

Then, in the early stages, we had the haphazard and conflicting justifications for the war: regime change, an imminent nuclear threat, the whole strange cul-de-sac of whether we were merely doing Israel's bidding.

Add to that the cringe-making purity of the wartime oratory, especially from our PT instructor in chief, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. His language, with its breathless imagery such as "death and destruction from the sky all day long" is the sort that would be rejected by the cartoonists at Marvel Comics.

Diplomacy is about communication too. But here again the president's style is to inflict lasting, needless harm. Spain, apparently, is "terrible" and we should no longer trade with it. The U.K. is no longer a special friend. To be sure, Europeans failed to show up for this fight. But the president may remember that these are the same people whose costly contribution to the Afghanistan war he derided a month ago as having "stayed a little back" from the front lines.

The administration's verbal profligacy and rhetorical ineptitude have already resulted in a war that is unpopular at home, a dangerous posi-

tion if, God forbid, things go south in Iran. The confusion over our relationship with Israel is especially damaging at a time when siren voices on the right and left want to blame the Jewish state (and the Jews) for all our woes. Verbal assaults on allies matter because we are harming relationships we may need one day.

Piling up resentments around the world is one heck of a form of statecraft. Yet it is typical of the Trump governing style. We have seen it elsewhere—immigration, most obviously: sound policies undermined by a curious insistence on conveying them to the public in a way that makes enemies for no obvious reason.

This matters most in war. The failure to articulate a persuasive and inspiring case not only weakens support at home, our diplomatic efforts overseas and our war-fighting capabilities. The unseemly representation of necessary, lethal battle as some sort of videogame corrupts our national culture. We can't be expected to raise our eyes to the shining beacon of our noble ideals if we can't see through the acrid smoke of our leaders' intemperance, incontinent, infantilizing verbiage.

Trump Has More Tariffs up His Sleeve

By Alan S. Blinder

Confused about tariffs? Having trouble telling the International Emergency Economic Powers Act from Section 122, Section 232 and other laws? President Trump may be, too. But believe him when he says he still has a bundle of protectionist arrows in his quiver.

Mr. Trump reacted angrily to the Supreme Court's decision that he had overstepped his legal authority in invoking IEEPA to justify his long list of "Liberation Day" tariffs and others. The court noted the obvious: Tariffs are taxes, and the Constitution vests the power to tax in Congress, not the president. This is Civics 101.

Invoking IEEPA also requires an

"unusual and extraordinary threat . . . to the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States." Although the Supreme Court didn't address this question, it's reasonable to ask: Who or what was threatening us? Was it those pen-guins on Heard Island, which was hit by a 10% tariff?

And what was the unusual and extraordinary threat? The share of U.S. employment in manufacturing has been declining for decades, as it has in other rich countries, largely because richer people want to spend more of their budgets on services. Markets respond to what consumers want. Nothing unusual there.

So the case for using IEEPA to raise tariffs without congressional approval was always a fiction, and

the Supreme Court finally put an end to it. But Mr. Trump has other legal authorities that don't violate the Constitution's separation of powers.

Mr. Trump responded almost immediately to the court's decision by imposing an across-the-board tariff—initially 10%, later threatening 15%—under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974. Congress delegated such authority to the president more than 50 years ago, although no president before Mr. Trump ever saw fit to use it.

Section 122 was originally designed to deal with short-term "balance of payments" emergencies, a concept that's become meaningless in the modern era of floating exchange rates, because currency values now adjust automatically to keep total international payments in balance. Section 122 was never designed for long-term trade issues, which may be why the president's tariff authority is limited to 150 days. After that, congressional approval is required.

Several lawsuits have already been filed challenging the legality of using Section 122 in this nonemergency context. But since the courts likely won't rule within 150 days, Mr. Trump can probably keep this tariff in place until then.

By coincidence, a threatened 15% across-the-board tariff isn't terribly different, in average rate, from the potpourri of tariffs in effect before the Supreme Court decision. So the total tax on American households will be similar.

But Section 122 tariffs are uniform, making this tool less useful to Mr. Trump as a targeted weapon. Section 122 tariffs don't discriminate across products or countries, so the president can't use them to reward friends or punish enemies at his whim. Remember Brazil's prosecuting Jair Bolsonaro?

What happens after 150 days, or perhaps before? That's anyone's guess. But Section 232 of the U.S. Trade Expansion Act of 1962 stands

After the Supreme Court's IEEPA decision, the president has other legal authorities at his disposal.

ready. Administration advisers have already mentioned it as another route to high tariffs, and it's now in use for steel and aluminum. But there's a catch.

Section 232 gives the president broad authority to deal with trade issues that "threaten to impair" national security. Invoking this law requires a recommendation to that effect from the Commerce Department, which normally takes some time. But Mr. Trump claims to find threats to national security everywhere, and I'm sure Secretary Howard Lutnick will happily accommodate Mr. Trump's hallucinations. So expect further uses of the statute.

The courts may invalidate specious claims that certain imports

threaten national security. So the legal process grinds slowly. So these tariffs could be around for a while.

So could Section 301 tariffs under the 1974 act, which the administration is already using to counter a variety of "unfair trade practices." Yes, that vague term leaves lots of discretion in the president's hands—as long as the U.S. trade representative (or a private firm) files a 301 case. Mr. Trump seems to regard any bilateral trade deficit with any country as "unfair," so watch out for lots of 301 cases.

Finally, Section 201 of the Trade Act gives the president significant powers to impose temporary tariffs or quotas against import surges that hurt U.S. industries. Suppose China learns how to manufacture better, cheaper solar panels, and Chinese panels suddenly flood the U.S. market, damaging the American industry. A Section 201 tariff is intended to buy time while the U.S. industry adjusts. It isn't hard to imagine the Trump administration saying that adjustment will take a very long time.

Don't count on TACO—"Trump always chickens out"—this time around. Despite losing on IEEPA at the Supreme Court, Mr. Trump still has plenty of weapons at his disposal that can keep tariffs close to Smooth-Hawley levels. And we know how that worked out.

Mr. Blinder is a professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton. He served as vice chairman of the Federal Reserve, 1994-96.

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The New York Times

COLUMNIST | THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Let Politics, Not Bombs, Decide Iran's Future

IN SEPTEMBER 1996, I visited Tehran for the first time. I stayed at the Homa Hotel, formerly a Sheraton. I wrote at the time that fixed above the door in the lobby was a sign that read, in English, "Down with U.S.A." As I pondered that sign, I remember thinking something like: Wow, that's not graffiti! That's firmly attached. That won't come down easily.

The late 1990s were a fleeting moment of openness in Iran, which is how I got a visa. I was hopeful that the obvious chest then of many of Iran's young people to join the world economy would eventually triumph over its leaders who had fixed those words into the wall. It didn't happen. The words were too deeply embedded.

Now, we're more than a week into the war with Iran launched by President Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, and the biggest question I have is this: What if the necessary is impossible? What if the transformation of Iran is so much more important than the war's critics admit, but so much more difficult than the war's designers understand?

Yes, nothing would improve the prospects of the people of Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Gaza, Yemen and Israel more than removing the Islamic regime in Tehran.

But what if that regime is also so embedded — in majorities, schools, police stations, government jobs, the banking system, the military, neighborhood paramilitaries — that, despite its unpopularity with a majority of Iranians, it can't be removed without plunging the entire Iranian landmass, about a sixth the size of the United States and home to 90 million people, into chaos? What if the only quick alternative to Iran's Islamic autocracy is not democracy but disorder on an epic scale?

Nothing underscores the embeddedness of this regime more than the fact that Iran just replaced its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, killed early in the war, with his son Mojtaba Khamenei, said to be another hard-liner.

Because this war took me and many others completely by surprise, I am feeling my way forward — trying to think through the best-case and worst-case scenarios with humility, because none of us have been here before.

As I do, events are telling me that Trump and Netanyahu should take their military achievement and call it a day, at least for now. Why?

First, it is obvious that Trump and Netanyahu started this war without any clear endgame in mind.

Netanyahu, I suspect, would probably be happy to turn Iran over to another big Gaza and to just keep "mowing the grass," or periodically putting down threats there, as he was so inclined to do in Gaza. As the Haaretz military analyst Amos Harel put it: "A few months ago, Netanyahu described Israel as a modern Sparta. But to preserve its militarist identity, a Sparta requires permanent military friction — of a kind that would also enable its ruler to remain in power — regardless

U.S.-Israeli strikes won't determine the leadership in Tehran.



SARNA HEITSMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

of the price it exacts from the country."

Keeping Israel at war with Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah enables Netanyahu to drag out his corruption trial and avoid a commission of inquiry for his failure to prevent Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, invasion. (If you think that is too cynical, you don't know Netanyahu.)

For his part, Trump has been all over the map when talking about the morning after in Iran — and saying truly ridiculous and often contradictory things that reveal a commander in chief who is just making it up as he goes along. One day it's regime change, one day not; one day he doesn't care about Iran's future, the next day he will have a say in choosing the country's next leader; one day he's open to negotiations, the next day he is demanding "unconditional surrender."

I thought the Middle East analyst Hussein Ibish summed up the Trump strategy in Iran concisely when he wrote: "It goes like this: The U.S. and Israeli bomb and destroy assets. Then (fill in the blank) Iranians will secure (fill in the blank) political change that will achieve (fill in the blank) U.S. war aims."

Would you invest in a company whose leader, without warning, embarked on a radically new business strategy and then, in the next week, described its goals in five different ways? That is a flashing red light.

That said, Trump and Netanyahu appear to have significantly knocked back Iran's nuclear capabilities and its ability to project power through its navy, air force and missiles. That is good for the Iranian people, given how many have been killed by the regime controlling that power, and it is good for the region. The wise thing to do now is pause and see how this plays out on what I call "the morning after the morning after."

That is when real politics happens. That is, if the United States and Israel declared that, having achieved most of their military objectives, they are now ready to halt their attacks — as long as Iran does as well — the surviving Iranian leadership would most certainly declare to the world and its people the morning after: "We showed them — we defied the combined power of the Great Satan and the Little Satan."

But the morning after the morning after, I'd bet on an explosive debate and infighting among the ruling elite in Tehran. Many voices of the people, merchants and reformers in the regime will surely declare to Iran's hard-liners: "Look at the disaster you have brought upon us. If this is a great victory by Iran, what does defeat look like? We have lost our savings, our economy, our environment, much of our military and the friendship of all our im-

mediate neighbors. What future do we have?"

Just consider the infighting we are already seeing between Iran's president and hard-line military factions over the wisdom of Iran attacking its Arab neighbors in hopes of getting them to pressure Washington to stop the war. Who knows what could emerge between the Iranian people and the regime, and within the regime, over time when the war stops and the true bill for Iran's extreme behavior comes due.

To be sure, no one can guarantee that this morning-after-the-morning-after politics will end in a change in the regime or of the regime. But it has every bit as much a chance as just bombing Tehran and Beirut into rubble and hoping a popular uprising will emerge.

