Price pressures

India must find sources of sustainable energy to curb inflation

The new series of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), the second data release of which was issued on Thursday, does not yet have enough historical data for robust comparisons, but does include enough information to provide clues about the future. Retail inflation in India quickened to a 10-month high of 3.2% in February 2026, largely driven by food inflation and precious metal prices. This rise is something that the government should take note of early, avoiding any complacency that might have crept in due to the low inflation levels of the last year or so. Food has a lower weight in the new series as compared to the old one, but is nevertheless a major driver of inflation with a 36.75% weight in the overall CPI. Inflation in food and beverages rose to 3.35% in February from 2.1% in the previous month, driven by quickening price levels in the meat, oils, and fruits and nuts categories. Notably, inflation in tomato prices stood at more than 45%. Thankfully, this was accompanied by a contraction in prices of the two other staples – onions and potatoes – by 28% and 18%, respectively. A large part of the low inflation last year was due to a statistical base effect that is now gone. Looking ahead, there are various factors that could result in rapidly rising food inflation. The first is that climate scientists are predicting the return of the El Niño effect in the middle of the monsoon this year. A weak monsoon will naturally raise food prices. The second impact will depend on how long the conflict in West Asia continues. Sustained natural gas supply constraints will hurt fertilizer production, affecting food output and, eventually, prices.

The other factor that has driven inflation up, and which will likely remain a major driver in the near future, is the price of gold and silver. Gold jewellery saw inflation rise to 48.2% in February from an already-blistering 46.8% in January. Inflation in silver jewellery stood at more than 160% in both January and February. With global uncertainty and anxiety skyrocketing, the demand for safe-haven precious metals is not going to let up any time soon. Rising oil prices and LPG and LNG shortages are already raising input prices for industry, which will eventually be passed on to consumers. The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee has a tough job in its next meeting in April. Inflation is being driven by supply constraints, so trying to reduce demand by raising interest rates will not only have a minimal impact on inflation but could also further hurt growth when fuel constraints are already impacting it. The onus lies with the government and its efforts to expedite alternative sources of fuel.

Duty of care

The state must not evade responsibility when it pushes for vaccination

The Supreme Court of India's directive in *Rachana Gangu* to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to design a no-fault compensation scheme for serious adverse events following immunisation (AEFI) arising from India's COVID-19 vaccination campaign marks a shift from a fault-based liability system to a no-fault one in state-run public health programmes. The case arose from writ petitions filed in various courts by families claiming that their relatives had died or suffered serious injury after receiving COVID-19 vaccines. *Rachana Gangu* was over the deaths, in 2021, of two women aged 18 and 20, allegedly from vaccine-induced immune thrombotic thrombocytopenia (VITT), a rare complication of the Covishield vaccine. Affected families contended that India had no dedicated mechanism to compensate those harmed in a state-run programme. For several years, the government resisted establishing a compensation policy because it held that vaccination was voluntary, serious AEFI rates were extremely low, and aggrieved citizens could sue vaccine manufacturers in civil court – a position the Court has since rejected as being impractical for ordinary individuals. The new ruling also builds on *Jacob Puliyel* (2022), in which the Court rejected challenges to emergency vaccine approvals but emphasised the need to make AEFI data publicly available.

In 2024, a few years after scientists had established the same concern in medical literature, AstraZeneca acknowledged in a U.K. court document that Covishield could, in rare instances, cause VITT. Since most Indians were vaccinated with Covishield, the admission further undermined the government's position that links between the vaccine and certain deaths were unproven or coincidental. Despite operating one of the world's largest immunisation efforts, India has historically lacked a dedicated national vaccine injury compensation programme. Many countries, including the U.S. and the U.K., have such vaccine injury compensation programmes where claimants need not prove negligence, but only a plausible link to vaccination. Even the global COVAX facility established a no-fault mechanism for 92 low- and middle-income countries. During the pandemic, the government had reported over 1,100 deaths following vaccination across 219 crore doses administered. The Court ruled that for a welfare state, these represent individual human lives and that the absence of a formal policy left affected families in a legal vacuum. It has also been clear that its directive is not based on adjudicating whether the vaccines caused specific injuries or deaths nor does it replace all fault-based liabilities in public health. However, it sets an important precedent for future vaccination drives, including the new one for HPV, affirming the state's duty of care when endorsing medical interventions for the public good.

The fate of the Washington Consensus, once talisman



Shashi Tharoor

is a fourth-term Member of Parliament (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram (Lok Sabha), the award-winning author of 28 books and the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee for External Affairs

Once upon a late-20th-century lecture circuit, the phrase "Washington Consensus" (WC) did the work of a talisman: 10 tidy policy prescriptions that promised macro stability, market-led growth, and a path out of crisis for beleaguered states. John Williamson, who coined the term in 1989, formulated its 10 commandments: fiscal discipline; reordering public spending toward pro-growth priorities; tax reform to broaden the tax base and lower rates; liberalisation of interest rates; competitive exchange rates; trade liberalisation through lowering tariffs; liberalisation of inward foreign direct investment; privatisation of state-owned enterprises; deregulation to remove barriers to entry and competition; and securing property rights. These were presented as near-universal remedies, administered by institutions in the West that watched the global macro-economy like physicians with a single, favoured prescription, summed up in the words liberalise, privatise, and deregulate. Three decades on, the prescription seems obsolete, overtaken by the onrush of global events.

Its shaping, its legacy

The Washington Consensus was never merely technocratic; it carried a political history. Adopted in moments of crisis, its reforms arrived bound up with conditionality, bargaining power, and a belief that markets, once set free, would generate growth that trickled down. The core tenets of the "consensus" emerged from the ideological crucible of Reaganomics and Thatcherite structural adjustment programmes. These principles – fiscal austerity, deregulation, privatisation, and trade liberalisation – were adopted with little critical scrutiny by the Bretton Woods Institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, or BWIs) and their regional counterparts such as the Asian Development Bank during the mid to late 1980s. Their embrace was largely a response to the debt crises and macroeconomic instability that afflicted many developing countries at the time.

Yet, the consequences of this orthodoxy were far-reaching and, in many cases, deeply destabilising. The Asian financial crisis, which erupted in Bangkok in 1997, and the global financial meltdown of 2008, were among the most visible symptoms of the Consensus's systemic flaws. Equally telling were the breakdowns of the WTO ministerial meetings in Seattle (1999) and Cancún (2003), which exposed the deepening rift between developed and developing nations – a divide the Doha Round never managed to bridge.

One of the most damaging legacies of the Consensus was its categorical rejection of industrial strategy. Promoted by the BWIs on behalf of industrialised nations, this taboo was reinforced through WTO rules on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs), intellectual property (TRIPS), and subsidies – all of which constrained the policy space for developing countries seeking to nurture domestic industries. Another pillar of WC dogma was deregulation in favour of an idealised "free market", even in contexts where market institutions were weak or non-existent – as was the case across much of Africa and the least developed countries. For decades, the IMF advanced the notion that inequality was irrelevant so long as growth occurred and would eventually "trickle down". In practice, however, Structural Adjustment Programmes proved particularly harmful to the poorest nations, which lacked even the minimal institutional foundations upon which the WC's assumptions were built.

> The Washington Consensus no longer fits a multipolar, digital and fragile world

Compounding these issues was the manner in which the WC was conceived – largely in western capitals, without meaningful consultation with the developing countries that would bear the brunt of its implementation. The results were mixed enough to invite reappraisal, even during the WC's heyday. Some countries – parts of East Asia, Pinochet's Chile – found ways to combine market openings with strong state direction and industrial strategy. Others – several Latin American cases, some post-Soviet transitions – suffered debt crises, inequality spikes and social backlash.

A loss of faith

The conditionalities imposed by the BWIs and the rigidity of WTO rules led to widespread discontent, manifesting in street protests across the Global South throughout the 1990s and beyond. The backlash against globalisation – whether from the anti-capitalist left in earlier decades or the far right after 2008, with its toxic blend of white supremacy, racism, and anti-immigration sentiment – can be traced, at least in part, to the failures of the WC and the global financial crisis it helped precipitate. Movements such as MAGA and Brexit reflect this disillusionment.

Ironically, none of the countries that successfully industrialised – neither the United States nor Japan before the Second World War, nor South Korea, Taiwan, or Singapore in the post-war era – adhered to the WC's prescriptions during their formative years. Their success was rooted in state-led strategies that prioritised industrial policy, precisely the kind of intervention the "consensus" sought to delegitimise.

The WC may have dominated the late 20th century, but its time has passed. The task now is to craft a new consensus – one that is inclusive, context-sensitive, and responsive to the realities of a multipolar, digital, and ecologically fragile world.

We must revisit the policy mix that enabled the rare post-war success stories – South Korea, Taiwan, and in its own way, China – to ascend into the ranks of advanced economies. This does not mean a wholesale return to 20th-century models, but rather a thoughtful adaptation of their core principles to contemporary challenges. Education, public health, infrastructure investment, and "infant industry" protection remain as vital today as they were then. But new imperatives – digital trade, climate resilience, and AI governance – demand fresh thinking and innovative frameworks.

We are witnessing two new trends: one, the emergence of a "post-Washington consensus" that insists on public accountability, social safety nets, and the politics of redistribution; the other, the Beijing counter-narrative, where state-led intervention, targeted industrial policy, and limited political liberalisation offer an alternative template.

If the late 20th century was the triumph of liberalisation, the mid-2020s have seen its theatrical undoing in the form of the Trump tariff tempest – sweeping, erratic and punitive. Protectionism is being brandished as an instrument of geopolitics and domestic politics alike. Supply chains are being reconfigured, not so much for efficiency but for dominance and national security. The implicit bargain that underwrote the WC – that free markets would be the engine of prosperity, and supply chains the neutral plumbing of global commerce – has been strained by a revived appetite for economic nationalism, and the wielding of sovereign power as a battle-axe rather than a shield.

Tariffs and industrial subsidies signal a re-politicisation of economic policy. They reveal that Trump's America is willing to accept short-run costs and global friction to reclaim perceived strategic advantage. If in 1990 the default was "liberalise", in 2025 the default is "what will protect our interests?"

The shattering of a myth

Has the world moved to a new consensus? Not exactly. What has emerged is less a single set of new verities and more an acceptance that policy must be politically context-sensitive. A pragmatic eclecticism now rules: fiscal prudence still matters, but so does targeted public investment; markets are powerful allocators, but they need rules, institutions, and buffers; trade is growth-enhancing, but national security can justify strategic decoupling and politics can justify tariffs.

The neat ideological narrative – liberalise, privatise, deregulate – has given way to a toolbox from which policymakers pick instruments with explicit geopolitical and distributional aims. In that messy landscape, success will come from the hard work of designing policies that fit national capacities, global constraints, and political realities.

That is not the end of globalised liberalisation; it is the end of the myth that there is a ready-made template that every nation subscribes to. The struggle to grow and prosper is still every nation's struggle. But each has to find its own path forward amid the policy mess into which all have been plunged.

The India-Canada turnaround is about deliverables



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When the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, visited India (February 27-March 2, 2026), the bilateral relationship saw a remarkable turnaround, especially in the backdrop of the no-nonsense style ties had taken under his predecessor, Justin Trudeau.

Mr. Carney's visit focused on deliverables and avoided getting bogged down by past issues. The visit also marked the culmination of bilateral efforts to put the relationship back on track, initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kananaskis (Canada) in June 2025 and, also the bilateral meeting in Johannesburg in November 2025. Canada has shown particular pragmatism in tiding over domestic politics to curate its relationship with India carefully, skirting some of the legacy issues.

Spotlight on economic issues

Coming on the back of significant geopolitical churn, the focus on economic issues was unmissable. Canada has faced pressure from its southern neighbour, the United States, which is among its largest trade partners, due to supply chains concentrated toward Washington. U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff policy, together with unending wars in Europe, West Asia, as well as the broader Levant region, have shaken global powers with economic momentum and purpose. India and Canada perhaps fall in the same spectrum of countries which want to avoid war and focus on deliverables for their countries.

However, with global supply chains deeply interconnected, it is virtually impossible for countries to avoid some of the fallout from conflicts and realignments. India and Canada see diversification in trade, energy, investment, and security as essential.

> The Canadian Prime Minister's visit has strengthened India-Canada ties, with a focus on India's needs

The Carney visit resulted in at least eight agreements and contracts, spread over a slew of important sectors. At the top was, of course, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), for which the terms of agreement have been signed, marking the road map and structure of negotiations.

There was another memorandum of understanding (MoU) under the Australia-Canada-India Technology and Innovation Partnership on cooperation in technology and innovation, designed to support long-term partnership in these areas and enhance Ottawa's engagements with key Indo-Pacific countries.

The focus areas

There were other agreements on augmenting research partnership, cultural exchange, and collaboration in the areas of food and nutrition. Perhaps two of the most significant agreements were the commercial contract between India's Department of Atomic Energy and Canada's Cameco for the supply of uranium ore concentrates, as well as the MoU on critical minerals cooperation.

These areas of cooperation are aligned with the current needs of India, but also a future road map in which technology and critical minerals are indispensable. First, there is a global rush to secure critical mineral supply chains, vital for technology and everyday life in the modern age. Second, supply chains for critical minerals are concentrated in the hands of a few countries, most notably China.

After China showed its ability to leverage critical mineral supply chains – most recently against the U.S. in the face of tariffs imposed by the Trump administration – other nations have recognised the need to secure their own supply chains that could be affected in times of crises. As such, the bilateral commitments on critical minerals between India and Canada are in sync with the U.S.-led Pax Silica coalition, strengthening strategic cooperation in AI and semiconductors, and which includes India among other 10-odd countries.

Energy at forefront

Among the sectors that India and Canada sought to strengthen, it was energy that took centre stage. Conventional and renewable energy are critical – Canada as a resource-rich nation, and India facing growing demand. For India, growth has to be a function of the usage of clean energy, given its sustainable development goals and zero-emission targets. The fastest way in which India can ensure energy sustainability and predictability is to reduce its reliance on external imports of energy and gradually increase homegrown production of energy. Arguably, the most efficient way to achieve this is by expanding the role of nuclear energy in India's energy mix. India's passing the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, 2025 was seen as a step toward that goal. If the U.S. could be a source country for nuclear reactors, the long-term agreement with Canada for the supply of uranium ore concentrates can add predictability to fuel supply.

Overall, India's dependence on external actors for its energy sources has left it vulnerable in the new era of unending wars. Thus, the uranium deal with Canada is most apt for India in order to reduce external risks, help meet its development goals and also reach its target of achieving 100 GW nuclear power capacity by 2047.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Unbalanced resolution

The UN Security Council resolution against Iran, co-sponsored by India, is a troubling instance of selective outrage in international diplomacy (Inside pages, March 13). The resolution demands restraint from Tehran while remaining conspicuously silent on the far more destabilising actions that preceded it — including the United States-Israel military strikes and other escalatory acts. Such one-sided censure weakens the credibility of the UN system. By ignoring the chain of events that triggered the crisis, the resolution reduces a complex conflict to a simplistic attribution of blame. India's decision to co-sponsor the measure is puzzling. For decades, New Delhi has prided itself on an independent foreign policy and a consistent defence of multilateral fairness. Aligning with a resolution that overlooks the conduct of major powers risks diluting that tradition. It also clashes with India's practical interests, as the Strait of Hormuz remains a vulnerable trade chokepoint.

M. Jameel Ahmed,
Mysuru

Let wisdom prevail

Continuing tensions between Iran, the United States, and Israel are deeply worrying for the world. Any escalation that drags other nations into the conflict would only multiply human suffering and destabilise the global order. History reminds us that wars ultimately end in dialogue. Therefore, it is imperative that world leaders choose restraint, diplomacy and peace over prolonged confrontation.

Gopalaswamy J.,
Chennai

Scrutiny and trust

The signal sent by the judicial reaction to 'corruption' in the judiciary is troubling. Constitutional institutions command respect through transparency and accountability, not insulation from criticism. Selective sensitivity risks appearing as insecurity rather than strength. If the judiciary expects trust, it must demonstrate the resilience to face scrutiny, not react to it.

Rushita Avula,
Hyderabad

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



Stranded foreign travellers leave a farmhouse owned by an Indian businessman that has been converted into a shelter in Ajman, near Dubai, UAE. AP

The Indians caught in the crossfire

Since February 28, when Israel and the U.S. jointly attacked Iran, plunging the entire West Asian region into war, thousands of Indian tourists and expatriates have been left stranded across the Gulf. Indian missions have struggled to keep up with requests and demands. From missile and drone strikes, to soaring prices, to communication blackouts, the conflict has left civilians vulnerable, reports **Kallol Bhattacherjee**

Priti Prakash, a travel blogger, had planned a vacation with her family to Dubai, an Instagrammable city of skyscrapers, beach adventures, and pure consumerism in the UAE, months before the war broke out in West Asia. On February 28, she arrived early at New Delhi's international airport to board an Emirates flight scheduled for that afternoon. She was excited to go to the country known as the 'land of endless possibilities'.

Soon after the flight took off, Prakash switched on the in-flight entertainment service. She noticed then that most of her co-passengers were glued not to movies, but to CNN's live coverage of the unfolding situation in the region. Israel and the U.S. had jointly attacked Iran, plunging the region into chaos.

"It was a strange feeling," says Prakash. "The war had broken out when I was busy at security check and immigration."

By the time the aircraft reached the Gulf – an important waterway that is an extension of the Indian Ocean and is bordered by eight countries, including the UAE – Prakash learned that the story had shifted from just Iran to the entire region. It appeared that in retaliation to the attacks by Israel and the U.S., which had killed the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran had hit Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain, expanding the scope of the war. As a result, Dubai airport, the world's busiest for international travel, with a record 9.23 crore passengers passing through its terminals in 2024, had also become vulnerable. Everyone on board had started praying.

"The pilot announced that the aircraft had been instructed by flight control to stay out of Dubai's airspace," she says. "So, he kept circulating over Oman. After 30-40 minutes of flying aimlessly, we were finally allowed to land in Dubai."

The war had been long in the making. Israel and Iran have shared an acrimonious past that began immediately with the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Decades of bitterness exploded in June 2025 when the two sides exchanged missiles in the so-called 12-day war. The war of 2026, however, has been unprecedented, as Iran's retaliation has followed the lines Tehran had promised during the last conflict, when it warned that any further violation of Iran's sovereignty would draw the entire region into war.

Within the first 24 hours of being attacked, Iran fired missiles and drones at all the U.S. bases located in Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The expatriate community of workers, a vast majority of them blue-collar as well as white-collar professionals from South Asia and Southeast Asia, came within the strike range of missiles and drones from Iran.

Stranded in paradise

After they landed, Prakash and her family frantically began making plans to leave Dubai as soon as possible. By then, the war had already claimed more than 200 lives. This included at least 180 children at a girls' elementary school in Minab, Iran, which had been bombed.

> I visited the Consulate General of India, Dubai, and requested for a meeting with the Consul General to get help and updates. There were 50-70 people at the gate but no one came to help.
>
> **PRITI PRAKASH**
> Traveller

Dubai, considered a human-created paradise, was filled with the sound of sirens. Anxious people spoke of their fears of falling missiles and debris. Prakash cancelled her plans of going sightseeing and spent most of her time talking to people in the hotel. But planning a way out was difficult: all the flights out had been cancelled. Dubai, an aviation hub, was brought to a standstill as all aircraft had been grounded. Like Prakash, thousands of Indians were stranded in multiple locations in the Gulf.

The UAE government responded with generosity, promising the tourists who were stranded that they would not be thrown out of their hotels. "Hotels received a general order from the government that no one should be thrown out for overstaying," says Prakash. "But when we asked the hotel, the manager told me that that order was specific only to the capital, Abu Dhabi, and did not apply to the rest of the Emirates." She says they had to pay more for the extra two days that they had to spend before returning to India.

Stretched to its limits

According to the Ministry of External Affairs, 90 lakh-1 crore Indian expatriates live and work across the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman – constituting the largest foreign workforce in the region. The Indian government issued safety advisories for expatriate workers, but the conflict has also left many Indians travelling in the region for tourism or business, stranded.

Brijmohan Singh Raghuvanshi, a journalist with Sadhna News, was trapped in the Israeli capital, Tel Aviv. He had arrived in Israel to cover Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit just days before the war. Soon after, the outbreak of the war left him stuck in the country.

"When the Prime Minister's visit ended, we planned to stay a little longer before returning to India. Suddenly, we received emergency alerts asking us to rush to underground bunkers. It came as a surprise," says Raghuvanshi. He adds that despite being a battle-ready state, Israel was jolted this time as Iranian missiles had managed to evade Israel's famed Iron Dome, a multi-mission system capable of intercepting rockets, artillery, mortars, precision-guided munitions, aircraft, helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles at ranges of up to 70 kilometres.

"We were hearing the sound of missiles being intercepted in the air. At times, some of the blasts sounded like missiles hitting the ground. But no one would tell us whether these hits were causing casualties as Israel is under a state of emergency," he says. Under such conditions, he explains, it is difficult to get verifiable reports about how the war is affecting the Israeli public. Barring a few handful news outlets such as *Ha'aretz*, most of the mainstream Israeli media has been unable to provide a clear picture of the ground reality. It is foreign workers in Israel who have been posting on social media about the situation.

Police and rescue services were active on the streets, carrying out operations, but Israeli authorities released no casualty figures from the missile strikes, Raghuvanshi says.

Tired of getting no answers to any of his questions, he hired a cab and requested the driver to take him to a spot where some missiles had fallen on the second and third days of the conflict.

"The driver took me to a place where four large buildings had turned into rubble. We saw rescue services on the spot. They claimed that only one person had died. But looking at the extent of the destruction, it seemed highly unlikely that the casualty figure would be that low," he says. Raghuvanshi spoke to residents of the area, who told him that the toll was higher.

He says there was a surge in prices across Israel, which has made life harder for Indian workers and students. The prices of essentials such as water and milk have soared since the fighting began. "A bottle of water cost about 12 shekels (₹350) a few days after the war began," he says.

Ratnadeep Chakraborty, a PhD student at Tel Aviv University, who saw the war in June 2025, is experiencing the current conflict as well. He says he has observed Israel's operations during both. "The war of June 2025 appeared more intense as it was focused on Israel. This time, there have been fewer hits, but the war is much bigger as the entire region has been plunged into conflict," Chakraborty says over a call. Like Raghuvanshi, he also speaks of the burden of price rise.

The Indian population in Israel has shot up over the past few years, especially after October 7, 2023, when Hamas-led militants poured into southern Israel from Palestine, killing some 1,200 people and abducting 251. Israel reduced the number of Palestinians working in its economy. The rise of Indians is mainly because the Israeli economy is absorbing more Indian workers in the agriculture and construction sectors, where there is a demand for labour. According to the Ministry, the number of Indian blue-collar workers in Israel is around 30,000.

Raghuvanshi says the war has stretched Israel's defence capabilities. On visiting missile impact sites, he found that while Israel may have managed to restrict information about casualties under emergency rules, Israelis have also been victims of the conflict.

Living in stress

The Indian population in Iran is relatively small, concentrated mostly in Qom, Tehran, and Bandar Abbas, the biggest port of the country.

Annie Mirza, who hails from Lucknow, had got caught, along with her mother, in the 12-day missile war last year. She had gone to Iran on a pilgrimage and was in Qom when the war had started. "This year, the war is much bigger as the Rahbar [Ayatollah Khamenei] was assassinated," says Mirza, who is concerned about the wellbeing of her relatives in Kuwait, Qom, and Tehran.

Mirza spent considerable time in Iran last year before being evacuated with the help of the Indian embassy. She says the people of Iran are different from what the western mainstream media portrays. "Iranians are a proud people and they believe in a life of dignity. It is important for them to live with their heads held high," she says.

Her relatives have been unable to contact her often due to an internet outage in Iran and communication restrictions in Kuwait. Kuwait has maintained strong defence ties with the U.S. since its liberation from Iraqi occupation in 1991, but a telecommunications law that gives the government sweeping powers to block content and deny access to the Internet has made staying in touch harder.

"My cousin spoke to me over a WhatsApp call on Thursday (March 12, 2026) and she said the U.S. embassy and the military base were being bombed by Iranian drones from the morning," says Mirza. Her relatives in Kuwait City are living in stressful circumstances as drones and missiles keep hitting the U.S. base, she says.

Providing protection

While there are no reports of Indians getting hurt in the U.S.-Israeli bombing of Iran, the plight of Indian sailors in merchant navy ships and oil tankers is of concern for the Indian government.

So far, five Indians have died in Iranian drone and missile attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and one is missing (presumed to be dead). At least 35-40 have been injured in attacks, officials from the Ministry said, even as India continues to call for an end to strikes on civilian vessels in the region.

Ashish Kumar, who was the captain of the ship *MV SKYLIGHT,* was killed when the ship was targeted by a projectile off the coast of Oman. Kumar and another Indian sailor were initially declared missing. Subsequently, the Ministry announced that he had died in the attack. His family, in Bihar's Bettiah, was informed over email about the circumstances in which he died, but they remain unconvinced that he is no more.

"The government sent us an email saying human remains were found in the captain's cabin. We need further forensic information before believing the news," says Ashish Kumar Verma, Kumar's brother-in-law. Official sources say forensic details about the recovered human remains from the captain's cabin of the ship can be shared only after more official and legal processes are completed in Oman, which is looking into the matter.

While India continues to hold phone calls with the Iranian foreign minister, Seyed Abbas Araghchi, the real worry continues to be the sheer size of the expat Indian population that works in the region, who will face a security threat for as long as the war continues. According to officials, it is not possible to evacuate such a large number of people in a brief span of time.

Prakash says the war seems to have surprised the Indian missions in the region. "I visited the Consulate General of India in Dubai and requested for a meeting with the Consul General to get help and updates. There were 50-70 people at the gate but no one came to help. I tried to contact them on WhatsApp, email, and the helpline numbers, but there was no response," she says.

When she tried to take a photograph of the Indians waiting at the gate, an Indian official forced her to delete it, insisting that she should contact the mission again on email, she says. Despite the prolonged crisis, the expatriate Indian population has not pressed the panic button yet.

This raises the big question of how long the crisis will continue. Zikrur Rahman, former diplomat and a frequent visitor to the Gulf, feels that Iranians are ready for the long haul, while the Arab states in the Gulf are unprepared for any military confrontation with Tehran.

"This war is changing the region. The Americans, who have long provided security for the GCC countries, have proven inadequate," Rahman says. He argues that Israel's September 2025 attack in Doha, Qatar, targeting Hamas's negotiating team, made Arab states doubt the U.S.'s commitment to their security. "They realised the U.S. did not protect them. Now they are paying a heavy price to Iran for hosting U.S. bases."

By the time Indian visitors return for a desert safari next time, the region would have undergone profound security and political changes, he says.



Passengers at the New Delhi international airport after several flights were cancelled due to the conflict, on March 2. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

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Dry run

IMD needs to provide realistic assessment on El Nino

Even as analysts are still working out the implications of the Iran conflict on the economy, trouble seems to be brewing on another front — the upcoming monsoon. Global weather watchers are now forecasting a likely re-emergence of El Nino this year. World Meteorological Organisation in its early March update said that fading La Nina conditions could morph into a warming El Nino episode by May to July with a 40 per cent probability.

The recent European Centre for Medium Term Weather Forecasts prediction is more direct, with a 22 per cent chance of a 'super' El Nino, an 80 per cent chance of a strong one and 98 per cent chance of a moderate event this year. Should such forecasts come good, the Indian economy could face headwinds on both growth and inflation, calling for policy vigilance. To be sure, there have been false alarms on El Nino in recent years. El Nino events can also vary in severity and not all of them adversely impact India's agricultural output. Offsetting factors such as the Indian Ocean Dipole can blunt its impact on the monsoon. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore that 10 of the 15 drought years in India since 1950, were brought on by El Nino. Moderate to strong El Nino years saw rainfall fall short of LPA (Long-Period Average) by 14-15 per cent. This led to a 1-2 percentage point contraction in the agriculture leg of GVA (Gross Value Added) in those years. Recent official estimates peg the growth in Agriculture GVA at just 2.4 per cent for FY26. A second consecutive year of poor growth can dent rural employment and incomes. Moderate/strong El Nino years have also sparked food inflation, due to kharif output declining by between 6 and 12 per cent. This is a worry, as RBI's forecasts already expect consumer price inflation to rise to 4 and 4.2 per cent in the first two quarters of FY27, without budgeting for El Nino.

In recent years, the government has attempted to address food shortages and inflationary trends set off by El Nino through post-facto interventions. It has undertaken releases of foodgrain stocks from Central buffers, banned exports and opened the floodgates of imports on agri-commodities in short supply. But such interventions carry a price. Ad-hoc export bans and import duty cuts hit realisations for farmers, who are already engaged in a risky occupation.

