Policy missteps

India has allowed panic over fuel availability to spread

The events unfolding in West Asia have shone a spotlight not only on India's energy security, but also on its policy preparedness and communication strategy in times of crisis. With India importing close to 90% of its oil needs, it is natural that any disruption to supply chains would hit it hard. The Strait of Hormuz is particularly vital in the supply chain. To the government's credit, it has been gradually trying to reduce India's oil import dependence. The push for ethanol and biofuels is a step in this direction. Smoothening their adoption should continue to be a policy priority in the near term. That said, India's dependence on imported oil remains vast and growing, with the economy expanding by 6%-8% every year. Therefore, measures such as ethanol or biofuel-blending are only likely to be of marginal strategic significance. The policies on importing oil need to become more long-term oriented and robust in the face of external pressure. The crisis in West Asia has shown India just how important supplies from Russia are, at a time when New Delhi had been cutting Russian oil imports due to American pressure. In the past, the government had given in to U.S. pressure over Iranian and Venezuelan oil. The U.S. is now encouraging India to import Russian oil again to steady global markets. The U.S.'s 50% tariffs were hard to bear, but India knew that the U.S. Supreme Court was deliberating on the issue, and, so, could have waited a month for its order. As things stand, India may no longer receive a discount for Russian oil, it has squandered Moscow's trust, respect from the U.S. is diminishing, and a trade deal with it remains distant.

Government officials have made anonymous statements saying that fuel prices will not be hiked in response to higher oil prices. This is as much a political necessity as a moral one. After all, fuel prices were not cut over the last two and a half years even when oil prices were comfortably low. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), providing LPG connections to households, has also laid bare how policy does not anticipate crises. Households have benefited from the PMUY, but the resultant increase in LPG demand – without a commensurate increase in stable supplies and reserves – has meant that restaurants and hotels are now suffering amid shortages. Finally, the policy of the government to so far communicate only through off-record briefings and occasional tweets has meant panic over fuel availability has spread faster than warranted. Tuesday's inter-ministerial press conference came days late and no questions were taken. Clear, accountable communication was needed, yet missing. The government's crisis communication needs more work.

A seismic decision

India needs a holistic, implementable earthquake zoning framework

The Centre's rollback of the revision to India's earthquake zoning by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), follows a major challenge to the methodology used, which some engineers believe are out of sync with site-based evaluations. Yet, the reversal is driven largely by the massive cost and execution implications, as the decision impacts urban planning, disaster preparedness and climate resilience. The current earthquake zoning exercise is an opportunity to disaster- and climate-proof cityscapes, power infrastructure, dams, highways, and homes and offices as India undertakes an urban infrastructure expansion. Getting the zoning framework right has, arguably, never been more important.

At the heart of the debate lies the scientific approximation of possible earthquakes and their intensities, *vis-à-vis* the preparedness of the built environment to withstand them. Globally, most advanced economies and seismically active regions now use Probabilistic Seismic Hazard Assessment (PSHA), a dynamic framework that models earthquake risk through probability-based simulations of ground motion. Until now, India has primarily used a simpler fixed zoning model. The BIS's attempt to move toward this globally accepted framework is, therefore, directionally correct. However, some structural engineers and policymakers argue that the revisions, which were notified in November 2025 and withdrawn on March 3, were too stringent. The proposed framework introduced an entirely new top-risk category, Zone VI, covering most of Kashmir, parts of the Himalayan belt, Kutch in Gujarat and the north-east. Urban planners worry that such zoning could stall developmental and infrastructure activity in already economically fragile regions, and potentially push more housing into the informal sector – which already accounts for nearly 80% of India's homes. Estimates suggest that a one-zone increase could raise costs by around 20%, and two zones by nearly one-third. For major infrastructure such as metro rail systems, dams and power stations, the cost implication could be significantly higher. Pushback to the BIS revisions has come from both the private sector and within government, including the Ministries of Housing and Urban Affairs, Home Affairs, the Central Water Commission and the National Dam Safety Authority. Another layer in this debate is climate. The construction sector in India is among its largest dispersed sources of carbon emissions. While a revision in the earthquake zoning framework is necessary, it requires wider consultation across ministries, regulators and industry stakeholders. Only a holistic and implementable framework can strengthen disaster resilience and address climate mitigation, affordability and execution challenges.

Holding up half the sky on India's farms

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As we celebrated Women's Day on March 8 this year, we also celebrated the International Year of the Woman Farmer (announced by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization). It was an opportunity to recognise the contribution of working women to India's agricultural economy. As official statistics do not give a complete picture of the scale of participation, type of work, and economic contribution of women, it is field data that we must turn to. It tells us that while women's labour is central to crop and livestock production, the remuneration to women workers is extremely low and stagnating.

Counting women workers

First and foremost, we lack accurate information on how many women are actually engaged in agriculture, livestock rearing, fisheries and other allied activities. Large-scale labour force surveys (such as the Periodic Labour Force Surveys) are unable to capture women workers accurately because in a largely informal agrarian economy, women's work is often home- or farm-based, unpaid, seasonal, intermittent (even over the course of a single day), and intermingled with care work. For example, a woman respondent may not report herself as a "worker" if her day involves multiple tasks of child care interspersed with animal rearing.

What official labour force surveys tell us is that women's work participation in rural India has risen sharply in recent years. Among rural girls and women aged 15 years and above, 46.5% were in the workforce in 2023-24 as compared to 35% in 2011-12. This still remains lower than the rest of the world: according to the International Labour Office, women's work participation was in the range 57%-63% in a majority of countries.

Hidden behind this statistic that shows a rise in rural women workers lies a less happy reality, namely, that the rise is largely in the count of 'self-employed' women, reflecting a lack of wage employment opportunities. In 2011-12, 60% of rural women workers were classified as self-employed; the proportion rose to 73 per cent in 2023-24. In the same period, the share of women employed as regular and casual wage workers fell. Further, the share of self-employed women working in the agricultural sector rose from 48% to 62%, and, of the total number of self-employed workers in agriculture, women comprised almost one-half (47.2% in 2023-24).

Put together, in 2023-24, there were at least 117.6 million women working in agriculture (of whom 21.7 million were hired workers, 95.1 million were self-employed and 0.8 million were regular workers). The estimated male workforce in agriculture was 127.5 million.

The first sector we consider is crop production. Official statistics cannot tell us the share of women workers in total labour deployed in crop cultivation as gender-disaggregated data on family labour are not collected. We provide an answer with data from village-level surveys conducted by the PARI project of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (www.fas.org.in/pari). From this unique database of 27 villages, we draw on two villages, Palakurichi and Venmani, from Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu (studied in 2019) and two villages (Harveli and Mahatwar) from western and eastern Uttar Pradesh (studied in 2023).

As a socio-economic classification of households in these villages is available, we focus on the peasantry and manual worker households, who constitute the majority. We have excluded landlord or capitalist farmer households, and those engaged in business or salaried employment.

In the four selected villages, women accounted for about one-third of family labour (except the village in western Uttar Pradesh where it was lower). When family and hired labour are combined, women accounted for the major share in Palakurichi (61%) and Venmani (57%) in Tamil Nadu, and about 41% in Mahatwar village of eastern Uttar Pradesh. These differences arose on account of several factors including crop choice and farming systems, and the socio-economic composition of households. Nevertheless, the key message is that crop cultivation relies heavily on women's labour.

The second sector is livestock rearing, one of the fastest growing sectors within agriculture, and where women constitute the primary work force. The PARI village studies show that in family-based livestock rearing (particularly milch cattle and poultry), most tasks are performed by women. If a household owned cattle, inevitably a woman participated in livestock labour, spending about 2 hours for every animal reared. At last count, 40 million rural households owned milch animals (All India Debt and Investment Survey, 2018-19), suggesting that around 40 million women were engaged in animal rearing.

The third sector is wage labour. As mechanisation has progressed and aggregate demand for labour in agriculture has declined, so has the demand for women's labour. Our estimates show that the share of women workers in total casual labour employment in crop production ranged from 16% to 71% across the four villages, but was more than one-third in all but the western U.P. village (where labour hiring is more complex given the scale of sugarcane cultivation). And, these women hired workers belonged not only to manual labour households but also to the lower rungs of the peasantry.

> Women sustain India's farming economy but remain underpaid and undercounted

Earnings and wages

For a workforce of more than 100 million, the question of remuneration is clearly important. What is the level of explicit or implicit earnings obtained by a woman worker in agriculture today?

For wage workers, the prevailing wage rate is observable. At today's prices, a woman worker in agriculture earned less than ₹300 a day in all four villages. The gender gap in wages was higher in those regions with overall higher wage levels. Women's wages (₹290) were less than 50% of male wages in the two villages of Tamil Nadu; in the two villages of Uttar Pradesh, women's wages were lower (₹242-₹276) but so were men's wages and the gender gap was narrower.

Official statistics reveal a similar story. In November 2025, according to the Labour Bureau, the average all-India daily wage for agricultural work (sowing/transplanting/weeding) for a woman was ₹384. There were, of course, variations across States, with women workers in Kerala receiving the highest daily wage (₹646). Furthermore, data show that wages corrected for inflation have barely risen over the last decade.

There are no official data on women's earnings in livestock earnings, and we estimated the implicit daily earning, based on income generated from animals over the year (based on production of milk, dung) and total hours of work. In the two U.P. villages, where milch animals were widely held, the implicit daily earning was around ₹100. In short, women earned only two-fifths of the prevailing agricultural wage rate for their labour in cattle rearing.

Turning to crop production, it is difficult to estimate earnings per worker, as many members of a family may contribute to production. Suffice to note that in all four study villages, the return from crop production was low, averaging less than ₹16,000 a year in the eastern U.P. village and less than ₹24,000 in Palakurichi, the Tamil Nadu village. Even if half the income was apportioned to women, their incomes would not be high.

The picture so far

It is clear that women now constitute about one-half of the agricultural workforce in India (the actual number is likely to be higher for the reasons mentioned above). The majority of rural women were self-employed workers, but only 10% of rural women owned land, the primary asset for a cultivator. Turning to agricultural workers, women workers now (21.7 million) exceed the number of male workers (19.7 million), a first-time occurrence in post-Independence India, but wage rates for women are low in absolute terms, with a few exceptions, and reveal a large gender wage gap.

Women workers hold up half the sky in rural India. The Indian state has failed to correctly record the number of women workers, and to ensure that they receive decent wages and all rights as workers.

Youth-backed RSP win signals Nepal's new political era

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Nepal's general election, on March 5, 2026, has produced a refreshing, if stunning, outcome. The landslide victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) is a watershed in Nepali politics. Traditional political parties were routed; prominent leaders of the ancien régime, including senior leaders from the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), or CPN(UML), lost to newer political faces. For New Delhi, this is a unique opportunity to shape a new future for bilateral relations.

The elections were held in the backdrop of the Gen Z movement, in September 2025. The massive protests, by Nepal's youth, were directed against the twin issues of corruption and nepotism. They led to the formation of a temporary government led by former Nepal Chief Justice Sushila Karki as the interim Prime Minister, with a clear mandate to hold the next elections. Consequently, on the recommendation of Ms. Karki, the President dissolved the lower house of Parliament, and the general election being held. For the 275-member House of Representative, 165 members are elected under first past the post (FPTP), and 110 members under proportional representation (PR) where voters choose parties. It is to the credit of Ms. Karki that the elections were held peacefully.

A party needs 138 seats in Nepal's parliament to form a government, and it is clear that the RSP will comfortably form the new government without a coalition partner.

The rise of a party

Although relatively new to national politics – having secured 20 seats in Parliament in the 2022 general election – the RSP has clearly captured public sentiment. Its rise can largely be attributed to dissatisfaction with traditional political parties, particularly among the youth. While RSP chairman, Rabi Lamichhane was made Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister of Nepal in 2022, in the coalition government led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', he was arrested in what were seen as framed charges of corruption. During the Gen Z protests, he was released from prison.

> The election result signals Nepal's democratic evolution and India needs to play a supportive role

A resonance

The RSP has declared Balendra "Balen" Shah as its prime ministerial candidate, while Mr. Lamichhane will retain the Party president post. The most startling symbol of a generational political shift is Mr. Shah's rise, a former rapper who stunned the political establishment by becoming the Mayor of Kathmandu as an independent candidate in 2022. Mr. Shah, a trained structural engineer, first made his name in Nepal's hip-hop scene. His rap lyrics – sharp, irreverent and often angry – took aim at corruption, political complacency and the everyday frustrations of urban life. His songs such as "Balidan", circulated widely among young Nepalis long before he entered politics,made him an unlikely voice of dissent for a generation weary of cynical politics.

As Mayor, his proactive initiatives in Kathmandu included a cleanliness drive, beautification, waste management, and the creation of "no traffic zones". Confident of winning the election, he defeated former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli in his traditional constituency Jhapa-5 by a margin of nearly 50,000 votes.

The RSP caught the imagination of the youth; the party fielded many candidates under the age of 40, as 52% of Nepal's voters are between the age of 18 to 40 years. The RSP's party manifesto or "Bacha Patra" appealed to young Nepalis, focusing on clean governance, corruption free politics, administrative and judicial reforms. But the RSP is largely untested, gaining support from an electorate that expressed its discontent with political instability, rampant corruption and poor economic development.

Since the adoption of the new constitution in 2015, no single party has ever won a majority in Parliament. The RSP now has a major responsibility to provide a stable government with no room for inner-party fissures, like other parties. Unmet expectations can quickly turn into frustrations. The new government should focus on socio-economic development, completing ongoing projects and identifying new ones which will benefit younger Nepalis.

The path for India to take

India has congratulated Ms. Karki for successfully conducting the elections and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that "as a close friend and neighbour, India remains steadfast in its commitment to working closely with the people of Nepal" and [wished] "their new Government to scale new heights of shared peace, progress and prosperity". The real course of India's policies must be guided by three principles.

First, respect for Nepal's democratic process. Governments will rise and fall, and coalitions will form and dissolve. India's engagement should remain consistent, whatever the political configuration in Kathmandu.

Second, there should be partnership through development rather than patronage. Infrastructure connectivity, energy cooperation and educational exchange can deepen trust far more effectively than overbearing political oversight.

Third, focus on quiet diplomacy. India's influence in Nepal has historically been the strongest when exercised with sensitivity rather than visibility.

The Nepal election was not merely a domestic political event. It was part of a larger story –the evolution of a young democracy navigating its own aspirations in a complex geopolitical environment. For India, the challenge is not to shape that story but to support it with warmth and positivity.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Time to make a switch

Indian households should be encouraged to adopt induction cooktops instead of traditional gas stoves that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Induction cooking is about 90% energy efficient, compared with roughly 40% efficiency in gas stoves due to heat loss. It is also safer and more space-efficient. Policies should promote induction cooktops and compatible cookware. A practical shift could be the use of induction stoves for daily cooking, with a single gas burner retained for power outages or specialised cooking. This could reduce dependence on imported LPG.

V. Vishnu,
Chennai

Baffling statement

Former Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi, who has now been appointed the Governor of West Bengal, has stated that the "54 months he spent in Tamil Nadu would remain the golden days of his life." It is baffling how Mr. Ravi could make such a statement, as the characterisation of his tenure in the State as "golden days" stands in stark contrast to the highly tumultuous, and often confrontational, relationship he maintained with the ruling DMK government and Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. Mr. Ravi frequently clashed with the State government, criticised the "Dravidian model" as an "expired ideology", delayed assent to several Assembly bills, and even walked out of the Assembly over disputes on the State anthem.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Corrections & Clarifications

In a report, "SC to look into plea against law on Muslim inheritance" (Inside pages, March 11, 2026), the second paragraph should have said "... a one-fourth share", in the first instance, and "... one-eighth share" in the second instance.

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

Reforming choice-based education

'Choice' and 'flexibility' have become the new buzzwords in educational reforms and policy documents. Across the country, educators are focusing – more than ever before – on catering to the individual needs and aspirations of students. The traditional one-size-fits-all model is giving way to an approach that values the diversity of student aptitudes and interests.

The new paradigm encourages multiple pathways, allowing students to pursue combinations of courses and careers that align with their passions and potential. A science major can now minor in music, for instance – a shift symbolic of the move from teacher-centric to learner-centric education. The focus has expanded beyond disciplinary boundaries, embracing multi-disciplinary and even transdisciplinary approaches. The rationale is clear: learning confined to a single discipline risks isolating students from related fields, while cross-disciplinary study offers a larger and fuller perspective of the world.

However, when such ideals are imposed upon a rigid academic framework like ours, the choice offered is Hobson's choice – choice in name only. Teacher workload, conventional pedagogy, poor student to teacher ratios, and outdated evaluation systems conspire to reduce flexibility to a mere paper promise.

Abida Farooqui

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The illusion of choice

The introduction of the Choice-Based Credit and Semester System (CBCSS) in Kerala in 2009 was heralded as a landmark reform meant to offer students more freedom. In theory, credits were to reflect weekly teaching hours. In practice, the system accommodated anomalies: a four-credit course could run for five hours a week, while a two-credit course might require just four hours. Such inconsistencies were quietly ignored to maintain the illusion of freedom. Moreover, the so-called buffet of choices were hardly choices in the real sense. Beyond a set of compulsory core courses, students were offered a limited selection of 'electives', often chosen by the departments themselves. The much-advertised "open course" – a two-credit paper in the fifth semester offered to students of other departments – was the only semblance of choice. Thus, despite the rhetoric, genuine academic freedom remained a distant dream.

> Teacher workload, conventional pedagogy, poor student to teacher ratios, and outdated evaluation systems conspire to reduce flexibility to a mere paper promise

The same rhetoric of flexibility once again took centre stage, with the launch of the Four-Year Undergraduate Programme (FYUGP) in Kerala in 2024, as mandated by the National Education Policy, 2020. The new structure allowed students to switch majors and minors, theoretically enhancing autonomy. Yet, unlike earlier curriculum changes, this reform demanded deep structural changes, making it highly challenging. The traditional idea of teachers delivering lectures in fixed classrooms gave way to students moving across departments in search of suitable courses and teachers.

It goes without saying that structural changes pose insurmountable challenges. A case in point was a clause in the university regulations of Kerala prohibiting students from choosing minors from allied disciplines. While it was intended to promote interdisciplinary learning, it inadvertently hindered specialisation.

Disciplines like Commerce and Functional English, which had previously allowed aligned minors, found this rule counterproductive – a restriction masquerading as choice.

Need for systemic changes

For any reform to succeed, systemic changes are essential. During the author's tenure as Chairperson of the Board of Studies in English at the University of Calicut in 2017, two key innovations were introduced.

The first was a skill-oriented question paper for the course on Communication Skills. The traditional format, filled with essay questions on theories and models, failed to test actual communication ability. It was replaced with a purely activity-based paper designed to assess real skills. Yet even this change ran into bureaucratic hurdles: permission for an accompanying answer booklet was denied on "confidentiality" grounds, forcing evaluators to flip endlessly between question papers (which carried more than twice the number of questions of its earlier counterpart) and answer sheets.

The second innovation was a course titled 'Introducing Literature' – a hands-on, concept-driven paper designed to teach how to read literature rather than merely what to read. Instead of memorising texts and answering questions on the basis of prescribed texts, students were taught literary concepts and were required to interpret unseen passages from linguistic, aesthetic and political angles. Ironically, this radical step met more resistance from teachers than students, as it demanded a shift from conventional methods to concept-based teaching, teaching us the valuable lesson that teacher preparedness and training should have been ensured prior to rolling out the reforms.

Facing ground realities

Today, the FYUGP aspires to make undergraduate education more skill-based, research-oriented, and autonomous, with a modest 10% autonomy given to teachers for framing syllabi wherein each teacher can pitch in their innovative ideas. Yet, at the ground level, classrooms and methodology remain largely unchanged. One can only reap the results if adequate teacher training is provided, if class sizes are smaller, and if research were to be integrated into teaching workloads.

The crisis of the Left in Telangana

The CPI (M) needs to find a way to convert its ground-level support to votes

STATE OF PLAY

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI (M)'s Telangana State committee appears to be at a crossroads. With less than three years for Assembly elections in the State, the party seems to be facing multiple challenges which are impacting its efforts to revive electoral fortunes of the past. With its sizeable vote bank, especially in the Nalgonda and Khammam districts, the party used to play a key role in the victory of its allies, mainly the Congress and later the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS).

But, the party's prospects have undergone a sea change, after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, with the party winning just one Assembly seat, Bhadrachalam, in 2014 and drawing a blank in the elections in 2018 and 2023.

The results of the recent elections to the urban and rural local bodies have revealed the party's situation at the ground level. Its supporters have come down significantly. The party could barely win a few wards in the municipal elections as well as in the elections to the *sarpanch* posts, although the latter elections are not contested on party symbols. Such an absence of votes and the subsequent lack of representation in the Assembly has dampened the spirits of CPI (M) activists who had long been associated with the party. This has yet again exposed the CPI (M)'s weakness in converting its grassroots support to actual votes.

Crisis of leadership

Coming at this juncture was the party's central leadership's decision to censure senior leader Tammineni Veerabhadram which has caused consternation among a section of CPI (M) leaders and cadre. The central committee felt that instead of increasing the party's influence among the people, it faced questions about its survival when Mr. Veerabhadram was at the helm. Mr. Veerabhadram was reportedly also faulted for not taking steps to infuse new blood into the party.

This is not the first time the senior leader has been reproached by the central leadership. Mr. Veerabhadram had earlier been reprimanded by the CPI (M) central committee when he, then State Secretary of the party, had formed the Bahujan Left Front in the runup to the 2018 elections, allegedly projecting the candidates on caste lines. The central committee felt that the emphasis on caste identity had reduced the alliance to a caste-based front, which was a major departure from the CPI (M)'s basic position.

However, senior members were keen to emphasise that such disciplinary actions against senior leaders were not new, as similar measures have been taken against leaders such as Kerala's V.S. Achutanandan and Pinarayi Vijayan in the past. There are six stages of disciplinary actions in the party – warning, censure, public censure, removal from the party post, suspension from full party membership for a period not exceeding one year, and expulsion. CPI (M) Polit Bureau member B.V. Raghavulu said that Mr. Veerabhadram's issue was the party's internal affair, and that it would not have any impact on its plans in the future. The party was now focussed on drawing up a policy agenda, the implementation of which will be of paramount importance for political parties to safeguard the rights of the working classes and help in alleviating the sufferings of the poor, he said.

Similarly, political analyst Telakapalli Ravi also stated that "this is not the severest action. Mr. Veerabhadram will continue as a special invitee to the State Secretariat meetings. That's why senior leaders did not make any public statement on the development".

The need for new blood

There is a definite lack of interest among the youth to join Left-aligned parties. "You have to take steps to attract youth and ensure that the past mistakes are rectified," Mr. Ravi said.

The party has made changes in its top leadership in Telangana ever since bringing in John Wesley as State Secretary, and by encouraging leaders such as Mallu Lakshmi, daughter-in-law of Telangana Armed Struggle veteran Mallu Swarajyam as part of efforts to infuse new blood into the party ranks. "You will see the aggression returning to the party soon," CPI (M) general secretary M.A. Baby recently said.

Hopefully, the CPI (M) will take to its agitational path again on issues of public importance. However, the party has to evolve and find ways to convert its mass support base into votes, a dream that currently remains distant.

How the war in West Asia exposes India's LPG dependence

The ongoing conflict in the region has disrupted supplies in the country, forcing price hikes and emergency measures

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani
Areena Arora

The war between the U.S.-Israel and Iran has put stress on India's Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) supply, which was already heavily import dependent and in need of government aid. Just last year, the Centre paid India's three public sector Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) – Indian Oil Corporation (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Corporation (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation (HPCL) – ₹30,000 crore to subsidise their losses for selling cooking gas for cheap at a time of soaring prices globally.

However, now with war breaking out, India faces the possibility of disruptions to its LPG supplies and higher global prices. On March 7, domestic LPG prices increased by ₹60 per cylinder. Brent crude briefly rose to nearly $120 a barrel, crossing $100 per barrel for the first time since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

On March 9, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas issued an order directing all domestic oil refining companies, including petrochemical complexes, to maximise the production of LPG and make the entire output available exclusively to IOCL, HPCL and BPCL. Refiners have been barred from diverting any output for other petrochemical production. The OMCs have been directed to supply LPG solely to domestic consumers.

This comes just a month after the Union Budget cut LPG subsidy allocation by 27%, from ₹15,121 crore to ₹11,085 crore. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas received ₹30,443 crore for 2026-27.

India produces only about 40% of its LPG requirement. The rest is imported, overwhelmingly from the same region now at war.

Increase in LPG use

India's LPG use has been on the rise as more people switch to cleaner cooking fuel **(Chart 1)**. Between 2015 and July 2025, the number of active domestic LPG consumers rose from 1,486 lakh to 3,305 lakh, an increase of over 120% in a decade, according to data from the Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC), Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. The government has claimed that LPG coverage has increased to nearly 100% of households, up from 62% in 2016 when the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana was launched.

The International Energy Agency, in its Indian Oil Market Outlook to 2030, noted that clean cooking programmes had led to LPG imports surging nearly three-fold in the past decade. The quantity of India's LPG imports increased from over 16.48 million metric tonnes (MMT) in 2020-21 to over 18 MMT in 2025-26. **(Chart 2)**

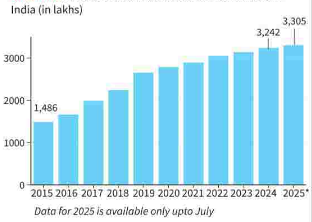
India's LPG imports are heavily concentrated in a few countries, most of them in West Asia **(Chart 3)**. In 2025, Qatar accounted for about 34% of India's LPG imports, making it the country's largest supplier, followed by the UAE (26%), and Kuwait (8.3%). This dependence on West Asia has been long-standing. In 2020, nearly 37% of all Indian LPG imports came from Qatar. Moreover, the Strait of Hormuz, located between Iran and Oman, is one of the world's critical energy shipping routes. A large share of global oil and gas shipments pass through this narrow waterway. With the Strait of Hormuz closed since March 1, LPG imports have been hit.

India's Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) imports have also been increasing in 2024-25, reaching 27 MMT, the highest on record and double the 13.5 MMT imported in 2011-12 **(Chart 4)**. Half of India's LNG also comes from Qatar. LNG powers fertilizer plants, electricity generation, and gas pipelines that fuel vehicles and commercial kitchens. Like LPG, it is largely sourced from the same West Asian suppliers caught in the conflict.

Supply strain

The data for the charts were sourced from Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas), and UN Comtrade

CHART 1: Number of active domestic LPG consumers in India (in lakhs)



Data for 2025 is available only upto July

CHART 4: The total import of liquified natural gas (in million metric tonnes)

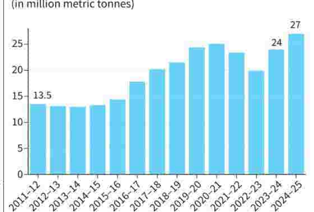


CHART 2: The total import of liquified petroleum gas (in million metric tonnes)

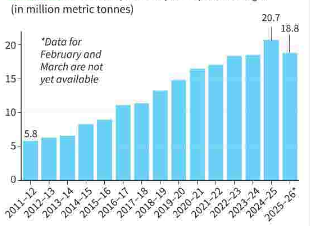


CHART 5: The domestic consumption of liquefied petroleum gas (in million metric tonnes)

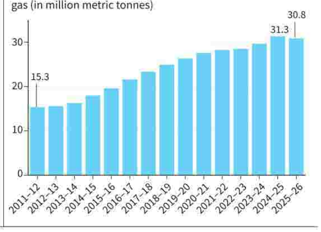
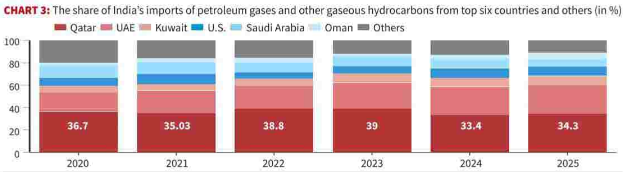


CHART 3: The share of India's imports of petroleum gases and other gaseous hydrocarbons from top six countries and others (in %)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 12, 1976

Technical aids to prevent train accidents

Madras, March 11: Lapses on the part of railway staff were the main cause for collisions and derailments on the Indian Railways during 1974-75. Out of 762 cases, nearly two-thirds (504) were due to this. Next in order came failures of mechanical equipment which accounted for 132 cases. Sixty cases were accidental. As many as 16 derailments took place due to defective track, seven due to sabotage and 26 as a result of failures not involving railway staff. In 17 cases, causes of derailment could not be established.

A review of Accidents on Indian Railways by the Railway Ministry had estimated the losses to railway rolling stock, engines, and permanent way at Rs. 10.49 crores during 1974-75. Safe running of trains depended on the vigilance and efficient performance of duties by railwaymen. The traffic density in certain parts of the Indian Railway system was among the highest in the world. Adequate training to railway staff, enforcement of correct methods of working, effective supervision and motivation, and increasing use of technology formed the basis of accident prevention policy on the Railways.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 12, 1926

British war graves commission

London, March 10: The progress of caring for and the beautifying of war-cemeteries florally and architecturally in Europe, Asia and Africa is depicted in photographic supplement to annual report of the War Graves Commission, whose labours are illustrated by statistics as follows:– Cared 2,380 cemeteries comprising 5,42,498 graves, conducted seven nurseries, supplied nearly 7,000,000 plants, tress and shrubs, purchased 360,000 bulbs, planted 49 miles of hedges and fortyone acres of grass and chemically treated 97,000 headstones.

The report discloses that isolated British remains continue to be found, the number for last year being 4,100, which were mostly discovered by organised gangs digging the ground in search of shells and war material.

The Prince of Wales has sent message to the Commissioners expressing his gratification at Governments of Britain, Canada and Australia, agreeing to endow the commission.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Pension-related grievances received in 2025

1,07,731 More than one lakh pension-related grievances were received online through the CPENGRAMS platform last year, the Lok Sabha was informed. The Ministry of Defence, Department of Financial Services (Banking Division) and Ministry of Railways received the highest number of grievances. PTI

Number of traffic challans issued in Mumbai in 2025

20.38 in lakh. In a written reply to a question in the legislative council, Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis said that the police in Mumbai issued challans to 20,38,440 motorists last year. Of these, 10,46,819 challans were issued for wrong parking. More than 4.34 lakh motorists were given traffic tickets for jumping signals. PTI

'Nano-tech' roads that failed in Arunachal Pradesh

37 Arunachal Pradesh Rural Works Department Minister Pasang Dorjee Sona informed the Assembly that 37 out of 42 Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana roads constructed using 'nanotechnology' have failed. The technology faced challenges because of hill terrain, slopes, unstable geology, monsoon rainfall, landslides and erosion-prone conditions. PTI

U.S. military personnel wounded in the Iran war

140 About 140 U.S. military personnel have been wounded in attacks since the start of the war against Iran, the Pentagon said on Tuesday. "The vast majority of these injuries have been minor, and 108 service members have already returned to duty," Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said in a statement. Seven U.S. military personnel were also killed. AFP

Number of vacant posts in Central Armed Police Forces

93,139 In a written reply to a question, Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai presented vacancies data in the paramilitary forces, showing that the Central Reserve Police Force has the highest number of vacancies at 27,400, followed by the CISF with 28,342 posts. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

A revision of GDP and its implications

The revised GDP series with 2022-23 as the base year shows a reduction in the absolute size of GDP and some changes in the production structure of the economy; while the correction in GDP size appears welcome, it remains unclear whether the revision addresses the red flags raised about the 2011-12 series

ECONOMIC NOTES

R. Nagaraj
Vikash Vaibhav

Annual gross domestic product (GDP) is the sum of the final value of all goods and services produced during a year, net of material inputs. It is the most widely used measure of a country's economic size. GDP, or the economy's gross value added (GVA), is an estimate prepared using a wide range of data on physical outputs and their prices, and this involves numerous statistical procedures. The estimates broadly follow the global templates of the UN System of National Accounts (UNSNA). The latest revision, with base year 2022-23, follows its 2025 edition.

Roughly every five to ten years, the base year for National Accounts Statistics (NAS) is revised. This includes GDP estimates and other aggregates such as national savings, consumption, and investment.

The revision accounts for changes in what an economy produces and its prices. As the economy expands, the mix of goods and services produced – and their prices – changes. These shifts affect the "real size" of the economy, that is, excluding price rise. Revising the NAS is therefore a complex and massive task, undertaken periodically by the National Statistical Office (NSO) of every country.

Awaited revision

This time, the release of the revised NAS was eagerly awaited as it was being issued after 11 years. The previous revision, with the base year 2011-12 and released in 2015, had prompted many data users – both official and independent analysts – to question the veracity of the GDP estimates.

For some sectors, such as manufacturing, the annual growth rates in the 2011-12 base-year series (when compared with earlier estimates) were not only higher, but the direction of change was also different.

The economic structure reported in the 2011-12 base year series also looked quite different from earlier structures. For example, the size of the non-financial private corporate sector (PCS) estimated in the 2011-12 series was much bigger than reported previously. Many experts have repeatedly shown that the official GDP growth rates based on the 2011-12 series during the last decade or so are distinctly overestimated. More recently, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its review of the quality of economic statistics of its member countries, awarded India a 'C' grade for the quality of its NAS, much to the country's embarrassment.

Against this backdrop, the recently released GDP series with 2022-23 as the base year acquired considerable significance. What are the main changes in the new series and why? Here, we will discuss the changes in GDP estimates from the production, reserving a similar discussion on consumption (or expenditure) and prices for another day. Two kinds of comparisons are reported at current prices: first, the annual percentage change between the latest estimates (2022-23 series) and the previous estimates based on the 2011-12 series for the overlapping years 2022-23 and 2023-24; and second, the changes in the GDP shares of principal sectors between the two series for the same years.

Recasting the economy

After an 11-year gap, the National Statistical Office has released a revised GDP series with 2022-23 as the base year, underlining changes in the economy's size and structure

Chart 1: Decline in size of the economy (%)
(As compared to GDP of 2011-12 series)

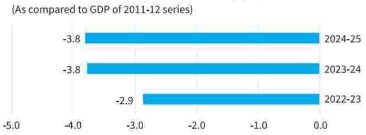


Chart 2: Nominal GDP growth rates for the two series (%)
Growth rates 2011-12 series ■ Growth rates 2022-23 series

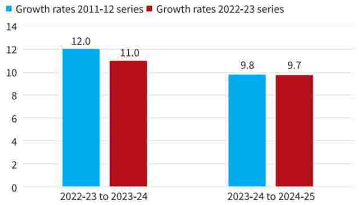


Chart 3: Sectoral shares for 2022-23 (As % of GVA)
■ 2011-12 series ■ 2022-23 series

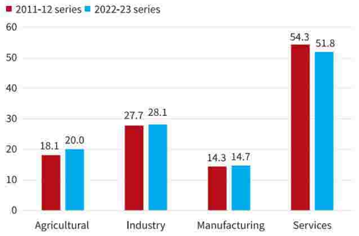


Chart 4: Decline in sectoral GVA shares
(As compared to sectoral GVA shares of 2011-12 series) ■ 2023-24 ■ 2022-23

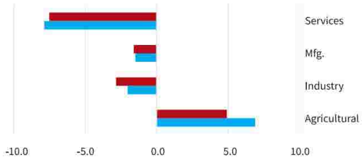
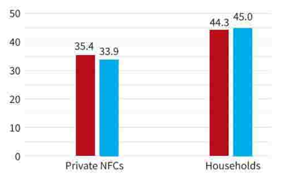


Chart 5: Institutional classification of output 2022-2023
(As % of GVA)
■ 2011-12 series
■ 2022-23 series



Key findings

The revised estimates show that GDP's absolute size has shrunk by about 3-4% in the new series compared with the earlier one (**Figure 1**). However, the annual growth rates by the new and the old series are not very different (plus or minus one percentage point) (**Figure 2**).

The production structure has also changed somewhat. The GDP shares of agriculture and industry (or the secondary sector) have increased, while the share of services has declined. Within the industry, the share of manufacturing has marginally increased to 14.7% of the economy from 14.3% previously (**Figure 3**).

At the same time, the absolute size of the manufacturing sector has shrunk by about 1.5-1.6% when compared with the previous series (**Figure 4**). This decline, though marginal, is significant because this sector was central to much debate during the previous revision.

In terms of institutional classification of GDP, the share of the non-financial private corporate sector (PCS) has declined by 1.5 percentage points, from 35.4% in the earlier series to 33.9% in the new series for 2022-23. This drop is steeper for 2023-24, with a gap of 3.4 percentage points. This change is significant as the size of the PCS in GDP was much debated after the previous revision (**Figure 5**).

The household or informal sector's share in the economy has increased marginally compared with the 2011-12 series – by 0.7 percentage points in 2022-23 and by 2.7 percentage points in 2023-24. The rise in the new series is partly or entirely on account of agriculture (**Figure 5**) (smaller sectors are ignored for brevity).

Many experts have shown that the official GDP growth rates based on the 2011-12 series during the last decade or so are distinctly overestimated. More recently, the IMF, in its review of the quality of economic statistics of its member countries, awarded India a 'C' grade for the quality of its NAS

Interpreting changes

In principle, rebasing the NAS should not change the absolute size of GDP at current prices, because the underlying economy being measured remains the same. If anything, the revision could enlarge the absolute size, as newer estimates – obtained using better data sets and methods – are expected to capture new activities or those that were inadequately captured earlier. Hence, on the face of it, the reduction in the absolute GDP size in the new series appears surprising. However, as mentioned earlier, given the widely held view of the overestimation of GDP growth rates in the earlier series, the observed reduction may represent a welcome correction.

Such a correction – though it may appear minor – implies changes to our understanding of the economy's performance. For instance, with the reduced (or corrected) GDP size, the goal of attaining a five-trillion-dollar economy, a target set by the Prime Minister in 2019, might be further delayed.

While the correction in the absolute economic size is welcome, it remains unclear whether the revision has addressed all the red flags raised with respect to the 2011-12 series. Likewise, it is not yet clear if the latest revision tackles the questions raised by the IMF in its review.

From what we know, the changes made seem to at least partially look into the issues raised. However, it is possible that the slower or faster growth rates reported in the new series may merely be on account of methodological changes introduced, or a newer dataset used or application of a newer "rates and ratios". Hence, a release of more methodological details of the revision for a fuller assessment of the veracity of the new GDP series is awaited.

(R. Nagaraj was formerly with Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR), Mumbai; Vikash Vaibhav is with OP Jindal Global University, Sonepat)

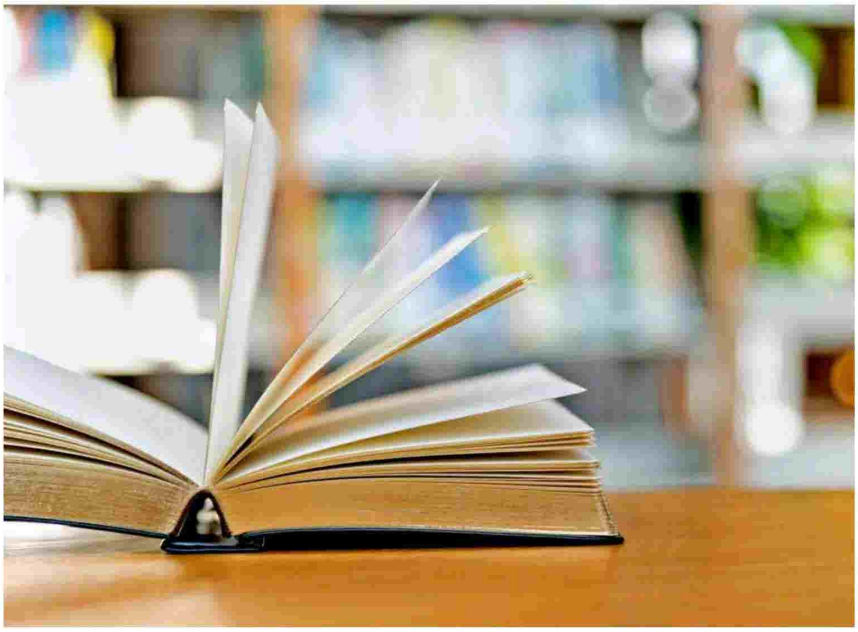
THE GIST

The National Statistical Office released a new GDP series with 2022-23 as the base year after an 11-year gap, amid public questioning of the veracity of the 2011-12 series.

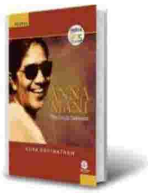
The revised estimates show GDP size declining by about 3-4%, with sectoral composition changing slightly — higher shares for agriculture and industry and a decline in the services sector share.

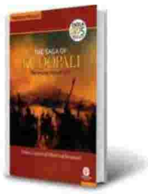
GDP by institutions indicates a modest contraction in the non-financial private corporate sector and a rise in the household or informal sector's share, but it remains unclear whether the revision addresses all the red flags raised earlier, pending further methodological details.

BIBLIOGRAPHY



GETTY IMAGES





The National Book Trust's India@75 series brings forgotten figures into the limelight

From woman scientist Anna Mani to unsung freedom fighters, the books are works of scholarship and storytelling intended to inspire the younger generation and reflect on momentous journeys

Soma Basu

One of the walls of the Kerala State Science and Technology Museum Innovation Hub in Thiruvananthapuram has photographs of famous scientists, including Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, C.V. Raman, S. Chandrasekhar, Homi Bhabha, and Stephen Hawking. In the long wall of honour, meant to inspire children, Marie Curie is the only woman scientist who finds space.

The Matilda effect and its impact on women in science are neither new nor unknown. A decade ago, neuroscientist and writer-researcher Asha Gopinathan coordinated the Cafe Scientifique, a series of science workshops in the same city, in which a young audience fell silent when asked to name a woman in science.

However, when a lone voice uttered Marie Curie, Gopinathan felt the need to study and unravel the life of two trailblazing scientists from Kerala: Janaki Ammal, a botanist who pioneered plant breeding, and Anna Mani, a physicist who made India self-reliant in meteorology, solar radiation, and wind energy.

Two women scientists

It was not that people had forgotten the two women scientists; they simply did not know about them. This was Gopinathan's attempt to document the struggles and achievements of women scientists who have been overlooked and denied public recognition.

Her first book, *Anna Mani: The Uncut Diamond*, was released at the New Delhi Book Fair earlier this year, marking a turning point in changing public perception about women in science. The book brings to light the genius, dedication, and perseverance of Anna Mani. It establishes her as the weather woman of India, who designed and standardised more than 100 weather instruments.

Aimed at young adults, the book, Gopinathan hopes, will help people understand, remember, and respect Anna Mani's achievements in the context of her family background, the times she grew up, and the wider world in which she was an important player.

Published by the National Book Trust (NBT) under its series India@75, the book is a powerful reminder that behind every achievement, there is a passionate individual who struggles, dreams big, and overcomes adversity, and yet may fail to exist in public memory.

'Act of recovery'

Gopinathan calls her book "an act of recovery" and shines a light on Anna Mani's brilliant contribution to measuring weather and atmospheric ozone, as well as to renewable energy and spectroscopy. She writes how Anna Mani described herself as "the right person in the wrong place". The words bear the weight of gender bias and barriers that women scientists of her generation faced.

The author wonders why people like Anna Mani do not feature in school textbooks or why their photographs are not seen in museums along with those of famous male scientists. The silence speaks loudly and therefore, the book matters. Both Gopinathan and the NBT deserve applause for documenting and preserving an iconic scientist's contributions. The hard work that has gone into researching archival details shows on every page.

From the pages of history

Biographies help to understand the nuanced history of different eras and the socio-economic and cultural contexts during specific periods in history. On the occasion of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav in 2023, the NBT launched its India@75 series categorised into four sections: people, places, events, and themes.

Under the People series, the organisation has so far published 60 titles so far. These are divided into people-achievers (such as Anna Mani; hockey player Dhyan Chand; liberal thinker, author, and diplomat Minoo Masani; journalist Motilal Ghose, who advocated for the rights of Indian farmers, and Karnataka's folk heroine Rani Chennamma) and books on both well-known and lesser-known freedom fighters from the pages of history.

Innovatively introducing the series as 'Book Box' and standardising the format, cover design, and layout, the NBT plans to publish biographies of 75 freedom fighters by the end of the year.

Other categories in the pipeline include major events of national significance, such as the 1971 war, the 1983 Cricket World Cup, and the White and the Green Revolution in India.

The books written by NBT's pool of authors, researchers, and scholars are published in English and 22 regional languages, making it a rich repository of knowledge and diverse cultural perspectives.

Some of the interesting titles include *The Saga of Kudopali: The Unsung Story of 1857*, *Kargil Heroes: Ten Exclusive Inspiring Stories* and *Unsung Anglo-Manipur War Heroes at Kalapani*. These books are as diverse and varied as the ordinary men and women who did much to build the fabric of Indian society. By highlighting their motivations, sacrifices, and vast contributions, the NBT places them centre stage.

With the objective of reflecting on the momentous journeys of pre-and-post independent India, the books are all works of scholarship and storytelling intended to inspire the younger generation. They also come at a time when the NCERT syllabus in school textbooks is being altered, leading to controversies.

By telling the stories of India's soldiers, poets, activists, freedom fighters, and other notable personalities, and by bringing to the fore the making of our cities and movements that helped shape India into a modern nation, the NBT's efforts appear to be a step in the right direction.

Often, the most influential people are those less heard of. Their lives are the true lessons in resilience and adaptability, and reading about them makes one realise that fame and impact are two different things.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Dandi March, led by Mahatma Gandhi, started on March 12, 1930. Here is a quiz on the march

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
How many days did it last?

QUESTION 2
It was done to resist the tax on which commodity?

QUESTION 3
Which places were the start and end points of this march?

QUESTION 4
What was this march also called, owing to the fact that all the people were joining the procession wearing white Khadi?

QUESTION 5
The culmination of the Dandi March led to which eventual consequence?

Visual Question:
Identify this march, parallely held by C. Rajagopalachari. On which coast was it held?
THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. This person was to Satyajit Ray what Toshiro 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. **Ans: Soumitra Chatterjee**
2. Name the Chinese ophthalmologist who was one of the first whistleblowers to warn about the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. **Ans: Li Wenliang**
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. **Ans: Milkha Singh**
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. **Ans: S.P. Balasubramanyam**
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? **Ans: Chetan Chauhan**
Visual: 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. **Ans: Colin Powell**
Early Birds: Akash Kumar | Piyali Tuli | Sunil Madhavan | Sukdev Shet | Sumana Dutta

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

Why are left-handers called "southpaws"? (B. Krishnaveni, Chennai).

Do you watch baseball? It used to be the practice in the old days to place the pitcher's (bowler's) mound east of the home plate (wickets, shall we say?). As you know, in baseball, a pitcher doesn't come running in to throw the ball at a batsman. Instead, he stands on the mound, winds up and then throws. As he winds up to throw, he swivels. A right-handed pitcher turns to his right and a left-handed pitcher turns to his left. So when he commenced his delivery, a right-handed pitcher faced north and a left-handed one faced south (in the days when the pitcher's mound was placed east of the home plate). Since the left-handed pitcher had the ball in his left hand – "paw" – and he faced south, he was called a "southpaw". As there were only a few left-handed pitchers to begin with, they began to be called "southpaws". From baseball, the term "southpaw" began to be used in other sports as well to refer to left-handers.

Why don't I find the word "banian" in the dictionary? (A. J. Venkatasubramanyam, Chennai).

Some dictionaries do list the word as a variant of "banyan". They define the word as a "loose flannel shirt". Native speakers of English do not use the word "banian" and that is the reason why many dictionaries do not list the word.

What is the meaning of "magnum opus"? (D. Rakesh Naik, Vizianagaram).

A "magnum opus" is an artist's greatest or most important piece of work. The artist may be a painter, writer or composer. The "a" in the first syllable of "magnum" is pronounced like the "a" in "cat", "bat", and "hat". The "u" in both words is like the "a" in "amount" and "china". The "o" in "opus" is like the "o" in "no", "so", and "go". The main stress is on the first syllable of "opus".

What is the difference between "magazine" and "journal"? (P. V. Srinivasan, Chennai).

A magazine is a general term for a periodical, which deals with various subjects. Unlike newspapers, magazines are published either weekly or monthly. They usually contain a large number of photographs.

Like a "magazine", a "journal" – which means a "daily" – is not printed every day. It is normally a monthly/quarterly/half yearly publication on a specialised or learned topic. The articles in a "journal" usually – though not always – tend to be scholarly. A journal tends to be much more serious than a magazine and it is usually produced for people belonging to a particular profession or people with particular interests.

What is the meaning of "hunky-dory"? (Surkesh Lakhwani, Jaipur).

This is an expression used in informal contexts. When you refer to a situation as being "hunky-dory", it implies that everything is fine; that everyone is happy with a particular situation. Here is an example:

Everything was hunky-dory at the party.

Published in The Hindu on November 23, 1999

Word of the day

Vestige:
an indication that something has been present

Synonyms: remnant, trace, residue

Usage: *The village still has a vestige of its old traditions.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/vestigepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /vestɪdʒ/

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

● WORDLY WISE
Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.
— John Stuart Mill

The Indian EXPRESS
~ FOUNDED BY ~
RAMNATH GOENKA
IN 1932
BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Opening the door, easing the flows

IN APRIL 2020, the government amended the FDI policy to prevent "opportunistic" takeovers of Indian firms during the pandemic-induced economic disruptions. The amendments then, directed primarily towards China, had made government approval mandatory for investments from countries that share a land border with India (LBCs). On Tuesday, the Union cabinet approved changes in the guidelines on investments from countries sharing a land border with India. Now, investors with non-controlling LBC beneficial ownership of upto 10 per cent will be allowed under the automatic route. Further, proposals for LBC investments in key manufacturing sectors such as capital goods, electronic components, and others will be "processed and decided within 60 days". Given the imperative for building domestic manufacturing capabilities in these sectors, the government can be more flexible in calibrating Chinese investments through joint ventures with Indian partners. This will be a win-win for both New Delhi and Beijing. These policy changes, which have been designed to encourage greater FDI flows, ease access to newer technologies and facilitate greater integration with global supply chains, have come at a time of dwindling capital inflows into the country. This underlines the need to facilitate more foreign investments in the country, and for a more comprehensive approach vis a vis the trade and investment relationship with China.

In the past, sections of the policy establishment have articulated the need to encourage investments from China. The Economic Survey 2023-24 had pointed out that to gain from the China +1 strategy, India can integrate with Chinese supply chains or ease FDI from China. It argued that "focusing on FDI from China seems more promising for boosting India's exports to the US, similar to how East Asian economies did in the past". A high-level committee chaired by Niti Aayog member Rajiv Gauba had also recommended removing the curbs on Chinese investments, as per a report in this paper.

Considering the centrality of China to global manufacturing, India needs a clear strategy. In recent years, while investment flows from China have dwindled, trade between the two countries has only deepened. Given that India needs both capital and technology to assist in its development trajectory, along with being more open to trade, it needs to be pragmatic. Its approach must be guided by the need to balance economic imperatives with strategic caution.

On passive euthanasia, over to the Centre

FOR 13 years, the parents of Harish Rana lived in a cycle of grief and hopelessness. A fall from the fourth floor of a building when he was 18 had left Rana with a 100 per cent quadriplegic disability. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court paved the way for a modicum of closure to their emotional, and financial, difficulties. A two-judge bench directed the removal of clinically administered nutrition (CAN) that had kept the 31-year-old alive, but in a vegetative state. The SC had allowed passive euthanasia in 2018. But the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment, even in cases when doctors acknowledge the futility of their interventions, is fraught with complex ethical and medical questions. Rana's parents had reportedly made up their minds to take the difficult decision two years ago. The Delhi High Court and the SC in 2024 had rejected their pleas on the ground that feeding tubes are not medical interventions. The apex court had, however, given them permission to approach it again. Wednesday's verdict overrules the earlier jurisprudence on CAN.

The judiciary has been cautious about euthanasia. However, it has increasingly come around to the view that forcing patients to remain in an irreversible vegetative state may undermine human dignity. In *Aruna Shanbaug v Union of India*, the SC rejected euthanasia for the nurse who had been in a coma for around four decades. It also held that life-sustaining treatment for such a patient could be withdrawn under "strict conditions", including approval of a High Court and consent of close relatives. The case laid the ground for the landmark verdict in *Common Cause v Union of India* (2018), which recognised the legality of passive euthanasia and introduced the concept of living wills — allowing individuals to specify that life-sustaining treatment be withdrawn if they are terminally ill. Hospitals and families found this procedure cumbersome. Five years later, the SC clarified the role of medical boards, whose evaluations would be critical. Wednesday's ruling is grounded in a medical board's opinion.

The SC has increasingly nuanced the Right to Life and led the search for humane answers to difficult questions about terminally ill patients. But experts have also pointed out that passive euthanasia can be prone to abuse — living wills can be manipulated, and patients pressured into signing their own death warrants. That's why after Wednesday's verdict, the SC asked the Centre to frame legislation. It should not waste any time in taking the cue.

The Sun sets on Britain's lords

"THE WHOLE world is in revolt. Soon there will be only five kings left -- the King of England, the King of Spades, The King of Clubs, the King of Hearts, and the King of Diamonds," King Farouk of Egypt said in 1948. Strengthening his argument, Farouk was overthrown in a military coup four years later. He did have a point about the British and their attachment to the monarchy, or more broadly, to the vestiges and ceremonial trappings of things past — be it guardsmen in bearskin caps or control of small islands around the globe; technically, the Sun never did set on the British Empire. When something finally does vanish, the grudges remain; there are still eccentrics cribbing about the Jacobites.

Naturally, Britain's aristocracy did not go gentle into that good night. Its formal authority has been eroded over the decades. The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 weakened the power of the House of Lords to veto or delay legislation, and the House of Lords Act, 1999, removed all but 92 hereditary peers from the chamber. Life peers, whose children do not inherit their titles, now make up the majority of the House. On Tuesday, the House passed a new Bill to remove all hereditary peers, fulfilling a manifesto pledge of Keir Starmer's Labour Party.

This has occasioned much heartburn — over the loss of nonpartisan expertise and institutional memory, and the fact that the life peers also have no democratic mandate and include political appointees. And of course, the death of a tradition. But small-c conservatives may take heart: Reform has come in fits and spurts, not as revolution, with no overarching thought or reference to first principles. Edmund Burke might have reluctantly approved.

Era of gentle trade is over. Global village is being replaced by law of jungle

THAROORTHINK
BY SHASHI THAROOR

FOR THREE decades, the ghost of the French political philosopher Montesquieu haunted the halls of the World Trade Organisation in Geneva. The Enlightenment philosopher's famous dictum of *doux commerce* — the idea that trade "polishes and softens" the manners of men — was the silent engine of the era of globalisation. The logic was as elegant as it was optimistic: If we weave a web of mutual dependency, the cost of conflict becomes too high to pay. We would trade our way to a permanent, civilised peace. It was a beautiful, seductive delusion — the belief that the accountant's ledger could finally replace the soldier's bayonet.

But today, looking at the flurry of Trumpeted tariffs, export controls, and "Buy National" mandates, it is clear that the era of "gentle trade" has expired. States are more economically and technologically interconnected than at any point in history. Yet the very ties that bind them are increasingly perceived as sources of vulnerability rather than stability. We have reached a state of maximal interdependence coupled with minimal trust. The interdependence spawned by trade is now seen as a form of geoeconomic vulnerability, where reliance on foreign partners is seen as a strategic liability rather than a stabilising force. This tension between reliance and suspicion shapes the contours of global geopolitics and geoeconomics, producing a world order that is simultaneously integrated and fragmented. In the place of the globalised world, a more primal, dog-eat-dog protectionism has emerged. The marketplace is no longer a salon for integrating the world; it has become the front line of a zero-sum conflict. We are witnessing the "de-civilising" of the global economy, where the handshake has been replaced by the chokehold.

The promise of *doux commerce* was that economic interest would eventually swallow geopolitical ambition. During the era of globalisation, we were all persuaded to believe that if Russia was piped into European energy grids and China was integrated into American supply chains, these nations would become "responsible stakeholders" in a peaceful global order, and that if India sold gems and jewellery to New York while importing Harley-Davidsons from Detroit, both countries would prosper. We fell into the trap of the classic Prisoner's Dilemma, assuming everyone was playing a long-term game of "tit-for-tat" cooperation. We thought that by being "nice" (opening our markets, inviting investment and integrating into global supply chains), we would invite reciprocal niceness and enhance our attractiveness as a "strategic partner". Instead, we discovered that the "rationality" of a trading partner is often secondary to the irrationality of a president's prejudices or the assertion of national pride. Interdependence didn't just create peace; it created vulnerability. Many countries that mistook mutual dependency for mutual friendship came to realise that they had simply handed their rivals the keys to their own front doors.

In the era of globalisation, the golden rule was efficiency. Companies chased the lowest cost, assuming the sea lanes would always be open and the rules would always be followed. Now, that golden rule has been replaced by the "Armour-Plated Rule". The realisation that a single geopolitical tremor — a pandemic or a sudden invasion — can collapse a supply chain has turned trade into a defensive crouch. The West is moving from "offshoring" to "friend-shoring" and "near-shoring". Countries no longer care if a partner is the most efficient or most cost-effective; we care if they are a "friend". WTO multilateralism has been replaced by a flurry of bilateral trade agreements. This is the death of the universal marketplace and the birth of a fragmented one. The cost of this new paranoia will be paid by every consumer at the checkout counter.

The "gentleness" of commerce was predicated on the idea that trade happens in a neutral space, a world of benign autonomous economic actors. Poor Montesquieu! Today, commerce is weaponised. When semiconductors are used as diplomatic leverage and critical minerals are withheld to settle political scores or even the scales in a tariff battle, the softening effect that Montesquieu praised can no longer be found. Tariffs have returned as tactical missiles intended to degrade the capabilities of rivals. We have moved from a world where we traded to get rich together, to a world where we trade to ensure our neighbour doesn't get richer than us, or doesn't "profit" from us through a favourable trade balance. Trade is no longer an engine of growth; it is a tool of attrition, designed to starve the other even if it means going hungry ourselves.

The realisation that a single geopolitical tremor — a pandemic or a sudden invasion — can collapse a supply chain has turned trade into a defensive crouch

There is an evident tragedy in this shift. While protectionism may offer a temporary sense of security, it abandons the civilising hope of the 18th century. The original theory of *doux commerce* wasn't just about money; it was about tolerance and mutual understanding emerging from mutual benefit. It was about the merchant who, in the pursuit of a sale, learns not just to tolerate but to accept the religion, language, and culture of the buyer. As we raise our drawbridges and retreat into rival trading blocs, we lose that bridge of communication. When we stop trading with countries we now see as "enemies", we lose the last remaining incentive to understand them. We are trading the gentle peace of the market for the brutal security of the fortress. And it could get worse. History warns us that when goods stop crossing borders, armies eventually might.

The era of globalisation may have been naive in its optimism, but the era that replaces it looks increasingly like a world where the dogs are finally off the leash. We are dismantling the global village and replacing it with the law of the jungle, where might is right and suspicion reigns amid widespread fear. We are moving from Montesquieu to Hobbes: A world that is a collection of armed camps, watching each other through the sights of an economic rifle, with their drawbridges up. *Doux commerce* is yielding to a harsh dystopia.

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When philanthropy is less leap of faith, more numbers game

SONALDE DESAI

THE 21ST century saw the emergence of a new philosophy for voluntary organisations. Good intentions were no longer enough, scale and outcome monitoring became the new gold standard. The California consensus, driven by the philanthropic impulses of tech billionaires, impatiently sought rapid societal change rooted in science and technology. This was a departure from the philosophy of institution-building favoured by foundations like Ford and Rockefeller. The traditional idea of selfless service was no longer sufficient; new philanthropists demanded measurable results. Ostensibly, it made sense that recipients of public funding should be held accountable. But what if this search for scale and accountability is ultimately counterproductive?

Microfinance programmes have been praised for high repayment rates in group lending to women by Grameen Bank and BRAC. However, Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta find that pressure on fieldworkers and group members to achieve high repayment rates has led them to selectively choose recipients based on their ability to repay, often excluding the poorest, least educated, and least connected. When outcome measures become the main criteria for judging programmes and institutions, it is not surprising that they lose sight of their original goals and become focused on maximising performance on outcome metrics.

Randomised evaluations, the foundation of rigorous programme assessment, are complex and often methodologically fraught. What happens in one place can influence another. Analysis of the effect of savings groups on income in Uganda and Malawi by Christopher Heitzig and Rossa O'Keeffe-O'Donovan finds that rising incomes in villages that implemented savings groups also impacted nearby villages. As a result, about 23-28 per cent of the programme's benefits were not captured. Without careful attention to spillover effects, we might wrongly conclude that a programme has failed even when it has succeeded.

In a climate where outcome monitoring, scaling up, and sustainability are the main buzzwords, grassroots organisations that speak from the heart are likely to be deprived of resources and public attention

A focus on scale introduces other challenges. Transformative social programmes are often bottom-up, emphasising processes that need participation and buy-in from local communities. They may not be easily scaled, and the idea that a programme is only valuable if it can reach hundreds of millions of people might be counterproductive. In their book, John List and colleagues enumerate examples of projects that fail to scale globally. Closer to home, consider Lok Jumbish, a primary education programme in Rajasthan. Lok Jumbish was a highly participatory programme in which the community was mobilised to create a village education plan. It was so successful that the World Bank and the Indian government collaborated to scale up some of these ideas into a larger District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) that eventually covered 272 districts and 18 states as a centrally sponsored scheme.

A comparison of Lok Jumbish and DPEP by Tomako Kobayashi highlights their differences and notes the shallow local participation in Village Education Committees of DPEP compared to the deep, passionate engagement in Lok Jumbish. Evaluation of DPEP by the World Bank shows that while the programme was successful in increasing initial enrolment, it did not achieve its goal of reducing dropout rates or improving learning achievement.

Arguably, the most significant critique of the California consensus — which has now entered the vocabulary of Indian philanthropy and policymaking — is that it has shifted the landscape of civil society activism from passion and commitment to technocracy. In a climate where outcome monitoring, scaling up, and sustainability are the main buzzwords, grassroots organisations that speak from the heart are likely to be deprived of resources and public attention.

India is home to some of the greatest transformative movements — Satyagraha and non-violence, land reform, dairy cooperatives, the Chipko Movement — all rooted in grassroots civic action. Each was a leap of faith, each generated energy that gave rise to a nation of a thousand movements. Let us not allow the space for civic action to shrink in the pursuit of the holy grail of outcome monitoring.

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US attack on Iran is part of a pattern — not a departure

SANJAY KUMAR PANDEY

DEAR EDITOR
I disagree
A fortnightly column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of 'The Indian Express'

AN EDITORIAL in this paper ('US, Israel kill Iran's leader, unleash new ghosts,' March 2) claims that the latest attacks on Iran mark a decisive shift. But to my mind, they follow an old pattern: The US has never hesitated to topple regimes that pose geopolitical, ideological, or economic challenges to US hegemony and interests. There have been around 100 such interventions by the US — Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), South Vietnam (1963), Chile (1973), Panama (1989), Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003) are just a few examples. The US is arguably the biggest violator of international law, and of Article 2(A) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. It has trampled upon the principle of sovereignty and the sovereign equality of states through unilateral military intervention, political interference, economic coercion/blockades/tariff wars, and extrajudicial actions. The abduction of the president of Venezuela and the assassination of Iran's leadership are only the most recent excesses. The US has arguably been operating outside the rules-based order, undermining its own credibility as the leader of the democratic world.

Similarly, the claim that "few tears will be shed for Khamenei" is only half true. While the Iranian regime was losing popular legitimacy, the fact that it could overcome this proves its deep roots and support among the military establishment and certain sections of society. US action may well give it a new lease of life. What is often described as a "rally 'round the flag" phenomenon allows leaders to shift public focus from domestic failures to national survival. While losses in war can sometimes lead to political upheaval, they provide unpopular governments with (if temporary) legitimacy based on patriotism. The regime can control the narrative and convince people to set aside divisions to unite against the "external enemy". It gains a pretext to suppress dissent, consolidate power and undermine democratic freedoms. One should also keep in mind the fact that Iran is among the oldest civilisational states and Iranians are proud of this legacy. US President Donald Trump seems to have no grasp of this. The editorials in the last 10 days have not adequately addressed these nuances.

The US is arguably the biggest violator of international law and of Article 2(A) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state

For India, there are several constraints on how it can react to the conflict: Energy security/dependency, over 10 million Indians in the Gulf, and delicate ties with the Trump administration. But Iran is vital to India, too. The International North–South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar port are important for connectivity with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasian region. India's position as a leader of the Global South will also be questioned if it can't take a position congruent with the principle of strategic autonomy. We cannot be seen as bending to US and Israeli pressure. The condolence message after the death of Ayatollah Khamenei should have been prompt. Similarly, we should have responded more decisively to the sinking of IRIS *Dena*. In view of the upcoming BRICS Summit, we must come out of the "stuck in the middle dilemma" and take a clear position.

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40 YEARS AGO
March 12, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
S. B. Chavan elected Maharashtra CM
I was asked to change varsity lawyer: Gore
Bill a reassurance to Muslims: PM

PM on Muslim law Bill

The Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, has said it is not the government's intention to encroach upon the Islamic system and the Bill on Muslim personal law, now before Parliament, is a reassurance to the community on the issue. In an interview to the Calcutta daily, *The Telegraph*, the Prime Minister said he did not agree that he had succumbed to pressure while introducing the Bill and felt that the law sought to be introduced gave women more rights.

Chavan elected as CM

Shankarrao B Chavan was elected new leader of the Maharashtra Congress (I) Legislature Party. ENS adds: Earlier, the three Congress (I) high command observers, Buta Singh, P Shiv Shankar and Naval Kishore Sharma, tried their level best to evolve a consensus candidate to succeed Shivajirao Patil Nilangekar.

Jaffna shootout, 6 killed

Six people — five Tamil militants and a patient — were killed and two female nurses injured, one seriously, in a shootout between two rival militant groups at the Jaffna General Hospital in North Sri Lanka, informed sources in Jaffna said. The incident occurred when a splinter group of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) attempted to kidnap a member of another splinter group, also owing allegiance to the TELO leader, Sri Sabaratnam, from the hospital where he was admitted for injuries sustained during "firing practice".

Judges protest appointment

Four leading judges of the Bombay High Court are believed to have protested to President Zail Singh at a proposal to appoint a junior colleague of theirs, Justice P B Sawant, to the Supreme Court. Their letters of protest have been routed through the Maharashtra Governor, it is learnt. Justice Sawant's name was proposed by the government to fill the vacancy arising out of the retirement on March 9 of Justice Tulzapurkar of the Supreme Court.

• WHAT THE OTHERS SAY
Investors risk being too complacent about war in the Middle East.
— Financial Times

Under Nitish Kumar, Bihar's forward movement shows breadth & consistency

SHAMIKA RAVI

FOR DECADES, Bihar was widely grouped among the so-called "BIMARU" states, a term coined in the 1980s to describe states with weak development indicators. The label came to symbolise administrative drift, poor infrastructure, and an economy unable to keep pace with the rest of India. Bihar was often invoked as an example of persistent developmental failure.