We are already seeing a desalination plant in Iran being bombed, and, in retaliation, Iran striking Bahrain's desalination plant. If that trend spreads, people are going to run out of water very fast. The potential for Iran's becoming an even bigger environmental disaster than the ayatollahs have already made it is very real; no one will be able to live there.

There was a haunting passage in a Times article on Monday about the mood in Tehran about the war.

"Peyman, a digital entrepreneur in Tehran, worries that the price has grown too high. Like many Iranians interviewed, he said he spent his days at home, unable to work, watching the destruction with increasing fear and unease. He wondered how locals could prevent even petty crime with police stations bombed out — let alone how any government could pick up running the country after so much had been destroyed."

Peyman told The Times: "If we are going to live in Iran in the future, no matter what government we have, we still need institutions."

Iran's regime is a disgrace — a mania to its own people, to its neighbors and to a rules-based order as much as any other nation. I pray that it can pass into history soon, at a reasonable cost, and unlock the Iranian people's enormous potential to contribute to humanity.

But endlessly bombing it, destroying more and more military and civilian infrastructure and just hoping that Iranians seeking democracy will come together — with barely any internet to communicate with, and where moving anywhere on the roads can be deadly dangerous — and topple this entrenched killer regime on their own... well, show me where that has ever happened in history.

My guess is that this regime will break open from the top, which will be a process that will start only after there is a cease-fire.

The best that the Trump-Netanyahu bombs-away strategy can do is start that process; just tilting Iran onto a better track would be a significant achievement. The worst the strategy can do is so devastate Iran with endless aerial bombardments that it becomes ungovernable for anyone. That would be a disaster of incalculable proportions.

Trump Is Making Carter's Mistake in the Persian Gulf

Rosemary Kelanic

The director of the Middle East program at Defense Priorities.

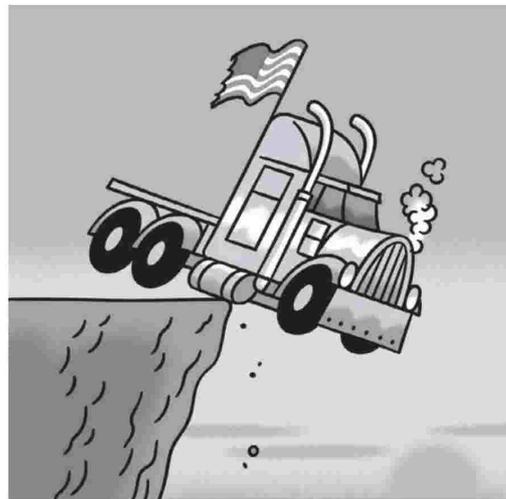
THE American-Israeli war on Iran has spilled oil prices, as tankers hesitate to transit the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow waterway connecting the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean through which some 20 percent of global oil trade passes. To keep oil flowing from the region, President Trump has promised U.S. naval protection to ships traveling through the strait, if necessary.

This is not a new idea but a continuation of President Jimmy Carter's 1980 pledge to defend the Persian Gulf after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which, compounded by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, heightened threats to the global oil supply. Mr. Carter's commitment led to the creation of CENTCOM, the U.S. Central Command, and became the driving rationale for a permanent U.S. footprint in the region.

But long-term U.S. military basing has failed to stop Iran from attacking Persian Gulf shipping, even as it has discouraged investment in a more robust global oil transportation network, setting the stage for today's oil price spike worries. As the Iran crisis plays out, the United States has better options than doubling down on Mr. Carter's approach, but they require us to understand and correct America's unique vulnerability: The country is more exposed to oil price shocks than any other major power, including China.

Many Americans might be surprised to hear this. The United States is the world's largest oil producer and a net petroleum exporter. But oil trades in a global market at a single market price. Experts compare the oil market to a giant bathtub with many spigots and drains. The levels of oil in the bathtub — plus market speculation about whether that level will go up or down — determines the oil price, even for countries that pour a lot of crude into the tub, such as the United States.

Every country that draws from the bathtub suffers from price shocks, but the United States suffers more than its peers. The U.S. economy has a high oil intensity; it consumes a lot of oil to produce each dollar of its gross domestic product. America's economy is more than 40 percent more oil-intensive than China's, even though China is a net oil importer and sources much of its oil from Persian Gulf countries, including Iran. The European Un-



ARNE BELLSTROM

ion's economy is half as oil-intensive as America's. Even Russia, a petrostate, is about 20 percent less reliant on oil per unit of economic output than the United States is.

China is still a developing country in many ways. Developing countries tend to consume more oil than fully industrialized ones. But China also recognized its strategic vulnerability to oil shocks years ago and has been methodically decreasing it — not with washes but with electric vehicles and high-speed electric rail.

Chinese gasoline consumption appeared to peak in 2023, far earlier than expected. According to an analysis by BloombergNEF, some two-thirds of electric vehicles sold worldwide in 2025 were purchased in China, and within a year, its E.V. sales were projected to exceed the entire U.S. car market.

The United States' oil intensity problem is set to worsen relative to China. The Trump administration has ended E.V. subsidies, discouraged investment in charging infrastructure and weakened U.S. fuel economy standards. The International Energy Agency has revised projections of American E.V. adoption sharply downward to only 20 percent of new American car sales by 2030, compared with over 40 percent under previous policies. That number is expected to be around 80 percent in China.

So what should Washington do right now? In the short term, the U.S. government can reassure markets by releasing oil from the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which was built for moments like this. The reserve currently holds about 415 million barrels and can begin deliveries within two weeks. Every previous

Pledging U.S. protection for oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz sends a bad signal.



emergency drawdown — during the 1991 Persian Gulf war, Hurricane Katrina, NATO's airstrikes on Libya and Russia's invasion of Ukraine — helped to stabilize global markets.

The White House should have planned for an emergency drawdown from the reserve before launching a reckless war on Iran, especially since Secretary of State Marco Rubio admitted last week that officials anticipated that prices would spike during the conflict. The delay suggests that the Trump administration was overconfident that the war would end quickly, before the oil market reacted.

The United States should coordinate its petroleum reserve release with the International Energy Agency's member countries, which collectively hold 1.2 billion barrels in government stockpiles. Combined global oil inventories, which include government stocks and those held by private companies, stand at 8.2 billion barrels — theoretically enough to compensate for a complete Hormuz closure for over a year. The current energy crisis is manageable, whether or not the U.S. Navy intervenes in Hormuz, particularly if governments act together.

Promising U.S. military intervention to protect Persian Gulf oil, as Mr. Carter did, sends a bad signal. He encouraged the oil market to overly on a single, vulnerable choke point, the Strait of Hormuz, for petroleum commerce. If he hadn't, oil companies and governments would have had more reason to diversify the routes on which Middle East oil could move — through pipelines or on railways to ports on the Mediterranean or Red Sea.

Over the long run, the United States needs to do what China is already doing: invest in E.V.s.

U.S. electricity production is already more than 99 percent independent from oil, running instead on coal, natural gas, nuclear power and green energy. Electrifying America's vehicle fleet would slash U.S. oil intensity and reduce exposure to price shocks from the Persian Gulf, Russia and beyond.

Transitioning away from internal combustion engines should not be tangled in the toxic partisan politics of climate change. Electrification is crucial for the United States to mitigate a strategic vulnerability that its rivals are already solving. If the United States relies less on oil, it can care less about the Persian Gulf. That would be one more reason to bring home the tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed there.

COLUMNIST | DAVID FRENCH

Talarico Is a Christian X-Ray



TAMAR KALIFA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THESE DAYS, I'm asked more about James Talarico than I'm asking about any politician not named Donald Trump.

Talarico is a 36-year-old Texas state representative and the Democratic Party's latest and greatest hope for winning its first statewide election there in more than 30 years.

He's also one of the most faith-forward politicians in the United States.

Talarico doesn't just root his policies and ideology in his Christian beliefs; he's a seminary willing to dive deep into theology. When he's arguing with the religious right about, say, Christian nationalism, he makes a specifically Christian argument to counter a poisonous Christian movement.

"Jesus liberates," Talarico said in a sermon in 2023. "Christian nationalism controls. Jesus saves. Christian nationalism kills. Jesus started a universal movement based on mutual love. Christian nationalism is a sectarian movement based on mutual hate."

The same thing applies to his discussions about specific government policies. Just as Christian conservatives often root their arguments about immigration and abortion in Scripture, so does Talarico.

For example, in an interview with my colleague Ezra Klein, Talarico criticized the evangelical focus on abortion and homosexuality in politics. "It's remarkable to me," Talarico said, "that you have an entire political movement using Christianity to prioritize two issues that Jesus never talked about."

"And so," he continued, "I'm not saying they're not important — I actually think both of those issues are very important. But to focus on those two issues instead of feeding the hungry and healing the sick and welcoming the stranger — three things we're told to do ad nauseam in Scripture — to me, is just mind-blowing."

When I hear Talarico speak about faith, I alternate between agreement and disagreement. He's spot on about the dangers of Christian nationalism, and yet I can't help but respond to his arguments about the relative priority of abortion by asking: "Why can't we do it all? Provide high-quality health care, welcome immigrants and protect the unborn?"

And that's hardly the only disagreement — theological or ideological — between us. But those disagreements are to be expected. Talarico is a political and religious progressive. I

am a political and religious conservative. But focusing on those disagreements misses the reason I'm asked about him so much.

Talarico isn't just making arguments. He's giving people hope, and I think I know why.

PUT SIMPLY, if the primary American divide is between right and left, then Talarico isn't that interesting. There's a long history of progressive religious activism in the United States, just as there is a long history of conservative religious activism. White evangelicals might be overwhelmingly Republican, but American Christians are remarkably diverse politically, and we've been arguing with one another for a long time.

Yet if the primary American divide is between decent and indecent, then the equation

A politician in Texas is teaching us what faith really means.

changes. Talarico shines. Talarico is one of the few openly Christian politicians in the United States who acts like a Christian, and by acting like a Christian he reveals a profound contrast with so many members of the MAGA Christian movement that's dominated American political life for 10 years.

For example, when Talarico won his Senate primary, he said, "I am tired of being pitted against my neighbor. I'm tired of being told to hate my neighbor. It's been more than 10 years of this kind of politics. Politics as blood sport, politics as trolling and owning, politics as total war. It tears families apart. It ends friendships, and it leaves us all feeling terrible all the time."

I know there are people who register those words deeply. They've endured the fractured friendships. They've seen their own families fall to pieces. And the idea that a politician might actually run a race without rancor and hatred can feel intoxicating — even if you have theological or ideological disagreements with him. I also know that Talarico won't win over many truly conservative voters. He's far too progressive. But there are legions of weary Americans who aren't moti-

vated primarily by ideology, and those are exactly the people who talk to me about Talarico.

One reason politics has been so exhausting — and so frightening — is that we often know that opposing politicians don't just disagree with us but that they hate us. If politicians hate us, then we know they won't listen to us, they won't care about us, and they may well actively try to harm us when they're in office.

THIS IS WHAT MAGA Christianity has become. In that world, cruelty in the name of Trumpism is no vice, and kindness in the name of progressivism is no virtue.