This makes it critical to get a hold on the strength and timing of the upcoming El Nino ahead of the kharif sowing season. This will enable proactive policy choices on trade, sowing decisions and water conservation. It is important that the India Meteorological Department (IMD) makes a realistic assessment of the likelihood and severity of El Nino in its April monsoon forecast. Experience shows that it tends to underplay the El Nino impact. In the El Nino years 2018 and 2023, IMD forecasted normal monsoons with rainfall at 97 and 96 per cent of LPA. However, actual monsoon performance turned out much worse, with rainfall at 91 and 94 per cent of LPA. More accuracy is called for here.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

Trump's war on Iran: the world's poor will pay dearly

Soaring prices at the pump, the scrapping of mortgage deals, and the prospect of higher prices for everything from food to smartphones. The US-Israeli attack on Iran, and Tehran's retaliation, has rocked the global economy. Consumers are already feeling the pain of the biggest energy supply shock in history, and Iran's new supreme leader, Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, vowed on Thursday that the strait of Hormuz will remain closed, according to a statement attributed to him by state media. The corridor is the biggest chokepoint for the global energy system. The relief to oil prices brought by the International Energy Agency's largest ever release of reserves had already proved shortlived: as the US and Israel intensified attacks on Iran, it escalated attacks on transport infrastructure across the Gulf. But the impact is not evenly felt. And it is the world's poorest and most vulnerable who will be worst hit. LONDON, MARCH 12

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. EUROPE

Keeping Up With the Jones Act

The Trump Administration is looking for ways to mitigate rising U.S. gasoline prices caused by the war. That includes suspending the 1920 Jones Act, and ponder that irony: Because of a war, the President may suspend a law that was intended to protect national security. As Iran escalated its attacks on oil tankers and infrastructure in the region, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Thursday that "in the interest of national defense, the White House is considering waiving the Jones Act for a limited period of time to ensure vital energy products and agricultural necessities are flowing freely to U.S. ports." Hear, hear. NEW YORK, MARCH 12



DESMOND LACHMAN

Can US afford Trump's Iran war?

PERILOUS PATH. It will considerably dent the US budget at a time when the country's public finances are unsustainable



VIA REUTERS

Until recently, one of the MAGA movement's most deeply held convictions was that American blood and treasure should not be expended abroad when Americans — and the American Dream — are suffering at home. Yet now the movement's leader, President Donald Trump, has rushed headlong into a costly war against Iran.

The US-Israeli campaign against the Islamic Republic is bound to put a considerable dent in the US budget at a time when the country's public finances already are on an unsustainable path. It is also bound to continue pushing up international oil and gas prices at a time when the US already has an affordability problem. Neither outcome bodes well for US inflation and employment, with the outlook already grim following an unexpectedly negative monthly jobs report.

Even before the start of the Iran war, Trump suggested that the US needed a substantial expansion of its defence budget, proposing to increase it by $500 billion per year from its current level of $1 trillion. Now that the US is engaged in a full-scale war that could drag on indefinitely and upend the world's geopolitical map, Trump's case for a significant increase in defence spending would seem to have grown even stronger.

Of course, it is too early to gauge the direct costs of the war, since nobody knows how long and intensive it will be. But we do know that it is currently costing around $1 billion per day. The bill for the month-long conflict that Trump is anticipating therefore would approach $50 billion, with the costs continuing to rise the longer the war continues.

Beyond the direct costs of replacing US ammunition and equipment, there will be other reasons for augmenting the defence budget.

For starters, the Pentagon may need to prepare for a scenario in which the entire Middle East is destabilised, especially if the Trump administration follows through on arming the Iranian Kurds, which will antagonise Turkey and perhaps incite other separatist movements within Iran.

Second, with America's attention diverted, Russia and China could see an opportunity to press their claims in Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively, demanding even greater US military spending to maintain deterrence.

NO FREE LUNCHES

As the Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman was fond of saying, there is no such thing as a free lunch. Nowhere is this maxim more aptly applied than to military interventions. The wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan all demonstrated that the US is not good at choosing between guns and butter. It always seems to want both, even though pursuing both risks generating inflationary pressure.

This is an especially relevant concern today. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the US can expect to run budget deficits exceeding 6 per cent of GDP as far as the eye can see. That means it is on track to exceed the debt-to-GDP ratio at the end of World War II.

Normally, when geopolitical tensions are heightened, investors rush towards the safety of US Treasuries. But foreign investors might be losing their appetite for US debt; bond yields have been rising since the start of the war

The Trump administration may not care about America's deteriorating public finances, but bond markets certainly do. Normally when geopolitical tensions are heightened, international investors rush towards the safety of US Treasuries. But in yet another sign that foreign investors might be losing their appetite for US debt, bond yields have been rising since the start of the Iran war.

With the US government financing a $2 trillion budget deficit and rolling over around $9 trillion in maturing bonds this year, a loss of foreign appetite for its debt is the last thing it needs. The US also is in no position to absorb an energy-price shock. But that is what seems to be in store. In its fight for survival, the Iranian regime is desperately trying to export the war to its Gulf neighbours and disrupt shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 per cent of the world's oil supply passes. On March 4, Goldman Sachs estimated that a five-week closure of this crucial waterway could send oil prices over $100 per barrel. In fact, that threshold has now already been breached.

OIL PRICE WORRIES

Even though the US economy is far less dependent on oil imports than it was during previous energy-price surges, it certainly would not be immune to a near doubling of the oil price since the start of the year. The International Monetary Fund estimates that, "If energy prices sustain just a 10 per cent increase over a period of one year, this would add 0.4 percentage point to inflation and slow economic growth by 0.1-0.2 per cent" globally.

Such stagflationary effects would further compound an already difficult budget situation by reducing tax revenues. The political strategist James Carville famously said that when it comes to winning elections, the economy is everything. If he is still right, a prolonged Iranian war could spell real trouble for Trump's Republicans in November's midterms. If the US does get a combination of a bond-market crisis, higher inflation, and an economic slowdown, Trump and his party may come to regret their betrayal of the "America First" agenda.

The writer is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and a former deputy director of the IMF's .
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Effective futures markets can lift farm fortunes

Transparent warehousing, integrated spot markets, predictable stock policies, and reduced ad-hoc interventions are essential

Lalit Patil Bahale

India's debate on agricultural futures markets has long been framed as a clash between two characters: the speculative trader and the vulnerable farmer. It is an evocative narrative, but it prevents us from asking deeper questions.

Instead of examining how institutions, incentives, and policies interact, we reduce a complex economic system into a moral judgment. If India aims for agricultural modernity, perhaps the more relevant question is this: can we build a credible system of price discovery while simultaneously using discretionary administrative control to influence those same prices? And if not, what must change?

Understanding the role of futures markets becomes essential in this inquiry. At their core, futures markets help manage price risk by allowing farmers and businesses to lock in prices ahead of time.

In reality, they serve three critical functions — discovering future prices, transferring risk through hedging, and coordinating inventory movements over time. But these functions work well only when prices reflect actual supply and demand conditions. This is where India faces its biggest challenge. The policy environment surrounding agriculture is full of interventions that seek to stabilise prices or protect farmers, but often these interventions unintentionally disrupt the very price signals that markets rely on.

Sudden stock limits under the Essential Commodities Act, unpredictable import-export controls, selective execution of Minimum Support Prices, fragmented APMC markets, and land ceiling restrictions all play a role. Each policy was created with specific objectives, yet together they create a system where markets are asked to function freely but are frequently overridden.

Can markets be expected to reveal economic truth while policy retains the authority to reinterpret it? And if both systems continue side by side, how do we manage the distortions that arise?

The consequences become clearer when we examine specific examples. Consider storage. If stock-holding is periodically restricted or penalised, private investment in warehousing naturally shrinks. Without adequate storage, post-harvest prices fall sharply, and prices during lean seasons rise sharply. Futures markets, which rely on stable storage costs to forecast future prices, lose their foundation. The result is not stability but uncertainty.

ANOTHER LAYER OF FRICTION

A similar contradiction arises with MSP. When MSP is presented as a universal guarantee, expectations rise. Yet MSP procurement is limited by geography, crop type, and State capacity. When the government cannot purchase all produce at MSP, farmers are left exposed. Futures markets could have helped them hedge against price dips, but without clear signals or consistent policy, they cannot participate effectively.

APMC markets add another layer of friction. Because many physical markets are poorly connected, price information travels slowly.



FARMERS. Will benefit from clear price signals VIJAYA KUMAR T

Arbitrage, which normally brings spot prices and futures prices into alignment, becomes difficult. Futures markets depend on strong linkages between physical markets and derivative markets; without them, price discovery weakens.

Consider land ceiling laws that keep farms fragmented. Small and scattered landholdings make it harder for farmers to store produce, engage in hedging, or access affordable credit. Without collective structures like farmer-producer organisations, participating in futures markets remains logistically challenging. This raises an important question: how can farmers exercise economic sovereignty if they lack the scale and tools to protect their incomes?

Given these structural gaps, suspending futures markets may seem like a protective measure, but does it address the root causes of price volatility? Or does it remove one of the few instruments that allow farmers to manage risk? When policy shifts frequently — whether through commodity suspensions, stock limits, or export bans — the result is not stability but hesitation across the system. Consistency, not interruption, is what ultimately curbs manipulation and builds trust.

If India wants futures markets to function effectively, the surrounding ecosystem must be strengthened. Transparent warehousing, integrated spot markets, predictable stock policies, and reduced ad-hoc interventions are essential. Equally important is enabling farmers to participate meaningfully by supporting farmer-producer organisations, improving financial literacy, and creating pathways for risk management. When farmers are given modern tools, rather than being shielded from them, they can act as informed economic agents.

The goal is not to remove the state but to bring coherence to policy, clarity to markets, and confidence to participants. India stands at a crossroads. If we aspire to agricultural leadership, we must decide whether to continue with contradictory systems that restrict the flow of price signals, or to build a transparent, modern, and trusted agricultural market architecture. The path to sovereignty lies not in supervision but in empowerment — and in trusting both our institutions and our farmers to move forward together.

The writer is President of Shetakari Sanghatana

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.

Easing of FDI rules

This refers to 'China positive' (March 13). The government's recent decision to relax FDI rules for neighbouring countries by allowing minority investments through automatic routes is indeed a positive move but it has started a debate. This clear policy shift reflects a balancing act between safeguarding economic interests and encouraging a more open investment environment. There is no doubt that easing restrictions will attract much needed capital, support the growth of Indian industries and strengthen economic ties. But it has to be implemented with clear safeguards and accountability as our strategic interests and data security should not be compromised at any cost.

Bal Govind
Noida

Strive for peace

Factors like animosity among neighbours and long-standing conflicts are the root causes of acts of terror. The lack of vision and far-sighted actions and the dearth of great minds have led to regional conflicts that have long been raging across the world. Economic slumps, unemployment and uneven growth have turned out to be bigger issues. The leaders should understand these chronic issues and take urgent steps to resolve them. It's time to walk towards a world of peace and prosperity.

P Senthil Saravana Durai
Mumbai

Pursue diplomacy

Instead of taking concerted steps to de-escalate the military conflict with Iran through dialogue and diplomacy, Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu appear to be persisting with relentless bombardment. Iran, for its part, continues retaliatory strikes targeting US military bases and assets in Gulf states, signalling that the conflict may not end soon. The war is already triggering massive disruptions in global oil supply and sending energy prices soaring, with serious repercussions for the global economy.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan, TN

FSSAI mandate

This refers to 'FSSAI mandates registration of milk producers, vendors' (March 13). Though belated, this is a welcome move that will help ensure milk quality and prevent adulteration. The reason for exempting milk producers registered with dairy co-op societies is questionable though, as FSSAI is a regulatory body whereas co-op societies are not. Importantly, FSSAI must undertake random visits to milk production outlets as a measure to curb malpractices as well as to ensure hygienic practices.

Rajiv Magal
Halekere Village, Karnataka

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{ OUR TAKE }

Beyond the court rooms

MC Mehta's PILs led to a radical reformation of India's environmental jurisprudence

Jurisprudence in India underwent major changes in the wake of the Emergency (1975-77). Public Interest Litigation (PIL) made its appearance in the Supreme Court around this time, promoted by justices PN Bhagwati and VR Krishna Iyer, and became an instrument in the hands of socially conscious lawyers to advocate policy interventions that had either been ignored or escaped the attention of the executive. Since the late 1970s, the Supreme Court has adopted an expansive vision of public interest and has mostly responded favourably to activists compelled to seek an ally in the judiciary to direct the legislature and the executive to act in matters of liberties and rights, which now includes the right to a clean environment.

It is against this backdrop that MC Mehta, in 1985, filed his landmark PIL that, in the course of time and continuous mandamus, transformed environmental jurisprudence in the country and introduced policy guardrails to staunch the assault on the Capital's air. Mehta's other PILs led to interventions that saved the Taj Mahal (toxic emissions from industries were causing a discolouring of the marble edifice) and attempted to clean up the Ganga. The right to clean air and water has since become embedded in the right to life, forcing the political class (under the court's watch) to take action to safeguard urban environments and protect natural resources. Landmark cases such as *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum* (1996) against pollution from tanneries in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, which saw the Court invoke the polluter pays principle, and the *TN Godavarman Thirumulpad* (1995) on protection of forests, have deepened the notion that industrialisation and development can't ignore the impact on the environment and citizens' well-being. The idea of public good has to embrace ecological equity and justice.

Forty years after Mehta first raised his voice for environmental justice, the Supreme Court on Thursday disposed of his PIL that led to continuous judicial oversight on pollution control in Delhi — from the conversion of the city's bus fleet to CNG to restrictions on firecrackers and the phasing out of older commercial vehicles. However, the battle has to continue. Mehta's singular crusade is a great study in the possibilities of civic activism. That it didn't manage a complete turnaround of Delhi also points to the limitations of volunteerism and judicial activism. Ironically, judicial vigilance has not always been backed or followed up by public action, which may be necessary to demand accountability from the executive. Air pollution continues to be a debilitating threat to life in the National Capital, and despite the Court's best efforts, progress has been incremental. The same could be said of the pollution in the Yamuna. Thankfully, pollution has now become an important part of public conversation, civic action (including protests), and political mobilisation, even making it to election manifestos and campaigns. The challenge is to translate these into effective policies and implement them in a time-bound manner with provisions to enforce accountability.

Mehta's PIL led to the constitution of the Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority (EPCA) in 1998, which submitted regular reports to the Supreme Court regarding Delhi's environment and pollution. The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) replaced EPCA in 2020, but the Court has continued to do its job as a watchdog. The efforts of pioneers like Mehta should not be wasted on account of populist demands (such as relaxing the norms on the use of firecrackers) or misplaced notions of development (the Aravallis case); stricter norms and greater vigilance over compliance are the need of the hour.

{ THIRD EYE }



Barkha Dutt

In West Asia, the ruins of globalisation

Donald Trump's tenure has destroyed the defining principle of globalisation, which is not just about inter-dependence but also integration

US President Donald Trump has lost control of the reckless war he began on Iran. As an Indian whose country has been at the receiving end of the Trump administration's unstable imperialism, I wish his Iran debacle could allow me some moments of schadenfreude. But alas, I can't draw any satisfaction from America's crazed military delusions because of the cataclysmic consequences for our economy, our energy security, and our geopolitical calculations.

You know the numbers by now. Nearly 10 million Indians who live in the Gulf countries have been pulled into a conflict they did not plan for. Forty per cent of India's crude imports travel through the Strait of Hormuz, a waterway today controlled entirely by the Iranians. And America's so-called waiver on India's purchase of Russian oil — for the record, India never stopped buying Russian oil as the White House routinely claims — won't insulate us from the pain of higher oil prices. This, in turn, will have a spiralling impact on the Indian economy.

If this sounds like the consequences of globalisation, it is the opposite. Trump's tenure has destroyed the defining principle of globalisation, which is not just inter-dependence but integration. If anything, as cities such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi come under daily drone and missile attacks from Iran, Trump's war has demolished the idea that in a globalised age, a capitalist oasis can be kept insulated from stormy headwinds of hegemonic powers.

Behaving like a ruthless neo-imperialist, Trump first dismantled the world trading system with his weaponisation of tariffs. Now, he has gone for the rules of war and strategic partnerships.

Nothing illustrates that better than when a US nuclear submarine sank an Iranian warship in international waters, a couple of weeks after it had been a guest of India at the Milan naval exercises. The precedent set is dangerous and disquieting. Tomorrow, China might send its navy into the Indian Ocean to conduct a military operation of its own.

By all available public accounts, India did the right thing — offering assent for refuge to three Iranian ships within a day and also pressing the Navy into search and rescue when the distress signal was received from IRIS Dena in Colombo. But, it is not as if the Americans informed our Navy of their plans to expand their theatre of operations into the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Sri Lanka. And I am not speaking of operational details here, just the professional courtesy of expanded presence. After all, an Indian vessel could have been in those waters at the same time and found itself caught in an inadvertent crisis.

Not for the first time, Trump's second term reminds us of the paradox of this Darwinian age. The Americans want to show that might is right.

TRUMP'S IS THE FIRST ADMINISTRATION THAT HAS DONE AWAY WITH THE ENTIRE DICTIONARY OF DIPLOMACY. PERHAPS THIS LEXICON WAS ONLY A VENEER, A PRETENCE, AS CANADIAN PRIME MINISTER MARK CARNEY'S DAVOS SPEECH REMINDED US



In a Trumpian age — and the world may behave in this manner even after he's gone — there is no better protection than the power of your markets and military. AFP

And the Iranians, with a staggering instinct for survival, are showing how asymmetric warfare can challenge the most powerful militaries. Their deployment of Shahed drones is the digital age version of guerrilla warfare.

For India, there are lessons on both counts.

India's air defence did a spectacular job in Operation Sindoor. But imagine if the conflict had lasted four weeks instead of four days. Whether to insulate us from short-term security challenges — think drones in the hands of terrorists or their patrons — or focus on long-term growth, India must build hard power. Our democracy, our diversity and pluralism, and our emphasis on constitutional values must remain guiding lights in this marathon journey.

But in a Trumpian age — and the world may behave in this manner even after he's gone — there is no better protection than the power of your markets and military.

It's true that Trump is not the first American president to begin irresponsible wars. Right from the 1960s and Kennedy's foray into Cuba up until the disaster in Afghanistan, regime-change wars have not just failed; they have created more extremist versions of the entities they vowed to displace. Think of ISIS in Iraq or the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

But Trump's is the first administration that has done away with the entire dictionary of diplomacy. Perhaps this lexicon was only a veneer, a pretence, as Canadian prime minister Mark Carney's Davos speech reminded us. Even so, it gave the world a common language to conduct business in, a language that was especially helpful in grey zone warfare.

None of this is a brief for the Iranian regime or for that matter for any other authoritarian government. The answer to dictatorships or religious orthodoxy or Neanderthal regimes cannot be wars without an end goal fought by militaries that are unable to place their men and women on the ground. History is littered with proof of this basic working thesis. Nor is war a video game to be spoken of in a language so coarse that the entire claim of being the so-called good guy is in serious question.

So, unless the world comes together to push back against one man's unbridled and unstable whims, globalisation lies in tatters and it's each country for itself.

Barkha Dutt is an award-winning journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Defining moment for law on passive euthanasia in India

Harish Rana was once a 18 year-old engineering student with the easy confidence of youth and the promise of a long life ahead. A tragic fall from the fourth floor of a building changed everything. Doctors managed to save his life, but not his brain. For the past 13 years, Harish has remained trapped in a body that breathes but does not live. The lives of his parents have been consumed by an exhausting cycle of caregiving, emotional anguish, financial burden and helplessness. This forced his family, and then the courts, to confront one of the most difficult ethical questions of modern medicine: Are we extending his life or merely postponing his inevitable death? What does dignity demand?



Nikhil Datar

The Supreme Court of India has already recognised the right to die with dignity in the landmark *Common Cause* judgment. Yet, the Delhi High Court rejected Harish's parents' petition to allow him to pass away. The Court observed that earlier rulings on passive euthanasia largely concerned patients who were kept alive through life-support systems such as ventilators, dialysis or heart-lung machines. Harish, however, was not dependent on such equipment.

The Supreme Court directed the constitution of two independent medical boards to examine his condition. Both boards concluded unequivocally that there was no chance of meaningful neurological recovery.

Still, a difficult legal question remained unresolved. Withdrawal of medical support such as a ventilator is one thing; withholding artificial feeding is another. Would withholding feeding amount to active euthanasia? If so, it would be illegal in India.

After a long wait, the judgment was delivered, fortunately, in favour of Harish and his parents.

Harish may soon be gone. But his story will live on in the minds of countless families who face — or may one day face — similar situations caused by devastating neurological injuries, advanced age, or conditions such as Alzheimer's or terminal illnesses such as cancer.

This case is likely to have a lasting impact on medical ethics and end-of-life decision-making in India. Even today, the Code of Medical Ethics considers euthanasia — except in cases of brain death for organ donation — to be an "unethical act". In a public interest litigation that I filed before the Bombay High Court, I highlighted this contradiction between evolving constitutional principles and outdated ethical guidelines. In April 2024, the High Court directed the National Medical Commission to examine the issue; yet, those directions have still not been implemented. The Supreme Court's order in the Harish Rana case will now push medical regulators to adopt a more humane and practical understanding of passive euthanasia.

The case also exposes serious gaps in the implementation of the *Common Cause* guidelines. Harish's parents must have had to approach the courts because they had no practical way to access a medical board. Under the *Common Cause* framework, the responsibility of setting up such boards lies with the hospital in which the patient is admitted. But Harish was being cared for at home.



The Supreme Court of India has already recognised the right to die with dignity in the landmark *Common Cause* judgment. HT ARCHIVE

Furthermore, the guidelines require one doctor on the board to represent the district's chief medical officer. In my PIL, I had urged the Court to direct the state to create panels of such doctors in every district. Unfortunately, most states have not acted on this requirement.

The *Harish Rana* case also highlights the importance of living wills, or advanced medical directives. A living will is a document in which an individual records his or her wishes regarding medical interventions such as ventilators, dialysis, feeding tubes or other invasive procedures in the event of serious and irreversible illness. Such directives can guide both doctors and family members when the patient is unable to communicate.

Expecting a healthy 24-year-old Harish to create such a document would have been unrealistic. But, hypothetically, if such a directive had existed, the legal and ethical dilemma might have been far easier to resolve.

After the Supreme Court clarified the law on living wills in 2023, I prepared my own advance directive. Yet I could not find a custodian in Mumbai because the state had not appointed one. Following directions in my PIL, the Maharashtra government finally appointed 413 custodians in March 2024. To my knowledge, very few other states — except Goa — have taken similar steps.

To talk about death remains a taboo in India. Many elders assume their families will automatically make the right decisions when difficult medical questions arise. In reality, such situations often lead to confusion, disagreement, emotional distress and enormous financial strain. Clear written instructions in the form of a living will can spare families this suffering and ensure that the patient's own wishes remain central.

Without widespread awareness of living wills, reform of medical ethics around end-of-life care, accessible palliative care and an administrative system that allows families to seek timely medical review, the constitutional right to die with dignity will remain largely theoretical.

For 13 years, Harish Rana's life has been suspended between biology and humanity filled with unimaginable suffering. If this case helps India to speak more openly about death, encourages people to write living wills, and pushes institutions to act with compassion, then Harish's silent death will leave behind a powerful legacy.

Nikhil Datar is a senior obstetrician-gynaecologist. The views expressed are personal

The national capital's other pollution problem

Every winter, air pollution in the national Capital seizes media headlines and social media virality. Beyond short-term measures and individual coping strategies, there are a few clear solutions on the table. Addressing air quality will require sustained policy action over time. What receives very little or no attention in comparison is another form of pollution — noise.

One part of this problem is visible and familiar — traffic and honking. Honking is now deeply embedded in how Delhi drives. Our traffic movement is not rule-based; it is based on negotiation and risk-taking.

There is limited trust that other drivers will behave predictably. Assertion replaces right of way.

In that sense, honking is not just a traffic issue. It reflects how movement takes place in the city — through assertion rather than coordination.

And because honking is ceaseless, it becomes background noise that has come to be accepted.

But traffic is only one part of the soundscape. Delhi is also defined by a continuous cacophony of other sounds — hawkers, music, construction work, loudspeakers, generators, all competing for attention. Even late at night, the city does not fall quiet; it only changes pitch.



Rakesh Thukral

Over time, this constant loudness has come to feel normal. It is often explained away as the price of population density, urban expansion and economic activity. Yet its effect on daily life is rarely examined.

By law, noise in residential neighbourhoods is meant to stay within defined decibel limits. In practice, many parts of Delhi regularly exceed them, often by a wide margin. During peak traffic hours or big events, official monitoring has shown noise levels closer to what one would expect in industrial areas. Despite this, we rarely speak about noise as pollution.

Sustained noise appears to change how attention works. Constant loudness makes it harder to concentrate for long periods. Over time, people adapt not by filtering noise out, but by paying less attention overall.

The deeper loss is what we stop noticing. Birds in the morning register less, if at all. Moments of quiet become rare enough to feel unusual. The mind remains alert but rarely settled. Over time, this affects how people engage — with work, with public spaces, and with one another.

Delhi is often described as an aggressive city. That may not be entirely accurate. It feels more like an overstimulated one. In many contexts, volume has become a sign of assertion — of visibility, influence or clout. Quiet is easily mistaken for absence. In such an environment, restraint does not come naturally.

This is not an argument against population density or economic activity. A busy city will never be silent. But there is a difference between activity and constant, and often needless, amplification.

Noise pollution highlights a particular kind of urban challenge — one shaped not only by infrastructure and enforcement, but by everyday behaviour.

Clean air will help the city breathe. Quiet, even in a limited measure, will help it concentrate. Delhi will continue to grow, move, and adapt. The question is whether it can lower its volume — without losing its energy and dynamism.

Rakesh Thukral lives in Delhi and is APAC CEO for Edelman. The views expressed are personal

{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

BOMBS AND GEOPOLITICS

Since its first instance in 1911, aerial bombing has been the defining feature of most wars. This is also true in the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran as well, but with a twist: low-cost drones have entered the picture. While Iran's drones have effected targeted strikes on US assets in West Asia, a hi-tech American missile killed school children in an Iranian city.

It is in this context that we recommend Sven Lindqvist's *A History of Bombing*. From the earliest instances of European colonial powers taking this route to subdue popular rebellions in their colonies, Lindqvist outlines a racial impulse in the West that guides such warfare, where civilians are not spared — as targets or collateral. Lindqvist traces the imfamous World War II bombings to this reasoning, pointing out that the documented American reluctance to bomb civilians extended only to the West and not to other political geographies.



A History of Bombing
Sven Lindqvist
1999

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Hormuz stranglehold and deeper *atmanirbharta*

If there is one piece of advice India must take from Donald Trump, it is 'drill, baby, drill'



BEYOND IDEOLOGY

R JAGANNATHAN

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No matter how the Iran-Israel-US war ends, and no matter how soon it ends, India now has to rethink its energy dependencies — not to speak of dependencies in other areas. In energy, we need deeper *atmanirbharta,* arguably even more than in defence. The ongoing cooking gas shortage, which has become every household's and restaurant owner's core short-term concern, tells us why. It can roil politics more than a limited setback even in defence.

India's excess dependency on oil and gas imports should prompt us to not only build larger reserves of the former (and as much of the latter as feasible), but also lead to further geographical diversification. We cannot simply have a 60-65 per cent import dependency in liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), the bulk of which comes from just one volatile region — West Asia.

At the broader energy security level, India has directionally been on the right track. The share of non-fossil fuel power capacity has now crossed 50 per cent of the overall installed capacity of 509 Gw. But the problem relates to concentrated dependence on some regions driven by policy priorities. The growing dependence on West Asia for gas supplies is directly related to the huge expansion in household cooking gas consumption and the increasing use of gas in the transport sector.

As Shamika Ravi, a member of the Economic Advisory Council of the Prime Minister, noted in a post on social media site X (formerly Twitter), "Indian households now depend on petroleum products for both cooking (LPG) and transport...Together, LPG + conveyance account for 7.5-10.2 per cent of monthly budgets. This makes our households doubly exposed to any oil supply disruption — a vulnerability that did not exist at this scale in 2011, when rural LPG adoption was just 17 per cent and conveyance 4.2 per cent."

While trying to address pollution and climate change, we may have given less importance to domestic production of fossil fuels, which are going to be important over the next two decades, coinciding with the period when India must maximise its demographic dividend. There is no place for fossil fuel complacency, never mind what climate activists and greens tell you.

If there is one piece of advice we must take from Donald Trump, it is this: "Drill, baby, drill". It means more and faster exploration and production investments.

What we must also thank Mr Trump for is exposing our vulnerabilities. Our dependence on West Asia, especially those supply sources that are routed through the Strait of Hormuz, cannot sustain. The major West Asian oil and gas producing countries are on either side of the narrow shipping waterway leading to the Strait, but they are now subject to Iran's security priorities. Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the UAE and even Saudi Arabia have most of their production going through the Strait of Hormuz.

In the 15th century, the Portuguese realised that the trade in spices and other goods from India was subject to extortion by West Asian and Venetian merchants, and Vasco da Gama was commissioned by Manuel I of Portugal to find a new sea route to India. While Vasco da Gama is not a revered name in post-colonial Indian history, he did find a different route to India via the Cape of Good Hope. This is our challenge if we choose to tap into West Asian fossil fuels — finding a new route that avoids the Strait of Hormuz.

India's proposal for the IMEC corridor (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) involves building transport infrastructure going through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Greece. Some of these countries are going to be under Iranian threat, which may make the corridor unviable unless there is a wider peace deal in West Asia, where both Israel and Iran agree to back off from threatening the other. Iran needs to do more, since its theocracy has put Jew-hatred and a commitment to destroy Israel at the core of its wider Islamist mission, which includes supporting proxies in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Yemen (Houthis) and Gaza (Hamas). More than stopping Iran's nuclear ambitions, it is these ever-present threats to Israel's borders that need reining in — and only Iran can do that. Israel and the US have not helped matters by decapitating the Iranian leadership, making the successor regime's willingness to do a deal more unlikely.