However, the Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys of 2011-12 and 2023-24, spanning part of Nitish Kumar's tenure in office, suggest that this narrative no longer adequately describes the state. Bihar appears to have made substantial gains in living standards, sharply reduced poverty, improved nutritional affordability, and narrowed some of its gaps with the national average. A comparison with neighbouring West Bengal highlights the scale of this change. West Bengal began the period with higher incomes, lower poverty, and a stronger urban economy, yet its progress on several indicators is significantly slower over the same period.

In nominal terms, both states show large increases in household consumption expenditure. Bihar's rural monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) rose from Rs 1,086 to Rs 3,531, implying a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10.3 per cent, higher than the all-India rural figure of 9.1 per cent. West Bengal's rural nominal MPCE increased from Rs 1,211 to Rs 3,366, a CAGR of 8.9 per cent, below the national pace. Bihar's urban nominal MPCE grew at 10.7 per cent, while West Bengal recorded only 6.9 per cent, compared with India's urban growth of 8.4 per cent.

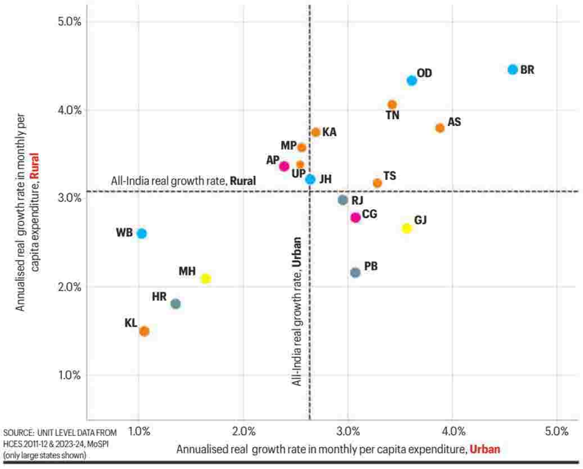
Nominal figures, however, can mislead when inflation differs across states. Once these values are adjusted using state-specific price indices, Bihar's relative improvement becomes clearer. Bihar's rural real MPCE grew at 4.5 per cent annually, about 50 per cent faster than the all-India rural pace of 3.1 per cent. Its urban real CAGR of 4.6 per cent also exceeded India's 2.6 per cent. West Bengal's growth was more modest: A rural real CAGR of 2.6 per cent and an urban real CAGR of 1.0 per cent. Expressed relative to the national average, the trend is even clearer. Bihar's rural MPCE rose from 80.5 per cent of the all-India figure to 91.7 per cent. Its urban ratio increased from 58.7 per cent to 75.4 per cent. West Bengal moved in the opposite direction. Its rural ratio declined from 89.8 per cent to 87.5 per cent, and its urban ratio fell from 97.5 per cent to 82.8 per cent.

Aggregate convergence can sometimes conceal uneven gains if growth benefits only the better-off. To examine this possibility, we consider real MPCE growth across the bottom 20 per cent, the middle 40-60 per cent, and the top 20 per cent. Bihar's gains appear broadly distributed. In rural areas, real MPCE for the bottom 20 per cent had a CAGR of 4.2 per cent. The middle quintile rose at 4.6 per cent, while the top 20 per cent increased at 4.4 per cent. The narrow range across quintiles suggests that gains were not concentrated among the better-off. In urban Bihar, the pattern is even more pro-poor. The bottom 20 per cent recorded growth of 5.7 per cent, the middle grew at 5.1 per cent, and the top 20 per cent at 3.6 per cent.

West Bengal presents a different picture. In rural areas, the bottom 20 per cent and middle quintile both grew at 3.1 per cent, while the top 20 per cent recorded 1.8 per cent. Urban trends are even weaker: The bottom 20 per cent grew at 3.2 per cent, the middle at 1.9 per cent, and the top 20 per cent recorded a negative CAGR of -0.4 per cent. On these estimates, real consumption of West Bengal's urban elite has fallen below their 2011-12 level.

> This evidence points to a substantial improvement in Bihar's economic position between 2011-12 and 2023-24. West Bengal, by contrast, shows weaker performance

• ANNUALISED REAL GROWTH RATE OF MONTHLY PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE ACROSS STATES, 2011-12 TO 2023-24



SOURCE: UNIT LEVEL DATA FROM HCES 2011-12 & 2023-24, MoSPI (only large states shown)

Convergence ratios reinforce this pattern. Bihar's rural bottom 20 per cent, which stood at 97.7 per cent of the all-India figure in 2011-12, rose to 101.0 per cent by 2023-24. Its rural middle quintile improved from 87.9 per cent to 98.4 per cent, while its rural top 20 per cent rose from 67.1 per cent to 87.0 per cent. In West Bengal, the ratios deteriorated across groups. Its rural bottom 20 per cent, once above the national average at 102.8 per cent, declined to 93.2 per cent, while its urban top 20 per cent fell from parity with the national average to 81.9 per cent by 2023-24.

Estimates based on the Rangarajan poverty line, updated to 2023-24 using state-level consumer price indices, indicate a sharp reduction in poverty in Bihar. In 2011-12, Bihar's poverty rate stood at 41.3 per cent. By 2023-24, it had fallen to 4.4 per cent — near parity with the all-India figure of 4.0 per cent. West Bengal began the period with a poverty rate 11 percentage points lower than Bihar's (30.4 per cent), yet by 2023-24, its estimated poverty rate is higher (6.0 per cent).

Another important welfare measure is whether households can afford a nutritionally recommended diet. In 2011–12, Bihar was the weakest performer among major states: 64.7 per cent of households could not afford a recommended diet, compared with 56.0 per cent in West Bengal and 49.0 per cent nationally. By 2023-24, Bihar had reduced this share to 27.4 per cent. This improvement exceeds that recorded in West Bengal (from 56.0 per cent to 34.6 per cent) and the all-India improvement of 25.9 percentage points.

This evidence points to a substantial improvement in Bihar's economic position between 2011-12 and 2023-24. West Bengal, by contrast, shows weaker performance.

These changes occurred during a long period of political stability and governance continuity under Nitish Kumar. Household survey data alone cannot establish a simple causal relationship; multiple factors may have contributed, including broader national changes, welfare expansion, migration, and inflation dynamics. Even so, the breadth and consistency of Bihar's improvement align with the possibility of a significant transformation in living standards. At the very least, the consumption data suggest that Bihar's long-standing image as a state of permanent economic failure is no longer tenable. That shift is an important part of Nitish Kumar's legacy.

The writer is member, EAC-PM

We need better unemployment data, policy must pivot to jobs

PULAPRE BALAKRISHNAN & SHARAD SULE

SELDOM DOES the release of official statistics on the economy receive such attention as did the announcement of a new GDP series on February 27. The data have been interpreted as encouraging for the government. The growth rate for the last full year for which data are available, i.e., 2024-25, has been revised upwards a notch, while the growth rate for the previous year, i.e., 2023-24, has been revised downwards substantially. However, for those promoting the "India growth story" this downward revision changes nothing as India remains the "fastest-growing major economy" in the world.

As one of us showed in a 1994 article with Kesavan Pushpangadan, the "double-deflation" method of estimating GDP — the principal innovation in the latest estimates — is a powerful approach. Yet, as economists we find the focus on production, which is what GDP captures, out of all proportion. Unemployment should be given as much importance as GDP or inflation in an assessment of the state of the economy. If we choose to look at the unemployment data, the picture looks far less rosy than that for either of these indicators. For the 10 months before January 2026, the unemployment rate (current weekly status) has averaged 5.2 per cent. In the first year prior to 2014 for which National Sample Survey (NSS) estimates are available, i.e., 2011-12, it was 3.7 per cent. 2011 would be an appropriate benchmark year as the effects of both the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Mukherjee Stimulus, named for the then finance minister, may be expected to have subsided. What is notable is that the unemployment rate has been higher every year since 2011, even if it has been falling of late. These figures are for the population as a whole. When we focus on youth unemployment, i.e., the unemployed in the cohort 15 to 29 years, the pattern is the same. The youth unemployment rate (usual status) in 2011-12 was 7.7 per cent and in 2023-24 it was 10.2 per cent. The economic policies of the Narendra Modi-led governments have thus far not succeeded in lowering the unemployment rate to the level it had inherited.


ILLUSTRATION: MITHUN CHAKRABORTY

The unemployment rate does not figure commensurately in the official pronouncements on the economy made from time to time. The latest Economic Survey speaks of policies "pushing the growth frontier" and having "tamed and anchored" inflation. The statement on inflation is contestable. While it is true that inflation right now is at its lowest in a decade and a half, what lowered it is open to question. Econometric investigation reveals no role in this outcome for monetary policy, the RBI's *raison d'être*. On the other hand, it reveals a definite role for agricultural prices, notably food, in determining the path of inflation. Food price inflation moves according to variation in the growth of agriculture. The just-released GDP data estimate agricultural growth to have been an extraordinarily high 4.2 per cent in 2024-25. So, it is not surprising that food inflation is down. It is just that we do not have a sufficiently clear idea whether its most recent record is due to policy intervention or a benign turn by nature. But what can be asserted is that the Economic Survey does not treat inflation and unemployment equally. It has presented data on inflation from 2011 onward, serving to draw attention to its decline since but does not afford similar treatment to the data on unemployment. Had the data on the unemployment rate been presented for the same period, the fact that unemployment today is high by historic standards would have become apparent.

Economic policy must now pivot towards jobs. However, even as employment generation is given more attention, a scrutiny of the methodology of measuring unemployment needs to be done. A puzzle presents itself when viewing the time series on the unemployment rate according to the Periodic Labour Force Survey. India's experience comes across as unique in that the unemployment rate declined during the Covid year of 2020-21 when output contracted by close to 7 per cent. In the United States, for instance, unemployment had surged during the pandemic, though the economy contracted far less. An explanation of the Indian case by the NSSO would help create greater confidence in the unemployment data.

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Letters To The Editor

Tehran's reply

THE MESSAGE of the election of Mojtaba Khamenei as Iran's Supreme Leader by the 88-member Assembly of Experts after the assassination of his father Ali Khamenei, defying the Trump administration, is loud and clear ('To end the war, it will take three', *IE*, February 11). Iran is resolute in its opposition to the US's imperial ways. With the people rallying behind the present regime, there is no sign of "regime change". The missile strike on a girls' school in Iran showed the US's true face.

C David Milton, Maruthancode

THE POTUS has a penchant for dramatic thrusts followed by swift disengagement, be it tariffs, diplomacy, or war. The strike on Iran, nudged by an anxious and exasperated Israel, follows that script ('To end the war, it will take three', *IE*, February 11). Yet Tehran's riposte lies not in battlefield parity but in choking energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz, triggering the predictable oil shock. That squeeze could ironically hand Washington its exit cue: Declare deterrence restored and step back before markets and allies revolt. Israel seeks a deeper degradation of Iran's military capacity. The endgame will hinge on which narrative prevails: America's need for a quick closure or Israel's quest for a finality it may never achieve.

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

India's Achilles' heel

India, which imports a large portion of its crude oil and natural gas via the Strait of Hormuz, has already begun to feel the ripples of US-Iran conflict via rising fuel costs ('Facing down the spectre of energy crisis', *IE*, March 11). Gas, which has significantly lower storage days than crude oil, becomes a more critical concern for the country amid prolonged supply disruptions. Though India has built several alternatives, the current crisis is a stark reminder of gas being India's Achilles' heel.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

Despite majority, RSP will tread a rough road in Nepal

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE

THE RASTRIYA Swatantra Party swept the March 2026 elections in Nepal, and Balendra Shah — who defeated K P Sharma Oli — is all set to become prime minister. The election signalled a sweeping rejection of the parties that have ruled the country over the past two decades. Except for three-time prime minister and long-time Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as Prachanda, no national or regional party chiefs won their seats. Dahal secured victory from Rukum East, the epicentre of the Maoist insurgency that began in 1996 and ended in 2006, but he contested from a different formation — the Nepali Communist Party.

The RSP, with a nearly two-thirds majority of its own in the House — an unprecedented achievement — will have the strength to pursue constitutional amendments. Yet doubts persist about its ability to hold together for long. Shah's charisma and RSP chief Rabi Lamichhane's hold over the organisation together attracted voters, mostly the youth, as well as those loyal to traditional parties but angered and frustrated with their leaders. Good governance, an end to corruption, and political stability have consistently emerged as the Nepali people's principal aspirations in various surveys. Shah's real challenge lies there. Past cycles of high promise followed by poor delivery have discredited almost every top leader or prime minister in recent decades.

Shah, who is about to turn 36, does not have much experience of governance. But during his more than three years as mayor of Kathmandu — until his resignation in December — even some of his symbolic moves earned him a reputation as a sharp, calculating risk-taker and a leader willing to act. He was ruthless in keeping the city clean, removing encroachers and even confronting the prime minister of the day on corruption issues. As mayor, he took a hard line against both India and China. He banned the screening of *Adipurush*, a Hindi film in which Sita was shown as having been born in India. He also opposed the inclusion of Lumbini in the map of India in the mural in the new Parliament House.

> As mayor, Balendra Shah took a hard line against both India and China. He banned the screening of 'Adipurush', a Hindi film in which Sita was shown as having been born in India

But being an independent mayor of a city and the prime minister of a country are different things. India welcomed the RSP victory, and PM Narendra Modi personally called Shah and Lamichhane, separately reiterating India's commitment to work together "for mutual prosperity, progress and well-being of our two countries". The US sent its congratulations and expressed its willingness to work for "shared goals of prosperity and security". China's suggestion of a "strategic partnership" is no less important. The indications are clear: External interest in Nepal, both from its neighbourhood and from farther afield, is set to increase, and its effects will inevitably trickle down into domestic politics as well.

Despite its absolute majority, the RSP may have to tread a rough road as it assumes power. D P Aryal, a trusted deputy of Lamichhane, had to retract his statement after saying the party had no knowledge of the understanding that Shah would become prime minister. Others insist that it is Shah's prerogative to decide the composition of the cabinet, especially to avoid the splits and the fall of governments that have characterised Nepal's politics in the past two decades.

During and after the announcement of the poll results, Shah, Lamichhane and Swarnim Wagle — a likely finance minister — were seen visiting temples and posting photographs on social media. This has been widely interpreted as a response to the large number of voters who had urged them to restore Nepal's "Hindu Kingdom" status. Finally, the Nepali Army, which had acted as a platform for negotiation when the Gen Z protests led to the fall of the Oli government, may emerge as an increasingly influential force in governance and politics. The impact on democracy of the army having an outsized role is yet to be seen but it has proved itself to be trustworthy in times of crisis.

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In a world of hard power, who sets the terms for AI?

BHARATH REDDY AND SHOBHANKITA REDDY

ANTHROPIC AND the Department of War (DoW) are locked in a standoff over how far the military should be allowed to go with frontier AI. At the centre of this clash are two red lines that Anthropic insists on for its models: No mass domestic surveillance and no fully autonomous weapons. In response, the DoW has designated the company as a "supply chain risk", a label previously reserved for US adversaries, and never before applied to an American company.

The US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth stated on X that "no contractor, supplier, or partner that does business with the United States military may conduct any commercial activity with Anthropic". As legally untenable as that sounds, it is an existential risk for Anthropic if it is cut off from being offered by major cloud service providers. While the company could challenge this designation in court, a negotiated settlement that allows the DoW to use the technology for "all lawful purposes", in line with what it has been advocating, is likely.

This episode has established a precedent. The Trump administration is willing to repurpose tools designed for foreign adversaries for use against domestic companies. In doing so, it is trying to establish that private companies that spearhead general-purpose technologies with vast civilian applications have obligations to the state beyond their terms of service when the technology is "spun on" for military use.

Second, it is only a matter of time before Anthropic falls in line. Amid the clash with the DoW, the company's rival, OpenAI, has been quick to accept a permissive contract for military-use cases. This is an undesirable outcome for Anthropic.

Third, the irony here is hard to miss. Anthropic and other frontier AI companies spent years building the case that the technology is so powerful that it compares to nuclear weapons and requires non-proliferation controls. Now the US government is using that very logic to argue that such a powerful technology cannot be left to a private company's discretion.

> In its clash with Hegseth, it is only a matter of time before Anthropic falls in line. The company's rival, OpenAI, has been quick to accept a permissive contract for military-use cases

Finally, despite the company's safety guardrails, there are reports that Claude, its family of language models, was used in US operations in Venezuela and Iran. While generative AI is described as a "country of geniuses in a data centre" that may surpass human intelligence within a year or two, this suggests that this technology is being used to make lethal decisions in military operations. However, the most likely use cases for generative AI in military operations today would be to augment text-, code-, analysis-, and simulation-heavy work, not serving as an autonomous entity making kill decisions.

Given that the current state of military AI technologies may be popularly misunderstood, both Anthropic's red lines and the Pentagon's heavy-handedness seem somewhat performative. Anthropic has positioned itself as a responsible AI lab, and standing up to the DoW appears to be an effort to stay true to its brand. However, the real fight does not seem to be about present use cases as much as who gets to set the terms for the future.

The writers are researchers in technology geopolitics with the Takshashila Institution, Bengaluru. Views are personal

• HARISH RANA CASE

The framework behind SC's euthanasia verdict

India has no passive euthanasia law. The top court's order is the first application of its framework on the issue, shaped by previous rulings

AMAAL SHEIKH

THE SUPREME Court Wednesday permitted the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment for 32-year-old Harish Rana, who has been in a vegetative state since 2013 when a fall left him with a severe head injury. This is the first ever Indian court order approving passive euthanasia.

A bench of Justices J B Pardiwala and K V Viswanathan directed that "the medical treatment, including Clinically Assisted Nutrition, being administered to the applicant, shall be withdrawn and withheld".

The court directed the All India Institute of Medical Sciences to carry out a palliative end-of-life care plan so that his final stage is managed with comfort and dignity. It also waived the usual 30-day reconsideration period, a cooling-off window meant to allow objections before treatment is withdrawn, noting that both medical boards and the family were unanimous that treatment had become futile.

Reflecting on the nature of the decision, the court observed: "Our decision today does not neatly fit within logic and reason alone. It sits in a space between love, loss, medicine and mercy. This decision is not about choosing death, but is rather one of not artificially prolonging life."

In 2024, Rana's father approached the Delhi HC seeking permission to withdraw life-sustaining treatment, but the petition was dismissed on the ground that he was not terminally ill. The family then moved the Supreme Court, which, in 2025, constituted primary and secondary medical boards. Both concluded his condition was irreversible with negligible chances of recovery.

"In our considered opinion," the bench said, "the greatest tragedy in life is not death, but abandonment."

What does the law say on euthanasia?

Assisted dying involves intentionally causing death through the administration of a lethal injection.

In India, this directly attracts criminal liability and may amount to culpable homicide under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. When a doctor assists the patient in performing the act, criminal liability arises for abetment to suicide. Attempted suicide continues to be an offence, even though the Supreme Court has repeatedly observed that a person attempting suicide requires care, not punishment.

VIDHEESHA KUNYAMALLA/FILE

ABHINAV SAHA/FILE

A family photo of Harish Rana (left); and his father arranging his documents at their residence in 2024.

Withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment is treated differently because it involves stopping or not initiating medical intervention and allowing the underlying illness or injury to take its course. This distinction flows from Article 21, the "right to life", which the Supreme Court has interpreted to include the right to live with dignity. For terminally ill or persistently vegetative patients whose life is "ebbing out", the court has held that the Constitution protects the choice not to be kept alive through invasive or futile medical intervention.

Court's rulings on euthanasia

The Supreme Court's order allowing the withdrawal of Rana's treatment is the first application of its passive euthanasia framework, shaped largely by rulings on end-of-life decisions rather than law.

The judicial position was set out in *Aruna Ramchandra Shanbaug v. Union of India* (2011). The court reaffirmed its earlier decision in *Gian Kaur v. State of Punjab* (1996) that Article 21 does not include a general "right to die". Assisted dying remained outside constitutional protection.

At the same time, the Bench recognised that the right to live with dignity may, in limited circumstances, include a dignified death. The court observed that a premature end to life for a patient in a terminal condition or persistent vegetative state "may fall within the ambit of the 'right to die' with dignity as a part of right to live with dignity, when death due to termination of natural life is certain and imminent and the process of natural death has commenced".

It drew a distinction. Assisted death — actively causing death — remained illegal. But withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment could be permitted.

Even so, the court declined permission in Shanbaug's case. Shanbaug, a nurse at Mumbai's KEM Hospital, was sexually assaulted in 1973 and remained in a vegetative state for decades. The court noted that she could "certainly not be called dead": her brain stem was functioning, she breathed without a ventilator, and she showed responses such as blinking or reacting to food. The nurses who had cared for her opposed any withdrawal of treatment.

Since there was no legislation governing such decisions, the court framed interim guidelines. A decision to withdraw life support could be taken by family members, doctors, or a "next friend", acting "bona fide in the best interest of the patient".

But implementation required approval from the High Court. A Bench of two judges would consider the request after obtaining the opinion of a committee of three doctors.

The issue returned to the court in *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018). A Constitution Bench held that the right to die with dignity is an inseparable facet of Article 21. Withdrawing or withholding life-sustaining treatment, the court said, merely "accelerat[es] conclusion of the process of natural death which has already commenced". The judgment also recognised Advance Medical Directives, allowing adults to record in advance their wishes regarding refusal or withdrawal of medical treatment.

> **The lack of a law**
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> Parliament has not enacted a comprehensive law governing euthanasia or end-of-life care.
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> •
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> The SC said about this on Wednesday: 'There are moments when legislative inaction speaks more loudly than legislative action.'

But the safeguards created in 2018 proved difficult to implement. Advance directives had to be signed by two witnesses and countersigned by a judicial magistrate, and hospitals had to involve multiple authorities and medical boards.

In 2023, the court acknowledged that the framework had created "insurmountable obstacles". It simplified the process: advance directives can now be attested before a notary or gazetted officer and stored in digital health records.

Hospitals constitute two medical boards — a primary board and a secondary board with an external nominee — with doctors having at least five years' experience. The Collector's role and mandatory magistrate visits were removed, though hospitals must inform the magistrate before implementing withdrawal of treatment.

What did the SC say on Wednesday?

The question before the court was whether the artificial feeding that had sustained Rana's biological survival for more than a decade could legally be treated as a "medical treatment" and whether discontinuing that support would amount to unlawful euthanasia or a constitutionally permitted withdrawal of life support.

The Delhi High Court had previously rejected the family's plea. It said that Rana was not dependent on mechanical life support because he could breathe on his own. The SC disagreed with that interpretation. Artificial nutrition delivered through a PEG tube, the bench held, cannot be equated with ordinary feeding. It is instead a part of a medically supervised intervention requiring clinical judgment and professional oversight.

The court described Clinically Assisted Nutrition and Hydration (CANH) as "a technologically mediated medical intervention that is prescribed, supervised and periodically reviewed by trained healthcare professionals in accordance with established medical standards." This classification was decisive for the legal analysis. Under the *Common Cause* framework, treatment can only be withdrawn when it ceases to serve the patient's interests. If artificial feeding were treated merely as sustenance, doctors would have no legal basis to discontinue it even when it had become futile. By recognising CANH as medical treatment, the court placed decisions regarding its continuation or withdrawal "within the realm of clinical judgment", allowing physicians to assess whether the intervention continued to serve any therapeutic purpose.

Withdrawing life-supporting care: The procedure and the hurdles

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, March 11

THE SUPREME Court on Wednesday allowed the withdrawal of life-supporting care for Harish Rana, 32, who has been in a vegetative state for years. While there are no laws on this in India, here's a look at the draft guidelines for such a procedure.

First, what's the difference between active and passive euthanasia?

Active euthanasia is a process in which a physician may prescribe a lethal drug or injection to relieve the suffering of a person with no hope of recovery. It is legal in countries such as the US, Canada, Australia, and parts of Europe — but not in India.

Passive euthanasia means allowing a person to die naturally by withholding life-sustaining treatment. Patients or their families can refuse treatments such as cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, ventilator support, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, dialysis or specialised nutrition.

What is the procedure for passive euthanasia in India?

In 2024, the Union Health Ministry released a set of draft guidelines, based on the top court's 2023 directives, detailing the process hospitals must follow to withhold or withdraw care.

- First, the treating physician needs to decide if the patient has any hope of recovery or having a good quality of life if treatment measures remain in place.
- Then, a primary board has to assess the case and reach a consensus. This board comprises the treating physician and two subject experts with five or more years of experience.
- The doctors then need to discuss the prognosis with family and whether they want any other treatment. A shared decision has to be taken and the team of doctors has to come up with a consistent plan for care.
- If the doctors and the family decide that the measures should be withdrawn, they need to submit a request to be submitted to a secondary medical board. This board consists of a doctor nominated by the chief medical officer (CMO) of a district and two subject experts with five or more years of experience. This board has to take a decision within 48 hours. Hospitals must also inform magistrates before withdrawal of treatment, though their approval is not required.

> **The legal precedent**
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> - In its 2011 ruling in the Aruna Shanbaug case, the SC held that passive euthanasia cases would need to be approved by High Court.
> - Another set of guidelines in 2018 modified the procedure and laid foundation for the legally valid advanced medical directives. This also required going to a judicial magistrate for approval.
> - Latest guidelines, in 2023, allowed two medical boards to take the decision with consent of next of kin or nominated person.

The hurdles

Dhvani Mehta, co-founder of the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy and one of the counsel representing Harish Rana's family, said that issues remain despite the top court simplifying the process in 2023.

"It is still difficult to find doctors with a sufficient level of expertise and experience in all hospitals. And, when it comes to the secondary medical board, the process requires the CMO to send in the list of nominated doctors," Mehta said.

She said that very few states have commenced the process of actually creating this list of nominated doctors for the secondary medical board. These include states such as Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka.

Dr Sushma Bhatnagar, former head of the palliative care team at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, said: "It is easier to withdraw such life sustaining measures after thoroughly counselling the family members in a government hospital. Many private hospitals, however, are afraid of litigation."

Dr Bhatnagar has, however, instituted a similar practice in Delhi's Indraprastha Apollo hospital where she now works. "Patients and their family members understand the pain of prolonging life through such measures. What is required is clear communication that can help them understand that they have done everything. There is a lot of guilt that families face over such a decision," says Dr Bhatnagar.

How can living wills help?

What has made the process easier is knowing the patient's wishes through a living will. These directives allow terminal patients to create a legal document choosing the measures that they would like or would not like to have done to them when they no longer have the capacity to decide.

It allows them to choose the type of care they would like to receive, the gender they would like to be addressed as, and it allows a patient to nominate a person to take their medical decisions, which could be someone other than their family.

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

How airstrikes triggered black rain in Tehran

Abhishek Chakraborty
New Delhi, March 11

WHEN TEHRAN residents stepped outside into the rain on Sunday morning, they were not greeted by the usual grey drizzle, but by oily, soot-laden droplets coating cars, clothes, and skin. On the night of March 7, Israeli strikes hit four oil storage facilities and an oil production transfer centre in Tehran and the province of Alborz, igniting large fires that burned for hours. The targets included the Aghdasieh oil warehouse in northeast Tehran, the Shahran oil depot, and the Tehran refinery in the south. This "black rain", dozens of miles away from the disaster site, has proven to be one of the war's most alarming consequences.

How did the black rain form?

The explosions reportedly released significant quantities of toxic hydrocarbon compounds, sulfur, and nitrogen oxides into the air. As rain moved through the pollutant-saturated skies over the city, it absorbed these chemicals and fell back down as oily, blackened precipitation.

Scientists explained that the black rain resulted from a weather pattern bringing rain into the area, which combined with particles already suspended in the atmosphere.

> **TOXIC EFFECT**
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> - The US-Israel strikes on Iran caused a massive release of toxic hydrocarbons, sulfur oxides, and nitrogen compounds into the air.
> - Inhaling or touching the smoke or particles could cause headaches, skin irritation and difficulty in breathing.
> - The rain could also cause serious lung damage and chemical burns to the skin.

What are the health risks from the black rain?

On Tuesday, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that black and acidic rain falling over Tehran poses a real danger to the population, primarily to respiratory health. It backed Iran's advisory urging people to remain indoors.

According to WHO spokesperson Christian Lindmeier, the strikes caused a massive release of toxic hydrocarbons, sulfur oxides, and nitrogen compounds into the air. Scientists said inhaling or touching the smoke or particles could cause headaches, skin and eye irritation, and difficulty breathing — and that longer-term exposure to some compounds increases cancer risk.

The Iranian Red Crescent warned that the rain could cause serious lung damage and chemical burns to the skin.

Petroleum mixtures contain thousands of hydrocarbons, including benzene, which areextremely toxic. The potential for severe long-term consequences is very real.

Tehran was already vulnerable before the first strike landed. Given the city's location, surrounded by mountains, as well as its dense urban layout, air does not circulate as it should, and pollutants remain in the air, pushed downward and inward.

Black rain and the curse of 'forever chemicals'

The black rain crisis may outlast the fires. Scientists warned that forever chemicals — likely present in flame retardants built into the facilities — could contaminate groundwater and become airborne, ending up back in the rain. Acid rain, depending on concentration, could also accelerate corrosion of buildings already weakened by Tehran's chronic air quality problems. In its latest report, the Conflict and Environment Observatory tracked over 232 incidents with environmental risk since the conflict began. It warned of contamination of vegetation that could expose humans and animals to toxic compounds through the food chain.

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

Iran-Arab ties: Tehran's survival could lead to a new geopolitical contract

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS
SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH, NEW DELHI

THE US-ISRAELI war on Iran has entered its 13th day. Even as Tehran's response has seen a barrage of drones and missiles aimed at US bases across all Gulf states, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian last week apologised to Arab states for the damage incurred and said that Tehran had "no intention of aggression against them". The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) reiterated this, with a commitment to respecting Arab sovereignty.

Both messages were meant to reinforce two objectives: that Iran would continue targeting these bases if they sustained attacks against Iran, and that Tehran would stop these retaliatory attacks if the US ceased their use in this war.

Mistaking this as a "surrender", US President Donald Trump sought to drive perceived US-Israeli military advantages home by striking Iran's oil facilities and the Qeshm Island desalination plant. Iran retaliated by reciprocally hitting a desalination plant in Bahrain.

So, what effects have these developments had on Iran-Arab relations?

First-order effects

All Arab states continue to seek conflict termination. A major indicator is that Gulf states, except Bahrain, have not joined the US-Israeli action against Iran so far.

Iran's attacks have forced Gulf energy giants such as QatarEnergy, Bahrain's BAPCO, and Kuwait Petroleum Company to declare force majeure (a serious, unexpected event exempting fulfilment of contract), while Saudi Aramco has partially halted operations. This now risks oil being potentially set at $150 per barrel and makes it exponentially worse than even the 1973 oil crisis.

Insurance rates have skyrocketed owing to Iran's threat to attack US-Israeli shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, grounding Gulf energy shipping to an unprecedented halt. Iran has also dented the image of cities like Dubai as shining economic engines isolated from recurring regional violence.

Broadly, the war has ruptured Arab trust in Washington. The US ordering an unprecedented mass evacuation of Americans from the Gulf, and partially or completely shuttering most regional embassies has reinforced this.

Throughout 2025, Arab states committed to massive investments in the US economy, with Qatar even gifting President Trump a $400 million Boeing 747. For these states, the US attacking Iran without any clearly achievable war aims or regard for Arab concerns, represented the first evidence of low Arab influence on Washington. The assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei guaranteeing substantial — and not limited — Iranian strikes on Gulf territories, was the second.

The continuing inconsistency of American war aims has further infuriated Gulf capitals. This war worsens the Arab effort to stabilise the region for investor confidence, which has already been dented by Israel's wars since 2023.

Second-order effects

Militarily, Arab states now face a Tehran that can establish regional dominance through punishment despite American security presence, even as Tehran says it attacks because of US presence. Saudi Arabia has long been acutely cognisant of overreliance on US equipment, spurring it to focus on building a new domestic military industry ecosystem.

Presently, Gulf Arab forces remain underprepared. The presumably mistaken Kuwaiti shootdown of three American fighter jets exemplifies their unfamiliarity with modern wartime pressures.

Politically, since 1979, Tehran's revolutionary outlook has presented the threat of spillover effects — the potential for Shia populations to rise against Sunni governments. Especially in Bahrain, with a Sunni royal family ruling an 80% Shia population without democratic freedoms, this risk has been potent.

Beyond the sectarian risk, the war has also ignited long simmering anti-US sentiments across Gulf populations — fuelled further by Israel's actions in Gaza, which Arab states officially deem a genocide.

Iran's potential regional dominance

Iran continues to prioritise friendly ties with "brotherly" Arab states. Tehran's 2026 reassurances are similar to its apologetic reassertions of fraternal ties to Qatar in 2025, when Iran symbolically retaliated against Al Udeid airbase in Doha after the US's Operation Midnight Hammer. Last week's statements by Pezeshkian and the IRGC, or Iran's "gratitude" to Riyadh for "not allowing" its territory to be used for anti-Iranian action, not only seek to clarify Iran's anti-US (and not anti-Arab) focus but to also ensure that the war does not escalate horizontally. Iran also seeks to prevent drawing other Arab security arrangements, such as the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement.

But for Arab states, the concerns are larger. Ideally, they would prefer to continue their post-2019 rationale of prioritising reconciliation (for instance, the Riyadh-Tehran rapprochement of 2023) in order to help preserve regional stability.

Now, Iran has successfully highlighted both the cost of Gulf states hosting American bases and relying on Washington for security — and reinforced the Arab need for stronger domestic military capabilities. Even if Arab states join in the war, Tehran's survival under new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei and its now-proven ability to absorb military and economic pain and upend Arab economic stability will be the most enduring influence on long-term Iran-Arab relations. Arab states and Tehran will then search for a new geopolitical contract.

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Rethinking FDI

Policy must evolve with changing realities

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday approved changes to rules governing investment from countries sharing land borders with India, otherwise called land-border countries (LBCs). This is a pragmatic decision. However, India's regime of foreign direct investment (FDI) needs to evolve with the changing global economic and geopolitical environment. The Union government had restricted FDI from LBCs in 2020 through Press Note 3. It was then argued that the change attempted to curb opportunistic acquisitions of Indian companies during the crisis caused by the pandemic. As a result, entities from countries that shared land borders with India were allowed to invest only through the government route. One of the reasons for the policy change was to restrict investment from China due to border tensions. Once those tensions eased and the pandemic's impact receded, Indian businesses started demanding a relaxation in restrictions. On its part, the government selectively allowed such investment from LBCs, particularly China. The success in developing an ecosystem for Apple Inc is a notable example.

Given the changes in the economic environment over the past few years, the government has done well to review the policy. Investment from entities with non-controlling LBC beneficial ownership of up to 10 per cent will now be permitted through the automatic route, subject to the applicable sectoral cap and other conditions. Investment will also be subject to reporting relevant information and details to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. Further, entities from LBCs wishing to invest in specific sectors — such as capital goods, electronic components, electronic capital goods, and polysilicon — will have their proposals processed and decided within 60 days. The Committee of Secretaries, under the Cabinet secretary, is empowered to revise the list. The guidelines note that the majority holding and control of the investee entity must be with resident Indian citizens or Indian entities controlled by resident Indian citizens.

The revised guidelines should help improve the ease of doing business and attract FDI. From a policy standpoint, it is not easy for any large country to exclude China, the world's second-largest economy, from its broader economic calculations. The decision also comes at an important juncture because India needs to attract FDI. Given the uncertainty in the global financial system, India is facing capital outflows and is running a deficit in the balance of payments. A sustained deficit on the capital account could significantly complicate external-sector management.

However, given the geopolitical sensitivities, there is a need to review the overall FDI regime. There are genuine concerns about China, and several countries across the world are calibrating their relations with the country. In the present context, scrutinising investment coming from specific countries may not be enough. Despite the guidelines on beneficiary ownership, it may not always be possible to determine whether investment coming from, say, Singapore or European countries is not from entities controlled by Chinese capital. Again, one could argue why interests should be protected only against Chinese capital. What India needs is to identify a set of sectors it views as strategic and which a hostile country can use to undermine its interests. In other words, India needs to spot sectors in which it will develop its own capabilities or be in partnership with select trusted countries. The rest can be liberally opened up for foreign investment. India needs large doses of foreign investment to supplement domestic savings to achieve higher growth rates. But in a world that is becoming increasingly unpredictable by the day, it must also safeguard its strategic interests.

Misguided strategy

Andhra's population policy weakens women's freedom

Andhra Pradesh has become the first state to announce a population-management policy to encourage families to have more children. The state plans to reverse the age-old "*Hum Do, Hamare Do*" family-planning campaign, which helped reduce the national total fertility rate (TFR) to about 2 from 3.2 in 2000, by offering an incentive of ₹25,000 to couples that have a second or third child and subsidising in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment. This payout is driven by anxieties that the state's TFR has fallen to 1.5, significantly below the replacement level of 2.1. The apprehension is that decelerating population growth could impact the state's representation in Parliament ahead of a potential delimitation exercise as well as its access to funding under Finance Commission allocations linked to each state's population. These are not invalid concerns, and the progressive southern states have all expressed similar reservations. However, this approach is inappropriate.

For one, it reflects narrow ethnocentricity, which is out of sync with a country as integrated as India. This assumption would make implementing the policy problematic. If "identity" is defined by geographical boundaries, then Andhra Pradesh has significant cohorts of settlers from other parts of India. Would a Punjabi or Bengali domiciled in the state for decades be eligible for the subsidy? Though not explicitly stated, the policy undoubtedly aims to boost the Telugu population. However, large numbers of Telugu people inhabit other states, with Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra being the most prominent. Would the policy address their concerns? The nativist focus of the policy, a grim emulation of practices increasingly followed in the United States and Europe, sets a poor precedent for states with similar TFR records. It overlooks the fact that as part of India, the state can augment talent and skills from anywhere in the country. Migration has been the backbone of economic growth. The country's most dynamic cities — Kolkata in the past, or Mumbai, Bengaluru, Gurugram, or Hyderabad today — are the most cosmopolitan, having been built on the toils of blue- and white-collar migrants.

The policy also runs the risk of creating adverse outcomes. The first concerns the quality of human capital. Given that India's and Andhra Pradesh's falling TFR is the result of improved education and incomes, most of the subsidy could well be accessed by poorer families with less wherewithal to sustain larger families. The state has recognised this issue with generous add-ons, such as a ₹1,000 monthly nutrition support for the third child up to five years and free education in government institutions for the second and third child up to the age of 18 years. But these in no way cover the full cost of raising a child in optimum conditions. So far, no country that has offered similar incentives has managed to reverse falling TFRs. The second perverse consequence concerns women's rights. Falling TFRs typically reflect improvement in women's education and, to an extent, their growing agency within society. Smaller families reduce the childcare burden for women and enable them to explore opportunities in education or professional careers. This is no small achievement. In a patriarchal country like India, offering incentives to have more children could narrow women's freedom of choice and reverse decades of hard-won social progress.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

A tilted balance

The Finance Commission ignores Union govt's fiscal laxity while questioning state profligacy

POLICY PILLARS

M GOVINDA RAO

Given the asymmetric distribution in the assignment of revenue and expenditure powers between the Union and the states, the founding fathers of the Constitution provided for the appointment of Finance Commissions every five years to determine fiscal transfers through tax devolution and grants-in-aid to the states. The transfers are to be determined by assessing the revenue-raising capacities and expenditure needs arising from the assignments of the Union and the states. In making these assessments, judgements are unavoidable.

As Justice P V Rajamannar, the chairman of the Fourth Finance Commission, stated, the assessment is a "...gamble on the personal views of five persons, or a majority of them." Nevertheless, in exercising these judgements, they are expected to follow (i) the assignment system detailed in the Seventh Schedule; (ii) concerns about macroeconomic stability and the developmental needs of the Union and individual states; and (iii) clarity in functional domains. As the Commission is supposed to be an arbiter and a semi-judicial expert body, it is required to be impartial.

The Sixteenth Finance Commission states that its approach was to consider the "available" and "required" revenue resources with the Union and the states to bridge the gap and to estimate additional revenue effort and expenditure economy at both levels of government to "rework the available" and "required" resources, repeating the exercise until the acceptable balance is achieved. The shares in the divisible pool are determined in line with this balance (p.18).

While making the assessment of Union government finances, the Commission is quite appreciative of the restraint exercised by the Union government during the pandemic and the reduction in deficits and debt since the spike that took place in the pandemic year. However, it simply ignores the fact that, except in 2007-08, in none of the years since the FRBM Act was adopted in August, 2003 has the Union government complied with the deficit and debt targets set by successive Finance Commissions, on one pretext or another.

Ironically, the target itself should have been revised downwards as the household sector's financial savings, which determines the borrowing space, have steadily declined from 10 per cent in 2002-03, when the Twelfth Finance Commission determined the target, to 7.4 per cent in 2011-12 and further to 5.1 per cent in 2023-24. The Union government has been shifting goalposts and changing definitions or offering explanations for the slippages. With the aggregate fiscal deficit substantially exceeding the available borrowing space, the corporate sector is faced with an elevated cost of borrowing, vitiating the investment climate, or is forced to seek external funds to finance investments.

Even in making the assessments, the tilt comes out clearly. The Commission rightly flags the problems of the discoms and the profligacy arising from the proliferation of subsidies and transfers at the state level, but looks the other way when it comes to even greater largesse by the Union government.

Apart from the explicit subsidies given in the Budget, the Union government has approved multiple, massive, multi-year bailout packages for BSNL and MTNL, involving ₹2.3 trillion in combined relief packages (2019, 2022, 2023), 4G/5G spectrum allocation, and debt restructuring.

Under the Rozgar Mela initiated by the Prime Minister on October 22, 2022, aimed at recruiting one million personnel across Union government ministries and departments in mission mode, over 1.1 million appointment letters have already been issued.

Under the PM-KISAN scheme launched in February 2019 to provide income support to landholding farmer families across India, over ₹4.09 trillion has been disbursed to more than 110 million farmers until November 2025. Are these not transfers initiated for political reasons? These are only some examples. The Commission simply chose to ignore them.

The biggest twist in the tale is the Commission's treatment of the Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) and their financing through cesses and surcharges. The Commission states that these schemes account for 50 per cent of the transfers from the Union to the states and constitute 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product. Given that states are required to contribute 40 per cent of the cost of these schemes, a substantially higher share of their funds gets conscripted to meet central priorities, violating the basic tenet of fiscal federalism (or Oates's decentralisation theorem).

Even as the Commission admits that there is no mechanism to review the efficacy and efficiency of these schemes, it states "the CSS have played a crucial role in the nation's development," and considers them an essential part of the Union's expenditure needs, making projections based on past trends.

Surely, there is a case for specific-purpose transfers in any federation to ensure minimum standards in respect of those services having significant nation-wide externalities or "merit goods". But that requires defining minimum standards, estimating the expenditure required for the purpose, and monitoring their implementation. How many of the 80 umbrella schemes in operation follow this? While most of the schemes are micro-managed by requiring the states to prepare detailed budget under various components within each scheme, there are no clear outcome or even input targets defined. The failure to comply with conditionalities results in the distribution of funds to those states that comply, defeating the very purpose of ensuring minimum standards.

Besides, some of the schemes were the universalisation of schemes adopted earlier by some states. The mid-day meal scheme for schoolchildren, which is now called PM Poshan, was started by Tamil Nadu, and MGNREGA (now renamed G-RAM-G) evolved from the "Food for Work" programme of Maharashtra.

Indeed, the schemes like elementary education, basic healthcare and water supply and sanitation are important, but it is necessary to specify the minimum outcome standards, work out the finding requirements, design the schemes and implement them according to the ground situation in different states.

Economist Martin Feldstein suggested varying matching ratios among states in financing school education in the United States. ("Wealth Neutrality and Local Choice in Public Education", *American Economic Review*, March 1975; pp. 75-89). It is not enough to claim that the CSS have improved the service levels. The critical issue is whether they have achieved the objective of ensuring minimum standards, howsoever defined. Most of the schemes belong to functions in the State List. How can a Constitutional Commission endorse such encroachment by eroding the divisible pool of resources?

As mentioned earlier, these schemes are financed from the cesses and surcharges levied on taxes. Surely, there is justification for raising revenue by levying surcharges under Article 271 for meeting exigencies such as war, famine, and pandemics, but this cannot be used as a regular source to finance CSS by eroding the size of the divisible pool.

The Commission admits that the "economic efficiency argument dictates that reliance on cesses and surcharges as the sources of revenue except for short-term specific needs is undesirable", but it is unwilling even to express the view that the practice is pernicious and not in the interest of sound finance or healthy Union-state fiscal relations.

The author is former director, NIPFP.
The views are personal

The return of the nativists

SWOT

KANIKA DATTA

The most potent signs of the integration of India's people emerged in the first days of the Covid-19 lockdown six years ago. As shops and factories downed shutters and construction sites froze, tens of thousands of workers and their families took to the roads. Unceremoniously evicted by employers and landlords, they were forced to make their way home from the boom towns of the south and west — on foot, bicycles, bullock carts (the lucky ones by lorry or trains) — to Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and West Bengal.

The Covid-19 exodus demonstrated the cynically utilitarian treatment by local residents towards people from other Indian states who play a vital role in sustaining economies far away from their homelands. Eight years earlier, the precarious state of internal migrants was underlined as thousands of northeastern migrants fled Bengaluru, Chennai and Pune on unfounded rumours of violence against their communities linked to communal clashes in Assam. Given the role they play in these cities' thriving retail and services business, the Karnataka government moved swiftly to allay their fears and assure them protection. No similar crisis has occurred since.

Despite clear evidence of the dynamism that migrants have brought to India's most prosperous states, parochialism is gaining traction throughout India. The frequent attacks on Muslims as outsiders or infiltrators are one outward manifestation of the threat perception many Indians have harboured for decades. But the killing of a young man of Tripura origin by local thugs on suspicion of being Chinese in Uttarakhand last year underlines the depth of the paradox. As emerging pockets of prosperity stoke the demand for the varied skills and abilities of citizens around the country, Indians are increasingly seeing other Indians as aliens.

Trust the politicians to pick up on an easy issue to enhance their appeal by promoting policies designed to focus on parochial values. The most enticing option here has been to reserve low-level jobs for locals hired by the private sector. Andhra Pradesh (2019), Haryana (2020) and Karnataka (2024) went down this route. All of them have foundered.

The Andhra Bill, which aimed to reserve 75 per cent of jobs in industrial units, factories and joint ventures for local candidates, has been stalled after a challenge in the High Court indicated that the law could be unconstitutional. The Haryana Bill was transparent in its intent. The Statement of Objects and Reasons to the Bill cited the influx of migrants in the state competing for low-paid jobs. The law met a more decisive outcome in 2023, after a bench of the Punjab and Haryana High Court quashed it as unconstitutional (the state has since appealed to the Supreme Court). Specifically, the high court said, the law violated Article 14 (the right to equality) and Article 19 (freedom of trade and commerce).

Significantly, the Punjab and Haryana High Court made a pointed observation: That the law created discriminatory artificial divisions among citizens. Not that this finding of a northern higher court deterred the Karnataka government down south. In 2024, the state government proposed a law to reserve 50 per cent of management and 75 per cent of non-management roles for locals. This announcement caused such a fierce backlash from industry — especially the IT and ITeS industry that put Bengaluru on the world map — that it has been in limbo ever since.

Whatever the impediments, as Europe and the United States have demonstrated, parochialism has an enduring appeal, never more so than when good jobs are hard to come by. Back in 2012, undivided Andhra mandated that all shops and commercial establishments display their signs prominently in Telugu, a rule that Telangana continued when it acquired statehood (other languages are permitted but in smaller type). Enforcement is draconian, so most establishments in the big cities comply; in smaller towns, compliance is more lax.

Andhra is also at the forefront of a move to produce more of its own people by announcing a Population Management Policy to incentivise couples to have more than one child. The impulse for doing so stems from alarm at falling total fertility (TFR) levels dropping below the replacement rate. Of course, falling TFR is a sign of social progress, but Andhra's politicians want the state's citizenry to produce more children to allay their fears of a diminution of parliamentary representation in the long run. Andhra is an emerging industrial belt; it could just as easily augment its population by extending domiciliary status, with all its attendant benefits, to its large cohorts of migrant white- and blue-collar workers. But it will take a brave politician to formally recognise "outsiders" as insiders, though most of India's most dynamic cities routinely do so.

In West Bengal today, amorphous political fault-lines are being drawn up between "Bengali pride" and "northern culture". But just half a century ago, a political grouping called Amra Bangali, a parochial political party, failed to make its mark. Amra Bangali's key demand then and now was for the creation of Bangalistan, which would encompass West Bengal, Tripura, (undivided) Bihar, Assam, and Odisha — basically any state with large Bengali populations. In the eighties, it made its presence felt in parts of Calcutta, then easily India's most cosmopolitan city, by erasing shop signs written in English. No one took much notice. It drew negligible electoral support except, oddly, in Tripura where it won some seats in the legislative Assembly. It remains on the margins of the eastern political theatre today but it is ominous that parts of its agenda are gaining traction among mainstream parties.

The myths of the Chinese Communist Party

BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

In 1937, the American journalist Edgar Snow published *Red Star Over China*, a book that introduced Mao Zedong to the world as a romantic, agrarian reformer and a charismatic figure leading a grass-roots movement for China's liberation from a feudal and corrupt regime of the Guomindang or the KMT party headed by General Chiang Kai-shek. For nearly a century, Snow's narrative served as the foundation for the Western understanding of the Chinese Revolution. With his latest work, *Red Dawn Over China*, Frank Dikötter offers a persuasive counter-narrative that draws from his meticulous research into the voluminous Chinese Communist Party (CCP) archives, supplemented by Russian archives. It is the approach with which one is familiar in Mr Dikotter's earlier works, comprising *The Tragedy of Liberation, 1945-57*, *Mao's Great Famine, 1958-62*, and *The Cultural Revolution, 1962-76*. The latest history reverses the chronology to take us back to the period 1911-45, which saw the birth of the CCP in 1921 in Shanghai and its subsequent transformation into a revolutionary party, leading up to its final victory in the civil war with the KMT in 1949.

The four histories together offer a comprehensive, granular and revisionist history of the Communist revolution from its early beginnings to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

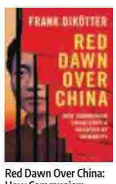
What are the main takeaways from Mr Dikotter's latest book?

One, he has detailed how the birth of CCP, its ideological identity, its political tactics and military strategy, were all carefully instilled among the CCP leaders and cadres by a succession of Soviet handlers. These were drawn from Soviet experience of using ruthless violence, adopting a culture of secrecy and conspiratorial imaginings, conducting constant and bloody purges and offering a one-party Leninist state as an institutional model. At no time during this period did the CCP have a significant membership or popular following. Its tactics of perpetrating endless violence and recourse to extortion from a countryside already ravaged by war belies its image as a people's movement. This enables us to understand the dynamics of current Chinese politics and its institutional underpinnings. The notion that under Mao the CCP was mostly an indigenous movement needs to be nuanced. There were disagreements between the CCP leaders and their Soviet advisors but in most cases, the Soviets were able to impose their own assessments of the situation and the tactics to be followed. Even after the ideological break with the Soviet Union from 1958 onwards, the Soviet imprint on the CCP remained and endures to this day.

Two, Mr Dikotter dispels the lingering view of the CCP as an important component of the anti-Japanese coalition in the Pacific war. He produces a wealth of archival evidence to show how the CCP mostly sat out the war and conserved its limited military capacity, while letting the Japanese progressively decimate the KMT. The US belief that the CCP ought to be supported because it was a nationalist more than a communist entity is thoroughly debunked in the book.

Three, the CCP and its People's Army was able to prevail over the KMT, thanks to the material and military support provided by the Soviet Union after the defeat of Japan in 1945. The Soviet Union took over the whole of Manchuria from Japan's Kwantung Army and made it available to the revolutionary army as a base from which to attack the KMT. The massive volume of weapons surrendered by the Japanese was handed over to the CCP and this support proved crucial in the CCP's eventual takeover of Beijing and its victory over the rest of the Chinese landmass.

The story is repeated in Xinjiang where the Soviets helped by first taking it over and then handing over control to the CCP. In contrast, US and Western assistance and support to the KMT was hesitant and niggardly, influenced by Chiang Kaishek's reputation as being corrupt and authoritarian. Mr Dikotter has used Chiang's dairies to throw light on the complex set of challenges he had to deal with during the 1945-49 civil war. Some historical accounts draw attention to the fact that Stalin was also extending support to Chiang Kai-shek and may have preferred a weak KMT-CCP coalition to rule over post-war China. The present volume shows that the Soviet support to Chiang was tactical while the objective all along was to ensure that the CCP prevailed in the civil war.



Red Dawn Over China: How Communism Conquered a Quarter of Humanity
by Frank Dikotter
Published by Bloomsbury
384 pages ₹799

The establishment of the People's Republic of China may have initially created the expectation of a government of social reformers and gradual change. The CCP moved swiftly to consolidate its power by dismantling virtually all vestiges of the old order. A one-party Leninist state on the Soviet model replaced the old order within a short span of time, validating the view that totalitarianism is an inherent feature of such a state. There may be adaptations in response to changing domestic and external challenges but whenever power of the party is threatened, the default option is invariably the ruthless imposition of control. We are seeing this play out in the current power play in China.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary

The Hindustan Times
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{ OUR TAKE }

A needed détente with Beijing

The trick is in finding the right balance between importing goods and importing capital from China

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday decided to revoke a 2020 order — Press Note 3 (PN3) — that banned foreign investment from countries with which India shares a land border. The decision followed hostilities with Chinese armed forces in Galwan Valley after which India announced several steps to disallow Chinese companies from doing business in India. The latest order will now allow Chinese capital — subject to some limits such as controlling stakes — to resume investment in India. Habitual or opportunistic hawks will scoff at the decision, but it should be seen as a pragmatic détente with the world's second-largest economy and by far its largest manufacturing powerhouse.

If India is to make progress in manufacturing, it cannot afford a self-inflicted decoupling from China. China controls critical supplies, not just inputs like rare earths, and also holds a near monopoly on skilled workforces necessary to train workers on cutting-edge shop floors, such as in electronics. The people and companies running iPhone manufacturing plants in India will agree. The logic of working closely with China has always made sense. It makes even more sense today when India-bound foreign investments from advanced economies have been sluggish and the Trump Administration is trying to arm-twist capital and countries to invest in the US.

China's economic prowess and its indispensability for India's manufacturing ambitions do not mean it will willingly help India become an economic superpower. From the Indian side, there will be concerns about safeguarding strategic interests, especially in critical and evolving areas of electronic surveillance and data safety. This is in addition to intermittent Chinese tactics of perpetrating hostilities on the border and its deep strategic relations with Pakistan. Valid and pressing as these concerns are, they do not justify a prolonged economic decoupling with China. India must maximise its economic engagement with China while trying its best to counteract all valid concerns.

The most important questions regarding Sino-Indian economic relations were best framed in the 2023-24 Economic Survey. "Is it possible to plug India into the global supply chain without plugging itself into the China supply chain? and (b) what is the right balance between importing goods and importing capital from China?" Now that the government has answered the second question, it should work on the first.

The case for a law on passive euthanasia

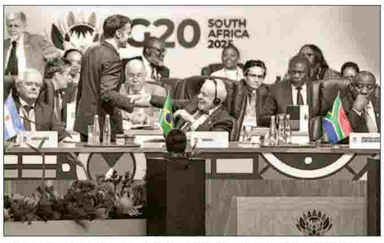
At the core of the right to life sits the right to dignity. To live with dignity is to retain, for as long as possible, the sovereign territory of the self. Autonomy over that life, that body, in the absence of criminality, is hewed into this very right. In a landmark decision on Wednesday, the Supreme Court made the difficult adjudication in a case where that life, in any meaningful sense of that word, has already departed. The top court allowed passive euthanasia for a 32-year-old man who has remained in a permanent vegetative state for more than a decade, while also laying down safeguards and procedural guidelines to regulate such decisions in the future. Delivering separate but concurring opinions, the bench of Justices JB Pardiwala and KV Viswanathan held that withdrawing life-sustaining support in a palliative care setting would be in the patient's best interest.

In many ways, this is the logical progression of the court's groundbreaking recognition in 2018 of the right of individuals to die with dignity — a verdict that permitted the removal of life-support systems for the terminally ill, and allowed individuals to decide against artificial life support by creating a living will. The solemn moment also underlines just how far jurisprudence has travelled since the sombre trial of Mumbai nurse Aruna Shanbaug, whose decades-long suffering made a powerful argument for passive euthanasia.

In a country rife with inequalities such as India, the possibility of misusing such a provision — especially against the elderly and the vulnerable — is always present. The court is correct in proceeding carefully and building multiple layers of safeguards — medical boards, judicial oversight, and several checks. But it has shown foresight and humanity in foregrounding compassion. The Centre should heed the Court's recommendation that it bring about a comprehensive legislation in this regard.

This moment in history & role of middle powers

The broadest challenge for middle powers is that such a diverse group is hardly likely to have a common set of interests on any of these issues



Middle powers know that opportunities to defend their interests from US and Chinese dominance won't remain open forever. GETTY IMAGES

Washington is no longer viewed by its allies as a champion of collective security, free trade, and the rule of law. At the same time, China's economic power and political influence continue to grow, intensifying the distrust of many governments that are increasingly dependent on constructive relations with Beijing. In this environment of US and China's dominance of the international system, and with Russia committed to upending the current global order, "the middle powers must act together," warned Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney in January, "because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu".

Can "middle powers" bolster existing multinational institutions like the United Nations? Can they partner where their interests align to safeguard their common interests? There are plenty of reasons for scepticism. But if they fail to assert themselves where they can, Washington and Beijing may ensure they suffer what they must.

On diplomacy, coalitions of willing middle powers like the EU, India, Japan, Brazil, Canada, and others could work together to boost financial and political support for institutions such as the UN, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and WTO. They can agree on common strategies to ensure the US abandonment doesn't sink these organisations and China doesn't come to dominate them. For now, it will be much easier to shore up existing institutions than to build new ones, particularly since Washington and Beijing can undermine anything that other powers try to construct. Yet, the UK and France are the only middle powers with Security Council seats, and the US, China, and Russia have considerable power to resist reform.

On security, the material military advantages the US and China still hold leave most middle powers dependent on a basic alignment with Washington on troop coordination, weapons development, and intelligence-sharing. But exceptions are emerging. Greater defence coordination within Europe is an ongoing response to Russia's war on Ukraine, though this process will take considerable time, money, and political will. Rivalry with China, the poor quality of Russian defence products, and doubts about America's long-term reliability as a partner have moved India's government, which has sharply increased defence spending in recent years, toward more security trade with Europe. Greater defence cooperation between Europe and Canada reflects shared fears about America's trajectory. Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey could develop their own nuclear deterrents.

Ian Bremmer

In economics, it is easier for middle powers to hedge on trade, investment, standards-setting, and development finance than in the security sphere, because here the US and China are less dominant. This is an area where real progress is already visible. Recent EU trade agreements with India and the South American bloc Mercosur have already made history. Canada's bid to broker a deal that would connect Asia-based (and the US abandoned) CPTPP trade group with the European Union would be extraordinarily complex but potentially profoundly beneficial across both continents. Brazil, with an abundance of the rare earth minerals that mineral-rich China has threatened to use as an economic weapon, has developed supply chains to multiple countries, most recently India, rather than exclusively to the US. Other middle powers blessed with critical minerals can do the same.

Finally, middle powers left vulnerable by the US, and Chinese willingness to weaponise their respective economic leverage can form collective economic security deals, agreements that commit willing members to coordinate responses to unilateral tariff pressures and/or violations of existing trade agreements or WTO rules in ways similar to the security guarantees offered to NATO members by the alliance's Article Five. To accomplish this, however, each of these middle power governments must overcome considerable domestic resistance to the concessions needed to forge new trade agreements.

On technology, middle powers face an even more complex environment. On tech trade, the US-China tech rivalry allows middle powers to pivot between the two. But there are no multinational institutions making rules to bring predictability to tech innovation and use, and the overwhelming dominance of American and Chinese firms in cutting-edge technologies leaves middle powers without much bargaining leverage or a common development strategy on Artificial Intelligence (AI). There are no middle power tech champions asking their governments to establish the rule of law, privacy standards, or open governance. Companies in Europe, Canada, or India could collaborate to build their own champion and develop an open, powerful AI "stack" that all can use without cost. But that effort would be expensive and time-consuming in times of economic and geopolitical stress.

The broadest challenge for middle powers is that such a diverse group is hardly likely to have a common set of interests on any of these issues. To put it more bluntly, while non-US western leaders generally agree that the rules-based international order is worth protection and deeper investment, leaders in the Global South are quick to point out that western values aren't universal. Any middle power strategy and architecture that treats non-western powers as rule-takers rather than partners in rulemaking is doomed to produce empty alliances and weak institutions without legitimacy. That means addressing the issues most urgent for Global South governments — development investment, debt management, climate finance, and technology access.

Despite these many challenges, middle powers know that opportunities to defend their interests from US and Chinese dominance won't remain open forever. If they fail to act, Washington and Beijing will lock in bilateral arrangements across the developing world — in infrastructure, digital systems, and security relationships. Once those deals are made and connections established, it will be much harder for other actors to check their dominance.

The obstacles to a common middle-power strategy in any of these areas remain formidable, but more and more governments now understand the need to assert themselves. Whether and how effective they will, remains an open question.

Ian Bremmer is the founder and board president of Eurasia Group Foundation. The views expressed are personal

The negative echoes of a divided education system

Long before closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras were installed in school classrooms, Michael Apple used the black box as a metaphor to convey the mystery of routine teaching. I was reminded of his metaphor when a student told me that her teacher had recently explained the caste system as a genetic classification. According to this teacher, the upper castes have been in a dominant position because they are genetically superior and fitter to survive than the lower castes. When a student tried to intervene and quoted BR Ambedkar's denial of the genetic theory of caste, the teacher replied that Ambedkar was not a scientist.

This peep into the mysterious black box of routine teaching offers no clue about what can be done to improve this teacher's understanding of Indian society. We can't guess what books she has read on the well-researched subject of caste. Perhaps we can speculate about the books she has not read or heard about. In all likelihood, she has not read any, and her views about the caste system merely reflect a widely prevalent perception that the problem of caste hierarchy is a colonial myth.

Krishna Kumar

In our system of public higher education, there is no provision for course evaluation. In the western world that our system is now vigorously trying to emulate and compete with, course content and teachers' knowledge are put through an evaluation process at regular intervals. If such a procedure were to be adopted in India, many strange practices and habits would emerge from the black box. For now, our only source is a student who might tell us what teachers know and how they teach.

Since no course evaluation or any other procedure ensuring transparency exists, pedagogic experience remains confined to a student's personal memory. Whether the course content or the teacher conveyed social or ideological prejudice, it does not enter the public domain. In this larger context, the much-debated official guidelines meant to curb discrimination — the University Grants Commission's Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026 — seem an innocuous attempt to avoid structural issues.

One major issue is the division between public and private higher education. The two sectors have moved apart at a remarkable pace over the last few decades. By and large, their separate paths of growth have followed the trajectories that school education witnessed earlier. As a nation, we were accustomed to living in a steeply hierarchical society. The Constitution offered a vision of equality and social justice, and mass education promised to push us towards that goal.

Since no course evaluation or any other procedure ensuring transparency exists, pedagogic experience remains confined to a student's personal memory. SHUTERSTOCK

An important condition for education to fulfil its promise was common schooling, but that proved elusive for a long time. Indeed, separate schooling meant a paucity of common or shared experiences of childhood across socio-economic classes. Just 15 years ago, the Right to Education (RTE) Act presented some limited movement towards common schooling by making a 25% reservation for students from the economically weaker sections mandatory in private schools. This provision created a narrow bridge of commonality.

No such bridge exists between public and fully private higher education. Free to charge whatever fee they wish, private universities have no legal necessity to follow the reservation policy. While overall reservation in public universities is touching 50% — and in some states it is more — private universities claim to enrol purely based on merit. Under that banner, they are free to charge the fee they want, and some are charging astounding amounts. Merit, thus, goes with the paying capacity of parents. Public universities, on the other hand, not only follow the government's reservation policy but also charge remarkably low fees. No wonder they function with a permanent scarcity of the basic necessities of a good educational institution.

This structural compartmentalisation of the system is a form of discrimination that no guidelines can address or mitigate. The discriminatory aspect of the public-private division has been further sharpened by the stark financial gap between the two kinds of institutions. When you visit colleges fully dependent on State funds, the poverty of their library and laboratory resources stares at you. The teacher-student ratio in private institutions and public institutions is also vastly different. Large classes are now a common story in even the most reputed public universities.

No inspection-based data, accreditation grade, or exam results can conceal the gap between the pedagogic experiences that the two kinds of learning venues give to their respective students. Under prevailing conditions, it is hard to imagine a brilliant Dalit boy or girl entering the gates of a high-fee-charging private university. No doubt, some private universities have provisions for subsidised fees and other systems of support for the needy. These systems can hardly compensate for the massive burden of disadvantages that students from lower caste and other underprivileged backgrounds carry since early childhood and primary school days. In any case, the entry of a handful of underprivileged students in the portals of private universities is no answer to the vast, negative echoes of a divided education system.

Krishna Kumar is a former director of NCERT and the author of Smaller Citizens. The views expressed are personal

War in West Asia and failure of global order

The war on Iran may come to be remembered not simply as another West Asian conflict but as a symptom of something much more serious — the gradual collapse of the post-1945 international order and, with it, the re-emergence of a colonial mindset in global politics.

The United Nations (UN) was born from the ashes of World War II, a world traumatised by the devastation of total war and the horrors of genocide. Political leaders sought to build a system that could prevent the recurrence of great-power conflict, with the UN Charter serving as the foundational document of that effort, governing how States may use force under international law. In parallel, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) exists to inject a measure of humanity into the chaos of war by prohibiting collective punishment, indiscriminate attacks, targeting civilians and using starvation as a method of warfare, through the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol 1. Importantly, the applicability of IHL does not depend on the legality of the conflict; it applies equally to all parties once an armed conflict exists.

Insiyah Vahanvaty

Ashish Bharadwaj

The US-Israel war against Iran raises a question that should stand at the centre of any serious discussion: Under what legal authority is this war being fought?

Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State. Under Article 51, States may resort to force only in two circumstances — when acting in self-defence after an armed attack or when authorised by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Neither applies here. There has been no UNSC authorisation, nor has there been an armed attack by Iran that triggers the right of self-defence. Instead, the strikes have been justified through the familiar but controversial doctrine of preventive war, aimed at neutralising Iran's alleged future threats. But once that logic is accepted, any State can claim that another might someday threaten its security. The idea that war requires legal legitimacy will no longer matter.

This legal breakdown is evident on land and sea. In the Indian Ocean, the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena was torpedoed despite no attack having occurred to trigger Article 51's self-defence provisions. Perhaps it will soon be argued that the ship was a sanctioned military target carrying drones and weapons destined for future hostile use — a dangerous stretch of legal reasoning. In the Strait of Hormuz, where neither Iran nor the US has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, control over one of the world's most vital shipping lanes is increasingly shaped by fleets and missiles rather than maritime law.