There is no better representation of that reality than one of Talarico's potential general election opponents, Ken Paxton, the attorney general of Texas.

The man is an admitted adulterer, which is something that used to matter to conservative Christians. His wife, a conservative state senator, has filed for divorce on "biblical grounds." Paxton tried to help Trump steal the 2020 election, and he's so corrupt that several of his top aides blew the whistle on him and resigned or were removed from their jobs, with many of them claiming that he provided favors for a donor in exchange for personal benefits, including finding employment for the woman said to be his mistress. Paxton has denied wrongdoing.

He was impeached by the Republican-controlled House, only to be acquitted by the Texas Senate. And yet, if Paxton wins, MAGA evangelicals will no doubt claim that he is the only viable candidate for Christians to support — after all, he's a common sentiment on the right that you can't be a Christian and vote for Democrats.

Fortunately, however, there are signs in Texas that voters of both parties are turning toward virtue. Senator John Cornyn, the incumbent Republican, won a surprising (though narrow) plurality over Paxton in the first round of Texas primary voting.

Cornyn ran a campaign centered on character — unusual in today's Republican Party. At the same time, Cornyn's ultimate prospects may hinge on whether the lowest-character politician in America endorses him. Trump has stayed out of the race so far, but he's reportedly said to endorse Cornyn as an instrumental reason — Cornyn has a far better chance of keeping Texas red than Paxton.

We know that the Trump era will end. We don't know how. Political scientists speak of the American electorate as "thermostatic," often reacting against the party in power.

There are different ways this can work. The public can certainly react against the ruling party's ideology by swinging right or left in response. But what if the coming thermostatic reaction isn't about ideology as much as about character and temperament? What if we're seeing a 21st-century version of the movement away from primary voting, the corruption of Richard Nixon toward the ethics and integrity of Jimmy Carter — a man who won for all the right reasons in 1976, even if his presidency didn't live up to his promise?

It's too soon to be that optimistic, but that's what I see in people's attitudes toward Talarico. That's what I see in Cornyn's surprising plurality over Paxton. This miserable political moment won't end when the left takes back the government or if the right continues to beat the left. It will end when our politicians — especially Christian politicians — forsake cruelty for compassion and realize that we shall know Christians in politics not by their stridency and ideology, but by their integrity and love, including their love for, as Talarico put it, "all of our neighbors."

That's the significance of the Talarico moment: not the old news that a Christian can be progressive, but rather that Christian politicians can actually act like Christians. Kindness still has a place in the public square, even if it doesn't always seem that way.

LETTERS

Fears of a 'Quagmire' in Trump's War on Iran

TO THE EDITOR:
Re "Despite Warning, Clerics Choose Hard-Liner" (front page, March 9):

While the Trump administration celebrates removing a despotic leader, the succession of his son Mojtaba Khamenei confirms that power has simply shifted from one autocrat to another. Meanwhile, the human cost is staggering.

Your investigation of the Minab school strike, which reportedly killed at least 175 people, many of them schoolchildren, exposes the wrong path we have taken.

I wish I could believe this war was based on sound military counsel, but we cannot forget that President Trump previously fired several top military experts.

If I find myself praying for a thunderbolt of recognition that leads us back toward sanity. We must infuse some sliver of reason into this madness before our national conscience is lost entirely.

DANA BRYANT, BROOKLYN

TO THE EDITOR:

In just little over a week of war we have killed moderate Iranian officials who might have worked with us; we bombed a girls' elementary school, killing dozens of children; and seven American service members have died.

We've been given multiple contradictory aims for the war. We've been told it might last a week, or four, or continue indefinitely. And we've been treated to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's juvenile rants about raining down "death and destruction" on Iran.

By selecting another theatrical hard-liner, Mojtaba Khamenei, a son of the recently killed supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran has signaled it has no intention of surrendering.

Meanwhile, canisters of enriched uranium remain hidden deep inside the country. We've given Iran many more reasons to want to build a nuclear weapon. As a result of this latest poorly planned war, President Trump has not ruled out sending in American troops.

How do quagmires begin? When a president forgets that the main purpose of American military might is self-defense, that a war of choice without clear goals and an exit strategy is likely to end badly and that when our military kills and destroys ruthlessly, it does not create or build.

This war is a huge mistake, with no end in sight. Hopefully Republicans will pay the price in November.

ERIC BELDOCH, BRONX

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "Trump Witnesses Return of Bodies of 6 U.S. Service Members" (nytimes.com, March 7):

Can someone please tell

President Trump that wearing a baseball cap while witnessing the return of fallen soldiers, even if you are the top dog and commander in chief, is in very poor taste?

In what world does someone start a war that almost immediately costs the lives of six service members, then don a casual cap to see them home? It's not a golf course, for Pete's sake! It is a somber situation. These people gave their lives for their country. Show some respect.

BRENDA SUSSNA
WHITE BEAR LAKE, MINN.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "A Feeble Pitch for a War Tough to Sell," by Peter Baker (news analysis, March 7):

Mr. Baker's thorough assessment of President Trump's impulsive, secretive and illegal military attacks on Iran leads one to wonder, "How can this be?" The daily opinion polls and the shaky stock market underscore the fears of an other long-term war.

In a speech on Saturday, Mr. Trump mentioned the return to Dover Air Force Base of the six soldiers killed in a drone strike in Kuwait. He called them "heroes" and then blithely added that they were "coming home in a different manner than they thought they'd be coming home?"

Mr. Trump's concern for the effects of war, both abroad and at home, is questionable. His refusal to ask Congress for authorization to go to war is illegal. Fears of attacks at home, cyber or otherwise, are rampant — 25 years after the Sept. 11 attacks.

I hope that this unlawful war can be stopped before it is too late.

BONNIE GREENE LEVAR
BRYARCLIFF MANOR, N.Y.
The writer's brother Donald Freeman Greene was killed on United Flight 93 on Sept. 11, 2001.

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "What Is Trump Up to in Iran?" by Frank Bruni and Bret Stephens (The Conversation, March 6):

The answer to this question is the same as what President Trump has been up to all his life — reckless gambles with other people's assets. This was the story of Mr. Trump's casinos, Trump University and, now, the Trump war in Iran.

If, by chance, the war is successful, he, the president, will get the credit. If it fails, as is more likely, we, the people, will pay the price.

BHARAT S. SARATH
EAST BRUNSWICK, N.J.

The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters must include the writer's name, address and telephone number. Those selected may be edited, and shortened to fit allotted space. Email: letters@nytimes.com

We Are Being Governed by Unserious People

Frank Bruni

A contributing Opinion writer who was on the staff of The Times for more than 25 years.

IS THERE a heart somewhere inside Kristi Noem, underneath all those costumes, behind all that lacquer? She makes no attempt to show it. Whether killing an inconvenient dog or slandering Minnesotans gunned down by federal agents, she picks cruelty over compassion — and, sadly, seems to equate that choice with strength.

Does she have a pinch, even a grain, of modesty? She spent tens of millions of taxpayer dollars on advertisements for, well, Kristi Noem. That seemed to peeve the president. From his underlings he expects compliments, not competition.

But another, less colorful trait of Noem's should have disturbed him, and should unsettle us, even more, because it's the root of so much of what's wrong with Trump's White House — an explanation of its dysfunctions, a key to its disgraces, a signal to the world of how fickle and foolish America has become: She's unprofessional.

During her mercifully terminated stint as the homeland security secretary, she made extravagant claims without much, if any, attempt to ascertain their veracity. She used government resources in questionable ways. She treated public service as private amusement. That's not how true professionals behave. But it's how many senior officials in the Trump administration do.

And it's a big part of my and many other observers' profound apprehensions about the military strikes in Gaza — not just that they got the degree of deliberation that war demands. We can't assume temperance, reflection, rationality. Those hallmarks of professionalism aren't values to which the Trump administration subscribes.

It's a twisted culture, its warp and warts

evident not only in the shenanigans at federal departments that routinely draw scrutiny but also in the melodrama at those that typically don't. The inspector general for the Department of Labor, for example, is investigating allegations of professional misconduct by its leader, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, and several of her top aides. Chavez-DeRemer has been accused of using department resources for personal trips (something Noem is also to have done, too), having an affair with a member of her security detail (hold on to that thought), taking department workers to strip clubs (is this the new morale building?) and drinking alcohol on the job.

Oh, and her husband, Dr. Shawn DeRemer, has been barred from the department's offices because at least two women who work there have accused him of sexual assault (which he has denied).

Wild as all of that sounds, it's actually a Trump administration leitmotif.

In The Wall Street Journal last month, Michelle Hackman, Josh Dawsey and Tarini Parti wrote that Trump frequently wondered what was going on between Noem and one of her senior aides, Corey Lewandowski, who has repeatedly conducted questions about their conspicuous closeness.

"Lewandowski and Noem, who are both married, have publicly denied the reports of an affair, but people said they do little to hide their relationship inside the department," the Journal article explained. It added, "The pair have lately been using a luxury 737 Max

jet, with a private cabin in back, for their travel around the country, according to people familiar with the matter."

Sounds comfy. And . . . familiar. Fancy trips, airborne love, unconventional doings with the security detail — it's so very Kash Patel, the F.B.I. director, who timed a recent, government-funded excursion to Italy to coincide with the Winter Olympics, where he guzzled beer and whooped it up with the American men's hockey team after its victory over Canada. On many flights he's accompanied by his girlfriend, Alexis Wilkins, "one of the best-protected country music singers in the United States," as my Times colleague Elizabeth Williamson wrote recently in a triumph of understatement.

"F.B.I. tactical agents have ferried her to a resort in Britain before a dinner at Windsor Castle and to an appointment at a hair salon in Nashville," Williamson continued. "Last April, agents in two S.U.V.s stood guard outside a senior center in Ronald Reagan's boyhood home of Dixon, Ill., while she sang for a few dozen young conservatives." I hope she also enjoyed the concert.

There's a tendency to talk of Noem, Patel and their perk-minded compatriots as grifters. The aptness is likely to be overstated.

It's tempting to focus on the inadequate experience and kooky beliefs of flamboyant strivers — from Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the health secretary, to Tulsi Gabbard, the director of national intelligence — whom Trump has elevated to the top tiers of government.

But that obscures and gives short shrift to their fundamental

For many Trump administration officials, professionalism seems overrated.

sloppiness, selfishness, disregard for proper procedure, evasion of accountability. They simply don't do their jobs — or at least don't do them earnestly, maturely or competently.

That was clear early on, when the defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, used the messaging app Signal for a group chat that discussed sensitive military information, then dismissed any complaints about that cavalierly — an adverb that, when coupled with spitefully, covers about 99 percent of his behavior.

It's clear when lawyers for the Justice Department — Alina Habba, Lindsey Halligan, Jeanine Pirro — have their cases thrown out or their appointments voided. When their boss, Pam Bondi, the attorney general, shows up at a congressional hearing with a crude cheat sheet filled with puerile insults. When Patel takes to social media to crow about developments in prominent investigations that turn out to be dead ends. When a major report released by a commission under Kennedy cites an array of nonexistent studies. When he or other members of Trump's cabinet capriciously fire or haphazardly hire people for important positions.