The IMEC is not going to work in the foreseeable future. We need different sources to fill in whenever supply disruptions hit the Strait of Hormuz. Dependence on West Asia is only a fair-weather option for us. Whenever peace reigns, we can use this region to augment or stock up reserves at low prices. Over the medium term, we must ask Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to build shipping capabilities far away from the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea areas that the Houthis can target. And, of course, we must fast-track domestic exploration and production of oil and gas, especially the recent discoveries off the Andamans. We should also be fast-tracking the use of ethanol for cooking purposes, using appropriate stoves.

However, it is not only in energy that we must reduce over-dependence on a few sources of supply in troubled parts of the world. This should be our guiding philosophy in all critical areas, both in imports and exports.

Three areas, apart from energy, stand out. One is our over-dependence on Chinese supplies in everything from rare earths to electronic components and other things. Production-linked incentives are important, but ease of doing business is even more vital. Two, our software services are too focused on North America, the US in particular. But margins aren't everything. The Infys, TCSes and Wipros must be prodded to diversify markets over a 10-year period. Their share of non-American and domestic Indian business must grow substantially, and products and sovereign platforms must be a larger share of their business.

Our dependence on foreign tech platforms — from Google to Microsoft, Meta and X — is a strategic vulnerability, not least because these firms are heavily involved in the US' national security architecture. If they had to choose between following Indian interests and American ones, no prizes for guessing which way they will tilt. We must have our own sovereign email, messaging, social media platforms, artificial intelligence models, office and Cloud services that will counterbalance US Big Tech. Our data should not be shareable with Uncle Sam, unless when authorised by Indian courts.

A sobering thought: *Atmanirbharta* is not without costs. There will be higher costs, and slimmer margins. That, unfortunately, is the price for strategic autonomy.

The author is a senior journalist

Bihar after Nitish Kumar



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

"I have a Rashtriya Swayamsevak background. Nitishji is not from our sangathan (organisation). But he has surpassed many of us when it comes to sacrifice, integrity, and dedication to social justice," said a Bharatiya Janata Party MLA, a Dalit, from Bihar.

But there are other views.

"We admire Nitishji. But we also want modernisation and development in Bihar. Whenever we would discuss industrialisation and land, he would always hold us back. His observation always was: If you take land away from the farmer, what will he do for a living? If Bihar is among the bottom three states in India in urbanisation, the blame must go to him. It was deeply frustrating," a former minister in the Bihar government and now a top office-bearer in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) told *Business Standard*.

Now that Nitish Kumar, in his last days as Bihar chief minister, is out of the state equation and the BJP will be the primary decision-maker in the government as the single-largest party with 89 of the 243 seats in the Assembly, it is worth considering what Bihar could look like in the years to come — and whether Mr Kumar's development perspective of the state will be shared by the BJP.

There's no denying the facts. The latest data from the NITI Aayog (2025) and Bihar government (Economic Survey, 2025) shows that as of 2022-23, the working population in Bihar was concentrated in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (49.6 per cent); services (28.9 per cent); and, construction sectors (18.4 per cent). Just 5.7 per cent were employed in manufacturing. The state's redemption could be its massive infrastructure investment in the past few years: ₹33,000 crore in highway upgrade offered by the central government, ₹1 trillion in ongoing rail capacity projects, and improvement in district roads and more.

The dilemma is: What should Bihar do with all this infrastructure? Should it seek accelerated industrial investment, requiring extensive (and expensive) land acquisition, and ending in only minimal additional employment? Or should it encourage the creation of industrial estates in which small and medium units can be set up, like, say, the Hajipur Industrial Area? After agriculture, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) generate maximum employment.

Ninety-five per cent of Bihar's all industrial units and 65 per cent of manufacturing output are from MSMEs. In 2023 [when the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), again became an ally of the Rashtriya Janata Dal], the Department of Industries in Bihar made a strong appeal to the Centre with a strategic business plan in which it argued that access to credit and market linkages were the two biggest challenges for MSMEs.

The response to the plea for help was below expectations, officials say. The chief minister had the wrong sort of alliance partners. When the partners changed, the BJP's Nitish Mishra, viewed by the state's industry as its champion, was made minister. However, he did not figure in the 2025 Nitish Kumar government because the BJP bowed to caste dynamics and opted to excise a Brahmin from Madhubani from its list.

All this suggests that if the BJP is to combine industrialisation and urbanisation in Bihar with social justice, its champions and advocacy leaders have to be from the same social base. For the BJP, this is an existential choice. Its opposition to the state government's caste census tells its own story.

And then, there's the other choice, which too is deeply problematic. In 2022, when the BJP and JD(U) were partners, Mr Kumar publicly snubbed the BJP's call to follow the Yogi Adityanath model, at work in Uttar Pradesh, and get all loudspeakers down from masjids.

"Let us not talk about this nonsense. In Bihar, we do not interfere in the religious practices of any people. Every person in Bihar has the full right to follow their own faith," he said at a public meeting in Purnea with BJP colleague Shahnawaz Hussain on the stage.

This was not a random act. BJP old-timers recall many occasions when he stood up to the BJP while being its ally. At the same time, he supported the BJP's Waqf legislation and said absolutely nothing about the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. His party contested the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the BJP and got 6 per cent and 12 per cent, of the Muslim vote, respectively. The data suggests that so long as it has the JD(U) by its side, the BJP can eat its Muslim cake and have it too. No one can say if this will still be the case if Mr Kumar is no longer on the scene.

So, the key question is: In his absence, will the BJP become more like the JD(U)? Or will the JD(U) become more like the BJP? The Opposition is asking itself the same question.

Where 2 billion voters reside

Rating democracies is a tricky business. I am only using the simple metric of who in the Indian subcontinent has had the most peaceful, stable, normal political transitions and continuity



NATIONAL INTEREST

SHEKHAR GUPTA

Try as we might, we will not find another continuous region in the world where about two billion people vote and value democracy. Not in the Americas, not Africa. Europe doesn't have the numbers, and most of Eastern Asia has the 1.4-billion Chinese overhang.

Something makes the Indian subcontinent different. All of its nations, from the Maldives through Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan have regular elections. Of course, the quality of democracy varies, let's say, from Pakistan at the lowest rung to India. It isn't my case that Indian democracy is perfect.

Rating democracies is a tricky business. I am only using the simple metric of who's had the most peaceful, stable, normal political transitions and continuity. India has had the most of it, barring the 19-month aberration of the Emergency that delayed an election by a year.

Pakistan, we rate as the lowest on this scale, as it discovered elections more than 25 years after its creation, and even then has never had an elected Prime Minister complete a full term. It has always ceded much ground to the army and invented its own hybrid arrangement. It has also had many full military interregnums for long periods, such as General Musharraf from 1999 to 2008. Yet, people continue voting.

Look elsewhere now. In a tiny, ultra-stable Himalayan monarchy like Bhutan, the king has been farsighted enough to hold regular elections and pass much power on to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet so installed. Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives (listed in order of their population size) have all been having elections and stable, peaceful transitions. Nowhere has that dreaded "A" word, for the army, cropped up. Not even in Bangladesh for three decades despite its history of two military dictatorships. Commitment to elected democracy, therefore, is well-established among one-fourth of humankind, living in one geographically cohesive subcontinent. If anything, in all countries except Pakistan, the army has proved to be a force for good, backstopping stability for fresh elections and transition — even when an established government was swept away dramatically by a furious street protest.

In the past four years, we have seen this play out among three of these neighbours. Sri Lanka's Mahinda Rajapaksa fell first, then Sheikh Hasina Wazed in Bangladesh, and then Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli in Nepal. All three, after what looked like a disruption to rival the Arab Spring, did not collapse into anarchy. They sprang back on their feet, held clean, peaceful elections and elected popular leaders with wide majority.

Two of those, Sri Lanka and Nepal, in the process also discovered new political parties. There was anger with the "system". It is just that it became a fury against the established political party instead: They are all the same, equally bad, complicit. The answer wasn't a new non-constitutional force or a new constitution, but a new political party.

Nepal is the latest. Over two dramatic days between September 8 and 9 in 2025, the Oli government fell amid speculation on "what the army would do". It did nothing. It just maintained order so a transitional government under a respected Chief Justice (Nepal's first woman Chief Justice) Sushila Karki was set up with the solitary agenda of holding a peaceful and fair election soon.

She delivered it within six months and allowed all parties to contest freely. The results were a spectacular rejection of all those between whom 14 prime ministerships had changed hands since the end of the monarchy, the establishment of democracy, and the adoption of a republican constitution in 2008.

This marked the end of the Maoist power. Now, with a shade less than 10 per cent in the 165-directly elected house, they've been swept away to the garbage heap of democratic history. The new leader? Balendra Shah, just 35, and not in the job because he's the offspring of a famous parent. A structural engineering MTech from Belagavi's Visvesvaraya Technological University (VTU), he was a rapper who became a humongous cult figure, with his lyrics reflecting popular frustrations against corruption, lousy governance, desperate outward migration and the quality of life. The party he joined, the Rastriya Swatantra Party, was launched by journalist Rabi Lamichhane in 2022 and has now won one short of a two-thirds majority. At this moment, it even looks ideology-free, although it calls itself centrist. The nutgraf of the story is a complete trust in the constitution, the democratic process, and the fact that all key institutions — from the Supreme Court, Presidency, and Election Commission to the Army — stayed intact, retaining their stature and respect.

Bangladesh played out just a little bit earlier, and had its variations. The supposed caretaker government under Muhammad Yunus didn't quite act like one and pretended as if it was fully mandated to make policy shifts, including reversals. It was the army chief who nudged Mr Yunus back into reality.

The election was far from ideal as one major party, the Awami League was banned. However, the election finally was peaceful — way more peaceful than any we remember in our West Bengal — and Tarique Rahman (60) won a two-thirds majority. Almost immediately, we have seen some return to sanity. The anti-India rhetoric and activity is down, conversations re-established, and the new government is looking at Bangladesh's future rather than grievances, national or personal, of the past. Bangladesh's democracy has emerged stronger even if the Awami League ban remains a blot.

Sri Lanka before that went through a longer, but remarkably calm process. Initially, while the rest of the Rajapaksa family left, Gotabaya, as President, appointed the old UNP (United National Party) stalwart Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister.

Two months later, the popular protest, called Aragalaya (the struggle), also threw Gotabaya out, and Wickremesinghe was made President. This, when his party only had one MP. The secret ballot in the national parliament chose to continue with him. Why? Because they had faith in their Constitution, democracy, and a shared commitment to stability in the national interest. The election was held entirely peacefully in November 2024, where Anura Kumara Dissanayake (57), a committed communist formerly from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was once considered a terrorist organisation and violently suppressed, swept aside all the established parties to win a two-thirds majority. To this extent, this was a pattern of rejecting all legacy parties that Nepal followed. The only difference being that one gave a landslide to the hard Left (Sri Lanka) and the other (Nepal) rejected it sweepingly.

The Maldives has also had peaceful, electoral transitions since 2008, although the odd incoming leader may have jailed his predecessor. We told you there is no such thing as a perfect democracy.

Early on, we also listed Pakistan among these democracies and that's only because the country is now going through its longest continuous phase of elected governments, such as they may be. Within its hybrid history, the current arrangement has produced the weakest government and it has conspired with the army to mutilate the Constitution.

So here's the question: How come, while all other countries in the subcontinent have seen their democracy mature and strengthen, Pakistan has slipped?

The answer many say is in the way each has imagined its nationalism. Pakistan is exceptional in that it is still fighting to justify the two-nation theory. It is this fixation that has never allowed any institution except the army to build moral stature. This happens when you define yourselves ideologically as a national security state. The Pakistan predicament is existential. Existential not in the sense that it's commonly used these days, but in the sense closer to the original Jean-Paul Sartre: Why do I exist? And how do I exist? Therein lies the difference between the quality of its democracy and the rest of the subcontinent's two billion.

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When bots buy and humans consume



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Artificial intelligence is not tweaking marketing. It is quietly rearranging its foundations.

There are two revolutions underway. Most marketers are busy reacting to the first. Almost none seem prepared for the second. And few appear to be even trying to prepare.

The first revolution is visible. Consumers are no longer "searching". They are "asking". For 20 years, we have optimised for Google. Keywords, backlinks, metadata — the holy trinity of digital marketing. The ritual was predictable: Search, click, compare and convert. Traffic flowed like clockwork. Unfortunately now, whether we like it or not, that flow is ebbing.

Ask a chatbot for "the best laptop under ₹1.5 lakh" and you don't get 10 blue links. You get three answers. Curated. Summarised. Sanitised. Your beautifully designed website may never even be visited. Your search engine optimisation or SEO budget may never see daylight. Kaput. Web traffic erosion today is not merely theoretical — it is structural. The game has shifted from SEO to what we now call generative engine presence. Visibility now depends not on how well you rank, but on how well you are synthesised.

Brands built purely on information are vulnerable. Information can be summarised. It can be abstracted. It can be replaced. Brands built on community, emotion, and experience are harder to displace. Nobody visits Reddit for information alone. They go for belonging. AI cannot replicate that — at least not yet.

But here is the second revolution. And this one is deeper. We are accustomed, in today's context, to asking, "Who is the customer?" We have to now begin asking, "What is the customer?" When AI agents start evaluating options, comparing specifications, filtering bias, negotiating price and completing transactions — the buyer may not be human at all. The consumer remains human. But the decision-maker could well be an algorithm. This is not science fiction any longer. The infrastructure is already being built. And rapidly. Every minute.

Imagine telling your assistant, "Order me the best air purifier under ₹20,000 with high energy efficiency and low maintenance." You do not browse. You do not click. You do not read reviews. The entire purchase journey happens inside a machine. Now ask yourself: Is your brand optimised for a human emotion — or for a machine evaluation? And that is the catch few brand handlers understand today.

Websites are currently built for eyeballs. Scrolls. Clicks. Hover states. AI agents, on the other hand, prefer structured data, clean specifications, transparent pricing and credible signals. We spent decades understanding human psychology — cognitive biases, social proof, framing effects. Tomorrow we will need to understand machine logic. Algorithms have their own biases. They penalise overt commercial influence. They weigh ratings differently. They respond inconsistently across models. Marketing will not disappear. It will bifurcate.

WEB TRAFFIC EROSION TODAY IS NOT MERELY THEORETICAL — IT IS STRUCTURAL. THE GAME HAS SHIFTED FROM SEO TO WHAT WE NOW CALL GENERATIVE ENGINE PRESENCE

One layer will continue speaking to human aspiration — storytelling, identity, community. The other layer will quietly speak to machine evaluation — clarity, structure, verifiability.

And then comes the strategic question that Indian CEOs must confront. If AI becomes the primary digital interface — who owns the relationship? The intelligence layer, or the brand behind it?

From a legal standpoint — let us momentarily wear a lawyer's hat — this is not an abstract concern. It is about data ownership, contractual boundaries, liability frameworks, and control over customer interfaces. If AI intermediates discovery and purchase, the platform providing that intelligence could sit between brand and consumer. And, that is a structural risk. The companies that will win are those that ensure AI remains an enabler — not an owner — of customer relationships.

Contracts must, therefore, preserve data rights. Brand voice must not be diluted into generic responses. Brand experience cannot, and must not, be outsourced to an invisible layer.

India has a unique advantage here. We are not a peripheral market. We are a linguistic labyrinth. If AI can function seamlessly across Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Bengali, Bhojpuri and dozens more — it will have learned something profound about contextual intelligence. India is not merely deploying global AI. It is pressure-testing it. Stretching it. Civilising it for cultural complexity. Which means we are not just users. We are co-authors.

Marketing has survived print-to-broadcast, broadcast-to-digital, desktop-to-mobile. Each shift created winners and casualties. This one goes further. It does not merely change the channel. It changes the decision-maker. Yes, AI is upending marketing. But the real upheaval is this: The future customer may not blink. May not feel. May not be persuaded by nostalgia. And yet, paradoxically, the brands that will thrive are those that double down on the one thing machines cannot manufacture — meaning.

AI isn't just upending marketing: It's rewriting who the customer is.

The author is chairman of Rediffusion

With colonialism came the decline of Persian



PAST PARTICIPLE

MANU S PILLAI

In 1656 a senior courtier of the sultan of Golconda defected to the Mughals. Titled Mir Jumla, this Persian emigre was one of India's wealthiest, most powerful men: he lent money to English traders on the coast, owned a merchant fleet of his own, controlled the kingdom's diamond mines, possessed an army, and above all, steered the sultan's government. It was a phenomenal achievement for an immigrant who had begun life as a shoe-salesman. So phenomenal, in fact, that eventually, the sultan smelled a threat. Salacious gossip—for instance, that Mir Jumla had taken a tumble in bed with the queen-mother—did not help. With things at a risky impasse, the minister chose to flee. But in the process the Persian also carted off to the Mughals a massive diamond, believed by some to be the Kohinoor—a gem that, less than a century later, another Persian, Nadir Shah, would seize for himself.

India's links to Persia—much discussed in the context of the ongoing war in Iran—are old and fascinating. In the medieval Deccan, for instance, Persianate culture was fashionable, in the same way that American soft power prevails in our time. Local Muslim kings, therefore, actively sought to cultivate it. One Bahmani sultan, for instance, nearly wooed the poet Hafiz to India, while another imported Persian scholars, warriors, architects, artists and other professionals by the shipload.

At a certain level, this sparked remarkable interactions. Bijapur's Adil Shahi dynasty, to cite one, was founded by a Persian warrior and his Hindu queen. Equally, however, it resulted in hostilities between local grandees and the foreign-born nobility. Around 1470, a Russian traveller was astonished that the Deccan's ruling class seemed overwhelmingly Persian, and the Bahmani state was soon torn up by a sons-of-the-soil-versus-immigrants type of conflict.

Interestingly, while the Mughals occupy much imperial real estate in our imagination, the Shah of Persia also had some sway in India. For the Deccan sultanates looked not to Delhi but Isfahan for protection, openly declaring themselves its vassals. This flirtation was strategic: an insurance policy against the Mughals. But faith was a factor too.

Many of the Deccan's princes were Shia Muslims. Indeed, the rulers of Ahmednagar (descended from a converted Brahmin, funnily enough) routinely sent their bodies to be buried in Persian-held Karbala. In the early 1600s, there was talk of a marriage alliance between Shah Abbas and a Golconda princess (who'd have introduced some Telugu blood into the Safavid dynasty had the union materialised), while some decades later begums from that kingdom travelled to pay their respects to Shah Safi. Such advertisements of loyalty to Persia didn't pan out in the end, though, for the Mughals swallowed up the sultanates. Interestingly the emperor who achieved this, Aurangzeb, had an Iranian mother.

GETTY IMAGES



Bijapur's Adil Shahi dynasty was founded by a Persian warrior and his Hindu queen.

But Persianate influence was not limited to Muslim courts, even if it was most pronounced in those settings. Architecture in Vijayanagara featured Persian flourishes, for example, and the court's sartorial styles also absorbed foreign inspiration. The conical *kullah* hat became here, thus, the *kullayi*, or, in everyday Kannada, *kulavi*. Murals at Tiruppudaimarudur and Lepakshi depict Hindu lords also sporting a tunic, the *kabayi*—an Indianisation of the Persian *qaba*. To be clear, embracing foreign fashion trends does not suggest a wholesale acceptance of Persianate political ideology or power. Krishnadevaraya, for instance, wore the *kullayi*. But in his poetry, he also delights at crushing the heads of Persians "like melons", and of filling (proverbial) tanks with their blood. It is a little bit like present-day supporters of the Iranian regime. They may wear trousers and shirts, and yet rail against the West—in English.

Language, in fact, is another area where Iranian influences left a mark. On the one hand, under the powerful Muslim-ruled empires of the subcontinent, Persian itself became the lingua franca for transregional diplomacy and politics—a lot like the place English holds in our time, with its advantages and exclusions both. As late as the 1820s, therefore, Malayali royals writing to the British in Bengal did so not in their mother-tongue or the colonisers language, but in Persian.

Equally, however, just as the legitimacy of English is questioned, Persian too had its critics. In a 14th century Vijayanagara poem, the "screeching of owls" is preferred to this language. Three-hundred years later, the Maratha hero Shivaji sought to replace "overvalued Yavana words" with Sanskrit. The project's practical success was limited: later Maratha rulers were known by the Persian title, Peshwa. Why, the surname of the incumbent Maharashtra chief minister (Fadnavis) too has Persian roots.

As odd as it may seem to us today, "during the early modern period," to quote Arthur Dudney, "India—even compared with Iran—was arguably the world's main centre for the patronage of Persian literature and scholarship." Many took to the language for better employment but there was genuine passion too. One of the "great Persian prose stylists and poets" of the 17th century, thus, was a man called Chander Bhan, who proudly also flaunted his Brahmin roots. Translation of Sanskrit texts into Persian had their own impact, including in ways that might surprise us now. In the 1860s, for example, Kanhaiyalal Alakhdhari translated 52 Upanishads into Urdu, to popularise among Hindus their textual and philosophical traditions. Except that with Sanskrit sealed off from most, his work was based on the *Sirr-i-Akbar*—a Persian treatise on the Upanishads, made by a Mughal prince, Dara Shukoh.

The decline of Persian—and Persianate culture—coincided with the rise of colonialism in the country. People seeking upward mobility now began to prefer English to the old court language, while in dress and other respects too, Anglicisation became attractive. One exemplification of this new trend appears in portraits of a single figure. The Travancore rajah Uthram Tirunal (reigned 1846-60), like several of his ancestors, sat for portraits dressed in Persian robes. But towards the end of his rule, he did something unusual: he asked a durbar painter to depict him in the Englishman's garb, resulting in perhaps among the earliest images of an Indian man in Western attire. His predecessor had already switched Persian with English when corresponding with the British. This transition to the white man's clothes, however, confirmed something more sharply: the advent of a new age, and the passing of another.

Manu S. Pillai is a historian and author, most recently, of Gods, Guns and Missionaries.

How the French challenged the British in India

Instead of zooming in on specifics, Robert Ivermee's book on French colonialism in India tries to be many things all at once

Rohit Chakraborty

ISTOCKPHOTO



To the untrained eye, the remains of a former French establishment look puny on the map of modern India: a bit of land along the rim of the Bay of Bengal, like Chandannagar, and Puducherry on the Coromandel Coast; then yonder west, a stronghold in Mahé on the Malabar Coast. So sparse, compared to the British, it seems, that some would think the French were merely passing through. Not quite as expansive and invasive as the Raj, or even as pioneering as the Portuguese, who sliced the Indian Ocean to inaugurate a trade route with South and South-East Asia as early as 1498, the French remain just a rung above the Dutch, the most minuscule of the Europeans in India (the Danes barely register).

So, how did the relatively small French colony in India become the principal challenger to the mighty British presence? How did the French become middle managers to Versailles on one end and India's indigenous rulers on the other as they negotiated France's mercantile ambitions? Why did they build alliances with, and sometimes double-cross, local resistance to English dominion? How did they try to recoup frequent, often colossal financial losses of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales (dissolved, bankrupted, and later revamped by a Scotsman, John Law, as Compagnie perpétuelle des Indes)? To sate the French gap in canonical histories of European colonisation on the Indian subcontinent, Robert Ivermee offers *Glorious Failure: The Forgotten History of French Imperialism in India*. France is no more chopped liver.

Ivermee's condensed history is a tightly stacked relay of epochs. It is a bird's-eye view of the history of French colonisation in India that is at times illuminating, but, mostly, a relentless rehearsal of history that moves at breakneck speed.

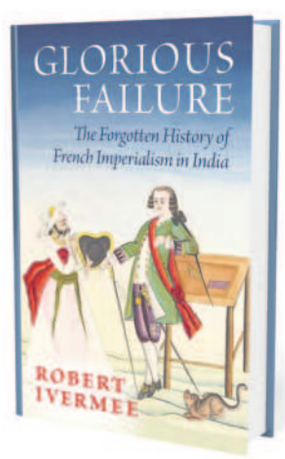
The French arrived about a century after the establishment of the Estado Português da Índia in 1505 and found the ports of Cochin (now Kochi) and Goa not only peppered with mimicries of European architecture, but also the Portuguese stronghold in the subcontinent beginning to come slowly undone.

Ivermee begins his survey with François Pyrard de Laval, who arrived in Chittagong after a tumultuous few years of imprisonment in the Maldives, travelled westwards, and spent a few months in the court of Calicut's Zamorin. Ivermee uses the French navigator's arrival as his locus to build a constellation of France's vested interests in regions surrounding the Indian Ocean, specifically trade in (and with) Madagascar and later Mauritius, regions skirting the Persian Gulf, Ceylon, Indonesia, in addition to investments in the Caribbean and North America that France was beginning to foster.

What follows could very well be Ivermee's portrait of Puducherry: its creation, its consolidation, the tugs-of-war it endured, its transfers of power and, at the very core of this, the figure canonical to the history of both the region, and to the shadow of the French empire in India: Joseph François Dupleix, who became the governor of Puducherry and French India, after 12 years of governorship of Chandannagar.

Ivermee's *Glorious Failure* is many things at once. It is a survey of globally intertwined histories of French trade. It is an assemblage of miniature biographies: of Law, John-Baptiste Colbert (who launched the Compagnie in 1664) and Dupleix, of course, but also of key Indian players to the French consolidation, like Ananda Ranga Pillai, who was Dupleix's chief courtier and kept a journal that offers a peek into Dupleix's day-to-day; Muzaffar Jang, the nizam of Hyderabad who was an ally to the French; and, of course, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, who had inconsistent French support across their military and imperial careers. It is a critique of the economic fallacies of the Compagnie and missionary malpractices of the Jesuits in particular and Catholics in general. It is a dramatisation of inchoate French-Indian allyship against the British.

(above) Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus church in Puducherry; and the statue of Joseph Francois Dupleix, the governor of Puducherry and French India.



Glorious Failure: The Forgotten History of French Imperialism in India: *By Robert Ivermee, 384 pages, Context, ₹699.*

Glorious Failure is not, however, an entirely immersive history of French India. Ivermee has tried to pack a multi-epoch history of French presence in the subcontinent into the space allowed to a midlist novel. This overpacked history infuses his writing with a staccato tempo.

In the span of only two pages, for instance, Ivermee skips from the Mughal-Maratha war's arrival in Puducherry in 1690 to a character vignette of Rajaram Bhosle, the Maratha empire's third Chhatrapati, to Franco-Dutch hostilities and the Nine Years' War, to French colonial stakes in America and the West Indies.

This engorged scale, along with the multinational coordinates, makes Ivermee's prose flit here then there. It detracts. It distracts. It overwhelms. If this is, in fact, the premier text on French India to exist recently, why does it disappoint? Precisely because it tries to be many things at once. Very early in the narrative, it loses its essence, its thesis, even.

To understand and even remind myself why Ivermee is recounting this history in the first place, I had to return to the blurb, which speaks of his aim to contest the "myth of a benign French presence on the subcontinent." The French are often projected as the lesser of the European aggressors, relative, especially, to the British. If they truly were agents of appropriation, trafficking and assault, Ivermee concedes a recurrent use of potent declarative gestures for his readers that tie his narrative back to his thesis.

GETTY IMAGES



These callbacks could have helped signpost his challenge to a popularly conceived notion that French colonialism was merely a quirk in the annals of India: a cosmetic blip exemplified in Puducherry's *ville blanche* (White Town), for instance. What Ivermee unearths out of the usual practice of fetishising the architectural, literary, culinary, theological and other cultural metonyms in both Indic and global imaginations of India's French colony is the inconsistency of French allyship and, at times, the failed narrative of some syncretism.

Perhaps one of the more scintillating passages that undoes a notion of the French as an exotic western presence in India is one where Ivermee implicates France in the slave trade. Far from a simple outpost of Compagnie activities, the subcontinent often became the source and destination in slave trade routes. Even before any European engagement, the Indian Ocean was the playground of Persian, Arab, and Swahili slavers.

With the Estado, the Portuguese set a traffic of slaves between Mozambique and India, and farther east, in South-East Asia. South Asian slaves were even shipped towards Mexico in the western hemisphere and the Philippines closer to home. The Dutch expanded this network to distribute South Asian labour to Java, Malacca, Cape Colony, and elsewhere. The British established Madras (now Chennai) and Bombay (now Mumbai) as the premier sites for buying and selling South-Asian slaves to ship to South-East Asia.

When the French entered this market, out went the "*principe du sol fibre*" (freedom principle) that would have emancipated all those enslaved when they landed on French soil. This was done to serve the interests of the Compagnie, of course. Out came Colbert's Code Noir (or Black Code), justifying slavery for business.

Ivermee showcases quite brilliantly how it was possible for France to set up shop in India due to their human trafficking schemes in Senegal and Guinea that helped sustain the North American and Caribbean colonies. Whilst showcasing how slave trade across the Indian Ocean is often a minor focus in histories of slave trade routes, which frequently centre the transatlantic and Pacific pathways, Ivermee uses French colonialism to explain that these routes have historically nourished one another.

Oddly, these examples that should upend and complicate sunny perceptions of India's French postings are buried in Ivermee's prose, which is peppered with non-sequiturs. Now, these detours that he takes are essential for setting the context for those uninitiated in French maritime and colonial histories, but they do a disservice in the end, leaving no room for Ivermee's story to breathe.