But this erosion of the legal order did not begin in 2026. When NATO bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 without UNSC approval, western governments argued that humanitarian necessity justified bypassing the law. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, based on unfounded claims of weapons of mass destruction, was framed as pre-emptive self-defence. Later, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Moscow pointed to earlier western precedents. China, too, increasingly speaks the language of historical rights and strategic necessity rather than universal legal norms.

Washington and Tel Aviv's rhetoric surrounding the military campaign on Iran, demanding Tehran's "unconditional surrender" and regime change, evokes an older era of imperial politics. Unconditional surrender historically means that the defeated State must submit completely to the political terms set by the victor. It assumes that powerful States can decide when another government has become unacceptable and can, therefore, be compelled (or replaced) through military pressure. This is especially alarming as it signals how easily the language of modern international law can give way to the older logic of empire.

For decades, the US and its allies have insisted that the world operates under a "rules-based international order." The phrase appears endlessly in speeches, communiqués, and summit declarations. It is invoked to condemn Russia, discipline smaller States, and justify sanctions regimes.

The war on Iran suggests that this aspiration is fading. By the time the world realises what has been lost, it will be living in a system where international law no longer restrains war at all. Perhaps we are already there.

Insiyah Vahanvaty is a socio-political commentator and author of 'The Fearless Judge'. Ashish Bharadwaj is ex-Dean at BITS Pilani and Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal

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Editor's TAKE

ESMA invoked as LPG crisis looms

Disruptions in global energy supplies triggered by the US-Israel conflict with Iran have exposed India's heavy dependence on imported LPG

The Iran war is now spreading far and wide. Its impact on the geoeconomy is now visible here in India. India imports almost 80 per cent of its gas, most of which passes through the Strait of Hormuz. With billows of barrels stuck as Iran decides to choke the oil artery of the world, the Indian kitchen is starting to face the heat. Though the crisis may not be here yet, one can see it coming should the war prolong for a month or more. With reports of LPG supply being restricted, if not completely cut, in Mumbai and Bengaluru, the fear of uncertainty is gripping people. Reportedly, even in Delhi the online gas booking lines are not working, adding to the panic. Meanwhile, the Government has invoked ESMA, a right move, to ration supply, and strict action against hoarding is a move in the right direction. India may not officially be facing a gas shortage as yet, but the warning signs of a brewing LPG crisis are everywhere. India's deep dependence on imported liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) is beginning to expose a critical vulnerability. The government's decision to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to ensure uninterrupted distribution reflects the seriousness of the situation.

For India, the implications of stalled supply are severe. About 50-60 per cent of India's crude oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, making it one of the country's most critical energy supply routes. The dependence is even higher for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), with around 80-85 per cent of India's LPG imports transiting through this narrow maritime corridor. India is the world's second-largest LPG importer after China. Most of India's oil and natural gas supplies come from Gulf nations such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait.

The most immediate impact is being felt by small businesses and the hospitality sector. If the disruption continues, temporary shutdowns could become unavoidable, adding to the losses to the economy and distress to workers who might be laid off. Reports from cities like Bengaluru and Delhi suggest that the grey market is booming, and LPG is being sold at much higher rates than its original price.

Recognising the potential fallout, the government has moved to prioritise domestic consumers and essential services. The gap between LPG cylinder bookings for households has been increased from 21 to 25 days to manage distribution.

Invoking ESMA can only offer temporary relief. The crisis highlights a deeper structural issue - India's overwhelming dependence on imported cooking gas and its concentration of supply routes. Strategic reserves for LPG remain limited, with analysts estimating that existing stocks may cover only two to three weeks of demand. It is a wake-up call. Diversifying energy supply routes, expanding LPG storage infrastructure, and accelerating the shift to alternative cooking fuels such as piped natural gas, electric induction, and biofuels must be prioritised. The push towards renewable energy must also extend to household and commercial cooking. Every crisis offers a lesson: energy is a pillar of nation-building. Without energy self-sufficiency, no country can truly claim power and will remain vulnerable to external pressures.

PIC TALK

Women perform rituals on the occasion of 'Sheetala Ashtami', in Jaipur. PHOTO: PTI

The dangerous gamble in Iran

History shows that external attacks on Iran often strengthen national resolve rather than weaken it. Instead of bringing stability, this move risks triggering retaliation, regional turmoil, and deeper global uncertainty

NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

The world is hurtling toward a geopolitical abyss, and Iran has become the latest arena of a reckless and deeply misguided experiment in decapitation and coercion. War was not a surprise; it was foreseen. The assassination of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei by the combined machinations of U.S. and Israeli forces is being hailed in some quarters as a surgical strike against tyranny. In reality, it is the latest episode in a playbook as old as the Iran-Iraq War itself, yet dressed in 21st-century technologies and executive hubris. Trump's decapitation project is neither novel nor subtle; it continues a century of covert interventions, from the CIA's orchestration of the 1953 coup against Mossadegh to the entanglements of Iran-Contra, from arming militias to pitting Kurds against fellow Iranians, and now to globalised narratives of chaos framed as "strategic advantage".

To understand the current conflagration, one must remember that Iran has endured far worse. During the eight years of the so-called Holy Defence against Iraq, millions poured into the streets, armed with resolve rather than sophistication, singing patriotic anthems and marching for survival against a far better-equipped adversary. Today, those streets are alive again, but with a new overlay of fear, uncertainty, and international interference. Whether one accepts it or not, the global order is no longer an order; it is disorder veiled as governance.

The assault on Iran, as detailed by multiple analyses, has followed a predictable arc of overreach and miscalculation. Trump and Netanyahu, emboldened by decades of proxy wars and intelligence manipulations, assumed that eliminating Iran's leadership would create political pliability. They underestimated the robustness of the Islamic Republic's institutional architecture: a system of overlapping authorities, including the Supreme Leader's office, the Revolutionary Guards, and parallel clerical networks, all designed precisely to withstand decapitation and disorientation. The very mechanisms the U.S. claims to exploit-the ethnic diversity, border minorities, and internal fissures-are now being leveraged by Tehran to consolidate loyalty rather than fracture the state.

The shadow of the Iran-Iraq War looms over this conflict. That war, long remembered as a futile slog of attrition, demonstrated that foreign interference-whether through Saddam Hussein's aggression, U.S. intelligence, or covert arming-can stiffen, rather than weaken, national resolve. Today, the ghosts of that war are alive in the streets, in the militias, and in the minds of military planners who know that Iranians fight best when existentially threatened. Arming Kurdish groups and other militias, a strategy pursued clandestinely by the CIA and other agencies since the 1980s, may once again set co-ethnics and compatriots against one another, yet it is unlikely to deliver the control envisioned by external manipulators. Uncle Sam may cheer from a distance, but the reality on the ground is far more unpredictable. Iran has also been accused by external actors of arming and facilitating groups such as Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen, suggesting that the stage of proxy conflict extends far beyond its borders.

IRAN HAS LONG BEEN A THEATRE FOR INFILTRATION AND INFORMATION WARFARE, RANGING FROM THE PLACEMENT OF INFORMANTS WITHIN GOVERNING BODIES TO THE COMMANDEERING OF CCTV NETWORKS AND COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The assassination of 87-year-old Khamenei reflects overconfidence in technological and military superiority, yet the attack has paradoxically elevated him as a beleaguered leader remembered for defending his nation rather than being overthrown by protests. By targeting him, the U.S. has ironically recreated echoes of 1979. Israel and the United States have reportedly dropped more than 5,000 bombs in the opening stages of the conflict, striking military and civilian infrastructure and causing casualties ranging from the verified to the conjectural.

Iran has long been a stage for infiltration and information warfare, from informants within governing bodies to the manipulation of CCTV networks and communication infrastructure. The decapitation strategy ignores a core lesson of asymmetric warfare: removing individuals does not dismantle systems, particularly when they are deeply institutionalised.

Iranian expatriates, numbering in the millions, have been invoked by Western and Israeli actors as proxies of legitimacy or opposition. Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the last Shah, has emerged as a symbolic figurehead in opposition narratives abroad. Yet his support remains fragmented, reflecting desperation more than a coherent political vision, while many in the diaspora remain sceptical of foreign manipulation.

Meanwhile, European powers have been marginalised in the U.S.-Israeli partnership, caught between realpolitik, economic ties, and domestic inertia. France, Germany, and the U.K. have issued statements of defensive readiness, even as European assets have reportedly been targeted by Iranian drones. BRICS, where Iran holds membership, has remained conspicuously silent, highlighting the limited influence of traditional alliances in a conflict shaped by technological overmatch and asymmetric capability.

Iran's geostrategic leverage remains its strongest deterrent. The Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20 per cent of global oil exports pass, has been partially closed, demonstrating the power of geography against external pressure. Disruptions here ripple across markets, supply chains, and the credibility of American global hegemony.

At the same time, Iran faces serious political and economic pressures. Poverty, unemployment, and factionalism persist under sanctions. Yet external pressure can strengthen cohesion rather than weaken it. Tehran now faces a crucial task: consolidating competing factions and reshaping governance structures while pursuing strategic negotiations not as capitulation, but as a means of survival and long-term agency in global affairs.

Israel reportedly maintains approximately ninety undeclared nuclear warheads, yet there is no international scrutiny comparable to that faced by Iran. Tehran's nuclear capability, limited and largely defensive, is cast as a threat in the narrative constructed by external powers, while Israel's strategic opacity remains unchallenged. This imbalance exemplifies the double standards underpinning contemporary interventionist logic: power exercised by the strong is legitimacy, whereas defensive capacity exercised by the weak is aggression.

The war on Iran is a manifestation of a broader pathology of intervention: a reliance on decapitation, manipulation, and coercion, divorced from the realities of institutional resilience, asymmetric capability, and popular mobilisation. If Tehran is the next Gaza, it is not because of weakness; it is because the architects of chaos have underestimated the very forces they sought to control.

History, strategy, and geography converge to create a paradox: the attempt to dismantle Iran may yet consolidate it, transforming a targeted campaign of decapitation into a narrative of survival, resilience, and renewed strategic agency. The question is not whether Tehran will fall-it is whether the architects of chaos are prepared to confront the consequences of their own hubris. Is this what we have gained in the name of the guardians of democracy?

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Connected to screens, disconnected at Home

SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

In the silence of the modern home, family time has slowly been replaced by screen time. Families return to the same room, but not always to each other. Instead of conversation, the space is filled with the blue light of scrolling parents and gaming children. A parent checks emails or social media while a child watches videos or plays games on a tablet. Physically, they are together, yet emotionally they may be miles apart.

The technological age has transformed nearly every aspect of modern life, including family relationships. Technology has undoubtedly made communication faster, information more accessible and learning more dynamic. At the same time, it has quietly entered the heart of the home, introducing subtle challenges to the bond between parents and children. The real question today is not whether technology is good or bad, but how it shapes the quality of relationships within families.

Traditionally, parent-child relationships were built through shared experiences-family meals, storytelling, evening walks or simple conversations about the day. These moments helped children feel heard, valued and emotionally secure. Today, many children are growing up in a world where digital interaction often replaces real-world human connection. A child may spend hours communicating with friends online but hesitate to open up to parents sitting just a few feet away.

One of the most important differences in the digital age is the gap between being available and being present. Parents today can easily track, text and call their children through various applications, ensuring their safety. Yet connection requires something deeper-undivided attention, empathy and genuine listening. Children do not simply need supervision; they need emotional connection. Even a few minutes of distraction-free conversation can mean more to a child than hours spent together while both remain absorbed in separate screens.

Another challenge is the widening generational gap in technology use. Children today are digital natives who navigate online platforms with remarkable ease, while many parents struggle to keep pace with rapid technological change. This gap can create misunderstandings. Parents worry about online safety, while children may feel their digital world is misunderstood. Instead of treating technology as a barrier, families can transform it into a bridge. Showing interest in a child's digital interests-whether games, videos or online communities-can create opportunities for communication and trust.

At the same time, healthy boundaries remain essential. Simple practices such as device-free dinners, technology-free time before bedtime and shared family activities without screens can restore balance. Equally important is the example parents set themselves. Children imitate behaviour more than advice. When parents put their phones aside and focus on family interaction, they send a powerful message about priorities. The strength of parent-child relationships has never depended on the era in which families live. The core needs of children remain unchanged: love, attention, understanding and guidance. In a world filled with constant digital distractions, the most meaningful gift a parent can offer a child is genuine presence. In the end, the true measure of parenting is not how connected we are to our devices, but how deeply we remain connected to our children.

The writer is an educator

SAFEGUARDING ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS IS ESSENTIAL FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

Recent discussions about a possible no-confidence motion against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar reflect growing tensions between opposition parties and constitutional institutions.

While scrutiny of electoral authorities remains a legitimate and necessary democratic practice, such actions must be guided by credible evidence and a clear respect for institutional integrity.

The Election Commission occupies a central role in protecting the credibility of India's democratic process. Repeated political confrontations surrounding this institution risk undermining public confidence in the electoral system. When doubts are raised in a highly polarised environment, they can quickly erode trust among citizens who depend on impartial institutions to ensure fair elections.

At the same time, concerns expressed by opposition parties regarding voter roll revisions and electoral procedures deserve transparent clarification. Questions relating to electoral processes should not be dismissed lightly. Instead, they should be addressed through open dialogue, detailed explanations, and appropriate parliamentary oversight.

A mature democracy requires both accountability and institutional independence. Neither should be sacrificed for short-term political advantage. Constructive engagement between political parties and constitutional bodies is therefore essential.

VIJAYKUMAR HK | RAICHUR

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com.
In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Samson leads India's charge

Sanju Samson's extraordinary performances in the final stages of the 2026 T20 World Cup deserve special recognition. It would hardly be an exaggeration to describe India's memorable victory as the "Samson Cup", considering the decisive role he played in three crucial matches under intense pressure.

In the semi-final against England, Samson produced a magnificent innings of 89, blending elegance with controlled aggression. His knock laid the foundation for a competitive total and helped India secure a place in the final. In the championship match against New Zealand, he once again delivered with another impressive 89. On the biggest stage of the tournament, Samson demonstrated remarkable composure, anchoring the innings while maintaining a healthy scoring rate. Earlier in the competition, Samson had already shown his match-winning ability against the West Indies with a superb unbeaten 97 that guided India to victory. These three outstanding innings in high-pressure situations clearly highlight his ability to deliver when the team needs him most.

Beyond the runs themselves, Samson's calm temperament, fearless stroke play and sharp understanding of the game energised the entire side.

AP THIRUVADI | CHENNAI

Rising oil prices is a cause of concern

The report titled "Crude price rise not to have major impact on inflation" quoting the Finance Minister deserves closer scrutiny. The assertion that the recent surge in global crude oil prices may not significantly influence inflation appears somewhat complacent and perhaps overly optimistic.

Crude oil is a fundamental input across several sectors of the economy, including transportation, fertilisers, manufacturing and power generation. Any sustained increase in crude prices inevitably raises logistics and production costs. These higher costs eventually pass through the supply chain and affect the prices of essential goods and services. Even if inflation currently remains within the Reserve Bank of India's tolerance band, it would be imprudent to assume that the economy can easily withstand prolonged energy price shocks. Geopolitical tensions in West Asia have historically created volatility in global oil markets, often triggering persistent price spikes. The government must therefore adopt a proactive approach. Expanding strategic petroleum reserves, rationalising fuel taxes during price spikes, improving efficiency in transport and industry, and accelerating the transition to renewable energy would help mitigate future shocks.

KV CHANDRA MOULI | MYSORE

War threatens global stability

Crude oil prices have surged above one hundred dollars per barrel as tensions escalate following the United States and Israel's military campaign against Iran. The conflict has already begun to affect global energy markets and could further deepen the ongoing economic uncertainty.

Iran's retaliatory strikes across parts of the Gulf region have raised serious concerns about the stability of energy supplies from West Asia. If the conflict intensifies, the production and transportation of oil and gas from the region may face severe disruption. The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical chokepoint for global energy trade. A significant portion of the world's oil and gas shipments passes through this narrow route. Any prolonged closure or disruption would immediately affect international supply chains and push prices even higher. If hostilities continue, the consequences will extend far beyond the region. Rising energy prices would increase the cost of fuel, fertilisers and transportation worldwide, placing additional strain on already fragile economies.

Without meaningful dialogue and restraint, the conflict risks triggering wider economic disruptions affecting nations across the world.

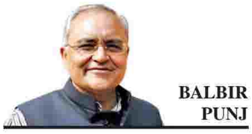
ABHIJIT ROY | JAMSHEDPUR

West Asia: India's strategic clarity amid selective outrage

In this intense conflict, there are no saints. Should India back Iran or the US–Israel alliance? The answer is neither. India must prioritise its own national interests, and the Modi government appears determined to do precisely that

FIRST Column

BALBIR PUNJ



In politics, memory is often the first casualty of expediency. The present uproar in India over the government's response to the convulsions in West Asia offers yet another illustration of this familiar phenomenon.

The Congress party has suddenly rediscovered the language of moral indignation. Its leaders now accuse the present government of "silence", of "abdication", and of abandoning India's civilisational ethos in responding to the death of Iran's Supreme Leader.

Is this judgement driven by concern for high moral values, or by the opposition's selective memory, amnesia and political pressures? West Asia today stands on the edge of a dangerous precipice. Over the past two weeks, the United States and Israel have launched relentless aerial strikes on Iran.

Tehran, in retaliation, has launched missile and drone attacks across the region-targeting Israel while also striking American military installations and strategic assets across Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria and Iraq.

The economic ramifications are equally severe. Nearly twenty per cent of the world's daily oil consumption passes through the narrow maritime corridor known as the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's decision to close this strategic waterway has effectively paralysed global oil shipments.

In this volatile theatre, one fact stands beyond dispute: none of the actors involved can claim the mantle of moral innocence. The Iranian regime itself has long been associated with repression at home and destabilisation abroad.

The Islamic Republic that emerged after the 1979 revolution institutionalised a doctrine of ideological expansion. Through the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, Tehran nurtured and financed a network of militant proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas across the region. This strategy enabled Iran to project power across West Asia while retaining plausible deniability.

Nor does Washington's record inspire moral confidence. The United States has often behaved as a self-appointed global arbiter whose commitment to principle fluctuates with strategic convenience.

IS THIS JUDGEMENT DRIVEN BY CONCERN FOR HIGH MORAL VALUES, OR BY THE OPPOSITION'S SELECTIVE MEMORY, AMNESIA AND POLITICAL PRESSURES? WEST ASIA TODAY STANDS ON THE EDGE OF A DANGEROUS PRECIPICE

The writer is an eminent columnist, former Chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), and the author of 'Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Mayajaal'

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From the devastation of the Vietnam War to its equivocal conduct during the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, from the invasion of Iraq to the two-decade military experiment in Afghanistan, American policy has frequently subordinated moral consistency to geopolitical calculation.

In the 1980s, Washington famously nurtured militant jihadist networks as instruments against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Decades later, the same networks evolved into the violent forces that haunt the world today.

Even today, this pattern persists. If President Donald Trump, transactional in nature, genuinely believed in liberating the Iranian people from the excesses of their theocratic rulers, one might reasonably ask why his administration continues to embrace Pakistan's military establishment with such warmth.

Against this turbulent international backdrop, political debate in India has acquired an oddly theatrical tone. Sonia Gandhi has criticised the government for failing to condemn the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Writing in a newspaper column, Sonia argued that the Modi government's response represented not neutrality but abdication. According to her, India's silence signalled tacit endorsement of a grave rupture in international relations.

Such claims, while rhetorically dramatic, collapse under the weight of facts. India did not remain silent. India's External Affairs Minister held discussions with his Iranian counterpart to maintain diplomatic communication at a moment of extraordinary tension. These actions reflect a deliberate attempt to preserve dialogue rather than inflame passions.

At the same time, Prime Minister Narendra Modi engaged extensively with leaders across the region-from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Bahrain. His conversations emphasised the need for restraint, de-escalation and the protection of civilian lives.

For India, whose nearly ten million citizens live and work across the Gulf, such caution is not timidity; it is responsibility.

Yet the most striking element of the present controversy lies not in what the Congress says but in what it chooses to forget. Sonia Gandhi invokes India's civilisational ethos of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'-the belief that the world is one family. The phrase is indeed a profound element of India's philosophical heritage. The same moral urgency is rarely heard when Hindus in neighbouring Bangladesh face persecution and violence at the hands of radical groups or when, closer to home, in Kashmir during the 1980s.

The irony deepens when one recalls the record of the very Iranian leader whose death has inspired such passionate commentary. Ayatollah Khamenei was hardly a sympathetic observer of India's internal affairs.

On multiple occasions, the Ayatollah publicly criticised India on issues ranging from Kashmir to the Citizenship Amendment Act. In 2017, he urged the Muslim world to support what he described as the "oppressed Muslims of Kashmir", echoing narratives long propagated by Pakistan.

After the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the Ayatollah again called upon India to adopt what he termed a "just policy". During the riots in Delhi in 2020, he accused India of persecuting Muslims and warned of isolation from the Islamic world.

Such statements did not reflect friendly engagement; they were overt attempts to influence India's internal discourse. Yet those who now mourn Khamenei as a misunderstood statesman appear curiously oblivious to this history.

The Congress party's moral posture becomes even more puzzling when one examines its own record on Iran. During the years of the United Progressive Alliance government, India voted against Tehran three times at the International Atomic Energy Agency-in 2005, 2006 and 2009-over concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme.

These votes, widely interpreted as aligning with American preferences during negotiations over the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement, triggered intense criticism within India. Nor was this the only instance.

Under sanctions pressure from the United States and Europe, India gradually reduced its imports of Iranian oil during that period. A proposed gas pipeline linking Iran, Pakistan and India lost momentum amid geopolitical complications. These decisions may well have been dictated by strategic necessity, but they make today's accusations of diplomatic timidity ring somewhat hollow.

The deeper transformation, however, lies in the evolution of India's foreign policy over the past decade. Modi's own diplomatic initiatives symbolise this shift. His historic visit to Israel in July 2017 marked the first time an Indian prime minister set foot in the Jewish state. The visit ended decades of hesitation rooted in domestic political sensitivities.

Nearly nine years later, in February 2026, he returned again, reaffirming India's growing partnership with Israel in technology, defence and innovation. These engagements did not alienate the Arab world; instead, India simultaneously strengthened its ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf states.

The message was clear: India would pursue its interests with clarity rather than ideological anxiety.

This confidence was articulated succinctly by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at the Raisina Dialogue in 2022. "We have to be confident about who we are," he observed. "It is better to engage the world on the basis of who we are rather than try and please the world as a pale imitation of what they are."

In this intense conflict, there are no saints to be found. So, which side should India back — Iran or the US-Israel alliance? The answer is clear: neither. India must put its own interests first, and the Modi government is already leading the charge in doing just that.

The untold environmental cost of clothing

SHARMILA DAS

We have a curious relationship with our clothes. We buy them with optimism. We wear them with personality. We fold them with varying degrees of discipline. And eventually, we part with them, sometimes tenderly, sometimes ruthlessly. But here is the uncomfortable truth: the life of a garment does not begin when it enters our wardrobe, and it certainly does not end when it leaves it.

For most of us, clothes exist in a neat little bubble between "I like this" and "I'm done with this." Everything before and after feels distant, almost abstract. Yet the hidden life of garments is where the real environmental story unfolds.

And it is far more complex than we imagine.

Before It reaches you

Long before a shirt hangs in a store, it has travelled an extraordinary journey. Fibres are grown or manufactured. Yarns are spun. Fabrics are woven or knitted. They are dyed, finished, cut, stitched, assembled, packed, and transported, often across multiple countries.

Having spent many years working within global garment supply chains, particularly in trims and components, I have seen first-hand how intricate this ecosystem truly is. A single garment can involve dozens of suppliers, each contributing a small but essential piece.

Here is where it becomes interesting. When we think of sustainability, we usually think of fabric-organic cotton, recycled polyester, linen. Rarely do we think of the zipper, the elastic, the thread, the label, the humble button.

Yet these small components often determine whether a garment can be recycled, how long it lasts, and how much environmental impact it ultimately carries.

A beautifully sustainable fabric combined with poorly considered trims is a little like eating a healthy salad topped with deep-fried croutons. The intention is good. The execution… slightly compromised.

The complication of mixed materials

Modern garments are marvels of engineering and also sustainability puzzles.

A single jacket might contain:

- Polyester lining
- Cotton/woollen outer fabric
- Plastic/metal buttons
- Metal zippers
- Elasticated cuffs

- Synthetic thread

When such a garment reaches the end of its life, separating these materials is not simple. Recycling systems struggle with complexity. Many facilities are not equipped to dismantle garments component by component.

So where do they go?

Often, landfills.

Or incineration.

Or, in some cases, they are shipped to other countries under the hopeful label of "second-hand clothing", where only a fraction may actually be resold.

The rest still becomes waste, just elsewhere.

The donation myth

We have all felt virtuous placing unwanted clothes into donation bags. It feels responsible. It feels generous.

Sometimes, it genuinely is.

But the reality is more nuanced. Charitable organisations can only resell garments that are in good condition and suitable for demand. The sheer volume of discarded clothing globally far exceeds resale or reuse capacity. In other words, donating is helpful, but it is not a magic eraser for overconsumption. This is not a call for guilt. It is a call for awareness. Because awareness changes behaviour far more effectively than shame ever could.

Durability: The quiet hero

One of the most powerful sustainability strategies is surprisingly unglamorous: making clothes that last. Quality components matter enormously here. A strong zipper. A resilient button. Elastic that retains its shape. Stitching that withstands wear, washing, and the torturous ironing, over and over again.

In my professional experience working with garment trims, I have seen how seemingly minor cost decisions can dramatically affect durability. A slightly cheaper component may save pennies in production, but cost years in reduced garment life.

When a zipper fails or a button snaps, the garment is often discarded long before its fabric has truly worn out. And so we return to the idea that sustainability lives in the details.

The hidden parts.

The things no one notices-until they fail.

After We Let Go. When we finally decide we are "done" with a garment, we rarely consider what happens next. Globally, millions of tonnes of textiles are discarded every year. Recycling infrastructure is improving, but it is not yet universal, nor simple. Clothing made from single materials is easier to process. Mixed-material garments are more complicated. Trims can interfere with recycling streams. Dyes and finishes add another layer of challenge.

In other words, the afterlife of our clothes depends heavily on decisions made long before we ever see them.

Design decisions.

Material choices.

Component selections.

This is where responsible manufacturing plays a critical role. And this is where consumers-even unknowingly-influence the system through what they choose to support.

So what can we do?

The solution is not to panic and wear the same sweater forever (although if you love it, why not?).

Instead, perhaps we can:

- Buy fewer, better-made garments
- Pay attention to construction, not just price
- Repair when possible
- Support brands that are transparent
- Ask questions about materials and durability
- Encourage brands to consciously display if the garment has been flown by air from the manufacturing hub-a silent but huge disruption to the environment just to catch fashion on time

Mindfulness does not belong only on the yoga mat. It belongs in our wardrobes too.

When we become more aware of the hidden life of our clothes, we shift from passive consumption to conscious participation.

And that shift matters.

The Bigger Picture

Sustainability in fashion is not about perfection. It is about progress. It is about understanding that the shirt on our back is connected to farmers, factory workers, designers, transport networks, and waste systems. It is about recognising that small components influence big outcomes. And it is about realising that every garment carries a story far longer than its time in our wardrobe. The hidden life of our clothes may not be visible, but it is real.

And once we see it, we cannot entirely unsee it. Perhaps that is the beginning of change.

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AI is setting the bar for skill: Can humans keep up?

ROHIT YADAV

Artificial intelligence has crossed a decisive threshold. What once assisted human effort is now beginning to coordinate, plan, and manage complex tasks independently. Tools such as Claude Cowork are already being used in ways that resemble human decision-making workflows rather than simple automation.

This shift signals more than a technological upgrade. It represents a structural change in how organisations define productivity, skill, and value. The growing influence of AI is not driven by technological curiosity alone; it is increasingly shaped by economic incentives. When Microsoft announced that it had saved around $500 million after adopting AI widely across its operations, it highlighted how organisations are beginning to redefine efficiency and productivity. AI is no longer viewed as an experimental add-on. It is becoming central to how work is designed and delivered.

Academic research reinforces the scale of this transformation. In their study, "The Latent Role of Open Models in the AI Economy," MIT researchers Frank Nagle and Daniel Yue estimate that organisations could save up to $25 billion by transitioning to AI-based models. Such potential gains are influencing investment strategies, operational structures, and workforce planning across industries.

The broader implications of this shift were evident at the recent India AI Impact Summit 2026, held in New Delhi. The summit, inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, brought together leaders from government, industry, and academia to discuss the responsible and inclusive deployment of AI technologies. As the first global AI summit hosted in the Global South, the event highlighted a key concern: preparing economies and workers for an AI-augmented future.

The discussions reflected a broader reality. AI adoption is no longer a distant possibility — it is becoming an immediate competitive requirement. Industries that historically depended on scale and labour intensity are already witnessing structural changes. The IT sector, for example, has long relied on billable hours, hierarchical expertise, and large project teams. AI is beginning to compress these structures by automating repetitive cognitive work and flattening traditional experience hierarchies.

For India, the implications are particularly significant. The country's IT sector employs nearly six million professionals, making it one of the largest concentrations of digital talent in the world. As AI transforms how software is developed, tested, and maintained, the central question is shifting. The issue is no longer simply about the number of jobs available, but about the nature of human contribution in an economy where intelligent systems increasingly handle execution. This does not mean that human workers are becoming obsolete. Instead, the definition of skill itself is evolving. AI systems excel at pattern recognition, speed, and large-scale execution. Human capability, on the other hand, will increasingly lie in defining the problems machines should solve, exercising judgement in complex contexts, and ensuring that technological outcomes align with social and ethical priorities.

One of the most profound aspects of the AI transition is the reversal of an old assumption.

In earlier technological revolutions, machines had to prove their usefulness to human workers. Today, the opposite is beginning to happen. Workers increasingly need to demonstrate how their contributions add value alongside machines that already perform core tasks efficiently and at scale.

This shift is redefining how organisations evaluate talent, productivity, and expertise.

India has historically shown an ability to adapt to global technological change. The discussions at the India AI Impact Summit suggest that policymakers and industry leaders are aware of the importance of inclusion, governance, and workforce readiness in the AI transition.

However, adaptation cannot rely on rhetoric alone.

Sustaining relevance in the AI era will require deliberate investment in education, continuous upskilling, and deeper forms of human-machine collaboration. Institutions, organisations, and governments will need to rethink how skills are taught, updated, and applied throughout professional careers.

If AI is becoming the benchmark for efficiency and innovation, then human capability must be redefined in terms that machines cannot easily replicate. Adaptability, contextual judgement, creativity, ethical reasoning, and leadership will become central to how human talent is valued.

In a world where machines increasingly function as capable co-workers, human skill will not be measured simply by effort or technical execution. It will be measured by the ability to guide, evaluate, and complement intelligent systems.

The future of work will therefore depend not on competing with AI, but on learning how to work alongside it.

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OUR VIEW

ISTOCKPHOTO

Maximize inflows of FDI but run a security check

Easing investment from border-sharing countries could revive Chinese interest and serve India's export ambitions but let's keep electronic components under watch for hidden risks

It is welcome that India is liberalizing inward investment from countries that share a land border with India. Investments up to 10% of a company's paid-up capital that involve no board-seat control will be allowed under the automatic route. Investment proposals that need government approval would also be fast-tracked for nods within 60 days in specified sectors, including the manufacture of capital goods, capital goods for electronics, electronic components, polysilicon and the conversion of polysilicon into ingots and their slicing into wafers. A precondition is that the investee company should be majority owned and controlled by Indians or Indian entities. The move eases curbs imposed back in 2020 and signals a lower guard against the role played by Chinese capital in India's economy. In general, a policy tweak that aims to maximize foreign inflows is good for GDP growth and job creation. For us to join global value chains, the colour of money should matter less than what it can do for us. However, in today's times, investment, technology and national security are interlinked. Many countries, the US included, no longer allow Chinese gear in their core telecom networks even though it is both effective and economical. Such caution must apply to some electronic components as well.

Every such component is not amenable to remote control by its maker and exposed to the risk of being turned against our interests. Those that are should be kept strictly indigenous in design and production; drone control units are an example. Complex electronic equipment is assembled from simpler parts that are not vulnerable to foreign misuse or sabotage. We should not hesitate to invite equity partners from abroad to produce such components at scale in India. But when it comes to sub-assemblies and assemblies, the picture changes. Only a firm grasp of their technological intricacy and openness to being disabled or hijacked should determine whether making them locally with foreign capital or tech participation would compromise national security or not. It is vital to develop this nous and bring it to bear on investment decisions in sensitive fields.

Although India has forged closer ties with many countries, only Russia has been willing to share critical technologies with us without holding anything back—as with cryogenic rocket engine blueprints. However, the past is no guarantee of future performance. We should strive for integration with supply chains that involve electronics and an easier inward path for foreign direct investment (FDI) can aid that effort. Indeed, it is vital for export success. However, for domestic deployment, particularly in vital sectors that have a bearing on national security—such as our power grid, telecom networks and defence equipment—we should bar automatic procurement from such export-oriented value chains. We must invest heavily in R&D, even 'reinvent the wheel' if necessary, to master crucial production processes and technologies, even if these are available cheaper from abroad. We need a programme set up to identify key areas of national security concern, equipment deployed in them, their components and their potential vulnerability, even as we liberalize FDI rules for an export thrust. Technology licensing must be counted as a form of absolute control, more binding than majority ownership, when it comes to the security vetting of investment proposals. Subject to such safeguards, we should let as much FDI in as possible. We have been running short.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

Wars and their market impact: What the historical record says

The history of conflicts would suggest that shaken stock markets don't take long to regain normalcy

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These are sombre times for the world. The big conflict in West Asia is giving everyone the jitters. For readers of a business paper, the main questions would be related to its impact on markets. Before coming to that, here's a bit of a background with the caveat that I am not a geopolitics expert. Nevertheless, what I have done is look at history, facts and data.

As I had pointed out in January in an interview, Iran is not a small country. It is more than half the area of India. And if you strike Iran, there will be adverse consequences. It is not a country you can overpower very easily. It has an arsenal. It has military forces. And probably more of a stomach to take casualties than the US alliance does. Moreover, Iran's geography—with mountains and salt deserts—is such that ground warfare is nearly impossible.

I, for one, never understood what the end game of the US-Israeli strikes was. This is not the place to go into the details of why regime change is almost impossible with current tactics.

On the other hand, Iran has been strategic in its chess game by striking economically. The cost of neutralizing an inexpensive drone is orders of magnitude higher. But it has also been working to increase the risk perception of the region and make the economic cost of the war prohibitive. It did not need to close the Strait of Hormuz, just make ship passage uninsurable. Plus, Iran has managed to shake the 'safe haven' image of US allies in the region. Possibly, its game is to get the Gulf countries to pressure the US to stop the conflict. Those appear to be Tehran's objectives, and to an extent, I would say that they have succeeded.

Coming to financial markets, we did this study just before the Russia-Ukraine war started in 2022. We went back over 50 years and looked at every single major geopolitical event: the two Gulf Wars, Afghanistan, 9/11, the US bombing Libya, etc. And what we found was that in every case, there was turmoil in stock markets just before and after the incident, but in six months to one year, markets had forgotten about the disruption.

We did not have enough data points for a statistical study, but the exercise did not need to be statistical because the same thing happened each time. I could not find an exception to the rule. At times, there was some residual impact on commodities, but not on stock markets. The only markets impacted a year later were those hit directly by the conflict.

On the other hand, conflicts themselves don't get resolved that easily. Even when the adversaries were completely mis-matched, as with the US versus Vietnam or versus Afghanistan, the bigger guy could not win even after seven years and 20 years respectively.

If you focus narrowly on markets, wars have historically not impacted them beyond a little at the start. That's also what we saw with Russia-Ukraine, even though the war continues four years later. Six months after the start of that war, I remember headlines in Indian newspapers that the market had forgotten about it.

While we had done the exercise going back a little over five decades, a recent piece in *Financial Times* entitled, 'On ignoring geopolitics, buying bubbles and hoarding gold' went back over a century and included the two World Wars which killed tens of millions of people, only to come to the same conclusion: that it is not worthwhile selling out due to geopolitical upheavals.

The big dislocations in markets have not been due to geopolitics. Extreme crashes were due to other reasons, from the 1929 Great Depression to the 2000 tech crash to the 2008 financial crisis.

As far as oil is concerned, let me tell you what we did on oil a few weeks ago. It was not a call that this conflict would break out. However, looking at the trajectory of oil prices at the time, it appeared to us that the risk-reward equation was in our favour in terms of oil going up. Around the beginning of February, we further underweighted US equities and increased the commodity exposure of our Global multi-asset fund.

Nevertheless, we know that every time there is a conflict in the Gulf, oil prices go up. But remember that no one wants the flow of oil to stop. Whether it's an old ruler, a new ruler or an invader, everyone wants the crude oil trade to continue. That is the region's cash cow. Whether it is Saddam Hussein or the ISIS, nobody disrupts oil flows beyond a point. We can all guess that the US would not be too interested in Iran (or Venezuela) if the latter was not a major oil producer. In other words, everyone is there for the oil.

This time, there has been a little more of a supply squeeze on oil, although the US has reportedly shown displeasure over Israel's targeting of Iran's oil facilities, which suggests that America does not want such damage inflicted.

Leaving aside the humanitarian questions that every war raises, as far as the stock markets are concerned, going by history, I do not expect any significant lasting impact of the latest flare-up.

Crude was anyway expected to rise a bit and you might see some news-driven gyrations there, but eventually it will settle down to a more normal—albeit perhaps an upward—trajectory. Also remember, we did live with $100-plus oil around 15 years ago, that too in the middle of a global recession. So even that is not the end of the world.

10 YEARS AGO

JUST A THOUGHT

Allowing limited Chinese participation in India's manufacturing ecosystem could make it easier for [multinational] companies to shift final assembly to India while maintaining access to Chinese inputs.

ARPIT CHATURVEDI

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Can any good come of this appalling war in West Asia?

RAHUL JACOB

is a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

If proof were needed that even after decades of globalization, the world isn't flat, Iran's chokehold over the Strait of Hormuz is providing plenty. The opposing view might be summarized in four words, 'The Revenge of Geography,' the title of geopolitical analyst Robert Kaplan's prescient book more than a decade ago. "Terrain determines the pace and method of fighting... the flat deserts of Kuwait and Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991 magnified the effect of air power, even as holding vast and heavily populated stretches of Iraq in the Second Gulf War showed the limits of air power and thus made American (ground) forces victims of geography," Kaplan wrote. "Aircraft can bombard, but they cannot transport goods in bulk, nor exercise control on the ground."

As they embarked on the Third Gulf War, the US and Israel appear to have assumed their vastly superior air power and military intelligence would end the war in days. Iran, in response, launched drone attacks on US allies around the region in a bid to globalize the war and force the US and Israel to relent.

Assuming some sort of strategic plan precedes war in today's world of majoritarian populists, the US-Israeli assumption appears to have been that with the senior Iran leadership killed, an acquiescent new leader in Tehran would capitulate, as in Venezuela. The recent 'election' of Ayatollah Khamenei's son as supreme leader suggests the hardline faction is still in charge. Now a war of attrition begins as the US and Israel seek to destroy Iranian infrastructure and Tehran responds by using drones and the proximity of geography to continue attacks on other oil and gas producers to make the global economy suffer collateral damage. US and Israeli casualties have been a fraction of those incurred by Iran. The bombing of an Iranian school and torpedoing of a naval ship off the coast of Sri Lanka each left vastly more people dead than the total casualties on the other side.

Are there any bright spots amid the horrors of war? The first is that if and when financial markets start to really tumble, the guiding principle of today's rule-by-chaos US administration may come into play: Trump (almost) Always Chickens Out. On the other side, Iran's leadership, unlike Ukraine's much more popular leadership when Russia attacked it four years ago, may come under domestic pressure to end the war. Iran's strategy of attacking its Gulf neighbours also looks set to backfire as they might cooperate more closely with the US and push for regime change in Tehran.

Two unintended consequences appear likely. One is that India and other Asian countries will build larger buffers of oil reserves. Japan and Korea have strategic oil reserves that should allow them to manage for half a year or so. Nevertheless, the Seoul stock index plunged as the war began before the Korean government stepped in to bolster it. It is in the interest of governments everywhere to put on a business-as-usual face. Markets are volatile but following suit; Brent crude oil futures descended after a brief scare earlier this week.

Perhaps an oil shock will arrest complacency on climate change and push us to decarbonize our economies

So far, so relatively sanguine. Yet, even as the Saudis and others find ways to transport oil through pipelines and other routes, the longer Iran's Hormuz stranglehold continues, oil price pressure will grow. As Windward, a research consultancy, observed in an update this week: "The mechanisms suppressing traffic are no longer purely kinetic. The combination of vessel attacks, elevated strike risk, GPS and AIS (Automatic Identification System) interference, and the withdrawal of insurable war-risk coverage is now producing a *de facto* closure effect for much of the commercial market, despite the absence of a formally declared and universally enforced blockade."

After four weeks of this, we could be in a different psychological zone altogether. Many oil tanker crews will have returned and many oil producers would have long exhausted their storage capacity. *The Wall Street Journal* points out, "As Yemen's Houthis have shown with their attacks in the Red Sea, it doesn't take much sophistication to close major international shipping lanes. With a few drones and anti-ship missiles, the Iranians could do that too for a long time." Since 2022, Iran's increased capacity to make Shahed kamikaze drones, and transfer the tech to Russia, has been a critical factor in that conflict and may prolong this one, too.

A happier prospect is that this oil shock might arrest today's complacency on climate change and push the world to decarbonize faster. As the global energy consultancy Wood Mackenzie forecast last year, demand for liquid hydrocarbons is expected to rise for another half dozen years. Natural gas demand will remain 'resilient' through the 2040s, the report predicts.

Two alternative paths have been laid out by our neighbours, one predictable, the other less so. In China, oil demand looks set to fall by a third in three decades thanks to rapid electric vehicle adoption, said the report: "However, India, Southeast Asia and Africa remain key drivers of oil demand growth." The other salutary example is Sri Lanka. In response to its economic crisis a few years ago that required an IMF bailout, the country is now reliant on renewables for 70% of its electricity, compared with less than 50% in 2021. By contrast, while renewables account for over half of India's power generation capacity, their share of our energy consumption is a mere 15-20%.

There are many reasons to decry this appalling war, but perhaps some good will come of it. As an expert quipped, it is hard to weaponize solar and wind energy.

MY VIEW | ACUTE ANGLE

Anthropic's warning shot about surveillance demands attention

AI enables the state to surveil citizens at a massive scale. This raises serious questions of privacy, freedom and dissidence

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ISTOCKPHOTO

Late last month, the US Department of War labelled Anthropic, creator of the artificial intelligence (AI) system Claude, "a supply chain risk," and began taking steps to remove it from all use in the department, including by contractors and subcontractors to its roughly $1 trillion annual spending. There are news reports that no company that does work with the Pentagon will be allowed to engage in "commercial activity" with Anthropic. President Donald Trump called Anthropic a "radical left, woke company" that he "fired... like dogs."

OpenAI, the creator of ChatGPT and leading system in the AI race, swooped in within a day. It is Anthropic's main rival and both companies are far ahead of challengers like Alphabet, DeepSeek, Meta and Microsoft. Anthropic is estimated to lose about $200 million in direct contracts. Its preference for the public good over private gain is widely viewed as a heroic, almost quixotic, act.

Why did matters come to this head? In a public statement, Dario Amodei, CEO and co-founder of Anthropic, said it is because Anthropic demanded two safeguards in using its product. One, that it should not be used for mass surveillance against Americans. Two, it should not be deployed for fully autonomous weapons. Amodei's own words are worth quoting at length because they summarize the argument best.

First: "AI-driven mass surveillance presents serious, novel risks to our fundamental liberties... Under current law, the government can purchase detailed records of Americans' movements, web browsing, and associations from public sources without obtaining a warrant... Powerful AI makes it possible to assemble this scattered, individually innocuous data into a comprehensive picture of any person's life—automatically and at massive scale." Today's column focuses on this issue.

Second: "Fully autonomous weapons (those that take humans out of the loop entirely and automate selecting and engaging targets) may prove critical for our national defense. But today, frontier AI systems are simply not reliable enough to power fully autonomous weapons... without proper oversight, fully autonomous weapons cannot be relied upon to exercise the critical judgment that [trained professionals] exhibit every day. They need to be deployed with proper guardrails, which don't exist today." This is a frightening prospect, especially given that makers of AI systems themselves do not understand how their systems make choices. This subject deserves a separate discussion.

The issue of mass surveillance and erosion of individual privacy by the state is one that has become increasingly urgent, almost in lock-step with the digitalization of information. The discourse is distressingly familiar. According to the state, there are rising threats from terrorists, bad actors, rogue nations, hostile governments and "the enemy within." To keep its 'good' citizens safe from these threats, the state asks (in not so many words) for a tradeoff: give up some individual rights (especially on privacy) to get more security.

Critical security theorists call this approach 'securitization,' implying that security threats are socially constructed. The state creates narratives of fear ("only we can save you") that are mostly bogus to enlarge its power to jail opponents or dissidents and curb civil liberties. The so-called 'war on terror' in the US after the 9/11 attacks led to 'enhanced interrogation' of unlawfully detained individuals, the Patriot Act and large-scale warrantless wiretapping by units like the National Security Agency to ostensibly identify 'terrorists' among the populace.

In India, digital tools have already massively expanded the state's armoury of surveillance and control. Some attempts have failed. For example, the ham-handed effort to mandate a state-run cybersecurity app on phones (Sanchar Saathi). Others have been scandalous, such as the alleged use of Pegasus spyware to surveil journalists and political opponents. Other ongoing efforts have been far more successful, especially the use of the Aadhaar system for large-scale data collection.

Yet, many other efforts are generally unrecognized, often covert and almost always with no public oversight. Laws such as the Telecommunications Act and Digital Personal Data Protection Act (both from 2023) are meant to safeguard the interests of data users. Perhaps they do, but they also empower the state over individual privacy in the guise of security. The state uses its Central Monitoring System to monitor communication across mobile, landline and internet platforms, and Network Traffic Analysis to surveil emails, social media posts and Voice over Internet Protocol calls, apart from facial recognition technologies and drone surveillance in public spaces.

Amodei warns that AI can be used to stitch this "scattered, individually innocuous data into a comprehensive picture of any person's life—automatically and at massive scale." This is not a sci-fi fantasy. The Chinese state is already using AI to systematize data, a project fed by 700 million cameras, biometrics, facial recognition, voice identification, ID cards, WeChat, Alipay, e-commerce, medical records, hotel stays and so on. But that is China, a regime like no other, governing a citizenry that has never had individual freedom of the sort that India, the US and most of Europe are justifiably proud of.

The Indian state, however, has a relatively dubious record on handling dissidence. A sedition law designed by the colonial state was used to jail figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita retains a provision to punish sedition (even though the word has been dropped), while the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act continues to be used to jail activists; think of the cases of Umar Khalid, Disha Ravi and Kanhaiya Kumar.

The use of AI for mass surveillance is a temptation for all 'securitized' states, India included. How far the Indian state has already gone with AI use on its massive data collection and how much further it will go are not known. It may be necessary to begin thinking now about ways for civil society to monitor the Indian state's use of AI (itself improving by leaps and bounds) as it grants officials unprecedented power to surveil the thoughts and behaviours of citizens.

MINT CURATOR

From bidets to AI labs: Japan's firms must stop being modest

They should learn the art of hype for the world to notice their tech

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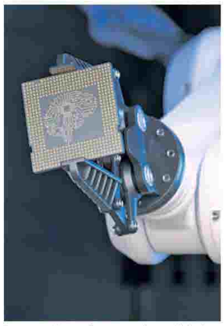

Japanese firms often struggle to tell their success stories. ISTOCKPHOTO

A Japanese maker of high-tech toilets has been causing a splash in the world of artificial intelligence (AI). Activist investor Palliser Capital recently called on the management of Toto, best known for its Washlet bidets, to highlight that the firm is a growing AI play, thanks to its advanced ceramics segments. Toto is the "most undervalued and overlooked AI memory beneficiary," Palliser wrote. Its little-known business of chip parts recently accounted for half its operating profit. Yet, just a page was dedicated to it in the most recent investor presentation, with this limited disclosure leaving its value "effectively hidden from the market," the fund said.

Palliser has a point here—and it's one that extends beyond the porcelain throne.

Japanese firms often struggle to tell their success stories, particularly if they're diversified or in niche industries. Carefully stage-managed domestic media engagements tend to dominate. While disclosure is improving, getting information out of some firms can still be akin to pulling teeth. Worse, for years even companies that were proactive often found it hard to reach a receptive audience.

But things are changing in the era of AI and robotics, where Japan has vast expertise in specialty chemicals and wafer substrates, sensors and motors. The country might have fallen behind in the age of software, but these physical hardware supply chains are exactly the kind of industries where firms still have an edge.

While some bemoan the lack of 'creative destruction' in the economy, innovation happens differently. Like Toto, companies reinvent themselves with alacrity and transition to new business models.

Take Fujikura. It was founded in 1885, the age of steam engines and gas lamps, but is now one of the world's hottest AI bets thanks to its optical fibres used in data centres. Shares have risen almost 25 times since the start of 2024, the best-performing Japanese blue-chip.

Or Nitto Boseki, which began as a silk-spinning firm in 1898, the year H.G. Wells published *The War of the Worlds*. It's now a leading supplier of glass cloth fibre, with its stock more than quadrupling since last year amid reports of its links to Nvidia and Apple. Printers Dai Nippon Printing (founded 1876) and Toppan (dating to 1900) might be associated with ink and paper, but are actually crucial makers of chip packaging materials and photomasks.

Yamaha is the subject of memes about its diverse output. It makes musical keyboards and pianos, even if it is mostly seen as a motorbike maker. The diversification continues: Yamaha aims to expand its own semiconductor backend business into a ¥100 billion ($633 million) earner by the 2030s.

I have had more than one conversation in recent weeks with people surprised to learn that Japan is the world leader in industrial robots, with a 70% market share according to the trade and industry ministry. But even I was unaware until recently that Omron, a company that most think of as making healthcare devices like thermometers and weighing scales, now makes two-thirds of its profits from industrial automation.

Despite this dominance, robotic tech is increasingly associated with China's flashy-yet-impractical kung-fu fighting humanoid automatons and Tesla's overhyped Optimus robots. This is where Japan must get better at promoting itself.

The advent of high-quality AI translation tools that make company materials understandable for anyone has helped. But in any language, you would struggle to learn much about one of the country's biggest companies in this sector, the notoriously secretive Keyence. Shares of this maker of sensors for automating factories have been range-bound for five years, even as sales and profits have doubled. It would surely benefit from a little over-the-top robotics hype.

Japanese products tend to become world famous only after they get a little help from abroad. The movie *Lost in Translation* is often credited with awakening the world to Japanese whisky; a handful of Australian skiers first realized the potential of Hokkaido's now-famous powder snow. The government is currently trying to turn anime into a major export business, but it became globally famous not because of a top-down push, but by bottom-up fandom on pirate sites like Crunchyroll, founded by a group of Americans.

Japanese companies need evangelists. Palliser says rewriting the narrative could add another 55% to Toto's shares. Some people in Tokyo have been getting a little uncomfortable with the growing power of activists, but these are the folks who could help spread the word.

In the original gold rush, it was all about picks and shovels. This time, it's more about the plumbing.

GUEST VIEW

India must act before the coming AI-pocalypse kicks in

ASHISH DHAWAN & PIYUSH DOSHI

are, respectively, founder-CEO, and operating partner, The Convergence Foundation

As the dust settles on India's recent AI summit—optimistic in tone, ambitious in scope—a harder question demands an honest answer. What does the next wave of artificial intelligence mean for a sector that has served as a key economic engine for three decades? Information technology (IT) services generate over $254 billion in annual exports, employ 5.4 million professionals and finance a merchandise trade deficit that has breached $300 billion.

Software exports are a success story. They are also a macroeconomic stabilizer, rupee backstop and social contract (given their role in expanding India's middle class). This engine is under threat as Agentic AI systems deployed at scale by Anthropic, OpenAI, Google and Microsoft can autonomously write code, manage workflows, process claims and run structured business processes. Much of India's IT sector's services fall in this category. Niti Aayog warns that our tech-sector headcount could fall from 7.5 million to 6 million by 2031. The stock market has voted: India's IT majors have seen their share prices fall while their global counterparts surged. A sharp slowdown in IT exports can precipitate a collapse of the rupee, forcing up interest rates and pushing the Centre to cut expenditure, which would put further pressure on growth and jobs.

If there's a silver lining, it is the possibility of a broad manufacturing renaissance. India accounts for just 2.9% of global factory output and 1.8% of goods exports—a share that has barely moved in two decades. Manufacturing contributes just 13% of GDP, against 25-32% in East Asian countries that exhibited miracle growth. The gap between India's potential and performance reflects not so much a market failure as a policy failure waiting to be corrected.

Paradoxically, a weaker rupee could become an asset. It would serve exports well, giving Indian merchandise a price edge just as global supply chains seek to diversify beyond China.

India's production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme has seen electronics production surge 146% since 2020-21, even as mobile exports have grown 8-fold. Our National Manufacturing Mission could convert this proof of concept into a structural shift in favour of the factory sector. Here is how:

First, a global value chain taskforce should identify the top 20 global firms across priority sectors—electronics, EVs, semiconductors, defence, chemicals and medical devices—and pursue them with a whatever-it-takes mandate: bespoke incentives, coordinated Centre-state action and 90-day decision cycles. Apple's move to India catalysed billions in investment and made us the world's second-largest mobile phone maker. The lesson: a few strategic anchors can transform a field.

Our IT services success story is reaching its limits and we must aim for a manufacturing renaissance

Second, ease import bottlenecks. High tariffs on base metals, speciality chemicals, capital goods and components protect upstream producers but also price downstream exporters out of global markets. A surgical audit of input costs across the top export value chains, followed by tariff rationalization and faster customs clearances, would restore competitiveness better than a weaker exchange rate.

Third, 'Gift cities' for manufacturing. Less than 2% of India's land is used for industry. Manufacturers, particularly small businesses. struggle to find suitable sites that are cleared and connected. States must develop industrial clusters where land is pre-acquired and titled, utility connections are in place, building bye-laws are liberal and approvals are delegated to local authorities offering truly single-window clearances. These clusters should be modelled on the Gift City framework, where meaningfully differential regulation can be applied on par with the world's most liberal.

Fourth, PLI 1.0 has given India a clear set of lessons. It has attracted over ₹2 trillion in investments across 14 sectors and helped transform electronics and pharmaceuticals. We now need PLI 2.0, which should be more ambitious in its targets. It should anchor the National Manufacturing Mission's goal of this sector accounting for 25% of GDP and be simpler in design: fewer sectors pursued with greater depth, and with streamlined eligibility and faster disbursement cycles. PLI 2.0 must operate with a dedicated secretariat and measurable quarterly milestones with full accountability.

Fifth, India must deregulate quickly. It has made genuine progress on this front through dedicated taskforces recently. But much still needs to be done before we can claim parity with frictionless investment destinations like China, Vietnam and other Asian countries. The immediate priority is to sharply reduce licence and compliance requirements, consolidate overlapping regulatory jurisdictions, digitize inspections with time-bound outcomes and enforce accountability for delays.

While these five measures can get our manufacturing engine going, it will require a few more reforms to sustain. We must tackle the issue of electricity cross-subsidization to ensure that Indian companies have access to reliable power at competitive rates. Similarly, GST and labour code simplification should go further, so our labour market and tax administration are on par with the best. Finally, we need a strong dispute resolution mechanism with dedicated commercial courts, mandatory pre-litigation mediation and specialist arbitration to reduce the risk premium that investors price into every decision.

India has missed the manufacturing bus before. The next one is boarding. We must spare no effort to get a ticket.

thehindu businessline.
THURSDAY - MARCH 12, 2026

Ethanol drive

Mandating E20 petrol calls for checks and balances

In an interesting coincidence, the Centre issued a directive mandating 20 per cent ethanol use in high octane petrol, just days before the Iran war broke out. To place in perspective the import of this step which will come into effect from April 1, petrol substitution has translated into savings of ₹1.4 lakh crore in foreign exchange since 2014. Ethanol blending can make a big difference to India's petroleum imports of at least $150 billion, at current over-the-roof prices. But the virtues and demerits of ethanol go beyond savings in the import bill.

By all accounts, ethanol blending of about 20 per cent has already been achieved. What the latest directive seeks to do is to formalise the arrangement across petrol pumps by also mandating the use of premium petrol (with a research octane number of 95) in the blend. Ethanol too has a high octane content; a superior blend is perhaps expected to smoothen the combustion process and allay consumer fears over ethanol damaging vehicle engines. But consumers should be allowed to make informed choices. Petrol pumps should offer a bouquet of options at various price points, while incentivising the shift to E20 or more. Consumers who wish to opt for less or no ethanol in their petrol should be given the option of paying more. Meanwhile, car and two-wheeler makers need to come out upfront with clear product specifications on how their engines are equipped to deal with ethanol's supposedly corrosive properties. Ethanol's lower calorific value reduces mileage, and to that extent raises petrol use.

Ethanol produces lower tailpipe greenhouse gas emissions, but the same cannot readily be said for the emissions over its entire product cycle. Besides, emissions from ethanol-blended petrol are not free of sulphur, nitrogen and other toxic chemicals. The environment-friendliness of ethanol depends a lot on the feedstock used. Recent research explains how ethanol is resource efficient perhaps only when no additional land, water or fertilizer is used. There is also the issue of diverting land from food crops. Fifty lakh tonnes of rice and 40 lakh tonnes of sugar would be used in India annually to support current levels of ethanol output. Therefore, agriculture waste, molasses, waste oils, fats and greases are a better feedstock option than using sugarcane, maize or rice. Maize is urea-intensive, even if it demands less water than rice or sugarcane. However, ethanol can be considered as a clean fuel option if product cycle issues are considered — including land and water scarcity, and food security.

It is also to be noted that electric vehicles are becoming viable by the day on account of falling battery costs and improved efficiency. To be sure, the product cycle emissions issues as well as import intensity of the process are germane issues here as well. The green transport transition should combine both ethanol blending and EVs judiciously — without lobbies driving the process. Domestic availability of ethanol feedstock is a crucial plus in times such as these.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH

MADAN SABNAVIS

GETTY IMAGES

Economy may survive war supply shocks

WAGES OF WAR. The rupee and stock markets will remain volatile, but impact on growth and inflation may remain muted

The current oil crisis is the fourth in the last four years. The first episode took place when Russia invaded Ukraine which saw crude price moving from around $84/barrel in February 2022 to $117 in March and remaining in a higher range till September, when it moderated to $90/barrel before reverting to around $80/barrel in December.

Therefore, the higher prices lasted for almost nine months. In this episode, Russia was a major supplier of oil (third largest with share of 10-12 per cent). With a ban being imposed on imports by the western community, supplies were disrupted.

The second was the Israel-Palestine conflict in October 2023 but its price impact lasted for just about a month. This is because no oil producing country was involved in this conflict.

The third was a short lived war where the US and Israel attacked Iran in June 2025. Here too, the price impact was limited as Iran is not really a major supplier of oil to the world, with its share in global output at around 4 per cent and sanctions still in place.

The present war is different. To begin with, almost all the oil producing countries in West Asia are embroiled in this conflict, impacting production of oil and gas. Further, while Iran has not officially closed the Strait of Hormuz, ships will not sail through this passage, given the risks involved.

So, there has been greater disruption to the oil industry with shipping costs also going up for all goods passing this region. Significantly, an early end to the war looks unlikely. Ukraine has managed to hold on for four years now.

IMPACT ON INDIA

India imports around five million barrels a day which works out to around $180 billion (1.8 billion barrels annually) a year. Hence, if the price remains high for the entire year, for every $10 dollar increase in the price of oil, the import bill be up by $18 billion.

This can lead to an increase in current account deficit by 0.5 per cent of GDP, which should not be a serious issue for India as the balance is fairly comfortable today in the region of 1-1.5 per cent. Exports, however, would be impacted as petro-products are around $65-70 billion per annum, of which 15 per cent is headed to these vulnerable regions.

The immediate impact has been felt on the currency with the rupee crossing the psychological level of ₹92/$. It is likely to see increased volatility. This market will witness increased volatility. First, the US dollar will also be volatile with a possible tendency to strengthen. The Fed will hold the reins here.

Second, any news on oil and gas supply disruption will spook the rupee. Third, FPI flows will remain uncertain. While the India growth story will bring in the funds, the rupee volatility will lower potential returns. This can be a deterrent.

Fourth, the behaviour of exporters and importers will also hold a clue. In times of uncertainty, exporters hold back earnings, while importers may rush in to buy dollars, exacerbating the demand-supply situation. Lastly, RBI action in the coming days will be important as intervention in the market can quell speculative forces and bring in stability.

LIMITED GROWTH IMPACT

Concerns over growth may be less serious. While supply disruptions will cause problems to user industries such as fertilizers, chemical products among others, a decline in exports can also dent growth in GDP at the margin. The overall impact may not be more than 0.1-0.2 percentage points but would need monitoring for secondary effects of the war. The supply disruptions of gas and their impact on user industries will be more of an issue.

Inflation is likely to be under control unless the government decides to pass on the higher price of crude to the consumer, which has rarely happened.

When crude prices stayed low, the benefit did not go the consumer but to the OMCs. Higher crude prices may not hence lead to an increase in retail prices in the near future as this can be absorbed by the OMCs.

In fact, given the fragile global oil situation over the last four years, it may make sense to transfer all future surpluses to an emergency fund that can be used in times of crisis.

Further, OMCs do buy oil based on contracts struck with suppliers where the price formula is worked out in advance. Therefore, the increase seen today in the market may not be the price which is finally paid and would be lower. Also, hedging practices are pursued to cover for price risk to an extent.

The government would be monitoring the situation carefully. There are a few issues that merit attention. The first is whether anything can be done on excise duty or VAT (by States) if prices rise further.

> Given the fragile global oil situation, it may make sense to transfer all future surpluses to an emergency fund that can be used in times of crisis

Second, the subsidy element is low today on LPG which is not an issue. In fact, the price was increased recently to partly offset the higher cost. But supplies are a concern on which a policy has already been indicated to ensure that essential services are not affected. Third, fertilizer prices need to be watched carefully as they affect the subsidy level as well its availability.

The stock market would continue to display yo-yo movements reflecting sentiment on a real time basis and hence will be hard to predict in the short run. This will be the case with global indices, too.

Last, the bond market has not been affected much. While forex intervention will draw out liquidity, the RBI has already announced OMOs which will be reassuring for the market.

Therefore, the length of the war will hold the clue to the final outcome. The government and RBI are seized of the matter and would take the appropriate steps to mitigate the risks. But markets for sure, will remain volatile.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views expressed are personal

Why the ECA has been invoked for LPG supply

The war in Middle East has disrupted gas supplies. The government move is expected to ensure cooking gas for households

bl.explainer

Ramasamy Jayaprakash

The Union government invoked the Essential Commodities Act (ECA), 1955, to deal with supply disruption of natural gas due to the war in West Asia. The government has invoked its emergency powers enshrined under the Act to secure cooking gas to crores of households.

What is the Essential Commodities Act? When is it invoked and how does it help?

The Essential Commodities Act (ECA) of 1955 grants the Union government the power to "regulate or prohibit the production, supply, distribution, trade, and commerce of commodities" that are declared as 'essential' under the Act. This includes commodities such as food, fertilizers, drugs, and petroleum products. It can be modified by the Centre to add items to the list if need arises.

It is typically invoked during crisis to prevent hoarding, black marketing, price gouging and artificial shortages. With the ECA, the government can dictate production, storage, priority allocation and distribution, and fix price caps. The Act serves as a tool for the government to ensure that ordinary citizens are not cut off from basic necessities in times of crisis.

COOKING GAS. Securing supply ANI

Why did the government invoke ECA to secure LPG supplies?

India imports more than 60 per cent of its total LPG requirements, with almost 90 per cent of these imports coming from the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz. The ongoing US-Israel-Iran war has effectively halted vessel movements through this critical maritime chokepoint.

With only 25-30 days of LPG inventory available domestically, there is a threat of acute shortage of LPG cylinders in India. As there is little clarity on when this war will end, the government has invoked the ECA to help consumers deal with the crisis.

What are the orders given by the government to secure LPG supplies?

The orders from the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas under the ECA and the new Natural Gas (Supply Regulation) Order, 2026 gives the following directives:

- All public and private refineries must divert propane, butane and other C3/C4 streams exclusively for LPG production.
- The entire additional LPG must be supplied only to the three public-sector oil marketing companies — IndianOil, BPCL and HPCL — for sale to domestic (household) consumers.
- No diversion for making petrochemicals allowed.
- A 25-day inter-booking period has been introduced for domestic consumers ordering cylinder refills to prevent hoarding.

What is the impact of the war in India? What is the shortfall likely to be?

With the choking at the Strait of Hormuz, India has been forced to scout for spot cargoes from distant sources such as the US, Norway and Algeria which might add to the cost. While there is no official announcements on the scale of potential shortfall, there are reports of commercial supplies being under severe pressure in cities such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and Pune.

While roughly 25-30 days' stock provides a thin buffer, a longer conflict in West Asia could create considerable shortfall if supply from alternate sources are not scaled up fast enough.

Which sectors are likely to be hit the most by the LPG supply disruption?

The hardest hit are the hotels, restaurants, eateries, bakeries and food courts — many of which have already reported supply halts or cut down of the menu. There is also a fear of temporary shutdowns of hotels and restaurants. Other services such as gas crematoriums, laundry & ironing using gas are also reporting shortages.

How will the pooled gas pricing under the order work?

The uncertainties and the shortages could lead to price surge of LPG, affecting domestic consumers the most. To cushion the financial shock, the government has introduced a 'pooled pricing' mechanism.

GAIL (India) Ltd has been tasked with coordinating the reallocation of gas from lower-priority users to the top-priority sectors (domestic PNG, CNG, LPG plants and pipeline operations).

The Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC) will periodically calculate and notify a single 'pooled price' that averages the cost of diverted gas. The entities receiving the gas must give a legal undertaking to accept the pooled price, overriding prior contracts and pricing, to share the burden fairly.

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.

Social media concerns

Apropos the Editorial 'Safety net' (March 11), Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh's move to regulate social media access for minors is a timely and prudent response to the growing concerns surrounding the digital lives of young users.

Increasing incidents of screen addiction, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content and psychological stress among adolescents underline the urgency for regulatory safeguards.

However, the true effectiveness of such measures will depend on the rigour of their implementation, particularly in ensuring credible age verification, platform accountability and parental awareness.

A coordinated national policy spearheaded by the Centre, and adopted by all States, would ensure consistency, stronger oversight and more meaningful protection for minors.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Apropos 'Safety Net' (March 11), the Editorial makes a convincing case that restricting access alone will not solve the problem. Platforms are designed to be compulsive, and until that architecture changes, age-based bans will remain easy to circumvent.

Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are right to push for regulation, but State-level rules will always have limited reach. What India needs is a central framework that goes beyond access control.

Mandatory default settings that disable autoplay and algorithmic feeds for minors, transparent reporting requirements for platforms, and genuine liability for harm caused to young users would create real accountability.