I'm sure these administration officials deem professionalism overrated, outdated, an enemy of necessary disruption, a brake on real genius. It's for slowpokes and prudes. It's fussiness for fussiness's sake.

Wrong. Professionalism recognizes that your job is bigger than you are. It rightly regards teamwork and discipline as handmaidens of accomplishment. It understands that a sturdy institution requires a code of conduct. And it sweats details, because if you get enough of those wrong, you get nothing at all right.

Noem, to be fair, sweated details — about her itinerary, her apparel, her accessories. But about the violence against Americans in cities that her armed agents flooded? She couldn't be bothered. She had a plane to catch.

HEM WITSEMAN

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES
"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

The déjà vu of Europe's energy shock

The UK and EU must raise their game on power security

Across Europe there is a distinct sense of déjà vu. Four years ago Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered an almighty surge in global oil and gas prices. It compelled leaders in Britain and the EU to implement expensive support packages to cushion the hit to their economies from their dependency on energy imports. With the war in the Middle East entering its second week, the same pressures are returning. Global oil prices are up more than 30 per cent and regional natural gas price benchmarks have almost doubled since the beginning of the conflict. European economies cannot afford to keep repeating the cycle.

Gas prices have, so far, not risen as dramatically as they did in 2022, and oil dipped back below \$100 a barrel on Monday. Europe has also made strides

in diversifying its energy mix and supply base away from Russia. Still, the longer crude shipments through the Strait of Hormuz are disrupted, the greater the economic fallout will be. Even under a relatively short-lived price shock scenario, Oxford Economics estimates that inflation in the UK and euro area will be around 0.5 percentage points higher at the end of the year owing, in part, to a continued reliance on gas imports and limited storage buffers. Investors have also increased bets on interest-rate hikes from the ECB and the Bank of England.

The political pressure to provide economic support is likely to mount. Britain's Labour government has repeatedly cited the cost of living as its "number one" concern. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer said on Monday that government was thinking about what it could do to limit the impact. If crude prices do continue to rise, policymakers ought to heed the lessons of the 2022 energy shock and ensure any support is cal-

ibrated. That means designing temporary measures targeted at the most vulnerable individuals and enterprises.

But the greater problem for Europe is that persistent geopolitical instability brings the risk of more frequent energy price shocks. Governments cannot be expected to provide emergency provisions every time there is a crisis. Nor do they have the capacity to do so. Many nations are still unwinding the debts accumulated from earlier cost of living measures.

Energy shocks also have a direct financial cost. Each disruption pushes up sovereign borrowing rates as investors price in higher inflation and the possibility of new support measures. UK 10-year gilt yields, for instance, have jumped around 50 basis points since the US and Israel launched attacks on Iran on February 28. This latest shock is another reminder of the need to build adequate fiscal buffers.

The main lesson, however, is that European leaders must strengthen

Governments cannot be expected to provide emergency provisions every time there is a crisis, nor do they have the capacity to do so

efforts to improve the region's energy security. This means doubling down on plans to boost power from solar, wind, and nuclear sources, while increasing strategic shock absorbers. Investment in electricity grids, storage and cross-border interconnectors would help better manage the intermittency of renewable power. Faster permitting processes for energy infrastructure would also enable new projects to be built more quickly. In Britain, in particular, questions remain on how to reform its electricity pricing, which currently leaves it highly exposed to volatile wholesale gas prices.

Though these initiatives involve upfront costs and some disruption, they would reduce the need for reactive short-term fixes and protect nations from repeated shocks and ongoing losses in competitiveness. Without a serious expansion of domestic energy supplies, the UK and EU's economic fortunes will remain dangerously tied to developments elsewhere.

Opinion Economics

EU impotence extends to decarbonisation



Martin Sandbu

The war on Iran has again exposed the EU's impotence, not just over its own economic prospects. Soaring energy costs – the European natural gas price has doubled from recent lows – will be on EU leaders' minds when they gather later this month. Already concerned about expensive energy weighing on business, and tempted by short-term fixes, they risk entrenching rather than reducing the bloc's vulnerability.

It should not take war in the Middle East to remind Europe how dangerous it is for a region woefully lacking in hydrocarbon reserves to depend on outside fossil fuel supplies. It is only four years since we last found ourselves on the sharp end of energy dependence – at the time, Vladimir Putin's throttling of gas supplies

War should not be necessary to remember the danger of depending on outside fossil fuels

forced prices up even more violently than now.

Yet it did not take long for the political momentum behind decarbonising Europe's energy system to be replaced by lobbying against carbon-related regulation. The single most powerful narrative from Europe's business community and parts of its politics, well beyond the traditional centre-right, is now one in which over-regulation, including on climate, is holding European "competitiveness" back.

The lobbying works. In just a few months, several moves have pulled the EU in the wrong direction: towards entrenching carbon dependence. One was to slow down the phasing out of internal combustion engines, essential to wean transport off fossil fuels.

Another affects the EU's incoming carbon tariff, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. In December, the European Commission proposed to exempt imports from CBAM in an emergency. It may have been a sop to farmers: several member states have campaigned to exempt fertiliser. But introducing a kill switch (let alone using it, which will be tempting given rising fertiliser prices) undercuts the profitability of companies that have invested in domestic, low-carbon production which would make Europe less vulnerable to global price swings.

The worst has been the uncertainty cast over the EU's carbon emissions trading market (ETS). Last year ministers pushed back its expansion to new sectors. Recently, some EU leaders have argued for a further watering down or even intervention to lower prices in the already existing scheme. The strategic error of slowing a transformation necessary for security and independence is bad enough. It adds insult to injury to do so in the name of European "competitiveness". The claimed trade-off between decarbonisation and EU economic prowess makes recalibrating the transition look like common sense: balancing security and growth priorities. But the truth is that rearguard action on fossil dependence is bad for business.

The backtracking injects government-creating uncertainty in markets. That ruins the prospects of those businesses we should most strongly support: entrepreneurial forces ready to create value by reducing Europe's geopolitical exposure. With the global order in tatters, it's foolish at best, disloyal at worst.

We should remember that there was also a positive lesson from the last energy shock. Europe got through the crisis if not unscathed, then with far less injury than feared. The continent managed to economise on energy use and to switch sources, including to renewable power, much better than expected. It was a monument to Europe's unsung economic agility.

The obvious conclusion is that decarbonising Europe's energy system is both more necessary and more achievable than previously thought. Instead, leaders seem tempted to pull back from that task in a misguided effort to protect the economy – they tend to listen more to incumbent companies than to their challengers. And more to established sectors than to the innovative ones that will only exist (at least at scale) in the future. In addition, they tend to be lobbied a lot more by businesses too hidebound to survive without help than by new ones rising to take their place.

This is natural: creative destruction has few champions. But it is not wise. Europe is clearly capable of speeding up its transition to energy independence via renewables. It did so four years ago. Imagine if, in addition, a large-scale programme had been funded to produce batteries at scale and install them in millions of European households: the intensifying daily swings in power prices – loudly predicted – would now be a profit opportunity, not a problem.

The confidence to make the investments that hasten the transition requires firm political leadership. Or Europe will make the same mistake all over again.

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Letters

Spain's position on Iran mirrors public mood

Re the current dispute between Spain and the US over the Iran war, it is useful and timely to remember the Iraq war started by US President George W Bush in 2003. More than 90 per cent of Spaniards were against getting involved, yet Spain's prime minister at the time, José María Aznar, agreed to join the "coalition of the willing" and supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without the approval of parliament. On March 11, 2004, days before a Spanish general election, Madrid's Atocha train station was bombed at the peak of rush hour,

killing 195 people. Aznar lost the election. Islamic fundamentalists were eventually tried and convicted.

Pedro Sánchez has refused to let the US use two military bases in Spain to attack Iran in a war started by US President Donald Trump. Unsurprisingly, FT reporters write "the question looming over the Spanish leader is whether he has pushed things too far" ("Sánchez relishes role as face of European resistance to Trump", Report, March 6) when he is merely reflecting the will of the country. According to the CIS

research institute, 76 per cent of Spaniards oppose military intervention in Iran led by the US and Israel.

A CNN poll finds that 59 per cent of Americans disapprove of the war. A January 2026 Quinnipiac University National Poll shows 70 per cent of Americans say presidents should seek congressional approval before taking military action against another country. Shouldn't your writers be asking: "Has Trump pushed things too far?"

Cynthia Miyashita
Gatiba, Biscay, Spain

Why ending lead pollution is no longer a pipe dream

Aveek Bhattacharya ("On lead, Britain is the laggard of the developed world", Opinion, March 5) is right to draw attention to the risks from lead exposure in homes in Britain, and to urge the government to do more to address the problem.

There is no "safe" exposure for children who are less than six years old. Lead impairs neurological development, with serious cognitive impacts. Bhattacharya argues for more surveillance of children which must be right but only as a step towards better managing the sources of the lead poisoning. Some sources, like lead painted windows, as he notes, are easy to identify and so it makes no sense not to act. But I want to make the point that drinking water (hardly covered by Bhattacharya) is more difficult and costly to manage and yet probably the most important source.

My own work with Minnesota Department of Health shows how the public health arguments for action can be underpinned by the economics but



that still there are political decisions to be made. In Britain and the US, houses built before 1970 with lead pipes are very likely to have exposure and the potential is even greater if, as happened in Flint, Michigan some years ago, the chemistry of the water is

also changed. The stock of houses in the UK affected is considerable: 8m to 9m homes. The cost of replacing the pipes is also substantial (up to £10,000 per home) and often is the responsibility of homeowners. In older properties, they simply may not be able to afford it.

A number of studies (including the one in Minnesota) have shown that the benefits of avoiding IQ impairment and the knock-on effects related to employability and crime can be many times greater than the remedial costs. But these are social benefits and the costs are on homeowners. So, the issue is whether politicians feel it makes sense to subsidise homeowners (wholly, partially and/or means-tested) for the social returns.

The Biden administration did so; the Trump administration does not. Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government has yet to take a view. Bhattacharya is right to urge action; but this should go beyond surveillance and recognise the complexities of the task.

Peter Calow
Professor, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, MN, US

Coastal erosion's real cause

Re "Residents lambast 'nuts' location of Sizewell C as coastal erosion gapes" (Report, February 24), Sizewell C is not only robustly protected against rising sea levels, the plant is itself one of our best protections against climate change by guaranteeing clean power for 7m homes. Because it is climate change, not nuclear construction, that is accelerating coastal erosion, and it is essential to keep that in proportion.

Sizewell C will have a defence wall more than 14 metres above sea level. Sea-level rise on anything approaching that scale would represent a profound national challenge for cities and towns all across the east of England. That is the risk we should focus on and do everything we can to deploy clean power to prevent that scenario coming to pass.