Could Ivermee have approached this flawed bird's-eye perspective differently? There is a wealth of South-Asianists who are reviving and revising history with apertures rather than panoramas, a methodology where the former often leads to the latter, and is kinder to the pace of the narrative, and to the reader. I am thinking of great character sketches, like those of Ruby Lal, and geo-dynastic biographies, like those of Anirudh Kanisetti.

There is an anxiety to the scope of *Glorious Failure*, of covering enough, rather all ground, and there is also a kind of audacity in it that is admirable. Despite, or perhaps because of, the ambitious vastness, which makes Ivermee's prose erratic, readers who come to his book seeking a primer on India's French history and legacy may be standing on a cracked foundation.

Rohit Chakraborty is a scholar and critic from Guwahati. They live in Kolkata.

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LEGAL

OBC creamy layer: Why SC ruled against 'hostile

Shyamlal Yadav
New Delhi, March 13

THE SUPREME Court on Wednesday ruled that income cannot be the sole criterion to decide the "creamy layer" among Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and settled the long-pending question of equivalence between public sector undertakings (PSUs) and private sector employees and those in the government sector. Those included in the creamy layer are not entitled to OBC reservation benefits.

What the top court said

The Division Bench of Justices PS Narasimha and R Mahadevan held: "The object of excluding the creamy layer is... not to create artificial distinctions between equally placed members of the same social class.... unequal treatment of similarly placed OBC candidates would not only be legally erroneous but constitutionally impermissible."

The Bench was hearing petitions arising due to an October 14, 2004, letter issued by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) with regard to the creamy layer criterion, clarifying an Official Memorandum (OM) issued on September 8, 1993. The OM noted who is classified as OBC and who belongs to the creamy layer among them.

Creamy layer in OBC quota

The concept of creamy layer within the OBCs was introduced following the landmark 1992 SC ruling in *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, also known as the Mandal verdict.

For those in government jobs, the creamy layer specifies groups such as persons occupying constitutional posts; Group-A/Class-I officers of All India Services, Central services and state services; Group-B/Class-II services of Centre and state; employees of PSUs; officers of Armed Forces; professionals and those from trade and industry; property owners; and an income/wealth test. In a nutshell, if either parent is a direct recruit of Group-A, or is promoted before the age of 40, their children cannot take advantage of the OBC quota. Similarly, if both parents are Group-B direct recruits, their children will be covered under the creamy layer. The criterion for those not in the government sector was set at Rs 1 lakh per annum in 1993. It was revised in due course and since 2017, this income limit is Rs 8 lakh.

DoPT's clarification

Para 9 of DoPT's October 2004 clarification said that "the creamy layer status of sons and daughters of persons employed in organisations where equivalence or comparability of posts vis-à-vis posts in Government has not been evaluated is determined as follows: Income of the parents from the salaries and from the other sources (other than salaries and agriculture land) is determined separately. If either the income of the parents from the salaries or the income of the parents from other sources (other than salaries and agricultural land) exceeds the limit of Rs 2.5 lakh per annum [as it was then] for a period of three consecutive years, the sons and daughters of such persons shall be treated to fall in creamy layer."

The court noted that while the OM had excluded income from salary and agricultural income from the income/wealth test for determination of creamy layer status, the October 2004 letter directed inclusion of salary income of PSU and private sector employees. This resulted in hostile discrimination between wards of government servants and those of PSU and private sector employees, "thereby attracting the rigour of the equality doctrine under Articles 14, 15 and 16." FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM/EXPLAINED



WAR IN WEST ASIA

Amid oil supply crunch, the big winner – Russia

Millions of barrels of Russian crude were languishing on the high seas. It is now in high demand as the war chokes energy flows & price spirals



SUKALP SHARMA

THIS WAR has no winners, except maybe one that is not even fighting in it.

As Iran effectively chokes off the Strait of Hormuz in its escalating response to the US and Israel's attacks, Russia is making a windfall on the back of the reduced supply of crude oil as well as its spiralling prices. According to a *Financial Times* report, Moscow is estimated to have earned around $150 million a day in extra oil revenue since the effective closure of the narrow transit passage for a fifth of the world's energy supplies.

Till a few days back, millions of barrels of Russian crude were languishing on the high seas with few willing buyers, thanks to US efforts to starve Moscow of oil revenues that could fund the Ukraine war. Now, America's own war against Iran has taken precedence. After issuing a 30-day "waiver" to Indian refiners last week for buying Russian crude that is already sitting in tankers on water, the US has now extended it to other countries too.

"To increase the global reach of existing supply, @USTreasury is providing a temporary authorization to permit countries to purchase Russian oil currently stranded at sea. This narrowly tailored, short-term measure applies only to oil already in transit and will not provide significant financial benefit to the Russian government, which derives the majority of its energy revenue from taxes assessed at the point of extraction," US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent posted on social media platform X.

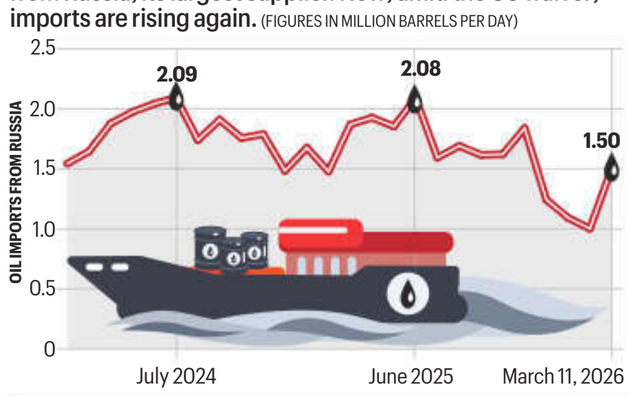
How does Russian oil waiver work?

The easing of sanctions, which will be in place for a month, means that the US will have no problem if countries import Russian crude that was loaded on or before 12:01 am eastern daylight time, or 9:31 am India time, on March 12.

While this move could help other countries secure some oil supplies, it is likely to help New Delhi as well as the India-specific waiver was for oil loaded on tankers before March 5.

Uneven flow

In recent months, India significantly cut down oil imports from Russia, its largest supplier. Now, amid the US waiver, imports are rising again. (FIGURES IN MILLION BARRELS PER DAY)





An oil tanker hit by an Iranian strike at Khor al-Zubair port in Iraq, Wednesday. AP

According to industry watchers, the US could be forced to ease sanctions further on Russian crude if the disruption to the global oil supplies via the Strait of Hormuz persists for an extended period.

Experts see these moves from Washington as part of Donald Trump's effort to prevent a further and sustained spike in international oil prices — and the consequent rise in domestic fuel prices in the US — given the midterm elections later this year.

"So far, there is only one winner in this war — Russia. It steadily undermines Ukraine's position by flouting international law. It gains new resources to finance its war against Ukraine as energy prices rise," European Council President António Costa said earlier this week at the European Union Ambassadors Conference in Brussels.

And while Bessent said in his X post on Friday that the temporary easing of sanctions on Russian oil on water will not provide significant financial benefit to Moscow, he said earlier that the financial gains Russia would accrue would be "unfortunate".

How has Russia benefited?

The West Asia war has led to a spurt in crude oil prices, which remain extremely volatile. At noon on Friday, benchmark Brent crude was around $100 per barrel, almost 37% higher than nearly $73 per barrel just before the US and Israel launched military strikes on Iran on February 28. So, like any other oil producer who is able to sell crude in this market, Russia gains from higher oil prices. But that's not all. The price of Russian crude grades — mainly its flagship Urals — have appreciated more given the availability in an otherwise tight market and buyer interest.

Surge price

At this stage, the US waiver on buying Russian oil does not change much for countries such as India, China and Turkey, which were already buying despite sanctions.

•

But now, increased competition for Russian barrels could lead to even higher prices.

Russian oil used to trade at a discount to crude benchmarks. The discounts have now largely disappeared, and there are reports of Russian oil even selling at a premium in some cases. Add to that the fact that the easing of sanctions by the US has made large volumes of Russian crude kosher for international buyers.

Around 130 million barrels of Russian crude was estimated to be on ships on water as of early March. Some of those volumes would have already been gobbled up by India and China, the biggest buyers of seaborne Russian crude. Additional volumes are likely to have come on water over the past couple of weeks as well.

"From a market perspective, Russian crude currently acts as one of the best supply hedges for Asian refiners. With persistent risks around the Strait of Hormuz and Middle East supply routes, refiners in Asia are naturally looking for barrels that are more secure and priced competitively, and Russian crude fits that role," said Sumit Ritolia, Lead Research Analyst, Refining & Modeling at Kpler, a commodity market analytics firm.

All this means Russia could rake in billions of dollars more as the war continues. And the longer the West Asian oil flows remain constricted, the more it benefits Russia, which has been facing a slowing economy and expanding budget deficit owing to its Ukraine war expenditure.

How is India affected?

With the conflict — now into its second week — suspending traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, India's Russian oil imports have shot up. In the first 11 days of the month, India imported 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of Russian oil, up around 50% from February levels, as per ship tracking data from Kpler. These volumes could increase if regular West Asian oil volumes through the strait are not resumed soon. Around 2.5-2.7 million bpd of India's crude imports — accounting for around half of the country's total oil imports — have crossed the strait in recent months; the longer-term average is around 40%. This oil is mainly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait.

India had, in recent months, significantly cut down its oil imports from Russia, its largest oil supplier, amid trade negotiations with the US, as Washington made it a prerequisite for scrapping its 25% additional penal tariff *(see chart)*.

In February, India had imported just over one million bpd of Russian crude, almost half of the 2025 peak of over 2 million bpd. Loadings of Russian crude for Indian ports, which averaged 1.7 million bpd last year, was just 0.7 million bpd in February. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its oil requirement.

But now the US is counting on India to buy more Russian oil. On Wednesday, Ambassador Sergio Gor said: "India has been a great partner in maintaining stable oil prices around the world. The United States recognizes ongoing purchases of Russian oil are a part of this effort. India is one of the largest consumers and refiners of oil and it is essential for the United States and India to work hand in hand for market stability for Americans and Indians."

A senior government official had said last week that India never stopped buying Russian crude, and the "waiver" appeared to be more for Washington's own legal and procedural requirements.

"What the waiver does is reduce some of the uncertainty around the trade and could potentially open the door for other Asian buyers who had stayed away (from Russian oil) since 2022," said Ritolia.

To compute the true costs of Iran conflict, look at the past



GRAPHS, DATA, PERSPECTIVES
BY UDIT MISRA
WEEKLY ECONOMIC AND POLICY INSIGHTS USING DATA

SINCE THE US and Israel attacked Iran on February 28, initial estimates suggest a heavy running cost for this war. Last week, Israel's Finance Ministry claimed that the country is spending $3 billion per week as it attacked Iran and defended itself from Iranian missiles. In the US, the costs are reportedly even higher. On Wednesday, the Department of Defense (or War, as the Trump administration calls it) told the US Congress in a briefing that the government had spent $11.3 billion in the first six days of the war: close to $2 billion a day.

For perspective, $1 billion is roughly equal to Rs 9,000 crore. So, the US and Israel spent over Rs 1.3 lakh crore in six days.

Another way to look at this is to compare it with India's defence budget for FY 2026-27: Rs 7.8 lakh crore. At the going rate, in just six weeks — one of the many timelines US President Donald Trump has given since the war began — the two countries would have spent as much as India's defence spending in the coming year.

Of course, it is possible that as the days and weeks go by, the direct running cost may come down. After all, Trump has said that almost all the targets that could be hit aerially have been hit. But it is unclear how long this war will drag on, especially since there is no clarity on the exact goal.

Lessons from history

While accurately assessing the true cost of war is near impossible, one way to get a sense of the scale is to look at the cost of past wars. A 2021 study by Brown University's Costs of War project put the total budgetary costs and future obligations of the post-9/11 wars (including estimated future costs for veterans' care) at about $8 trillion *(see chart)*.

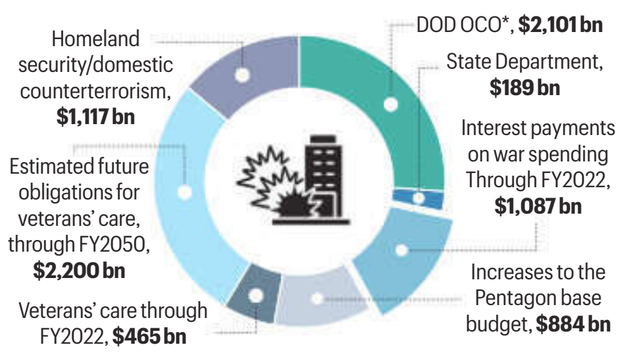
But even these costs are only those that will fall on the US government and American taxpayers. If this war settles down to a lower frequency of attacks and counterattacks, the focus of costs will shift from direct military costs to the US and Israel to indirect costs to the wider world, such as the cost of higher fuel prices.

Crude oil prices have shot up by almost 50% since the war began. That increase will now feed inflation globally, worsening the so-called cost of living crisis that started in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war.

But even such inflationary bumps fail to truly capture the real cost of war. For instance, what is the opportunity cost of any such war? Opportunity cost refers to the "money which could have gone towards societally beneficial expenditures such as infrastructure improvements, educational investments, and environmental protection" instead of military spending.

$8-trillion burden

A snapshot of America's war-related spending after the 9/11 terror attack, and its obligations



*DOD OCO STANDS FOR DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OVERSEAS CONTINGENCY OPERATIONS
NOTE: AMOUNTS PERTAIN TO FY2001 TO FY2022 IN CURRENT $; SOURCE: COSTS OF WAR PROJECT

The non-economic costs

Beyond the economic costs, are the human costs — again, far more difficult to assess. The project found that around 940,000 people were killed by direct post-9/11 war violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan between 2001 and 2023. Of these, over 432,000 were civilians.

The post-9/11 wars have also led to a severe undermining of civil liberties and human rights. "Domestically, the post-9/11 wars dramatically expanded mass surveillance, eroding constitutional protections, and intensified police militarization. Marginalized and racialized groups, from Muslims and Arabs to Black and Indigenous organizers to migrants, have borne the brunt of these consequences," the project noted.

Last, there are environmental costs because "military jets and vehicles consume petroleum-based fuels at an extremely high rate, and the vehicles used in the war zones produce tons of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons, and sulfur dioxide in addition to CO2". One of the key findings has been that the US Department of Defense is the world's single largest institutional consumer of oil — making it one of the world's top greenhouse gas emitters.

WAR IN WEST ASIA

Strait of Hormuz crisis spotlights a growing risk for Indian seafarers: Abandonment



SUNANDA MEHTA

THE WAR in West Asia, in which a number of tankers and merchant vessels near the Persian Gulf have come under attack, is throwing light on the risks faced by commercial sailors, especially Indians.

At least three Indian seafarers have been killed so far in Iranian attacks.

As ships continue to find themselves stranded near the Strait of Hormuz, industry stakeholders are warning of the increasing risk of "abandonments" — when shipowners cease all support to their crew and vessels.

Indians, who make up about 15% of the world's seafarer workforce — the second biggest share by nationality — top the list of "abandoned seafarers".

A recent report by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), which represents seafarers globally, put the number of abandoned Indian seafarers in 2025 at a record 1,125, representing nearly 18% of all global abandonment cases. The total number of ships abandoned was also a record — 410 in 2025 from 20 in 2016.

Around 7,40,000 seafarers are registered with India's Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) and 3,23,479 of them are active seafarers. Here's a look at why abandonment happens and why Indians are the worst affected.

What is 'seafarer abandonment'?

Seafarer abandonment refers to a scenario where shipowners cut off all support to their crew, leaving them stranded without pay, food, shelter, medical care or a way home, either aboard a vessel or in a foreign port. For many seafarers, especially those from low-income backgrounds, disembarking abandoned vessels without a salary is impossible — they often would have already shelled out hefty sums of money to agents for jobs or training certifications. Additionally, port or visa restrictions may prevent them from going ashore.

Why would owners abandon their crew and vessels?

When faced with situations such as high operational costs, debt, or even war and strife, ship owners may opt to cut ties altogether rather than pay wages, cover repatriation or maintain ageing vessels.

But enabling these abandonments is the "flag of convenience" (FOC) system. Each commercial vessel needs to register with a country's flag so that it has a legal nationality. This determines the laws a vessel must follow and the protections its crew receives.

But since international rules allow flagging anywhere, ship owners pick countries (called Flag States) that allow them to bypass safety standards, avoid taxes, and skirt laws protecting labour conditions and wages. The FOC system also conceals the ownership, enabling fly-by-night operators. It is little surprise, then, that FOC vessels dominate abandonment. The ITF estimates that 30% of the 1,00,000-strong global merchant fleet flies FOCs, and 90% of the abandoned ships in 2024 were under FOCs.

Chirag Bahri, operations manager at the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN), said the turmoil in West Asia threatens more abandonments. "If this crisis persists, shipping companies in the Gulf region may encounter significant financial difficulties, which could threaten their survival, potentially resulting in more seafarers being left stranded on their vessels," says Bahri.

What are the recent incidents in which Indian seafarers have found themselves abandoned?

In March 2026, 20 Indians and two others were stranded on the *MV Manali* near Iran's Bandar Abbas Port amid bombings.

In 2025, 19 people, 17 of them Indians, were stranded off UAE on the tanker *Global Peace*. Since June last year, the crew of the *Eleen Armonia*, including four Indians, has allegedly been abandoned off the coast of Nigeria — with no pay and battling severe mental strain in isolation.

In 2024, crew members on the *MV Captain Tarek*, one of them an Indian, were left abandoned for several months off Yemen.

In July 2025, the crew members of the *MT Nathan* found themselves abandoned in a war zone for months in a port in South Ukraine, caught between Russian bombing and the Ukrainian air defence.

The West Asian and Persian Gulf regions, conflict-ridden waters, dominated recent incidents of abandonment. Over 100 Indians were repatriated from 14 vessels in places like Sharjah (UAE), Tartus (Syria), Shinas (Oman) and Qatar in 2025-2026.

Why are Indian seafarers susceptible to abandonment?

Indian seafarers top abandonment lists owing to a mix of socioeconomic pressures, systemic flaws in recruitment, and a surge in fraudulent practices, says Bahri.

"India's vast population, particularly in tier-3 and tier-4 cities, sees seafaring as a golden escape from poverty — salaries here can dwarf local earnings by multiples. But unlike earlier generations with family shipping ties, many rural newcomers fall into traps set by rogue agents. These agents charge high fees for phantom jobs, peddle fake or bought foreign certificates, and dangle promises of instant wealth," he says.

Bahri also points to policy gaps. "The ease of obtaining a CDC (Continuous Discharge Certificate, mandatory for sailing) through minimal modular courses fuels false expectations without guaranteed employment, pushing desperate individuals toward exploitative agents."

What protections do seafarers have?

Stranded seafarers need to swiftly alert ITF inspectors worldwide for aid, wage negotiation and repatriation. Indian seafarers can also dial the DGS's round-the-clock helpline. In India, the DGS is responsible for verifying the credentials of ships, owners and recruitment and placement agencies. But the shipping community alleges that lax regulatory oversight is behind issues such as abandonment.

Capt P C Meena, Deputy Director General of Shipping (Crew) at the DGS, said the regulator has tightened compliance requirements for recruitment and placement service licensees and shipping firms. He said 86 vessels were blacklisted for repeated abuses against Indians in September 2025 alone.

The writer is Resident Editor, Pune

● **WEB EXCLUSIVE**
'The war on Iran might just strengthen its resolve to get nuclear weapons.' — *By Saptarshi Basak*
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Markets can remain irrational longer than you can remain solvent.
— John Maynard Keynes

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IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Tariffs to LPG, a shape-shifting crisis

THE 1997 Asian Contagion, triggered by the collapse of the Thai baht before spreading to other countries in the region and beyond, was a financial crisis. So was the American subprime mortgage crisis leading to the global Great Recession from late 2007 to mid-2009. India's twin-deficit and twin-balance-sheet problems of the last decade were also primarily "financial" crises. Financial imbalances — from currency devaluations and capital flight, the bursting of housing and asset bubbles or high fiscal and external current account deficits — spilled over into the real economy, causing growth and investment slowdowns. The "real" impact of over-leveraged private corporates not investing and bad loans-saddled banks not lending on the Indian economy was felt through much of the 2010s.

The present decade, in contrast, has seen more "real" crises. The Covid pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing US-Israel-versus-Iran conflict have all originated from the physical, as opposed to the financial, world. These have profoundly disrupted physical human interaction or movement of goods. Just as the virus made people afraid of meeting one another, the wars have created anxiety among exporters and importers, and producers and consumers alike. The movement of vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, which handles about a fifth of the world's total petroleum liquid consumption and liquefied natural gas trade, has stopped due to non-availability of war risk insurance for hull and cargo. The very reports of attacks on ships and their sailors being stranded at sea are enough to freeze international trade. The ripple effects on other real economic activities don't take long in coming.

Like with Covid and the Russia-Ukraine war, which sent global oil and food prices skyrocketing, the current West Asia conflict will have a spillover from the "real" to the "financial". For India, it could entail a further weakening of the rupee and renewed pressures on both the balance of payments and government finances. This, just when the Centre as well as states have been working on fiscal consolidation and reduction of debt-GDP ratios that had spiked to all-time-highs in 2020-21, because of pandemic-time spending and economic contraction. Financial crises resulting from debt-fuelled growth, over-investment and speculative bubbles are normal — even considered part of the business cycle — in most market economies. The "real" crises of the kind seen in this decade, including those emanating from Donald Trump's tariff wars, have more to do with geopolitics. It makes economic policymaking much more complicated.

On climate change, mind the science-policy gap

IN 2023, scientists began debating the need to quantify the extent of global warming. Natural fluctuations, such as El Niño, made it difficult to ascertain if the faster rise in temperatures was due to climate change. Now, an analysis by Stefan Rahmstorf of the University of Potsdam, Germany, and US statistician Grant Foster has confirmed the links between the two. The researchers isolated the influence of phenomena such as El Niño, volcanic eruptions and solar irradiance to affirm that the pace of global warming has doubled since 2014, compared to the decade before it. Their study, published in *Geophysical Research Letters* a few days ago, reckons that the Paris Pact's target of keeping temperature rise to below 1.5 degrees Celsius below pre-industrial levels could be out of reach by 2030. The study comes in the wake of a *Nature* paper that concludes that sea-level rise — caused by global heating — could be far higher than previously understood, including in IPCC reports. The two studies confirm the fears of scientists — the climate system is already in uncharted territory. As another analysis, published on Tuesday in the journal *Environmental Research: Health*, points out, a third of the world's population now lives in areas — including large parts of India — where heat severely limits human activity.

It took careful diplomacy to include the 1.5-degree target in the Paris Pact. Since then, diplomacy has not kept pace with science. Take the net-zero target. Two different methodologies are used to calculate this goal — one deployed by IPCC scientists and a much looser method adopted by national policymakers. The latter, criticised for not reckoning with the fact that multiple entities can claim the same emission cuts, has found its way into climate negotiations. Scientists who framed the net-zero concept warn that reliance on this method will artificially inflate progress.

Every fraction of a degree of warming will make adaptation more expensive. As the *Environmental Research: Health* study warns, extreme heat will affect not only the elderly but also the young and healthy. Public health experts, agriculture scientists and energy specialists have blueprints to increase resilience. It's up to policymakers to make optimum use of their inputs.

In Radić's architecture, poetics of space

WORDS OFTEN fail critics trying to describe the work of Chilean architect Smiljan Radić, recipient of the 2026 Pritzker Architecture Prize, architecture's most coveted award. His futuristic modernism is sometimes interpreted as "conceptually evasive", and, at other times, as "Mies van der Rohe-meets-*Star Trek*". Spanning cultural and commercial buildings, residences, and pavilions, each project is marked by a unique dialogue between structure, material and context. Ranging from minimalist, sharply geometric forms to sculptural, almost fantastical constructions, they challenge conventional notions of space.

Radić's buildings allow the city in. In the Biobío Theatre, he and his collaborators used woven fibreglass over 8,000 sqm, throwing the building's skeleton open to the city in its translucence. The VIK Winery in Millahue is mostly underground, with the remaining structure peeping out lightly above ground. For Alexander McQueen's Spring/Summer 2022 show in London, he created a stage almost like a soap bubble, against the city's skyline. Radić's architecture celebrates the weathering of materials, the "pretty ugliness" of objects, and the fragility of time and nature.

Once considered the end of the world, post-Pinochet Chile has become a site where architects explore material versatility and technical finesse. Radić's work, often inspired by literary or artistic references, succeeds not only because it honours legacy but because it offers inventive paths to the future. Blending experimentation with a deep sensitivity to context, it offers lessons for other architects, showing how architecture can be both rooted in place and radically inventive.

LPG cylinder crunch hits home, singes stories of welfare and aspiration



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

SINCE THEIR introduction in 1955, two implements of Indian domestic life have remained steadfastly rooted in the national imagination as symbols of well-being as well as intergenerational class mobility. One is the pressure cooker and the other is the LPG cylinder. Their non-Indian origins notwithstanding, they have iconic status as objects that both represent modernity and give rise to bonds of family. In popular culture, the idea of the modern Indian family is indispensably built around the idea of a kitchen equipped with one or more pressure cookers and (and even more desirably) multiple LPG cylinders. The plump red cylinder with faded company logo is the object of both domestic aspirations and welfare. It is not for nothing that old films wanting to show domestic poverty would do it through a scene of a woman blowing into a smoke-spewing *chulha*, tears streaming down her face.

The political importance of the LPG cylinder — or, rather, the fuel that gives it meaning — was recognised in the 2016 Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), intended to provide clean cooking fuel to rural and poor households. The BJP's publicity strategy centred around billboards that showed women in poses of happiness and gratitude as they receive cylinders from the Prime Minister. But the route to the well-being of the Indian kitchen and family is entangled in the global geopolitics of the US-Israeli war with Iran and the subsequent blocking of the Strait of Hormuz by the latter. The majority of LPG supplies are made up of imports and around 90 per cent of these pass through the Strait of Hormuz. While global media outlets give considerable airtime to energy experts who fret over the effect of petrol price increases in the US and Europe and the growing consumer anger, there is far less coverage of the effects of the war on some of the world's most vulnerable populations.

Multiple studies indicate that while the burning of solid fuel — wood, for example — adds to the overall air pollution, its health effects are most severe on the poor. There are four intertwined aspects to this: Class, caste, gender, and the rural-urban divide. At the most general level, biomass fuels affect the poor much more than the better-off both due to the density of the population where the poor are forced to live and the constricted nature of their residential dwellings. Individual households with a high level of biomass use suffer disproportionately whereas those who live in the locality but have a lower instance of using such fuel also suffer due to exposure to the outdoor air pollution in their locality.

Government data show that access to clean fuels such as LPG is crucially dependent on caste. In both urban and rural areas, for example, the percentage of upper-caste homes that use LPG as the main cooking fuel can be three to four times higher than those belonging to SC and ST families. A key factor relates to the places of residence of each of the above groups. In rural areas in particular the socially marginalised are forced to live in localities that suffer from forbidding topography and poor transport infrastructure. LPG cylinders are unwieldy containers requiring pedal-powered or motorised transport and, notwithstanding government subsidies, the location factor adds another layer of discrimination when it comes to energy access.

> With women's access to LPG, studies suggest that the time that is saved allows for leisure activities. Women are able to utilise it for activities that generate income. This secures a measure of personal autonomy

Among the poor — whether urban or rural — women and young girls shoulder the greatest burden of diseases connected to extended exposure to the pollution that results from solid and biomass fuel use. While the responsibility for food preparation is given over to women, the power to make decisions about what kind of fuel to use is usually in the hands of men. Given gender norms, women's health does not usually figure as a priority when it comes to deciding on the distribution of the household budget. Add to this the fact that daughters of the household join their mothers in sharing kitchen responsibilities from a young age and you have a lifetime of exposure to particulates and other forms of pollution in extremely confined spaces.

In addition to reducing the burden of disease, women's access to LPG is also linked to another well-being effect. Studies suggest that the time that is saved — no gathering of firewood and faster cooking periods — releases them from the enforced drudgery of household work, allowing for leisure activities. Not only are women able to devote more time to activities that improve health outcomes but also utilise it for activities that generate income. This, in turn, secures a measure of personal autonomy that is denied by unpaid household work. Control over time is a crucial measure of the capacity to control and fashion one's life chances. There is evidence that the red cylinder has been an important contributor to this aspect of women's lives.

India is heavily reliant on imports to meet domestic LPG requirements and the current shortage has had significant effects on commercial activities, such as restaurants and hotels having to curtail operating hours. However, a more significant crisis relates to the welfare effects on the poor. Popular culture portrayals of the LPG cylinder as harbinger of personal and collective well-being are not far off the mark: The transition from the wood-burning *chulha* to the bright blue flame of the LPG stove is also a transition to better life chances.

The writer is distinguished research professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS University of London

Amid the gloom, an opportunity to rebuild



K P NAYAR

WARS BRING windfalls. The ongoing conflict in West Asia is no exception. India can gain, too, but the public discourse in this country has so far dwelt entirely on doomsday scenarios — high oil prices, evacuation imperatives, job losses in overseas labour markets and the like. I have been a witness to fortunes made in the Persian Gulf from every outbreak of turmoil since the triumphant return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Tehran from exile in 1979. Smart countries in the lower parts of this region have thrived from every war — there have been many in its proximity — since Iran's Islamic Revolution. All this runs against India's traditional ethos and public policies. It needs to change because times have changed. If India does not change, it will lose, and the loss to altruism and compassion will be borne by this country's 1.4 billion people.