A Myilsami
Coimbatore

Focus on banking

This is with reference to the report 'PSBs made over ₹28000 cr in 5 years by selling 3rd party financial products' (March 11).

Bankers' duties are to increase primarily their CASA deposits and utilise these funds of less interest for lending to other sectors with relatively better interest rates and meet the statutory requirements. The banks should not get lured into hawking other financial products for increasing their incomes/commissions.

At the same time the customers should also realise that some schemes such as the life insurance are important for them as are housing loans which are of long tenure.

Another important issue is the 'mis-selling' of some products, which the Finance Minister has rightly flagged, so the bankers have to be more cautious.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

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Energy policy success

Deft diplomacy, strategic reserves can avert crisis

Tuhin A Sinha
Sumit Kaushik

ENERGY. A critical pillar of national security GETTY IMAGES

The temporary disruption in LPG supplies in parts of India is a reminder of how deeply interconnected the global energy system has become. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz amid escalating tensions in West Asia has triggered shocks across global energy logistics.

The government responded quickly by invoking the Essential Services Maintenance Act to ensure supply chains continue functioning smoothly. Officials have clarified that the disruption is logistical rather than structural and is expected to stabilise soon as alternative supply routes and inventories are activated.

Moments like these test not only the resilience of energy systems but also the maturity of political discourse. The Strait of Hormuz is among the world's most critical energy choke-points. When it is disrupted, the global supply chain inevitably feels the impact. In such extraordinary geopolitical circumstances, responsible politics requires calm assessment rather than alarmism.

A CRITICAL PILLAR

Energy security is a critical pillar of national security for a country that imports nearly 85 per cent of its crude oil requirements. Global oil market disruptions can directly affect inflation, trade balances and economic stability. Recognising this vulnerability, the government has spent the past decade strengthening India's energy resilience through diversification, infrastructure investment and diplomatic engagement.

One key factor behind this resilience is diversification of suppliers. Over the last decade, India has expanded the number of countries from which it imports crude oil. By 2025, the number of supplier nations had increased from 27 to 40. This ensures that no single geopolitical crisis can cripple India's supply chain.

India also maintains significant energy buffers. The country currently holds between six and eight weeks of crude and fuel inventory.

Commercial refiners maintain roughly 25 days of stock while strategic petroleum reserves provide additional coverage. Combined, these reserves allow India to withstand supply disruptions for nearly 70 days.

Strategic petroleum reserves have been particularly important. Underground storage facilities at Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru and Padur provide about 5.3 million tonnes of crude storage capacity. In addition, India maintains substantial onshore crude storage.

Another pillar of stability has been India's pragmatic energy sourcing strategy. Following changes in global markets, India significantly increased imports of discounted Russian crude. By 2025, Russia accounted for roughly 35 per cent of India's oil imports, helping stabilise supplies and shield domestic markets from global price volatility.

During the current crisis, the government has also reviewed contingency options including supply diversification and maritime security.

State run refiners such as Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum have explored alternative supplies from the US, West Africa and Latin America. While these shipments involve longer transit times than Gulf routes, India's diversified supplier network ensures viable alternatives remain available.

Energy security depends not only on infrastructure but also on diplomacy.

India has remained engaged with key regional actors including Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Such diplomatic balance is crucial in a region that remains central to global energy markets. It is also important because nearly nine million Indians live in West Asia.

The country is projected to be one of the largest drivers of global oil demand growth in the coming years. To support this growth, India has expanded refining capacity and upgraded energy infrastructure.

Energy security is constructed gradually through sustained policy planning, infrastructure investment and diplomatic engagement.

Sinha is National Spokesperson, BJP; Kaushik is a social impact and public policy consultant

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 12, 2006

IIMB grad creates history

Finally it was $193,000. Mr Gaurav Aggarwal, of the graduating batch of the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, has created history with his offer letter from Barclays Capital, London. He's now the highest-ever-paid graduate across all IIMs. On Friday, the Day Zero of placements at the IIMB, Barclays Capital, London, offered Mr Aggarwal an international posting and a salary close to ₹86 lakh a year.

States against plan to list LPG in 'declared goods'

State Finance Ministers, under the aegis of the VAT Panel, are demanding full Central compensation of the revenue loss that would be suffered by the States on account of the Budget proposal to include LPG in the list of 'declared goods' under the CST Act. By this inclusion, the States cannot levy a VAT/sales tax rate of over 4 per cent on this product.

Nokia suppliers to set up units near Chennai

Two of Nokia's suppliers have decided to set up plants at Sriperumbudur, about 50 km west of Chennai. The two suppliers — Aspocomp Group Oyj and Perlos Corporation — will together invest $82 million (about ₹365 crore).

RAJASEKHAR VK

Implications of SC spectrum ruling

HIERARCHY ARTICULATED. The Supreme Court's spectrum ruling does not weaken the IBC. It clarifies that insolvency operates within, not above, constitutional ordering

GETTY IMAGES

The Supreme Court's ruling that telecom spectrum cannot form part of the insolvency estate has been widely reported as a telecom decision. It is considerably more than that. It is a boundary marker in India's insolvency jurisprudence, with implications well beyond mobile networks.

At its core, the Court's reasoning is constitutionally straightforward. Spectrum is a scarce natural resource, owned by the people of India and held in trust by the State. This understanding reflects the constitutional conception of material resources of the community under Article 39(b), which places their control in the service of the common good. The right granted to a telecom operator is not proprietary ownership, but a limited and revocable privilege. Consequently, proceedings under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code cannot restructure the ownership or control of spectrum.

That formulation is constitutionally elegant. It is also structurally significant, with complex consequences.

For nearly a decade, the IBC has been understood as a dominant economic statute. Its *non obstante* clause, emphasis on creditor primacy and commercial wisdom, and "clean slate" philosophy created the expectation that once insolvency commenced, resolution would be governed by the Code across sectors. Spectrum now stands outside that assumption, marking the first emphatic articulation of a constitutional boundary to that ambition.

The deeper question is this: if insolvency cannot operate upon spectrum because it is a material resource of the community, what of other state-controlled resources?

Telecom is not unique in this architecture. Modern regulated industries are built on entitlements layered upon sovereign ownership.

Coal is allocated under statutory auction frameworks. Oil and natural gas exploration rights arise from sovereign grants and production sharing contracts. Electricity generation depends on licences and tariff regulation. Mining leases, airport slots, port concessions, sports broadcasting signals and inland waterways each exist within a comprehensive statutory regime in which the state retains underlying ownership and regulatory control.

The Court's reasoning places constitutional resource governance above insolvency prerogatives. That hierarchy may be theoretically sound. But it reshapes the financial expectations that have grown around regulated industries.

THE PARTICIPATION PARADOX

One under-explored aspect of the spectrum dispute is the state's dual posture: participant within insolvency, yet constitutional arbiter outside it. The Department of Telecommunications filed claims and engaged within the IBC framework.

Yet the judgment makes clear that the transfer or restructuring of spectrum cannot be determined by the commercial collective alone.

This creates a dissonance, because insolvency is designed as a creditor-driven process. Committees of Creditors evaluate viability, approve plans and exercise commercial wisdom. But in sectors anchored in sovereign allocation of resources, commercial consensus is no longer decisive; regulatory and constitutional considerations sit above it.

The result? A structural asymmetry. The government may appear in insolvency as a claimant for dues, yet stand outside it as constitutional trustee of the resource. That dual capacity is inherent in regulated industries. The ruling makes clear that the sovereign capacity prevails.

For lenders and resolution applicants, participation in the insolvency process does not exhaust regulatory authority. Resolution cannot be assumed to bind the state as trustee of a natural resource.

THE PHANTOM ASSET DILEMMA

The practical consequences for resolution professionals are significant.

Under the IBC, the resolution professional must preserve the corporate debtor as a going concern and invite plans based on the value of its business. In telecom, the business is inseparable from spectrum usage rights. Those rights appear on the balance sheet as intangible assets and underpin enterprise value.

The judgment does not deny the commercial value of those rights. But it clarifies that accounting recognition does not convert a privilege into an insolvency asset. Spectrum remains outside the estate. This produces an operational dilemma.

Insolvency law does not seek to transfer the underlying resource. It restructures the corporate entity that holds the licence. In theory, a change in control of a licensee, subject to regulatory approval, need not threaten sovereign ownership. The going concern objective therefore becomes regulator-dependent in a deeper way than in ordinary manufacturing or services sectors, with the regulator and the sovereign statutory framework setting the outer perimeter. Insolvency does not compel, restructure or redraw the underlying entitlement.

> The apex court ruling reminds markets that in sectors anchored in sovereign allocation of scarce resources, constitutional control stands above commercial restructuring

The Code assumes that the business can travel through resolution. The judgment reminds markets that where the business rests on a sovereign grant, that travel is conditional.

NOT AN ABSOLUTE PROHIBITION

It is important not to overstate the reach of the ruling. The Court did not declare a change in control of a telecom company impossible. It held that insolvency cannot guide restructuring of ownership or control of spectrum. In other words, the IBC cannot compel or override the telecom regulatory regime, or any statutory regime governing comprehensive public resources.

This leaves open a narrower path. A resolution plan may still propose a change in control. The Department of Telecommunications may consider that proposal under its existing statutory framework, as it would in a merger or acquisition outside insolvency. Resolution applicants must not only negotiate with creditors; they must operate within a constitutional boundary that places sovereign control first.

The distinction is important, as the decisional centre of gravity now shifts from the commercial collective to the sectoral regulator. Insolvency becomes one process among others, not the master framework.

For markets, this means resolution in resource-linked sectors will increasingly resemble coordinated negotiation between creditors and regulators rather than a purely creditor-driven restructuring.

REPRICING REGULATED RISK

The financial implications are immediate. If spectrum usage rights cannot be treated as insolvency assets capable of transfer or monetisation, lenders must reassess how they evaluate similar entitlements. The same inquiry arises wherever enterprise value depends substantially on State-conferred licences or concessions.

Are banks financing proprietary assets, or access subject to pervasive regulatory control and constitutional doctrine?

The answer affects leverage, covenant structures, risk pricing and recovery modelling. In resource-intensive sectors, insolvency is no longer merely a balance-sheet exercise. It is embedded in public law. Lenders must treat it as a conditional privilege, not collateral in the conventional sense.

LEGISLATIVE CLARITY

The judgment exposes a broader structural issue. The IBC was drafted with distressed industrial and service enterprises in mind. It assumes that "assets" can be owned, transferred and realised. It does not draw a sharp distinction between proprietary assets and regulatory entitlements.

Companies in mining, energy, infrastructure and broadcasting will continue to enter insolvency when they default. The question is how far the insolvency framework can go in reorganising the entitlements on which those companies depend.

The judiciary has clarified the constitutional position: insolvency cannot rewrite sovereign control over public resources. The question is: how should insolvency and sectoral regulators interact in practice? Should there be defined timelines for regulatory decisions during CIRP? Should statutory frameworks expressly address transfer of licensed businesses in insolvency? These are questions for Parliament and policymakers.

The spectrum ruling does not weaken the IBC. It clarifies that insolvency operates within, not above, constitutional ordering. In its early years, the Code shifted power from promoters to creditors. In this judgment, the Court recalibrates the equation once more, reminding markets that in sectors anchored in sovereign allocation of scarce resources, constitutional control stands above commercial restructuring.

Telecom is the first arena in which this hierarchy has been tested and articulated so clearly.

The writer is a lawyer and former Judicial Member of the National Company Law Tribunal

Germany can weather Iran war if it doesn't last long

Kamil Kowalcze

Germany's economy is expected to suffer only a minor setback from the war in Iran if the conflict doesn't escalate further, according to the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin.

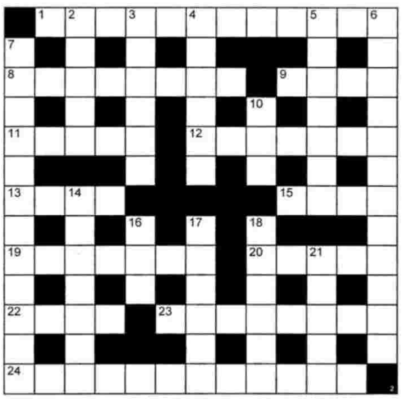
Higher oil and gas costs will reduce growth in Europe's biggest economy by about 0.1 to 0.2 percentage point this year, leaving expansion at around 1 per cent, said the institute, which is known by its acronym DIW. That outlook assumes that the biggest surge in energy prices linked to military intervention has already passed.

The inflation rate is expected to rise by roughly 0.4 percentage point because of higher energy costs, putting price growth at about 2.4 per cent in 2026 even without a further escalation of the conflict. DIW expects energy costs to ease "significantly" from April to June. Oil prices jumped above €100 ($115.95) a barrel after military strikes by the US and Israel on Iran. A corresponding sharp increase in gasoline and diesel costs in Germany prompted Friedrich Merz's government to set up a task force to monitor the situation.

While US President Donald Trump has said the war could end soon — contributing to a recent pullback in crude prices — the lack of visibility on how long it will last is weighing on the global economy. "It is important that politicians do their part to reduce uncertainty, which underscores how important it is to implement key reforms without hesitation," DIW president Marcel Fratzscher said in Berlin on Wednesday. Subsidising gasoline prices, as demanded by some lobby groups in Germany, would be a "serious mistake" because it would be expensive and result in a "misguided redistribution of wealth from people with low incomes to those with high incomes," Fratzscher said.

Germany's growth should remain supported by expansionary fiscal policy, said DIW, which is one of five key national institutes that monitor the economy. BLOOMBERG

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2635



EASY

ACROSS

1. More than a little, of importance (12)
8. Apostate, turncoat (8)
9. Apartment (4)
11. Vehemence, violence (5)
12. Cone-bearing tree (7)
13. Flank (4)
15. Defendant's answer to charge (4)
19. Spanish princess (7)
20. _____'s rod: mullein (5)
22. Require (4)
23. Strong attachment; consecration (8)
24. Paris students' area (5,7)

DOWN

2. Proprietor (5)
3. Clay box for packing pottery for baking (6)
4. Infer from premises (6)
5. Malignant (look) (7)
6. Acting as host (12)
7. Non-amateur (12)
10. Entity as opposed to attribute (3)
14. Turn aside, cause to deviate (7)
16. Whatever amount (3)
17. Gift, present (Fr) (6)
18. To smack, have a flavour (6)
21. Elevate (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Deem it capable of providing quite a lot (12)
8. Turncoat might need to change gear (8)
9. Sort of race for accommodation (4)
11. Compulsion to start criticising in warning from golfer (5)
12. Sort of tree nice for planting out (7)
13. It may be the right pretentious air (4)
15. Scottish lawsuit would be sure to provide gratification (4)
19. Princess in Madrid discovered tan if an adjustment was made (7)
20. Jewish high-priest whose rod may be found in bed (5)
22. Not to have been born of woman, a daughter (4)
23. Piety voted out as having one on (8)
24. Around the Sorbonne it's a dead language - mercy! (5,7)

DOWN

2. Proprietor produced nothing new at end of a year (5)
3. Clay box potter uses, for example, with rags (6)
4. Infer that Mussolini was half-dead to begin with (6)
5. So malignant, it could be a full version of it (7)
6. Being a host may prove amusing (12)
7. Paid performer for spies, loan being arranged (12)
10. An entity creating small spaces in print (3)
14. In the wrong clef, Ted found he could turn it aside (7)
16. Whatever the number, a lot lose their head (3)
17. A gift the French have, putting the bounder on water there (6)
18. Enjoy taste of what's lemony around a vanilla topping (6)
21. More money is available in a different era (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2634

ACROSS 1. Addict 8. Pearl 9. Suspect 11. Tendency 12. Beard 15. Lava 16. Row 17. Axle 19. Poppy 21. Standard 24. Yearned 25. Metal 26. Larder

DOWN 2. Deuce 3. Imperial 4. Tact 5. Spade 6. Barn 7. Play 10. Temporary 12. Bill 13. Labourer 14. Demy 18. Oddly 20. Piece 21. Same 22. Acts 23. Deal

It's a Smart, Careful, Welcome Reset

Richer investment harvest from Chinese vendors

India's relaxation of rules for investments made by Chinese companies in select industries such as electronics, capital goods and solar panels is a pragmatic re-assessment of trade imbalances and restrictions on capital inflows. India runs up its largest deficit in the goods trade with China. It is also beginning to see traction in exports of mobile handsets made in the country by companies like Apple that are diversifying their supply chains out of China. It helps global manufacturers to seed the Indian ecosystem if their Chinese vendors are allowed to invest as well.

India's easing of investment rules follows a series of moves to resume flights to China, issue visas to Chinese nationals to end factory floor technician scarcity, and permission granted to power companies to import Chinese equipment to avoid project delays. The latest set of policy easing can be expected to revive plans by Chinese EV-makers like

BYD, whose proposed investment in an Indian venture was rejected for security concerns. A richer investment harvest is likely from medium-sized Chinese vendors that play a key role in supply chains. These can contribute to development of India's SMEs through capital and technology transfers.

Reset in ties with China has been driven partly by US protectionism. Punitive US tariffs, technology export controls and immigration restrictions are nudging the two Asian economies to seek common ground over globalisation. Technologies like autonomous vehicles provide the countries a broad canvas for cooperation. This allows India to hedge its bets in the 'US vs China' AI race. The country's large pool of technical talent can add considerable value to both AI models. Normalisation of relations between India and China is a necessary first step to achieve the economic potential presented by two large economies growing in proximity. Handled with economic and strategic protections in place, Chinese trade and investment can speed up India's ambitions of becoming a global manufacturing hub.

Make 'No Wi-Fi' an Airline Sales Pitch

Air India became the first domestic airline to introduce in-flight Wi-Fi in January 2025. It was hailed as a triumph of tech dishing out yet another invaluable service for the air, especially business, traveller. More than a year on, we're not too sure if it's a value-add. Flights have long been the last bastion of disconnection, rare interludes when executives could plead tech-disabled '5th amendment' — emails unsent, calls unanswered. It was a socially and professionally acceptable pause, a liminal space between departure and arrival. No companies went into red because of phone calls going into voicemail.

The argument for airborne internet is efficiency. Why waste 6 hrs between Delhi and London when deals can be struck mid-

air? But productivity gains are marginal, while costs — psychological and cultural — are profound. The enforced break of a flight is restorative. It's the rare chance to think without notification, reboot, and recall that life is not merely a sequence of meetings. For international business-class travellers, especially those in first class, Wi-Fi-less hours are not a deprivation, but a privilege that comes with the glass of champagne, fine dining and hushed privacy. These individuals are the most relentlessly connected. A long-haul flight offers the only legitimate excuse to 'vanish' without guilt. Wi-Fi can only undermine this much-deserved experience.

Airlines tout connectivity as progress. In truth, it's annexation of yet another frontier by the more manufactured aspects of work. Skies should remain a refuge. Business travellers, of all people, deserve the luxury of being unreachable at 35,000 ft. In fact, airlines should sell their passengers being temporarily unreachable as one of their invaluable services.

JUST IN JEST

Our roads may be killers, but they can jolly well resurrect, too

Pothole Thickens With A Modern Lazarus

We're always moaning and groaning about our public works. We curse potholes, blame engineers and contractors, and question the wisdom of anyone who thought these roads were meant for 21st-c. vehicles. We may have been too harsh and misunderstood their true genius: the multipurpose design of our roads and flyovers. And here's why. A 50-yr-old woman declared brain-dead in Bareilly was being transported home to Pilibhit, when the ambulance she was in hit a lunar-level crater on the highway. While the passengers were likely cursing the pothole, the jolt did something unexpected: resurrect the 'dead'. Upon impact, the brain-dead woman began breathing again — achieving what doctors and standard resuscitators could not.

What we have is a modern desi take on Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, Frankenstein, where Dr Victor Frankenstein injects a 'spark of being' into a patchwork body to bring it to life. Later film adaptations, of course, dramatised this moment with crackling electric machines jolting lifeless flesh into motion. If Frankenstein were around today, he probably would skip the lab theatrics and head straight for Indian roads and highways. Why fuss with a galvanic apparatus when a strategically placed pothole can deliver the same life-affirming jolt? Shelley's novel's subtitle, 'The Modern Prometheus', could be replaced with 'The Modern Lazarus'.

LPG shortages highlight import risks, and show why India must scale ethanol for cooking

Meet Up With a New Flame

Tushar Gandhi

Is it oil? Is it coal? No, it's Ethanolman!

Restaurants, hotels and eateries are running out of cooking gas. Indian Hotel & Restaurant Association (AHAR) says 20% of establishments in Mumbai have shut due to disrupted commercial LPG supply, warning that closures could reach 50% if the shortage continues. In Delhi-NCR, commercial cylinders are reportedly selling on the black market for up to ₹1,500.

The crunch, of course, stems from the US-Israel war against Iran and the ensuing conflict in West Asia that has disrupted tanker movement through the Hormuz Strait, route for 85-90% of India's LPG imports. Domestic LPG prices have risen by ₹60 in a week, pushing a 14.2 kg cylinder in Delhi to ₹913, the highest since August 2023.

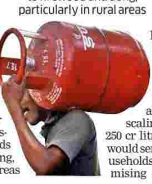
With 62% of domestic LPG demand met through imports, this disruption was always a matter of when, not if. The crisis in commercial kitchens, however, is only the visible tip of the iceberg. India's cooking fuel vulnerability runs far deeper.

India has made progress under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), connecting 32.99 cr households to LPG, including 10.33 cr subsidised connections. Yet, universal clean cooking remains elusive. About 500 mn people — nearly 40% of the population — rely on biomass fuels. Household air pollution from these fuels contributes to an estimated 1.2 mn premature deaths annually. Even within LPG-connected households, the ₹913-a-cylinder price — ₹613 for PMUY beneficiaries — pushes low-income households back to firewood and dung, particularly in rural areas where these fuels are available.

To sustain LPG usage among the poorest, GoI has committed ₹12,000 cr in PMUY subsidies for 2025-26, and sanctioned an additional ₹30,000 cr in compensation to IOCL, BPCL and HPCL for under-recoveries on domestic LPG sales. This is the fiscal cost of a system structurally dependent on imported fuel.

While India scrambles to secure LPG supply, its ethanol distilleries are operating below full capacity. India's ethanol production capacity has grown to 1,822 cr litres, supported by about 500 distilleries nationwide. The E20 blending programme requires 1,016 cr litres annually, leaving a substantial surplus available for other applications.

Even within LPG-connected households, the ₹913-a-cylinder price — ₹613 for PMUY beneficiaries — pushes low-income households back to firewood and dung, particularly in rural areas



Critically, cooking applications don't require anhydrous fuel-grade ethanol at 99.9% purity. 90-95% purity suffices, which lowers both production costs and the barrier to scaling. Diverting about 250 cr litres toward cooking would serve nearly 20 mn households without compromising E20 blending targets. The infrastructure to produce, store and move ethanol across India already exists.

Ethanol burns cleanly, producing primarily CO_2 and water vapour, with zero $PM_{2.5}$, and negligible toxic emissions compared to biomass. Centre for Science and Environment estimates that household cooking emissions in India exceed 350 mn tonnes of CO_2 annually, surpassing the entire transport sector. Ethanol clean cooking directly addresses this at scale.

Ethanol burns cleanly, producing primarily CO_2 and water vapour, with zero $PM_{2.5}$, and negligible toxic emissions compared to biomass

India's 4.5 mn street food vendors represent a compelling entry point for ethanol cooking deployment. These vendors operate in public spaces where LPG use is often restricted due to explosion risk. Ethanol stoves carry no such risk. Transitioning 1.1-1.3 mn urban vendors from biomass or kerosene to ethanol could reduce 3-4 mn tonnes of CO_2 annually, while materially improving occupational health and food safety outcomes.

The technology is ready, and its effectiveness is not untested. HPCL and IIT Guwahati have developed an ethanol-fuelled cookstove, and HPCL has announced plans for ethanol ATMs at retail outlets to enable household refills. A pilot in the Sundarbans tested ethanol stoves among households entirely dependent on forest wood, demonstrating viability in resource-constrained, off-grid environments. States are in active conversations about district-level pilots, with existing inter-state ethanol logistics. For example, Karnataka alone has an installed capacity of 270 cr litres, providing a ready supply chain.

UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Global Bioenergy Partnership (GBEP) has documented bioethanol clean-cooking programmes. Validated pilots in Ethiopia and Mozambique — both resource-constrained with high biomass dependence — have demonstrated that ethanol cooking is technically viable, socially acceptable and replicable across diverse geographies. India, with its far larger distillery base, superior logistics infrastructure and existing policy frameworks, is better positioned than any of these countries to deploy ethanol cooking at national scale.

India's ethanol ecosystem has matured. But the policy framework has not kept pace. Two specific steps are needed:

❶ GoI should designate bioethanol as an approved cooking fuel under PMUY, enabling its integration into the existing subsidy and distribution architecture.

❷ 3 state-level pilots should be commissioned, drawing on existing distillery capacity, oil marketing companies (OMC) distribution networks, and stove technology validated at scale.

The fiscal arithmetic is unambiguous. Sustaining LPG import dependence at 62% costs over ₹42,000 cr annually in subsidies and under-recoveries. It leaves India structurally exposed to geopolitical shocks, as the current West Asian crisis has demonstrated. Bioethanol cooking is not a replacement for LPG. It is a domestically produced, import-independent complement that India's distilleries can supply today.

The capacity exists. The technology exists. The crisis to justify urgency is on every front page this week. What is needed now is a policy decision.

The writer is convenor, Bioethanol Clean Cooking Alliance (BCCA)

ChatGPT **SHAIRI** OF THE DAY

There once was a vendor whom you'd see,

'Cash is so last decade — no can do, ji!

Bring cylinders, please,

And pay in gas for your cheez,

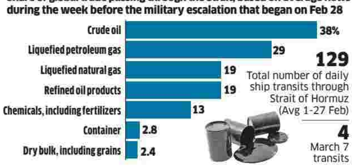
And your EMIs in full LPG.'

• • •

Hormuz Disruptions

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, carrying around a quarter of global seaborne oil trade and significant volumes of liquefied natural gas and fertilizers. The ongoing military escalation in the region has disrupted shipping flows through this narrow passage. The resulting ripple effects go far beyond the region, affecting energy markets, maritime transport and global supply chains.

Share of global trade passing through the Strait, based on average flows during the week before the military escalation that began on Feb 28



In 2024, total oil transported through the Strait was around 20 m barrels per day (bpd), or 25% of global seaborne oil trade. Crude oil and condensate account for 14 m bpd and petroleum products for 6 m bpd.

Source: UNCTAD

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad

Loot lo, loot lo!

Turbo-Charging FTAs

Piyush Doshi & Swagato Ganguly

Hammer blows to the multilateral trading system have ushered in a new world, to which India is swiftly responding by shedding its earlier reputation for protectionism and trade diffidence. It has signed a raft of FTAs, culminating recently in the 'mother of all deals' with the EU. It's also reached an 'interim agreement' with the US, bringing down punitive tariffs, but also committing India to eliminate or reduce tariffs on all US industrial goods and agricultural ones.

Greater openness raises the economic stakes, giving rise to opportunity as well as risk. Being competitive is of existential importance for India Inc and the economy. If we can maximise this opportunity and minimise risks, this can be another '1991' moment.

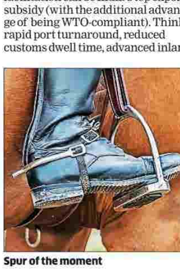
Exports are essential for India's growth, and FTAs are essential for a competitive shot at exports. A belief that India can't compete with other nations has cost it years of economic growth. While it will still not be able to win in all sectors, it needs to believe that it can dominate a few. Overall, India must target some 'FTA scale-plays' where it can win.

▶ **Pick winners** Rather than spreading itself too thin, India should pick 5-7 lines where it can be among the top 3 suppliers into partner markets — say, textiles-garments, chemicals, auto components, pharma, electronics assembly and processed foods. It should then streamline all elements that will make these sectors run smoothly: regulations, standards, testing labs, credit and logistics corridors.

If India is still not able to compete in certain sectors, despite a labour-cost advantage of over 10× compared with countries it has recently signed FTAs with, then wisdom dictates that those sectors should not be protected. Rather, Indian consumers and producers should have access to the best products, raw materials and capital goods at globally competitive prices.

The biggest hidden risk in liberalisation and opening its markets through FTAs is trans-shipments from a country like China via the FTA route. China does enjoy cost advantages over India in most categories, magnified in many cases through mercantilist methods such as overcapacity and dumping. In this case, India's first line of defence must be data-led rules-of-origin verification, risk scoring and penalties. Otherwise, tariff cuts will become 'China Plus One' via FTA.

▶ **Reduce costs** For India to fire on all cylinders of competitiveness, it must also do everything possible to bring down input and factor costs for all sectors. In that sense, improved infrastructure, logistics and trade facilitation can be India's top export subsidy (with the additional advantage of being WTO-compliant). Think rapid port turnaround, reduced customs dwell time, advanced inland logistics and paperwork digitisation. These shave costs for every sector without picking winners.



Spur of the moment

India should use Vietnam as its benchmark, and close specific gaps. This calls for some 'hard' reforms to bring down factor costs — for instance, in power, land and capital — going beyond the low-hanging fruit that has already been picked.

Vietnam's secret sauce is policy consistency, trade facilitation and plugging into supply chains. India must replicate all of this and focus on the 'boring fundamentals': stable and rationalised tariff policy, fast refunds, predictable compliance and industrial clusters linked to ports/air cargo.

▶ **Survival kit for firms** Cheaper capital, a reliable power supply at competitive rates, greater scale and necessary skills. The practical package is a lower cost of credit for exporters, faster GST refunds, easier availability of land and permits in export clusters, and workforce skilling tied to specific product lines, so that firms can scale before tariff walls come down fully.

India has thoughtfully negotiated import tariffs that fall over time, instead of all at once. But time is short. This interval needs to be leveraged to the hilt for Indian industry to emerge fighting fit.

India's manufacturing has been stuck at around 16-17% of GDP, and its share of global manufacturing is around 2.8%, even as India has almost 20% of the world's workforce. This leaves close to half of its workforce trapped in less-productive agriculture.

Recent trade deals provide India with the opportunity to break out of this vicious cycle and trigger a virtuous one — provided it grabs this opportunity with both hands. Hopefully, the trade deals themselves will provide the impetus. We need to get this right. Because halfway houses are no longer available.

Doshi is operating partner, and Ganguly is senior fellow, The Convergence Foundation

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Septime

Paris

Paris' dining scene has been reshaped by a wave of new restaurants that respect culinary discipline while treating tradition with irreverence. Few places capture this spirit better than Septime, where chef Bertrand Grébaut and his team cook with a confidence that is playful, yet deeply ingredient-focused.

Located on Rue de Charonne, the restaurant embodies modern Parisian cool. Its loft-like space, with wooden tables and exposed metal rafters, feels both industrial and elegant. Service is polished yet relaxed, though getting a table requires patience — reservations typically disappear weeks in advance and are handled exclusively online.

Grébaut trained under Alain Passard at Arpège, and that background shows in his meticulous attention to seasonality. The menu shifts constantly, reflecting what is season's freshest. A chilled velouté of green beans with white peach demonstrated the Parisian preference for subtlety, while the crisp caramelised pork belly with carrot purée is rich, balanced, beautifully executed.

For dessert, just stick to two slices of perfectly ripe French cheese: a melting Reblochon and a pungent tomme. Their purity sums up restaurant's philosophy — great ingredients when handled with care need little embellishment.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Secret Giving

NAJIB SHAH

We are in a month when adherents of several religious faiths are fasting — Christians observing Lent, Muslims observing Ramzan, and Baha'is observing the Nineteen-Day fast. Fasting is said to cleanse body and soul, making us aware of hunger and the need to give in charity.

Giving teaches us compassion and empathy; studies have shown that giving activates 'good feelings', a 'warm glow' effect. Giving also teaches us humility. There is a heart-touching incident, perhaps apocryphal, of saint-poet Tulsidas, who, intrigued with his poet-philosopher friend Rahim's habit of giving alms with his eyes cast down, asks him why he was doing so. Rahim replied with a much-loved doha: 'Denhar koi aur hai, bheje jo din rain, log bharam hampar karein, tose neeche nain' — the Giver is someone else, giving day and night; world has a misconception that I am the giver, so I lower my eyes in embarrassment.

The Jewish tradition talks of eight degrees of giving, from giving begrudgingly to giving anonymously. The Quran recommends secret giving since it protects the recipient's dignity and prevents arrogance. Jesus warned against 'sounding the trumpet'. The highest punya, as per the Hindu tradition, is gupt daan — charity given anonymously. The Sikh tradition emphasises that every donation given in the golak (donation box) must ensure anonymity.

The world needs a helping hand. And if you can do so anonymously, so much better.

Chat Room

War Game: Only Snakes, No Ladders

Apropos 'DC, We Have a Problem' by Seema Sirohi (Mar 11), changing regimes without a change in ideology only resets the clock on the next war. Violent beliefs survive sanctions, drones and assassinations; they often grow tougher in the ruins left behind. The Taliban's return and Iran's staying power show that movements rooted in grievance and absolutism can outlast any one man in power. If Washington and its allies truly want lasting security, they must confront the stories, fears and injustices that feed these movements, instead of just hunting their figureheads. The questions we still can't answer — why young people choose militias, why martyrdom appeals more than compromise — should be opened up to research and debate, not buried under bombs.

Gaurav Modak
Mumbai

Streamline Fuel Availability

This refers to the news report, 'Gas Supply for Homes, Vehicles Gets Primacy' (Mar 11). GoI must enforce Essential Commodities Act 1955 to control, supply and monitor distribution of LPG cylinders amid the scarcity on account of the ongoing conflict in

West Asia. GoI should prioritise supply of LPG cylinders to the vulnerable and needy, and ask the rest to use alternative fuel wherever available. We witnessed a similar situation when Covid vaccine was introduced and demand exceeded supply, but the crisis was managed with precision. That success needs to be replicated now.

S N Kabra
Mumbai

Pull Out Nani's Recipe Book

Apropos 'Chef's Special: Cook Less, Conserve More' by Ratna Bhushan and Anumeha Chaturvedi (Mar 11), India has a rich culinary heritage, built on wisdom passed down through generations. The rising LPG prices and energy shortages are nudging us to go back to our roots. Our traditional no-cooking methods — sprouting, fermenting, blending and raw assembly — offer nutritious options such as sprouted pulses, fermented dairy, soaked grains and fresh fruit-and-nut combinations. These techniques enhance nutrient availability while preserving essential vitamins, offering wholesome meals, proving that sometimes the future of food lies in the past.

Koyana Sharma
By email

Letters to the editor may be addressed to
editet@timesofindia.com

A thought for today

If you destroy a free market, you create a black market

WINSTON CHURCHILL

On All Cylinders

Stopping LPG black market requires commercial supply restoration, market pricing, distributor audits

Officially, there's no shortage of LPG. Anecdotally, cylinders are selling for twice the official price. That means we have a black market in gas now. This is not surprising when LPG supply to commercial kitchens has been curbed. There's logic behind govt's order: until Strait of Hormuz reopens, or enough new suppliers are found, India's gas stock must meet essential needs first. But as we said yesterday, commercial kitchens are just as "essential" as home kitchens now. They employ lakhs and feed crores daily. If they can't get gas legally, other means will arise. Gas meant for homes will get diverted – illegally – creating problems all round.

Administrators should know this. As a nation, we grew up on shortages and black markets of all types. In 1970s, parents booked LPG connections for daughters at birth, and Bajaj scooters too. Because delivery took years. Rice, sugar, kerosene, cooking oil, everything was rationed till 1990s, and rations were sold at open market prices. That was common knowledge. Why do we have a 1970s situation in 2026? Supply shock is only half the answer. The bigger reason is disruption of free market. There's a reduced stock of gas, and a large, desperate commercial sector that can't get any. Ergo, black market.

A cold-hearted economist would let gas find its right price. But govt can't be cold-hearted. It can't ask poor domestic consumers to pay ₹400 or ₹500 more per refill. The market is less squeamish. It sees a gap, and demands a "scarcity premium". But this is risky work. Gas distributors and their agents face stiff penalties, if caught. So they demand a "risk premium" as well. Effectively, LPG ends up costing more in the black market than it would in the "white market", if govt let demand and supply determine price.

Irony is, the harder govt cracks down, the higher black market's risk premium will shoot. But if it doesn't crack down, it risks normalising the black market itself. So, here's what it must do. One, increase LPG production and purchase. Two, bite the bullet on gas price. It's not diesel, and won't stoke inflation the same way. Three, audit distributors and ask marketing firms to start online dashboards showing real-time stock at the gas agency level. Transparency is the best fix for anything black. Higher prices may be politically unpalatable, but at least the money will flow to PSU companies, who can buy more gas with it. It's a better outcome than enriching middlemen.

The I In Individual

Our liberties make us & society stronger. Groupthink doesn't. But state & even some courts don't get it

Harish Rana has been in a vegetative state for 13 years. All this while, his parents have loved him, cared for him. For years, they have also pleaded for permission to withdraw the tubes clinically feeding him. Yesterday, the Supreme Court finally came through for them. Remember, the court had ruled the right to die with dignity, as being folded within the right to live with dignity, in 2011, and again in 2018. That didn't save Rana's parents, from running around the medical and judicial establishments, exhaustingly. It was their choice – but they had to wait 13 years to exercise it.

Look around at our turbulent world, and you see that many countries are not big on individual freedoms. India is different. Its Constitution, written by a people emerging from colonial subjugation, acutely conscious of what the denial of freedom meant in practice, committed to a transformative agenda. And placed the individual citizen at the nation's core, rather than traditional hierarchies. But too often, practice falls tragically short of theory. Theoretically, an adult is free to love any other adult of their choice. In reality, khap panchayats, 'love jihad' laws, 'honour' killings, and countless busybodies, won't let lovers be. Likewise, a woman's bodily autonomy is strong on paper. But in reality, hostile doctors and judges can vamoose her right to abortion. Even something as basic as what food a person chooses to eat, can be restricted by govt fiat or mob fury.

In the two fast & furious centuries since John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill's seminal text, *On Liberty*, was published, several weaknesses have been exposed in it. But this insight has held firm and true – that freedom of thinking is indispensable not just to make great thinkers, but also to enable average persons to become the best that they can be. If citizens cannot reach their potential, neither can the nation. If they cannot live in accordance with choices they make for themselves, is it even their own life? Often, the tyrant alone is portrayed as the enemy of liberty. But, suffocative public opinion does the job just as well.

Iran, Persia, and me

'Epic Fury' could learn from our real epic

Bachi Karkaria

How do we, Parsis, react to the insanity centred on our original motherland? Obviously, we never supported the regressive regime that in 1979 replaced our beloved Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. *Arre*, so what if he used his own secret police, SAVAK, to *khatam karo* his opponents, almost as brutally as his successors did? Claiming he was descended from Persia's Zoroastrian emperors, Cyrus the Great, etc, didn't he also encourage young Parsis to return to the *madar-e-watan*, which we abandoned 1,000 years ago, to save our sacred *jarthosti dharam*, and not get forcibly converted to newfangled Islam?

Of course, we condemned Khamenei, who tortured and killed his people – who were once our people, no? But Trump's MAGAlomanic attack crossed all limits. *Saala, hadd thayi gayi*.

erratica

He called it 'Epic Fury'. Well, boss, let us tell you about our Persian epic, famed ages before your America was even named. The *Shahnameh's* most poignant story shows war's unexpected, and inestimable, price. Legendary warrior, Rustom, goes off to serial battles, leaving behind a pregnant Tahmina and an amulet, saying, 'If it's a boy, bind it upon him in token of his father.' It is, and she does, naming him Sohrab.

Decades later, in Iran-Turan war, the two are unknowingly locked in mortal combat. Rustom fatally wounds Sohrab, who warns him that 'my father will seek you out, even if you hide high as a star in the heavens, or deep in the belly of the earth'. Intrigued, Rustom demands, 'Who is your mother, and what's your identification?' The dying son pushes up his sleeve, to reveal the jewel.

Or, take that other Shahnameh hero. Trump *seth*, don't imagine you are today's Shah Fareedon, who was anointed Athyawan' (the Righteous) for overthrowing the monstrous Zohak. Remember, for Iran, *America* is the 'Great Satan'.

As for the critical shipping lane, 'Hormuz' or 'Ohrmazd' is the Pahlavi word for our Supreme Being, 'Ahura Mazda'. In Avestan Persian, it meant Lord of Wisdom, a commodity dangerously lacking in both power-blinded parties.

***

Alec Smart said: "War is school for thought. But in war, there's little thought for schools.☺"

America's RIL Deal, India's Real Deal

The project is geopolitical leverage for New Delhi. It fits into GOI's smart transactional approach: invest in US, buy Russian oil, clear Chinese FDI, talk to Iran, be pals with Israel. Be guided by ROI, not emotion

Somnath Mukherjee

"Buy when there's blood in the streets, even if the blood is your own." That gem is credited to Baron Nathan Rothschild, a member of the legendary, eponymous banking family. And that wasn't just a smart quip. He lived by it. The Baron invested while the Battle of Waterloo was raging. He profited handsomely after the war. Nor is Waterloo a unique case in history.

Geopolitical upheavals have invariably thrown up economic winners (and losers). WW2, the most devastating geopolitical event known to mankind, allowed US to overcome a biting depression, and emerge as the pre-eminent world power. It also allowed USSR to recover very quickly, from the extensive destruction it suffered, and emerge as a peer-competitor to US. The ensuing Cold War threw up several winners – most of East Asia as economic powers, and finally emergence of China, as a near-peer geopolitical rival to US.

As the world adjusts, somewhat violently at times, to a new geopolitical construct, there is literally blood in the streets (and some, though not yet a massive amount, in the markets). While India confronts, and adjusts to, day-to-day emergencies thrown up by moment, it is important we remain alive to opportunities such upheavals invariably throw up.

Image: AI

It's early days yet, and social media chatter threatens to overwhelm reasoned narratives these days, but it looks as if India is playing the new "great game", with a certain level of aplomb.

Yesterday, Trump took to Truth Social to announce a large petroleum refinery, the first greenfield refinery in US in 50 years, with a $300bn investment by Reliance Industries. While actual scale and timelines of such projects are hidden below political headlines, it's an interesting development.

Details are scanty yet. But, at a proforma level, it seems like a win-win. RIL runs perhaps the world's most complex refinery operation, with its Jamnagar refinery complex possessing a Nelson Complexity Index (NCI) of over 21. Such high NCI reflects the ability to process heavy sour crude (of the sort found in Venezuela, among other places).

This is an operation Reliance has perfected over decades, and it's precisely the skillset that US is missing (all of US refining operations are today predicated on refining light sweet crude). Such a project helps US build critical supply capabilities, precisely in an area most under disruption today, due to the war in Persian Gulf.

For India, such an investment, by an Indian company, builds the reciprocity quotient so embedded in Trumpian deal-making. A large Indian-owned refinery in America creates some "tariff insurance" today, while continuing to yield geopolitical leverage long after Trump is gone.

Yes, RIL is a private enterprise. But, globally, large private corporations are often considered to be an extension of the state. There's likely to have been enough back-channel official nudges and encouragement, given the deal's size and importance.

This isn't a one-off. The Trump-RIL announcement is part of a series of similarly interesting GOI decisions, taken in recent weeks. On Tuesday, rules for FDI originating from China were changed. Reversing a decision taken in 2020, in the aftermath of Galwan, these revised rules make it easier for Chinese companies to invest in India.

This is expected to ease the flow of technology and capital from China. Technology has become a bottleneck for many Indian companies, setting up new manufacturing capacity. Because global manufacturing supply chains are predominantly centred around China.

Last week, the media made much out of US carving out a "30-day sanction waiver" for India's Russian oil imports. But data tells a different story. India had imported over 20% of its monthly crude from Russia in Feb, before any US 'waiver'. India had, earlier, continued to buy discounted Russian oil, for as long as it was economically feasible, before effecting a partial scale-back, to facilitate a trade agreement with America.

Go back slightly earlier. On Jan 19, the entire UAE royal family was in Delhi, on a state visit. Modi was in Israel on a state visit on Feb 25. Iran's junior foreign minister was hosted in New Delhi, during the semi-official Raisina Dialogue. Three Iranian naval ships caught out in Indian Ocean were offered refuge (one, unfortunately, didn't make it to a port on time, but the other two did). All of these are illustrative, of an approach different to traditional policy. That's why GOI has refrained, so far, from issuing moral judgements on the Iran conflict.

India's keeping lines open with all sides. Choosing to tilt, when a side seems to be the winner, choosing not to speak out loudly, when self-interests are not at play. India's guiding principle is, judge the transaction on offer. Don't go by some abstract philosophy, or *friendship*, or a greater principle.

This is a classic financial trader's strategy, applied to statecraft – hedging where necessary, taking exposure where there is an opportunity, cutting losses quickly. Above all, diversifying aggressively, with no emotional commitment to any position.

This is elite level policymaking, in a disturbed world. Of course, that's not enough by itself. Hard power needs to be built up, and that requires different kinds of state interventions.

But, such smart statecraft is a necessary condition for India, if it wants to capture opportunities emerging out of global disruptions.

The writer is Chief Investment Officer of an asset and wealth management firm. Views are personal

Chinese Checkers & Trump's Iran War

Beijing doesn't necessarily want an Iranian victory. Ideally, it would like the conflict to drain US resources, preserve a weakened Tehran regime, and protect Chinese regional economic interests

Anushka Saxena

In the prevailing logic of great power competition, Iran seems to have a valuable function for China. For every dollar US spends, defending commercial shipping lanes in Red Sea, from Houthi anti-ship missiles, and for every multi-billion-dollar carrier strike group tethered to Persian Gulf, to deter Iranian aggression, there's resource unavailable for deployment in Indo-Pacific.

Some may argue, Beijing is deliberately manufacturing a quagmire for US. The deeper insight is this: China is free-riding on US military's provision of security in Persian Gulf and Red Sea, securing Beijing's sea trade with Gulf countries, but it's doing just enough to keep Washington's resources bogged down. Covert support for Houthis, or Iran's IRGC, is an example of the latter.

This geopolitical calculus, however, has distinct limits. China's grand strategy in West Asia demands balancing. Beijing's commercial relations with Gulf states, and even Israel, are more lucrative than its ties to Iran. The current war directly hinders this balancing. Iran's retaliatory strikes against Gulf, for example, endanger 1mn Chinese expats in West Asia, $50bn-plus investment in regional BRI infra, and the broader stability of global energy markets. So, China is stuck in a loop, where it both applauds Tehran's firm response, but also sees the damage it can cause.

The near-closure of Strait of Hormuz – imposed in part by Iran itself – risks triggering a global oil shock, with consequences for the Chinese economy. This is true, even if, as rumour has it, the Strait remains open for Chinese vessels. 20% of the world's total oil trade, and much of China's oil imports coming in from West Asia, transit through the Strait. If suppliers refuse to insure ships, and warring parties ignore safety of commercial shipping, then economic security is not guaranteed for anyone.

Hence, while Beijing benefits from US-Iran friction, the current conflict may not be serving its best interests.

Beijing's language around the need to "prevent the spread and spillover" of conflict, and its latest decision to appoint a 'special envoy' for 'Mediation in Middle East', are notable.

In Iran's leadership structure, as it stands today, Ali Larijani seems to have emerged as a central figure. Reinstated as secretary of Supreme National Security Council, Larijani is the primary architect of the Iran-China relationship, having championed the 25-Year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. But there's no official confirmation on whether China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, and Larijani have had consultations. Wang has reiterated China's support to Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi.

Image: AI

Going forward, if and when the conflict enters a protracted phase, China's playbook is likely to be that of business over bullets. Beijing will, rigorously, avoid direct military confrontation with US. It will utilise the crisis to deepen Tehran's dependence on it, while, simultaneously, attempting to contain the conflict's scope and spread.

On the diplomatic front, it's likely to leverage its institutional weight within UNSC, SCO, or even the expanded Brics, to construct a diplomatic firewall for Tehran.

China could also veto, or abstain, from any UN resolutions seeking to impose new international legal mandates, or Chapter VII authorisations, against Tehran. Its foreign affairs corps will – as they already are – aggressively frame the US-Israeli campaign as an illegal, destabilising war of aggression, that blatantly violates UN Charter, while portraying China as a "responsible major power".

In the military domain, China will absolutely refrain from defending Iran, or establishing formal defence ties. Doing so would invite US secondary sanctions. Instead, China will employ a strategy of indirect military augmentation, designed to raise costs of US operations, without crossing the threshold of direct belligerency.

Perhaps, the clandestine transfer of CM-302 – supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles that, per *Reuters*, Iran was looking to acquire before outbreak of war – will be accelerated, and covert logistical pipelines will be established, to deliver kamikaze drones and MANPADS, necessary for Iran to rapidly repair and replenish its inventory.

These are defence transfers China has not just refrained from commenting upon, but whose existence it has actively refuted.

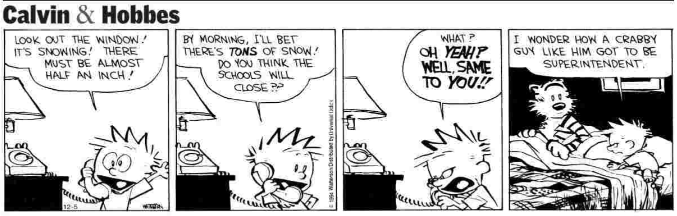
Economically, China will most likely utilise the crisis to capitalise on Iran's need for revenue, to fund its war effort. This could include Beijing seeking even more favourable, deeply discounted, long-term contracts for Iranian crude oil. It may also be that, as we speak, Beijing is exerting pressure on Larijani, the IRGC command, and even some open ears in Trump's administration, to ensure safe passage in Hormuz.

Finally, on the nuclear front, China will strongly oppose any Iranian move towards rapid enrichment and armament. Beijing recognises that if Tehran goes nuclear, there will be more West Asian conflicts. Ultimately, China's objective would not, necessarily, be to ensure decisive Iranian military gains against US and Israel.

Beijing's best case scenario is either a draining stalemate, or an immediate cessation of hostilities, provided either option preserves the Iranian regime, preferably weaker and more beholden to China.

The writer is a staff research analyst with Takshashila Institution

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape?...If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can!

JRR Tolkien

Aspire For And Curate The Great Escape

Narayani Ganesh

How can you sleep so soundly when my business has crashed and i am worried sick, yelled a husband at his spouse, who was trying to 'escape' into oblivion. Apart from the fact that she needed to rest and get energised to function the next day both at her workplace and home, shutting out the world and going to sleep was an escapism she needed, to wriggle free of gloom. Every one of us found some way or other to survive the pandemic-induced lockdowns, either by catching up on reading and writing, getting entertained by OTT channels, learning a new craft or skill, or simply renewing friendships, virtually. Escapism, yes, but it was necessary to help us tide over external world realities that were 'killing' us.

Watching the recently released film *Dhurandhar* with two of my older sisters – a film themed on gang warfare, terrorist killings, and conflicts – it was amusing to observe their diametrically opposite reactions. "Shut it, shut it," pleaded the oldest, "why watch all this gore and violence? Don't we have enough of these in our lives? Let's watch a happy, romantic, Christmassy movie!" The other, glued to the screen, protested: "Hey, don't change the channel, it is so gripping, these things really happened, you know!" While one sought to escape 'reality', the other wanted to experience it, vicariously.

What is meant by escapism? One explanation is that "escapism is mental diversion from unpleasant aspects of daily life. Escapism also may be used in relation to activities involving imagination or fantasy. Escapism may refer to things that one does to occupy oneself to get away from persistent feelings of depression or general sadness." You may wish to escape family pressures, a cloying relationship, workplace stress, a looming pandemic, imminent war, worldwide shortages of essential items – anything that disturbs you, in the 'real' world.

THE SPEAKING TREE

It follows, therefore, that in order to escape, one needs to suspend disbelief and enter the world of fantasy. Fall down into a rabbit hole as Alice in Wonderland did. Find an escape chute.

This brings us to more metaphysical questions, what is real and what is unreal? Is the reality we are seeking escape from, real? Is our mode of escapism, real? Are we running away from harsh truths instead of facing those challenges? Are we in hiding, avoiding anything distasteful?

When Alexander the Great visited Diogenes and asked whether he could do anything for the famed teacher, Diogenes replied: "Only stand out of my light." I don't suppose he meant it as a rude remark; he was merely stating a fact, also a metaphor for letting people experience their inner light that is sometimes obstructed by others, and often, by the individual himself. Can you stand aside and let yourself get illumined without having to resort to 'escapism'?

There are two kinds of escapism. One, escaping from the material world of disturbing reality. The other escape is what we could call the Great Escape – breaking free of shackles, including escaping from reality – that prevent us from finding ourselves, from experiencing the inner you that can take you on a beautiful path that can take you on an incredible journey to the Self – the ultimate therapy, the ultimate release. You can curate your own Great Escape.

ganeshnarayani@yahoo.com

Telangana Today
FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

"Real democracy is one in which even the poorest and weakest feel their voice can be heard... Here, whenever an oppn MP gets up to speak, what he gets from that side (Speaker) is No, No, No

ABHAY KUMAR SINHA
RJD MP

Our parliament should always be a place where talents are recognised and merit counts. It should never be a gallery of old boys' networks, nor a place where titles hold power over the will of people

NICK THOMAS-SYMONDS
UK minister

The cylinder of BJP's 'achhe din' has run empty. Earlier, people wandered in search of oxygen cylinders, now they are wandering for cooking gas cylinders"

AKHILESH YADAV
Samajwadi Party chief

Save children from toxic social media

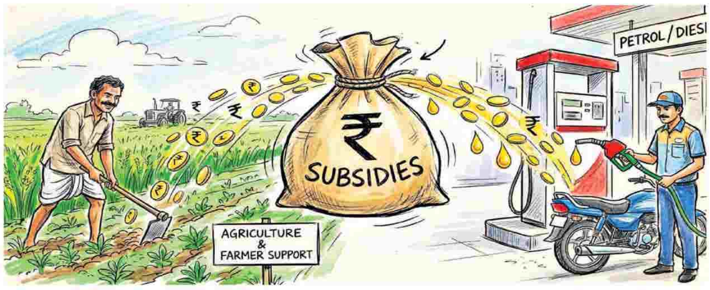
Reasonable restrictions on social media access are an idea whose time has come. Nations need to start honest conversations on how to curb the harmful effects of digital addiction, particularly among teenagers and young adults. For policymakers in a country like India, this new-age affliction presents a complex challenge with no legal compass to guide them. Now, two politically divergent southern States —Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka — have taken the lead and set a policy template for others to follow. They have announced plans to ban social media use for children below the age of 16, citing concerns over digital addiction, mental health and cyberbullying. Generally, a blanket ban on any social practice is not desirable and, in some cases, could prove counterproductive. However, there is a strong case for raising guardrails to protect children from becoming victims of screen addiction and cybercrime. The exponentially growing social media is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the penetration of the internet and smartphones has democratised the flow of information; on the other, it has spawned a dangerous trend of spreading cyber offences. Cyberbullying, digital addiction and mental illness are the worst nightmares for parents of teenage children. Safeguarding their kids from the potential harms of social media platforms is one of the biggest challenges parents face today. "Where and how to draw the line?" is the typical dilemma for present-day parents, fretting over their wards fiddling with mobile phones all the time.

> AP, Karnataka have set a policy template for other States to follow in tackling social media addiction among children

Underage children constantly glued to their mobile screens — sucked into algorithm-driven platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X and YouTube — run the risk of becoming disconnected from the real world and socially awkward. Moreover, the online world is a minefield of dangerous allurement. At a time when social media has become an integral part of our lives, parents around the world constantly worry about how to shield their children from the risks associated with these platforms until they are mature enough to navigate them responsibly. Australia has become the first country in the world to come up with a solution, though a radical one. It has passed a law banning access to social media platforms for children under 16 years. The new federal law, which came into effect in December last year, is the most sweeping measure to date aimed at shielding young people from the potential harms of social media platforms. It puts the onus on social media companies to prevent children from accessing their platforms. In the Indian context, it is a challenging task for the government to formulate an institutional mechanism to regulate social media in a manner that strikes a healthy balance between the imperatives of national security and social order, and the need to protect citizens' privacy, particularly the safety of children.

Fiscal discipline vs welfare

Budget 2026–27 signals a gradual rationalisation of subsidies while prioritising fiscal consolidation and capital expenditure




ALOK ADITYA
Dr PRASHANT KUMAR CHOUDHARY

The Union government in the Budget 2026–27 presented what it called a calibrated approach to subsidies. Spending on food, fertilizer, and petroleum subsidies together amounts to over Rs 4.11 lakh crore and remains a formidable fiscal commitment. While their relative weight in the Budget has declined, this does not signal a retreat from welfare, rather, it reflects an effort to normalise post-pandemic excess and re-anchor fiscal discipline.

Between 2015–16 and 2019–20, total subsidies remained roughly constant at Rs 1.9–2.4 lakh crore annually. However, during the pandemic, this surged to Rs 7.08 lakh crore in 2020–21, mainly driven by food expenditure, which accounted for more than 20% of the total expenditure, and was aimed at preserving consumption and social stability. Since then, with a steady rollback, it fell to Rs 3.85 lakh crore in 2024-25, followed by projected expenditure of Rs 4.11 lakh crore in 2026-27. While this shows an absolute increase, its share in total expenditure has declined sharply to roughly 8%, with overall government spending estimated at Rs 53.47 lakh crore in 2026-27.

The Economic Survey 2025-26 articulates the government's approach to rationalising subsidies while emphasising expenditure quality, debt sustainability, and the protection of capital outlays. While this rationalisation aims to normalise subsidies after crisis-driven expansion and ensure that they do not crowd out infrastructure investment, fiscal arithmetic alone cannot settle this question.

Food Subsidy

At Rs 2.28 lakh crore, food subsidy remains the single largest component of the Budget. However, it has stabilised at a structurally elevated level, signalling that food security spending has been institutionalised following the pandemic expansion.The continuation of large allocations reflects the enduring scale of the National Food Security framework and allied programmes, including free grain distribution for vulnerable households. However, the system remains procurement-heavy, with high carrying and storage costs.

As fiscal space tightens, the question is not whether food subsidies should exist; they must. However, whether the present grain-centric model is the most efficient way to ensure nutritional security remains questionable. Without reforms in procurement policy and grain management, food subsidy risks becoming fiscally sticky even as other components compress.

Fertilizer

The fertilizer subsidy, pegged at Rs 1,70,781 crore, reflects moderation after the volatility induced by global commodity shocks. On paper, this looks like a welcome normalisation. In reality, this is where the sharpest trade-offs occur. India's fertilizer subsidy is largely product-based. The government compensates fertilizer manufacturers, especially chemical producers, for selling at controlled prices. Farmers benefit indirectly through lower retail prices, but the transfer does not flow directly to them. This structure has historically distorted nutrient use, especially by encouraging excessive urea consumption. If the subsidy bill declines without structural reforms, such as shifting toward farmer-based direct transfers, farmers may eventually face higher input costs. This matters because farm incomes remain structurally fragile.

According to official data, the average agricultural household income increased between the 2012–13 and 2018–19 surveys, but much of the rise reflected diversification into non-farm activities rather than pure farm earnings. More recent trends show improvements in agricultural growth rates; however, small and marginal farmers continue to operate on thin margins, particularly amid climate variability and volatile crop prices. In this context, reducing fertilizer subsidies without strengthening income support mechanisms or productivity gains could tighten cost-of-cultivation pressures.

Petroleum

Petroleum subsidy, at Rs 12,085 crore, is now a minor line item in the Budget. Over the past decade, fuel pricing has steadily moved toward market alignment, thereby reducing fiscal vulnerability to global oil shocks. From a macroeconomic perspective, this represents a structural gain. The state no longer absorbs large crude price fluctuations. However, the shift also signals a broader pattern in which price subsidies are increasingly being replaced with targeted or limited interventions. The era of open-ended fuel under-pricing appears to be over.

Are Subsidy Cuts Harmless?

The Budget projects a fiscal deficit of 4.3% of GDP for 2026–27, continuing the path of gradual consolidation. Interest payments alone exceed Rs 14 lakh crore, dwarfing the subsidy allocations. Capital expenditure is a declared priority. In the "Rupee Goes To" classification, subsidies account for roughly 8% of spending, far less than their prominence in political debate would suggest. However, the assumption that subsidy compression is harmless deserves caution. Subsidies operate not only as welfare transfers but also as shock absorbers in a structurally unequal economy. Food subsidies smooth consumption. Fertilizer subsidies stabilise input costs. Petroleum interventions cushion transport inflation. When these buffers shrink, the adjustment burden shifts, often silently, onto households with limited resilience.

> That subsidy compression is harmless deserves caution: subsidies function not only as welfare transfers but also as shock absorbers in a structurally unequal economy

If farm incomes rise robustly in real terms, subsidy rationalisation would pose fewer risks. If rural wage growth is strong and non-farm employment expands steadily, fiscal tightening can be absorbed. Therefore, the debate is not about whether subsidies should be reduced; it is about sequencing and safeguards.

A Delicate Equilibrium

The Budget 2026–27 reflects neither aggressive expansion nor abrupt retrenchment. This signals continuity with caution. Subsidies remain substantial in absolute terms, but their relative role is shrinking as capital expenditure and interest obligations expand.

This rebalancing aligns with macroeconomic prudence. It strengthens fiscal credibility and preserves the space for infrastructure investment. However, its durability depends on complementary reforms, improved targeting, nutrient-balanced fertilizer policy, procurement rationalisation, and stronger farm income support. Rationalisation, properly understood, is about spending better. If it merely involves spending less, the equilibrium may not hold.

Currently, India's subsidy architecture stands at a logical midpoint, neither populist largesse nor austere rollback. The true test will lie not in next year's Budget numbers, but in whether rural incomes, food security, and agricultural productivity are strengthened enough to make consolidation socially sustainable. Fiscal realism is thus necessary, and social stability is indispensable; however, balancing the two remains a central policy challenge for India.

(Alok Aditya is Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Economic Studies and Policy, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru. Dr Prashant Kumar Choudhary is Assistant Professor, Department of Public Policy, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Bengaluru)

Letters to the Editor

Women's Day

It has been proven that education has enabled many women to secure competitive jobs, with several excelling even beyond their male counterparts. However, those unable to pursue higher education must be given opportunities to stand on their own feet. This also requires tailor-made bank finance schemes to support them. Acclaimed poet Sahir Ludhianvi beautifully summed up this in a song from the film Mujhe Jeene Do (1963): *Tere bachpan ko jawani ki dua, mere bachche tere anjaam se ji darata hai, teri dushman hi na saabit ho jawani teri!* (Oh my daughter, though I pray for your childhood to blossom into youth, I fear that your vibrant youth may one day become your own enemy.) Atrocities against women must be firmly curbed.

BRIJ B GOYAL, Ludhiana

Planning pays

The final of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup saw India defend the title by winning against New Zealand. This reflected clear planning and strong execution. It was heartening that the team relied on several contributors rather than a single hero. That balance appears to be the real strength of the present side and explains why India managed to defend the title successfully.

NAGARAJAMANI MV, Secunderabad

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Cartoon Today

India in the hotspot

■ Al Jazeera

The other side of IITs

Despite their reputation for academic excellence and lucrative careers, life at the IITs is also often marked by intense pressure and competition. While they highlight record placements, many graduates are left without jobs.

■ The Wall Street Journal

Too early to gauge AI impact: CEA

India is attracting billions in investment pledges from industry heavyweights to support its AI ambitions. That could be good news, but it is too early to gauge how AI will affect the country, a top government adviser said.

■ Foreign Affairs

How India can supercharge its growth

India has endured a perplexing year in its diplomacy. After decades of growing closer to Washington, New Delhi saw its strategic calculus scrambled by the pressure tactics of the Trump administration.

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Leaking tap

With JJM's outlay swelling to ₹8.70 lakh crore, Centre says next phase will ensure transparency

The Union Cabinet's decision to extend the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) till 2028 with an additional allocation of ₹1.51 lakh crore signals the government's determination to keep alive its flagship rural drinking water programme. With the scheme's overall outlay now swelling to ₹8.70 lakh crore, the Centre insists that the next phase will emphasise transparency, digital monitoring and citizen-centric service delivery. Yet the extension raises uncomfortable questions about whether India is pouring more money into a pipeline riddled with systemic leaks. Launched in 2019 with the ambitious promise of providing every rural household with 55 litres of tap water per capita per day by 2024, JJM was projected as a transformative intervention in rural life. The programme expanded infrastructure and raised expectations across villages. But the reality on the ground has been far less reassuring. Reports of corruption, inflated costs and poor-quality work have cast a shadow over the mission's implementation. The Centre itself acknowledged the rot when it dispatched over 100 inspection teams across states and initiated action against nearly 600 officials, more than 800 contractors and over 150 third-party inspection agencies.

Against this backdrop, the decision to extend the scheme without first addressing its structural infirmities appears premature. Digital mapping under the proposed 'Sujalam Bharat' framework may improve monitoring by tracking the supply chain from source to tap. However, technology alone cannot substitute for administrative integrity or effective oversight. India has repeatedly discovered that dashboards and digital platforms can record data, but they cannot automatically ensure accountability. Equally troubling is the financial opacity surrounding the mission. The Jal Shakti ministry reportedly sought ₹2.79 lakh crore for the next phase, only for the finance ministry to trim the figure sharply amid concerns about irregularities. Even the annual allocation tells a story of uncertainty. The Budget provision of ₹67,000 crore for 2025-26 was revised downward to ₹17,000 crore, reflecting a mismatch between ambition and fiscal commitment. Investigations have also revealed cost escalations exceeding ₹16,800 crore due to changes in guidelines and project estimates.

The government now promises stronger local participation by involving Gram Panchayats and village water committees in certifying project completion. While this may encourage grassroots ownership, it also risks shifting responsibility onto institutions that often lack technical capacity or administrative autonomy. Access to clean drinking water is a fundamental necessity, and the goals of the Jal Jeevan Mission remain noble and urgent.

Policing content

What Maharashtra truly needs is a more effective and comprehensive strategy

The Maharashtra government's decision to constitute a high-level committee headed by the state director general of police to monitor and curb social media defamation reflects a growing anxiety among governments about the unrestrained nature of online discourse. With trolling, misinformation and character assassination becoming routine features of the digital ecosystem, the concern is not entirely misplaced. Yet the creation of another oversight body raises a familiar question: Will this move meaningfully address the problem, or will it merely add another layer of bureaucratic symbolism?

Social media has undoubtedly transformed public conversation in India. Platforms that were once seen as tools for democratic participation have increasingly become arenas of abuse, intimidation and organised smear campaigns. Politicians, journalists, activists and ordinary citizens alike have faced targeted harassment, often through anonymous or coordinated networks. The damage to reputations can be swift and severe, amplified by algorithms that reward outrage and sensationalism. But the solution to this problem cannot simply be the formation of committees. India already possesses a wide range of legal instruments dealing with defamation, cyber harassment and misinformation under the Information Technology Act and various provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Law enforcement agencies also have dedicated cyber cells. If these mechanisms have failed to effectively curb digital defamation, the reasons lie not in the absence of authority but in weak enforcement, limited technical expertise and the slow pace of legal processes.