Tom Greatorex
Chief Executive, Nuclear Industry Association, London WC2, UK

A question for the professor from the roadie mum

Regarding Professor Almudena Sevilla's letter (March 9) on the hidden hours of being the parent "on call" after children have started full-time education, I wonder if being the "roadie" for the band my 15-year-old played in counts. All that hanging round venues till the early hours, not to mention my ruined hearing. And I never did get my promised seaside bungalow when they "made it".

Jane Swan
Delabole, Cornwall, UK

Correction

● Six US service members were killed by an Iranian attack on Kuwait's Port of Shuaiba, not a US base as wrongly stated in an article on March 7.

OUTLOOK SEOUL

The new food fad sweeping South Korea



by Song Jung-a

It never occurred to me that a dessert could save lives. Yet South Koreans' latest obsession – a Dubai chocolate-style chewy cookie – is doing exactly that.

At the start of this year the Korean Red Cross, long troubled by falling donations, began offering donors the small, cocoa-covered treat. The result was immediate queues formed outside donation centres from early morning in freezing weather. Turnout jumped more than 150 per cent, driven largely by first-time donors. "The impact has been very positive, especially among young women," says a spokesperson.

The miracle dessert, known locally by its nickname *dujjonku*, is a homegrown hybrid that was inspired by the crunchy, pistachio "Dubai chocolate" that went viral in 2023. Stuffed with green pistachio cream mixed with buttery strands of fried *kanleul* pastry and marshmallow, it is topped with cocoa powder, creating a lingering chewy texture.

South Korea is particularly prone to viral food crazes. In one of the world's most densely populated and digitally connected societies, trends spread quickly through social media and often fade just as quickly. The Dubai chewy cookie follows earlier national obsessions with tanghulu fruit candy, oversized cream-filled macarons and Taiwanese castella cake.

This particular craze began when one member of a K-pop girl group, Jang Won-young of IVE, posted a photo last year. Her post turned the

cookie into a national obsession. Small bakeries sold out, daily purchase limits were imposed and copycat products proliferated. One developer even created a live online map showing which shops still had inventory.

The frenzy initially strained supply chains, pushing up prices of imported pistachios and marshmallows. But shortages have eased as large bakery chains, convenience stores and restaurants have moved in on the trend. Everywhere from sushi bars to bulgogi shops has begun producing the dessert as a lucrative side business.

BN Kim, a TV producer in her early forties, says she has eaten more than 50. "It was the talk of the town. I had to try it," she says. Her husband often queued at opening time to secure them. "Every store tastes different, so I wanted to experience as many as possible."

Kim Se-in, a 29-year-old office worker, says it's the texture that is addictive. "But I limit myself to one a day because of the calories," she adds.

I was less convinced. Weighing just 50 grammes and on sale for about Won7,000 (\$4.75) each, it seemed overpriced. The sample I bought near the FT's office tasted closer to sticky rice cake than a traditional cookie – dense and heavy. I did not particularly like it: too chewy, too bitty. One tennis club acquaintance said her dentist had banned it during cavity treatments. Doctors have sounded alarms. Korea University Guro Hospital has

warned they could "immediately disrupt the body's metabolic balance" and "threaten overall health beyond simple weight gain".

None of that appears to matter to fans. Lee Jung-won, an employee at the bakery I visited, says companies in the downtown area had bought large quantities as Lunar New Year gifts. "Customers don't seem to care much about the price," she says.

Jeon Dalhye, co-author of the bestselling *Trend Korea* series, thinks the cookie's appeal lies partly in its visual excess: bright green filling spilling from a cracked shell. "It's very Instagrammable," she says. "Fear of missing out is strong in the country's collectivist culture."

It may also reflect the economic mood. During slowdowns, consumers often turn to small indulgences. The rate of Seoul home prices to income has nearly doubled over the past decade. Against that backdrop, a premium cookie becomes a manageable treat, Jeon says. For young people in particular, living in a highly competitive society, affordable luxuries can provide emotional comfort.

Still, she does not expect demand to last long. "Fads continue only while they feel rare," she says. "Now that big companies have joined, the craze seems to have already peaked."

The country's blood banks – and its bakeries – may not get to enjoy the sugar rush for much longer.

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Opinion

Britain's safety net isn't set up for a widespread jobs crisis

EMPLOYMENT

Sarah O'Connor



Let's suppose for the sake of argument that the tech leaders are right, and AI is going to turf large numbers of people out of their jobs in the next few years. What sort of safety net would you want to have in place?

If I were a policymaker in the UK, my response would be: not this one. The British welfare state offers some of the worst income insurance against job loss in the developed world.

Most OECD countries provide temporary but relatively generous unemployment benefits to those who have previously been in work and have paid into the system through taxes. This is often a percentage of their previous earnings (up to a cap). The idea is to provide people with a short-term financial cushion

while they look for something new. If they remain unemployed over the longer term, they tend to drop down to a less generous means-tested safety net. But the UK is different. There is, technically, a "contributory" unemployment benefit for those who have paid national insurance contributions over the previous two to three years, but it is a flat rate that is no more generous than the means-tested safety net. And that rate is very low: currently about £92 a week for over-25s.

As a result, workers in the UK face particularly sharp drops in income if they lose their jobs. Across all OECD countries, single homeowners who have just lost their jobs retain 55 per cent of their previous in-work incomes on average, falling to 22 per cent if they are still unemployed after five years. In the UK, the "replacement rate" is just 12 per cent in both cases, according to analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies. The UK system is a bit more generous to those who rent and have children, but for people in these circumstances it still only provides the fourth-lowest replacement rate in the OECD.

There are some advantages to the British approach. The support on offer is so low that people are incentivised to get back into work as quickly as they can, even if that means taking on jobs that have lower pay or status. After the financial crisis of 2008, for example, UK unemployment fell rapidly as Brits took whatever work they could. I remember interviewing a white-collar

Support on offer is so low that people are incentivised to take on work that has lower pay or status

worker who became a bin cleaner and a former public sector employee who started selling cupcakes. Given that long spells of unemployment are known to be bad for people's confidence and skills, this "work first" approach has merit.

But it also has costs. First, it can lead to what economists call "poor matching", where people take jobs that don't

make best use of their skills and training. This can lead to weaker economic productivity (as was the case after the financial crisis in the UK). If there is an AI-induced dislocation that changes which skills are in demand, there would be a stronger case than usual for people to have some breathing room to regroup and retrain.

Second, in the eventuality of a broad and rapid labour market shock, the UK's very low unemployment benefits would not offer much of a macroeconomic cushion. Aggregate demand would take a bigger hit, which could then lead to more job losses, even among people whose jobs were not directly exposed to AI.

Third—and this is more speculative—it could be politically incendiary if people who lost their jobs to machines after "paying in" over long careers suddenly found they were eligible for very little support from the state, and no more than people who hadn't contributed.

The Labour government, which is not blind to these issues, wants to introduce a more generous version of contributory

unemployment insurance. But—in the country's well-worn tradition of "muddling through"—it looks set to be more incremental than transformational. The mooted plan is for the new benefit to remain a flat rate but a somewhat higher one: equivalent to 19 per cent of average earnings, on the IFS's calculations.

Ireland has been bolder. Last year it implemented a new system for people with five years' worth of contributions that offers 60 per cent of their previous earnings (up to a cap of €450 per week) for the first 13 weeks of unemployment.

To be clear, I don't think a sudden and sweeping jobs bloodbath is very likely. I remain sceptical that the technical breakthroughs we're undoubtedly seeing will filter through to the messy and complex world of work at the speed or scale that tech leaders seem to expect. But we have insurance against unlikely-but-bad events for a reason. And Britain is—it has to be said—very underinsured.

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UK's public leadership pipeline is in disrepair

Munira Mirza

In *Gulliver's Travels*, the narrator describes ministerial reshuffles in Lilliput that are frequent and unusually diverting. "When a great office is vacant, either by death or disgrace (which often happens), five or six of those candidates petition the Emperor to entertain his Majesty and the court with a dance upon the rope; and whoever jumps the highest without falling succeeds in the office."

Jonathan Swift's satirical take on 18th-century politics comes to mind when we think of those who have fallen from grace in the UK government recently. Some, like Peter Mandelson, were deft on the tightrope but undone by personal weakness. Others, like former cabinet secretary Chris Wormald, barely registered a presence and were shuffled out within a year. Many others have come and gone in quick succession from Number 10. The heap of political corpses grows as public confidence in government collapses.

Britain is not a country short on talent in business, science, tech, culture, law and many other fields. Yet our political leadership is too often inadequate and seems to be getting worse.

The reasons for this are manifold. In the last few decades, the pipeline for public leadership has fallen into disrepair. In the past, political parties sought out and trained young talent in core areas like policy and law in colleges dedicated to this purpose. But those institutions were shut or repurposed in the 1980s.

Political parties themselves have also

The relative drop in salary and intense scrutiny can make senior roles in government unattractive

shrunk, from one in 10 adults being a member of a party in the 1950s to a tenth of that number today. Parties struggle to persuade high-achieving businesspeople, entrepreneurs, professionals or military veterans to stand for office.

The relative drop in pay and intense scrutiny can make senior roles in government unattractive. Meanwhile, the civil service has lost much of its status and credibility. The national training college was closed in 2012 and, despite efforts to establish alternatives, older officials confess that preparation is thin. Junior civil servants are more likely to be offered online well-being courses than serious training in management.

The consequences could not be greater. Although external forces play a part, many of Britain's institutions are failing to deliver basic commitments because of failures of leadership. We are unable to enforce immigration rules, build homes and infrastructure or run procurement without massive wastage. The long-term reforms needed to reduce spiralling costs are sacrificed for political expediency.

The incentives need to change if we are to improve. But those in charge are often unprepared, easily distracted and unable to control the system.

It doesn't have to be this way. Upon independence in 1965, Singapore had an ethnically divided population, lacked any armed forces and had no natural resources. Yet its visionary leader Lee Kuan Yew believed Singapore's most valuable resource was its human talent. He wanted the kind of competent and honest officials he had observed while studying in Britain for his own country. As a result, Singapore treats elite development as an important function, identifying talent from a young age, continuously testing and training, while keeping routes into public life open for able outsiders.

As Singaporeans once learned from Britain, we should now learn from them. Civic Future and others are building a dedicated, independent pipeline into public life with training opportunities and programmes for people at all levels. More and more are coming forward, motivated by a sense of duty.

Politics needn't resemble a courtly farce if we focus on achieving a higher quality of leadership and governance.

The writer is director of Civic Future, a charity, and a former head of the Number 10 Policy Unit

Trump's Venezuela plan is failing in Iran

WORLD AFFAIRS

Gideon Rachman



The official name for the US military campaign in Iran is Operation Epic Fury. The unofficial name should have been "Desperately Seeking Delcy".

Donald Trump's decision to go to war in Iran was powerfully influenced by his military success in Venezuela in early January. A US president who came to office promising to end wars was clearly intoxicated by what he called a "stunning, effective and powerful display" of military might. He was also openly delighted by the prospect of gaining access to Venezuela's oil.