I arrived in the Gulf, 11 months before Khomeini's return, to start the first broadsheet English newspaper on the Arab side of the region. With me were six Indian journalists, a British editor and a Bangladeshi news editor, who had spent many years at Xinhua and was the only foreign journalist in Beijing during the aftershocks of the Cultural Revolution. Nineteen months after Khomeini took control of Iran, Saddam Hussein, Iraq's then president, ordered an invasion of his eastern neighbour. The war lasted eight years, caused deaths estimated at half a million and ended in a draw brokered by the UN. Dubai thrived during this period by supplying Iran with everything it needed through the port of Bandar Abbas. This port is less than two nautical miles from the emirate and it takes only between 16 and 24 hours for cargo ships to reach it. It was like a lucky lottery ticket for Dubai's merchants — many of whom are of Persian descent — that such vessels could avoid the most dangerous choke points in wartime in the Strait of Hormuz. As a reporter, I went every six months to the Dubai ports and customs department to check re-export figures, a barometer of the emirate's prosperity in those days before Dubai grew into anything remotely like what it is now. Re-exports went up by leaps and bounds. Such windfalls were repeated during the war to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991 and the US invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein in 2003.

How can India gain from the dent in the image of Gulf countries as safe havens from constant Arab upheavals without appearing to fish in troubled waters? Abu Dhabi and Dubai are leading MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) locations. The Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC), the largest such venue in the Arab world, hosts more than 100 international events every year. Dubai's Expo City does the same. Cancellations of some of these events are inevitable now because global MICE programmes require certainty. Instead of going in for cancellations, India can use its friendly relations with the UAE to shift some of these events to Delhi, Mumbai or Bengaluru, which have venues that match ADNEC and Expo City in capacity, amenities and comfort. Yashobhoomi in the national capital, the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre and Mumbai's Jio World Centre are currently underutilised. MICE is a multi-billion-dollar business, but India has never had a strategy or credible plan to attract this business.

Persuading ADNEC and Expo City to shift some of their mammoth events this year to India — even if they have to be downsized — instead of cancelling them is a stopgap arrangement. But it can be built upon because of the opportunities such relocation will allow to expose India's recently enhanced MICE infrastructure — like Bharat Mandapam in Delhi — to the global exhibition and conference industry. Fortuitously, this chance coincides with the appointment of an economic diplomat, Jawed Ashraf, as chairman of the Indian Trade Promotion Organisation (ITPO). As he works on a complete reorientation of ITPO's global outreach, Ashraf has been keen to bring in the best practices of another MICE location, Singapore, where he was high commissioner. Disruptions in the Gulf offer him an opportunity, if only India is ready to be self-serving.

Dubai's reputation was built over 40 years of hard and imaginative work. If the war in West Asia does not stop soon, it will take as many decades to rebuild confidence in the Gulf. India used a windfall from the war in Ukraine until Trump stepped in. But those were government-to-government windows and were existential for India. The opportunities popping up now are people-centric and can benefit everyone, from some entrepreneurs to corporate leaders.

The writer, a senior journalist, has worked in West Asia

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The many limitations of a social-media ban



ANGELINA DASH

THE KARNATAKA and Andhra Pradesh governments have announced their intention to introduce measures to restrict social-media access for children below the ages of 16 and 13 years respectively. With law-making powers relating to internet and communications governance typically falling under the Union List, it is unclear whether states can, in fact, regulate children's access to social media through legislation.

Fragmented approaches to social-media bans can present challenges in applicability, particularly in the case of non-uniform age thresholds across different states. It is also unclear how different states may intend to assign the onus with respect to enforceability. A broader social media ban for children is also contentious due to several constraints. It is challenging to identify an age threshold, as it could be onerous to ascertain the extent of agency and evolving capacity that an individual child may demonstrate. Moreover, online age verification raises several privacy concerns, since such regulation would require every user to verify their age to access platforms, through mechanisms which have not fully been specified. Such a ban also fails to account for challenges such as shared device usage. A ban may also further limit online expression for girls and LGBTQIA+ children.

As per India's data protection law, which is yet to be enforced, even when children are past an identified age threshold, they will still need parental consent to access most platforms. Notwithstanding the prevailing law in their state, parents may choose to exercise caution in a manner that disregards their child's individual capacity and agency. Social-media bans, coupled with existing parental consent requirements under data protection frameworks, may shift the narrative entirely towards restricting children's access, whereas the real question relates to how we can safeguard children from the very real harms that present themselves online. With children continuing to be exposed to inherent platform design choices that can foster safety harms, the crux of the problem often remains unaddressed.

Rather than restricting access, policies and legal frameworks should empower children and parents to navigate these platforms safely. The Centre is reportedly looking to introduce a law that attempts to take a "nuanced and graded approach" to regulating access to social media for children. However, it is imperative that consultative processes take a multi-stakeholder approach, including consultation with civil society, academia, and children. Any law must acknowledge different harms, such as grooming, sexual content, addiction, and mental-health challenges, and explore targeted mitigation strategies as opposed to a sweeping ban. The law must also build pathways towards equipping children, parents and educators with tools for responsible social media use.

It is crucial that legislation consider factors such as India's linguistic diversity, which may not only impact how platforms detect children's accounts but can also dictate the accuracy with which safety measures used by platforms work. Additionally, a narrow focus on social-media platforms alone ignores risks that may present themselves on alternative mediums such as gaming platforms and large language models. Policies and legal frameworks must, therefore, safeguard the best interests of children in a manner that accounts for emerging technologies and India's unique considerations and challenges.

The writer is project officer at Centre for Communication Governance, National Law University Delhi

> Any law must acknowledge different harms, such as grooming, sexual content, addiction, and mental-health challenges, and explore targeted mitigation strategies as opposed to a sweeping ban

40 YEARS AGO
March 14, 1986


INDIAN EXPRESS
India not walking into debt trap: V. P. Singh
MODVAT to aid indigenisation
3 Nirankaris shot dead
Lanka asked to stop violence
UN panel told of killings
Chavan finalises names of ministers

Chavan finalises ministers

S B CHAVAN, Maharashtra Chief Minister-elect, met the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in New Delhi. Chavan is expected to return to Bombay soon. He said the list of the members of his Cabinet was finalised after his meeting with Rajiv Gandhi, which lasted about 90 minutes. After arriving here from Bombay, Chavan drove straight to the Prime Minister's house. Prabha Rau, MPCC(I) president, who accompanied him from Bombay, waited at Chavan's residence.

India told of killings

INDIA WAS told of a UN panel on the escalating violence and indiscriminate killings of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka and expressed the hope that President Jayewardene would resist political pressures and work out a peaceful solution to the ethnic problem in his country. Speaking in the committee on the elimination of racial discrimination, Shanti Sadiq Ali said the situation in Sri Lanka had "deteriorated considerably" with the conditions of the minority (Tamils) becoming "very precarious."

PM's TV 'exposure'

A DOORDARSHAN discussion on the projection of the Prime Minister on television vs the official control of the media has run into rough weather, thanks to the government's noncooperative attitude. The discussion was to be telecast in *Newsline*, a fortnightly programme presented by a private agency under a Calcutta editor. The original idea was to interview L K Advani, information minister in the Janata government, Mani Shankar Aiyar, the Prime Minister's publicity aide, and Amita Malik, a media critic.

Marcos papers

THE REAGAN administration has decided to turn over to the Philippines government copies of all the 1,500 financial documents brought to Hawaii by Ferdinand Marcos, amidst reports that President Corazon Aquino has frozen all assets and properties in the Philippines of the deposed president, his family and associates.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

It would be morally indefensible for this country to support the US-Israeli aggression against Iran.

— Dawn,Pakistan

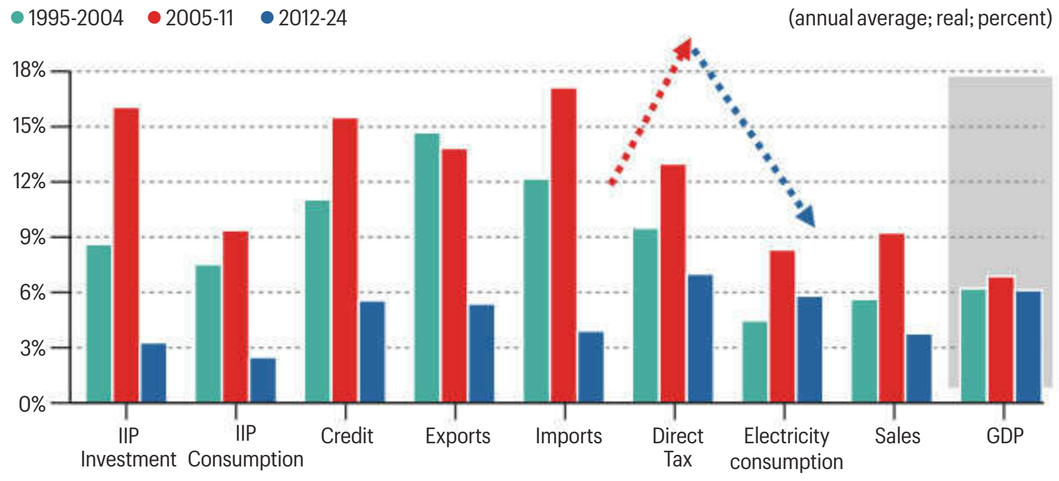
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Growth has been less strong than it seems. The misreading has complicated policy



ABHISHEK ANAND, JOSH FELMAN AND ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

GROWTH RATES OF MACRO-INDICATORS OF GDP



ALL VARIABLES ARE IN REAL TERMS; SEE PAPER FOR DETAILS. SOURCES: RBI, CEA, MOSPI

RECENTLY, THE government released a new series of GDP numbers. It did so for two main reasons. First, the weights of the various goods and services needed updating, a step that was long overdue as India's economy has gone through tremendous changes since the weights were last established in 2011-12. Second, shortcomings in the methodology for estimating GDP needed to be addressed.

The process of changing the methodology has been commendably consultative, for which the Ministry of Statistics and Policy Implementation (MoSPI) deserves credit. But assessing whether the shortcomings have been substantively addressed will take time. And it will ultimately depend on the quality and plausibility of the new numbers.

Prima facie, while there have clearly been improvements, some oddities remain. For example, goods inflation (as measured by the manufacturing GVA deflator) is strangely negative for 10 quarters, which has led to an unusual jump in the sector's real growth rate. Also, import deflators are radically different from those in the previous series, which has produced sharp changes in real import growth.

But before we can fully assess the new methodology, we need to understand: What were the problems with the old methodology? Were they serious? In a new paper, we try to answer these questions.

Start with the manifestation of the problem. Until a decade ago, there was a close relationship between the GDP numbers and the standard macro-indicators that economists monitor to gauge the health of the economy: Exports, credit, taxes, electricity consumption, sales and the index of industrial production. These relationships broke down, however, after the methodology was radically revised in January 2015.

A key problem was the use of inappropriate data sources, notably proxying the performance of the informal sector by using data from the formal sector. This may have been a reasonable approach in normal times. But after 2015, the informal sector was hit disproportionately by three severe shocks: Demonetisation, the introduction of the GST and Covid. As a result, the methodology overstated informal sector performance — a serious problem, since informal enterprises accounted for over 45 per cent of the economy in 2011-12.

The other major problem was the use of inappropriate deflators. Much attention has been paid to the lack of "double deflation". The bigger issue was the use of inappropriate price indices, most notably the use of the wholesale price index (WPI), to deflate services production even though the WPI doesn't really capture service prices. This was a particularly acute problem over the past decade when the WPI plunged, driven largely by the collapse in the price of oil. As a result, inflation was understated and real growth was overstated. These problems mattered enormously, causing significant misestimation when the 2015 methodology was applied to GDP growth numbers, initially from 2011-12 onwards and then retrospectively to figures going back to 2004-05.

> Much attention has been paid to the lack of 'double deflation'. The bigger issue was the use of inappropriate price indices, most notably the WPI, to deflate services production even though the WPI doesn't really capture service prices

Growth was overstated by about 1½-2 percentage points on average between 2011-12 and 2023-24, with inappropriate data and deflators contributing roughly equally. As a result, we estimate the economy grew at 4-4½ per cent on average instead of 6 per cent over these 12 years. Estimates of India's potential growth need to be re-calibrated accordingly.

For the earlier period, the 2015 methodology had the opposite effect: It underestimated growth by about 1-1½ percentage points on average between 2004-05 and 2011-12. The net result is a mischaracterisation of the 20-year trajectory of growth. The boom of the aughties and the subsequent slowdown have been erased from history, replaced by a picture of steady, rapid growth.

The figures show the problem. The macro-indicators surged from the 1990s to the early aughties but then decelerated sharply, falling even below pre-2005 levels (see arrows). Yet official GDP growth figures (the shaded area) portray a picture of stable growth over the entire period.

In this picture, there was no India Shining between 2003 and 2010, when the heady, dizzy dynamism was palpable everywhere, including in all the major macroeconomic aggregates. Nor was there any slowdown after the global financial crisis, any impact of the twin balance sheet problem, or of the four major post-2015 shocks: Demonetisation, GST, the ILFS-triggered credit meltdown and Covid. The official data suggest that the last two decades were an uninterrupted idyll of 6-7 per cent growth.

This misreading complicated macroeconomic policy: At various periods the data signalled strength when the economy was weak, and in others, it suggested that policy should be eased when growth was strong. It also attenuated the urgency for reforms, especially in the period between 2014-15 and 2019-20. After all, why change the policy framework when it was already producing world-beating growth?

In recent years, there have been frequent invocations of puzzles. If growth is strong, why is private investment so weak? Why is net FDI declining? Why are capacity utilisation, wage growth, employment growth so tepid? More recently, why was there pressure on the rupee if real growth was so much greater than anywhere in the world? Each puzzle elicits its own complex and different explanation. But in the spirit of Occam's Razor, there is one simple, albeit partial, explanation for all of them: Growth has been less strong than it appears!

India has taken pride in being amongst the fastest-growing economies in the world. According to IMF data, India has been the fourth-fastest-growing major economy between 2011 and 2023. But even on our revised estimates, India will remain amongst the top seven or eight fastest-growing economies. National pride may yet be warranted but it does not require a statistical crutch.

Our analysis is both complimentary and complementary to the latest effort by MoSPI. Complimentary because MoSPI has now attempted to address the challenges identified by our analysis and other scholars. Complementary because while the new methodology will apply to future estimates, our research is about the past, focusing on correcting the historical record. Our research will also provide a benchmark for assessing the new methodology when MoSPI undertakes the backcasting exercise to come up with estimates for the last one or two decades. Hopefully, out of the fog of the past there will be light ahead.

The writers are affiliated respectively to Madras Institute for Development Studies, JH Consulting and Peterson Institute for International Economics. Data and replication code for the paper are available at the PIIE web-site

In Nepal and Bangladesh, the people have spoken



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

INDIA IS not only the world's largest democracy but a successful one, too. It is a model for its South Asian neighbours to emulate. The last couple of months saw two important neighbours, Bangladesh and Nepal, successfully demonstrating their democratic credentials. Bangladesh held its elections on February 12, while Nepal went to the polls on March 5. Two things stood out: One, the peaceful manner in which they were conducted, and two, the commendable maturity that the electors in both countries displayed.

Bangladesh and Nepal witnessed popular revolts that led to the ouster of their respective heads of government: Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and K P Oli in September 2025. These revolts were not peaceful. The abruptness and scale of violence in both cases prompted some observers to suspect the involvement of foreign agencies. But there were genuine reasons for popular unrest in both countries.

Bangladesh remained under an unelected government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus for an unusually long period. The Yunus government's antics endeared it neither to its people nor to neighbours like India; India-Bangladesh relations touched a nadir. The National Citizen Party, backed by the student groups that spearheaded the agitation against Hasina, was seen as an important contender for power along with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. In the run-up to the elections, many suspected that the two parties, with the backing of the interim government, would emerge as frontrunners.

But the voters in Bangladesh demonstrated utmost wisdom and maturity in offering a landslide majority to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a seasoned warhorse in the country's politics. The BNP, under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, is best suited to provide a stable government with credibility and experience at this crucial juncture.



The BNP's priorities include implementation of the constitutional and political reforms approved by the citizens in a referendum conducted by the Yunus administration in February 2025. The reform proposals include, among others, limiting the prime minister to two consecutive terms and creating an independent anti-corruption body. While Yunus followed an overtly anti-India policy, Rahman is expected to bring balance and bonhomie back into the relationship.

In Nepal, the voters chose a new party that came into the electoral scene just a few years ago. The Rastriya Swatantra Party, led by 50-year-old journalist-turned-politician Rabi Lamichhane, and 35-year-old rapper and youth sensation (also former mayor of Kathmandu) Balendra Shah, registered an unprecedented victory by winning more than two-thirds of the seats. Nepal opted for younger faces and new leaders, decisively rejecting the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (UML), led by septuagenarians like Sher Bahadur Deuba and K P Sharma Oli.

Although Nepal began its democratic journey in 1990, it never succeeded in establishing stable governments. There were more than a dozen prime ministerial tenures during the constitutional monarchy between 1990 and 2008, and 14 since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008. The 2026 election is a watershed moment because a single-party majority government is being formed. It will provide greater stability and allow for mature decision-making.

No democracy can be perfect, and no election will be complaint-free. But India has always been more comfortable dealing with fellow democracies, except for Pakistan, where a sham democracy prevails with the country's military looming large. Earlier, the Maldives (in 2023) and Sri Lanka (in 2024) conducted elections peacefully. In Myanmar, elections were held in December 2025-January 2026. All these governments enjoy excellent relations with India. Given its historically strong people-to-people ties with neighbours, India should proactively reach out to the new governments in Bangladesh and Nepal and rebuild relations, which have suffered some setbacks in the last few years. After all, as Atal Bihari Vajpayee said, "We can change our friends but not neighbours."

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC vs NCERT

TO BE angry over the textbooks issue even after NCERT's deletion and apology appears excessive for the apex court ('In blacklisting experts, SC does itself disservice', *IE*, March 13). In a wider framework, it risks creating a chilling effect on teachers, authors, and publishers, who may hesitate to state even alleged details that could reflect adversely on an institution. It also raises concerns of a double standard, that is, when similar institutional protection is often demanded by minorities or religious bodies. Guarding faith in institutions is one thing, but measures that instill fear run contrary to our constitutional values.

Shaswat Jena, Indirapuram

THE MORAL authority of an institution is paramount and nothing must dent it ('In blacklisting experts, SC does itself disservice', IE, March 13). In the case of NCERT, the reaction of the SC is being seen as an overreach without a matching cause. It would have been better to show intent to own, correct, and move forward. We have high hopes from our strong setup of governance, including the legislature, executive and judiciary.

Sanjeev Raina, Noida

Move to impeach

THE OPPOSITION parties in India are in dire straits. They are hard-pressed by a series of defeats and the high-handedness of state institutions, both of which are mutually reinforcing. Their own conduct has exacerbated their predicament ('Question CEC, but move to impeach is unwise', IE, March 13). There is scarcely any issue on which it has fought the government tooth and nail. Rarely is an issue pursued with diligence. This shifting of goalposts has reduced the stature of the Opposition to a caricature. This explains why state institutions continue to treat them unfairly with impunity, while they simultaneously fail to rally meaningful public support.

Anirudh Parashar, Chandigarh



Forces of martyrdom, military lead charge in Iran

RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

THE WAR between Iran and the US and Israel is in its second week. The conflict is increasingly turning into a test of will between the Iranian regime and a multifront military alliance. This is a moment of uncertainty for the Iranian nation — caught between intensifying attacks, geopolitical tensions, and internal repression. Iran's strategy is clear: Survive the war. Iran has expanded the confrontation with Israel and the US because this is the only strategy for the survival of the Islamic regime. The Iranian regime is weakened, but it is not decimated. Young Iranians are also pushing back against the religious policies and cultural repression of the current regime.

Hope is a necessary component for creating a better future for Iranians, but the war does not follow a written script. US President Donald Trump has no exit strategy; he seems to be offering the international community conflicting signals on how long the US war with Iran will last. Consequently, what started on February 28 as an attempt to end the Islamic regime and its hegemony in the region turned into the erosion of the political balance in the Persian-Arab Gulf. Both Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu know that the Iranian Regime cannot win this war, but what they seem to be underestimating is the potential of the Shia ideology of martyrdom. This is embedded in the institution of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its actions, and is used to justify regional expansion, hostility toward the US, and the eradication of the state of Israel. It is by favouring this view that the Iranian regime survived the eight-year war with Saddam Hussein. This worldview cannot be destroyed by bombs; it is faith-based.

> In Iran, the military mindset — in favour of the escalation of the war — is winning against the political strategy of a reduction in tensions with the West

For four decades, the ayatollahs and the IRGC amplified the role of the Iranian regime as a hegemonic power in West Asia and the Levant. But today, with the degradation of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, Iran's hegemonic potential has been fatally compromised. Iran still has the capacity to turn this war into a "religious war" by mobilising the Shia communities across Asia. We saw an example of this during the pro-Iran protest at the US consulate in Karachi. Many still remember the suicidal missions of young Iranian volunteers during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988).

Today, the scenes of jubilation that followed the death of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in cities like Tehran and Shiraz are now far away. The election of Mojtaba Khamenei as the new Iranian Supreme Leader is a clear sign that the hardline factions in the establishment will retain power. Though Mojtaba does not have the Shia theological credentials needed, he is certainly a security-minded leader through whom the IRGC will try to expand its authority.

Therefore, more than ever, the military mindset — in favour of the escalation of the war with the US and Israel — is winning against the political strategy of a reduction in tensions with the West. The latter group is represented by the former Iranian president Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), who consistently advocated for diplomacy over military conflict. It looks as if, with the intensification of bombings in Iranian cities and around the Persian-Arab Gulf area, the political line of thought is losing ground within the Iranian power structure. It is difficult to predict how and when the war will end, but it seems that neither Israel nor the US would like to deploy ground troops in this war. It looks like the greatest moments of this war for Donald Trump are the unplanned ones.

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Society bears AI risks, must have say in AI governance

SASMIT PATRA AND ASHWIN UPRETI

AS THE proliferation of AI increasingly impacts us, one question looms large: Who gets to govern artificial intelligence? The pace and scale of AI deployment has far outstripped the ability of traditional regulatory models to ensure oversight. Historically, technology governance has been state-centric, with standards set by regulators. The emergence of artificially intelligent systems, however, disrupts this tendency.

AI-enabled systems increasingly impact labour markets, education, healthcare, finance, and even democratic processes. While technical know-how resides in private firms, the risk and impact is borne by the public at large. This is compounded by the ability of machine-learning systems to evolve post-deployment, complicating regulation for static legal frameworks. The cumulative outcome is a fragmented ecosystem where knowledge, regulation and risk are unevenly distributed.

A participatory approach to governance offers one pathway to correct this imbalance. Such an approach would enable the diverse community of end-users, such as citizens, civil society organisations, independent researchers and academia, to detect emerging harms that domain experts or developers overlook. This is particularly helpful when bias relates to linguistic or cultural groups, regional practices or local traditions. Participatory approaches allow models to account for experiential knowledge, enabling audits to bring contextual shortcomings to the surface. Community-led audits can further strengthen transparency and accountability by stress-testing systems under real-world conditions. However, a participatory approach to governance may only be effective when embedded in institutional design.

This requires us to reimagine governance structures. To have meaningful oversight, AI governance cannot remain in silos of state, private sector or civil society organisations. Also, intersectional coordination is contingent on infrastructure. Deliberative governance requires accessible reporting platforms and open datasets. Targeted literacy programmes are required to lower barriers to engagement and democratise knowledge.

> If governance remains a technocratic exercise behind closed doors, AI will deepen inequalities and weaken democratic oversight

If governance remains a technocratic exercise behind closed doors, AI will deepen inequalities and weaken democratic oversight. If India invests in qualitative institutionalised participatory mechanisms for AI audits and builds infrastructure to drive responsible innovation, AI-enabled systems can be aligned with public values rather than narrow institutional priorities. The challenge is not whether to govern AI or not, but to do so in a way that redistributes power equitably and secures public trust going forward.

Discourse around AI governance often treats opacity as a purely technical problem, locating the "black box" within proprietary algorithms and complex model architectures. While technical opacity is real, this framing is incomplete. There is also an emerging social black box. Decisions regarding what problems are worth automating, which datasets are to be deployed for training models, whose errors are tolerable and which harms we embrace are not always made by algorithms. They are shaped by commercial value, strategic priorities and social considerations. So long as upstream choices remain opaque, even transparent AI models may produce unjust outcomes. Participatory governance mechanisms carry the prospect of piercing this veil and opening AI systems to democratic oversight.

Patra is Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha. Upreti is assistant director at Cyril Shroff Centre for AI, Law & Regulation

Opinion

SATURDAY, MARCH 14, 2026



INTELLIGENT UTILITY

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman

"We see a future where intelligence is a utility like electricity or water and people buy it from us on a meter and use it for whatever they want

Return of El Niño

This factor could cloud prospects of a bountiful southwest monsoon

DURING THE LAST five years, barring 2023, the southwest monsoon has been bountiful with normal and above normal rainfall from June to September. The big question is whether this run will be upset by the development of El Niño conditions later this year—according to the latest update from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO)—which negatively impacts the monsoon. This factor refers to the warming of sea surface waters in the central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, which has been associated with deficient and below normal rainfall in the country. The cooling of such waters is referred to as the La Niña factor which results in a marked increase in rainfall. Temperatures are already beginning to climb in many parts of the country, presaging much hotter summer months according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

As if all of this weren't grounds for concern, research published in *Geophysical Research Letters* highlighted that patterns of salt distribution in the Pacific Ocean can increase the intensity of El Niño by 20% and almost double the probability of an extreme event occurring. If El Niño conditions are indeed strong, this is bad news that can result in severe drought conditions in the country. Meteorological experts, however, urge caution on drawing inferences on the El Niño factor. Madhavan Nair Rajeevan, a former secretary in the ministry of earth sciences, has reportedly stated that there was no need for panic as a better idea will emerge by June; that such conditions are expected to develop in the second half of the monsoon season and are likely to be moderate according to current predictions. Although this highly complex, dynamic system arrives with unfailing regularity, there are other factors also responsible for its behaviour—like the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), Eurasian snow cover, and Madden-Julian Oscillation.

While positive IOD conditions are good for rainfall, negative conditions—due to cooler sea surface temperatures in the western Indian Ocean relative to the warmer sea surface temperatures in the eastern Indian Ocean—have the effect of suppressing monsoon bursts over the Indian subcontinent. Eurasian snow cover has an inverse relationship with the monsoon. The Madden-Julian Oscillation, an equatorial travelling pattern of anomalous rainfall, also impacts the monsoon. While El Niño conditions are associated with deficient and below normal rainfall, the relationship is actually far more complex. While El Niño conditions undeniably had an impact on deficient southwest monsoon rainfall during 2014 and 2015, for instance, its impact was less clear on other episodes of below normal rainfall in the country. During 2017, warm neutral conditions prevailed during the first half of the monsoon season while cooler conditions characterised the second half, which led the IMD in its end season report to infer the absence of El Niño's influence.

Similarly, in 2018, the IMD stated that the direct impact of the evolving El Niño on the monsoon was limited. In 2023, while El Niño conditions correlated with below normal rainfall, positive IOD conditions in the monsoon's second half offset this deficiency. Greater clarity on the El Niño factor will of course become available when the IMD makes its first long-term forecast for the monsoon by April. But as they say, to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Contingency plans must be put in place if El Niño conditions develop this year that can affect the monsoon as indicated by agencies like the WMO.

VIBE CODING

WITH THE RIGHT SCRUTINY AND SECURITY GUARDRAILS, UNDERLYING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AWAITS CAPTURE

Software at the speed of chat



ANIL NAIR

Founder, ThinkStreet

WHAT IS VIBE coding? It's artificial intelligence (AI) assisted programming, where those seeking to code describe their intention and creative direction in natural language, and AI tools do the rest. This includes figuring the architecture and project structure, generating code and doing the debugging, to create working software.

The term "vibe coding" was coined by AI researcher Andrej Karpathy, as AI acts as an active collaborator. Advanced versions use AI agents to collaborate more deeply—writing and running self-tests, or executing multi-file editing across the codebase, enabling rapid prototyping and quick deployment.

The popular tools for vibe coding include Cursor (for professional developers who want an integrated development environment that combines various tools into a single graphical user interface), Replit Agent for beginners, Windsurf/Cline for agentic support, Google AI Studio which leverages Gemini, and the popular Claude Code from Anthropic.

Educational and other imperatives

Considering the developments in making AI tools easier to use, one could argue that structured learning isn't essential. What's clearer is that mastery over all tools is a long shot, considering their abundance, and because that type of proficiency is transient. An education grounded in enduring principles is more durable. Like conceptual data flows, precision in semantics, skills to audit code, and enduring clarity of thought.

With AI handling all the grunt work, such a curriculum also signals the shift—from needing more entry level coders to more experienced orchestrators.