Placing the state's top police officer at the helm of a monitoring body may signal seriousness, but it also raises concerns about overreach. Social media regulation inevitably sits at the delicate intersection of free speech and accountability. Any attempt to police online expression too aggressively risks sliding into surveillance or the selective targeting of critics. In a democracy, governments must tread carefully when seeking to regulate the digital public square. Equally important is the question of feasibility. The scale of social media activity is staggering, with millions of posts generated daily across platforms. Monitoring, verifying and acting upon potentially defamatory content in real time requires technological infrastructure and specialised expertise that traditional policing structures may struggle to provide. Without clear guidelines, transparent processes and judicial oversight, such committees risk becoming reactive bodies that issue occasional advisories but rarely deliver lasting solutions. What Maharashtra truly needs is a more effective and comprehensive strategy.

Moral dimensions of war

There are no good sides in current Middle East conflict

Alok Tiwari
PERSONAL VIEW

The only moral view on war can be that it is inherently evil. Almost all the lives lost in it are of innocent people.

Like practically everything these days, the US and Israeli war on Iran too has divided the world. In India as much as elsewhere. You could be a typical Hindutva nut and applaud the aggression simply because those getting killed in large numbers are Muslims. You could be a typical liberal and go to your default anti-American setting and condemn the unprovoked violation of Iranian sovereignty and killing of its supreme leader. You could be a typical Islamist hothead and chant death to Trump and America just because a Muslim country has been attacked. Anything more nuanced than that and you risk being called names, not just by those opposed but even by those otherwise on your side.

The age of social media and trolls thrives on easy choices. We are getting programmed to see everything in black and white. There is little space for grey. Everything is us versus them. As former US President George W Bush so memorably said at the launch of his war on terror, "If you are not with us then you are against us." That mentality now rules and it is dumbing down the discourse. Everything is explained, lauded or ridiculed by memes.

Reality, of course, is a bit more complex than that. Trying to find a moral way through it is messy and fraught. There is no good versus evil narrative here. At some point almost every player is evil. The only thing that is unequivocally sad and condemnable is loss of innocent lives that inevitably happens in such circumstances. That includes not just the civilians but also soldiers. They too are sacrificed for causes that they did not sign up for.

It is easy to condemn the US-Israel attack on Iran. No nation should have its sovereignty violated in this manner. Especially because this time around there is not even the fig leaf of imaginary WMDs that was touted at the time of the second Gulf War. Just a few weeks back, the US had attacked the Iranian nuclear sites and claimed that those facilities were "obliterated". Moreover, the US had engaged Iran in talks about the future of its nuclear programme but attacked while the talks were still on.

But if you condemn the attack and disregard international law, are you on the side of Iran? With the Iranian people, yes. With the Iranian regime? That is a good question because again just a few days back you were outraged by its brutal suppression of protests. Thousands of protesters were reportedly killed and their families persecuted. Not just during those protests, but the overall record of the regime over the decades is despicable. It has harassed, tortured and subjugated a vast number of its own people under the garb of strict Islamic rule.

Also, consider if Iran itself had been a model international citizen. Across the Middle East, it had set up proxies that meddled in the affairs of other nations. That includes Hamas in Gaza whose attack on Israel in October 2024 started the current round of troubles. Even if you excuse that as its long-standing support for Palestinian cause, how do you explain Iran's propping up of Hezbollah in Lebanon, or Houthi rebels in Yemen, or Shia militias in Iraq? Those acts do not look like respecting national sovereignty. So, anything that loosens the grip of this regime should be a good thing, right?

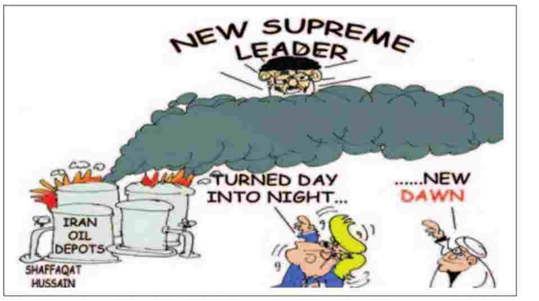
Bring this up and you would be told that national sovereignty must be sacrosanct. Dislodging or reforming the regime should be left to Iranian people, like it happened in Nepal or Bangladesh. Funnily, among the set of people arguing this are those who were obliquely justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine four years back. They then blamed the US and Europeans for provoking Russia by trying to integrate Ukraine into NATO even though Ukraine had been a far better international citizen than Iran. Similarly, Vladimir Putin's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty moved Europeans not only to take hundreds of thousands of refugees but also supply Ukraine with arms and ammunition to right off aggression. No such luck for Iran or Iranians.

That also raises the question why national sovereignty is so important. A nation-state is, after all, an artificial construct. Its boundaries keep changing with time. Most of us do not choose to be citizens of a particular country. Yet the modern world seems to attach more importance to those borders than to people within them. Dictators often take shield of inviolable sovereignty as they oppress and suppress people. Those people can sometimes overthrow them but usually uprisings do not end well for rebels as Iran itself has shown us recently. There is no internationally recognised mechanism to depose such rulers. What is wrong then if an external power takes it upon itself to do that?

Think about the nuclear question itself. Why is Iran trying to get them so unthinkable? After all, even North Korea has them and nobody has invaded them. Given the behaviour of both US and Russia internationally, those two are least deserving custodians of WMDs. Will it be morally right for another country to take out their heads of state for this reason?

The only thing we can say with certainty is that politicians will start a war if it serves their interests. That is the only real rationale for any war. Any moral platina they put over it is just that, a ruse, an excuse, a facade. While some wars may be unavoidable, at least for one of the parties, there is no war that is morally right or justifiable. The only moral view on war can be that it is inherently evil. Almost all the lives lost in it are of innocent people. All the resources it uses up and destroys are taken from common people, not the elite. Those who start them profit politically from it; their friends profit financially. Everything else is just smoke and mirrors.

The author is a Nagpur-based senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.



Your Letters

Hormuz closure & strategic resilience

The reported 50-day buffer of crude and refined products provides a critical albeit temporary cushion as the Strait of Hormuz closure chokes 40% of our supply lines. While 25 days of crude excluding Strategic Petroleum Reserves is reassuring, the volatility of Brent crude exceeding $80 per barrel demands accelerated diversification.With Qatar's LNG production paused and Aramco's Juaymah terminal damaged, our energy security hinges on distant geographies. The ministry's 24X7 monitoring is vital but we must address the 44-month low in Russian imports. True resilience requires aggressive procurement from non-middle eastern sources to ensure that cautious optimism doesn't dissolve if this West Asian conflict becomes a protracted war of attrition.

Dr Vijaykumar H K,
Raichur.

Recalibrating RSS' electoral machine

Biswajeet Banerjee

With barely a year left for the 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has begun sharpening its organisational apparatus across the state. The renewed activity within the Sangh network indicates that the ideological and grassroots machinery behind the Bharatiya Janata Party is entering an early phase of electoral preparation.

Unlike political parties that campaign in visible bursts closer to elections, the Sangh traditionally works through quiet and systematic mobilisation. Recent developments suggest that this process has now gathered momentum in Uttar Pradesh. The strategy reportedly focusses on activating cadres down to the booth level through shakhas and affiliated organisations. A contact person for every booth is expected to be identified and workers are likely to carry out a detailed scrutiny of voter lists to identify missing names and ensure their inclusion in the electoral rolls.

Such booth level engagement has long been considered a crucial strength of the Sangh Parivar's political ecosystem. In a state as vast and socially complex as Uttar Pradesh, electoral outcomes are often shaped by micro-level mobilisation and sustained contact with voters. By strengthening its grassroots network well in advance, the Sangh appears keen to ensure that the BJP enters the 2027 contest with a robust organisational base.

Alongside organisational mobilisation, ideological outreach is also expected to intensify in the coming months. Themes such as nationalism, cultural identity and the Uniform Civil Code are likely to feature prominently in discussions and public engagements. These issues have consistently formed part of the Sangh's ideological framework and are often projected as broader civilisational concerns rather than merely electoral talking points.

Equally important is the effort to deepen engagement with various social groups. According to sources, special outreach initiatives are being planned for other backward classes, Dalits, tribal communities and the urban middle class. Service activities, social campaigns and community programmes are expected to be used to reinforce the Sangh's presence among these sections.

This emphasis reflects a broader political reality. The BJP's rise in Uttar Pradesh over the past decade

has been closely linked to its ability to build a wide social coalition that cuts across traditional caste alignments. Sustaining that coalition will be essential if the party hopes to secure a third consecutive term in the state.

Coordination between the RSS and the BJP is also expected to intensify as the election approaches. A series of meetings between Sangh functionaries and BJP leaders are currently taking place to assess the ground situation and exchange feedback. These interactions serve as an important channel through which the government receives unfiltered inputs from grassroots workers while organisational leaders gain a clearer understanding of policy priorities.

Such coordination meetings are not unusual. Similar consultations were held in 2018 ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and again in 2021 before the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls. The BJP delivered strong performances in both contests, winning 62 parliamentary seats in the state in 2019 and securing a decisive majority with 255 seats in the 2022 Assembly elections.

In contrast, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections saw the party's tally in Uttar Pradesh decline sharply to 33 seats. While electoral outcomes depend on multiple factors, the experience has clearly prompted a renewed focus on coordination and organisational preparedness within the Sangh Parivar.

The recent meeting attended by chief minister Yogi Adityanath in Ghaziabad illustrates this evolving strategy. The interaction formed part of a series of regional consultations organised under the RSS' prant structure, with each prant comprising several districts.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the Sangh Parivar has begun laying the groundwork for the 2027 Uttar Pradesh elections well in advance. While the formal political campaign will unfold closer to polling, the current mobilisation underscores a familiar lesson of Indian politics. Electoral victories are rarely built overnight. They are often the outcome of long, patient organisational work carried out far from the glare of campaign rallies and television debates.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

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ESTD 1983
FOR THE PEOPLE
Free Press
FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

Viksit dreams, feudal pockets

BCCI's corridors are thick with the musk scent of a grand, masculine triumph. Fresh off a T20 World Cup conquest in March 2026, the Board has anointed its gladiators with a staggering ₹131 crore. It is a sum that does not merely talk; it roars. Yet, cast your eyes back to the women's ODI victory just a season ago. Their reward? A relatively paltrier ₹51 crore. The arithmetic of our national pride, it seems, remains stubbornly anchored in a primitive imbalance. The timing is a masterclass in irony, a jagged pill swallowed just one day after the nation's airwaves were choked with the saccharine platitudes of International Women's Day. We toasted the "Shakti" of our daughters on a Sunday, only to remind them on a Monday that their sweat, though just as salty, fetches less than half the market price of a man's.

This is the "tilt"—the subtle, sickening lean of the playing field. We saw it in 2021, when the Tokyo sun set on a bronze-winning men's hockey team and a fourth-place women's squad. The Haryana government's ledger was cold: ₹2.5 crore for the men, a mere ₹50 lakh for the women. The logic of the medal is a convenient shield for a deeper, older prejudice. It is the same prejudice that keeps the high altars of sports governance—the BCCI's inner sanctum, the executive suites of our federations—almost barren of the female spirit.

> *We pay a theatrical lip service to gender justice, yet we allow these financial gulfs to widen*

Where is the fire from the top? We look to PT Usha, the Payyoli Express who now holds the reins of the IOA, and Mary Kom, the pugilist who knows the weight of a gloved fist. They must do more than inhabit these seats. They should recall the steel of Dipika Pallikal, who boycotted the squash nationals for years over prize money gaps, and the harrowing courage of wrestlers like Vinesh Phogat and Sakshi Malik, who took to the streets to challenge the very foundations of institutional apathy. Ultimately, match fees are the crumbs; the hoard is in the rewards, the retainerships, and the raw, unchecked power of the vote. We are a hoary civilisation, old as the dust of the Vedas, yet we behave like adolescents in the face of true equality. We pay a theatrical lip service to gender justice, yet we allow these financial gulfs to widen. One cannot, with a straight face, castigate the Taliban for their mediaeval erasure of women while maintaining a fiscal apartheid in our own stadiums. To claim India is Viksit—developed—while the rewards of the arena are still dictated by the presence or absence of a Y-chromosome is a hallucination. If we are to be a great power, we must first learn that greatness is not measured in the thickness of a chequebook but in the levelness of the ground upon which we stand.

IndiGo gets rid of its CEO, at last

If it were not for the December crisis, which resulted in the cancellation of 4,500 flights and, reportedly, cost the airline Rs 2,000 crore, Peter Elbers might have continued to remain IndiGo's CEO. The costly lapse, preceded by a growing number of complaints about poor service, cabin crew's high-handedness, mid-air near misses, a litany of grievances from pilots, and whistle-blowers' revelations, appeared to be warning signs that the airline's management chose to ignore, reinforcing the perception that the confidence of being the country's largest airline had hardened into arrogance.

The fact that all these issues, which were constantly ignored, came to roost in December last year, when the airline missed the deadline for implementing the Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) mandated by the regulator, the DGCA, to manage pilot fatigue and prevent safety incidents, clearly shows that the airline tried to push its luck too far this time, hoping that the regulator would ignore its escapades once again. The latest lapse proved too serious to ignore, with the Civil Aviation Minister of State, Ram Mohan Naidu, demanding accountability and threatening strict action, including holding the top management accountable for passengers being held to ransom. A four-member DGCA committee later flagged over-optimisation of operations, weak software systems, inadequate regulatory preparedness and "shortcomings in management oversight" as the primary causes.

The pressure was mounting on IndiGo's management, with the DGCA itself setting an example by firing four flight operations inspectors for lapses in monitoring the airline. IndiGo, on its part, relieved its senior vice president heading the operations control centre (OCC) of his role, but that was not enough. Nearly three months after the crisis, the IndiGo CEO eventually resigned, citing personal reasons and asking that his notice period be waived in his letter. This can be construed as symbolic as much as substantive. Removing the OCC head, warning senior managers, and pushing out the CEO gives the appearance of accountability.

However, the real test will be whether, a year from now, IndiGo has learnt its lessons and carried out substantial changes, with a renewed focus on systems and buffers rather than on squeezing the last ASK out of each aircraft and crew roster. The airline must harden its planning tools, diversify decision-making beyond a small inner circle, and build enough redundancy into its fleet, crew, and IT systems to absorb shocks without collapsing its schedule. But there are larger issues that the airline needs to address. The December crisis did not happen overnight but was the result of a series of lapses carried out with complete impunity. A meltdown that strands tens of thousands of passengers and triggers a regulatory crackdown is not an acceptable cost of ambition. The board would do well to remember that even some of the biggest brands with near-impenetrable market share have vanished when they failed to listen to their customers.

Guest Column

MANJEEV SINGH PURI

Generational change in Nepal's politics and its regional impact

RSP must deliver. But that's easier said than done given Nepal's inherent resource limitations and heightened aspirations among the Nepalese

Nepal has once again displayed democratic vibrancy with a generational change sweeping its politics in the recently concluded polls. The Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP), a relatively new political party with Gen Z proclivity, found favour across most of the country and has secured a near two-thirds majority in the House of Representatives (125 out of 165 First Past the Post seats; the full house is of 275 with 110 being elected through a proportional slate). And its PM candidate, former mayor of Kathmandu Balen Shah, defeated KP Sharma Oli, who has been PM several times, in Oli's home constituency by nearly 50,000 votes.

The general view pre-poll was that the RSP would do better than the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party (UML) of Oli, but a wave appears to have overwhelmed the traditional parties, reminiscent of the AAP wave in Delhi in 2015. Elections were held in Nepal following huge street protests and three days of mobocracy in September last year. At that time, the street toppled the UML-NC coalition government of prime minister Oli and forced the dissolution of parliament. Now it appears to have decided to give the reigns of the country to a new dispensation dominated by younger people. Indeed, the only former PM to have won is Prachanda, though his party, the Maoists, too has been hugely diminished. The same is also the case with parties from the Madhesh, who were seen in Nepal as pro-India.

Interestingly, sensing the people's mood, Gagan Thapa, a relatively young leader, toppled five-time prime minister Sher Bahadur Thapa as leader of the Nepali Congress, but that didn't help. Gagan Thapa was trounced by Amresh Singh, a former NC MP, who had joined the RSP. Apparently, the street wanted to push out the established parties and give the new one a chance. Indeed, they strongly squared up behind the RSP, with even independents, such as former Nepal Electricity Authority head Kulman Ghishing, who had also taken on prime minister Oli, being defeated. And the, supposedly, pro-monarchy Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) has been nearly wiped out in the current polls.

Balen Shah, who is just 35, has studied engineering in India and was popular as a rapper before becoming the mayor of Kathmandu in 2022. He achieved this without the backing of any political party and often found himself at loggerheads with PM Oli and his government. In general, for the people in Kathmandu, his go-getter style saw improvements in local government, in particular sanitation and roads.

The RSP was formed by Rabi Lamichhane, a former TV anchor, who had held US citizenship. The party came into its own in the 2024 elections when it swept the Kathmandu Valley with much support from young people in the country and those overseas who persuaded their families to vote for the RSP. After being in the government initially, Lamichhane later found himself incarcerated on charges of fraud in the mismanagement of a cooperative. Balen Shah and Rabi Lamichhane have obviously turned out to be a combination of the people's liking.

For many people, while the street protests of September may have been triggered by a social media ban and the general haughtiness of the strong UML-NC coalition government, the hand of globalisation (read: the West) was also there. For many, therefore, the RSP win has Western backing and may see a certain curtailing of the Chinese influence, though for India, the imperative must remain 'ek la chalo re', i.e., retaining its distinct and significant place in the hearts and minds of the Nepali people and the sinews of its government.

RSP leaders are also conscious of a perception of Western influence on them, and even in the interim government, a certain display of Nepali nationalism was evident with ministers and others pointedly dressing in the traditional Nepali daura saruwal. Indeed, nearly all photos of Balen Shah show him attired in the traditional Nepali manner. This external identity politics in Nepal, which is essentially a differentiation vis-à-vis India, won't go away. As India reaches out to the new leaders of Nepal, this Nepali identity consciousness in its politics needs to be accepted in India not only in formal diplomatic ties but also in the media and among people in general, no matter our roti-bete ke samband.

The recent polls were, perhaps, the first election where India was not sought to be made an issue and, instead, generational change versus experience was the dominant issue. This can only be seen as positive for India, along with a certain relief in the defeat of Oli, who was perceived as anti-India and was seen providing a segue for increased Chinese influence and play in Nepal. The latter, obviously, won't sit well with the Chinese, but given their money power, there should be little surprise if they create equities within the new dispensation too.

The people have placed their faith in the RSP, and it must deliver. But that's easier said than done given Nepal's inherent resource limitations and now heightened aspirations amongst the Nepali population, given their exposure to globalisation through migration. While unemployment and a slow post-COVID recovery were among the structural issues that propelled the street protests, the present conflict in the Middle East doesn't bode well for an economy where remittances matter. While Balen Shah has demonstrated good governance on local issues, macro matters of the economy require external outreach.

Prime Minister Modi has tweeted and spoken to both Balen Shah and Tabi Lamichhane, stating India's commitment to working closely with the new government in Nepal. This new generational beginning in Nepal is a time to take this commitment further at the level of people and economics. Hydropower is an obvious area where India's SJVNL is taking forward its Arun projects, but a certain emphasis on the new, e.g., new tech, including AI, where young Nepalis are proving their mettle, could lead to a renewed invigoration of India-Nepal ties.

Former Ambassador of India to Nepal.

Niti Sutra

PROF HIMANSHU RAI

India@2047 - The Architecture of a Civilisational Power

A vision for India's rise as a civilisational power by 2047. Focus on economic strength, institutional reform and human capital

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna reminds Arjuna: "Yad yad acharati shreshthah, tat tad evetaro janah" — As the great act, so do others follow.

As India approaches the centenary of its independence in 2047, the strategic question before us is not whether we will be large, nor whether we will be visible, but whether we will be exemplary — whether we will merely accumulate scale, or architect enduring influence; whether we will simply rise in rankings, or shape the norms by which the century operates.

Today, India stands as the world's fourth-largest economy, exceeding $4 trillion in GDP and expected, by most credible estimates, to reach $7–8 trillion by the 2030 if growth sustains at 6.5–7% annually; yet per capita income remains near $3,000, manufacturing contributes roughly 16–17% of GDP against the desired 25%, and research and development expenditure hovers around 0.7% of GDP compared to 3–4% in innovation leaders — numbers that remind us that scale without structural depth is fragile.

If India is to become a $30 trillion economy by 2047 — a realistic aspiration assuming sustained real growth, demographic productivity, and institutional reform — then the task before us is not linear expansion but structural transformation, because a civilisational power is defined not by headline GDP alone but by the density of its institutions, the quality of its human capital, the resilience of its supply chains, the credibility of its governance, and the trust it commands globally.

A rising power reacts to crises; a civilisational power anticipates them. A rising power seeks influence; a civilisational power sets agendas. A rising power commands markets; a civilisational power commands respect. To move from ascent to architecture, India must secure five measurable foundations by 2047.

First, economic depth and technological capability must expand significantly, with manufacturing crossing 25% of GDP, exports exceeding $2 trillion annually, semiconductor fabrication and advanced electronics becoming domestically viable, and digital public infrastructure evolving from national innovation to global standard-setting architecture, while research intensity rises toward 3% of GDP and private capital formation strengthens domestic innovation ecosystems.

Second, strategic sovereignty must mature, meaning defence indigenisation above 75%, seamless integration of cyber, space, maritime, and AI capabilities, secure access to critical minerals such as lithium and rare earths, diversified energy supply chains including green hydrogen leadership, and naval presence sufficient to stabilise the Indian Ocean Region — because geography does not reward complacency, and sovereignty cannot depend on external goodwill.

Third, human capital excellence must replace demographic optimism, requiring foundational literacy and numeracy near universal levels, skilling aligned with automation and artificial intelligence, higher education institutions ranked among global leaders in research output, and public health outcomes — including nutrition and preventive care — comparable to upper-middle-income benchmarks, since productivity, not population, determines power.

Fourth, institutional maturity must become non-negotiable, with judicial efficiency accelerated through procedural reform and digitisation, regulatory predictability strengthened to reduce transaction costs, administrative capacity upgraded through data-driven governance, and corruption minimised not merely by enforcement but by system design — because investor confidence and citizen trust rest upon reliability more than rhetoric.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, social cohesion and middle-class expansion must be safeguarded, with urbanisation managed through infrastructure foresight, inequality moderated through opportunity rather than redistribution alone, and public discourse disciplined enough to sustain policy continuity across political cycles, since fractured societies rarely sustain long-term strategic ambition.

The transition required, therefore, is not from poverty to prosperity alone, but from ambition to execution, from consumption-led growth to innovation-led growth, from reactive diplomacy to agenda-setting multilateral leadership, and from demographic advantage to productivity advantage — transitions that demand institutional stamina rather than episodic enthusiasm.

Indian civilisational thought has never separated artha from dharma; prosperity divorced from ethical order invites instability, while moral aspiration unsupported by strategic capacity invites vulnerability. India@2047 must therefore embody disciplined growth — environmentally sustainable, technologically competitive, institutionally credible, and socially inclusive — because power accumulated without responsibility breeds resistance, whereas power exercised with restraint builds legitimacy.

If the 20th century was defined by industrial might and ideological polarity, the 21st will belong to nations that combine scale with stability, innovation with inclusion, and ambition with anchoring principles — and India, with its demographic weight, geographic centrality, digital experimentation, and civilisational continuity, possesses the raw material to architect precisely such a model.

The next twenty-three years are not a countdown; they are a calibration. The sutra for India@2047 is thus:

Build scale with structural depth, pursue power with institutional discipline, and align prosperity with principle — for only then does a rising nation mature into a civilisational power.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, we are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to editor.indore@fpj.co.in Using snail mail? Send your letters to Free Press, Free Press House, 3/54, Press Complex, AB Road, Indore 452008

City Of Contrasts

"Biting the Big Apple" symbolises embracing New York's vast energy and challenges. Beneath grey skies and winter chill, the city pulses with relentless vitality. Its contrasts of decay and resilience shape stories of growth, ambition and transformation, making it unforgettable.

Maniam Ramani
Jayanthy, Chennai

Markets Need Patience

Post trade-deal euphoria, Dalal Street's sharp correction signals volatility ahead. Software stocks face AI pressures, while commodities fluctuate wildly. Investors should avoid panic, invest gradually, and focus on long-term consolidation rather than reacting to short-term market swings.

S N Kabra

Improve Feeder Services

EMU service cuts on the Chennai Beach–Tambaram–Chengalpattu corridor highlight chronic feeder shortages, especially towards Velachery. Commuters have long struggled while autorickshaws exploit gaps. Promised improvements remain pending. Authorities must urgently enhance connectivity to ease passenger hardship during ongoing structural work.

N. Mahadevan, Chennai

Recovery Norms Tightened

RBI's stricter loan recovery norms prioritise grievance resolution before action. Borrower protection is welcome, though wilful defaulters may gain temporary relief. Balanced enforcement must safeguard honest citizens without diluting financial discipline.

P.G. Menon, Chennai

Political Turnabout Questioned

Shashi Tharoor's shifting stance after internal party engagement invites speculation. Political pragmatism may explain changing tones in Parliament. Yet consistency remains vital for credibility in public life.

Gundu K. Maniam, Trichy

Sovereignty Of India At Stake

HASAN ZAIDI

When Trump asserted that India had agreed not to import oil from Russia, the Modi government stoutly refuted that there was any such condition imposed. Now, with the report that Trump has permitted India to import oil from Russia, and that too only for 30 days due to the war, India stands exposed on the following counts: a) that the government has lied to the people of the country that Trump has not imposed any such precondition; and b) the sovereignty of India has been unconditionally pawned at the altar of the US.

Tharcius S. Fernando, Chennai

Trust Your Doctor

A hospital's "No Googling" sign wisely reminds patients that online searches cannot replace clinical judgment. Self-diagnosis fuels anxiety. Personalised medical advice must come from qualified doctors, not algorithms.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

Bangladesh Turning Point

Tarique Rahman's victory marks change in Bangladesh. India must pragmatically engage the new leadership while safeguarding regional stability and minority security. Balanced diplomacy can preserve shared interests.

Dr. Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

Debate Brand Choice

Criticism over Tamannaah Bhatia's appointment as Mysore Sandal ambassador appears politically driven. Representation debates should focus on sustained support for local talent, not selective outrage.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Love Beyond Spectacle

Valentine's Day often reduces love to display. True love thrives in patience, kindness and daily commitment, not grand gestures. Depth, empathy and responsibility sustain relationships beyond fleeting excitement.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Act East Pragmatism

India's Act East policy blends ambition with realism, strengthening ASEAN ties and Indo–Malaysian trade. Connectivity and maritime cooperation anchor regional stability and economic growth.

Vijay Singh Adhikari, Nainital

Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to reform — Mark Twain

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

GULF CRISIS HITS ENERGY & GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT, COOLER HEADS MUST ACT

A Thai cargo vessel bound for India was struck in the strategic Gulf shipping corridor on Wednesday—the clearest signal yet that the escalating confrontation between the United States, Israel and Iran is pushing one of the world's most vital energy routes toward paralysis. The Thai cargo vessel *Mayuree Naree* was attacked while transiting the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the critical artery linking the Persian Gulf to global markets. En route to Kandla, the vessel was struck by an unidentified projectile, igniting parts of the ship and prompting a crew rescue. Maritime agencies report three other vessels hit on Wednesday, bringing the total since the conflict escalated to 14—signalling that commercial shipping is now squarely in the war's crosshairs.

The escalation began after the United States and Israel launched strikes on Iran on February 28, triggering a volatile cycle of retaliation across the Gulf. Tehran has since intensified efforts to disrupt maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, a move that threatens the very foundation of the global energy system. The stakes are enormous. Nearly one-fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas flows through this narrow passage. According to United Nations data, shipping traffic has collapsed by 97 percent since hostilities began.

The shock is already coursing through global markets. Nearly 15 million barrels of crude a day, plus 4.5 million barrels of refined fuels, are effectively trapped inside the Persian Gulf as traffic through the Strait of Hormuz collapses. Exporters like Iraq and Kuwait have no viable alternative routes, pushing oil prices toward highs last seen in 2022. The International Energy Agency has responded with a historic 400-million-barrel emergency release, while US Central Command says it has destroyed 16 Iranian mine-laying vessels to keep the strait open.

For India, heavily dependent on Gulf energy supplies and home to thousands of seafarers working in global merchant fleets, the danger is immediate and personal. Yet the crisis now extends far beyond shipping lanes. Oil depots and energy infrastructure across the region are burning, spewing toxic smoke and raising the spectre of long-term ecological damage. If the escalation continues, the world faces far more than disrupted shipping—a prolonged energy shock, environmental catastrophe, and a war reshaping West Asia's strategic map for the worse. Diplomacy must prevail before the world plunges into an unprecedented crisis.

AN OFFER BEYOND THE GUN TELANGANA SHOWS A WAY

WHAT transpired on March 7 in Telangana would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago. With the surrender of 130 Maoists, the state police declared Telangana effectively Maoist-free as the banned outfit's state committee folded. This followed the surrender of two Central Committee leaders, Devji and Malla Raji Reddy. Now speculation is rife that former Maoist chief Ganapathi, alias Muppala Lakshmana Rao, may be the next to join the mainstream.

There can be little doubt about what brought the Maoists down from their heydays, when they ran a parallel government in the Dandakaranya forest region, including the interior parts of Telangana. Operation Kagar, launched in 2024 to eradicate the violent movement by the end of this month, pushed the Maoists to their limits. It resulted in the deaths of hundreds of them and serious casualties among the security forces. Yet force alone cannot close this bloody chapter in the country's history. A weakened force can disperse, lie low and wait for another opportunity to return.

In this context, the Telangana government adopted a proactive approach. Instead of simply hunting down the beleaguered Maoists, it offered them a chance to lay down their arms. The government promised them a respectable life and after negotiations, persuaded them to abandon violence. Telangana, mindful of the role the Maoists once played in the state's history, has thus shown a path that the Centre and other states affected by Left-wing extremism could follow.

The Naxalite movement from the 1970s onwards had a deep impact on Telangana society. Its influence in cultural, political and social spheres was, and in some ways still is, significant. Its fight against feudalism and the exploitation of peasants, tribals and workers cannot be ignored. But society has changed, and so have social conditions, leading to a steady decline in its influence. People today are far more aware of their rights, technology has advanced rapidly and society faces new challenges.

Violence in the name of justice will only backfire, tearing society apart and giving hostile forces an opportunity to exploit unrest. In a changing world, unity is essential. Alienating those who sacrificed their lives for the cause of the poor, however misguided their path, is not the answer. Their return to the mainstream can strengthen the democratic fight against corruption and forces that threaten the country's progress.

QUICK TAKE

FASHIONED RUIN

STARTING July 2026, the European Union will forbid the destruction of unsold clothing and shoes, requiring companies to rethink overproduction, emphasise reuse and expand recycling. Beyond unsold stock, fast fashion presents an even greater environmental challenge. This system produces cheap, low-quality garments at high speed which consumers discard almost immediately, creating enormous textile waste. It consumes vast amounts of water and generates roughly 10 percent of global carbon emissions, more than all international flights and shipping combined. Fast fashion has also become widespread in India, making regulation urgent. This relentless cycle of buying and discarding hides the true environmental cost of the clothes we wear, calling for conscious and responsible consumer choices.

WANGCHUK, PREVENTIVE DETENTION AND THE REACH OF STATE POWER

Wangchuk's case illustrates how India's preventive detention laws empower State, test constitutional safeguards and challenge the balance between security and liberty

KALEESWARAM RAJ

Lawyer, Supreme Court of India

THE continued detention of Sonam Wangchuk poses vital questions about the legitimacy of India's preventive detention laws. Two aspects are significant. First, despite the habeas corpus petition filed by his wife, Gitanjali Angmo, which the Supreme Court has been considering for over 150 days, Wangchuk remains in prison. By its very nature, a writ of habeas corpus is intended to secure the immediate release and production of the detained person. The Supreme Court's keeping of the petition pending for such a prolonged period undermines its purpose. Secondly, as is common in any detention based on mere suspicion and anxiety, the climate activist is detained without trial on the basis of an administrative report under the National Security Act.

The law of preventive detention in India has a disturbing history. In *A K Gopalan* (1950), the Supreme Court substantially validated the erstwhile Preventive Detention Act, finding fault only with Section 14, which prohibited disclosure of the grounds of detention even to the court. The Act enabled the Centre to detain citizens on grounds of security and public order. The court in *A K Gopalan* practically endorsed the detention of the communist leader, who had suffered incarceration under the British.

A K Gopalan epitomised one of the first illiberal judgements of the Supreme Court of India. The detention was challenged for breaching Articles 14, 19 and 21, which guarantee equality before the law, freedom of expression and protection of life and personal liberty. Additionally, Gopalan relied on Article 22, which provides protection against arrest and detention in certain cases. But the court overruled these contentions. The law laid down in *A K Gopalan*, however, was overturned in *Maneka Gandhi* (1978), which addressed the interplay between fundamental rights and upheld their centrality in the lives of citizens. *A K Gopalan* was decided at a time when the Congress government's majoritarianism sought to restrict oppositional liberty, while *Maneka Gandhi* was decided when the country rescued itself from the clutches of the Emergency.

Article 22(3) implies that the legislature may enact a law to facilitate preventive detention. Article 22(4) prescribes a three-month time limit for such detention and permits extensions based on the report of an advisory board. This is the constitutional foundation for draconian enactments like the Preventive Detention Act, 1950; Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), 1971 and National Security Act, 1980. B R Ambedkar's optimism regarding Article 22 (Article 15A in the proposed draft) was based on other constitutional provisions that stipulate due process before arrest and detention. Members like Thakur Das Bhargava and Mahavir Tyagi warned that this constitutional indulgence could enable future draconian laws. Their criticism was not merely legal—it was ethical, historical and political. It was a prescient warning against the rise of an illiberal state.

Indian preventive detention laws ultimately proved Ambedkar wrong and his critics right. The communist leader, who had been incarcerated under the British, became a victim of the first preventive detention law which the Supreme Court endorsed. History, like an Orwellian novel, reveals ironies in political powerplay, often annihilating even the surviving idea of justice. Parliament repealed the 1950 Act in 1969.

Then came MISA, which led to the incarceration of thousands of opposition leaders during the Emergency. This Act was later repealed in 1978 by the Janata Party regime. The dispensations that discarded the idea of freedom and sought to suppress dissent and dissidents were clearly on the wrong side of history. Judicial endorsement of such State actions met a similar fate, reinforcing the principle that law cannot always shield injustice when it serves political expediency.

Now, back to Wangchuk. Neither the Centre nor the Supreme Court had the organic sensibility to learn from India's legal history on preventive detention. They could not learn from their own egregious follies. Wangchuk was arrested on September 26, 2025 and the case has been repeatedly adjourned since October 6, 2025. Continued detention for over five and a half months, without trial or conviction, of the Magsaysay Award-winning climate activist, demonstrates the precarious state of our democracy.

In Wangchuk's case, breach of the provisions of the 1980 Act was demonstrated, though the validity of the statute itself was not challenged. The National Security Act empowers the State to detain anyone agitating for political causes on vague grounds like 'security of India' and 'maintenance of public order'. It grants unfettered powers to state governments, district magistrates and police commissioners. Moreover, the provisions governing execution and validation of detention orders are highly stringent. Section 5A provides that a detention order will remain valid even if some grounds are vague, irrelevant, unconnected or otherwise invalid. It was argued that this is subservient to Article 22, which imposes broader safeguards against preventive detention. Based on Section 8 of the Act, it was contended that non-disclosure of the grounds would vitiate the detention.

It was shown that the detaining authority—district magistrate—without application of mind, merely copied and pasted the recommendations of the Ladakh administration. The court was told that there were no materials linking Wangchuk to the allegations. The demand for statehood for Ladakh is a political slogan, not divisive or partisan. Many such demands have arisen in the past across India, yet Centre's response in Wangchuk's case has been disproportionate and politically charged.

The repeated adjournments in Gitanjali's petition reflect poorly on the court. The case has been adjourned again until next week. Meanwhile, Gitanjali stated that once Wangchuk is released, he will not pursue even the path of peaceful agitation. This demonstrates the fragility of freedom and the limits of expression in practice, despite constitutional guarantees.

As of now, what is awaited is not even a final judgement. It is judicial statesmanship. And even if it occurs, it will be undermined by the delay it has taken to manifest. Wangchuk's continued detention thus serves as a stark reminder of the tension between the rule of law and the exercise of unchecked power under preventive detention statutes. It underscores the urgent need for the State and judiciary to reconcile legal procedure with justice and human rights.

(Views are personal)
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SOURAV ROY

THAILAND'S FRAGILE STABILITY

SHANKARI SUNDARARAMAN

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ASIAN AXIS

SINCE 2023, Thai politics has changed direction several times. In under three years, three different prime ministers from separate political families and parties have led the country. This instability has deepened the divide between those who support popular representation and those who favour the conservative monarchical and military order that has shaped Thailand for almost a century. The latest election in February 2026 has heralded the new government under Anutin Charnvirakul and the Bhumjaithai Party.

This article will address four key questions critical to any understanding of the political situation in the country. First, why did the Move Forward Party (MFP) not lead the government? Second, what decisions led to the shift from Move Forward's momentum to the Shinawatras' return through the Pheu Thai Party? Third, what reasons did the Constitutional Court give for removing two elected prime ministers during the transitions between Srettha Thavisin and Paetongtarn Shinawatra? Fourth, how is the current election different and if Anutin's leadership could mean stability in Thailand?

First, although MFP became the largest party in the 2023 general elections, it could not even achieve a majority through coalition. This shows that winning the most seats does not always mean gaining power. The MFP's reform plans faced strong opposition. Senior party leader Pita Limjaroenrat questioned the influence of big business and the military in Thai politics. He argued that the close ties between the two limited participation and encouraged crony capitalism, which affected political leadership.

The most sensitive topic was the monarchy. Pita's call to reform the lèse-majesté law, which makes it a crime to publicly criticise the monarch, drew strong reactions from conservative groups. Since the monarchy is still highly respected in Thailand, these proposals made many people uneasy about what an MFP government might do.

Second, even though the MFP won 151 seats and became the largest party, the way Thailand forms its government is not balanced. The House of Representatives has 500 seats, with 400 directly chosen by voters and the remaining by party-list voting. The party-list system lets parties win votes across the country and put 'loyal' candidates in Parliament, sometimes allowing people with little political experience but strong connections to become lawmakers.

The Senate is just as important. According to the 2017 Constitution, all 250 senators are appointed and help choose the PM. When it was time to vote, the Senate gave little support to MFP's candidate, so Pita did not get enough votes.

AFP

> Thailand's political landscape has been subjected to inconsistent doldrums lately. With public confidence leaning toward the conservative monarchy and rising military influence, the newly-elected coalition government has to face the herculean task of implementing democratic reforms

This allowed the Pheu Thai Party, which succeeded the Thai Rak Thai Party founded by Thaksin Shinawatra, to form a coalition with groups linked to the military and monarchy. These former rivals joined forces, making Srettha Thavisin prime minister in 2023.

Third, ongoing changes in leadership were also influenced by internal politics and court decisions. The switch from Thavisin to Paetongtarn Shinawatra happened after a Constitutional Court ruling. Thavisin's term was mostly uneventful, but he faced criticism for appointing a lawyer who had been convicted in a case related to the Shinawatra family. The court said this choice did not meet the ethical standards expected of the office and ordered Thavasin's removal. This situation again showed the tensions between coalition partners who had been rivals for a long time.

After Thavisin's removal, Paetongtarn Shinawatra took the office in August 2024 and became Thailand's youngest woman PM. Her leadership brought renewed attention to the Shinawatra family's ties in the region. The ongoing Preah Vihear dispute continues to cause border tensions between Thailand and Cambodia, especially when someone from the Shinawatra family is in charge.

Some in the Thai military are suspicious of the Shinawatras' close relationship with Cambodia's leaders, especially former Prime Minister Hun Sen. These worries grew when a phone call between Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Hun Sen went public and caused a controversy. The Constitutional Court later ruled that her actions threatened national stability and security. As a result, she was removed from office which allowed Anutin to take over in September 2025.

Fourth, when Anutin Charnvirakul first became prime minister, new divisions appeared instead of quick unity. The MFP, now called the People's Party, supported Anutin and the Bhumjaithai Party. Their support depended on his promise to hold early elections that might lead to constitutional reform.

Anutin kept his promise, and early elections took place in February 2026. The results showed a change: the Bhumjaithai Party won 193 seats and together with its coalition partners gained a majority of over 290 seats in the lower house.

After years of dismissals and quick changes in leadership, Thailand now has a majority party with its leader as prime minister. Still, the situation is fragile. Anutin Charnvirakul must balance the demands of those who want more democratic reforms with the interests of conservative groups that support the military and monarchy which have long influenced Thai politics.

(Views are personal)
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MAILBAG

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Odisha's landscape

Ref: *Congress-BJD joint pick* (Mar 11). The BJD-Congress coalition is purely one of tactical understanding. There are two distinct divisions of ideological perceptions in Odisha: those who simply support the Congress and those who don't. How ground-level workers of both parties will react to the combination is too uncertain to guess. The BJP might ultimately have the last laugh.

Jitendranath Guru, Bargarh

Ethical stand

Ref: *India's political resolve* (Mar 10). The spade needs to be called a spade. Nothing can be devoid of ethics and natural justice. If the government wants to become a yes-man of the US and Israel, let it be clear. Announce it to the world, buy a Board of Peace chair and continue the journey.

T S Rao, Ghaziabad

BJP's distractions

Re: *'Lapses' in LS* (Mar 11). The BJP members seem to be more obsessed with accusing Rahul Gandhi instead of asserting that the speaker was capable of conducting unbiased sessions. This shows that the BJP has nothing constructive to defend including the PM's absence from Parliament.

T M Uday Shankar, Hyderabad

Renewables switch

Ref: *Gas-what* (Mar 11). The present situation underscores India's structural dependence on imported fossil fuels. Had the country invested more decisively and consistently in renewable alternatives, the economy would not be so vulnerable to distant geopolitical disruptions. Decentralised biogas systems, rooftop solar power and other clean-energy solutions can provide reliable local substitutes for conventional domestic consumption fuels.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Warangal

Utilise veterans

Ref: *Shortage of specialists ails TN* (Mar 11). I have worked in State-operated hospitals in Tirunelveli which followed the erstwhile 67-year retirement age. Now that the limit for medical colleges is extended to 70 years for consulting staff, physicians are allowed to work. Furthermore, I had also joined Tirunelveli Medical College Hospital in 1982 under the honorary system. By means of adopting such systems, doctors after retirement can be utilised till the government builds capability to pay regular consultants in time and scale so that services, especially in primary healthcare centres, are not affected.

Dr S Shanmugam, Tirunelveli

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The Tribune
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Chinese FDI

Caution is a must amid easing of curbs

INDIA's decision to ease restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI) from China acknowledges an inescapable truth — Chinese capital inflows are vital to ensure deeper integration into global value chains. It also indicates that New Delhi won't allow the festering border dispute with Beijing to act as a stumbling block on the economic front. The Galwan valley clash of June 2020 and the active support provided by China to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor in May last year have also been conveniently pushed to the sidelines.

The curbs, which required government approval for investments from countries sharing a land border with India, had been introduced in April 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic. The ostensible aim was to prevent opportunistic takeover or acquisition of Indian companies. A prolonged military standoff cast a long shadow on India-China relations, even as bilateral trade kept growing (heavily in China's favour). Diplomatic ties have improved significantly over the past six months or so; PM Modi's visit to China and the resumption of direct flights between the two countries have signalled an unmistakable thaw.

The writing has been on the wall since July 2024, when the Economic Survey made a strong case for FDI from China to boost local manufacturing as well as exports. Chinese investment, however, often arrives not merely as capital but as influence, especially in strategically sensitive sectors such as telecommunications, fintech and critical infrastructure. Any relaxation in oversight could expose Indian companies to vulnerabilities, ranging from data security risks to supply chain dependencies. The challenge for the government will be to differentiate between productive investment and potentially strategic leverage. A calibrated approach — allowing investments in non-sensitive sectors while maintaining rigorous scrutiny in areas linked to national security — may be the most practical path forward.

Shameful rhetoric

Khaira's remarks belittling women cross the line

THE uproar in the Punjab Vidhan Sabha over remarks linked to Congress MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira has once again exposed the deeply troubling tone of political discourse in the state. The Assembly's decision to pass a censure motion against Khaira for his alleged derogatory comments about women in connection with the government's Rs 1,000 monthly allowance scheme is, in principle, justified. Public representatives must be held to the highest standards of language and conduct, especially when speaking about women and the poor. Khaira's remarks are insensitive and demeaning. Political disagreement over welfare schemes is legitimate, even necessary. But questioning such initiatives through language that appears to belittle women or mock the beneficiaries crosses the line from criticism into contempt.

The AAP government cannot claim the moral high ground without confronting its own contradictions. Only days earlier, CM Bhagwant Mann himself faced allegations from the Congress that he had made unsavoury remarks about women during a public speech in Ludhiana. Congress leaders have approached the Punjab State Women's Commission seeking a case against the Chief Minister, arguing that his anecdote about a female student during an event conveyed a disrespectful message.

The episodes underscore a larger malaise: the casual normalisation of sexist rhetoric in political speech. Instead of engaging in serious debate over the design, affordability and effectiveness of welfare programmes, political leaders too often resort to cheap jibes and inflammatory language. Such conduct demeans the Assembly and diminishes public trust in democratic institutions. The dignity of women should never become a weapon in partisan battles. Whether in government or opposition, leaders who cross the line must apologise and reflect on the consequences of their words. Punjab's politics needs far greater responsibility from all sides of the aisle.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 1926

An interesting confession

IT was a singularly interesting confession which Lord Lytton made in a recent address at Dacca to a Muslim organisation, of which he had just been made a life member. "I have talked even with the most extreme of the younger politicians", said His Excellency, "and have never yet found one who wants anything for India which I do not also want, or who has any political aspirations for the country which I do not entirely share." We do not know if in making this confession it was any part of His Excellency's intention to answer a famous Aligarh speech in which unmeasured ridicule and contempt were poured upon these very aspirations by a Muslim politician who only a short while before had been Lord Lytton's colleague in the government. What we do know is that if he had intended to give the lie direct to certain parts of that speech, he could not have spoken differently. But that is another matter. Our present concern is with his lordship himself. If it is, indeed, the case that he has never yet met the Indian politician, however young and however extreme in his views, who wants anything more for his country than he himself wants or who has aspirations for his country which he does not entirely share, how does he defend the policy he has consistently and systematically followed during these many months and for which the one possible and appropriate name is ruthless repression? Such a policy can be justified, if at all, only when you are confronted by a widespread subversive movement, which it is not within the resources of statesmanship to deal with in any other way.

Viksit Bharat is our grand strategy

It's necessary to evaluate who India's partners really are in the pursuit of this goal

SANJAYA BARU
SENIOR JOURNALIST

PRIORITY: How we govern ourselves at home and pursue our development is very important. PTI

IN the midst of a turbulent, uncertain world destabilised by its most powerful nation, it is worth asking what exactly is India's grand strategy and are our policies, at home and overseas, serving the cause of pursuing the goal of *Viksit Bharat* that we have set for ourselves.

In his monumental study, *Strategy: A History* (2013), Lawrence Freedman says a strategy is about "getting more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest. It is the art of creating power." Power itself, as we know from Bertrand Russell and many others, has multiple dimensions. Hence, strategies come in all shapes and sizes with varying durations of execution.

What, however, is a 'grand strategy'? On this too there are multiple definitions depending on the sphere of activity one is studying. Militaries, businesses and, indeed, nations have their 'grand strategy'. A long-term plan for not just the 'creation of power' but also its retention and deployment.

What then is India's 'grand strategy'? It is now commonplace for many to suggest that 'multi-alignment' is today India's grand strategy, just as non-alignment was. This is a wrong way of viewing both concepts. Non-alignment, multi-alignment and indeed even alignment are only means to an end. They are not ends in themselves.

India's grand strategy, as my intellectual guru on this subject, the late K Subrahmanyam, often said, is its re-emergence as a developed nation, recognising that "Knowledge, not weapons, will be the currency of power in this century." Subrahmanyam wrote in a 2012 essay, "The Constituent Assembly's oath in 1947 implied that India would promote world peace for the welfare of mankind, including its own population, and it would assume its rightful global position by developing itself to the standards of the industrialised world." This, he suggested, was as good a definition as any of India's grand strategy.

An overpowering idea that captured the imagination of the leadership of the Indian national movement was that the Indian subcontinent had once been home to a prosperous economy and even as recently as the 18th century, it accounted for one-fourth of the global economy, with China accounting for another one-fourth.

As the painstaking statistical work of the British historian Angus Maddison showed, both China and India had each accounted for close to 25 per cent of the world's income in 1700. This had shrunk to less than 5% for both by 1950. Both countries overthrew colonialism and have sought to regain their share of the global income.

> The military and economic policies of major powers are not creating a global environment that would be conducive to India's emergence as a developed economy.

Independent India's national agenda — its grand strategy, so to speak — has been to seek an international order that would enable it to pursue its economic development and modernisation, seeking to restore its due status in the comity of nations and its due share of world income and trade.

There is, however, a caveat. As Subrahmanyam says in the 2012 essay, "The other aspects of India's grand strategy related to governance and development. No other country is comparable to India in terms of its diversity of religions, languages and ethnicities. Consequently, unity is only possible under a secular, pluralistic, democratic and quasi-federal constitution."

In relating the pursuit of economic development to a conducive global environment, Subrahmanyam emphasised that the character of the Indian political system and governance at home is an important second leg of India's grand strategy. This should never be forgotten.

Consider the present moment in world affairs. Are the actions of the US and Israel likely to create a global, and regional, environment conducive to India's economic development? If not, should we not be objecting to their actions rather than remain mute? Will the destabilisation of West Asia not slow down India's journey towards *Viksit Bharat*? If so, does the Modi government's present stance fit in with our grand strategy?

Our strategic partnership with the US was based on the assumption that the US would be a partner in the pursuit of India's grand strategy. Recent developments and statements from the Trump administration suggest that the US can no longer be regarded as a 'strategic' and 'trusted' partner in the pursuit of such a goal.

Our global personality as a liberal, plural and secular democracy has been defined by our constitutional principles and values. If the world is becoming less tolerant of such values and if nations led by leaders who are bigoted and authoritarian are becoming more assertive, ought we not to reiterate our interests based on our grand strategy?

The military and economic policies of major powers are not creating a global environment that would be conducive to India's emergence as a developed economy and a liberal, plural and secular democracy. Against this background, how we govern ourselves at home and pursue our development becomes even more important.

Are the policies being followed at home likely to help us meet the goals of *Atmanirbharata* and *Viksit Bharat*? An increasingly communalised ruling dispensation that pursues policies that slow down economic development and make it less egalitarian is, by definition, not pursuing the goal of *Viksit Bharat* as defined by our constitutional view of a grand strategy. It is precisely for this reason that the Modi government should take a more long-term view of developments at home and overseas and examine whether they serve our national interest.

The problem with much scholarship these days is that it views domestic and global events in a piecemeal manner without grasping their impact on our goal of becoming *Viksit Bharat*. With fundamental changes taking place in the global system, it is necessary to evaluate who India's partners really are in the pursuit of the goal of *Viksit Bharat*. The task at hand, to be sure, is entirely in our hands, but the external environment matters too.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Strategy is a commodity, execution is an art. — Peter Drucker

Ramzan and Urdu Bazaar

SYED NOORUZZAMAN

EVERY year during Ramzan (the Islamic month of fasting), I remember a former colleague who shared with me an interesting experience he had during a visit to the historic Urdu Bazaar in Delhi's Jama Masjid area. Though an English-language journalist, the late Saraswati Saran Kaif was considered an authority on Iqbal, the Poet of the East. He had authored a well-received book in English on the celebrated Urdu poet.

Kaif knew very well that the *iftar* (fast-breaking) time in any Muslim-majority area gives the impression as if a curfew has been imposed. Every eatery in such localities has a curtain hung on its front side during the day. It is difficult to find anybody enjoying food in the open in such neighbourhoods, especially during the evening hours.

The day's fasting comes to an end at sunset — the sirens installed in mosques are switched on to announce that the devout should now break their fast. Immediately, *azan* (the call for prayers) is announced. Muslims begin to eat whatever they can before proceeding to a nearby mosque to offer prayers. But no one can gather courage to eat anything before the fixed fast-breaking time even if they are not fasting. This practice is maintained keeping in view the sentiments of the devout.

Such was the situation when Kaif unwittingly took out a cigarette and his lighter, and began smoking. He was so engrossed in reading a book at a bookshop in Urdu Bazaar that he forgot about the prevailing practice. Soon, an old man interrupted him, saying politely, "*Bade miyan*, even if you are not observing a fast, please respect the sentiments of the devout. You happen to be here when people are patiently waiting to break their fast in a few minutes." Pat came Kaif's response, "How do you presume that I am a Muslim? I am not a Muslim. I am a communist and not a serious practitioner of my own religion."

"But your dress and language indicate that you are a Muslim. You are busy reading a book in Urdu. You are speaking chaste Urdu," the man said.

"I am sorry. You are right. But I indulged in smoking at this time as I forgot that I was in the Urdu Bazaar area," Kaif responded in a pacifying tone.

Alas, when I visited that place recently, I noticed that Urdu Bazaar of the past was no longer there. It has only two shops selling Urdu books. The other shops offer eatables or items meant for tourists. Urdu bookstores have shifted to a nearby street called Gali Matia Mahal. Interestingly, the old market is still called Urdu Bazaar, though it has turned into a bustling food market.

The iconic market traces its origins to the 17th century, when the area flanked by the Jama Masjid and the Red Fort had Army camps. By around 1920, it had several Urdu bookshops and publishing houses. It grew into a major attraction for writers, poets, intellectuals and others. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited it occasionally.

The writer is a senior journalist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India diversifying oil sources

Refer to 'West Asia crisis roils oil, gas markets'; the highest ever Brent Crude oil price was $ 147.5 per barrel in 2008 and we should not be surprised if we see that threshold being breached amid the current Gulf crisis. The Centre must be completely transparent on the oil and gas crisis. The government has made it clear that fuel prices will not be hiked till crude oil price goes past $130 per barrel, until then oil marketing companies will absorb the losses. The Russian oil supply waiver has provided some relief, but we will have to tap Australia and Canada for gas supply and scale up ethanol and biogas production. The government has already started procuring crude from 40 other countries, 70 per cent of it from non-Hormuz routes.

BAL GOVIND, NOIDA

Long queues for LPG

Refer to 'Centre rushes to allay LPG fears' and 'West Asia crisis roils oil, gas markets'; despite government's tall claims of no shortage and no cause for panic, cooking gas consumers can be seen queuing up outside gas agencies and petrol pumps in many cities. There is panic among *dhaba* and restaurant owners. Airlines have announced fuel surcharge on tickets. Shortage and crisis of petroleum products in the country is imminent if the war continues longer. However, India is sending 5,000 metric tonnes of diesel to the same Bangladesh where innocent Hindus were targeted and murdered recently.

VINAY KUMAR MALHOTRA, AMBALA

Protect migrant labour in Gulf

The government should come forward to protect Indian migrant labourers in the Middle East. The country has faced such type of situation previously also and successfully handled it. Indian workers in the Gulf are employed in low-wage sectors and have been left stranded due to the ongoing war. Telling stories are emerging of their stay in cramped dormitories, construction sites and labour camps. Constant missile and drone attacks have caused severe casualties disrupting employee safety, commercial movement, mobility and operational continuity. Security risks in maritime activities will put workers at risk of employment instability if tensions continue to escalate.

YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

Wartime propaganda

Apropos of 'Propaganda, social media and the fog of war'; during World War I, the British propaganda machine spread a canard that the German army was using the bodies of dead soldiers to produce soap, fats and other materials in a factory called the 'German corpse factory'. After the war, investigations showed that the story was false. British officials themselves later admitted that the report had been a propaganda tactic. During a war, it is common for opponent countries to spread false publicity. For ordinary people, it then becomes very difficult to judge whether the news we read is true or simply disinformation.

IHSAN ALI, QADIAN

Shed patriarchal mindset

With reference to 'Why Hali should be read today'; we need to change our patriarchal mindset, ensure women's dignity and safety to create a gender-equal and prosperous society. Today women are educated, self-assertive and confident, economically empowered and liberated, and breaking the glass ceiling in various spheres of life and contributing equally towards national development. But despite continued government initiatives and judicial intervention, women have to face restrictive customs and bear responsibilities at home in the name of culture. Women are in no way lesser human beings. Male chauvinism is still entrenched deep in the lower as well as upper strata of society, which are regressive, despite adequate education and exposure to modern society.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

Faith in courts, CBI eroded

Refer to 'CBI under scrutiny'; the common man has no power to fight such a big cult like Ram Rahim's, they only have faith in the CBI and the courts. Political parties encash his popularity during election time and they don't carry any responsibility of wrongs done to the victims. This verdict will influence the other religious *babas* that if they have power and money, no one can challenge them. We were taught in schools that CBI separates truth from the lies; with Ram Rahim being exonerated, all these lessons have been unlearnt.

SAROJ BANYAL, HAMIRPUR

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@tribunemail.com

CBI's image has taken a hit in Kejriwal case

TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

COMPROMISED: Is the CBI permanently to be dubbed a "caged parrot"? PTI

WHEN Arvind Kejriwal dumped Anna Hazare to pursue his political ambitions, he surely must have known that no political party could survive without adequate funding. Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena, which was established as a political party in the mid-1960s, could function as such only after it gained control of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. It was widely rumoured that the Sena subsisted mainly on the 10 per cent its corporators earned on every contract signed in their respective wards.

Every party, including the BJP — the "party with a difference" — has to find sources to finance its expenses, like paying wages to full-time workers and organising public meetings. I am convinced that AAP is no exception.

I met Kejriwal only once, about two decades ago. Former Union Cabinet Secretary, BG Deshmukh, Dr RK Anand, a leading paediatrician of Mumbai and an activist against malpractices in the medical profession, and I had set up in 2002 an NGO, the Public Concern for Governance Trust (PCGT), aimed at defending honest government officers.

It was Deshmukh who invited Kejriwal to interact with the trustees of the PCGT. He obliged. He was then an income tax officer serving in Delhi. Kejriwal told us that he had placed a chair on the pavement outside his office, where he sat for an hour each day before office hours.

People who could not obtain their PAN cards or I-T refunds without paying bribe used to approach him to get their work done without any hassle.

No wonder I was taken aback when reports claimed that Kejriwal had ordered a jacuzzi to be installed at the Delhi CM's residence. It was an unnecessary luxury that seemingly changed his public perception as a man of the people.

The trial court in Delhi that absolved Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia in the excise policy case was very harsh on the CBI's investigating officer (IO). The officer must have been under immense pressure from his bosses who had to comply with the orders of the political leadership.

One may argue that the CBI's top brass should have resisted political pressure. I know of many senior police leaders who politely refuse to comply with "irregular" orders. But I am reminded of a conversation I had with top leaders of the Gujarat Police in 2002 after the riots that broke out in the wake of the Godhra train massacre.

> Targeting opponents by using Central investigation agencies is a relatively novel method.

Then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had pulled up Gujarat's then Chief Minister Narendra Modi for failing to do his *Raj Dharma*! I paid a visit to Ahmedabad and asked top police officers, who had worked under my command, why they had failed.

They informed me that the political leadership was different from any I had worked with during my career. It would not just stop at transferring officers who confronted it!

The tragedy is that the reputation of a premier investigating agency like the CBI has been badly dented by the recent judgment.

How will the CBI regain its credibility? Is it permanently to be dubbed a "caged parrot"? Even run-of-the-mill police investigators, like the commissioners and superintendents of police across the country rely upon daily to crack difficult cases, are not "caged parrots". They are supposed to establish the truth, and they do so routinely.

The BJP has one overpowering intent. It wants double-engine, and now triple-engine governments, in every state of the Union. It has used various means to achieve this dream.

Winning over elected opponents is, perhaps, a legitimate method in a democratic polity, but, allegedly, targeting opponents by using Central investigation agencies, like the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate, is a relatively novel method.

West Bengal without the Trinamool Congress, Tamil Nadu without the DMK and Kerala without the CPM translates to an India drifting far away from federalism. It is a jarring thought.

If radical elements gain ground in states such as Bengal and Punjab, there will be extremist groups on both the western and eastern borders. The Jamaat-e-Islami in Bangladesh may not have been able to win the recent elections, but it took a leading part in the ouster of Sheikh Hasina, proving that it is a factor to be reckoned with in that country's politics.

During Hasina's reign, India did not have to worry about its eastern borders. Today, with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in power, India will need to be more watchful lest Pakistan's ISI get a foothold there.

The BJP-led Union government shouldn't think of using Central probe agencies against Opposition leaders and concentrate more on heightened external threats. There's another reason why the government should change course: India must avoid becoming a religion-obsessed country like our neighbour on the western border.

The hidden heat of modern cities

SS SEKHON
FORMER PROFESSOR,
GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

AS North India heads into another punishing summer, Punjab is already feeling the strain. Farmers worry about heat stress on wheat, residents brace for longer afternoons indoors and cities prepare for rising electricity demand, worsening traffic congestion and heat radiating from concrete. When we talk about climate change, we usually focus on greenhouse gases (GHGs). Yet another form of warming affects urban residents every day, but it rarely receives much attention: anthropogenic heat, or waste heat.

Waste heat is the heat released by vehicles, ACs, factories, power plants, diesel generators and machines that keep modern life running. GHGs are the main source of warming, but waste heat makes local conditions worse, especially in dense urban areas. This is not a minor issue in a rapidly urbanising and energy-hungry country like India. Every time we burn fuel, run machinery or cool a building, much of that energy eventually escapes into the surrounding environment as heat. Thermal power plants lose a substantial portion of their energy during electricity generation and many industrial processes, from steel-making to oil refining, do the same. Conventional vehicles are also inefficient: much of the fuel they burn becomes heat rather than motion.

At the same time, concrete, asphalt and glass absorb solar radiation during the day and release it slowly after sunset. This is the familiar urban heat island effect. Waste heat adds another layer. The result is that cities often remain warmer than nearby rural areas, particularly at night, when relief should normally come.

Chandigarh, with more registered vehicles than residents, illustrates how transport becomes a generator of heat. Ludhiana's industrial activity, Mandi Gobindgarh's furnaces and the expansion of commercial and residential cooling across Punjab add to the heat burden. Even when the source goes unnoticed, its effects are felt in hotter streets, warmer nights and greater outdoor discomfort.

Air-conditioning is perhaps the clearest example of this paradox. ACs are essential for the elderly, children, patients and those working indoors. But when thousands of such units run at once in a dense neighborhood, they can make surrounding streets and building exteriors even hotter.

The same is true of transport. India now has well over 40 crore registered vehicles, most powered by internal combustion engines. In heavy traffic, engines idle, exhaust systems run hot, brakes generate frictional heat and crowded roads radiate warmth back into the air.

Our digital lifestyles also carry a hidden thermal cost. Data centres, server rooms, telecom infrastructure and their cooling systems consume large amounts of electricity and release much of it as heat. Punjab too is becoming more integrated into this infrastructure through IT parks, commercial expansion and rising demand for uninterrupted digital services.

The public-health consequences are serious. Higher temperatures increase the risk of heat exhaustion, dehydration, cardiovascular stress and sleep disruption. Outdoor workers bear the brunt. Poorer households suffer disproportionately. When nights remain hot, the body has less chance to recover, making prolonged periods of heat more dangerous.

> Waste heat may receive less attention than climate change, but for millions it is the most immediate form of climate stress.

This is why waste heat deserves greater attention in public discussion. It is not separate from development; it is one of the hidden costs of the way we develop. Unless cities begin to plan for it, the problem will grow alongside rising incomes, traffic, industrial growth and increasing demand for cooling.

Denmark, Sweden and Finland already use waste heat from power plants, industries and data centres to warm homes, while some Indian industries use waste heat to generate electricity.

Punjab has an opportunity to respond early and intelligently. Industrial waste-heat recovery can help factories reuse energy instead of releasing it into the environment. Better building design, insulation, reflective roofs and efficient appliances can reduce the need for excessive cooling. More trees, shaded bus stops, ventilated public spaces and water access points can make summer streets safer. Stronger public transport and less dependence on private vehicles would reduce both emissions and heat on the roads.

The state can also link heat management to broader environmental priorities. Rooftop solar and canal-top solar can reduce dependence on thermal power. Cleaner biomass use would be far preferable to open burning of crop residue. Local governments can incorporate heat risk into building rules, transport planning and summer preparedness instead of treating heat as merely a seasonal inconvenience.

The larger lesson is simple. Energy does not disappear after it powers our homes, vehicles and industries. Much of it returns to the environment as heat. In crowded cities that heat accumulates around us: in the air we breathe, on the roads we walk, and in nights that no longer cool down enough. If Punjab wants its cities to remain livable in the decades ahead, it must pay attention not only to the invisible gases warming the planet, but also to the heat building up around us. Waste heat may receive less attention than climate change, but for millions of urban residents, it is one of the most immediate ways climate stress is felt.

Recognising and managing this hidden heat may prove essential if our cities are to remain habitable in a warming world.

Surveillance in schools

NAVNEET SHARMA
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF HP

SCHOOL boards require the installation of CCTV cameras in all schools, including in corridors and classrooms. The rising rate of crime involving students justifies, even necessitates, this. Its main aim is to keep students and staff safe and help identify those who commit crimes or show anti-social behaviour.

Surveillance technology is common in public places and is lawful. But the use of cameras in schools raises some questions. Are classrooms public or private spaces? Do students and teachers expect privacy within school precincts? Schools have restricted access. They are not fully public, like parks.

When entering a school, students and staff join a community where individual rights are shaped by the broader needs of the school. Individual rights must be balanced with the community's right to a safe environment. School activities are more regulated than those at home. Teachers and students do not want their actions to be constantly monitored as it is detrimental to the teacher-student relationship. Teachers need to be enabled to discuss sensitive issues with students.

Another aim of surveillance could be to observe the 'performance' of teachers and students in the classroom. But its more controversial use comprises observing and assessing teachers' performance and students' discipline. This has the potential to intrude on private activities by recording their personal information with or without their knowledge. Technology should provide a solution to a problem and not be a knee-jerk reaction to a particular incident.

> The more controversial use of cameras comprises observing and assessing teachers' performance and students' discipline.

Their impact on pedagogy also deserves examination. Surveillance in classrooms can stifle open inquiry, which lies at the heart of learning. In a classroom where everything is recorded, a student hesitates to raise her hand, fearing that a 'silly' mistake might be captured and later scrutinised by parents, administrators or classmates. Similarly, a teacher may avoid encouraging discussions on sensitive topics, worrying that a momentary lapse or nuanced explanation could be misinterpreted. These subtle shifts can undermine the trust essential for genuine educational growth.

Cameras in the classroom do not lead to an improvement in teaching, especially if they are used to evaluate teachers, finds a 2011 study by Jack Hassard. According to a report, 85% schools in Britain have CCTVs. Teachers cite concerns that the cameras are not set for safety reasons, but to judge them. A study by a teachers' union in the UK showed that 41% teachers claimed the cameras were used to find evidence that led to "negative views" of the staff being monitored.