Just a few weeks later the US, acting in concert with Israel, moved to overthrow the government of Iran. Trump saw the role that he had played in picking a new leader for Venezuela as a model for Iran. He told Axios: "I have to be involved in the appointment, like with Delcy [Rodríguez] in Venezuela."

That hope has been dashed, at least for now, by the announcement that the new supreme leader of Iran will be Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the former leader, Ali Khamenei—who was assassinated in the opening act of the war.

The Israelis are likely to seek to kill the younger Khamenei. But, even if they succeed, it is already clear that the future leadership of Iran is unlikely to be determined by Trump.

The US had clearly been in contact with Rodríguez before launching the Venezuela operation and seizing President Nicolás Maduro. Since Rodríguez was already serving as the vice-president of Venezuela, installing her as the country's new leader was relatively straightforward. But Washington had no ready-made successor in place in Iran to take over from the elder Khamenei; the White House has so far shown scant enthusiasm for the leadership aspirations of Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the former shah. In tragicomic mode, Trump has revealed that: "Most of the people we had in mind are dead."

It is certainly possible that, somewhere near the top of the Iranian system, there is a pragmatist who would be willing to take on the Rodríguez role—in return for peace and a personal payoff. But there is no clear path for such a person to displace Iran's new supreme leader and then to hold on to power.

The failure to install a US-friendly leader makes it impossible to follow the Venezuelan playbook in Iran. That strategy has been called "regime alteration" rather than "regime change" by Jeremy Shapiro of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

A regime alteration policy is focused on installing a leader who will do America's bidding. But that is where the intervention stops. There is no real effort to



change the underlying political system. That strategy pays little heed to the aspirations of pro-democracy forces in Iran and Venezuela. But it has obvious attractions from Trump's point of view. Regime alteration promises the US an immediate geopolitical and business payoff, while saving America from getting involved in the messy and often futile business of nation-building.

The regime alteration strategy has, so far, worked well for Trump in Venezuela. That country has gone, almost literally overnight, from being a close collaborator of Russia, China and Iran to becoming a client state of the US. Doug Burgum, the US interior secretary, has just visited Venezuela with a bevy of American business leaders, aiming to strike deals on energy and critical

US military intervention in the Middle East has already departed drastically from the model used in Caracas

minerals. He was cordially received by Rodríguez—while her former boss, Maduro, languishes in jail in America.

But US military intervention in Iran has already departed drastically from the Venezuelan model. The capture of Maduro was all over within hours. The attack on Iran has been going on for more than a week—with Trump talking of a campaign of four to five weeks and contemplating the deployment of ground forces.

Unlike Venezuela, the war with Iran also quickly went regional—with more than a dozen countries either hit by missiles or targeted by them in the first week of the conflict. Trump wanted to bring this situation swiftly under control by finding a "great and acceptable" leader for Iran. But those hopes have now been dashed.

The economic consequences of the Iran war have also been immediate and dramatic—with the global oil price soaring following the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. A prolonged rise in gas prices and a slump in the markets would steadily increase the domestic

pressure on the White House. With the midterm elections looming—and Trump's MAGA coalition under strain—the president might not tolerate an Iran-induced economic downturn for very long.

If Trump is faced with a choice between escalating further or seeking a quick exit, his temperament and political interests point to an effort to cut his losses. That may be easier for this president than all of his more conventional predecessors. Trump has an almost unique capacity for claiming victory, even when he has clearly lost. (Think of the 2020 presidential election.)

But simply declaring victory in Iran and walking away may not be straightforward. There are around 40,000 American troops in the region, as well as military bases, economic assets and vulnerable allies. Trump was able to start this war at a time of his own choosing. He may not be able to end it on the same terms. Operation Epic Fury risks turning into an epic failure.

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A crucial test case for the American way of war

Jacquelyn Schneider

On February 28, President Donald Trump launched America's largest shock and awe campaign since the attack on Iraq in 2003. This may be Trump's battle, but Operation Epic Fury is exactly the kind of war that, for the past half-century or so, the US has sought to fight.

The campaign of precise long-range strikes against a weak Iranian regime is what social scientists call an "ideal" case to test the US vision of warfare. It is a chance to demonstrate that, despite two decades of counterinsurgency and the drone revolution in Ukraine, the American way of war is still possible.

The challenge is that ideal cases are also double-edged swords. They can't prove a theory will work in less than ideal situations. But when they fail, they can disprove entire theories. The impli-

cation here for the US is that if the American way of war can't work against Iran, a weak regime with a middling military, there is no chance that it will work in a much harder case—China, say.

The American way of war is long-range, precise and depends on overwhelming domination. The assumption is that quality—expensive technology and well-trained personnel—can achieve victory with limited risk to American lives. By targeting key leadership, bases and capabilities, well-executed precision strikes can induce changes in the enemy's foreign policy, regime collapse or even surrender, all without ever having to face the adversary on the ground.

The US debuted an early version of this in the first Gulf war. And it experimented with it throughout the 1990s—in Kosovo, in the skies over Iraq and in coercive strikes in Africa and other parts of the Middle East—using new cruise missiles, stealth aircraft and precision bombs.

However, it seemed to meet its match in the subsequent two decades of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghani-

stan. Even as the US built remote-controlled drones and increasingly precise munitions, it couldn't hold or stabilise territory without ground troops becoming embroiled in close-quarters conflict with adversaries.

And then, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it appeared as if the American way of war was over once and for all. New technologies, nota-

Should countries arm for attritional conflicts or the kind of technological dominance seen recently?

bly drones and AI, announced the return of drawn-out wars of attrition.

Some wonder why the US hasn't more fully absorbed the lessons of Ukraine. Why hasn't it replenished its arsenal with cheap munitions and drones, abandoned its expensive platforms and redesigned its campaigns to support multi-year fights to take or defend territory? This is not merely the result of

bureaucratic inertia, however. On the contrary, America has a deeply rooted belief in its own way of waging war and a distinctive understanding of how new technology (drones, AI and so on) can enable it.

Operation Epic Fury can, in many ways, be seen as a compelling counterexample to the dystopian vision of conflict that the war in Ukraine represents. On the first day, the US-Israeli operation decapitated the head of a despised regime. And it attacked more than 1,200 targets, with the loss of just six American military personnel. It has rebuffed one of the largest missile volleys ever launched and a US submarine destroyed an enemy warship with a torpedo for the first time since the second world war.

But there are already cracks in this account. The US may have accidentally attacked a school, killing over 100 children. (As of the end of last week, defence secretary Pete Hegseth said the Pentagon was still "investigating.") Three F-35s were shot down by friendly Kuwaiti fire. The Trump administration has been elusive on strategic objectives,

the possibility of deploying ground troops or campaign timelines. Meanwhile, American missile and bomb arsenals are dwindling and costs soaring.

For nations watching and wondering whether to invest in the Ukrainian or American military model, Operation Epic Fury is an important test case. Should they be arming for wars of attrition or for the kind of technological dominance showcased over the past week?

How this all ends will shape Iran and the region, but it will also dictate the future of the American military. Imagine, for a moment, that the US is unable to achieve a decisive victory, and is instead drawn into a long, costly and complicated nation-building exercise or guerrilla war. If that happens, the failure of the ideal case will force the military to rebuild its arsenal and transform its strategy in order to equip it for a very different kind of warfare—one that looks a lot more like Ukraine than the first Gulf war.

The writer is a Hoover fellow at Stanford University

COMMENT

Editorials

China's responsible diplomacy provides stability and certainty for a volatile world

China's composure and adherence to principles in handling China-US relations reflect its determination and confidence to bringing stabilities and certainties to a turbulent world.

That is also a key message of the news conference of China's foreign minister on the sidelines of the annual session of China's top legislature in Beijing on Sunday. In laying out the country's diplomatic policy, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that in a volatile world marked by conflict and uncertainty, China's diplomacy seeks to provide stability, certainty and constructive solutions.

China and the United States are both big countries, as Wang said. "Neither side can remodel the other, but we can choose how we want to engage, that is, to commit to a spirit of mutual respect, to hold the bottom line of peaceful coexistence, and to strive for the prospect of win-win cooperation."

Taking stock of the global landscape, it is hard to imagine what the world will become should some countries continue to act in opposition to the common good. The fighting grinds on in Ukraine and the Middle East, while countries glare at one another across the trade barriers erected by some. In many parts of the world, everyone claims to want stability while nervously moving chess pieces across the geopolitical board.

The certainty of China's foreign policy, as Wang underscored, is anchored by its head-of-state diplomacy. Under its strategic guidance, China has intensified engagement with countries around the world, strengthening dialogue, building trust and expanding cooperation.

The country has put forward the vision of building a community with a shared future for humanity. Behind this vision are the common expectations of people around the world for a peaceful future.

In a world tied together by supply chains, digital networks, climate pressures and economic collaboration, this vision of a community striving together for a better collective future acts as a beacon lighting the way forward for humanity. It advocates cooperation instead of confrontation, openness instead of division, dialogue instead of conflict, and mutual benefit instead of zero-sum game.

Diversity is the inherent nature of human civilization. Countries should respect others that follow different development paths. In this context, multipolarity is not a threat but a natural and desirable evolution of the global order. Rejecting a so-called "G2" framework, Wang stressed that, in a multipolar world, every nation, regardless of size or strength, is an equal member of the international community, and can find its place and play its role.

Apart from contributing these international public goods, China's foreign policy also begins

close to home. "Immovable neighbors" is the term China often uses in its call for neighbors to work for a peaceful, stable and prosperous regional environment where disputes do not define the entire relationship. That thinking shapes Beijing's approach to the South China Sea issue — that disagreements should be addressed through dialogue with directly concerned parties while keeping the broader region stable.

The diplomacy of China demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility for the region and the world at large. Whether addressing regional hot spot issues or global challenges, China consistently promotes peace talks, the political settlement of disputes and inclusive development.

Beyond its immediate neighborhood, China continues to strengthen solidarity and cooperation with developing countries. The Global South is a vital force for peace and development in today's world, and China's partnerships with African nations, Latin American and Caribbean countries and other developing economies aim to promote industrialization, connectivity and sustainable growth while promoting the Global South having a greater say in global governance.

Be it the Ukraine crisis or the conflicts in the Middle East, China has remained steadfast in working with all peace-loving countries to achieve a peaceful resolution through negotiations. Such efforts reflect China's commitment to fairness and justice in international affairs and its belief that lasting peace can only be achieved through dialogue.

This position is supported by the framework of global initiatives China has proposed — on development, security, civilization and governance. Together, these public goods offer constructive Chinese solutions to common global challenges.

The initiatives also reflect China's conviction that on major issues of right and wrong, it is imperative to uphold principles. In the process, as Wang said, the country will firmly safeguard the international system with the United Nations at its core and defend the legitimate rights and interests of all countries, especially developing nations. China has never been deterred by intimidation, swayed by fallacies, or cowed by pressure. Wang reiterated that China and the United States, as the world's two largest economies, need to properly manage their differences in the spirit of mutual respect, hold the bottom line of peaceful coexistence, and strive for win-win cooperation.