Investors are beginning to value product visioning, the scale and depth of the problem being solved, and market timing, more than before.

An aside: It is advisable to be disciplined about vibe coding work hours, as developers transitioning from traditional coding to vibe coding reportedly experience a high—much like having acquired a superpower of sorts—and are inclined to work much longer hours, which could lead to burnout.

Upsides and downsides

To reiterate, entry barriers are collapsing, allowing non-technical founders to rapidly build functional software solutions at a fraction of the cost, signalling a shift away from the usual, jejune URL path. Simultaneously, as developers become orchestrators, the focus is shifting to system design and user experience. Lean tech teams at nascent startups are now building products overnight, changing the economic equation substantially.

Scaling separates the hobbyist from production grade coding which calls for experienced, patient, nurturing hands and minds

While an AI agent creates code almost instantly, it usually lacks a global understanding of the system. Redundant libraries could be added. Over time, a vibe-coded solution could well become a black box where neither humans nor machine understand the interconnected dependencies. When AI's context window can no longer decipher the code created, it could lead to a "vibe collapse". Sometimes, without a complete grasp of the business context, or because of prioritising getting the app to work, oversight pertaining to compliance or original security assumptions could also occur. Expert guidance could help preclude such hurdles.

Maintainability could be an issue too when a complex bug surfaces, owing to the cognitive ownership not residing in human minds.

Governance and cybersecurity risks

Studies reveal that AI-generated code has some inherent cyber vulnerabilities, arising from vibe coders sacrificing safe levels of threat modelling and authentication for speed. This is accentuated when the audit logic is weak, and apps deployed look perfect, but invite AI-driven exploits by hackers. Attackers are now getting smarter, concealing commands inside requests, using true or false questions to reconstruct the database structure, or making the database send information to servers they control for stealthy exfiltration of sensitive credentials.

The natural consequence of coding at the speed of chat is that human oversight becomes the bottleneck, unable to catch all security flaws or compliance drifts across vast codebases. Agentic governance could be the answer, with specialised AI supervisors playing the role of real-time gatekeepers. Vibe coding without digital guardrails is an invitation to trouble.

Scaling paradox

Coders say that building the first 80% of a solution or app, using vibe coding, is incredibly easy, and building the rest, involving scaling, edge cases, and integration, equally complex. That's also why scaling beyond the initial vision could prove to be a limitation. Another aspect to be wary about is that while AI is great at local optimisation, it may take shortcuts that contradict architectural decisions taken several prompts before. This recency bias causes drift, creating a patchwork of conflicting logic over time. And when a bug is encountered, the tendency of AI to patch the symptom rather than refactor the root cause compounds later navigation. One way of tackling this could be through modular orchestration, breaking the app into isolated, modular components and then integrating them, a more elaborate path. Scaling certainly separates the hobbyist from production grade coding—which demands experienced, patient, nurturing hands and minds.

Creating value

Vibe coding is a major structural realignment vis-à-vis creating value from software, a tectonic shift from syntax-centric programming to AI-assisted software development that prioritises human thinking. And a profound shift away from dealing with semicolon placement, function signatures, and compiler errors, as in the past. When human creativity embraces heavy-duty agentic sweat work, it needs hi-fidelity orchestration—very different from traditional, lengthy IT projects with inherent scope creeps—to sectoral specialists aiming to solve real problems more directly with digital interventions.

With the right levels of human scrutiny based on risk profiles and application criticality, appropriate engineering leadership, and security guardrails, the underlying competitive advantage awaits capture.

It's not about whether to embrace vibe coding, but how!

Iran war puts India's dosa and AI dreams on ice



ANDY MUKHERJEE

Bloomberg

THE WAR IN Iran was always going to creep up on India, the world's second-largest destination for oil exiting the Strait of Hormuz. Surprisingly, the biggest immediate impact has been on dosa and dal makhani. State-owned refiners are forced to eat their losses to keep trucks and tractors moving, but commercial kitchens are starting to crater under a severe shortage of liquefied petroleum gas, or LPG.

In the 1973 energy shock, India's industry leaned on coal, but its homes relied on the erratic availability of liquid fuels. LPG cylinders were a rationed luxury, and all middle-class families had kerosene stoves. The situation has flipped now: buses, taxis, and kitchens have switched to some form of gas to curb pollution. But unlike oil, which can be stored in rock caverns, gas requires super-cooled tanks, or pressurised vessels. India's storage buffer is thin, and therein lies the germ of the current crisis.

Under the Essential Commodities Act, the government has prioritised household cylinders, but commercial supplies have seized up. Restaurants are unable to serve foods requiring continuous high-energy cooking. The crisis extends beyond eateries. Huli Spirits, a jaggery rum micro-distillery in Karnataka, has decided to halt production. After paying $9,000 a month just for a licence, a shutdown is a gut punch. Retrofitting for coal would take three months, a taller chimney, and new environmental permits—a niche startup like his can't afford any of it, founder Aruna Urs told me.

India's push for a more gas-based economy is centred on liquefied natural gas. Across South Asia energy firms have rolled out a $107 billion bet on imported LNG. India is pursuing the world's second-largest terminal capacity expansion and the third-largest gas pipeline buildout, says Global Energy Monitor. Pressing buses and autorickshaws and urban condominiums towards burning the methane contained in LNG was supposed to be a halfway house. India has been making remarkable progress in harvesting solar energy. The idea was to eventually shift demand to renewable sources, curbing emissions, and reining in a historical dependence on West Asia.

A side benefit was that it would free up local LPG output for use by the less affluent. But there was a catch. The production—basically propane and butane released during the refining of crude oil—didn't keep pace with the new demand created by giving subsidised cylinders to 100 million new connections. That campaign is widely believed to have buttressed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity, especially in rural India, where women voters were the most exposed to toxic fumes from burning coal, wood, or cow-dung cakes.

As a result, almost 65% of India's cooking fuel is directly imported in large vessels, and 90% of that traverses the Strait of Hormuz. The government says household supplies are stable, and it's only misinformation that's leading to "panic booking and hoarding". Still, people aren't taking chances; sales of electric cookers are soaring. Meanwhile, public facilities like 22 LPG-operated crematoriums across Pune have closed indefinitely, forcing a switch to electric in case families don't want the traditional Hindu option of wooden pyres, which lead to felling 50-60 million trees a year nationwide. The municipal authority has said it is following the petroleum ministry's orders to conserve gas for households.

More pain looms for the food economy. Fertiliser plants are suspending production of urea, a critical crop nutrient, as Qatari LNG supplies stall. Still, a smaller harvest is tomorrow's problem; today's headache is urban dislocation.

New Delhi is reportedly in talks with Tehran for safe passage of tankers, though it remains unclear if such movement is feasible from an insurance perspective. A US reprieve for India to buy Russian oil—without reprising last August's 25% punitive tariffs—may keep traffic moving and tractors plowing. A plan to import LPG from America is also underway. While that should please President Donald Trump, the geography is punishing: A ship from Qatar reaches Gujarat in four days; a ship from the US Gulf Coast, dodging Red Sea tensions via the Cape of Good Hope, takes a month.

India's gas transformation was supposed to help modernise the economy, at least until more environmentally ambitious plans like green hydrogen could become practical solutions. Instead, the Iran war has exposed the most-populous nation as a vulnerable commuter on the world's energy highway. It's keeping the home fires burning by cannibalising the very industries that provide employment to a restive youth. With the dough for the dosa getting cold in the pan, how will India ever pitch itself to AI hyperscalers as a hot destination for their next energy-hungry data centre?

The bulb that never goes out (of the red)



ADITYA SINHA

The author writes on macroeconomic issues

India's power sector has made a restructuring and called it reform. The question is not what needs to be done but who will bear the political cost of doing it

IN 1879, THOMAS Edison lit a carbon filament bulb in his Menlo Park laboratory for 14.5 hours. By 1882, his Pearl Street station was supplying 85 buildings in lower Manhattan at a commercial tariff of $0.24 per kilowatt-hour (eyewatering by any standards), yet every customer paid it, because the alternative was candles and lamp oil. There were no state distribution companies in 1882. There was also no accumulated loss of ₹7.08 lakh crore.

India's electricity distribution sector has managed that figure (compiled by the Prayas Energy Group for the Sixteenth Finance Commission or FC) through state-owned utilities that have been bailed out in 2001, restructured in 2012, and bailed out again in 2015, emerging from each exercise approximately worse than before. The Electricity (Supply) Act of 1948, itself modelled on Britain's Electricity (Supply) Act of 1926 and designed for an administrative structure that has since dissolved, created the vertically integrated state electricity boards that proved impossible to reform and difficult to kill. The Electricity Act of 2003 was supposed to change all this. It has now been 22 years.

Begin with the bailout record, because it is instructive. The 2001 settlement identified ₹41,473 crore of dues for restructuring; states issued tax-free bonds and signed commitments to reform. The Financial Restructuring Plan of 2012 followed, covering short-term distribution company (discom) liabilities, with participating states bound to eliminate their cost-revenue gap and enact a Model State Electricity Distribution Responsibility Bill. The 16th FC notes, with considerable understatement, that none of the participating states met their improvement conditions, and none enacted the Model Bill. The Assurance Yojana (UDAY) arrived in 2015: ₹2.32 lakh crore in bonds, 75% of discom liabilities absorbed by state governments, another set of mandatory targets. Accumulated losses at the time of UDAY stood at ₹3.78 lakh crore. They stand today at ₹7.08 lakh crore. Three bailouts, yet the number has nearly doubled.

Why does this keep recurring? Prayas offers an explanation. Between 44% and 86% of discom borrowing in eight major states goes not to capital investment but to working capital, paying generators for power already consumed, covering subsidy arrears that state governments owe but defer, and servicing old debt with new debt. Interest expenses alone account for roughly 5% of annual discom expenditure. Tamil Nadu's discoms have accumulated ₹1.66 lakh crore in losses; in case of Rajasthan it is ₹91,565 crore; and ₹69,301 crore in Madhya Pradesh. These are not utilities in financial difficulty. They are utilities sustained by the implicit guarantee that the state government will eventually absorb whatever they cannot pay, which removes every incentive to pay.

The argument for protecting the cross-subsidy model no longer has a model to protect

The tariff question is where the analysis turns genuinely damning. Prayas modelled what would have happened had State Electricity Regulatory Commissions simply enforced inflation-linked tariff revisions of 3.9% annually, from FY16 onwards, rather than the erratic pattern of non-revision followed by shock correction that most states prefer. The answer was ₹4.41 lakh crore in revenue gap reduction over eight years, with ₹1.6 lakh crore in interest savings. The political cost of 3.9% per year would have been a mildly unpopular annual announcement. The fiscal cost of avoiding it has been borne by every taxpayer who will eventually fund the next bailout.

What makes the Prayas report more than another diagnosis is the scale of the opportunity it documents. Battery energy storage costs have fallen from ₹11.25 lakh per megawatt per month (Kerala tender, April 2022) to ₹2.80 lakh per megawatt per month (January 2025), a 75% reduction in under three years, with no viability gap funding required in the more recent tenders. Solar combined with storage is now cost-competitive with discom industrial tariffs in 21 of 28 states. Agricultural feeder solarisation (aligning farm power supply with daylight hours, replacing subsidised grid electricity with solar) could save ₹77,558 crore annually across 12 states by FY32, with cumulative savings of ₹2.61 lakh crore between FY27 and FY32. Maharashtra contracted 18.7 gigawatts of agricultural solar in roughly nine months once it decided to move.

There is a further irony. Cross-subsidies from commercial and industrial consumers, the traditional mechanism by which discoms effectively taxed industry to fund cheap power for farmers, now account for less than 10% of discom revenues, because large consumers have been moving to captive generation and open access. The argument for protecting the cross-subsidy model no longer has a model to protect. The FC recommends privatisation as the long-term answer, proposing a special purpose vehicle to warehouse accumulated working capital debt, stripped out so a private buyer might consider what remains. (In fairness, the private discoms that already exist (operating under the same tariff environment) post aggregate technical and commercial losses of 12.12% against 16.37% for state-owned ones. State-sector power projects, meanwhile, average delays of 42 months in Uttar Pradesh and 87 months in Andhra Pradesh. Private projects are commissioned on time, or close to it.

Tacitus recorded that the Romans made a desolation and called it peace. India's power sector has made a restructuring and called it reform. The recommendations are good. They were good in 2001, in 2012, and in 2015. At some point the question is not what needs to be done but who will bear the political cost of doing it, and whether we reach the answer before the fourth bailout.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pragmatic opening

Apropos of "Capital idea" (*FE*, March 13), India's decision to relax curbs on investments by China in select sectors is a pragmatic recalibration of its economic strategy. It acknowledges the persistent trade imbalance while heeding the need for greater capital inflows and supply-chain integration. Medium-sized Chinese vendors, which form a backbone of global manufacturing networks, could bring valuable investment, tech expertise, and component ecosystems that benefit small and medium enterprises. These can strengthen our domestic manufacturing capabilities and deepen industrial value chains. A gradual normalisation of economic engagement between the neighbouring giants is essential to realise untapped economic potential. Provided strategic safeguards remain in place, Chinese investments could boost our manufacturing ambitions.
—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bangalore

Need for greater caution with China

Apropos of "Capital idea" (*FE*, March 13), the government's relaxations of the Press Note 3 of 2020 with a view to attracting more capital investment from China appears to be sound at a first glance. Also, at a macro level, a 60-day approval timeline fixed for specific sectors would put fast-track processing and give a fillip to the manufacturing sector, strengthening supply chain integration and ease of doing business. However, given the experience with China in the recent past—from a clash in Galwan Valley to other disputes over the Line of Actual Control—India needs to be more vigilant regarding the terms on agreements with legal provisions for compensations in case of delays in execution.
—RV Baskaran, Pune

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Gas Shortage & Wajid Ali Shah's Biryani

Food shocks could well linger in cuisines

War employs unusual messengers. The one in the neighbourhood is brought home by the Big Fat Indian Wedding, where gas shortages are reportedly being felt, affecting menus and volumes. Flipping the standard wisdom of making hay while the sun shines, traditional weddings could do with some moderation and still retain their festivity. Much like biryani from the kitchens of exiled nawab of Awadh Wajid Ali Shah, which had to incorporate potatoes under financial duress (now a valued variety, by itself), caterers can get away with serving fewer courses.

Once shortages have made an appearance, they tend to show up in odd places. Gas bottled up in Hormuz Strait goes into making urea, whose stockpiles must be ready before the next crop is planted. Indian fertiliser companies have cut production because of natural gas shortage. When India, the world's largest importer, enters the market with a bigger shopping list, the price of urea is expected to surge. Agriculture soaks up around 30% of the world's energy. It can't do without electricity to pump water, natural gas to produce fertilisers, and diesel to transport food. Even a few weeks of energy disruption can have an outsized effect on food output depending on its timing. Planting for the monsoon crop is a couple of months away. In other parts of Asia, from where India buys food, monsoon arrives earlier. India has stockpiles of cereals, but is dependent on imports for plant-based proteins like pulses and vegetable oil. Wedding caterers should tailor their summer menus accordingly.



The effect Russia's invasion of Ukraine had on the fertiliser industry is still being felt globally. Prices have not returned to their pre-conflict levels, and production is now concentrated in a volatile part of the world. Countries, including India, reacted to Russia's fertiliser export bans with food export control. The US-Israel war against Iran will also have a domino effect in the world food market. Energy shocks grab headlines. But food shocks tend to linger in cuisines, like aloo in biryani.

A Bit Much, No, My Lordships?

Earlier this week, Supreme Court imposed a 'lifetime ban' on three academics from undertaking any work connected with government or GoI-aided educational institutions. This follows the kerfuffle that followed a Class 8 NCERT textbook chapter that discussed 'judicial corruption', a notion the court believed to be too corrosive for impressionable minds. The judges may have smelt a conspiracy to undermine the judicial system. It also directed GoI to identify and act against individuals who circulated or endorsed the disputed material on social media, describing them as 'mischief-mongers' spreading harmful narratives about the judiciary. A bit too much, no, lordships?

The court had already directed that all copies of the book be withdrawn from public access. In practical terms, it addressed the immediate concern and nipped it in the bud. Blacklisting of the three writers, however, smacks of the kind of disproportionality many pre-Independence Indians were familiar with when dealing with a hypersensitive colonial system. Academic content, especially in the social sciences, is often debated, revised and duly corrected through institutional processes. These measures preserve accountability, without sending out an unfortunate — and surely unintended — message of 'toe the narrative, else'. The message of a line having been crossed was served by pulling out the book. Was there also a need to send the writers to Kaalapani?



Courts guard institutional credibility of the judiciary. Yet, credibility is strengthened not only by protecting reputation, but also by demonstrating how that reputation is built and maintained. By extending the matter from textbook correction to professional exclusion, we enter a punitive, not corrective, terrain.



JUST IN JEST

We can use our 'strategic autonomy', and keep our fingers crossed

India, Get a Foot Into FIFA World Cup?

Iran is likely — and understandably — going to boycott the 2026 Fifa World Cup being hosted in Mexico, Canada and — drumroll, please! — the United States of Trumpland. Other countries may well follow Iran. But hang on, strategically autonomous India. Could India go to where it has never been before by dint of other Asian countries not playing: the World Cup? In 1950, India technically qualified for the World Cup in Brazil because all other Asian teams withdrew. India, too, ultimately withdrew, as AIFF didn't have the funds to send its team across the world. So, yes, that remains a 'What if?' Slow forward to 2026. India got knocked out in the second qualification round, doing what it has been doing all these years: becoming cricket champions, instead. But wait. If Iran boycotts, and Qatar and Kuwait decide to join, with perhaps a few other Asian countries staying away, could we…?

Sure, this isn't the most dignified way to qualify. Not through goals, but through boycotts and missing opponents. But, listen, sport is war by other means, and that means having a 'whatever it takes' attitude. If survival means hoping that half of Asia stays home, then India should — nay, must — practise its strategic autonomy down the flanks. In any case, if India does willy-nilly qualify, the spin on the ball can always ensure that 'Mera Bharat' is mahan in football, too.

Indian tech firms must stop being effort-based vendors, and adopt outcome-based pricing

IT's Time to Migrate to AI



Nishant Sahdev



Make the transformation now

Washington: From trading floors of Wall St to Dalal St, capital is repricing services businesses for the AI era. AI is raising productivity and reducing human hours embedded in contracts. When revenue models depend on effort, and effort declines, margins compress unless pricing and positioning evolve.

For three decades, India's global ascent has rested on deploying skilled labour at scale, pricing it competitively and exporting it. Today, IT services sector generates $224 bn in annual exports, contributes about 7% of GDP, and directly employs nearly 6 mn people.

Complexity in the West created opportunity in India. More software meant more engineers. More engineers meant more exports. AI is disrupting that linear relationship. MNCs integrating AI copilots into software workflows report double-digit efficiency gains. Higher productivity is good for the global economy. But it alters pricing power. Surplus generated by AI doesn't disappear, it migrates.

Nifty IT index fell more than 20% from its recent highs, and nearly ₹6 lakh cr in market value was wiped out across Indian IT firms. This did not happen because global demand for tech collapsed. Most companies continued to report steady deal pipelines. What changed was expectation around margins.

Investors asked: If AI allows companies to complete the same work with fewer engineer-hours, can revenue continue to grow at the same pace? For decades, India's IT sector expanded by adding people and billing for time. If AI reduces the time required, that growth formula weakens.

The issue is not automation alone, but where gains from higher productivity will accrue. Will they stay with service providers? Or shift to companies that build AI models, control cloud platforms and design advanced chips?



For decades, India's IT sector expanded by adding people and billing for time. If AI reduces the time required, that growth formula weakens

In the AI economy, outsized gains are accruing to those who control three layers: advanced semicons, large-scale computing infrastructure and foundational AI models. These layers are capital-intensive, shaped by strong network effects and scale globally. They are largely dominated by US firms, with China building parallel capacity.

Services firms — in India, Europe or Southeast Asia — remain essential for integration, customisation and deployment. But essential does not always mean powerful.

India must interpret this moment carefully. A gradual compression in margins, or slower hiring growth, would ripple across urban economies, credit markets and consumption patterns. Other countries provide instructive contrasts.

▶ US has positioned itself at the commanding heights of AI infra. Its largest firms control chip design, cloud platforms and frontier model development. Services companies operate within this ecosystem. But value capture is concentrated upstream. Lesson: ownership of core infrastructure drives margin resilience.

▶ China has responded with strategic investment in domestic AI capacity. It views compute and models as national capabilities, not merely commercial assets. Its approach blends industrial policy with private-sector execution.

▶ Israel is focusing on proprietary AI solutions in cybersecurity, defence and enterprise systems, and capturing high-value niches.

India's scale gives it both strength and vulnerability:

▶ **Reskill** Entry-level coding and testing roles may decline proportionally. Demand will rise for AI integration specialists, data engineers, cybersecurity professionals and model governance experts. Engineering curricula should treat AI tools as baseline instruments, not optional enhancements. Corporate training must shift from defensive automation management to offensive capability building.

If Indian firms remain primarily effort-based vendors, they will face margin pressure. If they transition toward outcome-based pricing — tied to measurable efficiency gains, revenue improvements or operational transformation — they can preserve, even enhance profitability.

▶ **Invest in IP** Reusable AI platforms, sector-specific solutions and proprietary toolchains create defensible differentiation. Services firms that develop internal AI assets will negotiate from a position of strength rather than dependency.

▶ **Stack control** AI is becoming embedded in financial systems, supply chains, healthcare infra and defence applications. Countries that control meaningful layers of this stack influence global standards and economic flows.

India has demonstrated its institutional capacity to build DPI at scale. Extending that ambition to AI means ensuring competitive access to high-performance computing, supporting domestic research ecosystems and incentivising AI intellectual property creation. This doesn't imply isolation from global platforms. It implies avoiding structural over-dependence.



India's first technology wave was about scale. The AI wave is about ownership of intelligence: who designs systems, controls compute and sets standards

India's domestic market is large enough to test and scale AI applications. Its linguistic diversity provides a foundation for multilingual AI systems that could serve emerging markets globally. Its diaspora occupies influential positions in global tech ecosystems.

The risk is complacency. If AI-driven productivity gains primarily benefit foreign clients and upstream infra providers, Indian services firms may remain stable, but could see slower growth and thinner margins over time. Capital markets are factoring that possibility into valuations.

The alternative is strategic repositioning. India's first technology wave was about scale. The AI wave is about ownership of intelligence: who designs systems, controls compute and sets standards.

India must capture a meaningful share of the economic surplus generated by AI within its own ecosystem. Global reallocation of value has begun. The question is not whether AI will reshape India's IT sector. That shift is underway.

The real question is whether India remains the world's most efficient exporter of skilled labour, or evolves into a country that also shapes the infra of intelligence. In an AI-driven economy, efficiency alone is insufficient. Position determines power. India still has time to choose its place.

The writer is a physicist, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, US

Drip by Drip, Learn the Israeli Way



Ramesh Chand

Narendra Modi's recent visit to Israel focused on reviewing the strategic partnership and exploring further cooperation in several areas, including agriculture and water management.

Israel has emerged as a global leader in both sectors through the strategic use of technology. At the time of its independence in 1948, more than 60% of its land was desert. Much of it was unfit for cultivation. Yet, within a few decades, Israel transformed this barren terrain into one of the world's most productive agricultural systems through innovation, scientific research and efficient resource management.

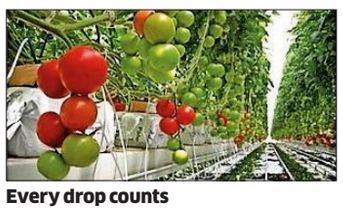
Israel exports high-quality agricultural produce — particularly fruit and vegetables — worth approximately $2.9 bn from 271,000 ha of arable land. In 2024, its agricultural exports exceeded $10,000 per ha of arable land, compared to a global average of about $1,700. India's export value per ha remains below $400.

The principal reason behind this disparity lies in productivity. Israel's per-ha productivity is roughly 6.3× the global average and about 5× that of India. For example, maize yields in Israel stand at 15.69 t/ha compared to 3.5 t/ha in India. In vegetables, Israel harvests nearly 66 t/ha of tomatoes, while India averages around 25 t/ha. In dairy, the average milk yield per cow in Israel is 37.6 kg per day — 5× the global average and nearly 7× India's average.

Israel's annual rainfall ranges from 20 mm to 700 mm. So, how has Israel achieved global leadership in agriculture? Its success lies in a combination of technological innovation and scientific management.

▶ **Drip irrigation** Israel pioneered the technology in the mid-1960s, reducing water use by nearly 60% while raising yields by around 40%. Today, it recycles over 85% of its wastewater for agricultural use — the highest rate in the world. It has developed drought-resistant and high-yielding crop varieties through biotechnology and advanced breeding techniques.

▶ **Fertigation** Delivering fertilisers through drip systems and precision agriculture has enabled farmers to double yields with significantly lower water use. Scarcity of land and harsh climatic conditions have also driven the widespread adoption of greenhouse and protected cultivation technologies for high-value crops. Vertical and urban farming systems are further enhancing productivity in space-constrained environments.



Every drop counts

India's agricultural scale is far bigger than Israel's, but many challenges are like those addressed by it: water scarcity, climate variability, rising input costs, low productivity in several crops, and sustainability concerns. Although India has achieved historically high agricultural growth in the past decade, pressures on natural resources — especially water — are intensifying. Enhancing resilience, improving productivity and ensuring sustainability are now urgent priorities.

Collaboration with Israel can accelerate India's transition toward efficient, technology-driven and climate-resilient agriculture.

Bilateral cooperation is underway. Israel has established 43 Centres of Excellence in India under a G-G partnership. These centres focus on high-value crops such as fruit, vegetables and flowers, promoting protected cultivation (polyhouses and net houses), precision farming and efficient water management. Reports indicate improved productivity and higher incomes for farmers using these technologies.

The next step should be to scale up this partnership. ICAR and state agricultural universities could deepen research collaboration with Israeli institutions in areas with high-impact potential. Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) could serve as platforms for testing, adapting and disseminating proven Israeli technologies in crops, water management and dairy across larger geographies.

With structured cooperation, India can enhance productivity, conserve scarce water resources and shift toward high-value agriculture. A strengthened Indo-Israel agricultural partnership holds transformative potential — not only for farmer incomes and sustainability but also for India's aspiration to emerge as a global food power. Reaching one-third of Israeli productivity could raise India's share in global agriculture to one-third — a sure path to meet India's aspiration to emerge as a global food power.

The writer is member, NITI Aayog

India Must Steer WTO 2.0 Forward



Shishir Priyadarshi

For much of the past three decades, WTO has been the institutional anchor of globalisation. Yet, today, few international organisations face persistent questioning of their relevance, authority and future direction. Dispute settlement remains paralysed, negotiations struggle to advance, and major powers increasingly pursue unilateral or club-based approaches to trade.

This is not merely a technocratic crisis. It is a political and strategic one. Choices made over the next few years — particularly in the run-up to WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Cameroon — will determine whether the organisation adapts to 21st-c. realities or drifts into managed irrelevance.

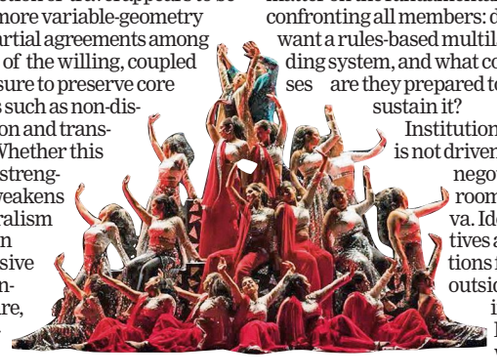
The diagnosis emerging from recent reform debates is sobering. Businesses complain of eroding predictability and rising fragmentation as rules are ignored or circumvented. The balance of rights and obligations struck in 1995, when WTO was born, no longer reflects today's trade patterns, the digital economy or the weight of emerging powers.

Yet, there is deep disagreement about the cure. Some advocate pragmatic reform — new negotiating approaches, greater flexibility and plurilateral agreements among willing members — to prevent paralysis. Others warn that poorly designed reform could hollow out the institution, downgrade its rule-making authority or legitimise discriminatory clubs dominated by major powers. What unites both camps is recognition that the status quo is unsustainable.



Among the most frequently cited priorities are restoring dispute settlement, making progress on stalled negotiations, improving transparency and monitoring, and rethinking how special and differential treatment (SDT) applies in a world where developing countries now span different levels of competitiveness.

The direction of travel appears to be toward a more variable-geometry system: partial agreements among coalitions of the willing, coupled with pressure to preserve core principles such as non-discrimination and transparency. Whether this evolution strengthens or weakens multilateralism depends on how inclusive such arrangements are, how benefits are multilateralised, and whether large economies continue to respect common rules even when they are inconvenient.



Multilateralism works

India has long been a pivotal — if sometimes controversial — actor in WTO politics, presenting itself as a champion of developing country interests. Yet, it is also one of the world's largest trading nations. This dual identity brings both leverage and responsibility. In a moment when the system's institutional foundations are under strain, a defensive posture is inadequate. But alignment with major powers would also undermine India's strategic autonomy and development priorities.

India is also well-placed to act as a bridge between camps. As reform debates intensify, New Delhi's voice will matter on the fundamental question confronting all members: do they still want a rules-based multilateral trading system, and what compromises are they prepared to make to sustain it?