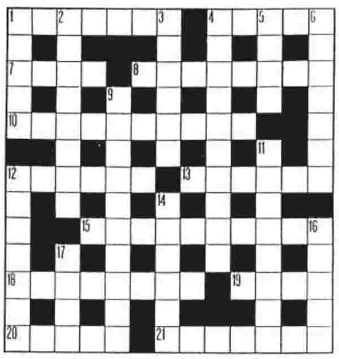
Education processes are social processes carried out in an environment of trust and freedom. Cameras affect students' psyche as they may not respond in a natural way during the teaching-learning processes.

A study by the National Association of School Psychologists in the US finds there is no clear evidence that the use of metal detectors, security cameras or guards in schools is effective in preventing violence and providing a safe environment. Teachers and students can feel vulnerable in a classroom where cameras can slip into an evaluative role which seeks to catch you doing something wrong, rather than being a tool to help one see clearly.

We also need to realise whether these cameras are going to 'fix' the pedagogy by the nanny state, as it does with the curriculum — pre-deciding what to think rather than how to think. The truism that the 'destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms' cannot be equated with crafting destiny under surveillance.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 The North Star (7)
4 Become alert and attentive (3,2)
7 Sea eagle (4)
8 Leverage (8)
10 A fair bargain (6,4)
12 Showing little concern (6)
13 Hand-tool with screw point (6)
15 Collapse emotionally (2, 2, 6)
18 Including latest information (2-2-4)
19 Stern (4)
20 Slightly drunk (5)
21 Affluent (7)

DOWN
1 Squeeze to extract juice (5)
2 Lose vitality (8)
3 Strongly built (6)
4 If one can call it that (4,2,2,2)
5 Pull violently (4)
6 Forestall (3-4)
9 Dawn (5,2,3)
11 Suddenly lose consciousness (5,3)
12 Motor-racing track (7)
14 Act obsequiously (6)
16 Wretched (5)
17 A short distance (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Over the hill, 9 Ongoing, 10 Drain, 11 Amen, 12 Fixation, 14 Demand, 16 Target, 18 Optional, 19 Hush, 22 Trace, 23 Tuneful, 24 Set to rights.

Down: 2 Vague, 3 Rail, 4 Haggis, 5 Hideaway, 6 Leading, 7 Dos and don'ts, 8 In a nutshell, 13 Indolent, 15 Methane, 17 Master, 20 Unfit, 21 Snug.

SU DO KU

		9						
	1				2		5	
	2	4	8	9				
		5	9			4		
6			7		4			3
		8			1	6		
				2	8	3	9	
	3		4				1	
						2		

HARD

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

1	5	9	2	4	8	3	6	7
4	2	7	5	3	6	1	9	8
3	8	6	7	9	1	5	2	4
7	9	2	1	5	3	4	8	6
6	3	8	4	7	9	2	5	1
5	4	1	6	8	2	7	3	9
9	1	4	8	2	5	6	7	3
2	6	3	9	1	7	8	4	5
8	7	5	3	6	4	9	1	2

CALENDAR

MARCH 12, 2026, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 21
- Phalgun Parvishte 29
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 9, up to 6:30 am
- Siddhi Yoga up to 9:59 am
- Moola Nakshatra up to 12:44 am
- Moon in Sagittarius sign.

FORECAST

SUNSET: THURSDAY 18:28 HRS
SUNRISE: FRIDAY 06:35 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	16
New Delhi	35	17
Amritsar	26	19
Bathinda	32	18
Jalandhar	26	19
Ludhiana	31	18
Bhiwani	32	20
Hisar	33	19
Sirsa	33	19
Dharamsala	25	11
Manali	18	09
Shimla	20	10
Srinagar	14	08
Jammu	30	20
Kargil	13	02
Leh	12	02
Dehradun	31	17
Mussoorie	23	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Opinion

THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 2026

WATER SECURITY
President Droupadi Murmu

Awareness about water management and conservation among the younger generation will ensure the country's water security in future

Availability over price

Gas supply crunch after West Asia turmoil shows full pricing freedom for complex fields can't wait

THE WAR IN West Asia has quickly exposed the deep vulnerabilities of India's energy sector. The flaring up of crude prices has adverse ramifications for domestic inflation, the current account, government finances, and economic growth. However, as far as the war-induced crippling of natural gas supplies is concerned, the crisis has been prompt. This explains why QatarEnergy's halt in liquefied natural gas (LNG) production has forced the government to immediately consider rationing gas supplies and reprioritising allocation across sectors. Transportation, cooking, and farming already receive top priority. These sectors would now get an even larger share of the available (reduced) gas supplies, likely leaving industrial users like the petrochemical-to-plastics value chain (the cracker route) high and dry.

Nearly half of 195 million standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd) of gas consumed in the country is met through capital-intensive LNG imports. As much as 60 mmscmd of gas, or around two-thirds of imports, is currently unavailable due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz and the force majeure declared by Qatar. In fact, India's gas consumption growth is far below potential and stunted. The green-transition target to raise the share of this hydrocarbon to 15% of the country's energy mix by 2030 doesn't appear to be within reach. The dynamics of India's gas economy remained skewed for many years. The earlier pricing systems—opaque administered caps and the one linked to global gas hubs—were far removed from domestic realities or cost structures. Uncertainties over remunerative prices made investors cautious, causing stagnant production and drying up of new discoveries.

Overall high costs have also made gas unviable for power generation. Gas-based power stations are heavily under-utilised or stranded, with an average plant load factor of just around 15% in off-summer periods. In fact, the National Electricity Plan has turned silent on the use of this fuel. As an industrial feedstock, gas has often stoked inflation, with the cost of its volatile prices borne not only by consumers at large, but also by the government. Retail prices of urea are kept unchanged, irrespective of the vagaries of the global LNG market.

However, there is reason to believe that implementation of the Kirit Parikh Committee's recommendations since April 2023 has made gas pricing a little more investor-friendly. As for the legacy nomination fields run by the ONGC-OIL, the price band linked to Indian crude basket, along with monthly revisions and annual ceiling escalation, is seen to balance producer viability and consumer interests. With the stated purpose of attracting investment in complex offshore fields, a separate pricing policy is in place, with a far more liberal cap benchmarked to imported LNG price. The average production from the fields run by the Reliance-BP combine in the Krishna Godavari (KG) basin, rose sharply from 20 to 27 mmscmd between 2022-23 and 2023-24 and is now around 28 mmscmd. The combine's current production is around 30% of total domestic gas output at its peak, while ONGC has also sharpened its focus on its assets in the KG basin. The government must not defer implementing complete pricing freedom for difficult-field gas. As per Parikh panel's report, this was to take effect by this January, but it has yet to materialise. Along with the new, greater emphasis on coal-bed methane projects, market-determined pricing for deep and ultradeep water gas would help India prepare itself better for global energy supply shocks like the present one.

The mercy of letting go

WHEN A YOUNG life is suspended between breath and silence, the law is forced to confront questions that medicine alone cannot answer. The Supreme Court's decision allowing passive euthanasia for a 32-year-old man in a persistent vegetative state is one such moment. The judgment is a recognition that dignity, compassion, and closure must sometimes guide the most painful decisions at the edge of life.

For months, the young man's body continued to breathe with the help of machines, even as his mind remained locked in darkness. Doctors had concluded that the damage was irreversible and that there would be no awakening. What remained was a life sustained by tubes, monitors, and the fragile rhythm of hope slowly giving way to resignation.

The court's ruling does not celebrate death. It acknowledges the limits of medicine in an age where technology can extend biological life long after consciousness has slipped away. Modern healthcare has given humanity extraordinary power to sustain the body, but it has also created situations where life continues without awareness, memory, or dignity. The law cannot pretend these dilemmas do not exist.

Over the past decade, the court has carefully carved out a narrow and cautious path through this moral terrain. Beginning with the landmark judgment in the Aruna Shanbaug case in 2011 and strengthened by later rulings recognising living wills and passive euthanasia, the court has gradually shaped a legal framework that allows families to withdraw life support under strict safeguards. The present ruling continues that journey.

Shanbaug, who had slipped into a vegetative state and remained there for more than four decades, should have been allowed to die long ago. Her existence became a symbol of medical endurance, but also of prolonged suffering that the law hesitated to confront. When the SC finally allowed passive euthanasia in principle in 2011, it still declined to withdraw her life support. She would continue in that suspended state until her death in 2015. The tragedy of Shanbaug was not only the brutality that destroyed her life in a single night, but also the years in which dignity seemed trapped between hope, fear, and legal hesitation. Her story remains a haunting reminder that mercy delayed can sometimes become another form of cruelty.

SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR
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Wednesday's judgment also opens a deeper debate that society cannot indefinitely postpone. Many argue that if the law recognises passive euthanasia—allowing death by withdrawing treatment—then it must also confront the question of active euthanasia, where doctors administer medication to end suffering swiftly. To them, the distinction between allowing death and causing death can appear thin. In cases of unbearable suffering with no possibility of recovery, they say, active euthanasia may seem the more humane choice.

But the argument is fraught with moral peril. Medicine, after all, rests on a foundational promise: to preserve life. Allowing doctors to actively end life risks altering that sacred trust. There are also fears that such powers could be misused, particularly in societies where the elderly, the disabled, or the dependent may already feel like burdens. These concerns are neither abstract nor trivial. They explain why the court has chosen to proceed with extreme caution, limiting the law to passive euthanasia under strict medical and judicial oversight.

Even so, the ruling represents an important step in acknowledging a difficult truth: death is not always an enemy that must be fought until the final breath. Sometimes it is a release from suffering that medicine can no longer heal.

Modern healthcare has pushed death into intensive care units and behind hospital curtains, surrounded by machines and protocols. We speak endlessly about saving lives, yet rarely about how life should end. Perhaps it is time for a more open national conversation—about advance directives, about the dignity of patients who cannot speak for themselves, and about how compassion should guide us when medicine has reached its limits.

The SC's judgment does not settle the debate. But it reminds us that the law, at its most humane, is not merely about rules. In permitting a grieving family to finally let go, the court has shown that sometimes the most compassionate act is not to hold on to life at all costs, but to allow it to end with dignity.

REAL ESTATE INSOLVENCY

SUPREME COURT HAS BRIDGED A GAP WHERE IBC FELL SHORT; LEGISLATURE MUST CLOSE IT IN LAW

Deliver the homes first

MS SAHOO RAGHAV PANDEY

Respectively Emeritus Fellow, Insolvency Law Academy, and Assistant Professor, NLU Delhi

THE SUPREME COURT'S (SC) February 5 order in the Supertech matter answers a question that has vexed the insolvency ecosystem since the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) first confronted real estate stress: whose claim deserves primacy when a developer collapses, the bank or the homebuyer? Hopefully, the 7th amendment to the IBC, slated for the ongoing Budget session of Parliament, will provide an authoritative answer.

Invoking Article 142 to uphold the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal's December 2024 direction appointing NBCC to complete Supertech's 16 stalled housing projects, the court held that other claims will be considered only after homes, as promised by the developer, are delivered to the buyers. Any surplus, it added, may thereafter be distributed among other claimants in a manner the tribunals consider just and equitable.

The IBC rests on a distinction between financial creditors and operational creditors. Financial creditors—banks, financial institutions, and bondholders—sit on the committee of creditors and exercise commercial wisdom over the fate of the corporate debtor. Operational creditors—suppliers, service providers, and employees—have claims but no governance rights. The 2018 amendment deemed homebuyers to be financial creditors and gave them representation at the decision-making table through authorised representatives. However, resemblance to banks is only formal. A bank can absorb haircuts, write off losses against capital, and move on to the next transaction. A family that has paid instalments for 15 years towards a flat in Noida cannot do the same.

The court does not engage with the doctrinal question of whether homebuyers are properly classified as financial creditors. Instead, through Article 142, it establishes a hierarchy of outcomes: homes first, creditor recoveries next. This is a judicial assertion that in real estate insolvencies, the delivery of the promised product to the consumer must take precedence over the distribution of the debtor's estate among its creditors.

This reliance on Article 142 is both the order's strength and vulnerability. The provision empowers the SC to pass such orders as are necessary to do "complete justice", particularly when existing legal frameworks prove inadequate. Here, over 50,000 homes booked between 2010 and 2012 had remained undelivered for over a decade. Faced with such prolonged failure of the statutory process, the court stepped in.

> **Each intervention, from Amrapali to Jaypee to Supertech, strengthens the case for reform: a waterfall mechanism that protects the homebuyer as a customer**

Extraordinary remedies do not create a stable doctrine. Article 142 is inherently case-specific and does not substitute for a clear statutory rule governing future real estate insolvencies. The next bench confronted with the next failed developer will have to decide afresh whether the facts warrant a similar invocation.

The Supertech order nonetheless carries implications beyond the immediate relief to homebuyers. It reinforces an emerging principle that in real estate insolvencies, project completion is the primary objective, with financial distribution a secondary consideration. This inverts the usual logic of the IBC, where resolution plans are evaluated primarily for the value they deliver to creditors. In Supertech, the relevant metric becomes consumer delivery.

The SC also directed that no court or forum shall interfere with the implementation of the NBCC takeover, effectively creating a litigation-free corridor for completing stalled projects. This reflects a recognition that repeated litigation has often compounded delays in large real estate insolvencies and frustrated the objective of delivering homes.

The deeper structural issue, however, remains unresolved. Real estate firms in India occupy a position that the IBC was not originally designed to address. They are hybrids: conventional businesses that borrow from banks and engage contractors, but also financial intermediaries that collect customer funds to finance construction. When such hybrids fail, the insolvency framework struggles to reconcile the competing claims of lenders and consumers. The 2018 amendment addressed this by pulling homebuyers into the creditor framework. The Supertech order addresses it by pushing creditor claims behind consumer delivery. Both are workarounds.

The treatment of homebuyers under the IBC, therefore, remains misaligned with their actual economic position. Classifying them as financial creditors was an act of legislative compassion, but it placed ordinary families, who had invested life savings into homes, within a commercial decision-making apparatus designed for institutional lenders. A more durable solution would recognise homebuyers as customers whose claims arise from the promise of a home rather than from a financial investment and accordingly deserve priority in the resolution process. Though it does not articulate the issue in these words, the Supertech order moves towards that destination through judicial rather than legislative means.

The logic for such priority is not unfamiliar in financial regulation. The Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance Bill, 2017, for example, proposed a priority structure for financial service providers that placed customer claims ahead of other claimants. Similar principles already operate in insurance liquidation and the protection of client assets under securities law. Customers who pay money for a promised product bear a different risk from creditors who lend money. The customer's claim is specific and contractual; the creditor's claim is inherently risk-adjusted.

Applying this logic to real estate insolvencies would not require a separate insolvency regime, a path that risks fragmenting the framework. A more modest but consequential amendment could place the obligation to deliver homes ahead of creditor distributions in the insolvency waterfall for real estate corporate debtors. That would achieve legislatively what the SC has achieved through Article 142, but with the predictability and stability that judicial improvisation cannot.

The Supertech order is, therefore, a welcome intervention. It brings relief to thousands of families who have waited far too long for their homes. At the same time, it signals to the legislature and regulators that the IBC's treatment of homebuyers remains a work in progress. Nearly a decade after the code's enactment, real estate insolvencies still depend on episodic judicial intervention rather than a settled statutory framework.

Each intervention, from Amrapali to Jaypee to Supertech, strengthens the case for reform: a waterfall mechanism that protects the homebuyer as a customer. The Supreme Court has acted where the IBC fell short. The task of completing the framework now rests with the legislature.

Healthcare can't afford regulatory overload

AMEERA SHAH

President, NATHEALTH, & Promoter and Executive Chairperson, Metropolis Healthcare

A focused regulatory overhaul can simultaneously uphold standards and promote ease of doing business, unleashing the sector's full potential

INDIA'S HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY is not just an essential pillar of national well-being; it is also a high-impact economic engine. With the private sector catering to over 70% of India's patients, it forms the backbone of service delivery, innovation, and infrastructure. The sector has drawn nearly $30 billion in investments in recent years, and is one of the most dynamic and promising areas for long-term growth.

Yet, beyond capital and capacity, what truly determines the future of healthcare is the ecosystem in which it operates.

However, as healthcare delivery becomes more complex and technology-driven, regulatory frameworks must evolve in parallel. When compliance becomes fragmented, duplicative, or unpredictable, it increases the cost of care, slows expansion, and diverts critical resources away from patient outcomes. Reducing regulatory friction is therefore not merely an industry demand—it is a national imperative to ensure accessible, affordable, and high-quality healthcare for all.

Today, India stands at a pivotal moment. Encouragingly, we are seeing a growing spirit of partnership between policymakers, healthcare organisations, and federations as we work together to build a stronger, future-ready healthcare system. Meaningful reform is only possible when government and industry collaborate with a shared commitment to improving care for every citizen.

Healthcare is among the most regulated sectors in India, governed by over 28 central and state authorities and subject to more than 6,500 compliance requirements. A typical healthcare facility may be required to comply with nearly 29,000 obligations annually, including maintaining over 1,500 records and securing close to 1,400 approvals.

Adding to this complexity is the constantly shifting regulatory landscape, with 25-30% of regulations undergoing changes each year. This unpredictability creates uncertainty for investors, delays project execution, and escalates compliance costs.

> **A typical healthcare facility may be required to comply with nearly 29,000 obligations annually**

While regulation is essential for patient safety and quality assurance, excessive overlaps, inconsistent interpretations, and fragmented processes often divert time, resources, and focus away from what matters most patient care and innovation. The need of the hour is not deregulation, but smarter regulation—one that safeguards patients while allowing providers to grow responsibly and efficiently.

One of the most pressing challenges lies in the diagnostics sector, which remains caught between unregulated expansion and overregulation. Diagnostics laboratories face conflicting requirements under clinical establishment laws, bio-medical waste rules, and local municipal regulations. There are also inconsistent licensing norms across states and unclear applicability of judicial rulings, leading to legal uncertainty.

This is particularly concerning because diagnostics is the foundation of preventive healthcare. If we want India to move from illness to wellness by shifting from late-stage treatment to early detection, we must create a clearer, more supportive regulatory framework for this vital sector.

Another example of outdated regulation is the restriction on hospital building height under the National Building Code, 2016, which caps height at 45 metres, despite no such limitation for residential or commercial buildings. This limits optimal land utilisation and forces horizontal expansion in land-scarce urban areas. All this eventually increases capital expenditure due to duplication of infrastructure and manpower. Revisiting such norms with robust safety safeguards will ensure that India's cities can build healthcare capacity for the future in a sustainable and cost-effective manner.

A focused regulatory overhaul can simultaneously uphold standards and promote ease of doing business, unleashing the sector's full potential. Some key steps are harmonising state and central licensing frameworks, introducing greater transparency and defined timelines for approvals, expanding single-window digital clearance systems, recognising global quality certifications to reduce duplication, simplifying environmental and safety compliance, modernising infrastructure norms, creating a dedicated med-tech regulatory system, and bringing clarity to ethical marketing practices. But beyond operational efficiency, the real impact of smarter regulation lies in what it creates for citizens.

Importantly, this is not about deregulation. It is about building a thriving healthcare ecosystem where patients can trust the system, where quality is consistent, and where minimum standards are assured across the country. When trust is strengthened, patients do not feel the need to repeat tests, seek multiple opinions out of doubt, or worry about variability in care and quality. This is how we build a healthcare system that serves people better, faster, and more fairly.

If India gets regulatory reform right, the outcomes will be transformational. We will not only enable Indian healthcare providers to scale with confidence but also strengthen India's position as a global healthcare destination. "Heal in India" must not only be a promise for Indian citizens, but also for the world—where overseas patients come to India with trust, knowing they will receive quality care, ethical diagnostics, and consistent standards.

The government's intent and willingness to engage with the sector at this critical juncture is deeply commendable. If we continue this collaborative path, we can build a healthcare ecosystem that is trusted, future-ready, and globally competitive.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

World order in peril

Apropos of "A dangerous turn for the world" (*FE*, March 11), the recent actions of the Trump administration have once again raised serious concerns about the erosion of respect for international law. When powerful countries bypass international agreements or institutions, they risk weakening the very system that helps prevent conflicts and promotes cooperation. In this instance, the administration's failure to provide a convincing legal or moral justification for its actions has deepened anxieties across the global community. International law functions largely on the principle of mutual trust and adherence; when a major power appears willing to sidestep those rules, it emboldens others to do the same. The result could be a gradual unravelling of the delicate web of treaties, conventions, and diplomatic understanding that sustain global order.
—Narayanan Kizhumundayur, Thrissur

Need for proactive diplomacy

The widening conflict in West Asia has placed Donald Trump's administration in a precarious position. The US initially appeared confident that a strong show of support for Israel would deter Tehran and quickly shift the balance in the region. Instead, the confrontation has widened across the Gulf and beyond. Ultimately, the crisis highlights how deeply global prosperity is tied to stability in West Asia. For India, the challenge is not only securing energy supplies but also contributing to peace in a region that remains central to its economic and strategic interests. In the present circumstances, proactive diplomacy-rather than quiet caution-is the need of the hour. This senseless war must be brought to an end immediately.
—Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

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The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Nepal's Youthquake

The electoral surge of Balendra Shah, the rapper-turned-mayor now poised to become Nepal's youngest Prime Minister, represents more than an unconventional political victory. It marks a generational rupture in a political system long dominated by familiar parties and leaders. By defeating former Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli in his own stronghold and leading the Rastriya Swatantra Party toward a commanding parliamentary majority, Mr Shah has ridden a wave of public anger that has been building for years. If confirmed, the mandate would mark Nepal's first decisive single-party majority in decades.

For decades, Nepal's politics has revolved around a narrow circle of parties that alternated in fragile coalition governments. While the country successfully transitioned from monarchy to republic and navigated a difficult peace process after the civil war, governance often appeared paralysed by factional bargaining. Frequent changes of government produced little sense of continuity in policy or reform. To many voters ~ especially the young ~ the system seemed designed more to sustain political elites than to address the country's economic and social challenges. The protests that erupted in 2025 captured that frustration. Demonstrations led largely by younger Nepalis denounced corruption, nepotism, and inequality, and demanded accountability from those in power. The unrest exposed a widening disconnect between an increasingly educated, digitally connected generation and political institutions that appeared slow to reform themselves.

Mr Shah's rise must be understood within that context. His political appeal has little to do with traditional ideological alignments. Instead, it reflects the attraction of an outsider who has positioned himself as a voice against entrenched power. The rapid growth of the Rastriya Swatantra Party suggests that voters are no longer content merely to punish the old guard; they are prepared to replace it altogether.

Economic realities have amplified that demand for change. Nepal remains heavily dependent on remittances sent by millions of citizens working abroad. Every day thousands of young Nepalis leave in search of employment, a pattern that has created both economic lifelines and deep social anxiety about the country's future. A government promising jobs, infrastructure and better governance therefore enters office with enormous expectations.

Yet electoral upheaval is easier than political transformation. If Mr Shah's party ultimately commands a large majority in parliament, it will have the rare opportunity to pursue reforms without the constraints of fragile coalitions. That opportunity also brings risk. Without a strong opposition, the responsibility to uphold democratic accountability will fall even more heavily on institutions, civil society, and the electorate itself. Nepal now stands at an unusually decisive political moment. The defeat of established leaders ~ from Oli Sharma to figures such as Gagan Thapa ~ signals a public appetite for renewal. Yet the endurance of figures like Pushpa Kamal Dahal reminds observers that political systems rarely transform overnight. The real test for Nepal's new leadership will not be winning an election shaped by anger and hope. It will be proving that the promise of generational change can translate into lasting governance.

Dynasty Question

The death of Iran's long-time supreme leader Ali Khamenei in US-Israeli air strikes aimed at crippling the country's leadership, has triggered one of the most consequential political transitions in the history of the Islamic republic. The elevation of his son as the new Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, immediately raises a deeper political question about the nature of the revolutionary system created in 1979. A republic that once defined itself in opposition to hereditary monarchy now faces the uncomfortable optics of power passing from father to son.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, replaced the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty with a political system grounded in clerical authority and the doctrine of velayat-e faqih, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist. Under this structure, the supreme leader occupies the highest position in the state, exercising ultimate authority over the military, judiciary, and key political institutions. While Iran holds elections for President and Parliament, the supreme leader remains the central figure shaping the country's strategic direction. Mojtaba Khamenei has long been a familiar name within Iran's political elite, though rarely a visible public figure. For years, insiders in Tehran have suggested that he wielded influence behind the scenes around the office of his father. Yet the transition from discreet political operator to supreme leader represents a dramatic shift. The office he now holds commands authority over the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the security establishment and the ideological institutions that define the republic's identity.

Questions about legitimacy inevitably follow his appointment. Iran's constitution assigns the selection of the supreme leader to the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body responsible for ensuring that the office is filled by a figure with both religious credentials and political capability. The new supreme leader's clerical rank, however, has often been regarded as modest compared with senior scholars in the seminaries of Qom, the centre of Shia theological learning. That gap may not prevent him from governing, but it complicates the claim that authority flows naturally from religious scholarship.

Political controversies also shadow his rise. During the presidential elections that brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power in 2005 and again in the disputed vote of 2009, reformist leaders such as Mehdi Karroubi accused now Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei of influencing the process through networks linked to security forces. The protests that followed in 2009, remembered as the Green Movement, exposed how quickly public frustration could erupt when large numbers of Iranians believe the political system offers little genuine choice.

The regional context makes the transition even more precarious. Iran is already confronting economic pressure from sanctions and open confrontation with Israel and the United States. A leadership change brought about by wartime strikes adds a further layer of uncertainty to an already volatile moment. For the new supreme leader, the challenge now is not merely to inherit authority but to prove he can exercise it. Whether his leadership consolidates Iran or intensifies doubts about its direction will shape Iran's political future.

Nation-making and women

'Have we not Padmini of Cheetore, Chand Bibi, Jhansi Rani? Is she saintly, a poet, and a mystic? Is there not Meera Bae? Is she the queen, great in administration? Where is Rani Bhowani, where Ahalya Bae, where Janhabi of Mymensingh? Is it wifehood in which we deem that woman shines brightest? What of Sati, of Savitri, of the ever-glorious Sita? These ideals moreover are constructive. That is to say, it is not their fame and glory that the Indian child is trained to contemplate. It is their holiness, simplicity, sincerity, in a word, their character'

In today's turbulent time and age, when women across our world are responsibly discharging their duties as Presidents and Heads of State, industrialists and entrepreneurs, social activists and sarpanches, we acknowledge and applaud this spectrum of socio-political change witnessed over the last one hundred years. International Women's Day, marked this week, is also the perfect occasion to recall the contribution of women thinkers-philosophers and educationists like Sister Nivedita who wrote voluminously on 'education' and 'education for women.' Not a coincidence that Prof Sugata Bose, hailing from the illustrious family of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, recently lauded Sister Nivedita's role in harmonizing different streams of thought of Swami Vivekananda and Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Sister Nivedita played a pivotal role in ensuring that philosophical foundations laid by these iconic personalities were implemented as action plans. What is significant today, and a pointer to the multiple crises affecting our modern education system, is her emphasis on 'national education', 'nation-making' and 'education for women'. Published in 1923 is the compilation of her papers and essays titled 'Hints on National Education in India', an invaluable resource for those drawing upon the past to build a new future.

In 'Paper on Education ~ V', Sister Nivedita spelt it out: "The reconstitution of a nation has to begin with its ideals. This, because in a nation three primary elements have to be considered, first the country, or region, second, the people, and third, the national mind. Of the three, the last is dominant, and all-directing. By working through it, we may modify or even re-create either or both of the other two while their influence upon it is comparatively feeble and indirect. Mind can re-make anything, however inert or rebellious, but a rebellious mind, what can reach? It follows that in national reconstruction there is no other factor so important as education. How is this to be made national and nationalising? What is a national education? And conversely, what is un-national? And further what kind of education offers the best preparation for the attempt to solve the national problems? What type of education would be not only national, but also nation-making?"

With her focus on national education, she wrote, "A national education is, first and foremost, an education in the national idealism. We must remember, however, that the aim of education is emancipation of sympathy and intellect. This is not often reached by foreign methods. By this fact of the attainment of the universal, must the education ultimately stand justified, or condemned. To emancipate the greatest number of people most easily and effectively, it is necessary to choose familiar ideals and forms, and in every case, it is necessary to make progression absolutely continuous, so that there be no sharp incongruity amongst the elements of early experience. Such incongruity begets confusion of thought, and this confusion is educational chaos.

"A national education then, must be made up of familiar elements. The ideals presented must always be first clothed in a form evolved by our own past. Our imagination must be first based on our own heroic literature. Our hope must be woven out of our history. From the known to the unknown, from the easy to the difficult, must be the motto of every teacher, the rule of every lesson. The familiar is not the goal; knowledge is the goal: trained faculty is the aim. An education that stopped short at the familiar would be a bondage instead of an emancipation; a mockery not a reality. The familiar is merely the first step. But as the first step, it is essential. Geographical ideas must be built up first through the ideas of India. But they must not stop there."

Each phrase embodying the thoughts of Sister Nivedita is relevant and important in our age when Artificial Intelligence is the new cloud on the horizon of knowledge. "It must never be forgotten that nationality in culture is the means, not the end. There is a level of achievement where all the educated persons of the world can meet, understand and enjoy each other's associations. This level is freedom. Intellectually speaking, it is mukti. But it can be reached only by him whose knowledge is firm ~ rooted in love for mother and motherland," she wrote, with characteristic flourish.

In an earlier 'Paper on Education ~ IV', she had emphasized that "education in India today, has to be not only national, but NATION-MAKING. We have seen what a national education is ~ a training which has a strong colour of its own, and begins by relating the child to his home and country, through all that is familiar, but ends by making him free of all that is true, cosmopolitan, and universal. This is the necessary condition of all healthy education, in all countries, whatever their political position or stage of development. These general statements are as true of England and France, as of India, as true in happiness as in adversity."

On 'The Future Education of the Indian Woman', Sister Nivedita was clear in the clarion call she made. "In making the school as much an essential of the girl's life, as it has always been of the boy's, we are establishing something which is never to be undone. Every generation as it comes will have to carry out the great task of the next generation's schooling. Much in the problem of Woman's Education as we today see it, is difficulty of the time only. We have to carry our country through an arduous transition. Once the main content of the modern consciousness finds its way into the Indian vernaculars, the problem will have disappeared, for we learn more from our Mother tongue itself, than from all our schools and schoolmasters. In order to bring about that great day, however, the Mother Herself calls for vows and service of a vast spiritual knighthood. Hundreds of young men are necessary, to league themselves together for the deepening of education in the best ways amongst women. Most students, perhaps, might be able to vow twelve lessons in a year to be given either in home or village, during the holidays this should hardly prove an exhausting undertaking yet how much might be done by it."

RAJU MANSUKHANI

The writer is a researcher-author on history and heritage issues, and a former deputy curator of Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya

Sister Nivedita presented the constructive elements within the ambit of idealism. "What is the type of woman we most admire? Is she strong, resourceful, inspired, fit for moments of crisis? Have we not Padmini of Cheetore, Chand Bibi, Jhansi Rani? Is she saintly, a poet, and a mystic? Is there not Meera Bae? Is she the queen, great in administration? Where is Rani Bhowani, where Ahalya Bae, where Janhabi of Mymensingh? Is it wifehood in which we deem that woman shines brightest? What of Sati, of Savitri, of the ever-glorious Sita? These ideals moreover are constructive. That is to say, it is not their fame and glory that the Indian child is trained to contemplate. It is their holiness, simplicity, sincerity, in a word, their character.

This, indeed, is always a difference between one's own and an alien ideal. Impressed by the first, it is an effort that we seek to imitate: admiring the second, we endeavour to arrive at its results. There can never be any sound education of the Indian woman, which does not begin and end in exaltation of the national ideals of womanhood, as embodied in her own history and heroic literature." It is not glorification of the woman, for Sister Nivedita spoke about efficiency and duty: "Woman must undoubtedly be made efficient. Sita and Savitri were great in wifehood, only as the fruit of that antecedent fact, that they were great women. There was no place in life that they did not fill graciously and dutifully. Both satisfied every demand of the social ideal. Perfect wives as they were, if they had never been married at all, they must have been perfect just the same, as daughters, sisters, and disciples. This efficiency to all the circumstances of life, this womanhood before wifehood, and humanity before womanhood, is something at which the education of the girl must aim in every age."

There was a moral ideal for Sister Nivedita who had witnessed the Swadeshi movement in Bengal and felt the pulse of a new nation being born. She wrote, "the moral ideal of the India of today has taken on new dimensions ~ the national and civic. Here also woman must be trained to play her part. And again, by struggling towards these she will be educated. In order to achieve the ideal of efficiency for the exigencies of the twentieth century, a characteristic synthesis has to be acquired. It is no longer merely the spiritual or emotional content of a statement that has to be conveyed to the learner, as in the mythologico-social culture of the past. The student must now seek to understand the limitations of the statement, its relation to cognate ideas and the steps by which the race has come to this particular formulation. The modern synthesis, in other words, is scientific, geographical, and historical, and these three modes of knowing must ~ since there is no sex in truth ~ be achieved by woman as by man."

CHINA DAILY

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.

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Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

TN polls

Sir, This refers to today's report, "Unexpected twist: Vijay's TVK in talks to join NDA ahead of TN polls," in *The Statesman*. The evolving political dynamics in Tamil Nadu suggest an emerging contest that could reshape the state's electoral landscape ahead of the next assembly elections. The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam appears to view the rising popularity of actor Vijay and his newly formed Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam as a potential political threat. Reports of administrative and political hurdles confronting the TVK's mobilisation efforts have intensified speculation that Vijay may seek broader political partnerships.

Against this backdrop, discussions about a possible alignment with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, which is part of the National Democratic Alliance, have gained traction. If such a partnership materialises, it could significantly alter the electoral arithmetic in the state. Vijay's growing youth appeal combined with the AIADMK's established political base may consolidate anti-incumbency sentiments against the DMK. Such an alliance would potentially provide the NDA with a substantial political boost, transforming the forthcoming election into a far more competitive contest.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy,
Bengaluru, 9 March.

Stay grounded

Sir, The editorial "India's New Order" (March 10) rightfully celebrates the emphatic T20 World Cup triumph in Ahmedabad, yet history suggests we should embrace this "new era" with a sense of perspective.

The transition from the towering shadows of Kohli and Rohit to the fearless strokeplay of Sanju Samson and Abhishek Sharma is indeed heartening. However, the "invincibility" the editorial hints at has been seen before and dismantled. In 1983, India entered the ODI World Cup as underdogs and defeated a West Indies side that seemed destined to rule forever. Similarly, the Ricky Ponting-era Australia once looked untouchable, yet in this recent tournament, they couldn't even breach the Super 8.

While much is made of the "Gambhir approach" and the fearless batting depth, the cornerstone of this victory was the surgical precision of Jasprit Bumrah. His Player of the Match performance (4/15) reminds us that while aggressive batting wins applause, disciplined bowling wins championships.

It is this balance, managed masterfully by Suryakumar Yadav at a critical transition point, that defines the current success.

As we eye the 2028 Olympics, the "New Order" must remain grounded. The close contest against England proved that it could have been anyone's game.

Lessons from the past ~ both within Indian cricket and internationally ~ teach us that momentum is a gift, not a permanent right. To truly dominate, we must ensure this system values consistency as much as it does aggression.

Yours, etc., Krishan Kumar Chugh,
New Delhi, 10 March.

Bold governance but unenforceable intent

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

When Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah rose to present the state budget on 6 March 2026, few expected a digital governance milestone to emerge from the speech. Yet in a single declaratory sentence, he made Karnataka the first Indian state to formally announce a ban on social media use for children under 16 - joining a small but growing group of governments worldwide that have decided enough is enough.

The announcement was unambiguous in intent. "With the objective of preventing adverse effects of increasing mobile usage on children," Siddaramaiah stated, "the use of social media will be banned for children under the age of 16." What the speech did not provide - and what policymakers, legal experts, technology companies, and parents have been urgently asking about ever since - were the specifics: which platforms, what legislation, what timeline, and above all, how.

Those unanswered questions are not peripheral. They are, in many ways, the entire story. And understanding them requires understanding both why Karnataka felt compelled to act and what the realistic limits of that action are.

The concern driving the Karnataka government's decision is neither new nor unique to India. Across the world, a convergence of research, public anxiety, and high-profile tragedy has forced governments to confront what platforms themselves have been slow to address: the measurable harm that heavy social media use inflicts on adolescent mental health.

Studies consistently find that teenagers are spending between five and seven hours daily on social media and smartphones, with many spending considerably more. The consequences documented in the research literature are serious: chronic anxiety, depression, severely disrupted sleep, declining classroom attention and academic performance, and a deep psychological dependency on platforms engineered to maximise engagement through algorithmically curated content loops. Unlike a book or a television programme, social media is designed to prevent stopping. The endless scroll is not an accident - it is a feature.

For adolescents, whose brains are still developing, the vulnerability is acute. Self-esteem and body image are particularly susceptible to the constant social comparison that platforms encourage. Cyberbullying - the online variant of peer harassment - has evolved into something qualitatively different from its offline predecessor: it operates 24 hours a day, spreads with unlimited reach, and offers its victims no physical refuge. The link between severe cyberbullying and adolescent suicide has been documented in jurisdictions across the world. India is not immune.

Karnataka had already signalled its concern before the budget announcement. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah raised the issue at a Vice-Chancellors' conclave in February 2026, seeking the views of university leaders on restricting mobile phone and social media access for minors. The state has also run public awareness campaigns - most visibly, 'Mobile Bidi, Pustaka Hidi', a Kannada-language initiative urging children to leave the phone and pick up a book. The budget announcement, in this light, was the culmination of a policy conversation that had been building for months, not an impulsive gesture.

Karnataka's decision did not emerge in isolation. It arrived at a moment of accelerating global movement on the same question. Australia became the first country in the world to legislate a social media ban for under-16s in December 2025, requiring platforms including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, X, and YouTube to enforce strict age verification and access controls. Britain, Denmark, and Greece are studying comparable measures. France already requires parental consent for children under 15 to access social media.

The global wave is reaching India from multiple directions simultaneously. Indonesia announced in early 2026 that it would restrict access to high-risk platforms for users under 16. The Madras High Court, in December 2025, urged the Union government to consider Australia-style restrictions. India's Chief Economic Adviser publicly called for age-based access limits in January 2026, describing certain platforms as "predatory." Goa's IT minister confirmed in January that the state was examining a similar ban, and a lawmaker in Andhra Pradesh - which has since announced its own restriction for children under 13 - introduced a bill along the same lines.

For the global technology industry, the Karnataka announcement carries weight that extends well beyond its immediate scope. India is the world's second-largest smartphone market, with 750 million devices and approximately one billion internet users. For Meta, it is the single largest market globally - with more users of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp than any other country. Karnataka, home to Bengaluru and its concentration of global technology firms, is not a peripheral constituency. When India's tech capital moves, the industry pays attention.

The most immediate challenge facing the Karnataka government is one of implementation. The announcement established intent; it did not establish mechanism. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah acknowledged as much, telling reporters after the speech: "We will formulate a programme for that. Once the programme is finalised, we will inform you."

Age verification is the central technical and practical problem. Any system that attempts to restrict platform access to under-16s must be able to verify a user's age reliably. The options currently available - submission of government identity documents, AI-based facial age detection, parental consent mechanisms - each carry significant vulnerabilities. In India, where falsified or borrowed identity documents are not uncommon, age verification systems face circumvention at scale. Children routinely access social media through parents' accounts. Parental consent mechanisms, if adopted, may effectively transfer the ban's enforcement to households with varying levels of digital literacy and supervision.

Digital rights advocates have raised a further concern that deserves serious attention. Age verification infrastructure, once built, creates a surveillance architecture that extends well beyond its stated purpose. Removing anonymity from the internet - which effective age verification requires - creates risks for journalists, activists, and whistleblowers who depend on pseudonymous access. The Internet Freedom Foundation has also warned of a gendered enforcement risk specific to India: in conservative households and communities, a state-mandated ban could be repurposed to justify denying girls access to digital platforms altogether, deepening a digital gender divide that is already a serious obstacle to women's economic participation.

Beyond enforcement, Karnataka faces a constitutional question that may prove more fundamental: does a state government have the legal authority to impose binding restrictions on global platforms?

The short answer from legal experts is: probably not, at least not without central government support. Internet governance in India falls under Union jurisdiction. A state can articulate a policy objective and introduce measures within its own administrative domain — in schools, for example — but a platform-facing ban that requires Meta, Google, or Snap to enforce age restrictions would require legislative authority that currently resides with Parliament, not state assemblies. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 contains relevant provisions on children's data and parental consent, but it does not grant states the power to compel platforms to restrict access on age grounds. As legal experts have noted, Karnataka may face a jurisdictional barrier that forces the issue upward to the central government — which has so far remained silent.

The critique of the Karnataka announcement from technology policy researchers and digital rights advocates is not that the underlying concern is wrong - it clearly is not. It is that a blunt prohibition, announced without consultation with technology companies or civil society, without accompanying legislation, and without a credible enforcement mechanism, may generate headlines without generating outcomes.

The alternative argument, advanced by organisations including the Internet Freedom Foundation and technology policy think tanks, is that effective child protection online requires a layered approach: mandatory digital literacy programmes embedded in school curricula from an early age; robust parental control tools that are accessible and genuinely usable; time-limit systems built into platforms by regulatory requirement; transparent algorithmic accountability; and a legal framework that holds platforms liable for harms caused by design features specifically engineered to maximise adolescent engagement.

These measures are harder to announce in a budget speech. They require sustained regulatory effort, central-state coordination, and the kind of detailed negotiation with global technology companies that a single sentence in an assembly cannot accomplish. But they are also more likely to work - and less likely to produce the unintended consequences, from privacy violations to deepened digital inequality, that a blunt ban risks.

Karnataka's announcement has already produced one tangible outcome: it has forced a national conversation that was long overdue. Andhra Pradesh has announced its own restriction. Goa is watching closely. And the central government, which has remained conspicuously silent, will find it increasingly difficult to avoid the question as more states signal their intent to act.

The stakes are significant. India is home to hundreds of millions of young people, many of them among the world's heaviest social media users. The harms associated with unregulated adolescent social media use are real, well-documented, and growing. The Karnataka government is right to treat this as a priority. The question is not whether to act - it is how to act in a way that is legally sustainable, practically enforceable, rights-respecting, and genuinely effective.

A ban announced without a law, an enforcement mechanism, or a consultation is a statement of intent, not a policy. Karnataka has opened the door. What walks through it - serious, evidence-based digital governance, or a well-meaning announcement that fades into implementation difficulty - will say a great deal about whether India's political class is ready to lead on one of the defining social challenges of the digital age.

(The writer is a director-Mrikal (AI/Data Center) and a young alumni member, Government Liaison Task Force, IIT Kharagpur.)

Unintended consequences of regulation

SHREY MADAAN

A three-hour deadline can reshape the internet. Under India's new AI rules, platforms must remove flagged content almost immediately or risk losing legal protection. The goal is to combat deepfakes and synthetic generative information (SGIs). The risk is creating a system where deletion becomes the safest response, even when speech is lawful.

The concern driving these rules is real. Generative AI has made it easier to manipulate images, clone voices and fabricate speeches at scale. Impersonation, fraud, and non-consensual imagery demand firm enforcement. Clear labelling of AI-generated content can also serve as a reasonable transparency measure.

But regulation is defined not just by its intent, but by its incentives. The new framework reduces the takedown window from thirty-six hours to just three hours. When safe harbour protections hinge on speed, platforms will prioritise compliance over deliberation. Remove first, assess later. In heated political climates, complaints can be weaponised. Satire or criticism may disappear not due to illegality, but due to liability. [1] [2]

That incentive structure matters. An internet governed by accelerated liability risks is becoming an internet governed by defensive moderation. The rules also introduce mandatory technical markers, effectively embedding traceability into AI-generated files.

While metadata may help investigators trace criminal misuse, universal traceability requirements expand oversight beyond clearly defined harms. Infrastructure built for accountability can quickly become infrastructure for monitoring.

There is also a competitive consequence. Large global platforms can absorb compliance costs, automated detection systems, rapid response teams, and metadata authentication tools. Smaller Indian startups may struggle. A rigid regulatory structure often favours incumbents and erects entry barriers, reducing competition in the name of safety.

Other jurisdictions offer contrast. In the United States[3] [4] [5] , Section 230's safe-harbour framework protects platforms from liability for user-generated content while enabling them to remove illegal content in good faith. It preserves free speech while enforcing accountability, instead of promoting pre-emptive censorship. Speed is not treated as a substitute for safeguards.

India's digital ecosystem has thrived when policy struck the right balance. In telecom and digital payments, predictable rules and competitive neutrality unlocked innovation. AI governance should follow the same logic: clear disclosure rules, strong action against fraud and impersonation, protection of safe harbour, and due process before content disappears.

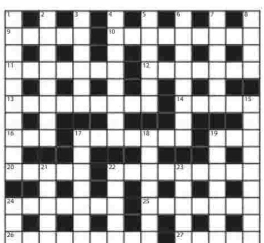
A safer internet is a legitimate goal. But safety achieved through constant acceleration comes at a cost.

If platforms respond to every complaint with immediate removal to protect themselves, the result will not be greater trust. There will be narrower debate, higher compliance barriers, and fewer entrants willing to innovate in India's digital space.

The real challenge is not whether to regulate AI. It is whether India can do so without replacing one risk, misinformation, with another: a digital environment shaped by liability-driven caution rather than considered judgment.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

Crossword | No. 293401



Yesterday's Solution

ACROSS

9 Collection of pictures almost entirely of poor quality (5)
10 Calling out pioneering woman about career? Not acceptable (9)
11 One newly in power backing criticism applied to location mostly (7)
12 Compelling work in the transport domain (7)
13 Shortcoming not initially visible in reproduction (9)
14 Hard for us for some time (5)
16 Pointer regularly indicating early afternoon? (3)
17 Terrain to have an effect on railway (7)
19 Computer peripheral with no second function (3)
20 Yorkshire town certainly backed retaining pound (5)
22 Attack dislodged tons, stifling scream? (9)
24 Half of US women`s college close to missing American Hollywood star (7)
25 Rector in church almost put off for ages? (7)
26 Timepiece always keeping hour? How`s it going? (4,5)
27 A chore, endless, capturing latitude – in this? (5)

DOWN

1 A Hindi soup cooked in the style of potato dish (10)
2 Mug in musical kept up being unsuccessful (8)
3 Simple creature, European, amongst crowd accepted by drivers club (6)
4 Happen a story in universities will identify motor museum (8)
5 Information about earlier shining (6)
6 Has girly twirls using bright colours (8)
7 One in distance beginning to upset environment (6)
8 Arctic explorer who`s lost in ice formation (4)
15 Picks items out, showing doubt in LA (10)
17 Uproar over medicines dropping temperature? Temperature well dropped in this (8)
18 Eccentric person following big game producing visual chart (4,4)
19 You are texting cautiously – or otherwise? (8)
21 No expert bet – lots of people going short (6)
22 Irish writer working to consume cheese (6)
23 At sea? Runs up to see location after sea-voyage, perhaps (6)
24 Book with a weak line making you cry (4)

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

100 Years Ago

Front page of The Statesman dated 12 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

ONCE more comes proof, in the report of the Bihar Government sum-marized elsewhere, that local administration is not so attractive as provincial or imperial politics. The municipal record for last year is de-pressing. Objection to paying taxes is the general explanation, but all men have that, and authority has to overcome it. Party faction is another impediment, but this is known in towns and villages everywhere, and authority has to see that it is kept within bounds. Patna, the very centre of things, seems to be the worst offender. The Chairman met the same resistance to his attempts to restore financial order as all the Finance Ministers have met in France, and the special attentions of Government have not yet brought the Commissioners to a sense of responsibility. The roads, we are told, are deplorable, and the sanitary defects scandalous. This sort of neglect is paid for in human lives. The question most people will feel inclined to ask is, why do men put themselves to trouble to secure election if they are not anxious to carry out the duties which they assume?

News Items

DARTMOOR FIRE

DAMAGE TO PRINCE OF WALES' STABLES

(Special Cable.)

LONDON, MAR.

CONSIDERABLE damage has been done to the Prince of Wales' stables near Princetown by fire this morning. Police employees and the Fire Brigade from Dartmoor assisted in extinguishing the outbreak. All the Prince's, horses have been rescued.—Copyright.

"NO SETTLEMENT POSSIBLE"

MR. V. HARTSHORN AND THE REPORT

(From Our Correspondent.)

LONDON, MAR.

"The report does nothing but make the blackness more intense," was the opinion expressed by Mr. Vernon Hartshorn, President of the South Wales Miners' Federation and the ex-Postmaster-General, on hearing of the findings of the Coal Commission.

Mr. Hartshorn added that they had reached a stage where nothing but deadlock could ensue. "A settlement on the basis of this report," he went on to say, "is impossible. It will be the greatest surprise of my life if the Miners' Federation waste five minutes in discussing it either with the coal-owners or the Government. I shall use all my efforts to prevent even a discussion on the proposals."—Copyright.

COAL COMMISSION'S PROPOSALS

NO STATE CONTROL

Proposals for the re-organization of the British mining industry are contained in the report, issued yesterday, of the Royal Commission on the Mining Industry, under the chairmanship of Sir Herbert Samuel.

Nationalization as a solution to the miners' troubles is rejected, but the Commission advocate State ownership of minerals, including unproved coal.

A closer connexion between the mining and allied industries, coal utilization research, with State aid, and better sales and transport organization methods are recommended.

No increase in wages or hours is proposed, but profit-sharing schemes and family allowances are suggested. The national wage agreement should continue.

The Commissioners add that the subsidy should cease at the end of its authorized term and should never be repeated.

All eyes on Tamil Nadu as polls draw near

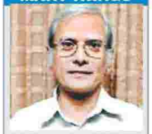
SURVEYS have started making their entry into the political scenario at Chennai, ahead of the impending announcement of Legislative Assembly election dates. Parawheel, which calls itself India's first ground-up public intelligence platform, has come up with predictions that indicate that actor Vijay helmed Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) is poised to emerge as the deciding party with 13.6 per cent vote share even as the two major Dravidian parties DMK and AIADMK and their allies are set to retain a sizeable share of their loyal followers, with the former's alliance expected to return to power as per current trends. While the present ruling party DMK and its 21-member alliance is expected to bag 41.5 per cent vote share, the AIADMK, which has the BJP as its ally, is estimated to get 36.2 per cent. This after the political atmosphere was peaking with DMK initially refusing to play ball with the Congress and its flip-flop attitude, before settling the alliance anxieties by conceding more than what it did in the 2021 election.

Reports had mentioned how DMK has given 28 Assembly seats to Congress, three more than what it had over five years ago apart from a Rajya Sabha seat nomination. In a long time, the Congress had not bargained so hard and consistently for two of its key demands – more seats for the ensuing polls and the other contentious one – power-sharing if the alliance triumphs at the hustings. Their flirting with the TVK was enough to cause heartburn among DMK veterans, who were aghast at how the Congress chief was firing on all cylinders and not making any attempts to couch it in political doublespeak, even once. While the margin between the two leading alliances does not give much comfort to the ruling party, its leaders like Chief Minister M K Stalin and his team, are hopeful of the tide shifting in their favour once the dates are announced. Yet the first-timer Vijay whose popularity has never been in question as a film star and managing to corner a likely double-digit voting percentage can cause concern owing to the damage it can inflict when the contests are close and fierce in key constituencies, which is likely.

With the BJP focusing heavily on the Dravidian state politics and the high-power campaign from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the other leading party leaders once again exhibiting the party's desperation to have a slice of the power pie, 2026 is likely to see the Dravidian model governance severely tested against the incessant tirade of corruption, violence and terrible law and order situation in the State launched by the Opposition parties. The southern part of the country is still an enigma wrapped in a mystery for the saffron outfits, and they would want it to be decoded at least partially this time even as neighbouring Kerala poses a new set of challenges for the NDA alliance.

India must invest heavily in R&D to be in the reckoning

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

IN keeping with the tradition that was set rolling in 1987, India celebrated the National Science Day, commemorating the Nobel-winning light discovery by C V Raman, on February 28. The day has emerged as a national festival. A bigger tribute comes courtesy of UNESCO, which has declared that 2028 will be observed as the "International Year of Raman Spectroscopy".

Meanwhile, every November 10 is celebrated as the 'World Science Day for Peace and Development', to highlight the crucial role of science in society and promote sustainable development. In India, the theme for 2026 is 'Women in Science: Catalysing Viksit Bharat'.

Science has grown from the natural philosophy based on deductive reasoning of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle through the empirical experimental methods of the scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries, by pioneers such as Bacon, De Cartes, and Galileo, to what it is today. British philosopher Sir Francis Bacon propounded the steps-experiment, observation and inference-as the foundation of the scientific method.

Scientific research has largely flourished due to the support and assistance received from rulers. Fortunately extending patronage to cutting-edge scientific research, inventions and discoveries has remained high on the agendas of governments, across countries.

The flipside of the matter presents an interesting picture, as perceived by experts. The first is whether as much energy, effort and support are going into the cause of supporting R&D, given the needs of the country, on the part of governments, the corporate sector, scientific community and academic institutions. The second is the extent to which such results, as the scientific community is able to generate, are finding adequate and productive application in the national effort aimed at rapid growth and sustainable development of the socio-economic fabric of the nation. On both counts, however, it is regrettable that all efforts made so far leave much to be desired.

And that continues to be the situation, although several efforts have been made in the past such as the Lab to Land programme launched in 1979 by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) to transfer proven technologies to the fields of small and marginal farmers. Transferring technology from academic research to commercial application using licensing, startups, and patenting to bridge the gap between the laboratory and the industry is another effort promoted by the National Research Development Corporation (NRDC) and other key factors such as the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institute of Science.

For one thing, India has a long way to go before the desired level of two per cent of the GDP goes into promotion of R&D from the present 0.6 per cent. As a result, the remarkable ability of the community of Indian scientists, to apply their skill and talent to discovering solutions for the pressing problems of the country, is largely underexploited. What is even more distressing is that even the corporate sector has shown far less than the desirable levels of interest in developing R&D.

The country has a long way to go before the desired level of two per cent of the GDP goes into promotion of R&D from the present 0.6 per cent. As a result, the remarkable ability of the community of Indian scientists to apply their skill and talent to discovering solutions for the pressing problems of the country is largely underexploited. What is even more distressing is that even the corporate sector has shown far less than the desirable levels of interest in developing R&D

Therefore, while it is all very well to commemorate the memory of our great scientific legacy, and the towering personalities that dotted its history, the time has come for the Union and state governments to realise the enormous, and largely unutilised, potential of the R&D sector to develop new knowledge, techniques and technologies that can spur production and productivity and reduce costs, improve quality, diminish risks and respond to market signals apart from increasing Total Factor Productivity (TFP).

Needless to say, the support has to be directed into areas where there is potential that can have maximum impact, from the point of resolving problems of the neglected sectors, regions, and sections of society.

The question, as always, boils down to whether those inhabiting the corridors of power will appreciate the need to make a short list of options and address them in an acceptable order of priority. Things that can wait for better days like organising international sports events, or investing heavily in somewhat unproductive activities like statues and magnificent new buildings, should perhaps make way for more urgent issues like sale of children, honour killings, economic distress in the farming community leading to suicides and the country's somewhat fragile state of preparedness to combat terrorism, climate change and conflict and inequity.

Also, it is necessary to preserve, protect, validate and make contemporarily relevant use of the rich legacy of indigenous technical knowledge that has been inherited from ancient times.

As noted in a similar context in this column earlier, one only has to lie back and look at the big picture. Just imagine the world in which we live today without search engines and sources of knowledge, information, entertainment, and support like Google. It could not have come into being without the help of the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Department of Defence, in collaboration with the National Science Foundation and prior research undertaken in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The focus of future scientific research should, in other words, be made to stand on a tripod foundation of basic, applied and development research. Basic research, the variety that is also referred to as "blue sky" or fundamental research, is largely concerned with the acquisition of new knowledge which may or may not have direct application in the needs of society, including applied research and development research. In the situation in which India is in today the central and state governments will be well advised to accord the highest priority to applied research, particularly that part of it which addresses the most pressing challenges that figures among the priorities.

While on the subject of the priority accorded by governments to the R&D sector, I cannot help recalling the position which obtained in Israel when on a visit to that country in 1994.

The delegation led by Sharad Pawar, the then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, became the first official initiative of the government of India after 1948, and followed the resumption of diplomatic ties with Israel. As a Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, the country's commitment to research in the agriculture sector was of special interest during that visit. The Agriculture Research Organisation (ARO), a counterpart of ICAR, had set apart an overwhelming 97.5 per cent of its total budget entirely for conducting contractual research. Farmers would propose problems confronting them. Finding solutions to them was the primary task of the organisation. In a stark contrast, in India, even today, not even the remaining 12.5 per cent is earmarked to applied research aimed at coming to the rescue of the farming community.

The case being made out for increasing the country's spend on R&D is substantially strengthened by the fact that such an enhanced allocation correlates strongly with higher socio-economic progress, acting as a key driver for innovation, GDP enhancement, and improved living standards. A relationship whose veracity is brought out by the experience of countries, including South Korea and Israel, which lead the nations of the world in terms of the emphasis they lay upon R&D, setting apart as much as 6.8 per cent and 5.21 per cent, respectively, of their GDPs for that purpose. Handsome allocation is also made in countries such as Belgium, Greece, and Croatia.

One can see that India lags behind even those countries which still have a long way to go, in recognising the importance of R&D.

It is high time, in other words, for the country to get going in this direction.

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Adulterated milk spells death, can no longer be ignored

Dr M Suresh Babu

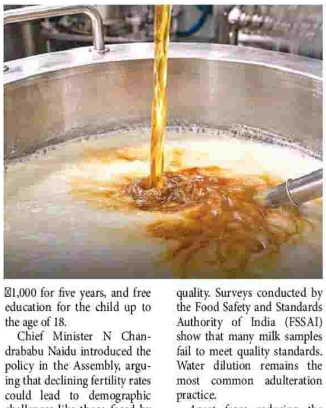
Contaminated water can introduce harmful substances like pesticides and heavy metals

FOOD safety is one of the most basic responsibilities of any government. When citizens cannot trust the milk that they drink or the ghee they consume, it raises serious questions about governance and the protection of public health. In India, recurring reports of milk adulteration and poor regulatory enforcement show that the system meant to ensure food safety remains far from adequate.

The situation in Andhra Pradesh highlights these systemic weaknesses. While the state has created food testing infrastructure on paper, the actual functional capacity remains limited. Across a population of nearly six crore people, only a handful of food analysts are available in government service. The state also depends heavily on the food testing laboratory at JNTU in Kakinada. This facility is expected to handle regulatory testing while also fulfilling academic responsibilities.

Instead of strengthening an independent regulatory system, the government has effectively transferred part of its food safety duties to an educational institution. As a result, sophisticated equipment often remains underutilized, and food samples must travel long distances before they can be tested. The consequences of such gaps became tragically evident in Rajamahendravaram, where more than a hundred families reportedly consumed adulterated milk supplied by a single vendor. Nine people died of acute renal failure and several others, including children, were hospitalised in critical condition. Even after the tragedy, authorities had to wait for toxicology reports from laboratories outside the state because local facilities lacked the capacity to immediately identify the contaminant. A system meant to prevent contamination instead responded only after lives were lost.

At a time when strengthening food safety infrastructure should be a priority, the AP government has instead focused on a Draft Population Management Policy. The proposed "Poshana–Shiksha–Suraksha" package seeks to raise the total fertility rate from 1.5 to 2.1 by offering incentives for families to have a third child. The policy proposes ₹25,000 at the time of delivery, monthly assistance of



₹1,000 for five years, and free education for the child up to the age of 18.

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu introduced the policy in the Assembly, arguing that declining fertility rates could lead to demographic challenges like those faced by Japan, Italy and South Korea. While long-term demographic planning is important, critics argue that immediate public health concerns such as food adulteration deserve far greater attention and resources.

National data also reveal troubling patterns in milk quality. Surveys conducted by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) show that many milk samples fail to meet quality standards. Water dilution remains the most common adulteration practice.

Apart from reducing the nutritional value of milk, contaminated water can introduce harmful substances including pesticides and heavy metals. Other substances found in milk samples include detergents, urea, starch, glucose, and formalin. These are sometimes used to increase the thickness of milk or extend its shelf life. However, they pose serious health risks. Medical research shows that such adulterants can cause gastrointestinal disorders, food poisoning, organ damage, and long-term health complications.

Earlier surveys had indicated that nearly 70 per cent of tested samples did not fully conform to quality standards, though not all were unsafe. A more comprehensive national survey conducted by FSSAI tested 6,432 samples across the country. The results showed that only a small number contained dangerous adulterants such as hydrogen peroxide, detergents, or urea. However, the survey also revealed that about 41 percent of samples failed to meet important quality parameters such as fat and Solid-Not-Fat (SNF) levels.

Another important concern was the presence of aflatoxin M1 residues in about 5.7 per cent of samples. These residues originate from contaminated cattle feed and represent a broader problem related to dairy farming practices and supply chain management.

The findings highlight an important distinction between milk safety and milk quality. While most milk may not contain dangerous levels of adulterants, many samples fall short of nutritional standards due to dilution, poor hygiene, and weak regulatory oversight.

Loose milk sold by informal vendors remains particularly vulnerable to adulteration compared with packaged milk from organized dairies. Urban markets also tend to show higher rates of non-compliance due to the pressure of high demand.

Milk is one of the most widely consumed foods in India, especially among children. Ensuring its safety and quality is therefore not merely a regulatory matter but a crucial public health obligation. Governments must invest in stronger food testing infrastructure, recruit adequate numbers of trained analysts, and enforce stricter monitoring across the dairy supply chain.

Until taken seriously, millions of consumers will continue to face an uncomfortable question every day: Is the milk they drink truly safe?

(The writer is President of Praja Science Vedika)

MEDLEY

LETTERS

Passive euthanasia has implications

IT is heart-wrenching that Harish Rana, who has been in coma for 13 years, has been permitted by the Supreme Court to withdraw life support and cause passive euthanasia. Ironically, one Aruna Shanbag, who was in coma for 40 years, was not allowed passive euthanasia by her family and well-wishers at a Mumbai Hospital. We cannot underestimate the evolving trends in medical advances. Medicine offered to those with the medical disorder DMD gave no hope of survival but now immunotherapy of AOC (Antibody Oligonucleotide Conjugate) raises survival hopes. Even treatment of terminal cancers has made great advances as regards longer remissions. Likewise, passive euthanasia may be put on hold for a longer period, provided there is dedicated support from the government and NGOs.

Dr T Ramadas, Visakhapatnam

Ensure digital discipline during exams

WITH reference to the article published in The Hans India on March 11 regarding rising digital stress among students during the board examination season, I would like to emphasise a growing concern that deserves immediate attention of parents, educators, and students. The survey findings clearly bring out how excessive screen time is affecting students' concentration, sleep patterns, and emotional well-being. Many teenagers tend to stay up late, log on to social media platforms, and be carried away by online distractions instead of focusing on their studies. As a result, they often fall behind in their preparation and experience additional stress during examinations. It is encouraging that several families are now trying to cut down on unnecessary screen usage by setting clear digital boundaries. Students too must take responsibility for their habits. Simple steps like planning a daily timetable, taking short breaks, revising regularly, and getting adequate sleep can help them stay focused and avoid digital distractions.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Focus on renewable energy infra

THE disruption in commercial LPG supply that is affecting eateries and small enterprises across cities reveals how vulnerable India's energy system remains to external shocks. It underscores India's structural dependence on imported fossil fuels. Had the country invested more decisively and consistently in renewable alternatives such as solar, wind and biogas earlier, the economy would not be so vulnerable to distant geopolitical disruptions. Decentralised biogas systems, rooftop solar power and other clean-energy solutions can provide reliable local substitutes for conventional cooking fuels. Going forward, the government must allocate greater budgetary support to renewable energy infrastructure and encourage households, institutions and small businesses to transition toward cleaner and locally available energy sources. These measures can ensure long-term energy security and resilience.

Vidyasagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanumakonda

Govt must update on fuel situation

THE shortage of LPG cylinders has severely impacted eateries across Hyderabad, Mumbai and Bengaluru. This crisis contradicts repeated government assurances of adequate supply. For millions of people—especially migrant workers, students, and bachelors—hotels and small restaurants are their primary source of daily meals, making cooking gas supply even more critical than petrol. When fuel shortages occur, public confidence in the government erodes quickly. Authorities must go beyond vague reassurances and provide transparent, daily updates on the actual fuel situation. Opposition blaming the government is not fair; instead, they should cooperate and avoid instigating public unrest.

Dr O Prasada Rao, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

Govt inks MoU for India's first research-driven policy manifesto

BENGALURU: The Department of Information Technology and Biotechnology has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Jupiter Meta, India's agentic consumer intelligence platform to launch a comprehensive, privacy-first research initiative. This partnership aims to future-proof the state's startup ecosystem by using Jupiter Meta's agentic intelligence platform, Hercules, to gather high-fidelity data from over 2,000 stakeholders.

Minister for Electronics, IT/BT and Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Priyank Kharge, announced on X (formerly known as Twitter) - "This research study will directly listen to founders, investors and students to capture their feedback - and will enable an evidence-led approach to refine our startup programmes and accelerate high-quality startup growth across Karnataka."

Under the Memorandum of Understanding, Karnataka's tech startup founders and venture capitalists are invited to directly participate in Karnataka's startup policy manifesto creation - through Jupiter Metals agentic consumer intelligence platform. Unlike traditional models, the initiative will gather real-time insights from founders and investors on critical policy areas, including funding access, regulatory frameworks, talent retention, and infrastructure needs.

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War shock strains energy lifeline

Disruptions in energy supplies and market volatility have signalled the first real impact of the Gulf war on India. Brent crude went above the $100-per-barrel mark last week. It softened later and is hovering around $90, but can top $100 any time. Continuing attacks on Iran, Tehran's retaliatory strikes on oil installations in the Gulf, the choke at the Strait of Hormuz, and statements by leaders, especially United States President Donald Trump, are extending the uncertainty. Oil and gas flow across the world has been disrupted. About a fifth of global LNG supplies moves through the Strait of Hormuz. India sources about 80% of its energy supplies from the world market. It imports half of its natural gas and over 60% of its LPG requirements from the Gulf region.

Amid risks of a supply crunch, the Union government assured that there would be no shortage. States such as Karnataka and Maharashtra have started experiencing an acute shortage of commercial LPG. Many hotels, restaurants, and roadside eateries have either suspended or curtailed operations. The livelihoods of many people, including caterers, workers, vendors, and delivery staff, are affected. An extended crisis may severely impact the hospitality industry. The government has already raised LPG prices, while panic is triggering overbooking and delivery delays. The price of automobile fuels may not be increased when elections are due in multiple states, but there will be a spurt in imported inflation.