In a world where geopolitical drama grabs the headlines, China's strategic composure provides a steady and much-needed counterpoint to division and conflict. As Wang's remarks reveal, it is long-view diplomacy, whose goal is a better future for all.

Dutch obliged to right the wrongs on Nexperia

The ongoing dispute surrounding Nexperia, a Netherlands-based chipmaker owned by China's Wingtech, threatens to unravel the delicate balance of the global semiconductor supply chains.

The roots of this conflict trace back to last October, when the Dutch government intervened in the operations of Nexperia, citing "national security" concerns. The intervention resulted in the sidelining of Wingtech. The move was met with swift countermeasures from China, which suspended exports of Nexperia's China-made chips.

After diplomatic negotiations, China announced it would exempt qualified exports and urged the Dutch authorities to "act from the perspective of maintaining the overall stability and security" of trade relations.

Yet Nexperia's Dutch headquarters still seems bent on consolidating its corporate control by all means. In its latest provocative move, the company's European management disabled the corporate accounts of all its employees in China starting last Tuesday, disrupting critical production processes of the Chinese subsidiary. Nexperia China posted a statement on WeChat on Friday saying that most operations had resumed and that the company was working to minimize any impact on future production and deliveries.

The latest move by the Dutch side is compounding mistakes rather than correcting them. Continuing in this manner will negatively impact the global semiconductor supply chain and Nexperia's future development.

China's Ministry of Commerce warned on Saturday that the latest action taken by Nexperia's European management has unnecessarily provoked new frictions and created fresh difficulties and obstacles for negotiations. Moreover, the move has severely disrupted normal business operations of the Wingtech subsidiary, and the Dutch side will bear full responsibility should

these measures trigger another crisis in the global semiconductor industry and its supply chains.

This is not the first time that the Dutch side has gone to great lengths to sabotage the production of Nexperia China. Last October, Nexperia's European management stopped supplying wafers to the company's packaging and testing facility in Guangdong province, forcing the Chinese unit to source supplies from local firms.

All this started with the Dutch government's intervention in Nexperia. The Dutch side must recognize the seriousness of the situation and immediately cease actions that harm the normal business operations of Nexperia. It is imperative that it return to the negotiation table to resolve differences through dialogue.

The tensions created by the Dutch government's act of banditry underscore a broader geopolitical struggle, driven by certain politicians in Europe irrationally seeking to reduce reliance on China under the guise of "de-risking". This strategy driven by the United States involves diversifying supply chains. Yet rather than enhancing national security and economic resilience, the policy moves only lead to increased costs, inefficiencies and heightened tensions between China and Europe.

Interdependence is not a risk, intertwined interests are not threats, and openness and cooperation will not weaken economic security. A dynamic balance in China-European Union economic ties is within reach should Europe have a correct perception of China.

For China-EU relations to develop steadily, it is crucial for the Dutch side to realize that the essence of bilateral economic and trade relations lies in complementary advantages.

To safeguard the future of the semiconductor industry and the global economy, a commitment to dialogue and cooperation is essential. The stakes are too high for unilateral actions and irresponsible protectionist measures.

Cai Meng



Opinion Line

Canberra should refrain from playing double game with Beijing

The latest dispute between China and Australia shows how Canberra's preoccupation with its security alliance with the United States could risk derailing its economic ties with the world's second-largest economy.

Australia claimed that one of its military helicopters was approached "unsafely and unprofessionally" by a Chinese helicopter while conducting what it described as a "routine patrol in support of United Nations sanctions enforcement" in the Yellow Sea.

China's Ministry of National Defense rebutted the baseless allegation saying it was only a pretext and Australian shipborne helicopters had repeatedly carried out close-in reconnaissance against China in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea. Such provocative actions clearly endanger China's national security.

The incident is another example of a country geographically distant conducting military surveillance on China's doorstep. No United Nations resolution has authorized any foreign military to carry out such provocative operations.

The episode is symptomatic of a deeper question about how Australia is positioning itself in the evolving strategic geometry of the Asia-Pacific with its participation in the United States' "Indo-Pacific" strategy.

The unease is compounded by other issues. One is the future of Darwin Port, leased in 2015 to a Chinese company for 99 years through a commercial bidding process. The Anthony Albanese government has signaled that it now wants the port "returned" to Australian ownership, citing "national interest" concerns. This risks sending a message

that legally signed contracts can be arbitrarily unwound under political pressure from the United States.

Canberra's attempt to annul the contract is similar to the Panamanian government's move to annul the contracts signed with a Chinese company to operate the ports at either end of the Panama Canal, which was also carried out under US pressure.

Another source of friction is Australia's participation in military activities in the South China Sea alongside the Philippines and other allies. Such involvement amounts to intervention in the territorial dispute between the Philippines and China in which Australia itself has no claim. Looming over all these actions is Australia's "security collusion" with the US and the United Kingdom, which will eventually give Australia nuclear-powered submarines at a projected cost of hundreds of billions of dollars. Even within Australia, critics have questioned whether the arrangement risks binding the country too tightly to Washington's strategic priorities.

The paradox is that China and Australia remain intertwined economically. China has been Australia's largest trading partner for years, and the two economies have developed an extensive web of trade in resources, agriculture and services. Both sides acknowledge that stabilizing relations in recent years has delivered tangible benefits to businesses and households.

This economic reality makes the current tensions feel less like an inevitable clash and more like a strategic misjudgment of Canberra. The question confronting Australia is whether it

can fool itself into thinking that it can continue to work with the US and its allies to contain China in geopolitical games while making money from trading with China, a country with which it maintains a sizable trade surplus.

Australia seems intent on seeking the economic benefits from cooperation with China but simultaneously participating in military activities that threaten China's core interests. No country can accept such a double game.

This is particularly resonant in a region already unsettled by geopolitical competition. The Asia-Pacific has watched conflicts in Europe and the Middle East with unease. Once cooperation is replaced by confrontation and mutual trust is replaced by suspicion, the regional situation could deteriorate faster than Canberra expects.

In that context, the stakes extend beyond one helicopter encounter. They touch on whether the region can avoid sliding into a cycle of suspicion and military signaling.

There is still ample room for cooperation. China and Australia share interests in trade, climate policy, regional development and multilateral frameworks such as the APEC mechanism. The relationship works best when differences are managed through dialogue rather than confrontation.

But cooperation requires strategic clarity. If Australia wishes to preserve the stability that has gradually returned to its relationship with China, it needs to show that its China policy is guided not by its alliance commitments to the US but by its own long-term interests in regional stability.

— LI YUANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Increasing people's incomes key to consumption

Editor's note: China's Government Work Report released last week listed the expansion of domestic demand as a priority. National Business Daily spoke to Ma Jianqiang, former secretary of the Party Leadership Group of the Development Research Center of the State Council, on how long-term mechanisms can be established to boost consumption. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.

The government is committed to creating over 12 million urban jobs this year, demonstrating its resolve to increase people's income through employment. But policies should be tailored to different groups. For young people, encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship is one way to help increase their income.

Strengthening the social security system is equally important. The government should provide greater income support through cash transfers and consumption subsidies to retirees and vulnerable groups who are no longer able to work, reflecting the people-centered nature of the socialist system.

China's relatively high savings rate and comparatively low consumption are partly cultural, but they also reflect people's concerns about future expenses. Increasing government investment in services for both the elderly and children, such as childcare, education, healthcare and elderly care, can help ease these concerns and make households more willing to spend.

In recent years, consumption

among young people has displayed new characteristics, with branded products and events such as rural sports competitions attracting widespread enthusiasm and stimulating spending. These examples suggest that well-designed consumption scenarios can also effectively unleash consumer potential.

Plus, the consumption needs of those aged between 60 and 70 deserve greater attention. Their demand spans healthcare services, tourism and pursuits for continued learning or hobbies. Addressing these needs may require policy adjustments, such as improving vacation arrangements to support tourism or allowing greater participation of foreign-funded hospitals to enhance healthcare services.

High-quality consumer demand has not yet been fully met, especially in the area of services. In sectors such as high-quality childcare, education and healthcare, long waiting times and reliance on personal connections indicate insufficient supply and institutional barriers. Expanding market access and encouraging both private

and foreign investment in these areas would help increase the availability of high-quality services to better meet people's needs.

Investment should also not be overlooked. Expanding the supply of services, meeting consumption demand, building new infrastructure and improving people's quality of life all require substantial investment. While the scale of funding arrangements is significant, the key lies in improving investment efficiency and ensuring that funds are used effectively.

Future investment should therefore combine investment in physical assets with investment in people. On the one hand, major infrastructure projects should continue to advance.

On the other hand, greater attention should be paid to investment across the entire life cycle, covering childbirth, child care, education, training, employment, elderly care and even end-of-life care. Such efforts involve not only physical infrastructure but also institutional and social investment.

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(غادة السمان)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Because we have mastered silence, they burdened us with the weight of intentions.
Ghada Al-Samman

(Contemporary Syrian writer, author and woman of letters)

Opinion

Discussions on going to war have become a circus

CHRIS DOYLE



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negotiations and diplomacy would have succeeded are dismissed out of hand. This approach is dead. The absence of any proper American and Israeli strategy or planning is part of this.

Discussing going to war has become a circus. Many on the right in Western politics simply argue that because the American president is going to war, other leaders must back him. Not joining the war is depicted, quite falsely, as cowardly. A host of right-wing war hawks have described the British decision not to join the attacks on Iran as making it irrelevant — a ludicrous argument. Remarkably, many of those pushing these views normally insist that the UK must make its own sovereign decisions. But not on this.

Opposition to the war among the public in Europe and even the US is overwhelming, not that this matters much in the media. The British right derisively dismisses this as “the Muslim vote,” yet

only 8 percent of the British people would back London joining the war, so the opposition is found in all communities.

Another feature of the debate on this war is the further decline in expertise on the Middle East in policy and decision-making circles. For example, Westminster used to have access to a wealth of expertise.

The remaining experts on the Middle East, even ones from the region, now seem to be given far less exposure in the media. This is just like Iraq in 2003, when expertise was sidelined.

None of this helps cultivate a proper policy or consensus about the Middle East. Those forces that are engaged in this conflict, even in a defensive capacity, are entitled to demand a coherent, well-thought-out approach to know that their efforts will make a positive difference.

Is a cool, calm examination of the options still possible? It does not seem likely, even if the return of grown-up debate is sorely required.

Ever since the mid-1990s, I have been deeply involved in the debates on every foreign intervention the UK has and has not made in the Middle East. This has meant protracted meetings with ministers, parliamentarians and officials, as well as debates in the media.

Yet one thing stands out in 2026 and the US-Israeli war on Iran: This is by far the most low-grade debate on any conflict Britain has engaged in over the last three decades.

Even in the run up to the Iraq war in 2002 and 2003, the analysis and debate were of a higher caliber. But it does not appear that the UK experience is unique.

The tenor of the debate has descended into a farcical mishmash of chest-thumping, hyperbolic histrionics and cheap political point-scoring. War is being trivialized. The White House's advert promoting the war was a stunning example of this.