Institutional reform is not driven only from negotiating rooms in Geneva. Ideas, narratives and coalitions formed outside WTO increasingly shape what is politically possible inside. In that context, Trade Not Just Aid: Winners and Losers in the WTO (TRaNJA) initiative launched by CUTS International is noteworthy. It has an ambitious task: repositioning WTO in an era of geopolitical rivalry, emerging powers and digital transformation.

Three strands of work for TRaNJA stand out.

▶ Rebuilding a positive narrative around WTO.

▶ Fostering coalitions among major players and middle powers to pursue reform.

▶ Generating research on what has worked in WTO, where the system is failing, and what credible reform options look like.

Most importantly, India must decide whether it wants to be seen primarily as a blocker of (in)convenient outcomes or as a co-architect of WTO's next phase. The two are not mutually exclusive — but in a period of institutional flux, leadership is often exercised by those who propose workable alternatives rather than merely resist flawed ones.

Writing off the multilateral trading system would be a strategic error with long-lasting consequences. The real question is whether governments are prepared to invest the political capital needed to fix it — and whether India is willing to be among those shaping what comes next.

The writer is former director (development), WTO

THE SPEAKING TREE

A Vision For Future

DADA J P VASWANI

It is undeniable that we are passing through a period of crisis. Unrest is deepening in the world. There is a wild race for weapons and missiles, battleships and bomber jets, and sophisticated arms and ammunition.

Today, there is a craze for 'big' and 'great'. Little things, alas, do not satisfy us any more. Our egos have become inflated. We want to amass greater fortunes, build larger structures, found larger institutions and write larger volumes. All this leads to 'bigger' and greater unhappiness.

The moral base of public life has been shattered; values are no longer respected. All over the world, today, there is a cry for a new world order, a new life. For men and women, young and old, are tired of the present order. But there is hope for us all.

A new age is dawning; a new age when love and peace will be established upon this earth. All we need are the blessed ones who will open the door to the new age.

Mine is a vision of a world without war, a world without want. A world in which every human being can live a life of dignity, with all the necessities of life, and can hold their head high. A world in which peace prevails among nations and harmony among the peoples of earth. A world in which the right to live is guaranteed to every creature that breathes the breath of life.

Mine is the vision of a world in which the truth is recognised that life and all its bounties, all that we are and all that we have — our time and talents, knowledge and wisdom, experience and influence, prestige and power, wealth and strength, indeed, life itself — is a loan given to us, to be passed on to those whose need is greater than ours. We are standing on the threshold of a new age of love and peace.

LOLLING ON SATURDAY

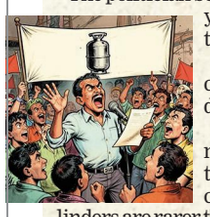
More Political Gas

At a rally, a politician declares, 'Brothers and sisters, I promise every household two free gas cylinders!'

The crowd erupts in cheers.

One old man shouts, 'But what if there's a shortage?'

The politician beams. 'Then you will get three!'



The crowd cheers louder.

The old man mutters, 'In this country, cylinders are rarer than honesty. Promises may be gas, but at least they don't leak.'

Cylindrical Proposal

A young man goes to meet his prospective bride's family. The father asks, 'Beta, what do you do?'

The boy replies, 'Uncle, I work in IT.'

Father [frowns]: Hmm. But do you have a gas cylinder connection in your name?

Boy [hesitates]: No, Uncle, I live in a PG.

The father slams the table. 'Then what will you feed my daughter — Wi-Fi?!'

The boy, desperate, says, 'Uncle, I promise I'll book a cylinder tomorrow.'

The father smiles. 'Good. Marriage pakki. In this house, love is measured in cubic metres of LPG.'

Chat Room

War Traps to Peace Trappings

Apropos the Edit, 'Modi as Intermediary To End Trump's War' (Mar 13), US President Donald Trump, who, along with Israel, started the war with Iran, may not like anyone else to end it, at least not so soon. The reasons are his personality traits and his burning ambition to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Given his larger-than-life ego and narcissistic conduct in international affairs, displayed throughout his second term, there seems to be no room for anyone to mediate, a step that, if it succeeds, might eclipse Trump's campaign as a champion of world peace. Further, PM Narendra Modi functioning as an intermediary in a war in which the chances of failure to bring about peace are high could make him suspect of being partisan.

Y G Chouksey
Pune



A thought for today

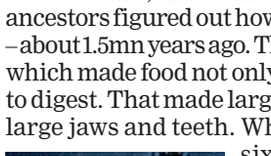
The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled

PLUTARCH

Seas On Fire

Damage of wars on oceans is everlasting, yet invisible

There are some 16 US warships – stuffed with gazillion guns, aircraft, missiles, and ammo – in Arabian and Mediterranean seas. Strait of Hormuz is aflame, as Iran deploys explosive-laden boats, targeting fuel tankers. TV news runs, in a loop, videos of jet black plumes rising up from ships ablaze – but, never, ever will there be images of the total wreckage below. News won't talk about it, either. Thing is, war kills seas, devastates marine ecosystems, destroys coastal habitats. Few people care. There're no dramatic videos. There're no smart, easy-to-grasp data points on the damage. So, yup, no one's keeping tabs on warships' debris dumped into the seas. Or on environmental cost of ships sunk. IRS Dena was torpedoed in Indian Ocean – its debris will decay, corrode, and leak – metal scrap, toxic oils, chemicals, that'll poison, and choke marine plants & animals.



Visuals of overground warfare, on land ecosystems, is horrifying enough. But, it is well-established that war's impact on seas is worse. For a simple reason. Seas are interconnected, damage is carried forward. So, when Russia battles Ukraine, on Black Sea, fallout isn't contained to warring nations' coastlines. Connected to Mediterranean Sea to its south, war's debris wrecks its way through estuaries, salt marshes, lagoons, islands, home to dolphins, whales, seabirds, uncommon species, and 2,000 plant & animal species. Chemical pollution, heat, noise, anti-sub warfare, trigger changes in animal behaviour, and species composition. They disrupt migratory patterns, throw off nesting & feeding routes. And they kill infinite numbers of creatures, great and small. Biodiversity is resilience. War kills it.

Overground repercussions of land destruction, like in Gaza, or forests flattened – Ukraine rightly accused Russia of ecocide – are, however, the only talking points. Sunken ships, from two world wars, contain chemical poisons, unexploded munitions and, per IUCN, 6bn gallons of heavy fuel oil. Warming oceans have sped up their decay. So, ruinous oil spills are inevitable. Wars end, destruction undersea remains, in perpetuity. It's invisible to us. And, that ignorance is a profound tragedy.

You're Fired

Humanity's march, down to ChatGPT, is story of fire

There's so much anxiety about gas out there. But it isn't about gas, really. Deep down, it's about being human. We are children of fire, and its masters, too. On current evidence, our ape-like ancestors figured out how to manage fire – mostly started by lightning – about 1.5mn years ago. Then, by a lucky accident, they started cooking, which made food not only tastier, but also more nutritious, and easier to digest. That made large digestive systems unnecessary, along with large jaws and teeth. While apes chewed their stringy, fibrous food six hours a day; for us, one hour was enough. In fact, it left us with an energy surplus, which supports brain growth.



Human brains are so energy-hungry, they account for 20% of calorie burn at rest. So what? So this: without fire, there would be no Homo sapiens, and no ChatGPT. Fire also helped our brains grow, by letting us sleep long hours, without fear. A moonless night has, roughly, one-trillionth the light of a sunny day. And humans, with fewer rod cells in their eyes, are sitting ducks for leopards, and other nocturnal predators. Fire turned the scales, and not only against animals. Burning midnight oil became key to social mobility. Bricks, Roman cement, engines, cannon, Apollo missions, Tomahawk missiles, even electricity – largely – are fire's gifts. We need fire, and because gas is the only fuel most of us know how to use, we can't help being especially antsy when we can't get it.

Should Older People Be 2nd-Class Voters?

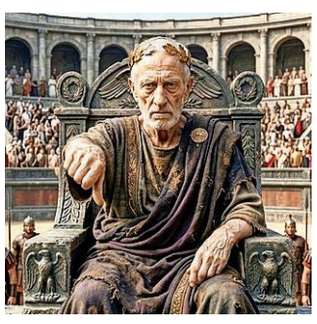
Those with their whole life ahead should have more say

Why do young people everywhere seem disenchanted with govt? A 2021 OECD survey shows only 37% in 18-29 age group trust govt, as against 46% in 50+ cohort. In S Korea, the gap widens to 17 percentage points. In Ireland, it's 38 points. Zoom out of this rich nations' club, and a 2020 Cambridge study makes similar findings around the world.

Perhaps, youth is hard to please. But if that's the case, why were 54% of 30-year-old Britons satisfied with govt in 1973? Why did satisfaction at that age increase to 57% in 1983, and 62% a decade later, before falling to 48% in 2010s?

The problem is not with youth but with the way democracies are functioning, says Harvard professor ***Samuel Moyn***, who diagnoses the problem as "gerontocracy". His book, ***Gerontocracy in America: How the Old Are Hoarding Power and Wealth***, sums up the problem in its title.

mindfield
SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



What's changed between, say, 1973, and now is that whole populations, not just leaders, have aged. In Britain, for example, half the population was younger than 33 then; now it's older than 40. Moyn mentions three things that make older presidents and PMs likelier now. One, old people generally vote for old people. Two, old people vote more than young people. Three: "The prevalence of aged politicians is almost certainly increasing the abstention of the young from politics and thus intensifying gerontocratic dominance…"

Gerontocracy also reinforces through wealth. Older people earn more, buy or inherit the best real estate, and network at the highest levels. Even if they don't contest an election, they can pursue their agenda by propping up a young candidate. "If the voters and the wealthy are old, it may not even matter whether the politicians are young."

But what is old peoples' agenda, and why is it a problem? Moyn says, "An ageing society is more set on preservation than on renovation." So, gerontocrats usher in tax cuts for the rich – themselves – rather than raising taxes to spend on schools. They place "high priority on their own needs like medicare and social security". On the economic front, they worry about inflation, not growth. Since the elderly know they have only a few years left, their worldview tends to be short-sighted. Hence, it isn't in a society's best interest, according to Moyn.

So, what can be done to prevent gerontocracy? We can't snatch wealth and property from the elderly, but Moyn suggests linking the "weight" of a vote to the age of the voter. Why? Because young people have a greater stake in every election, as they have more years to live. Since govt decisions shape the future, a 20-year-old should have a bigger say in them than someone who's 80: "Seniors are voting for potentially long-lasting outcomes they may never experience fully." Also, 18-year-old voters are the closest proxy for children who can't vote, so their votes should have more weightage, he says.

Moyn suggests a couple of ways to go about this: dock 10% of a vote's weight every two years after the age of 65, or give 80-year-olds one vote, 70-year-olds two, and so on, till 20-year-olds have seven votes each. The aim is not to disenfranchise the elderly, but empower the young in proportion to their remaining lifetime.

Running scared? Nope. Playing Smart

Too many critics of GOI foreign policy are preoccupied by whether India sounds fearless. But, we are in a world of weaponised hard power. So, the priority is to, somehow, maintain operational flexibility. That's what GOI moves, on Iran war, Chinese investment, Russian oil reflect

Syed Akbaruddin



Viewing India's foreign policy debate from outside the capital has its uses. Distance makes it easier to see how starkly arguments are drawn in Delhi, and how quickly the actual constraints on Indian policy disappear from view.

Today, the sharpest criticism of Indian foreign policy is that it has tilted in the wrong direction: too deferential to Washington, too comfortable in its signalling towards Israel, and too ready to adapt under American pressure, while underestimating the wider signal this sends.

That criticism comes in three broad forms: dependence, asymmetry, and signalling. The dependence argument is that Delhi increasingly trims policy, to remain within an American comfort zone. The asymmetry argument is that India is more restrained in responding to American and Israeli uses of force, than to the retaliation that follows. The signalling argument is that India increasingly accepts the optics of a wider US-Israel frame.

GOI's recent move on Chinese-linked investment points to something larger. India did not ease Press Note 3 because distrust of China disappeared. It adjusted because the demands of manufacturing, technology, and capital began to outweigh the signalling value of blanket rigidity. The real story is not alignment, but exposure.

Indian foreign policy should now be read not through the old alignment-vs-non-alignment frame, but as an effort to manage exposure. Key exposures are energy, technology, capital, supply chains, and security. Each of these can now be weaponised by others, whether through sanctions, export controls, shipping disruption, investment restrictions, or conflict. Seen this way, some apparent inconsistencies look less like confusion, than like selective risk management.

The Russia oil episode is more complicated than the above criticism suggests. India bought Russian crude at scale, because discounted oil helped contain inflation, and ease pressure on growth. When the costs of that position rose, Delhi adjusted. One reading sees capitulation. Another sees a state trying to keep energy affordable, without inviting punitive fallout. For an import-dependent economy, it may not look elegant. It was still an effort to protect room for growth.

The Iran episode sharpens the asymmetry critique, but it also reveals the order of India's concerns. India described developments in the Gulf as a matter of great anxiety, and called for dialogue, after the US-Israeli strikes on Iran triggered retaliation. Critics note the imbalance. India showed more visible urgency when



Image: AI

Gulf stability, shipping, and energy flows were at risk, rather than when the original strikes took place.

Wider international response reflected a similar pattern. On 11 March, Security Council adopted Resolution 2817, condemning Iran's retaliatory attacks on Gulf states and Jordan, but issued no comparable condemnation of the earlier strikes on Iran.

That asymmetry reflects not just political preference, but India's deep exposure to the Gulf. The region bears directly on growth, inflation, remittances, energy security, and household stability. When order in the Gulf is shaken, the effects are quickly felt across India's economy.

That is where India's material dependence is greatest, and where its diplomacy is bound to be especially careful. That may not satisfy critics, but it explains more than moral outrage does.

India learned this lesson long ago. In 1962, China exposed the limits of rhetoric without leverage. In 1971, facing war and external pressure, India turned to Soviet Union for strategic insurance, when doctrine alone would not do.

Taken together, the lesson is the same: principles matter, but when security is at stake, states preserve themselves through leverage and partnerships, not rhetorical consistency alone.

Here, the criticism is strongest, but incomplete. It is most persuasive when it warns that tactical adjustment can harden into dependence, and that signalling can slip into self-subordination. It is weakest when it assumes that autonomy is proved mainly by keeping declaratory distance from US.

That is an older way of measuring freedom of action. For India today, the more serious question is whether it retains operational autonomy: enough energy flexibility, economic resilience, technological access, and strategic choice to avoid being trapped by any single pole.

India was once poorer, but louder. Now it is wealthier, and more guarded. The contrast is real, but the usual conclusion is too easy. Declaratory non-alignment carried fewer costs, than today's world of weaponised interdependence. A richer India has more power, but also more exposure.

The real question is not whether it sounds fearless, but whether it remains free to choose. That is why Indian foreign policy should be judged not by abstract purity, but by whether Delhi can reduce exposure without surrendering agency.

In a fractured order shaped by American overreach, Chinese pressure, and weaponised economic power, that will not always look elegant. But for India, inelegance is not the worst sin. Misreading the structure of the problem, is the greater danger.

The writer is a former permanent representative of India to UN

Loads Of Research Says: Don't Marry. So, Why Do We?

Economists, sociologists, psychologists…show how the wedding industrial complex takes a toll on individuality, and even on sleep. Here are 5 reasons, why marriage is bad for us, and one reason, why we won't let it go

Arash Rudra

In the short video, a couple are discussing marriage. She asks, "Babe, what is the ideal age to get married?" He gives an answer, worthy of the canned laughter that follows it: "Biologically 15 years. Legally, after 18. Culturally, 24-28 years. Economically, above 30. And logically, NEVER."

Of course, internet is awash with such videos. People are forwarding it every second, confident of a chuckle at the receiving end. And, it's not just online humour. In offices up and down the world, the same kind of joke is a face-to-face staple of the watercooler conversation.

Of Life And Love
STORIES OF THE WAY WE ARE

Marriage is one of humanity's most durable inventions – right up there with bread, taxes, and the habit of giving advice. But all this joking about it, shows something is seriously changing. Structural quirks baked into marriage's design, are beginning to feel less cute, more unpleasant.

People now pause, before signing what is, theoretically, a lifelong social contract. And many different sciences – behavioural economics, psychology, sociology – have taken a shot at explaining why marriage sucks. We list just a few insights.

Freedom tax | Chicago economists, and Nobel prizewinners, Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, have framed marriage through household production, where time, labour, and money are jointly allocated, in a cooperative enterprise. In theory, cooperation increases efficiency. In practice, it also introduces veto power.

Marriage quietly retires the luxury of unilateral decision-making. Sociologists call this "household bargaining", which sounds civilised, but often resembles a budget meeting that never quite ends.

Married peeps make noticeably fewer independent lifestyle choices than their single counterparts, whether it concerns spending, or social plans, or the small matter of moving cities. "I will do this," slowly morphs into, "Should we do this?" What looks like a grammatical tweak is, in fact, a profound constitutional amendment, in the republic of personal autonomy.

Consumption interruption | Marriage also performs another impressive administrative feat: it merges two financial systems, even if these seem designed on entirely different planets. What begins as romance, soon acquires the texture of a joint budget spreadsheet.

US National Survey of Families and Households has done a longitudinal study (that's the fancy term for a study that collects info on the same group over a long period of time). It suggests that disagreements about money are the single strongest predictor of divorce – outranking disputes about children, sex, or even the perennial battlefield of household chores. One partner may see saving as a moral virtue, the other regard spending as the best expression of being alive. One person's "necessary investment" can look to the other, like an "unnecessary extravagance".



Image: AI

Thermostat war | As India enters summer, some of us are perfectly happy with fans, while others insist on ACs. Love may be warm, but not necessarily at the same temperature. So, one partner complains, "Why is it freezing in here?" And the other, "A bedroom isn't a sauna."

This squabble too has respectable scientific explanations. Thermophysiology researchers have found that many building temperature standards were, historically, calibrated around the resting metabolic rate of a 70kg, 40-year-old man. The broader point is, shared indoor environments often run warmer or cooler, than half their occupants would ideally prefer. So, moments after the thermostat is nudged upward by one party, the other nudges it downward. A cardigan appears. A window opens. And this is not the only tug-of-war.

Blanket inequality | What begins as an equal and democratic distribution of bedding at 11 pm, often evolves, by 3 am, into a highly unequal arrangement, in which one party sleeps warmly while the other suffers Arctic conditions. Studies of co-sleeping suggest that it frequently reduces sleep quality, for at least one partner.

Wendy M Troxel's research, presented through the Sleep Research Society, has confirmed that a partner's movements during the night can, repeatedly, interrupt the other person's sleep cycles. In other words, marriage is bad for uninterrupted REM sleep. And the blanket, like many shared resources, tends to migrate toward whoever pulls hardest, in the middle of the night. Somewhat like geopolitics these days.

Minor tiffs, major rifts | Decades of research, by psychologist John Gottman, has shown that couples can easily slip into negative interaction cycles. In these loops, a small disagreement quietly recruits larger emotions, until the original issue – say, whether dinner should involve pasta or leftovers – becomes incidental.

He identified criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling as the "four horsemen". Once these riders arrive, even the most innocent conversation can gallop into emotionally charged territory. The question "What shall we eat tonight?" can rapidly develop into a Greek tragedy.

Conclusion: Less a fairy tale, more a complex operating system, marriage, thus, comes preloaded with several structural strains. And yet, people continue to sign up for it, often with remarkable enthusiasm. This suggests something mildly inconvenient for economists: human relationships are not entirely rational enterprises. They run on a peculiar blend of emotional attachment, cultural expectation, habit, and optimism. And the stubborn belief that one's own version of the arrangement will, somehow, be smoother than the statistical average.

So, marriage persists. It may be inefficient, and occasionally absurd. But whatever boffins say, humanity appears determined to keep running the experiment anyway – one wedding invitation at a time.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*



Be grateful for what you already have while you pursue your goals. If you aren't grateful for what you already have, what makes you think you would be happy with more.

Roy T Bennett

The Glass Ceiling Is Not Outside – It Is Within

Jaya Row

Can you imagine the world without Google? Then how can you live life without a guide? Gita gives the roadmap that takes you from mediocrity to excellence.

A talented sportsperson first visualises his goal – the trophy. Then he pours his time, energy, and effort into achieving it. This means fewer hangouts with friends, staying away from his favourite food, and not lazing on a Sunday morning. Yet, it never feels like sacrifice, because the goal excites him far more than what he must give up.

In the same way, begin life with a clear vision of what you want to achieve. The glass ceiling isn't outside – it is within you, in your thinking. Visualise excellence in your chosen field, in the field of your passion. Aim to be the best at it. Set smaller milestones along the way. Work dedicatedly, consistently. Love your work. Be devoted to it. And finally, work hard. The sharper your efforts, the quicker you move forward towards your goal. You will, then, not even feel tempted to dissipate your energy in random activities.

Now suppose you achieve your goal – the Olympic gold, business success, fame, and wealth. Are you fulfilled? That strange inner emptiness that drove you forward in the beginning still lingers. You begin asking, what next? Why do I still feel incomplete? Is there a way to reach lasting happiness?

That's where Gita steps in. It introduces you to yourself. You are born with amazing equipment – a body, a mind, and an intellect. But were you ever given a user manual? It's like buying the most sophisticated gadget, without knowing how to use it.

Sense contact gives instant happiness. The first mango of the season tastes divine. But overindulgence dulls the joy. The more you consume mindlessly, the less you enjoy. Learn the art of discriminate contact, so the enjoyment lasts a lifetime.

We seek satisfaction through action, but it often ends in pressure, comparison, and burnout. Gita introduces the concept of *yajna* – action performed in a spirit of service and sacrifice, for a higher purpose. Act with the attitude of giving, not grabbing. Modern research confirms it: givers thrive, excel, and succeed. The law is simple – give and you gain; grab and you lose. All givers are happy. And grow to their potential.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Relationships begin beautifully, but expectations and demands create friction. Romance turns to resentment. The days of wine and roses, become days of whine and neuroses! Learn unconditional love. Love others irrespective of any return, tangible or intangible. And people naturally respond with warmth and loyalty. They go beyond the call of duty to do things for you. True love empowers. Your influence grows. Your happiness multiplies. You emerge as a powerful leader.

The intellect is designed to control the whims and fancies of the mind, as well as the urges of the senses. But a weak intellect falls prey to the mind. A strong intellect helps you master yourself – and the world. Gita helps refine your intellect. You are then able to conceive the subtle thought of Atman, Spirit.

Everything in the world is temporary, passing, ephemeral. But there is something in you that is permanent. That is the Spirit, Atman, your real personality.

Jaya Row conducts Gita webinars every Saturday, 6-7 pm on YouTube. WhatsApp 99200 54000 for details

The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Hormuz shock

Domestic LPG crisis mirrors global turmoil

THE conflict triggered by US-Israeli strikes on Iran and Tehran's retaliation has disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, pushing global oil prices past the $100 mark and jolting energy markets worldwide. For India, the shock is already visible in an LPG shortage that has forced restaurants, small businesses and households into anxious improvisation. The immediate problem is structural dependence. India imports roughly 80% of the oil it consumes and a large share of these supplies flows through the narrow Hormuz passage. When that artery falters, the effects travel quickly from tankers at sea to kitchens at home. The government's decision to prioritise domestic LPG supply while curbing commercial allocations has exposed the fragility of our energy security.

Ironically, relief has arrived from an unexpected direction. The US had earlier pressured New Delhi to reduce purchases of Russian crude. But it has now granted a one-month sanctions waiver, allowing all countries, including India, to buy Russian oil. The abrupt shift underscores the transactional nature of global energy politics. What was yesterday portrayed as unacceptable has today become vital.

The crisis also carries a diplomatic lesson. In the early days of the West Asia conflict, India appeared to tilt perceptibly towards Israel, reflecting both strategic ties and political signalling. As the economic consequences of the conflict ripple through energy markets, New Delhi has quietly returned to its traditional middle path — maintaining channels with all sides while prioritising national interest. That approach must now guide policy. Diversifying supply routes, expanding strategic petroleum reserves and accelerating renewable energy investment are no longer merely economic goals; they are strategic imperatives. When a distant strait can disrupt the daily meal of millions, energy independence becomes not just a policy objective but a national necessity.

Military roadmap

Long-term planning augurs well for India

INDIA's security challenges demand a military that is not only strong but also adaptive, technologically advanced and strategically integrated. The unveiling of 'Defence Forces Vision 2047: A Roadmap for a Future-Ready Indian Military' marks an important step towards this objective. The document outlines an ambitious action plan to transform the armed forces into a modern, multi-domain powerhouse over the next two decades. At the heart of the vision lies the tough goal of jointness among the three services. The proposed reforms aim to address gaps in coordination by promoting integrated planning, operations and capability development. Such synergy is crucial because 21st-century warfare spans multiple domains, such as space and cyberspace. There is no time to lose as jointness has already been long delayed.

The blueprint also lays strong emphasis on technology and innovation. Conflicts across the world are increasingly being shaped by artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, space-based assets and advanced surveillance capabilities. By prioritising the adoption of state-of-the-art technology, the roadmap seeks to make the defence forces future-ready. Equally significant is the focus on self-reliance in defence production — India is the world's second-largest arms importer. Strengthening domestic manufacturing will not only reduce dependence on imports but also spur research and economic growth.

The government's fiscal commitment reinforces this strategic shift. In the Union Budget 2026-27, the defence sector has been allocated a record Rs 7.85 lakh crore (a hike of around 15% compared to the allocation for 2025-26). Notably, neighbouring China continues to raise its military spending and capabilities, with the People's Liberation Army aspiring to match and then surpass the US military by 2049 (the centenary of the Chinese republic). Thus, India's long-term planning is both necessary and timely. However, the success of this vision will depend on effective implementation. Institutional reforms and sustained investment are essential to translate strategic intent into operational capability.

The way forward for Punjab

The border state is special because it is not interested in tokenism



THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA



BASIC TRUTH : Punjab is not a consolation for the loss of Delhi or the pivot to relaunch AAP across the rest of India. TRIBUNE PHOTO

THE Modi government's foreign policy failures resonated in the Punjab Assembly earlier this week, with MLAs cutting across party lines passing a resolution against the Indo-US trade deal. This is certainly a first. It's certainly not the business of legislatures to pontificate on foreign policy, leave alone pass resolutions. But so much bitterness is these days defining the business of politics, that not even the spectacular Le Corbusier-designed building that is the Punjab Assembly was able to insulate itself from the noise of the street.

No wonder the state is bracing itself for a huge rally by Home Minister Amit Shah today in Punjab. The BJP is blowing the bugle, make no mistake, announcing its ambition to stake a claim in the politics of this hugely important border state. Less than a year from now there will be a new government and the BJP is asking itself — and Punjab — why it cannot do the unthinkable, which is to paint Punjab *kesariya*, saffron, the colour of sacrifice, both intimate and familiar, especially to Sikhs.

So far, though, the party has been a bit at sixes and sevens. Even if Amit Shah takes a leaf out of Lenin's book, who famously said he found power lying on the streets of St. Petersburg, picked it up and that's why he mounted the Revolution, the BJP, at least for the moment, is discovering that the people of the Land of Five Rivers — or three, today — are a slightly different kettle of fish.

It's not that Punjab is in the pink of health — quite the opposite. The drug crisis is dragging down the state into a vortex, from which there's no seeming return — read my colleague, Aparna Banerji's depressing stories about the third drug death in a fortnight, of a 19-year-old boy from Mehatpur, in the Doaba region. Every day stories of foreign-based gangsters gunning down rivals in Punjab's broad light of day are rife. The ruling AAP has thrown caution to the winds by announcing impossible spends in a Budget that promises a little of everything to everyone — including Rs 1,000 a month policy benefit for women (Rs 1,500 for women belonging to Scheduled Castes, a third of the 3-crore population), which is being seen as a *Brahmastra*. Only, the problem is no one knows where the money's coming from. Punjab's debt is an astounding Rs 4.17 lakh crore, interest payments alone totalling Rs 1.16 lakh crore, its state GDP the second lowest in the country after Arunachal Pradesh.

Cunningly, the women-only card is straight out of PM Modi's quiver — AAP's national convenor Arvind Kejriwal has learnt well.

The problem is that Punjab is broke. An investment summit in Mohali this weekend may have come a bit late in the day, even if it's to make good-natured promises. Unfortunately, AAP has not called upon the experiences of Punjab's hugely successful entrepreneurial class elsewhere in the country or abroad — remember, Canada's 4-crore population can become Punjab's 24th district — to reinvent itself. The previous Congress government's Punjab Innovation Mission had some good ideas. Unfortunately, it's a cipher of its former self, because Bhagwant Mann's bureaucracy is so busy reinventing the wheel that there's no time to ponder over the ideas that came in the previous cycle.

> The BJP is blowing the bugle, make no mistake, announcing its ambition to stake a claim in the politics of Punjab.

And then there's Bhagwant Mann. The chief minister has been rightfully castigated for his loose comments on women in a speech in Ludhiana some days ago; he was supposedly remembering the escapades of his callow youth, but really, there have to be less colourful ways. (As for the Congress party's Sukhpal Khaira, his outrageous comments linking "dancing women" with the benefits of AAP's Rs 1,000 payout should encourage the party to immediately banish him to Kalapani, where he should repent deeply and seek forgiveness — well, he definitely should beware the rage of Punjab's women.)