LPG shortage and price pressures expose India's vulnerabilities and signal risks of a prolonged conflict

In response, the government has turned to new import sources and prioritised the production of LPG, the supply of piped natural gas for households, and CNG for transport. Fertiliser units are next in line and will receive 70% of their normal supplies, based on availability. These are followed by tea industries, manufacturing units, and other industrial consumers. The government has directed refineries to increase gas production and has set up an oversight committee to monitor the situation. By making it clear that the highest priority is meeting household energy needs, the government has tried to ensure that most people are insulated from the fallout, at least for now. The shortage of LPG, an essential commodity in most homes, will also have a political impact. By invoking the Essential Commodities Act, the government has made a statement of urgency. The scarcity in supplies may continue until the conflict eases. Without de-escalation, measures to address the supply bottlenecks will have limited impact. In this context, economical use will truly complement the increased production and damage control efforts.

Governor reshuffle and federal tensions

The latest round of gubernatorial transfers involving six states and two Union Territories centres on shifting Tamil Nadu Governor R N Ravi to West Bengal, replacing C V Ananda Bose, who resigned before completing his term. Kerala Governor Rajendra Arlekar will hold the additional charge in Tamil Nadu. Former diplomat Taranjit Singh Sandhu has replaced Vinai Kumar Saxena as the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi. Saxena will shift to Ladakh, where an ongoing agitation is pushing for greater regional autonomy and constitutional and economic safeguards.

The transfers in the two poll-bound states – Tamil Nadu and West Bengal – are significant on two counts. One: Ravi's recurring confrontations with the M K Stalin-led Tamil Nadu government strengthened the narrative that the Centre's engagement with the state violated federal principles. Two: In West Bengal, after a series of standoffs, Bose was seen as sharing warmer relations with Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The central government, through Ravi, one of the most disruptive governors, could be setting the tone for a face-off with Mamata. While it is unclear if the Centre has softened its approach to Tamil Nadu, it is likely to adopt a tougher stance on Mamata. Considering Ravi's tenure in Chennai, the new governor could be the man for the mission. In his previous role, Ravi delayed assent to bills passed by the state legislature, inviting strictures from the Supreme Court, and on multiple occasions, walked out of the State Assembly without delivering his special address to the House. He violated the constitutional mandate that should guide governors and acted like a political functionary, openly supporting the BJP's ideological line. Ravi's criticism of the Dravidian model of governance has only fed the argument that he was the Centre's political voice in the state. He persisted with his aggressive line despite judicial reprimands and severe criticism from civil society.

It is hard to miss the politics in R N Ravi's transfer to poll-bound West Bengal under a defiant Mamata

It is important that a governor with a record of overreach is being positioned in a state headed for a high-stakes Assembly election. A controversial Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls is on in West Bengal, which indicates that about 60 lakh voters may be excluded from the list. There is even talk about President's rule being imposed in the state ahead of the election. The Lok Bhavan will be integral to the varied possibilities, and Ravi, who has not been constrained by constitutionality or federal principles, may be a natural choice as its occupant.

WHAT THE WAR SAYS

Political choice framed as civilisational clash

Identity and culture are convenient rallying points that enable powerful actors to legitimise political conflict

K NANJARAJE URS

In 1993, political scientist Samuel Huntington published his seminal article in *Foreign Affairs*, later expanded into a 1996 book titled *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*. He argued that post-Cold War conflicts would pivot from economic ideological battles to cultural and religious fault lines, defining civilisations as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity." This thesis challenged his student Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" optimism, positing instead that liberal democracy's triumph would not usher in universal harmony but instead ignite primordial rivalries. Crucially, Huntington's framework was predictive, not merely descriptive, a distinction his critics too often collapse. Initially dismissed as reductionist, his ideas now demand re-evaluation in a world where civilisational narratives are no longer fringe rhetoric but statecraft.

Recent geopolitical tensions vividly illustrate this resurgence. The joint United States-Israeli strikes on Iran exemplify how rhetoric frames disputes as existential civilisational struggles. US officials have portrayed Iran not merely as an enemy state but as a theocratic antithesis to Western secularism. President Donald Trump has invoked Christian values to underscore this divide, declaring in speeches that "no one will be touching the cross of Christ under the Trump administration", pledging to defend "Judeo-Christian principles" against perceived threats, and most visibly, in a March 2026 Oval Office scene where evangelical pastors prayed that "wisdom from heaven to flood his heart" and "continued blessing and favour" upon him amid global challenges, fusing religious authority with executive power.

For Huntington, this would not be incidental symbolism but a deliberate civilisational signalling, transforming foreign policy into a form of eschatology. This framing elevates policy disagreements into struggles between Christian enlightenment and Islamic authoritarianism. Along with Israel, this would be the bulwark of Judeo-Christian heritage as in Eretz Yisrael, the biblical Promised Land where God's covenant with Abraham is held to anchor Jewish historical and spiritual claim to the territory. Huntington would reinforce this alliance as a civilisational front. As Edward Said warned presciently in 2001, such framing "misleads and confuses the mind" by collapsing diverse realities into monolithic blocs, manufacturing the very confrontations it claims to describe.

Iran's former President Mohammad Khatami offered the sharpest counter-vision. His 1998 Dialogue Among Civilisations, adopted by the United Nations as the theme for 2001, argued that "believing in dialogue paves the way for vivacious hope." In retrospect, Khatami's initiative was not mere idealism; it rested on the philosophical premise that civilisations are internally plural, historically porous, and incapable of monolithic agency. What Huntington treated

as fixed identities, Khatami exposed as dynamic negotiations. Yet in 2026, with US-Iran hostilities intensifying, this vision appears not just marginalised but structurally suppressed, crowded out by leaders like Marco Rubio, who at the Munich Security Conference decried migration as a "crisis destabilising societies all across the West," recasting economic anxieties as civilisational siege.

Critics expose deeper flaws in Huntington's architecture. Noam Chomsky argued it served as a post-Cold War "paradigm to control people," substituting Islam for communism as the organising enemy. Tomorrow, Hinduism could equally furnish the pretext for an external anti-India rhetoric, erasing the subcontinent's centuries of layered pluralism. Jonathan Fox's 2002 empirical analysis found civilisational conflicts constitute only a fraction of ethnic disputes, with intra-civilisational violence far more prevalent – this is a statistical rebuke to the thesis's predictive claims. Most incisively, Amartya Sen's *Identity and Violence* (2006) demonstrated that Huntington's singular civilisational categorisation is not merely oversimplified but dangerous: by reducing persons to one dominant identity, it actively generates the violence it purports to explain.

"The denial of an important liberty," Sen wrote, occurs whenever external frameworks override an individual's own negotiation of plural loyalties. This insight reframes the problem entirely; civilisational conflict is less an inevitable structural feature than a political choice, amplified by those who profit from polarisation.

Resisting the rhetoric

Deeper analysis reveals Huntington's prescience in the rhetoric's rise, yet his determinism falters against globalisation's counterforces. Transnational movements, climate activism, feminist solidarity, and digital subcultures routinely cut across his civilisational boundaries. Conflicts in Sudan or Myanmar, among 2026's gravest crises, are driven predominantly by resource competition and authoritarian consolidation, not theological difference. Even the Russia-Ukraine war, often mapped onto Orthodox versus Western fault lines, is better explained by Russia's centuries-old compulsion to secure its vast borders, a strategic anxiety exacerbated by NATO's eastward expansion. The civilisational label, applied post-hoc, obscures more than it illuminates, which may precisely be its political utility.

At the time of this article's submission, only 36% of Americans supported the war in Iran, and fewer still would likely accept that what is unfolding constitutes a civilisational struggle rather than a failure of diplomacy. Solutions lie in Khatami's dialogue, amplified through institutional architecture. Education must embed cultural literacy as a civic priority, dismantling the stereotypes that make civilisational rhetoric legible to mass audiences. International bodies must actively monitor and counter divisive narratives, channelling competition into shared frameworks, climate, pandemic response, and nuclear non-proliferation, where cooperation is structurally incentivised. As Khatami argued, "the information age is the age of dialogue," but dialogue requires institutional scaffolding, not merely goodwill.

Huntington's thesis illuminates identity's role in conflict while erring fatally on inevitability. The real danger is not that civilisations must clash; it is that enough powerful actors can make it appear they do. Philosopher Hannah Arendt's warning remains the sharper guide: the most dangerous condition for the common masses is one "where the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists." In that epistemic collapse, civilisational myths thrive. Resisting them demands not just dialogue, but the intellectual clarity to see past the narratives that powerful interests construct and dismantle them before they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

(The writer is a social scientist based in Australia)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Memories etched in foam

A familiar scent carries the mind back to the quiet luxuries of another time

S HARSHA

Sometimes, it takes the smallest of objects to unlock the deepest memories. Recently, when I bought a can of shaving foam, I expected nothing more than a routine addition to my bathroom shelf. But the moment I pressed the nozzle and watched the white foam rise into my palm, I found myself travelling back nearly 34 years – to a different time, a different life.

In an instant, I was no longer standing in my bathroom. I was a young man again, living in a modest middle-income home where every purchase was considered carefully and every expense measured. Imported products were rare luxuries – objects you saw more often in shop windows than in your home.

That was also the year my cousin, Poojitha Rao, then a student at the National Law School of India, travelled to Washington, DC, to participate in a moot court competition. For our family, the very idea felt remarkable. A young member of our family flying abroad to compete at an international stage filled us with pride.

She returned not just with stories of her journey but with something even more memorable in its quiet generosity. With the limited money she must have had as a student, she brought back small gifts for her cousins and family members. Among them were two cans of shaving foam – one for my cousin Ravi and one for me.

Today, such a gift may sound ordinary. But at that time, receiving shaving foam from the US felt almost grand. It was probably the first gift I had received as an adult. I remember examining the can closely – turning it over in my hands, reading the English labels, and admiring the sleek foreign design.

It was not merely shaving foam. It represented affection, thoughtfulness, and pride in being remembered. I used it sparingly, almost with reverence. That single can lasted for four years. Even an everyday routine felt slightly special.

Then, one day, Ravi – who is sadly no longer with us – mentioned that the foam irritated his skin. Without much fuss, he handed his can over to me. And just like that, the gift doubled.

His can lasted another two years or perhaps even longer. Two cans that had travelled across oceans because a young cousin thought of us while standing in a foreign land ended up giving me nearly six years of daily use. Life, of course, moved forward. Brands changed. Priorities shifted. People came and went. And now, after more than three decades, I happened to buy the same shaving foam again and began using it about a week ago. When I pressed the nozzle this time, the familiar scent rose gently in the air – and with it came a flood of memories. Poojitha's achievement. Ravi's quiet generosity. Our simple home. And the warmth of knowing that someone had thought of us from thousands of miles away.

A can of shaving foam isn't expected to carry much emotion. Yet, sometimes the smallest objects become vessels for the biggest memories. This new can may or may not last for four years. But the memory of the first one will last a lifetime.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Burden on households

Apropos 'Firewood, menu cut: Hotels' desperate steps amid gas woes' (Mar 11), the impact of the US-Israel-Iran conflict is being felt in India. LPG supply disruptions have led to price increases for domestic cylinders, straining household budgets. The hospitality sector is also affected, with hotels and restaurants reducing menu offerings or shutting down. Global crude price surges have raised aviation fuel costs, leading to higher ticket prices. The government should absorb part of the shock to avoid steep price hikes, which fuel inflation and worsen living costs.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Focus on the present

It is unfortunate to hear MPs debating expelling the Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla. Some parliamentarians have exceeded themselves with one-sided research, focusing on past events. The focus should be on recent actions and the reasons behind the move. Anyone watching parliamentary proceedings can see how the Speaker allowed certain things to happen, treated opposition leaders sternly, and suspended them.

Hemachandra Basappa, Bengaluru

Preventive education key

The recent Kanakapura Road accident highlights reckless driving among young people, putting lives at risk. A long-term solution lies in preventive education. Road safety, civic responsibility, and disciplined driving should be introduced in school curricula. Young people must understand the consequences of negligent driving before obtaining licences.

Aravind Murthy T S, Bengaluru

SPEAK OUT

There is no difference of opinion, no sadness. We are happy. We are contesting three seats under the DMK symbol and one under the symbol allotted to us (by the ECI).

Vaiko, MDMK Chief, after striking the seat-sharing deal with DMK

Compromise makes a good umbrella, but a poor roof.

James Russell Lowell

TO BE PRECISE

IN PERSPECTIVE

BJP's ascent through alliance

Bihar validates a tested BJP strategy – building on the base of regional partners to secure unilateral power

NILANJAN MUKHOPADHYAY

Often termed as the 'Phoenix of Indian Politics', Nitish Kumar – who took oath as Chief Minister of Bihar on November 20 – is unlikely to rise again. Since beating a hasty retreat in December 2023 into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) fold, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi as the unapologetic hegemon, Kumar's only dignified option seemed to be a graceful exit.

The Janata Dal (United) leader's departure from Patna's chief ministerial chamber, however, will not translate into a front-door entry of the BJP into the state's highest office. Instead, it remains a backdoor arrangement until the BJP musters the courage to seek the people's mandate on its own, and not step into the portals of power by clinging to the coattails of a formidable ally.

Unlike the BJP leaders of the NDA's first tenure under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the current leadership places little value on alliance partners. Coalitions are seen less as partnerships of principle and policy, and more as instruments of political power. From 2004 onwards, when the NDA formed the government in Bihar with Kumar as chief minister, the BJP accepted its role as junior partner to the JD(U), seeing it as a pathway to eventual dominance in the state.

Nitish Kumar is not the first ally that the BJP has used as a stepping stone to unilateral power, nor will he be the last. The fate of the Shiv Sena – first united, then the breakaway unit headed by Eknath Shinde – is well known. Likewise, is the destiny that has befallen the Janata Dal (Secular) in Karnataka, the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, and many would say, even the Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab.

In the Maharashtra Assembly polls, the BJP may not have explicitly projected Shinde as its electoral mascot, unlike in Bihar, where the mandate was sought in Nitish Kumar's name. Yet, while Kumar – mockingly dubbed *Paltu Ram* for his frequent political somersaults – and the JD(U) are facing marginalisation, Shinde's camp too seems destined for decline as Devendra Fadnavis consolidates his hold on Maharashtra.

Despite the insistent clamour that Nitish Kumar would serve a full term as chief minister, long stretches of silence accompanied the road to the eventual mandate. Questions remained unanswered, and even when Kumar did respond, his erratic public behaviour and ill-timed remarks only deepened uncertainty. The long tweet and reasoning for seeking a Rajya Sabha seat have found few takers. For the BJP, the challenge is not merely to find a credible replacement for Kumar but also to simultaneously ensure that the people do not rise in anger at the BJP's misleading campaign.

Kumar's alliance with the BJP was both paradoxical and opportunistic. He, however, retained a veneer of his Mandal political roots, while the BJP pushed its Kamandal politics. The extent to which this can be the sole guiding principle remains unknown. The BJP faces the daunting task of furthering Hindutva while not being seen as coarsely eroding the political balance of Bihar.

The dominant partner

Following the BJP's unexpected electoral majority in 2014, many argued that the coalition era had ended, and India was returning to single-party dominance. Despite this idea appearing premature after the BJP's loss of majority in 2024, it has staged a comeback. Under Modi, the BJP makes no bones about its intention within the polity, and also in the Sangh parivar. His decision to appoint a previously unknown face as party president underscores his determination to retain functional autonomy.

In contrast to the BJP's domineering presence within the ruling front, the Opposition remains multi-headed, with the Congress showing little intention of subsuming others, especially regional parties. Many would say this is because Congress lacks the capacity to reduce regional parties to the margins. Despite its inability to stage an electoral comeback, save in fits and starts, the Congress has resisted regional satraps' attempts to take pole position within the opposition bloc. It has paid with costly consequences – various leaders and parties broke ranks; Mamata Banerjee, for instance, and Nitish Kumar too. Because independent India's past demonstrates that democracy thrives when social and political majoritarian forces are kept at bay, the Congress has to decide on its immediate objective: pose a serious challenge jointly, or be content with a lonesome and inconsequential leadership.

Against this backdrop, Nitish Kumar's move to the Upper House sends troubling signals for the future of Indian politics.

(The writer is a journalist and author of Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times *and* The RSS: Icons of the Indian Right*)*

Vande Mataram and BJP's dilemma in Christian-majority states

DATELINE
Guwahati

SUMIR KARMAKAR

When *Vande Mataram* was played in the presence of Vice-President C P Radhakrishnan at the Nagaland University convocation on March 6, an unusual scene unfolded. Many students and research scholars at the central university neither stood up nor sang the national song—something that is usually observed as part of protocol.

Videos of the incident, which went viral on social media, came as a surprise for many. But the episode followed strong objections and protests in the Christian-dominated Nagaland. From MLAs to student bodies, many had already opposed the Centre's directive in January making it compulsory to sing all six stanzas of *Vande Mataram* in government events and in educational institutions. The directive, according to critics, infringes upon the religious faith and constitutional rights of the Nagas.

The Naga Students' Federation (NSF), an influential student body formed in October 1947, was quick to raise objections, saying the directive regarding *Vande Mataram* could hurt the sentiments of the Christian Nagas, as it carries "strong and undeniable religious connotations rooted in the worship of Hindu deities." The student body also stated that any attempt to enforce or institutionalise the recitation of such a song within the Nagaland Assembly or any public institutions in the Naga homeland directly violates the spirit and safeguards enshrined under Article 371 (A), which protects the unique religious and social practices of the Nagas.

The issue also raised a storm on the floor of the Assembly on March 5 when many MLAs, including the Naga People's Front (NPF), which leads the ruling alliance, objected to singing all six stanzas of *Vande Mataram*. This forced the Assembly to refer the matter to a Select Committee. The Bharatiya Janata Party is a major ally of the coalition government in Nagaland.

"The attempt to portray the song as purely secular and historical deliberately ignores the legitimate concerns raised by communities whose faith and cultural identity do not align with its religious imagery," NSF said while condemning BJP leader and minister Temjen Imna Along, who tried to defend the Centre's directive.

"In trying to endorse the Centre's move, he appears more concerned with pleasing his political bosses in Delhi than safeguarding the rights and sensitivities of the Naga people. No individual or political representatives have the mandate to dilute or compromise the hard-earned rights of the Naga people," it said. Nagaland has an 87% Christian population.

Special protection

Many in Nagaland believe that Nagas were never part of India, a sentiment that fuelled a violent movement after 1947. The decades-long Naga conflict has still remained unresolved, and this prompted the Centre over the years to offer various safeguards to win over the confidence of the communities in Nagaland.

Tribal-dominated states such as Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya enjoy safeguards under Article 371, and any central acts or directives need the endorsement of the state assembly for enforcement or implementation. Tribal-dominated areas in Assam and Tripura also enjoy some level of autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

Meghalaya and Mizoram, two other Christian-majority states in the Northeast, also witnessed similar objections. Adelbert Nongrum, an MLA of the opposition Voice of Peoples Party, said he was not against the practice of singing the first two stanzas but considers the Centre's directive to make all six stanzas compulsory as an "imposition and infringement" on the freedom of religion. "As a Christian, I would like to quote the first of the Ten Commandments."

The missing consent

From the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) to the demand for a ban on beef by many BJP leaders and now the directive regarding *Vande Mataram*, the BJP-led Narendra Modi government has faced backlash in the Northeast, particularly in the Christian-majority Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, and also in areas under the autonomous councils set up under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The CAA seeks to offer Indian citizenship to non-Muslim "persecuted" migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan till 2014. Strong protests, sometimes violent, against the CAA finally forced the Centre to exempt these areas from the purview of the Act, while the Inner Line Permit System—travel permits for outsiders—was introduced in Manipur in 2020. It already exists in Nagaland, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh.

Mizo Zirlai Pwal (MZP), an influential students' body in Mizoram, questioned why such a decision was taken without discussion with communities practising diverse religions and customs. "The Centre should reconsider and respect India's secular status and address this urgently, ensuring that no community is forced to compromise on their faith," it said.

"The educational institutions should remain spaces dedicated to learning and not be used to impose cultural or political mandates. Without proper deliberation and discussion, nothing should be forced upon schools or colleges," the body added.

DHNS

Before the attack, President Trump downplayed the risks to the energy markets as a short-term concern that should not overshadow the mission to decapitate the Iranian regime

MARK MAZZETTI, TYLER PAGER AND EDWARD WONG

DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Hormuz crisis exposes gaps in Trump's Iran war plan

On February 18, as US President Donald Trump weighed whether to launch military attacks on Iran, Chris Wright, the energy secretary, told an interviewer he was not concerned that the looming war might disrupt oil supplies in the Middle East and wreak havoc in energy markets.

Even during the Israeli and US strikes against Iran last June, Wright said, there had been little disruption in the markets. "Oil prices blipped up and then went back down," he said. Some of Trump's other advisers shared similar views in private, dismissing warnings that — the second time around — Iran might wage economic warfare by closing shipping lanes carrying roughly 20% of the world's oil supply.

The extent of that miscalculation was laid bare in recent days, as Iran threatened to fire at commercial oil tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic choke point through which all ships must pass on their way out of the Persian Gulf. In response to the Iranian threats, commercial shipping has come to a standstill in the Gulf, oil prices have spiked, and the Trump administration has scrambled to find ways to tamp down an economic crisis that has triggered higher gasoline prices for Americans.

The episode is emblematic of how much Trump and his advisers misjudged how Iran would respond to a conflict that the government in Tehran, Iran's capital, sees as an existential threat. Iran has responded far more aggressively than it did during last June's 12-day war, firing barrages of missiles and drones at US military bases, cities in Arab nations across west Asia, and on Israeli population centres.

US officials have had to adjust plans on the fly, from hastily ordering the evacuation of embassies to developing policy proposals to reduce gas prices.

After Trump administration officials gave a closed-door briefing to lawmakers on Tuesday, Democrat Senator Christopher S Murphy said on social media that the administration had "NO PLAN" for the Strait of Hormuz and did "not know how to get it safely back open."

Inside the administration, some officials are growing pessimistic about the lack of a clear strategy to finish the war. But they have been careful not to express that directly to the president, who has repeatedly declared that the military operation is a complete success.

Trump has laid out maximalist goals such as insisting that Iran name a leader who will submit to him, while Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth have described narrower and more tactical objectives that could provide an off-ramp in the near term.

Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said the administration "had a strong game plan" before the war broke out, and vowed that oil prices would drop after it ended.

"The purposeful disruption in the oil market by the Iranian regime is short term, and necessary for the long-term gain of wiping out these terrorists and the threat they pose to America and the world," she said in a statement.

This article is based on interviews with a dozen US officials, who asked for anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Hegseth acknowledged Tuesday that Iran's ferocious response against its neighbours caught the Pentagon somewhat off guard. But he insisted that Iran's actions were backfiring.

Trump has displayed growing frustration over how the war is disrupting the oil supply, telling *Fox News* that oil tanker crews should "show some guts" and sail through the Strait of Hormuz.

Some military advisers did warn before the war that Iran could launch an aggressive campaign in response, and would view the US-Israeli attack as a threat to its existence. But other advisers remained confident that killing Iran's senior leadership would lead to more pragmatic leaders taking over who might bring an end to the war.

When Trump was briefed about risks that oil prices could rise in the event of war, he acknowledged the possibility but downplayed it as a short-term concern that should not overshadow the mission to decapitate the Iranian regime. He directed Wright and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to work on developing options for a potential spike in prices.

But the president did not speak publicly about these options — including political risk insurance backed by the US government, and the potential of US Navy escorts — until more than 48 hours after the conflict started. The escorts have not yet taken place.

As the conflict has roiled global markets, Republicans in Washington have grown concerned about rising oil prices damaging their efforts to sell an economic agenda to voters ahead of the midterm elections.

Trump, both publicly and privately, has been arguing that Venezuelan oil could help solve any shocks coming from the Iran war. The administration announced Tuesday a new refinery in Texas that officials said could help increase oil supply, ensuring that Iran does not cause any long-term damage to oil markets.

The confidence that White House officials had that the shipping lanes could stay open is surprising given that Trump authorised a military campaign last year against the Houthis, a Yemeni group backed by Iran, that had used missile and drone attacks to bring maritime commerce in the Red Sea to a halt.

In a social media post last March announcing he had authorised military strikes against the Houthis, Trump said that the attacks had cost the global economy billions of dollars, and that "no terrorist force will stop American commercial and naval vessels from freely sailing the Waterways of the World."

But since the start of the war in Iran, Trump has not offered a consistent message. In private, his aides have said they feel frustration over his lack of discipline in communicating the objectives of the military campaign to the public.

Trump has said both that the war could go on for more than month and that it was "very complete, pretty much." He also said the United States would "go forward more determined than ever."

Rubio and Hegseth, however, appear to have coordinated their messaging for now on three discrete goals that they began laying out in public remarks Monday and Tuesday.

"The goals of this mission are clear," Rubio said at a State Department event on Monday before Trump held his own news conference. "It is to destroy the ability of this regime to launch missiles, both by destroying their missiles and their launchers; destroy the factories that make these missiles; and destroy their navy."

The State Department even laid out the three goals in bullet-point fashion, and highlighted a video clip of Rubio stating them on an official social media account.

The presentation by Rubio, who is also the White House national security adviser, appeared to be setting the stage for the president to bring an end to the war sooner rather than later. In his news conference, Trump boasted of how the US military had already destroyed Iran's ballistic missile capability and its navy. But he also warned of even more aggressive action if Iranian leaders tried to cut off the world's energy supply.

Matthew Pottinger, who was a deputy national security adviser in the first Trump administration, said in an interview that Trump had indicated he could decide to pursue ambitious war goals that would take weeks at least.

"In his press conference, I could hear him circling back to a rationale for fighting a bit longer given that the regime is still signalling it won't be deterred and is still trying to control the Strait of Hormuz," said Pottinger, now chair of the China program at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies, a group that advocates a close US partnership with Israel and confrontation with Iran.

The New York Times

A budget of schemes, not outcomes

PRAKASH NEDUNGADI

Budget speeches should not merely list expenditures and schemes, punctuated with slogans and quotations. For a state like Karnataka—whose economy is larger than that of many countries—citizens expect something more: a clear vision, a strategy for growth, and measurable outcomes for the taxpayer's money.

Unfortunately, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's budget for 2026–27 offers little of that. Instead, it reads largely as a catalogue of activities: "This sector is important; we will spend this much." What is missing is accountability. What will actually change because of this spending?

Across sectors—agriculture, education, healthcare, infrastructure, and industry—the budget repeatedly lists schemes and allocations but rarely explains the outcomes they are meant to deliver. That absence of measurable goals is the single biggest weakness of the budget.

Take agriculture. The government promises micro-irrigation and farm machinery support for lakhs of farmers and announces dozens of irrigation works. But what will this achieve? How much will agricultural productivity rise? How many additional hectares will be irrigated? How much will farmer incomes improve? Without such targets, it becomes impossible to judge whether public spending is delivering results.

The same pattern appears in animal husbandry. The budget proposes upgrading 15 veterinary hospitals into polyclinics at a cost of Rs 10 crore. But what difference will this upgrade make for livestock productivity or farmer incomes? And when Karnataka has more than 230 taluks, upgrading just a handful of facilities will hardly change the state-wide picture.

Education policy shows a similar lack of clarity. The government proposes converting 800 government schools into Karnataka Public Schools with an expenditure of Rs 3,900 crore over three years. Yet the budget does not explain what improvement in learning outcomes this investment will deliver.

Similarly, Rs 841 crore has been allocated to prepare 26,821 students for competitive examinations. That works out to more than Rs 3 lakh per student. While any spending on building a better future for children is welcome, the result this spending is expected to produce should also be spelt out.

In Delhi, when the Aam Aadmi Party government undertook a transformation of government schools, the goal was clear: improve learning outcomes. Within a decade, government school results improved so much that CBSE pass percentages were higher than many private schools, and thousands of students entered top universities and professional institutions.

The real challenge is not merely spending money but improving outcomes and holding the system accountable for results.

Some announcements in the budget also raise serious questions about policy thinking. For instance, 31 crore has been allocated to upgrade "girls' infrastructure" in 31 colleges where girls' enrolment exceeds 50 per cent. But what about colleges where girls' enrolment is lower? Shouldn't adequate infrastructure for girls be available in every institution?

The budget also raises concerns about efficiency in public spending. The government proposes constructing a 450-bed hospital in Karwar at a cost of Rs 198 crore — roughly Rs 44 lakh per bed. In Delhi, world-class government hospitals have been built at around Rs 20 lakh per bed, less than half that cost.

Similarly, the state proposes to spend about Rs 17,000–18,000 crore on the controversial 17-kilometre north–south tunnel road in Bengaluru — nearly Rs 1,000 crore per kilometre. Metro rail infrastructure, by contrast, typically costs about Rs 700–750 crore per kilometre and serves far larger numbers of commuters. When resources are limited, expanding mass transit may be a far more sensible priority than expensive tunnel projects.

More worrying is the lack of focus on employment. The budget highlights Rs 30,000 crore of private investment in the Dharwad node of the Mumbai–Bengaluru Industrial Corridor, expected to generate about 75,000 jobs. That implies roughly Rs 40 lakh of investment for each job created.

Karnataka urgently needs job-creating sectors that absorb large numbers of young workers. Export-oriented apparel parks, toy manufacturing clusters and tourism could generate employment at scale. Yet these sectors receive little strategic attention in the budget.

Karnataka's tourism potential alone could generate many times the income it does today if the state invested systematically in airports, hospitality infrastructure, destination development and global marketing.

A state budget should answer a simple question: what do we want to have achieved by next year (and then five or ten years from now) from the decisions we take today?

On that fundamental question, this budget remains silent.

(The writer is the treasurer, AAP Karnataka)

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: MARCH 1976

MPs rap Kissinger for remarks on nuclear policy

New Delhi, March 11
Two members of the Lok Sabha today took strong exception to U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's comment on India's nuclear policy at a recent question answer session in Wyoming University. External Affairs Minister Y. B. Chavan shared the members' feelings, but did not wish to comment on the propriety of Dr. Kissinger making a reference to India. He disagreed with a suggestion that India send a formal protest note. India's stated policy on nuclear explosion for peaceful purposes was "very well known", he said.

25 YEARS AGO: MARCH 2001

Gopichand lifts All England Open badminton trophy

Birmingham, March 11
Pullela Gopichand won the 2001 Yonex All England Open badminton Championships in fine style today, beating Chen Hong of China 15-12, 15-6 in the final. He became only the second Indian to win this tournament after Prakash Padukone won in 1980. There were scenes of jubilation among Indian supporters at the National Indoor Arena in Birmingham when the final came to an exciting finish. "Winning the All England Open is the dream of all badminton players. I am very happy," he told *DH* after the historic triumph.

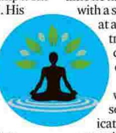
OASIS | KANDASWAMY GNANAMURTHY

Stress is no excuse to hurt others

People readily consult doctors for physical ailments, but are far more hesitant when it comes to psychological distress. There are many mild cases where a person is aware that something in their behaviour has changed--changes that affect not only themselves but also those close to them.

Several years ago, a junior colleague developed a curious compulsion to wash his hands repeatedly. After receiving the change from a bus conductor, for example, he would feel the urge wash both his hands and the coins.

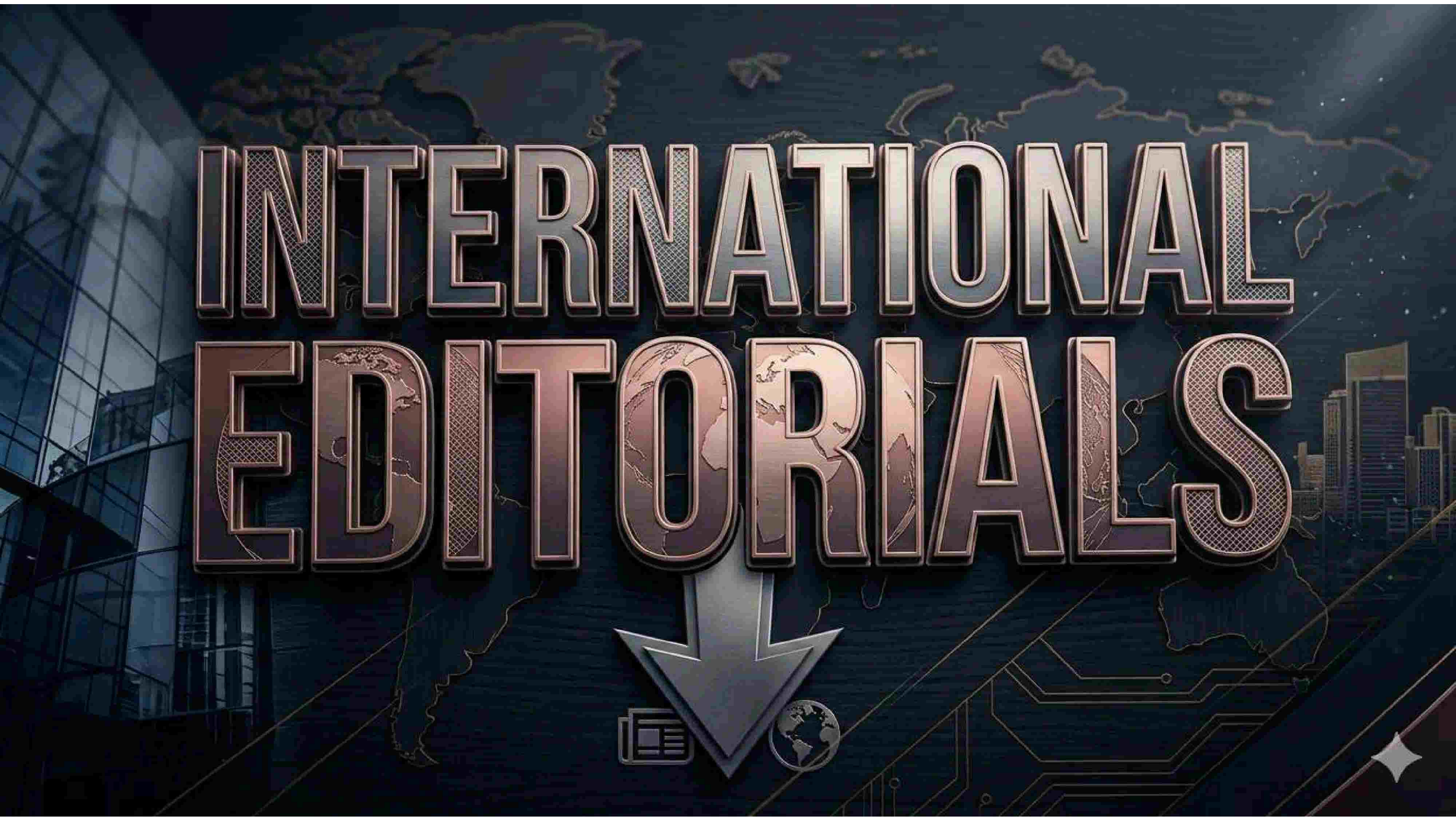
There were endless trips to the washbasin--after shaking hands with colleagues or even after receiving papers from the office assistant. His trouser pockets were often damp from wet hand kerchiefs he carried. His hands had grown pale from excessive washing with soap. While we took all this in our stride, his wife found it increasingly distressing and called me one day in despair.



At the time, a well-known psychologist was teaching behavioural sciences in my evening classes, and I referred my colleague to him. The rest, as they say, was history. After a few sessions, my colleague began to open up about his anxieties and uncovered the source of his fear. For a long time he had repeatedly seen a person with a severe skin condition sitting at a street corner. The sight had triggered an intense fear of contamination that slowly developed into a phobia.

Once the source of anxiety was recognised and with some gentle therapy and medication, he gradually returned to normal life. What a relief it was to his wife, to all of us and most of all to him. For some reason, I have long been drawn to writings on psychoanalysis – the works of Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung, and later the remarkable life story of John Nash, who lived years with paranoid schizophrenia.

Perhaps the most compassionate thing we can do is to ensure those around us seek help before distress grows overwhelming. If someone close to us shows signs of persistent anxiety, phobia or compulsive behaviour, it is important to gently encourage them to consult a counsellor or mental health professional. Equally, if a person senses early on that their behaviour is troubling them or causing distress to those around them, it takes courage—but also responsibility—to seek professional guidance in time.


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

مَن كانَ ذا مالٍ كَثيرٍ ولَمْ
يقنعْ فذاكَ المُوسِرُ المُعْسِرُ
(محمود الورّاق)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

He who possesses great wealth yet remains unsatisfied, that is the rich man who is truly poor.

Mahmoud Al-Warraq
(Abbasid-era poet)

Opinion

No regime change, no exit: The Iran war's reckoning

OSAMA AL-SHARIF

Almost two weeks after the US and Israel launched what they described as a preemptive strike against Iran — with the stated objective of regime change — the odds that this goal will be achieved anytime soon appear as remote as they did on Day 1. Yet as both sides dig in, trading blows in an increasingly senseless war of attrition, there are signs that President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are quietly backing away from that stated objective.

On Monday, Trump said America's goals may be "pretty well complete" and that the war could end soon. But later that same day, Trump told reporters that the US would continue striking Iran to destroy its ballistic missile capabilities. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the newly designated supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, implying he wanted a say in who leads Iran next. Earlier, Trump had indicated that any decision to end the war would be made mutually by himself and Netanyahu.

Iran's response was swift and unequivocal. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps declared that only Iran would determine when the war ends. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said diplomacy was no longer an option. IRGC forces continued firing missiles and drones at Israel and neighboring Gulf states.

By Tuesday, Trump's advisers were reportedly urging him to devise an exit strategy — to end a war that remains deeply unpopular with the American public and is increasingly threatening Republican prospects in the November midterm elections. Some analysts believe Trump may declare victory, claiming the US has crippled Iran's military and eliminated key figures in its leadership. But it is far from clear how Tehran would respond to such a gambit, particularly as Iran appears intent on raising the stakes and setting its own conditions for ending hostilities.

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In hindsight, Trump appears to have miscalculated both Iran's resolve and its capacity to absorb the initial shock, which was, by any measure, devastating. The attacks on Gulf neighbors have strained ties with US allies that never wanted this war.

Iran's resilience — despite heavy damage to its military and civilian infrastructure — has visibly stunned Washington and Tel Aviv. By internationalizing the conflict, Iran's hardliners have deftly transferred pressure onto Arab and European capitals, as well as into the political and military decision-making centers of both Israel and the US.

Trump should also be cautious about his continued alignment with Netanyahu. Reports indicate that Israel is striking civilian infrastructure in addition to military targets. When Israel hit Tehran's main oil facilities on Sunday, igniting widespread fires, Washington expressed dismay. That gap between the two allies is worth watching.

While Iranian officials insist the fighting will continue unabated, there are indications that Russia and Turkiye may be exploring a mediation role. But the shape of any postwar order remains deeply uncertain. The fallout has already been enormous and the geopolitical reverberations will outlast the conflict itself.

From Tehran's perspective, any acceptable end to the war will require a new set of negotiating parameters: credible guarantees against future US and Israeli aggression, the lifting of sanctions and a nuclear agreement on favorable terms. Iran's ballistic missile program, a persistent flash point, will remain a nonnegotiable red line.

For the Gulf states, the reckoning will be longer and more complex. They will need to reassess the foundations of their military partnership with the US, recalibrate their relationships with Israel and Iran, and confront the long-term security implications of a conflict that has left the Arabian Gulf more volatile than before.

Iran's resilience — despite heavy damage to its military and civilian infrastructure — has stunned the US and Israel

COURTESY: AMJAD RASMI-ASHARQ AL-AWSAT

Tehran seems convinced that prolonging instability — from Gaza to Syria and beyond — will strengthen its regional role

Prolonging the war will make Iran the biggest loser

HANI HAZAIMEH

In politics, some leaders believe that time works in their favor. They assume that if a conflict drags on long enough, their enemies will weaken, alliances will shift and eventually they will emerge stronger. Iran appears to believe this about the current wave of conflicts across the Middle East.

But this calculation may be dangerously wrong.

Tehran seems convinced that prolonging instability — from Gaza to Syria and beyond — will strengthen its regional role and increase its leverage against rivals. The idea behind this strategy is simple: the longer the region remains unstable, the more influence Iran can exercise through its network of allies and armed groups.

In reality, however, prolonging the war may ultimately turn Iran into the biggest loser in the region.

The first reason is economic. Iran is already suffering under heavy sanctions imposed by the US and its Western allies. These sanctions have severely limited Iran's ability to sell oil freely, access the international banking system and attract foreign investment. The result is a struggling economy marked by high inflation, currency depreciation and declining living standards.

The second major issue is the cost of Iran's regional strategy.

For years, Iran has invested enormous resources in building influence across the Middle East. Tehran has supported armed groups and political allies in several countries. These alliances were designed to expand Iran's strategic reach. But today, many of these investments are producing diminishing returns.

Syria is perhaps the clearest example. The fall of the Syrian regime in 2024 shattered many of Iran's long-term plans in the country. Years of financial, political and military investment suddenly turned into a strategic loss.

The situation in Gaza also illustrates the limits of Iran's strategy.

For years, Tehran has supported armed Palestinian factions as part of its broader confrontation with Israel. These alliances were meant to strengthen Iran's regional influence and create additional pressure points against its adversaries.

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But the devastating war in Gaza has not produced clear gains for Iran. Instead, it has intensified international scrutiny of Iran's regional activities and reinforced the political arguments for maintaining sanctions against it.

Iran's broader network of allies is also under pressure. Maintaining this network requires money, weapons and logistical support. All of this places additional strain on Iran's already fragile economy.

Simply put, Iran is spending billions of dollars abroad while its economy struggles at home.

At the same time, the rest of the Middle East is undergoing significant transformation. Many countries in the region are shifting their priorities toward economic development, technological innovation and global investment. Governments are focusing on diversification, infrastructure, tourism and new industries that can create jobs and long-term growth.

Iran, however, remains deeply entangled in geopolitical confrontation and proxy conflicts. This contrast is becoming more visible every year. The gap between Iran and many of its neighbors is widening.

Inside the country, economic hardship is growing. Many citizens are asking why their government continues to devote resources to regional conflicts instead of focusing on economic recovery and domestic development.

These questions are becoming increasingly difficult for the Iranian leadership to ignore. Iran's leaders may believe that prolonging regional instability will strengthen their strategic position. But the opposite may be true.

If sanctions persist, economic pressure intensifies and regional conflicts continue without resolution, Iran could emerge from this period weaker rather than stronger. In the end, the strategy of endless confrontation may leave Tehran paying the highest price for a war that refuses to end.

Opinion

Iran crisis is redrawing the global energy map

ZAID M. BELBAGI

The Strait of Hormuz, a 39 km-wide waterway flanked by Iran to the north and Oman and the UAE to the south, is a passage through which one-fifth of the world's oil flows each day. For decades, it has been a strategic chokepoint, considered a critical vulnerability in global energy security.

On Feb. 28, this vulnerability was laid bare when Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps issued a stark warning in the wake of US and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. It said no vessels would be allowed to pass. Within days, tanker traffic plummeted by nearly 90 percent, oil prices spiked and the US navy swiftly mobilized to escort commercial ships through one of the world's most perilous maritime corridors.

For the first time in history, the Strait of Hormuz was effectively closed. What followed was a permanent shift in the rules of global energy security, rewriting how energy is secured and traded in real time.

The most consequential lesson of the closure is financial. Iran did not mine the strait, nor did it deploy a naval armada. However, it struck three tankers in the vicinity of the passage and the insurance market did the rest. War-risk premiums for transits through the strait had already doubled before this, rising from 0.125 percent of ship value to between 0.2 percent and 0.4 percent, adding about $250,000 to each supertanker voyage.

After the drone strikes, protection and indemnity insurance was withdrawn entirely, rendering transit commercially nonviable for most operators. No blockade was required, as Iran's actions had weaponized the insurance market and it was the market that effectively closed the strait.

> **Iran's actions weaponized the insurance market and it was the market that effectively closed the strait**

The scale of what flows through this narrow corridor makes its significance impossible to ignore. The Strait of Hormuz handles about 20.9 million barrels of oil per day, 27 percent of all seaborne crude oil, alongside 20 percent of global liquefied natural gas and a third of the world's fertilizer shipments.

Last Tuesday, Iraq's Rumaila oil field was forced to shut down due to the region's storage capacity being exhausted. The same day, QatarEnergy suspended LNG production at Ras Laffan, effectively freezing an entire national economy. Within 72 hours, European natural gas prices surged from €30 ($34) to more than €60 per megawatt-hour and more than 3,000 ships were left stranded.

The impact of the disruption has been far from uniform. Iraq, which relies on the strait for 100 percent of its oil exports, had no choice but to shut down production entirely. Qatar, whose LNG-dependent economy was built on the assumption of seamless maritime access, is now facing an existential crisis. The Asian economies most exposed, which are China, India, Japan and South Korea, rely on the Strait of Hormuz for 69 percent of their crude imports and have almost no alternatives for LNG.

This crisis has given a structural urgency to supply-chain shifts that had been discussed before. China last year announced an additional 200 gigawatts of solar capacity through 2027, explicitly framing it as an energy security measure rather than a climate ambition. India made an identical commitment with the same rationale.

> **The long-term impact may well be in achieving what three decades of climate diplomacy could not**

The long-term impact of the crisis may well be in achieving what three decades of climate diplomacy could not. As such, the strategic case for energy independence has, for the first time, become politically undeniable.

The emerging shift in global energy geography is most evident along Africa's western coast, where strategic infrastructure is being developed to bypass the Middle East's vulnerable maritime chokepoints. Morocco's Dakhla Atlantique port, currently under construction, exemplifies this trend. Designed to accommodate the world's largest vessels, the port's location on the open Atlantic Ocean makes it a critical asset in a rapidly changing energy landscape. This strategic advantage, which was once viewed as a long-term opportunity, has been accelerated by the 2026 crisis.

While the Strait of Hormuz may eventually reopen and tanker traffic may resume, the global energy landscape is already undergoing a fundamental transformation. The militarization of energy trade, with its associated costs of naval escorts and continuous military presence, is now an inescapable reality. The effort to build resilient, chokepoint-free supply chains, once a long-term aspiration, has rapidly become an urgent strategic priority. This shift is no longer driven by environmental concerns but by the stark imperatives of national security. The geography of global energy has shifted and nations must now confront the challenge of navigating this new reality.

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'Remigration' a euphemism for forced transfer

YOSSI MEKELBERG

Right-wing populists have perfected the use of language to conceal their true intentions, particularly when it comes to minorities and migrants. Although "remigration" — a euphemism for deporting migrants — is not new in academic circles, in recent years it has entered the discourse of the ultra-right across Europe and has gradually begun to creep into mainstream politics. Those who subscribe to this view are becoming increasingly bold in their insinuations against migrants and even in redefining who qualifies as a migrant.

Let us be clear. What motivates these groups is not the upholding of the law, a principle that unites most societies — they are seeking a culture war. If they cannot deport all those who do not fit their notion of who belongs and who does not, they at least seek to reduce their numbers substantially and force the rest to submit to what they perceive as a superior culture.

Across Europe, ethnonationalism and nativism have been promoted by right-wing parties such as Alternative for Germany, Reform UK, France's National Rally and Hungary's Fidesz, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Parties and leaders once regarded as ultra-right are now being outflanked from the right by movements and parties that not long ago were widely considered immoral, illegitimate and, in some cases, illegal.

Remigration is widely considered a direct, actionable offshoot and key policy component of the "Great Replacement." This so-called theory has little to substantiate it; instead, it spreads a debunked conspiracy that alleges that left-wing politicians and a "globalist" elite are deliberately undermining birth rates in Western countries while encouraging nonwhite immigration in order to alter the demographic balance.

> **It is not only irregular migration that upsets them but migrants in general, with Muslims often their primary target**

More than anything, it reflects a Pavlovian reaction among parts of the white majority in both the US and Europe who feel threatened by newcomers who do not speak, look or live like them. In many cases, it is ingrained racism in parts of their societies.

Gradually, the mask is being removed from those on the margins of European politics. It is not only irregular migration that upsets them but migrants in general, with Muslims often serving as their primary target.

Martin Sellner, the current leader of the Identitarian Movement of Austria, is most closely associated with developing the concept of remigration. In his book "Remigration: A Proposal," he outlines an agenda targeting people who fall into three categories: illegal migrants, including asylum seekers; legal noncitizen migrants who hold residence permits or work visas; and, to remove any doubt about the ultimate objective, a category of "non-assimilated" migrants who have obtained citizenship but are suspected of "maintaining loyalty to foreign nations or radical religions."

Sellner proposes the creation of a centralized "assimilation monitor" database that would determine who belongs and who does not. On that basis, decisions could be made to force even naturalized citizens to leave the country. Welcome (or rather unwelcome) back to European totalitarianism.

> **These views and their proponents have been gaining popularity at a frightening pace, along with increasing political influence**

In recent years, these views and their proponents have been gaining popularity at a frightening pace, along with increasing political influence.

This phenomenon is not limited to Germany and Austria. Consider Reform UK, which is riding high in the polls and, as a result, becoming increasingly unabashed in its antimigrant rhetoric.

The party has suggested that, if elected to government, it would abolish the right of migrants to qualify for permanent settlement in the UK after five years. Instead, all migrants would be required to apply for renewable five-year visas, available only to those earning high salaries and meeting additional strict criteria.

The stated intention is clear: to force many people who currently have permanent residency to leave the UK because they would not meet the new requirements.

The rise of Reform is particularly worrying because the party leads in the polls. Whether or not it wins the next general election, its popularity demonstrates that this ideology and language are gaining traction among a significant segment of British society.

There is mounting evidence that the remigration movement and its ideology are not a passing trend. It cannot be treated with complacency, especially in Europe, given its not-so-distant past. History has taught us that the road from repugnant ideology and hateful rhetoric to implementation can be far shorter and far more brutal than we might wish to believe human beings are capable of.

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OPINION

The Improvisational Trump

BUSINESS WORLD
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

With the press starting to call Donald Trump a "war president," a bell went off for me. I used the phrase in a forgotten 2019 column titled "Why Trump Is Winning on Iran."

The column came after the first-term President Trump, amid much recrimination from the region, declined Saudi pleas to respond militarily to an Iranian drone strike on a Saudi oil facility.

Mr. Trump's "peculiar" politics, I said, meant he couldn't count on the rally-round effect that "sometimes makes war an attractive domestic political proposition." Check. Being a "war president" also wouldn't suit his "episodic and wandering leadership style." Check.

I'm struck by what else I said back then. The Saudis & Co. were rich enough to defend themselves against Iranian drone and missile attacks without the U.S. having to be at their beck and call. The U.S. Navy doesn't exist only to keep oil lanes open for China. It also exists to close them (or not care if they are closed) when it suits U.S. interests.

At the time, Mr. Trump's nonresponse didn't strike me as an American retreat. Instead he was handing off regional duties to regional allies while the U.S. pursued bigger game.

On paper, he might now be reacting as any president would, seeing the locals as not up to the job, seeing an opportunity to guarantee that a drone-, missile- and nuclear-armed rogue state won't edge out the U.S. Navy as controller of the world's vital energy choke point.

The Trump outcome depends now on securing this U.S. strategic interest. If he gives the impression of being deterred by Iran's threatened closure of the Strait of Hormuz, it will be a geopolitical earthquake he didn't bargain for. Among other results, China might reconsider its relatively hands-off attitude toward the U.S.-dominated Persian Gulf.

But Mr. Trump is running far ahead of his political support. It wasn't long ago Democrats were trying to stir up U.S. military personnel to disobey his orders. If we learned anything from Joe Biden, a president fighting to keep his head above water cognitively is a president who has a hard time keeping his administration adhering to his priorities.

The concern with the 79-year-old Mr. Trump, of course, has usually been the opposite: his going overboard in creating chaos to keep his opponents off balance and allow himself to dominate the battleground he most seems to care about, the media (textbook example: after losing the 2020 presidential race).

On the 11th day of this war, Mr. Trump is redefining a history-laden term from the U.S military past, "unconditional surrender." He will be unconditioned in what he chooses to interpret as Iranian surrender. If Mr. Trump is ready to call it quits, he needs only an unreconstructed Iranian regime to call it quits too. What perhaps started when Mr. Trump ad libbed "help is on the way" to Iranian protesters could come down to an aerial hunt for Mojtaba Khamenei, the new tin-pot, with the message "Make a deal now before a bomb finds you."

His greatest asset, his flexibility, may prove his undoing if he lets Iran off the hook.

Deterrence—it's a core Trump principle, but only one aspect of his glaringly tit-for-tat personal political strategy, which also, glaringly, he will turn off the moment you say something nice about him or sue for peace.

Events may yet pan out but Mr. Trump is becoming captive to decisions made elsewhere. The Iranian regime is apparently choosing whether to bet big on its ability to hold the world's oil consumers hostage and dare Mr. Trump to do something about it. Then it becomes a different ballgame.

Inevitably 1973 comes to mind, when a president reached deep into his commander-in-chief bag even as his political approval rating plummeted into the 20s. Yet Richard Nixon, unlike Mr. Trump, also inspired broad respect as a geopolitician, even among his enemies.

Nixon, with the dregs of his Watergate-damaged authority, put the U.S. military on global nuclear alert to stop the Soviets from involving themselves in that year's Mideast war and global energy panic.

Those who think Mr. Trump didn't have anything larger in mind when he struck Iran are likely wrong—U.S. presidents usually have one eye on their superpower rival. Oh, to be a fly on the wall when Mr. Trump meets later this month with Xi Jinping, who possibly will get a clearer explanation of what Mr. Trump is up to than the American people have gotten.

Which brings us to the strangest words of the war, Secretary of State Marco Rubio saying on day four that the U.S. would "unleash Chiang" on the Iranians. Was he channeling Roy Cohn, the Trump mentor-fixer and veteran of the GOP's "who lost China" wars of the late 1940s and early '50s? Was he sending a message to Beijing? Or was it simply an odd leakage from the ironies of Republican history, a GOP that during Nixon's generation went from wanting to overthrow communist China to cozying up with it?

A War by Any Other Name

POLITICS & IDEAS
By William A. Galston

President Trump's decision not to seek congressional authorization for the use of military force against Iran has unleashed a chorus of circumlocution from Republican lawmakers.

Sen. Josh Hawley (R., Mo.) argues that only committing ground troops to the fight would qualify as war "in the constitutional sense." Mr. Hawley is an intelligent man who completed a bachelor's degree from Stanford, a law degree from Yale and a clerkship with Chief Justice John Roberts. If he has a credible legal basis for the claim that the military campaign the U.S. is waging against Iran doesn't qualify as a war under the Constitution, he should lay it out.

Rep. Randy Fine (R., Fla.) makes a different argument. "It's not a war," he says. "The way you are officially at war is Congress declares war, and we haven't declared war." This is the logical equivalent of insisting that the sky isn't blue until we say it is—and about as persuasive.

House Speaker Mike Johnson could win an award for military euphemisms. "We're not at war right now," he contended last Wednesday. "We're four days into a very specific, clear mission—an operation." In fairness, Mr. Johnson made this statement before the president announced that the aim was Iran's "unconditional surrender," which is what the Allies demanded of the Axis powers during World War II. A question for the speaker: Does the president's new goal move the needle from "operation" to "war"? Or will our conflict with Iran remain, for you and your colleagues, a war by any other name?

These evasions seem motivated by Republicans' unwillingness to acknowledge that Mr. Trump has plunged the U.S. into a war that Congress neither declared nor authorized. It isn't the first time that an American president has done this. President Harry S. Truman in 1950 dispatched American troops to support South Koreans against invasion from North Korea without seeking or receiving congressional approval. He agreed with a reporter's description of U.S. participation as a "police action under the United Nations." His administration took the position that the United Nations charter provided the legal authority for the president to act without Congress.

Strikingly, neither political party early on chose to make a big issue of Korea. Even Republican Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio—a leading skeptic of U.S. foreign involvement who protested the president's "usurpation" of Congress's authority—said he would vote to authorize the use of force. The leaders of both parties, however, showed little appetite for a formal vote on such a measure. For different reasons, each leader feared that the ensuing debate would raise divisive issues that he preferred to avoid. Truman offered to address a joint session of Congress to receive a formal resolution of support. The Senate Democratic leader, however, persuaded him not to go this road. Instead, Truman sent a message to the Hill justifying the use of U.S. force, and Congress approved supplemental funding for Korea.

GOP lawmakers use military euphemisms to describe the current hostilities against Iran.

According to Charles Stevenson, who teaches American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University, Truman came to regret his decision to call the war a "police action." As the conflict turned into a three-year war that cost 36,000 American lives, he was left to take the blame, his popularity plunged, and he declined to seek re-election. In 1952, campaigning on a slogan criticizing Democrats for "Korea, Communism and Corruption," Dwight Eisenhower won a sweeping victory in the presidential election and helped the GOP win control of Congress.

To be sure, 1950 was different from 2026. The parties initially weren't divided over Korea, and Truman didn't usurp the legislative branch's power to authorize war. Instead, Congress abdicated its responsibility to vote since lawmakers wanted to avoid inconvenient debates and responsibility for results. Since then, too many presidents of both parties have led the country into extended conflicts without congressional approval.

It's easy to dismiss my concerns as an obsession with constitutional niceties that modern conditions have rendered obsolete. But congressional consideration of the case for war is a precondition for a sustainable foreign policy. With public debate, the people have a chance to understand the pros and cons of putting American interests and lives at risk. Even if the public loses the argument, at least Americans can see that elected officials have represented their views. The alternative—ignoring public sentiment—widens the gulf between the people and their government.

When presidents make mistakes in the use of military force, the absence of congressional buy-in leaves them with nowhere to turn. When wars go badly, the president's party pays a price, even when its elected representatives don't participate in the decision to go to war. Because congressional Republicans' fate is so intertwined with Mr. Trump's, they may eventually rue their decision to block a public debate on Iran.

The Forgotten 444 Days in Tehran

By Warren Kozak

Why is the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 such an overlooked part of the story of America's relations with Iran?

Diplomatic immunity is a concept that goes back to ancient times, when warring tribes allowed enemy messengers safe passage as a way to communicate with each other. It evolved over centuries to an accepted standard between governments, permanently codified by the Vienna Convention in 1961.

This involved more than simply treating diplomats well, in the expectation that one's own diplomats would be similarly treated. It actually elevated human conduct.

Consider a historic footnote from World War II. Shortly after Pearl Harbor in 1941, all the Germans and Japanese in their embassies in Washington were sent under guard to the luxurious Greenbrier and Homestead resorts. Germany and Japan did something similar with our embassy people in Berlin and Tokyo (although their accommodations weren't as deluxe). Within six months, the Swiss negotiated an exchange and embassy personnel on each side returned home safely. Even Adolf Hitler respected diplomatic immunity.

In 1979 Iranians held 52 Americans hostage for more than a year.

The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Tehran from exile in France in 1979, after the shah departed. Seven months into the subsequent Islamic Revolution, on Nov. 4, 1979, Iranians stormed the U.S. Embassy and took dozens of hostages, 52 of whom they held for more than a year.

But the Iranians would go on to use diplomatic immunity—when it was in their murderous interest. On July 18, 1994, a car bomb detonated outside a Jewish center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 and wounding another 300. Two years earlier, the Israeli Embassy in that same city was attacked by a suicide bomber, killing 29. Although no one has been brought to justice for this act of terror, Argentine prosecutors laid the blame squarely on Iranian government officials tied to their embassy in Buenos Aires. The Iranians used diplomatic immunity to bring in the bomb material.

From 1979 to 1981, the captives seized from the American Embassy were humiliated, paraded around blindfolded for cameras and jeering crowds and threatened. Years later Jimmy Carter, president when the embassy was seized, reflected on his conduct with pride. He said he could have easily bombed Iran but, instead, by showing restraint, all the hostages came out alive. (Mr. Carter conveniently forgot that he authorized an April 1980 rescue that ended in catastrophic failure and the deaths of eight U.S. servicemen.)

A 34-year-old New York real-estate developer saw Carter's approach quite differently. In an interview in 1980, Donald Trump called the entire hostage episode a horror and said it was ridiculous that the U.S. allowed its people to be mistreated for so long.

We don't know if the hostages would have survived had the U.S. reacted forcefully in 1979, but tens of thousands of human beings would be alive today, and the entire Middle East wouldn't have been destabilized for half a century, had the Iranian theocracy been stopped at the start.

Mr. Kozak is author of "Waving Goodbye: Life After Loss" and "LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay."

BOOKSHELF | By Mark Yost

Trade Craft

G.I. G-Men
By Stephen Harding
Citadel, 416 pages, $29

Safe Passage
By Evelyn Iritani
FSG, 480 pages, $33

When Allied troops landed in Italy during World War II, not far behind them was Frank Amprim, the first FBI agent to be dispatched to a combat zone. His mission was to track down American traitors who had aided the Italian and Nazi war efforts. One of his first targets was Ezra Pound, the American poet who, starting in January 1941, made some 200 radio broadcasts praising Benito Mussolini and Italian Fascism. Pound had advocated for Fascism as a cure for social injustice, financial inequality and the "dire threat" of an "international Jewry."

Pound surrendered to U.S. forces outside Genoa in May 1945, was turned over to Amprim, and immediately had two requests: to send a telegram to President Harry Truman, offering to broker a "just peace" between the U.S. and Japan based upon his study of Confucianism; and to make one final radio broadcast, calling for America to be a benevolent victor. If that sounds a little crazy, the Justice Department thought so, too.

Never convicted of treason, Pound would spend nearly 13 years in a psychiatric hospital in Washington, D.C., before returning to Italy, where he died in 1972.

This and other tales of the FBI's wartime spy-hunting are the focus of "G.I. G-Men" by Stephen Harding, a former journalist.

Once Paris was liberated in August 1944, a small cadre of FBI agents known as the Army Liaison Unit arrived and set up shop. Spearheaded by Don Daughters and Frederick Ayer Jr. (Gen. George S. Patton's nephew), the unit first looked for traitors in France. These included Anthony Helfenstein, an Army deserter from Brooklyn, N.Y., who worked as an accountant in Paris at the start of World War II. "Helfenstein had access to French documents listing important tapestries and other items held by individuals and museums" and shared them with the Germans, Mr. Harding writes. "Helfenstein also evaluated and inventoried looted items, and arranged for their packing and shipment to Germany."

Many suspects were American expats whose loyalties were to whatever regime was occupying Paris. Among these was Ruth Dubonnet, who said the Nazi idea "was the fascinating one of the future." Ayer, in a report to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, called her a "rich and vicious parasite."

Then there was Frank Jay Gould, the son of the industrialist Jay Gould, and Frank's wife, Florence, who, Mr. Harding tells us, "was believed to have worked with members of German military intelligence."

"Worked" is a quaint euphemism.

Florence, we are told, "joined her friend Marie-Louise Bousquet in organizing the *souris grises* (gray mice) network of well-to-do French women willing to have sex with senior Nazi officers and diplomats in return for money and other favors. Florence used information the 'horizontal collaborators' learned from their 'clients' to further her own financial interests." Many of these collaborators were never prosecuted.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the Allies had a different problem. Just as there were prisoners of war, there were also civilians caught behind enemy lines. And like the POWs, these civilians had to be exchanged. That is the subject of "Safe Passage: The Untold Story of Diplomatic Intrigue, Betrayal, and the Exchange of American and Japanese Civilians by Sea During World War II" by Evelyn Iritani, a journalist who has written about Japanese-American relations. Unpacking the wordy subtitle, the diplomacy is only mildly intriguing, and not much happens during the voyages that moved Allied civilians out of Asia and the ethnically Japanese from the Americas to Africa, where the exchanges took place. It is the individual stories of the civilians being moved—many unwillingly—that make this a tale worth telling.

The FBI had a unit tasked with finding traitors in occupied Europe. Another American priority was exchanging civilians caught in warzones.

America's shameful treatment of Japanese-Americans during World War II is well known. Even though many were several generations removed from Japan, they had their loyalties questioned by the U.S. government after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and were unfairly interned in relocation camps. Families were separated. Many lost their businesses. It is truly one of the darkest moments of America's conduct during World War II.

Among the interned is Don Hasuike, the 13-year-old son of George Hasuike, one of Los Angeles's leading Japanese-American businessmen at the start of the war. The younger Hasuike knows nothing of Japan. As an eager Boy Scout in his local troop, he is unsure why he and his two sisters, along with their mother, are sent to the Amache detention camp in Colorado. He's further flummoxed when he's taken, along with other reluctant Japanese-Americans, on a journey to a country where they've never lived.

"It didn't take long for Don and his sisters to figure out that they were on the losing team," Ms. Iritani writes. "Boarding the *Teia Maru* was like going from a luxury hotel to boot camp. As soon as they crossed the gangplank onto the decks of the troopship, it was clear that the Japanese military was in charge."

Equally appalling is the story of the relocated Japanese who settled—and prospered—in Peru. As Ms. Iritani explains, their success was resented, especially during the Depression. Once America came looking for Japanese to exchange for Allied civilians, the Peruvians were more than happy to hand them over and confiscate their businesses.

There were reluctant Americans, too, including Emily Hahn, a free-spirited writer for the New Yorker who fell for Maj. Charles Boxer, a married British spy. While he was being tortured in a Japanese POW camp, she navigated the privations of wartime Hong Kong with their infant daughter, Carola. Hahn eventually returned to New York and brought Carola with her; the young girl, who was born in Hong Kong and only spoke Chinese, would often hide under the couch, frightened by all the white faces. Like many of the others in this story, she didn't want to live in a country she'd never known.

Mr. Yost writes about military history for the Journal.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Elizabeth Warren's Housing Coup

Republicans want to show voters they're doing something to ease housing costs. The result, alas, is a pork-filled bill hitting the Senate floor this week that is big win for Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and the political left.

> The GOP Senate is about to pass a bill that is great for progressives.

The Senate's 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act is a melange of some 40 bills. Call it a blueprint for a bigger Washington. It establishes multiple grant and loan programs for "affordable" housing while expanding federal power over local zoning. The worst provision is a ban on large investors purchasing single-family homes to rent.

Companies like Amherst and Invitation Homes that buy and then rent single-family homes have become a popular scapegoat for high housing prices. The real leading culprit is the Federal Reserve's pandemic-era monetary policy. Historically low mortgage rates followed by inflation fueled price appreciation and resulted in a lock-in effect for owners that is constricting the supply of homes for sale.

Large investment firms mopped up foreclosed homes after the 2008 housing crash, placing a floor on prices. They account for less than 1% of the single-family housing stock, and the number of rental homes has declined on net by 900,000 since 2017. They manage fewer homes in pricy markets like Los Angeles (0.3%), Boston (0.02%) and Washington, D.C. (0.07%).

President Trump thinks the investor ban polls well and likes to say "people live in homes, not corporations." But who does he think lives in rental homes—hedge fund managers? Most tenants are lower-income. The Senate bill could force many of them out of their homes.

Investors who own 350 or more homes would be barred from buying new ones with a few exceptions—namely, if home builders construct homes specifically for rental purposes; if investors make substantial renovations to bring homes into compliance with local building codes; or if they buy them from other large investors.

Investors would still be required to sell any homes they acquire under these exemptions within seven years. This may not be enough time to recoup their investment, especially since they would have to pay hefty taxes and transactions costs upon selling a home. They also face risk if prices fall.

Smaller firms will likely exit the market because they couldn't expand. If investors are forced to unload properties, where will their tenants go? Amherst estimates that roughly 85% of its tenants wouldn't qualify for a mortgage because of credit constraints or other underwriting restrictions.