Equally as jaw-dropping is the way the media, much of which feels far more jingoistic than the general public, has recycled the same faces that promoted and sold the colossal failure that was the 2003 war on Iraq. Rather than treat them as the largely discredited rabble they are, much of the media gives them top billing. Even Tony Blair, the architect of the Iraq war failure, was taken far too seriously when he promoted the war, given his record.

There has not even been a vague attempt to assess the pros and cons, the rights and wrongs or the implications of this war on Iran. For sure, there are reasons that support multiple positions, but these should be forensically tested.

Discussions on war used to be sober affairs. War was the most onerous of decisions to be taken, which demanded due care and attention. Yet, in 2026, questions as to whether the war is legal, wise and well-planned or whether

There has not even been a vague attempt to assess the pros and cons, the rights and wrongs or the implications of this war

COURTESY: AMARUPOH/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Crushing victories against regimes like that of the shah give the victorious an extraordinary dose of arrogance

The war to change features

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the operation to destabilize the system that was put in place by the Americans, who were massively out of their depth. Soleimani ran the game of dismantling alliances, overcoming obstacles and planting explosives that sped up the collapse of the new system and doubled Iran's influence.

Iraq's features changed and the best evidence of that is the role of the Iraqi factions in the current war.

Ali Khamenei's time in power was an era of changing the features of the region. The supreme leader banked on two men who were close to his heart and mind: Soleimani and Hassan Nasrallah.

Soleimani worked hard to eliminate American influence, which he viewed as an obstacle to Iran's agenda of changing the features of the region. The Revolutionary Guards boasted about controlling four Arab capitals. Soleimani dreamed of pouncing on Israel with a wave of rockets fired from several countries. One can only understand what Yahya Sinwar did by returning to

Soleimani's agenda. Donald Trump eventually caught on and ordered Soleimani's killing in Baghdad.

Was Tehran behind Sinwar's Al-Aqsa Flood Operation? Did it underestimate Israel and the US' might? Benjamin Netanyahu obviously saw in the flood a historic opportunity to make inroads with Arab countries. The Syrian link in the so-called Axis of Resistance was taken out. Israel began to implement its new military creed: attack dangers before they strike and surround Israel with buffer zones.

Netanyahu concluded that his ability to change the features in Israel's direct vicinity would remain under threat if features in Tehran itself were not changed. Netanyahu tried tirelessly to convince Trump.

We have now entered the fiery chapter of the war to change features. Iran has changed the features of countries. The US, in partnership with Israel, is now trying to partially or fully change the features of the Iranian regime.

Two past developments can help us understand the present. The first was when Ayatollah Khomeini, after the victory of the revolution, ordered the removal of the Israeli flag from its embassy in Tehran and that it be replaced with a Palestinian one. He changed the nature of his relations with the most challenging issue in the Middle East. The second was when the world watched as Americans became hostages in the embassy of their country in Tehran. The hostage crisis dragged on, irrevocably changing relations between Tehran and Washington.

Iran has never made it a secret. Its own constitution speaks about exporting the revolution and championing the weak. It chants about wiping Israel from existence and expelling the “Great Satan” — America — from the region.

The victory of the Khomeinist revolution was no ordinary development. The

revolution was born out of the realm of the world of two camps in a country that boasts massive capabilities and lies at the crosspoint of straits, routes, wealth and roads. Experience has shown that crushing victories against regimes like that of the shah give the victorious an extraordinary dose of arrogance and an insatiable ambition. This is what happened. The victorious fell into the trap of aiming to change the features of the Middle East and even beyond.

A third development helps us understand the present. A suicide bomber blew himself up at the US Marine headquarters in Beirut in 1983, leading Washington to pull its troops from the Multinational Force in Lebanon. The country consequently fell into the clutches of Hafez Assad's Syria and Khomeini's Iran.

Iraq also witnessed a major battle to change its features. Factions loyal to Iran took over governments and ruling bodies. Gen. Qassem Soleimani was in charge of

Opinion

Saving the Middle East begins with Palestinian justice

DR. RAMZY BAROUD



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Let us imagine a liberated Palestine. Let us consider how justice for the Palestinian people would reshape not only the region but the entire globe.

This is not a conversation about a "political solution" in the narrow, bureaucratic sense. Such solutions require no particular genius: true justice can only occur when the Palestinian people are granted the totality of their rights and the fulfillment of their political aspirations.

Equally true is the reality that no such justice can manifest so long as Israel remains committed to its current Zionist ideology — a framework predicated on racial supremacy and the systematic eradication of the indigenous Palestinian population.

To some, discussing a liberated Palestine now may appear slightly — though not entirely — removed from the current war ravaging the region. It is a war that, if not permanently halted, will continue to devastate the peoples of the Middle East, inviting further militarization, runaway defense spending and cycles of violence. On the contrary, this is the most critical

discussion we can have today. Palestine has remained the beating heart of every Middle Eastern war and every persistent conflict. For Israel, the occupation has served as the linchpin for its military incursions across borders. For Palestine's neighbors and allies, it remains the unhealed wound of a region historically unified by political, cultural, linguistic and religious continuity.

Palestine has remained the beating heart of every Middle Eastern war and every persistent conflict

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has explicitly confirmed his expansionist intent, last year declaring that he is on a "historic and spiritual mission" to realize the vision of a "Greater Israel." By openly connecting with a map that swallows Palestinian land and threatens the sovereignty of neighboring Arab states, he has made it clear that the erasure of Palestine is merely the first step in a much larger colonial design.

The current war confirms this centrality. Its origins, the ensuing political discourse and the clashing visions of a "postwar" reality all pull Palestine back to the center of the global stage. To discuss Palestine as if it were an isolated issue — as some unfortunately do — is a profound

historical mistake. Conversely, to discuss the future of the Middle East without centering Palestine is equally delusional.

Therefore, we must insist on discussing Palestine now more than ever. Once a just outcome to the Palestinian struggle is achieved, the waves of positivity will transform the region. Only then can we move from a state of perpetual warfare to a future rooted in genuine, collective liberation.

That said, do not expect a list of dry political recipes to follow. We already know, instinctively, what justice for Palestinians looks like. The freedom to live, to be treated as equals, to enjoy sovereignty and to demand accountability and respect — these do not require exhaustive citations of international law. These are natural rights.

The fact that Israel and its enablers refuse to respect international law or adhere to any common humanitarian principle is no fault of the Palestinians or the other victims of Israeli aggression. The moral and legal burden must be shouldered entirely by those who have abused, disregarded and attempted to dismantle the international legal order for far too long.

Today, the Palestinians — much like the people of Lebanon, Syria and other nations across the region — are doing exactly what every oppressed nation must do: they are remaining steadfast. The ultimate outcome of this conflict will be determined by the unyielding resilience of the people. History tells us that if the rightful owners of the land hold their ground, they will eventually win.

To discuss Palestine as if it were an isolated issue — as some unfortunately do — is a profound historical mistake

Richard Falk, the former UN special rapporteur on Palestinian human rights, refers to this phenomenon as winning the "legitimacy war." It is a war fought not with fighter jets but with the moral clarity of those who refuse to disappear.

If true justice prevails in Palestine, it will inevitably prevail in Lebanon, Syria and beyond. The exhausted branding of the Middle East as a "war-torn" region will finally vanish. A just peace will invite more than just the absence of war; it will invite opportunity, reconstruction, a collective regional rise and — most importantly — the restoration of hope.

This is not a desperate wish whispered in a time of darkness. It is the only way out.

The economic magic of equal opportunities for women

INDERMIT GILL AND TEA TRUMBICE



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In 2012, facing a shrinking labor force and economic stagnation, then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe bet on women. To encourage more women to work, his government rolled out a series of reforms, including expanded childcare, enhanced parental leave and tax incentives for firms that promoted women. By 2019, 2.5 million additional women were employed, female labor force participation reached 67 percent and job placement for graduates was nearly universal. The conclusion is straightforward: When barriers to women's workforce participation are removed, economic outcomes improve.

In most countries, closing the opportunity gap could boost gross domestic product by as much as 20 percent

Today, developing economies face the opposite challenge: a massive youth bulge. Over the next 10 to 15 years, 1.2 billion young people will enter the labor market in these economies, which are expected to generate only about 400 million jobs over that period, implying an unprecedented jobs deficit.

Ensuring that young women — roughly half of this bulge — have the same opportunities as men to participate fully in the economy will be crucial to turbocharging growth and employment. As more women join the workforce on equal terms, they

will increasingly start businesses and create jobs. Research shows that, in most countries, closing the opportunity gap could boost gross domestic product by as much as 20 percent.

In recent decades, dozens of countries have taken the first step toward supporting women's economic participation by reforming family, labor and financial laws. As a result, women today have about two-thirds of the legal rights that men enjoy, up from barely half at the turn of the century.

But too many countries fail to take the next step. The World Bank's "Women, Business and the Law 2026" report shows that, even where protections exist on paper, fewer than half of the policies and services needed to implement them are in place. And a new enforcement index reveals that these

laws are applied only about half the time, creating a massive gap between legal rights and lived reality.

The biggest gap is in safety. Limited and inconsistent protection from gender-related violence prevents women from joining and remaining in the workforce. Similarly, laws against sexual harassment vary considerably depending on the environment: 143 countries ban it at work but only 90 address it online, 63 in

education and just 36 in public spaces. Another weak area is entrepreneurship. Women can legally start businesses in most countries but they still face obstacles to securing funding: only about half of all countries support equal access to credit.

Childcare is the third-weakest area, with the lack of affordable and high-quality services keeping too many women out of paid work. While 146 countries regulate childcare services for children under the age of three, fewer than half (66) set comprehensive quality standards, like caregiver-to-child ratios, group-size limits, education or training requirements and mandatory periodic inspections. And only 78 offer financial or tax support to families.

These deficiencies depress labor force participation rates, reduce hours worked and slow formal employment and firm creation, all of which are vital to long-run growth, tax revenues and resilience.

The good news is that governments have started to address the most problematic areas over the last few years. Twenty-two economies, many in Latin America and the Caribbean, enacted reforms to improve women's safety. Six of them — Belize, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Peru, Suriname

and Zambia — raised the legal minimum age for marriage or removed the parental consent exception, closing a loophole that enabled child marriage. Seven economies — Argentina, Brazil, Mali, San Marino, Sri Lanka, the UK and Uruguay — introduced or strengthened online harassment laws.

Some progress has also been made on building supportive frameworks for entrepreneurship, with 21 reforms across 19 economies. Ecuador's Organic Law

The good news is that governments have started to address the most problematic areas over the last few years

to Promote the Economy of Ecuadorian Women Entrepreneurs bans gender-based discrimination in credit evaluation, adds oversight and introduces sanctions for noncompliance. Thirteen economies strengthened women's representation on corporate boards. Overall, however, implementation has been uneven.

For governments seeking more jobs and growth, the question is not whether they can afford to close the opportunity gap for women, but how they can afford not to. By aligning laws that empower women with systemic changes, enforcement mechanisms and public reporting, policymakers can track results, adjust strategies and, perhaps most importantly, show that gender equality delivers measurable economic returns.



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