The American Enterprise Institute's Ed Pinto and Tobias Peter warn that federal agencies and government-sponsored enterprises might seek to prevent evictions by easing underwriting standards to enable tenants to buy homes that investors are forced to sell. This would increase the risk and costs for taxpayers who backstop mortgages.

The bill implicitly acknowledges the potential for collateral damage by giving the Treasury Secretary carte blanche authority to issue rules to "minimize market disruptions" and "mitigate, to the extent possible, negative impacts on consumers and communities." Treasury could also redefine "large institutional investor," "single-family home," and "excepted purchase."

In other words, Treasury would have the power to rewrite the provision. Don't Republicans want to pare back the administrative state? We're told the Trump team demanded this unfettered discretion because they realize Ms. Warren's drafted language would cause problems in the housing market.

Imagine how a Democratic administration will exploit this sweeping power. How about a nationwide eviction moratorium or rent control? The bill also instructs the Housing and Urban Development Department to establish housing "best practices" for local governments—solar panels on all homes!

Oh, and don't forget a grant program to reward local governments that "promote dense development" and "mixed-income housing," an idea Ms. Warren campaigned on during her presidential bid in 2020. She sent out an exuberant press release on Tuesday listing all of the left-wing groups endorsing the bill.

Eager to claim a housing victory, the White House is pressuring Senate Republicans to pass the bill and wants the House to accept it. But why do Republicans want to provide a down payment for Ms. Warren and fellow progressives to expand Washington control over housing in their states?

The Talking Filibuster Is a Mirage

President Trump keeps insisting that the Senate pass the SAVE America Act, and he's all but threatening a hunger strike until it does. At the same time, Mr. Trump keeps trying to add to the bill, which his Truth Social feed now says is supposed to include national voter ID, "NO MAIL-IN BALLOTS" (with exceptions), and "NO MEN IN WOMEN'S SPORTS."

How is the GOP supposed to get all this past the Senate's filibuster, which requires 60 votes to end debate? There's no good answer without changing the rules in some way to nuke the filibuster, which would be a grave mistake for Republicans. The 60-vote rule always frustrates the party in power, but it's what stops a bare majority of Democrats from restructuring the Supreme Court and creating new states out of Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

Some on the right are saying the easy solution is to demand a talking filibuster. The idea seems to be that Democrats would quickly tire of reading the dictionary aloud for the C-Span camera, and then the GOP could move to pass the legislation. Yet given the chamber's rules, this vision is a mirage.

The reality is that Democratic Senators could take turns giving interminable speeches. Cory Booker last year went 25 hours all by himself. Meantime, Republicans would have to keep most of their Senators handy at all times, ready to answer a quorum call, meaning it would turn into an endless GOP campout. Bring your pajamas, toothbrush, and CPAP machine.

Democrats could offer amendments that either undermine the bill's intent or put swing-state Republicans on the spot. Raise the minimum wage? Extend ObamaCare subsidies? What else? The talking filibuster idea "is much more complicated and risky than people are assuming," Majority Leader John Thune told reporters this week. He said Tuesday that Republicans lack the votes to get to a talking filibuster or sustain one if they did.

The MAGA base loves the idea that Republicans could achieve everything they want, if only their leaders would fight harder, somehow. It isn't true. If it were, Democrats would have done it already—and they'd certainly copy the maneuver next time to pass far more transformational bills than the SAVE America Act.

The Nuclear Job in Iran Isn't Finished

President Trump made a comment Monday that went unremarked, if that's possible. Iran's "regime was trying to reconstitute its weapons program at a different site" before the war, he said, "protected by granite." That's a likely reference to Pickaxe Mountain, where Iran could build a uranium-enrichment plant. It has yet to be attacked.

> Why leave the regime the infrastructure and stockpile to try again?

The war is ahead of schedule in degrading Iran's military, but the nuclear program appears to have faced only a few Israeli "surgical strikes," according to nonproliferation expert Andrea Stricker of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Israel attacked the secret Minzadehei site, where it says Iran was working on a nuclear-weapons component. But U.S. aircraft have had other priorities.

The Pickaxe Mountain site is a difficult target, buried 80 to 100 meters below ground—even deeper than the Fordow facility the U.S. bombed in June. Located next to Natanz, it has seen construction continue since June.

Last week a vehicle was struck outside the site, presumably by Israel. The vehicle may have been involved in air defense or in seeking access. Along with Mr. Trump's comment, the strike is evidence the two powers are watching Pickaxe Mountain carefully.

If U.S. bombers can't reach deep enough even with Massive Ordnance Penetrators, then the job will have to be done on the ground. Without a deal to secure full dismantlement, this could involve a special-forces raid or some other operation once Iran's military is weakened further. The only option more dangerous is to do nothing, leaving it for the regime to enrich uranium behind a shield again.

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi said Monday that about half of Iran's 440-kilogram stockpile of highly enriched uranium is likely buried under its Isfahan complex, to which the U.S. blocked access in June. The rest is believed to be under Fordow, and possibly damaged, or else at the above ground Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant and likely destroyed.

Iran has done little to restore Fordow, but recent reports suggest it may be able to retrieve some of the stockpile at Isfahan through a very narrow access point. If true, this raises the urgency of securing the material before the regime does.

An additional nuclear site worthy of attention is Taleghan 2, which contained a high-explosive chamber for weaponization experiments. Israel struck it in October 2024, but the Institute for Science and International Security assesses that Iran has been rebuilding since May. It may be nearly complete.

While the June war reduced Iran's nuclear program to odds and ends, together these could help the regime rebuild and pursue a bomb again. That's what this campaign is supposed to prevent, and all the more so if Mr. Trump decides to stop short of regime change.

For the U.S. and Israel, Pickaxe Mountain, the nuclear stockpile and Taleghan 2 are loose ends. They are another reason that calls for Mr. Trump to bow to $3.50 gasoline and end the war now are premature. Those who want to limit U.S. objectives in Iran should be the most vociferous about the need to strike or secure Iran's top remaining nuclear sites.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Real Lesson of Purim for the Iranian War

Yosie Levine's Houses of Worship piece ("Purim Was Right on the Nose This Year," March 6), describes the holiday of Purim, celebrated a few days prior, as a reminder that "history turns on our capacity for moral clarity and moral courage." Haman, a senior official in Persia, now Iran, solicits the king to exterminate the Jews. Esther, the king's wife, convinced the king to withdraw the edict and arrest Haman. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu celebrated the holiday this year as having contemporary relevance in the conflict the U.S. and Israel initiated against Iran.

But the analogy is relevant in a way Messrs. Levine and Netanyahu miss. Esther convinces the king not only to execute Haman but to allow the Persian Jews to kill Haman's sons and all those associated with Haman throughout the kingdom—at least 75,000 people. Just as the Persian Jews lacked moral clarity, so too in the present conflict do the Netanyahu-led Israeli government and its U.S. allies.

EDDIE ETTCHES
McLean, Va.

Yes, the Jewish holiday of Purim felt different this year. I am guessing, based on my experience, that attendance at Purim spiels (plays or spoofs) and Megillah readings was up throughout the U.S., as the story about a villain getting his just deserts in ancient Persia was especially relevant.

The observant will always observe holidays and show up at houses of worship. Will the typical American Christian find more meaning this year in keeping Lent and attending Easter services? Will the average American Muslim find added purpose in fasting during Ramadan and giving to charity? Could a military conflict thousands of miles away make Americans more apt to recognize evil for what it is and to pray for divine guidance? Maybe yes, but maybe no.

LISA S. KALSON
Dublin, Ohio

I was perplexed that Rabbi Levine's excellent piece left out a critical element: The story's climax isn't only the execution of Haman and his family of henchmen. The king also supports a Jewish counterattack and the destruction of the plot's leadership in the capital and the proxy militias throughout the provinces paid to destroy the Jews. The universal message of Purim is prayer for the protective hand of God when confronted with evil, and the importance of men and women willing to take up arms to confront that evil. A term called "hishtadlus." In a very Lincolnesque way, right makes might.

MARC KALTON
Boynton Beach, Fla.

Iran's Chance for Religious Regime Change

Walter Russell Mead considers whether the U.S. and Israel can identify a pragmatic Iranian insider willing to deal ("Can the Iranian Regime Survive?" Global View, March 6). But a moderate successor need not emerge from mere political opportunism; one could arise from a deeply established theological foundation.

The mullahs have wrought horrific death and destruction—massacring their own citizens, targeting Americans, and fueling devastation across Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Gaza. Yet this aggressively expansionist posture contradicts traditional Shiite Islamic thought. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's doctrine of absolute clerical rule—velayat-e faqih—and offensive war was a radical departure from the traditional "quietist" school of Shiite Islam, which strictly limits offensive warfare and rejects the politicization of the faith.

The regime's brutality has actively driven countless Iranians away from the faith altogether. For traditional Shiite scholars, this catastrophic failure isn't merely a political opportunity; it is tragic evidence that their warnings against wielding religion as a weapon of statecraft were well-founded. The next iteration of Iranian leadership could naturally arise from this quietist school, offering a credible transition toward moderation driven not only by Western pressure, but by the undeniable proof that the regime's radicalism was a destructive dead end.

MICHAEL J. KARLIN
Bethesda, Md.

The Legacy of Bringing a Knife to a Gun Fight

I can imagine the angst Joseph Epstein's op-ed "A Tyrant Slayer Who Looks Like a Tyrant" (March 6) is causing in many quarters, but the overwhelming point is that you don't bring a knife to a gunfight, and not everyone plays by the Marquess of Queensberry rules (from 1867). When you're constantly lied to, fooled and manipulated, then you have to play by the same absence of rules in order to win. Jesus said to "turn the other cheek," but he never said to let them keep hitting you.

ALAN WEISS
East Greenwich, R.I.

Mr. Epstein aptly refers to President Trump as a "world-historical figure," which now is undeniable. What has to drive our progressive friends crazy is that their political messiah, President Obama, will be comparably a footnote in history while Mr. Trump's legacy and tangible accomplishments will live on. Barack who?

DANA R. HERMANSON
Marietta, Ga.

UCLA Antisemitism Problem

In his March 4 letter "UCLA Treats Antisemitism as the Threat It Is," UCLA Chancellor Julio Frenk rightly stated, "Combating antisemitism is a moral imperative . . . advanced through consistent leadership and serious action." Why, then, did the Justice Department file a suit alleging that UCLA failed to formally discipline any of the pro-Palestinian activists who DOJ contends mistreated Jewish students during the protests after Oct. 7, 2023? Why did UCLA have to settle in a suit by "excluded" Jewish students and faculty before for $6.13 million in damages and fees? Why, after banning Students for Justice in Palestine in early 2025, have administrators and campus police not stopped ongoing SJP demonstrations on campus into the rest of 2025? Why did campus police fail to enforce the school's no-masking rules during a recent SJP event in October? Why does campus security for Jews remain problematic, such that CBS editor-in-chief Bari Weiss cancelled a lecture last month due to security concerns?

Mr. Frenk's assertion that "UCLA answers with action" against antisemitism rings hollow.

CHARLES D. EDEN
Atlanta

Remember Saul and Amalek

Reading "The New Israeli Rules of Engagement" (Amit Segal, op-ed March 5) reminds me of the biblical passage that was read last week: "Zachor," meaning remember. In the reading, God commands King Saul to destroy all of Amalek, including women, children and property. Nothing can be allowed to survive or be taken as the rewards of victory. Amalek (the totality of evil) must be wiped off the face of the earth.

Saul allows his army to take the spoils of the Amalekites, thus earning a rebuke from God and the prophet Samuel. We are to infer that because of this disobedience, evil was allowed to continue and replicate itself in the world.

Thus do the Israelis understand that while some may call for compassion, evil is evil and must be eliminated completely.

EVE COHEN
Reno, Nev.

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.ltrs@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"It's a 'Hope you're leaving the hospital very, very soon bear' from your healthcare provider."

The Pentagon-Anthropic Spat Is Good for China

By Katherine C. Epstein

As the author of a book that Anthropic used without permission or payment to train its artificial-intelligence chatbot Claude, I can't say that the company's welfare tops my list of concerns. But as a historian and an American, I'm troubled by the Pentagon's behavior toward it.

Up to a point, the fight between the Pentagon and Anthropic is unremarkable. Contract negotiations break down all the time because the parties can't find mutually agreeable conditions. If all that is happening here were that the Pentagon won't buy under the conditions imposed by Anthropic, and Anthropic won't sell under the conditions imposed by the Pentagon, then there would be no cause for concern.

A precedent from early-20th-century Britain augurs ill for the heavy-handed U.S. approach.

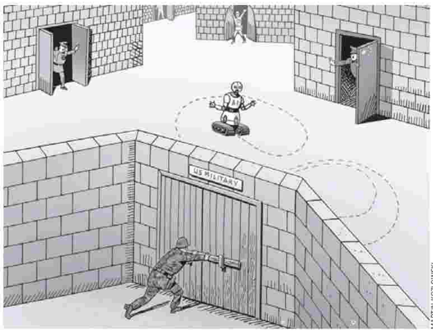
But that isn't all that's happening here. It's being reported that the Pentagon accepted the conditions that Anthropic wanted in a new contract with OpenAI—which suggests that the Pentagon's real objection wasn't to the conditions, but to Anthropic. Buttressing that interpretation are public statements by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and President Trump castigating Anthropic for "wokeness." The Pentagon has gone beyond declining to buy from Anthropic by designating it a supply-chain risk, which prevents Anthropic from working as a subcontractor on other Pentagon contracts. Mr. Trump may soon issue an executive order directing all federal agencies to stop using Anthropic AI. These punitive moves have significant implications for the company's bottom line.

Hence the concern that the Trump administration is pursuing an agenda other than national security. It has created the appearance that it is choosing not to buy on technological merit while also punishing a world-leading American company in a race for AI that it claims the U.S. must win.

This isn't unprecedented—and the precedent should worry Americans.

In the first decade of the 20th century, two brilliant English civilians, Arthur Pollen and Harold Isherwood, invented the world's first modern gunnery computer to aim the big guns of battleships. The most sophisticated computer of its day and decades ahead of its time, it represented a quantum improvement in the effectiveness of the Royal Navy's primary weapons system and the nation's premier instrument of combat power. It was the closest thing at the time to AI: a mission-critical technology capable of enabling smart, networked warfare and precision strikes. An observer who saw their computer described it as a "machine that uses intelligence."

Equipped initially only with ideas and not a working prototype, Pollen and Isherwood sought cooperation and support from the British Admiralty. So deeply did they impress the Royal Navy's leading gunnery officers that the Admiralty agreed in 1906 to an extraordinary development contract, in which the Admiralty provided funding and both parties undertook to preserve the invention's secrecy.



MARTIN KOZLOWSKI

Pollen and Isherwood honored the contract, but the government didn't. Instead, the Admiralty fed information about their system to a naval officer named Frederick Dreyer, who was a capable gunnery officer but not the great inventor he fancied himself to be. (He was also a vindictive egotist, but fortunately there aren't any of those in the Trump administration.) Dreyer built a less capable but cheaper knock-off of the Pollen-Isherwood system. The Admiralty opted for the knock-off. It relied on Dreyer's ostensibly disinterested advice, which was backed by powerful superior officers with whom he had ingratiated himself, even though a majority of expert gunnery officers unequivocally opposed it.

This should have freed Pollen and Isherwood to sell abroad. But the Admiralty had no intention of letting them do so. So it resorted to smear tactics, made baseless accusations, and threatened them with prosecution under the Official Secrets Act if they tried. When Pollen and Isherwood called the Admiralty's bluff, it retaliated with the equivalent of designating their company a supply-chain risk: It struck their firm from its list of approved suppliers, thereby making them toxic to other defense contractors. It was a bad look for the navy of one of the world's two noisiest champions of private property and market freedom.

Pollen and Isherwood's resolution to export gave the navy of the other noisiest champion—the U.S.—the opportunity to pirate them too. The U.S. Navy, which wanted the best and thus had no interest in Dreyer's inferior system, funneled information about the Pollen-Isherwood system to an American startup. Headed by a much more talented engineer than Dreyer, the American firm produced a system as good as the English original.

There is a cautionary tale here for the U.S. today as it squares off against China. The Pollen-Isherwood story provides a lesson about the danger of decadence for the reigning hegemon in the face of a rising challenger. In the Pollen-Isherwood computer, Britain had a world-leading home-grown technology in a crucial sector. But the Admiralty took its eye off the ball. Instead of focusing on getting the best technology to serve the national interest, it corrupted its acquisition process. By contrast, the U.S. Navy had no agenda other than excellence in support of the national interest.

So there is precedent for the Pentagon's behavior toward Anthropic. But it isn't a precedent that bodes well for the U.S. in its competition with China over AI.

Ms. Epstein is a professor of history at Rutgers University and author, most recently, of "Analog Superpowers: How Twentieth-Century Technology Theft Built the National Security State."

Reconsider Your Failing Strategy, Mr. President

UPWARD MOBILITY
By Jason L. Riley

Donald Trump was elected to combat inflation, secure the border and counter the cultural excesses of the progressive left. Like any president, he's expected to shift priorities when unforeseen circumstances surface. But if and when that happens, the president is obliged to explain himself to voters.

The Trump administration's problem is that much of the public is confused about the war, including many who agree that Tehran had it coming. As the American offensive in Iran approaches the two-week mark, too many voters are having difficulty making heads or tails of Washington's goals and game plan. Earlier on Monday, Mr. Trump told a CBS News reporter that the war is "very complete, pretty much" and that we were "very far" ahead of schedule, indicating that he might soon end the bombing campaign.

But the Pentagon insisted in a post on social media that "We have Only Just Begun to Fight." And later Monday, Mr. Trump said that he was poised to intensify attacks because Iran was blockading the Strait of Hormuz and preventing oil from reaching the market. "If Iran does anything that stops the flow of Oil within the Strait of Hormuz, they will be hit by the United States of America TWENTY TIMES HARDER than they have been hit thus far," he wrote on Truth Social.

Strategic ambiguity, if that's what this is, can be a double-edged sword. The upside is that you keep your enemies on their toes, while the downside is that you risk looking unsure and incompetent at home. Given Mr. Trump's already low job-approval rating, he couldn't count on the American public to give him the benefit of the doubt. And they haven't. Generally, the war is polling poorly, with support ranging from 50% (Fox News) through 38% (Quinnipiac) to 27% (Reuters/Ipsos).

Mr. Trump's other challenge is the political calendar, and he is testing the patience of fellow Republicans who will have to face voters in November. The president is being pressured to call off the strikes, but let's hope the White House understands the difference between ending a war and winning it. It makes little sense to stop short of replacing the regime root and branch, or at least destroying its ability to spread global terror.

Still, the ability of those Republicans in Congress with an eye on the midterm elections to bring pressure to bear on the president shouldn't be underestimated. It was GOP lawmakers who forced the president last week finally to sack Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem. And it's an indication that Mr. Trump's hold on Republican lawmakers could weaken significantly as the midterms approach and his priorities diverge from theirs.

Intentional ambiguity won't serve Trump well during the coming midterm elections.

The griping over Ms. Noem's expensive marketing campaign was pretextual. Ms. Noem's real sin was her handling of immigration enforcement, which managed to turn one of the president's strengths into a festering liability. Successfully securing the border was a political winner, a stark example of Mr. Trump's delivering on a promise that had been central to his re-election campaign. But the clumsy and overly aggressive mass-deportation efforts that have followed—culminating in the death of two Americans—have been deeply unpopular.

Simply replacing Ms. Noem is unlikely to be sufficient. The administration's real problem is that the immigration issue is producing diminishing political returns. The border mayhem that crested under President Biden has subsided, and surveys show that voters are much more concerned about the cost of living.

Some draw a direct line between the immigration raids and declining Hispanic support for Republicans. In last year's gubernatorial races in New Jersey and Virginia, Democrats recaptured the Latino vote in enclaves that Mr. Trump carried in 2024. Last week, James Talarico won a Democratic primary race in Texas for the U.S. Senate with a strong performance in counties that boast the highest share of Hispanics.

It's likely that the Trump administration's mass-deportation efforts have affected the voting patterns of Latinos and other minority groups, but it's also true that Mr. Trump's restrictionism has been the constant in both terms. If the president's hard-line immigration stance is scaring away minority voters, why was he able to win them over in the first place?

Mr. Trump's appeal to minorities has always been more about his stewardship of the economy and less about his border policies. As inflation has continued to take its toll on wages, and affordability concerns have heightened, minority support for Republicans has become more tentative. According to last month's jobs report, the white unemployment rate has remained stable over the past year, while it has increased for blacks, Asians and Hispanics.

Yes, the president needs a new homeland security secretary. He also needs a new strategy.

A Diffident Trump? Antisemites Will Believe Anything

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

Among the café-table clichés that experts and geopoliticians string together with astonishing self-assurance, one is particularly striking. The war with Iran, they say, would have been desired by Israel, inspired by Israel, imposed by Israel.

The U.S., we are told with the knowing tone of those boldly revealing "open secrets," is merely the executor—why not the auxiliary, while we're at it?—of "Israel's war."

I don't deny that the two countries have converging interests, or that their military and intelligence agencies are operating in close coordination. But that is called an alliance.

Would anyone have said that Franklin D. Roosevelt was being manipulated by Charles de Gaulle? Or that Winston Churchill—who in 1919 said Bolshevism should be strangled in its cradle—became Stalin's puppet 22 years later? Of Alexander the Great that he acted on behalf of the Greek cities of Asia that he had freed from Persian rule? Or of the Roman Republic, during the Third Punic War, that it was acting under the orders of Massinissa, king of Numidia? The idea is absurd.

In this case—and however much it may displease conspiracy theorists—there is no mystery. Israel has one concern: neutralizing a threat that it rightly considers existential. The U.S. has its own concerns: defending its allies (Arab countries as well as Israel), weakening a strategic axis that runs from Tehran to Moscow and Beijing, and washing away the humiliation that has remained, for 47 years, like an open wound in the side of every administration since Jimmy Carter's—the invasion of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 and holding of American hostages for more than a year.

All this follows a logic of interests that have their own consistency but could diverge in the weeks or days ahead.

To fail to understand this? To believe that a country the size of New Jersey could twist the arm of a country of 350 million, equipped with the most powerful military and the most sophisticated network of bases in history, and governed by a president of unrivaled egotism? To imagine that Donald Trump—who everyone knows never decides anything that doesn't first serve his own interests and those of the U.S.—would have given any foreign prime minister the gift of a war of this magnitude? It is simply grotesque.

Imagine the Oval Office scene: A diffident Mr. Trump agonizes, wavers, ruminates—then makes up his mind only when his friend Bibi tells him what to do.

It took two years to prepare the Normandy landings. Six months to prepare the Gulf War in 1991. One year to prepare the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Who can imagine that the Pentagon improvised in a few days the deployment of two aircraft-carrier strike groups, the repositioning of hundreds of combat aircraft, the establishment of a refueling network 6,000 miles from its shores? The accumulation of colossal quantities of fuel and ammunition required? Not to mention the intelligence capabilities indispensable for such an operation?

Who can believe that the American president, however impulsive Mr. Trump may be, would have committed such an armada without seeing further than the tip of his nose, and that Benjamin Netanyahu would have had to explain to him, over a hamburger, the strategy and meaning of it all? The reasoning is childish.

But the more serious problem lies elsewhere. This fable reveals a very old and toxic lie.

This is how people thought in the 1930s—those who saw in "the Jews" a community of conspirators pushing nations toward war, pulling the strings of catastrophe, and scheming to provoke conflicts from which they expected to profit.

The notion that Benjamin Netanyahu is pulling the president's strings is particularly absurd.

In France, this was the theme of the infamous 1942 pamphlet by Lucien Rebatet, "The Ruins." According to him, it was the "Jewish warmongers" who pushed France into war with Germany and were therefore the real architects of the ruin described in the book's scenes of exodus, fire and apocalypse.

It was the central thread of three pamphlets by Louis-Ferdinand Céline: "Trifles for a Massacre" (1937), about the "Jewish plot"; "School for Corpses" (1938), denouncing the machine of "indoctrination" preparing peoples to fight and die "for Israel"; and "The Fine Mess" (1941), claiming that Jews had dragged France into "their war."

In the U.S., it was the obsession of Father Charles Coughlin, who denounced in his radio broadcasts the "Jewish finance" supposedly pushing America toward confrontation with Hitler, and of Charles Lindbergh, who in his September 1941 speech in Des Moines, Iowa, opposed the first "America First" movement to the "Jewish interests" he claimed were fomenting a global conflagration.

The Jew as a warmonger is an old cliché of antisemitic propaganda. It would be wise to take that terrible poison out of circulation today.

Mr. Lévy is author of "Israel Alone." This article was translated from French by Emily Hamilton.

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Notable & Quotable: 'Habitual Drunkards'

Principal Deputy Solicitor General Sarah M. Harris and Justice Neil Gorsuch during oral arguments in U.S. v. Hemani, March 2:

Ms. Harris: The Second Amendment does not prohibit the government from temporarily disarming habitual marijuana users. . . . The government must show a historical analogue that is relevantly similar and why and how it restricts Second Amendment rights. Here, that's habitual drunkard laws. Under historical vagrancy and civil commitment laws, habitual drunkards were imprisoned or confined without specific dangerousness findings based on judgments that habitual drunkards as a class threatened public safety. . . .

Justice Gorsuch: One can ask whether the habitual drunkard statutes are sufficiently—how and why sufficiently analogous. One could also ask, though, more basically whether this defendant would qualify as a habitual user, and I want to explore that before we lose track of it.

A habitual drunkard, the American Temperance Society back in the day said eight shots of whiskey a day only made you an occasional drunkard.

(Laughter.)

Justice Gorsuch: We have to remember the founding era. If you want to invoke the founding era, to be a habitual drunkard, you had to do double that, okay?

John Adams took a tankard of hard cider with his breakfast every day. James Madison reportedly drank a pint of whiskey every day. Thomas Jefferson said he wasn't much of a user of alcohol, he only had three or four glasses of wine a night, okay?

Are they all habitual drunkards who would be properly disarmed for life under your theory?

The FT View

FINANCIAL TIMES
'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

There is no easy exit to Trump's war

US and Israeli attacks on Iran will leave the Middle East in greater turmoil

For a moment this week, Donald Trump hinted that he was preparing for an off-ramp from the US's war against Iran. The conflict, the US president said, was "very complete". As intended, his comments had a soothing effect on rattled energy markets. The price of oil dipped below $90 a barrel having earlier soared to nearly $120. But once markets had closed on Monday, Trump was, once again, sending out conflicting signals. The US, he said, would not "relent until the enemy is totally and decisively defeated", adding: "We haven't won enough."

His shifting comments underscored his cavalier attitude towards a devastating war. Since launching the biggest conflict in the Middle East in decades after being spurred on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump has been boastful, belligerent and confusing in equal measure. The critical question of how the conflict ends is unanswered. He has failed to articulate a clear set of goals or a day-after plan. He has spoken about destroying the Islamic republic's ballistic arsenal and nuclear programme, a Venezuela-style leadership change, and an "unconditional surrender".

On Monday, he described the war, which involves the biggest US military deployment in the Middle East since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, as a "little excursion". At the weekend, he dismissed concerns about rising fuel prices as "a glitch". His administration appears to have underestimated the repercussions of the conflict it unleashed and failed to understand its enemy.

US and Israeli officials say Iran's ability to launch missiles has been significantly debilitated. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, and other senior officials were assassinated on the first day of the war. Tehran and other cities have endured relentless bombardment too.

Yet if Trump expected the regime to capitulate under fire, he is being proven wrong on a daily basis. Cornered and battling for its life, the regime has been lashing out in all directions, fighting an asymmetrical war of attrition that it has long prepared for. It is still firing salvos of missiles and drones at Israel and the US's Gulf allies, disrupting travel and trade. The flow of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has slowed to a trickle and Gulf states are being forced to halt or reduce oil and gas output.

Gulf leaders had pressed Trump not to strike Iran and warned of the risks of a regional conflict if he did. Now their nations are bearing the brunt. Yet Trump told Fox News on Monday he was surprised that Iran "attacked countries that were not attacking them".

There are hints that he is indeed seeking an off-ramp. Yet the war he started has no good ending. There are no signs the regime is about to capitulate — it appointed Khamenei's son, Mojtaba, as successor to his father in an act of defiance. Nor are there indications that it is facing imminent collapse. The Iranians who protested against the regime in their masses, before a brutal crackdown in January killed thousands, are not taking to the streets, no doubt more concerned today about their own safety.

> Cornered and battling for its life, the regime has been lashing out in all directions, fighting an asymmetrical war of attrition that it has long prepared for

Any chances of a transition to a more moderate, less hostile government appear remote. If the regime were to disintegrate, the more likely outcome is a fragmented, fractured nation. Iranians will suffer and its neighbours will have another failed state in their backyard.

Continuing the war risks triggering a bigger energy crisis that would have consequences for the global economy and, most important for Trump, endanger Republicans ahead of the mid-term elections. Ending it will leave the regime wounded and weakened, yet able to claim its survival as a victory. Whichever path Trump now takes, it will be others who pay the price of his Iran folly.

Opinion Society

How to combat digital fakery and falsehood

Andy Carter

Anjana Ahuja

Whether it is cloned voices being used to empty bank accounts or AI-generated videos of politicians behaving badly, the digital world has long harboured fakery, falsehood and fraud.

But Hany Farid, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, specialising in digital forensics, recently advanced two opinions that suggest a darkening picture. The first came in a podcast in January, when he was asked to grade the threat to society from deepfakes, on a scale from one to ten. His reply? Twelve.

The second came when I asked Farid more recently if people were generally still able to distinguish between genuine and AI-generated material. "No, this is over," he answered, explaining that experiments in his perceptual studies lab show people can accurately spot whether an image, audio or video is genuine about 65 per cent of the time (chance is 50 per cent). People scrolling emotive content in the real world probably fare worse, he says; even he is no longer confident of telling the difference without forensic help.

> The trouble is that technology has democratised deception

When fakery resembles fact and vice versa, verification of real-world events gets harder and takes longer. There is more fake than legitimate information circulating on the Iran war, Farid suggested to me this week; it took several days for media outlets to triangulate satellite images, witness reports and the views of weapons experts to suggest that the US bombed a girls' school. The line between fact and fiction is not so much blurring as becoming invisible.

There are steps that institutions and individuals can take today to practise "digital hygiene". Given it can take as little as 10-15 seconds of audio to clone a voice, Farid says, banks should immediately abandon using voice biometrics to access sensitive information. Families are advised to set up a secret password, and practise using it, to protect against fraudsters impersonating a distressed relative in urgent need of money.

Some companies have voluntarily signed up to watermarking schemes to stamp their content as AI-generated or AI-altered. Google's SynthID, for example, inserts covert digital signatures when files are created or amended. These hallmarks stay hidden to viewers but show up under specialist analysis and survive cropping (Gemini users can upload content to check for watermarks). Embedded signatures are hard to strip out without damaging file quality — unlike metadata, which comprise attached identifiers such as date and location.

The EU wants digital watermarking to become mandatory. Should it be a criminal offence to pass off AI-generated material as real? Farid believes that would be undesirable and unenforceable — but tech companies should, he argues, bear some criminal liability for non-consensual intimate imagery and child abuse material.

His own cyber security company analyses organisations' livestreamed meetings, among other techniques, to verify in real time that on-screen participants are not AI clones. The research firm Gartner estimates that by 2028, one in four job applicants will be fake, some of them scammers hoping to break into corporate systems.

The trouble is that technology has democratised deception: it takes only motivation and a mobile phone to churn out convincing deepfakes. These fantasies, catering to our biases, muddy how we perceive reality: most of us access the wider world through our screens, a pixelated feed with its margins set by algorithms and increasingly curated via suggestible chatbots and digital assistants.

The rise of deepfakes means that people who care about the truth will delay reposting information to check it — if reposting at all. That increasingly cedes the public square to those who care less, or those who stand to gain from misinformation and disinformation. In a recent survey on how AI is changing media, compiled by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford university, one contributor suggested "breaking news" will soon be superseded by "breaking verification". Others float the idea of a "digital chain of custody" for digital information, detailing its origin, ownership and any changes.

These, though, are proposed solutions for a problem that is already here. Reality is becoming diluted by artifice, and we are harmed twice over in the struggle to keep up: wrongly falling for the falsehoods and mistakenly dismissing truths as fake news (the latter is the so-called liar's dividend).

But what a lifeline for the unscrupulous! As the sea of contestable facts expands, how much easier it becomes to stay afloat.

The writer is a science commentator

Letters

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Linking aid and migration policies is worse than misguided

We were aghast to see Amy Pope, head of the UN's International Organization for Migration, applauding the transactional turn in EU member states' aid policies in the article "Linking aid and migration policies a 'sea change', says IOM head" by Laura Dubois (Europe Express, FT.com, March 5).

This idea of tackling the "root causes" of (irregular) migration is by no means new; it has come in and out of fashion for decades. It has also spurred both inefficient migration policy and bad aid policy.

Our MIGNEX survey findings show that the sweeping notion of managing migration by dealing with its root causes is at odds with how migration works. The interviews with more than 13,000 young adults across Africa, Asia and the Middle East demonstrate that people's decisions to migrate tended to be dominated by drivers outside the scope of migration policy: for example, people who have ties with migrants are more likely to want to migrate. Some root causes work in counterintuitive ways and addressing them could, in fact, foster migration. There is longstanding evidence that economic growth and development are associated with rising emigration.

Alleviating the hardships that might result in migration is important, for intrinsic reasons. But if migration and development policy objectives are increasingly intertwined, policy efforts will focus on the hardships that appear to drive migration, as opposed to those hardships that matter the most to all people. In doing so, it will also undermine the case for development aid and mean aid has inadvertently legitimised restrictive and harmful deterrence and border control policies.

The message EU ministers should be taking into their meetings is that linking aid, migration and deterrence has not delivered what it promised and is not based in evidence. Development policy should be steered by development outcomes and not by its presumed effects on migration.

Jessica Hagen-Zanker
Head, Migration and Displacement Hub, ODI Global, Surrey, UK
Claire Kumar
Head of Policy, ODI Europe, Bangor, County Down, UK

Lack of workforce buy-in may hamper AI adoption

Regarding the piece by Ellesheva Kissin and Elizabeth Bratton, which online ran with the headline "Accenture combats AI refuseniks by linking promotions to log-ins" (Report, February 20), many organisations are rightly advocating for a more symbiotic human-AI working relationship, but the way this is implemented risks becoming a blocker to long-term success.

While AI adoption may rise quickly, the crucial question remains: how much of this increased usage will yield meaningful results over performative experimentation?

The answer lies in staff engagement. Research shows that 70-80 per cent of AI initiatives fail, with lack of workforce support a recurring cause. Mandating AI use outright can backfire, undermining adoption rather than fostering it. Organisations can build genuine buy-in through short pilot phases, regular feedback cycles and targeted training. These are approaches that encourage employees to embrace AI tools voluntarily, rather than through the pressure of threatened career consequences.

Of course, buy-in requires a foundation of skills and knowledge. AI will fail to deliver its full return unless employees are properly trained to use it. Yet almost three-quarters of the UK workforce has received no formal AI education, even though two-thirds use it daily at work. Simply hiring specialist talent is not enough: without upskilling existing staff, organisations risk creating knowledge silos. Tailored training programmes, aligned with operational needs and tools, are essential to ensure AI is used effectively, and to build employee confidence and engagement.

Ultimately, success with AI depends less on mandates and more on meaningful employee engagement. Training and genuine buy-in are not just morale boosters, they are vital to ensure AI is used successfully and delivers measurable results.

David Barber
Distinguished Scientist at UiPath and Head of UCL Centre for AI
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Oil and gas volatility shows up in energy bills

Daniel Yergin suggests that the oil and gas system is resilient and diversified ("Is the nightmare scenario for global energy here?", Opinion, March 6). The lesson here is not resilience, it's volatility. Every time instability or conflict impact supply routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, energy prices surge, households pay higher bills and oil and gas companies profit from more drilling and fossil fuel expansion.

This cycle of crisis and profiteering will never enhance energy security. It is the predictable outcome of a fossil fuel-dependent system. The idea of oil "resilience" looks very different if we consider whether the attack on Iran would have happened if the US were a net importer of oil today rather than a net exporter. If governments want stability for economies, households and the climate, the answer is not doubling down on fossil fuels but ending the cycle of war profiteering and accelerating the transition to renewable energy.

Valentina Stackl
Oil Change International
Washington, DC, US

A corollary to the UK's 'strength in services'

Tej Parikh, in "Britain's rising tax on ambition" (Free Lunch, FT.com, March 1), reports that "right now the most ambitious UK graduates, especially those in science, engineering, technology and maths (Stem) fields, are channelled into careers in the 'Bermuda Triangle of talent' (finance, management consulting and corporate law)".

Unless something is done, this is Britain's future decline in plain sight. finance is a bloated industry protected by regulation and special interests, management consulting can be helpful or can be just a means of keeping weak leaders in their jobs and corporate law has become important because the framework for doing business has been overcomplicated by a legal profession keen to make itself indispensable. None of these makes a direct contribution to the things that matter — health, education, food, goods, homes, essential services, environment.

Is it time to question Britain's much-vaunted "strength in services" as a virtue? Perhaps "weakness in delivery" is a corollary?

John Hunter
Orpington, Kent, UK

EU military co-operation cannot be held to ransom

I agree with Adam Tooze (Opinion, February 20). A common army of the "coalition of the willing", financed by common debt, is the way forward for credible European defence. An enhanced military co-operation is a second-best, but it would be much better than what Europe has now.

Germany and France are the economic drivers of the EU and thereby also of its strength and unity. Outliers such as Hungary are economically dependent, so it is ridiculous they can hold to ransom initiatives in the interest of Europe's security, like loans to Ukraine. If some EU member states don't want to join an enhanced defence co-operation, they can be left in the outer ring of states that may co-operate more loosely. Candidate countries like Ukraine could be assisted by means of agreements on close co-operation, namely on arms manufacture and joint training.

An enhanced defence union would not just put reliance on the US military on the backburner. It would also help the US taxpayer, as it would allow them to focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The world order is changing fast and EU defence policy must change with it.

Marek Svoboda
Frankfurt, Germany

Accounting standards flaw is a risk to financial system

Further to the pertinent comments of Daniel J Aronoff on the risks of US Treasuries (Letters, February 16), it is worth noting that the accounting standards do not help close the gap that exists with bank regulations.

Banks are required to keep "high-quality liquid assets" to comply with liquidity regulation. Government bonds like US Treasuries are the most obvious asset class given their treatment from the regulator and their safe haven status. The fact that interest rate risk is embedded in these fixed-income assets is a well-known feature and banks know how to manage it.

Silicon Valley Bank held these assets in a "hold-to-maturity" accounting classification, raising the question: how can HQLA held to satisfy liquidity requirements — that is, available to be converted to cash in the short term (via sale or repo) — be allowed to be classified as HTM? Holding an asset to maturity makes the hedging of interest rate risk meaningless and if carried out it would impact the profit and loss of the institution with questionable investor reaction.

Unless the accounting rules and bank regulation address the requirements for a stable financial system, the rules banks must follow will be insufficient to accomplish systemic safety.

Nikos Kaloyeropoulos
London W8, UK

The role of stuffy offices in Britain's low productivity

Solving the UK's productivity conundrum will take more than a focus on the "long tail of unproductive firms". It demands a broader rethink of how all businesses enable performance ("Share of UK companies with low productivity higher than in 1997", Report, February 23).

As return-to-office mandates rise, employers should not overlook the importance of the physical office environment as a productivity driver.

Our recent research revealed almost three-quarters of UK employees lost time to office distractions — adding up to 330mn working hours a year. Disruptive noise levels, bad lighting, poor air quality and outdated tech were to blame, with 10 per cent of workers admitting they've fallen asleep at work due to "stuffy" rooms.

While the office environment alone will not solve the UK's productivity puzzle, crafting the ideal environment for productivity — including adopting the right tools and optimising the right office layout and conditions — remains an underutilised lever to build more productive workplaces.

Hanneke Faber
CEO of Logitech, London EC2Y, UK

Locking away carbon will give us breathing room

Simon Mundy's Moral Money article "The other side of the 'net zero' ledger" (FT.com, February 25) captures the central tension shaping net zero policy: while businesses and scientists agree on the need for large-scale carbon dioxide removal (CDR), the sector remains voluntary, under-supported by regulation and economically out of sync, hindering its potential.

Emissions trading schemes in the UK, EU and Japan are beginning to consider CDR integration, but one barrier repeatedly highlighted is permanence, or, how long a carbon removal keeps CO_2 locked away. The insistence from the EU on millennial-scale certainty before deployment risks paralysing the very market that could help decarbonise emissions-heavy sectors. The climate challenge is immediate, so even 300 years of stable carbon storage gives us 300 years to solve a crisis that is just 120 years old.

Alastair Collier
Chief R&D Officer, A Healthier Earth, London E1, UK

Better to play it safe?

Given the public's concerns about the safety of self-driving cars, may I suggest the print newspaper headline was a bad choice of words: "Insurers bullish on impact of self-driving cars" (Report, March 6).

Jem Eskenazi
London N3, UK

Opinion

Taco on Iran will come too late for Trump

GEOPOLITICS

Edward Luce

Sometime soon Donald Trump will ring the closing bell on his Iran war. That moment will have less to do with whether his mission is accomplished (whatever that is) than how much pain he can endure. We can safely assume that Iran's pain threshold is higher than his. Trump will nevertheless present his exit as a victory. Iran will have every incentive to ensure nobody believes him. That is the crux of his self-inflicted dilemma.

Anticipating this would have served Trump well. One step would have been to build up America's strategic petroleum reserves, which dropped sharply after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and were never replenished. Oil and natural gas prices may have soared but an ounce of prevention is still worth a pound of cure. A second would have been to win the Gulf monarchies round to his war plan in advance. That he had no fixed goal made that difficult. Now he is faced with an increasingly irascible Gulf. A third would have been to prepare the US public for a longer conflict. Ditto.

The question is whether Trump has become aware of the drawbacks of not thinking ahead. Were he on a learning curve, he would know that even a severely degraded Iran can continue to frighten oil tankers from the Gulf and shutter much of the region's energy production. Short of occupying Iran, Trump cannot guarantee safe passage in the Strait of Hormuz. Drone production is decentralised and hard to eradicate from the air.

Nor can Trump handpick a new Iranian leadership. Others have observed it took America two decades to replace the Taliban with the Taliban in Afghanistan. It took Trump just over a week to replace one Khamenei with another. Since Mojtaba, the new supreme leader, is considered more hardline than his father, Trump will probably draw a blank on securing an Iranian ceasefire, let alone an "unconditional surrender". Which leaves him with a couple of very risky gambles.

> He chose this course of action and has taken explicit satisfaction in his power of life and death

The first would be to send US or Israeli commandos to Isfahan to seize what remains of Iran's 400kg stockpile of enriched uranium. Success would offer Trump a spectacular off-ramp. Indeed, the temptation of a lightning operation that upends the Taco narrative could be overpowering. Hovering over that is the ghost of Jimmy Carter. His failed 1980 Iranian hostage rescue mission helped to sink his presidency. Having so often announced the obliteration of Iran's nuclear programme, Trump would not survive an equivalent setback.

His other gambit would be to occupy Iran's Kharg island to shut off its oil exports. Such a move could be even riskier because it would involve many more US boots on the ground than a commando raid — and for much longer. It would strangle Iran's main revenue source and worsen the oil shock. But its risk-reward ratio looks reckless. After barely a week, public support for Trump's Iran war is at the same level it was for the Vietnam war in late 1967 following more than 11,000 American deaths. There is no US tolerance today for even a few dozen casualties. Taco — "Trump always chickens out" — is thus a question of when.

Trump would still pay a high price for a unilateral declaration of victory. The biggest risk is that nothing will happen. By walking away, the US president would have given Iran knowledge of his price point, which is soaring energy prices. Iran also has a vote in deciding when this conflict ends. It would have every reason to sustain its disruption to global energy markets as a deterrent to Trump changing his mind. Iran has now been attacked by Israel four times in the past two years — twice with Trump's America in the lead. Iran will want to raise the costs of another resumption a few months from now.

The Iranian regime's surest route to safety would be to go nuclear. Good intelligence can keep making a rubble of Iran's nuclear capacity but that is no sure bet. Iran's logic of dashing to North Korea's status will be compelling. Others, notably Russia's Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong Un, may be tempted to help. Regimes everywhere are making the same calculations with fresh immediacy.

One piece of damage that Trump cannot repair is to trust in America. Long after oil prices have stabilised, the world will recall his administration's glory in the imagery of "lethality", as his defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, calls it. Trump chose to go to war and has taken explicit satisfaction in his power of life and death. War is a grave step after all other options have been exhausted. That Trump had other courses of action is well understood. That he preferred this one is hard to unsee.

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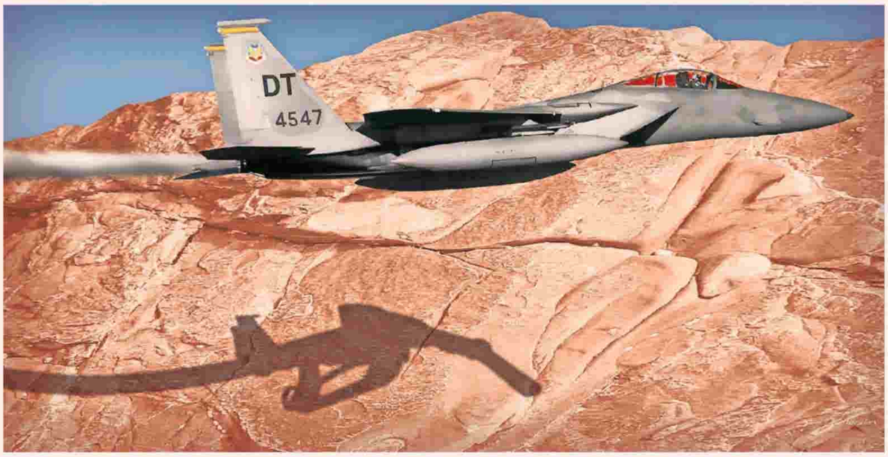
The economic consequences of the war



Martin Wolf Economics

There are lasting lessons about energy resilience to be learnt from this conflict

Will the US and Israeli war on Iran soon be over? This question has to be answered if one is to address its possible economic consequences. But this depends on the answers to two other questions. Does Robert Armstrong's "Taco" ("Trump always chickens out") coinage apply here, or not? And, second, would an end to the war for Donald Trump mean it has also ended for Iran, Israel or both? If these two combatants, for whom the struggle is existential, fight on, the carnage visited on the Gulf could continue, too.

A part of the difficulty is that it is impossible to know what Trump wants. Maybe he has little idea himself. Thus, on Monday, the president told a press conference that the war will be over "very soon", but not this week. Yet two days earlier, he wrote on Truth Social that "there will be no deal with Iran except UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER! After that, and the selection of a GREAT & ACCEPTABLE Leader(s), we, and many of our wonderful and very brave allies and partners, will work tirelessly to bring Iran back from the brink of destruction."

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responded to Trump that they "are the ones who will determine the end of the war", adding that "Tehran would not allow the export of "a single litre of oil" from the region if the US and Israeli attacks continued. The choice of Mojtaba Khamenei, who has just lost much of his family, as his father's successor, underlines this recalcitrance. It looks rather as though Iran is set on victory, not unconditional surrender, which is in any case highly unlikely to follow a conventional aerial campaign. After more than two years of Israeli bombardment, Hamas has not surrendered unconditionally. Iran will surely not do so. That would take the use of nuclear weapons. Is Trump mad enough to consider that?

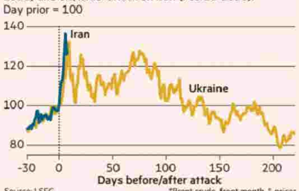
A cessation of active hostilities seems far more plausible. America might believe it has done enough damage and decide to stop its attacks. Iran, battered and bruised, might decide to stop attacking its neighbours. Trump might force Israel to halt its attacks even though the Iranian regime survives. This would not be peace, but a (perhaps temporary) ceasefire. In sum, a ceasefire, not peace, seems a plausible near-term outcome, largely driven by Trump's worries over oil prices. Another outcome could be continued war, but at a lower intensity, because Iran's weaponry is depleted. Ships might even sail the Strait of Hormuz again.

What might all this mean for the world economy? That depends on what happens to the shipments of oil and gas from the region and the scale of long-term damage to oil and gas facilities.

Capital Economics considers three scenarios. The first is of a short, sharp conflict, lasting about two weeks. The estimate is of a loss of around 1.4 per cent of global annual oil exports and a similar proportion of LNG exports. The second is of a conflict lasting three months, but with limited longer-term damage to facilities. The estimate for this is of a loss of 5-6 per cent of world exports of crude and LNG in 2026. The third is also of a conflict lasting three months, but with longer-lasting damage to capacity, notably to Iran's Kharg Island. The estimate here is of a loss of 8-9 per cent of world exports of oil and LNG, with an impact into 2027. Oil prices could hit $150 a barrel and prices of gas in the EU (per megawatt hour) could hit €120. According to Capital Economics, the only comparable global supply shock to this last possibility was "from the late-1970s to the mid-1980s".

The oil price rise matches that immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

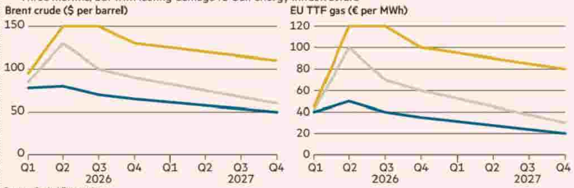
Oil price* around the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Feb 24 2022) and US/Israel attack on Iran (Feb 28 2026). Day prior = 100



Source: LSEG *Brent crude, front month, $ prices

The most disruptive scenarios could have large and prolonged effects on oil and gas prices

Scenarios for oil and gas prices



Source: Capital Economics

A long and destructive war would have noteworthy effects on the price level and economic activity. In poor countries, the impact could be severe. In western countries, where "affordability" has become a political issue, a spike in energy costs would be unpopular.

Growth would surely suffer. But, for reasons Paul Krugman spells out for the US, even the worst scenario would be nowhere near as economically damaging as the shock of the late 1970s. One reason is that our economies have become far less oil intensive since then. As Martin Sandbu has noted, Europe has also shown itself far better able to adjust to higher gas prices than feared when the Ukraine war started. Another reason is that central banks have done a far better job of anchoring inflation expectations since they learnt the lessons of the 1970s.

What are the more narrowly economic lessons from this shock?

The first is that we need to reduce our vulnerability to shocks in the availability of fossil fuels. For the US, the net effect of big rises in fossil fuel prices on aggregate real incomes is modestly positive because it is a net exporter, though the distributional effects are malign. But the opposite is true for almost all other industrial countries. Their need to invest in renewables, in order to reduce vulnerability, is clear.

> We have repeatedly seen the US start fights on a whim but end up in lengthy and catastrophic disasters

The second is the need for central banks to ensure that inflation expectations do not get unanchored. Unfortunately, the price spike after Covid makes this more likely. Central banks must be prepared to act against second-order effects of big price rises.

The last is that subsidising energy every time prices jump is unaffordable. Support should go to those worst hit.

The biggest lesson of all, however, is the most obvious. Yes, an early ceasefire seems plausible, which would limit the damage. But such an outcome is far from inevitable. We have repeatedly seen the US start wars on a whim but end up in lengthy and ultimately catastrophic disasters. Harold Wilson kept the UK out of the Vietnam tragedy. Given the impulsive start to this war, Keir Starmer was right to attempt the same.

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America has become an agent of chaos in world energy markets

Emma Ashford

In 1980, shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Jimmy Carter told Congress that "an attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force".

This policy, which would become known as the Carter Doctrine, committed the US to defend the free flow of oil globally. But over the past few decades, America has come to play a more insidious role in global energy markets. True, the growth in US shale production has smoothed out some of the notoriously volatile gyrations of oil prices in times of crisis. But at the same time, US foreign policy choices have increasingly created destabilisation and distortions.

Consider Washington's addiction to sanctions. Earlier generations of sanctions often included carve-outs to protect energy markets. But since at least Donald Trump's first term in office, sanctions have become increasingly broad, with fewer exemptions.

"Maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran and Venezuela largely shut off sales to all international buyers, except through illicit mechanisms such as the shadow fleet. American and European sanctions on Russian oil exports following the invasion of Ukraine upended the global oil trade, with the chaos sending prices spiking for several months.

US military adventurism has likewise been problematic. Take the Obama administration's choice in 2011 to intervene on behalf of Libyan protesters against the Gaddafi regime. Libya's oil exports dropped to around 20 per cent of its prior output, removing a major producer from world markets, albeit in a period of low demand. It took several years for Iraqi production to recover from the 2003 US invasion, and ongoing conflict in the country has had long-lasting effects on its oil industry.

> One wonders how long China, India and others will tolerate these disruptions

The war with Iran is merely the most recent case of America operating as a destabilising force in global oil markets. Traders and energy security specialists have long feared a conflict that would close the Strait of Hormuz to traffic, prevent exports from facilities in the Gulf or damage oil production infrastructure. All of this, however, was considered an unlikely scenario until now.

But the Trump administration has brought us far closer to just such a situation. Iran may not be physically blocking the Strait of Hormuz, but few captains (or their insurers) are brave enough to sail through an open war zone. Qatar has already shut down gas production, sending prices soaring, and producers such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq are beginning to shut in oil production as they run out of domestic storage.

Oil prices have been ticking up, and they are surging for specific commodities such as jet fuel, where the market is more constrained. The effects of America's war of choice will be felt most acutely in Asia, where Japan, Taiwan and other US allies are heavily dependent on Gulf fuel. Both China and India are likewise starting to feel the pinch. And in Europe, still barely recovering from the aftermath of Ukraine energy shortfalls, prices have skyrocketed.

Ironically, these effects are already being felt by the American consumer as well. The Trump administration is looking for mitigation strategies, including loosening sanctions on Russia, and releases from the US or G7 strategic petroleum reserves. But such measures are unlikely to have a significant effect on prices if the war continues for weeks to come.

It increasingly seems that pressure from voters and markets feeling the pinch of increased energy costs may lead Trump to search for an off-ramp from this conflict. Pushback from US allies and adversaries alike has also begun. The Gulf states are in an impossible situation: facing significant economic impact from the war, but unable to break with the US. Indian refineries are already seeing shortfalls in supply of crude oil, while China has suggested it may negotiate directly with Iran to guarantee safe passage for its tankers.

Trump may soon back down. But while his is not the first administration to wield US power in a way that undermines global energy markets, the consequences of this war of choice are incalculable. One wonders how long China, India and others will tolerate these disruptions and their potential economic impact, before they conclude that American policy in the Middle East is a genuine threat to their energy security.

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COMMENT

Editorials

Missile deployment further proof that Japan poses real threat to regional peace

In a troubling shift in its defense strategy, Japan advanced its offensive capabilities by deploying the first batch of domestically produced long-range missiles in the southwestern prefecture of Kumamoto on Monday. Deployment of the upgraded Type-12 land-to-ship missiles is expected to be completed by the end of March, basically marking an end to Japan's defensive stance under Article 9 of its Constitution.

The move has been in preparation for a long time, at least since Japan formulated its second National Security Strategy in 2022. The missiles, with a range of about 1,000 kilometers, bring the Chinese mainland and much of the East China Sea within striking distance.

Japan claims the move is "a necessary response to rising regional tensions". But this reasoning rings hollow. It is only an excuse for Tokyo to push for the resurgence of Japanese militarism, which is the real threat to regional peace and stability.

As Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at a news conference on the sidelines of the annual gathering of the country's top legislature on Sunday, Japan should have deeply repented for the wrong path it chose in history, including its brutal invasion and colonization of China's Taiwan region.

Instead, the current Japanese leader claimed that a "Taiwan contingency" could constitute a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan, under which Japan may exercise its so-called "right of collective self-defense". Given that Japanese militarists used "survival-threatening situation" as a pretext for launching aggression, such rhetoric can only make the people in the region alert and deeply worried: Where exactly is Japan headed?

Despite ongoing regional tensions, Tokyo received a so-called "personal visit" from a member of the Democratic Progressive Party authorities of the Taiwan region on the weekend. The Sanae Takaichi government was fully aware of the "unspeakable motives" behind this individual's surreptitious visit to Japan with the motive of engaging in provocations for "Taiwan independence", as pointed out by Foreign Ministry spokesman Guo Jiakun.

This is a thoroughly despicable act, not only by the DPP authorities but also by the Takaichi government, which feigns ignorance of the nature of this "personal visit".

China is firmly opposed to any attempt by the Japanese side to create gray areas or test Beijing's red lines on the Taiwan question. The Takaichi government should stop leveraging the Taiwan Strait situation to accelerate the pace of Japan's military buildup. Guo warned that Japan will have to pay a price for emboldening such provocations and acting recklessly, and shall bear full and sole responsibility for all consequences arising from its actions.

Japan has already deployed PAC-3 interceptors and mid-range surface-to-air missiles on many of its islands, and Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi has announced plans to deploy the mid-range SAMs on Japan's westernmost island of Yonaguni, just east of the Taiwan island, by March 2031. From point to line to area, Japan is quickly covering an increasingly larger region within the range of its missiles under the pretext of countering "external threats", irrespective of the implications of its provocative moves and the potential consequences.

All this indicates that Japan is rapidly deviating from the path of peaceful development it has long claimed to uphold, and is moving further in a dangerous direction reminiscent of its aggressive and militaristic past.

Such a "preemptive" strategy only fuels potential military adventurism. It will inevitably exacerbate regional tensions, and could trigger uncontrollable conflicts. The exercising of the "right of collective self-defense" is simply a way to hollow out Japan's pacifist Constitution, which renounces the right of belligerency.

The lessons of history are clear: unchecked military ambition leads only to conflict and suffering. It is imperative that all peace-loving nations should unite to oppose any form of militaristic resurgence in Japan.

The world cannot afford to stand idly by while Japanese right-wingers gamble with the lessons of history.

Global nuclear energy governance critical

In the push for a global energy transition, much attention has been given to wind turbines and solar panels. Yet a sober look at the arithmetic of decarbonization suggests that these alone will not suffice. The second Nuclear Energy Summit, hosted by France in Paris on Tuesday, reflects a growing recognition that nuclear energy must be part of the solution.

Nuclear power provides nearly 10 percent of the world's electricity and roughly a quarter of global low-carbon electricity. Yet if the world is to achieve the goals of the United Nations' Sustainable Development framework and the climate commitments embedded in the Paris Agreement, much more will be required.

Academic studies have repeatedly shown that power systems dominated by intermittent sources become increasingly costly without a stable baseload component. Nuclear energy remains one of the few technologies capable of providing large-scale, low-carbon, around-the-clock electricity.

The agenda of the Paris summit reflects this reality. Three themes dominate: regional cooperation in nuclear deployment, financing models for new reactors, and technological innovation ranging from small modular reactors to advanced Generation-IV systems and, eventually, nuclear fusion.

Each theme addresses a critical constraint. The first concerns inequality in access. Many emerging economies face rapidly rising electricity demand but lack the technological and regulatory capacity to develop nuclear power. The benefits of nuclear technology remain concentrated among advanced industrial states. Without mechanisms for technology transfer and capacity-building, the gap could widen.

The financial factor is another constraint. Nuclear projects are capital-intensive and involve long construction horizons. This makes them difficult to finance through conventional market mechanisms. The cost of capital — often exceeding half the lifetime cost of a plant — depends heavily on government guarantees and stable regulatory frameworks. Innovative financing tools, including green bonds and public-private partnerships, are therefore becoming crucial to the industry's development.

Technological and institutional constraints cannot be ignored either. Nuclear supply chains remain fragile. Skilled labor shortages affect reactor construction. Meanwhile, spent fuel management and long-term waste disposal continue to raise public concerns. The legitimacy of nuclear energy expansion hinges on credible safety regulation, transparent oversight and international verification mechanisms.

These challenges underline the relevance of a summit devoted to nuclear power. The task is not merely to expand capacity but to do so in a manner that is safe, equitable and internationally coordinated. Geopolitical tensions, such as the Middle East crisis, have further exposed vulnerabilities in global energy supply chains. In such a context, the governance of nuclear energy cannot remain fragmented or politicized.

The participation of Chinese Vice-Premier Zhang Guoqing, the special representative of President Xi Jinping, in the meeting shows the importance China attaches to nuclear energy cooperation and governance.

China stands ready to work with countries on a more inclusive nuclear energy governance and development. The country now ranks among the major countries in nuclear power deployment and possesses one of the most complete industry supply chains in the sector. An atomic energy law that came into effect in the country in January emphasizes peaceful use, international cooperation and strict safeguards against proliferation and nuclear terrorism, providing a legal basis for China to strengthen the regulation of its nuclear energy sector and international cooperation.

Given its wide influence in different fields, nuclear energy development should be framed as part of a broader strategy combining energy security, climate responsibility and technological innovation. International collaboration and coordination, under an improved global governance framework capable of reconciling expansion with security, is needed to allow more countries to benefit from nuclear energy while strengthening safety and nonproliferation standards.

The Paris summit therefore is not simply a diplomatic gathering but a recognition of an uncomfortable truth: achieving emissions target without nuclear energy is not feasible with current technology and global governance system.

If the world is to decarbonize while maintaining economic stability, nuclear power must be governed not by suspicion and fragmentation but by cooperation, transparency and shared responsibility. That, ultimately, is the promise — and the test — of the Paris gathering, which should focus more on actions and results.

Song Chen

Opinion Line

Low-carbon transition fund a catalyst for green growth

China has long prioritized green development, guided by its dual carbon goals of peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060. This national strategy has proven effective in boosting economic growth, accelerating the green transition, and improving the quality of the environment.

But as this year's Government Work Report emphasized, coordinated efforts to cut emissions, reduce pollution and pursue green growth are still essential. In this context, the proposed establishment of a national fund to support the low-carbon transition marks a pivotal move.

This is not the first fund China has set up to accelerate green development. In 2011, the country launched the Renewable Energy Development Fund, financed through central budget allocations and a nationwide surcharge on electricity sales. The mechanism enabled feed-in tariffs that guaranteed renewable energy producers above-market prices for the power they generated.

The fund provided stable financial support to the nascent wind and solar industries. It lowered operational costs, catalyzed rapid industrial expansion, and incorporated a gradually phased-out subsidy structure that spurred technological innovation. After multiple adjustments to subsidies, grid parity with coal-fired power was achieved, and by January 2021, China officially ended feed-in tariffs for new solar and onshore wind projects. What remained was a robust, globally competitive renewable energy sector.

The transformation has been remarkable. At the end of 2010, solar power accounted for just 0.08 percent of China's total installed power capacity. By the end of 2025, that share had surged to nearly 31 percent. Moreover, according to the National Energy Administration, China has helped reduce the average cost of electricity for global wind power projects by 60 percent and solar photovoltaic projects by 80 percent over the past decade.

China will now set up a national low-carbon transition fund to foster new growth drivers such as hydrogen power and green fuels. Unlike wind and solar, which have begun their march toward commercialization, hydrogen power and green fuels remain in the early stages of development. These are capital-intensive, technology-heavy sectors with long return cycles, and are the areas where social capital hesitates to venture due to high risks and slow payback. Green hydrogen, green methanol and sustainable aviation fuels are prime examples: essential for deep decarbonization, yet struggling to attract private investment to be commercially viable.

Hydrogen is unique in that it is a clean alternative to fossil fuels in heavy industries where emissions are hardest to abate. Green hydrogen produced via electrolysis using renewable electricity can replace coking coal in steelmaking. The production of green hydrogen also helps solve the growing problem of wasted wind and solar power. By converting surplus renewable electricity into hydrogen through electrolysis, excess power can be stored and utilized later, effectively turning an inefficiency into an asset.

The proposed national fund will ensure that foundational but risky green technologies receive the sustained support they need to mature. It provides the long-term commitment that private investors cannot offer.

Furthermore, the establishment of such a national fund would send a clear message to the market that these sectors are strategically important and worthy of long-term commitment. It would improve the confidence of private investors, financial institutions, industrial capital and local governments to invest in the sectors.

In essence, the planned low-carbon transition fund will be more than just a financing tool. It will be a catalyst for systemic change. From the Renewable Energy Development Fund to the new low-carbon transition fund, China is demonstrating its capacity to adapt policy tools to meet the evolving demands of the green transition.

Such dynamic adjustment ensures that the country's environmental ambitions are backed by durable financial mechanisms that keep pace with the times, paving the way for a cleaner, more sustainable economic future.

— HOU LIQIANG, CHINA DAILY

What They Say

Humans must retain control of AI's development

Editor's note: *The Government Work Report released last week highlighted the goal of developing the smart economy. National Business Daily spoke to Li Meng, former vice-minister of science and technology, on the potential of the smart economy and the development of artificial intelligence. Below are excerpts of the interview. The views don't necessarily represent those of China Daily.*

Although intelligent technologies' large-scale entry into the consumer market may still take time, intelligent agents capable of delivering emotional value are likely to be among the earliest artificial intelligence applications adopted in households.

Companion robots may become the first specialized embodied intelligent systems to enter the household consumer market. At the same time, smart toys represent a potentially massive yet often overlooked industry. These toys may incorporate weak AI or embodied intelligence, integrating functions such as companionship, education and childcare.

As global demand rises, the size of the companion robot market could eventually rival that of the traditional toy industry. Compared with normal robots, smart toys have relatively simple structures. They do not require humanoid forms, dexterous hands or complex multi-joint designs because their core is natural language interaction capabilities. By contrast, household service robots carry high market expectations but face far greater technological challenges.

The smart economy can be viewed as an upgraded version of the Internet Plus economy. Its development will continue to rely on the existing internet ecosystem and technological foundations, while gradually building a new ecosystem centered on networks of intelligent agents.

Policymakers should carefully manage the transition between concentrated job displacement and the distributed creation of new employment opportunities brought about by AI, establishing transition mechanisms and safety nets to smooth this adjustment period.

Ultimately, the relationship between AI and humanity should be defined as that between humans and a super tool, or a tool-like partner.

AI capabilities may progress along a trajectory from assistant, to agent, to embodied humanoid systems, then to a stage where carbon-based and silicon-based intelligence mirror each other, and then eventually toward superintelligence.

Without appropriate constraints and governance, it is conceivable that AI could evolve into partners that resemble humans or even surpass human capabilities, drawing on advances in biotechnology, information technology, materials science, precision engineering and brain science to create human-like or super-human silicon-based intelligence.

The key question, however, is whether humanity needs or desires AI to develop in this direction, and whether humans have the ability to guide AI's evolution toward a form consistent with human intentions.

The appropriate development direction is for AI to remain a tool that is capable of enhancing human abilities and efficiency, or at most a tool-like partner that provides assistance and emotional value.

For enterprise applications, AI will primarily evolve into super tools that enhance productivity. For consumer applications, it will mainly function as tool-like companions. In either case, it should not develop beyond the boundaries of a tool.

Human beings must remain the central actors in the development of AI and maintain a leading role in shaping its future. Humanity should define the trajectory of AI.

Achieving this goal will require agile governance and strengthened international cooperation so that AI can become an international public good that benefits all of humanity.

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