As for dancing women, all of Punjab's men, including Khaira, should know that these "*naach-newaalis*" are doing an honest day's work, and not dependent on anyone for handouts or freebies. As for who's dancing on which master puppeteer's tune — well, the jury is out and the people will decide, not just in Punjab next year, but in West Bengal, Assam and Kerala this year.

But back to Bhagwant Mann. His occasional visits to the hospital to check his haemoglobin provoke a huge yawn — Punjab's haemoglobin levels have been high for a while. The promise to make the state corruption-free shimmers in the unseasonal heat, an echo from another "*na khaoonga, na khaane doonga*" era. As for the influence from Delhi — Punjab is a worthwhile prize, has never liked to submit to the Dilli Durbar, which is why the return journey, across the political class, is in such high demand.

Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia and AAP's Delhi politicians understand that basic truth. Punjab is not a consolation for the loss of Delhi or the pivot to relaunch the party across the rest of the country. The state's significant sense of self has been scarred by Partition, damaged by terrorism and depleted by the continuing lack of investment into itself, both political and economic. If AAP wants to win Punjab again, it has to do much more than just tokenism — and that includes the Rs 1,000-a-month benefit for women.

AAP — like the BJP elsewhere in the country, where largesse for women has been doled out in amounts that could help wipe out Punjab's debt, in the attempt to create a "women constituency" that will supersede caste — must remember that women are not beneficiaries, or recipients of handouts or "wombs" from which "brave men are born" — some of those phrases that resonated in the Punjab Assembly earlier this week were not just jarring, they were revealing of a deeply patriarchal mindset that doesn't even realise it is patriarchal.

Punjab is special because it isn't interested in tokenism. To rephrase John F Kennedy, as the state goes to the polls in a few months, ask not what Punjab can do for you, but what you can do for Punjab. That's also why Amit Shah's rally will be keenly watched today.

Montek Singh Ahluwalia, former Finance Secretary and right-hand man to former PM Manmohan Singh in the early 1990s — two Punjabis who led the economic reforms in the country and changed the course of the nation — sent me this phrase, quoting a ballad by Bhai Gurdas, much admired by Guru Arjan Dev himself. "*Satguru Nanak pargatya/miti dhund/jag chaanan hoya.*" Guru Nanak manifested himself, the fog of ignorance lifted and the world was bathed in light!

If Punjab has to be bathed in light again, the way forward is clear.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Punjab has some distance to go before it can say that it has achieved its developmental goals. — Manmohan Singh

She lived deeply, fought bravely till the end

VIKRAM NAYYAR

ON February 17, I was sitting at the bedside of my daughter, Lukshita (20), at the PGI, Chandigarh. She was on a life-support system, surrounded by a web of intravenous lines with medical monitors continuously beeping. Even in that moment of unbearable vulnerability, she looked serene and elegant, reflecting a calming grace that seemed untouched by suffering. The hospital gown she wore appeared like a royal robe, and the electrode on the forehead resembled a crown resting upon a sleeping queen. I felt less like a grieving father and more like a soldier guarding a princess lost in enchanted sleep. It reminded me of the fairy tale 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', which she loved as a child.

Suddenly, a voice broke through my thoughts, "Hello, Sir". It was the doctor. He gently pointed to the vital signs monitor, an indication no father could imagine to witness. The divine light was gone. With a choked voice and teary eyes, I held on to the doctor's hands.

He looked at me and said, "She was the unlucky one in a million." These words shattered my soul. I wondered how my daughter, who had brought fortune and joy to everyone she ever touched, could be unlucky for herself.

My thoughts drifted back to August 3, 2005, when our princess illuminated our abode with her arrival. When the doctor gave her to me in my trembling arms, the first look at her brought tears and I could not utter a word. I could only stare in awe at the miracle I was holding. The doctor said: "You are very lucky, take care of this pretty girl". Yes, that's why she was named "Lukshita" — Luck-shita, the one who brings fortune.

From her early years, she stood apart — not by seeking attention, but by the depth of her thought and the sincerity of her heart. She showed that leadership is born not of authority, but of empathy and quiet responsibility. People trusted her, leaned on her. Her teachers would candidly say, "*Agar ye life me kuch bada nahi karti, toh yeh aapki galti hogi.*" During the Covid-19 lockdown, she chose creation over withdrawal and brought out a book titled *Globetrotting in Confinement*, which highlighted voices of young people from across the world. Her blog, 'Teen Tidings', became another expression of her reflections.

On the verge of turning 18, she was ready to embark on her career. We accompanied her to Gujarat National Law University (GNLU). She was full of dreams, confidence and a sparkle in her eyes. At GNLU, she flourished with remarkable poise. In moot courts, she argued with clarity and confidence, earning the national-level Best Student Advocate Award.

A rare auto-immune disease cut short her blossoming life, but it couldn't fade her charming and lively smile. With a bleeding heart and in profound reverence, I kept looking at my princess, thinking about her luminous journey as a loving daughter, a caring sister, a faithful friend, a devoted student and a writer.

She lived deeply, loved fully and fought bravely. In the end, she surrendered faithfully, holding close the words which she had got tattooed on her left arm, *Rabb Raakha* (May God protect you).

The writer is Finance and Development Officer, Panjab University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Govt waited for the right time

Refer to 'Women's quota is back at the forefront'; though the Women's Reservation Bill was passed in 2023, but was not put into force immediately. The passage of the Bill came with a rider that it will be more effective only after a fresh Census and delimitation exercise. Though the NDA government wanted to take the credit for being women-friendly, it had its own calculation about implementing it at the right time. The policymakers need to acknowledge that women empowerment is an irreversible force and all political parties must acknowledge and move with the change.

PS KAUR, BY MAIL

Transparency in drug fight

Refer to 'Punjab's drug scourge'; the article rightly highlights the gravity of the drug menace and the disturbing involvement of individuals entrusted with combating it. The fight against narcotics will remain incomplete unless the government adopts greater transparency. More importantly, the focus must be on action against the bigger fish controlling drug networks rather than merely highlighting arrests of middlemen or addicts. Equally crucial are transparent investigations, protection for informers and strict monitoring of local defence committees. Special emphasis must be laid on shedding political and police protection enjoyed by drug syndicates. Clear and enforceable strict rules of accountability of officials and political actors alike are essential, but the question is who will bell the cat?

AMARJIT SINGH, BY MAIL

Misusing euthanasia provision

Apropos of 'Dignity in death'; the Supreme Court verdict permits the removal of life-support systems for any terminally ill person, and allows individuals to decide against artificial life-support by creating a 'living will'. But many opine that passive euthanasia is prone to abuse, as such Wills can be manipulated. Patients may be pressured to sign their own death warrants. In a country like India, misusing such a provision of law, especially against the elderly and vulnerable, is quite a possibility. To avoid this situation, the SC has asked the Centre to frame legislation.

SK SINGH, BY MAIL

Greater role of doctors

The decision of the Supreme Court permitting passive euthanasia marks a significant milestone in the medico-legal evolution of end-of-life care in India. The judgment is also likely to influence hospital protocols and medical practice by encouraging greater recognition of advance directives or 'living wills', which allow individuals to express their preferences regarding life-sustaining treatment in terminal conditions. The ruling may stimulate clearer statutory legislation governing end-of-life decision-making in India. At the same time, it places greater ethical and legal responsibility on medical professionals.

DS BHULLAR, BY MAIL

Don't resort to panic LPG booking

Apropos of 'Panic buying due to anxiety, not LPG shortage: Puri in Parliament'; the Union Minister stressed that panic bookings were due to consumer anxiety and not shortage of LPG. He assured that India had enough gas supplies, even if the West Asia conflict prolongs. The Centre has advised all state pollution control boards to allow eateries and hotels to use alternative fuel options like biomass, coal, kerosene & RDF pellets for a month. The government must deal firmly with hoarders of essential commodities spreading rumours to sell their stock at exorbitant rates, and the public too must be proactive in reporting illegal hoarding.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Prevention a better solution

Apropos of 'In 2025, Punjab saw 68 cancer deaths daily, Haryana 50, Himachal 15'; apart from individual efforts of staying away from carcinogens and introducing organic lifestyle changes, the government role here is very crucial. We need subsidised or free cancer screening in government hospitals, schools, residential societies, offices, or wherever feasible for large number of people to be scanned. For those who are already victims of the disease, measures should be taken so that they can avail of treatment at low cost. Prevention is better than cure, so the health ministry should gird up its loins and start working on it with immediacy.

RAVINDER KUMAR, LUDHIANA

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**

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 1926

The censure motion

AT the time of writing, we do not know whether Muhammad Ali Jinnah's motion for the omission of the grant for the Executive Council was or was not carried by the Assembly on Friday. But whatever may have been the fate of that motion, there is absolutely no doubt that its real object was completely served. It was not the omission of the grant for which Jinnah cared. He knew very well that even if the Assembly carried his motion by an overwhelming majority, as it would, indeed, have done if the Swarajists had been in their places, the omitted grant would at once be restored by the fiat of the Executive. All that he did want was to once again put on solemn record the conviction of the country that the time for the institution of an enquiry into reforms with a view to the immediate installation of a responsible government was long overdue and that the government's obstinate refusal of the national demand in this regard was worthy of the severest condemnation. In this his success was unqualified. That the Swarajists more than shared this conviction of the leader of the Independent party went absolutely without saying; the very empty benches that stared the government members in the face bore eloquent and unmistakable testimony to that fact. And of those Indian members who were left in the House, everybody who was anybody was with Jinnah in this matter. Of course, there were some like Sir Sivaswami Iyer who, while sympathising with him as regards his object, expressed their inability to vote with him, on the extraordinary ground that the motion would either deprive the Executive Councillors of their much-needed travelling allowance or compel the Governor-General to certify the disallowed grant.

Geopolitics & India's fragile energy dependence



AJAI MALHOTRA
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, TERI, & FORMER AMBASSADOR

THE US-Israeli strikes on Iran and its Gulf-wide retaliation have rendered the Strait of Hormuz near-impassable, with Brent crude surging past $90 a barrel and global energy markets experiencing their most severe disruption since the 1970s. Given India's heavy dependence on imported oil and gas, this poses an immediate challenge to our energy security, economic growth and household energy costs.

Nearly half of India's crude imports transit the Strait of Hormuz, sourced from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE. Our gas dependence is even more concentrated: 53% of LNG imports and 90% of our LPG imports pass through the strait. Much of the Gulf's output cannot reach global markets if the Strait of Hormuz is blocked. Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline to the Red Sea and the UAE's Fujairah pipeline provide partial alternatives, but cannot compensate for a strait closure. The global oil market has little shock-absorbing capacity. Amid disruption fears, our government has prioritised LPG supplies to households, leaving commercial consumers, restaurants and food delivery services facing supply cuts and closure.

Against this backdrop, the US has provided India a 30-day sanctions waiver to purchase Russian crude already at sea. Ironically, Washington had for over a year been unfairly pressuring New Delhi to wind down its Russian crude purchases, imposing punitive tariffs on Indian exports, including a 25 percent charge pegged to our oil imports from Russia. By January 2026, Russian crude's share of our import basket had slipped to 21%, the lowest since late 2022, while purchases from West Asia surged to multi-year highs.

Our cumulative savings from buying discounted Russian crude in 2022-2024 were an estimated $16.7 billion. Redirection of much of that demand to the Gulf increased our exposure to the Hormuz chokepoint. The lesson is not that Russian or Gulf oil is preferable; it is that over-dependence on any corridor or supplier is a liability.

India's cumulative oil and gas investments in Russia constitute the largest share of our overseas hydrocarbon portfolio. By far, the largest amount of oil that our PSUs extract from overseas investments comes from Russia.

In turn, Russia-based Rosneft and its partners own and operate India's second largest refinery and largest private sector fuel retail network. The Kudankulam nuclear power project and Gazprom's contracted LNG deliveries to GAIL represent other major bilateral energy cooperation pillars.



NOT DESIRABLE: Over-dependence on any corridor or supplier is a liability. ISTOCK

Indian refiners have reportedly already secured around 30 million barrels of Russian crude since the waiver was issued, with roughly 9.5 million barrels on vessels near Indian waters. It is estimated that Russia could meet up to 40% of our crude requirements if Gulf supplies remain disrupted.

A larger principle is also at stake here. The speed with which Washington pivoted from penalising India for buying Russian oil to facilitating precisely those very purchases reveals how transactional that pressure was. The US tariff surcharge served as an instrument of leverage, deployed or withdrawn as per US convenience. India's energy policy must not be subject to such whims. Our foreign policy draws on strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, and our energy procurement must reflect these principles.

> Multi-alignment is the bridge to use as we progress towards self-reliance.

The Hormuz crisis compels a frank appreciation of our situation. Besides crude oil and gas flows, 63% of our nitrogen fertiliser imports originate from the Gulf and transit Hormuz, exposing a double vulnerability. Whether energy security or food security, or sophisticated foreign weaponry and defence platforms, the pattern is of excessive external dependence.

While we work steadily towards reducing dependence in each of these crucial sectors, the practical solution lies in another spoke of our foreign policy approach: multi-alignment. Maintaining close, productive ties with major partners and ensuring that no external actor acquires disproportionate leverage over us builds the resilience that lets us exercise genuine strategic choice. Multi-alignment is the bridge to use as we progress towards self-reliance.

Indeed, we should apply multi-alignment while focusing on small modular reactors (SMRs) and work with the three nuclear powers — Russia, France and the US — to see that no country controls the fuel supply, technology pipeline or maintenance chain of our SMR future. A fast progression from technology transfer to co-production on Indian soil must also be put in place.

While India must fully exploit the current 30-day waiver window to bolster its energy security, we should have a long-term, integrated strategy. Energy procurement decisions should remain guided by price, quality, reliability, and our own assessment of supply security, not get misdirected by external political pressures. Diversifying energy sources and routes must remain a central priority to strengthen resilience against disruptions, market volatility and external pressures. We should accelerate expansion of our strategic petroleum reserves and keep them topped up to cushion future disruptions. Storage capacity for critical fuels, including LPG, must also be expanded. Investment in renewable energy should be viewed not only via a climate policy prism, but as a strategic imperative.

India's energy diversification plans envisage 500 GW of renewable capacity by 2030, encompassing rapid expansion of solar power, developing offshore wind, biofuels, green hydrogen, and nuclear energy. These should be aggressively pushed to reduce our exposure to global oil markets.

India must also pursue pragmatic diplomacy, maintaining open channels with all major players. India has shown it can serve as a central node in a new energy geography, importing crude from multiple suppliers, efficiently refining it and exporting petroleum products. Managed prudently, this intermediate processing role can transform vulnerability into leverage.

Not so long ago, Washington was loudly threatening India with penalties for Russian oil purchases; last week, it issued a waiver to facilitate precisely those purchases. Such volatility reinforces the case for India to pursue a steady, national interest-driven energy policy. India is the world's third largest oil consumer, fourth largest refiner and fifth largest exporter of petroleum products. Our scale provides leverage and our growing economy gives us standing. Both should be used to access energy on our own terms, rather than the shifting priorities of others. India's energy policy must ultimately be guided by one principle: our own strategic calculus.

Views are personal

Teaching children to question war and power



AVIJIT PATHAK
SOCIOLOGIST

IN these turbulent times, it is exceedingly difficult to escape from a deeply existential and pedagogic question: As adults, are we responsible enough for sowing the seeds of a new world in which our children can grow up as integrated, sensitive and compassionate beings and live joyfully and meaningfully? Think of it. Do we have any answer if a school/college student asks us these three questions: Why did you create a world in which there is no end to war and violence? Why did you give us such a polluted world in which we cannot even breathe properly? And even though you speak of democracy, why do we repeatedly witness the absence of the art of conversation and listening among our parliamentarians?

As a teacher whose primary task is to establish a life-long communion with young minds, I believe we should not escape these questions. After all, there ought to be something more to education than what the prevalent culture of regimented schooling has normalised — the routinised act of teaching discrete and fragmented academic subjects like physics, mathematics, geography, history or accountancy and training them in a way so that they can succeed in all sorts of standardised tests and examinations and fit well into the 'system'.

In fact, it is high time we began to bring the world — yes, this turbulent/chaotic world — into our classrooms, raise critical questions and inspire this perplexed generation to strive for a better world. After all, you cannot have an insulated/sanitised classroom. You cannot pretend that you can teach science, history or political studies meaningfully, even if you remain indifferent to what is happening outside the classroom.

To begin with, think of the ongoing war, or the never-ending hostility we see among different countries: Israel vs Palestine, Russia vs Ukraine, India vs Pakistan, Pakistan vs Afghanistan and Israel-USA vs Iran. Yes, war is normalised, and projected as a visual spectacle on the television screen; militarism is glorified, and even sanctified as the finest form of patriotism; and every war is justified in the name of 'protecting' the nation from its 'enemy'.



VITAL: The young learner must be made to understand the deeper reasons behind crises. ISTOCK

Is it possible to go beyond the textbook and the official syllabus, and bring the tales of these devastating wars in the classroom, enquire collectively, see beyond the discourses of 'victory' and 'defeat', and raise critical questions?

It is like looking at ourselves — our brute instincts, or what Sigmund Freud would have characterised as 'death drive' or '*Thanatos*'; it is to see the pathology of hyper-nationalism and its implicit militarism; it is to see the discontents of a civilisation in which the hugely profitable global arms industry continues to expand; and, above all, it is to see the narcissism and moral impoverishment of all sorts of authoritarian masters who rule over the world.

> It is high time we brought this turbulent, chaotic world in our classrooms, raise critical questions and inspire this perplexed generation to strive for a better world.

Without this constant reflection and awareness, it is difficult to say 'no' to war and strive for a peaceful world.

Think of yet another kind of war: the way the unholy alliance of instrumental techno-science and global capitalism has caused severe damage to the ecosystem and reduced everything, be it a tree, a river, a forest or a mountain to a mere 'resource' for ceaseless economic growth, our irresistible greed and indulgence with consumerism.

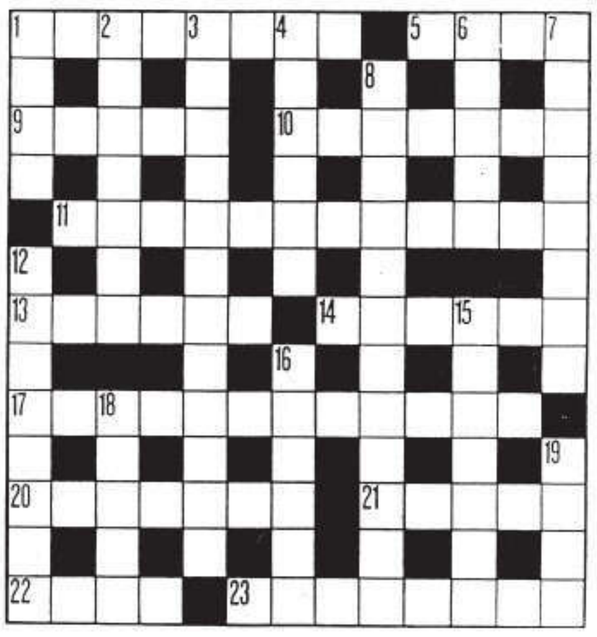
In fact, the climate crisis we witness today — the rising temperature and prolonged heat waves, flash floods, wildfires, and air pollution — is a logical consequence of the war modern techno-capitalism has declared against nature. It is, thus, not surprising that, as a report published by the World Economic Forum warns, by 2050 climate change may cause an additional 14.5 million deaths.

How do we sensitise ourselves? How do we sensitise our children? Imagine how superficially we look at this crisis. When, for instance, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in the national capital crosses all limits and breathable fresh air becomes the costliest commodity, the government closes all schools or proposes the 'hybrid' mode of teaching. Or, for that matter, our school principals are fond of planting a couple of trees on the World Environment Day.

However, for a true awakening of the crisis, we need to see beyond these symbolic gestures. What is actually needed is a kind of critical and reflexive pedagogy that makes the young learner understand the deeper reasons behind the crisis, and inspires him/her to say 'no' to the Establishment seeks to censor or hide.

Though it is not easy to retain the spirit of libertarian education amid these three forms of war, we should not give up what Antonio Gramsci would have characterised as the "optimism of the will."

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Slow in development (8)
5 Having enough power (4)
9 Flock of wild geese in flight (5)
10 Impair quality of (7)
11 In good health (3,2,1,6)
13 Unkempt (6)
14 Accompany as guard (6)
17 Binoculars (5,7)
20 Means of entry (7)
21 Ravine (5)
22 Become less reserved (4)
23 Heavy cotton upholstery fabric (8)

DOWN

1 Despicable (4)
2 Live together in peace (7)
3 Gain comfortable victory (3,5,4)
4 Divulge (6)
6 Insipid (5)
7 First principles of learning (8)
8 When seen initially (2,5,5)
12 A shoot-out (8)
15 Invade and occupy (7)
16 Actor (6)
18 Subject to additional charge (5)
19 Being nothing more than (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Just about, 8 Huron, 9 Guarded, 10 Lavish, 11 Flaunt, 12 High seas, 15 Rehearse, 18 Adrift, 20 Torrid, 21 By and by, 22 Latch, 23 Tennessee.

Down: 2 Usual, 3 Turn up, 4 Breather, 5 Thrash, 6 Bruiser, 7 On the spot, 11 Fairy tale, 13 Go easy on, 14 Charity, 16 Aright, 17 Uranus, 19 Fibre.

SU DO KU

HARD

3			2					8
		9		3				
	7	2	5		4		3	
					3			
5	4						6	1
			7					
	1		4		6	3	9	
				5		4		
6					9			7

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

9	4	1	8	2	3	6	7	5
6	5	2	9	4	7	1	8	3
8	7	3	5	1	6	4	9	2
1	6	7	4	3	2	8	5	9
2	8	4	1	9	5	7	3	6
3	9	5	7	6	8	2	1	4
4	2	9	3	8	1	5	6	7
7	3	8	6	5	4	9	2	1
5	1	6	2	7	9	3	4	8

CALENDAR

MARCH 14, 2026, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 23
- Chaitra Parvishte 1
- Hijari 1447
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 10, up to 8:11 am
- Variyan Yoga up to 10:43 am
- Uttrashadha Nakshatra up to 4:49 am
- Moon enters Capricorn sign 9:33 am
- Chaitra Sankranti

FORECAST

SUNSET: SATURDAY 18:30 HRS
SUNRISE: SUNDAY 06:32 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	31	18
New Delhi	32	20
Amritsar	27	15
Bathinda	30	15
Jalandhar	27	15
Ludhiana	30	17
Bhiwani	32	17
Hisar	32	17
Sirsa	32	17
Dharamsala	28	12
Manali	17	08
Shimla	24	11
Srinagar	19	07
Jammu	30	17
Kargil	12	00
Leh	14	01
Dehradun	31	17
Mussoorie	24	11

TEMPERATURE IN °C

epaper.tribuneindia.com

India must tap new sources to boost energy production

India's quest to reach the developed economy status by 2047 hinges largely on self-sufficiency in critical areas. And energy security is one of the most critical aspects of self-reliance. Since the country imports 85 per cent of its crude oil needs and 55 per cent of its natural gas requirements, it is exposed to geopolitical events. In the refinery front, the country has built impressive capacity and is self-sufficient. But when the raw material supply chain is disrupted, processing suffers. This is what is happening as West Asia conflict rages with no signs of any early end. If the war between Israel-US and Iran lingers, then the Indian economy will suffer, leading to livelihood threats for many. According to reports, the closure of Strait of Hormuz can create serious issues for the global economy. Against this backdrop, India must create several energy sources to diversify its overall portfolio. Over the last 30 years, the country has realised the importance of green energy and vulnerabilities with respect to crude oil and LNG. Currently, more than half of the country's energy needs are fulfilled by renewable energy sources. India produces around 250 GW of renewable energy.

Solar power is the highest contributor to the renewable energy pie, with an installed capacity of about 120 GW. Wind and hydro are the other renewable energy sources with more than 50 GW of power generated each from these sources. Bioenergy and nuclear contribute the rest of the energy portfolio in the renewable vertical. Heartening, the pie of renewable energy is increasing in line with India's zero emission commitments. However, it is nearly impossible to do away with fossil fuel dependency. Heavy industries and operations require fossil-fuel driven energy sources. India has an ample amount of coal and coal-fired thermal plants. The need is to further accelerate the coal mining capacity and speed up coal gasification projects. Especially, coal gasification projects will reduce dependence on LNG imports apart from meeting the critical fertilizer-Urea. In both these areas, India is depending on other nations. Reports suggest that while petrol and diesel availability is not an issue due to the ongoing West Asia conflict, LNG supply has been disrupted, especially LPG supplies. Therefore, such projects are essential for national energy security.

Notably, India's technology industry is eyeing to take a pole position in the AI space in coming years. With a huge talent base, operations of global companies and high internet penetration, India can be the global capital in the AI space. But the supporting infrastructure needs to be strengthened. Keeping this in view, the Union Budget 2026 has proposed to provide tax holiday till 2047 and promote setting up data centres in the country. Notably, data centres consume huge amounts of energy. Because AI-focussed data centres use advanced chips that consume 2-4 times more electricity than traditional servers. To put things in perspective, large scale data centres consume power that is equal to 100,000 households. Now, imagine the pressure on India's electricity grid once major data centres become operational. In this regard, it will be better if alternate energy sources can be tapped on a mission mode. Moreover, the exploration work about new oil and gas sources should be done on an urgent basis. While India has been endowed with most mineral resources, the missing link is the oil and gas portfolio. If that can be plugged, the country will become immune to global shocks in many ways.

Shouting in Parliament won't solve India's energy crisis

BOLD talk
V RAMU SARMA

It is most unfortunate that India's political ecosystem—its leaders, spokespersons and even some so-called analysts—continue to operate within an outdated and narrow mindset. Many of them appear more interested in delivering long lectures that please the leaders of the political parties they support rather than contributing meaningfully to the national discourse.

Instead of demonstrating maturity and statesmanship, they often reduce serious national issues to a political spectacle.

What is even more disappointing is their refusal to adopt a broader outlook and an open mind, especially during times of national crisis. Political competition is natural in a democracy, but when circumstances demand unity and constructive engagement, our political class often fails to rise above partisan calculations. The country expects responsible leadership; instead, it frequently witnesses noisy confrontation.

The recent uproar over the LPG shortage triggered by the ongoing Iran conflict is a classic example. Some opposition leaders have been loudly accusing the central government of failing to be prepared for the crisis and have alleged widespread hoarding by gas agencies.

In a democracy, the opposition certainly has the right—and indeed the duty—to question the government. However, one ought to remember that the right to question comes with the responsibility to speak judiciously and base accusations on facts rather than rhetoric.

Hoarding of essential commodities is unfortunately not a new phenomenon in India. It has existed for decades and continues to persist despite regulatory mechanisms. To portray the issue as an overnight development that has emerged due to government's negligence is both misleading and irresponsible.

What was particularly disturbing was the spectacle of opposition representatives shouting on national television about shortages of domestic LPG cylinders and accusing agencies of overcharging consumers. This situation demands introspection from those very leaders. They must ask themselves an uncomfortable question: who exactly benefits from creating panic among the public?

It is no secret that many LPG distributorships are are owned by individuals enjoying political clout. Many belong directly or indirectly to politicians across parties. If that is the case, why are such leaders not ensuring that their own networks operate with integrity during a crisis? Why are they not demonstrating patriotism by ensuring that there is no hoarding or black-marketing?

Instead, some appear more interested in creating outrage while conveniently ignoring the role of local networks and state-level enforcement.

The truth is simple: while the central government can issue policy guidelines and increase supply, preventing hoarding and black-marketing is primarily the responsibility of state governments.

This is precisely where the opposition has an opportunity to demonstrate real leadership. If non-NDA States ensure that supply chains remain transparent and efficient, and that there is minimal hoarding or price manipulation, they would gain enormous credibility. Imagine the political impact if states governed by such parties are able to show that LPG distribution in their territories was smooth, affordable and corruption-free. That would be a powerful example and a legitimate political weapon against the ruling establishment.

SCREAM LESS, THINK MORE



India's Parliament is increasingly turning into a stage for political theatrics rather than meaningful debate. As the opposition blames the Centre for LPG shortages triggered by global tensions, it ignores its own responsibility in preventing hoarding and black-marketing at the state level. Instead of shouting slogans, leaders should study innovative solutions—from energy management to global best practices—and offer constructive ideas that help the nation confront crises with unity, maturity and foresight

Instead of taking this constructive route, many opposition leaders prefer shouting matches and dramatic walkouts in Parliament.

Leaders such as Rahul Gandhi frequently complain that they are not allowed to speak in Parliament. Yet when the opportunity arises, meaningful policy ideas are rarely presented. What the country hears instead is repetitive rhetoric designed for television clips rather than serious parliamentary debate.

The deeper problem is that large sections of the political class appear unwilling to learn from global developments. While many countries are rapidly adopting innovative technologies and forward-looking policies, our debates often remain trapped in obsolete frameworks shaped by colonial-era thinking.

The current energy crisis triggered by the Iran conflict is not of India's making. It is a consequence of complex geopolitical developments. In such a situation, the opposition should certainly highlight ground realities, while at the same time, demonstrate maturity by proposing solutions and studying global best practices that could help India manage similar crises in the future.

Take for instance, the example of innovative energy solutions emerging in countries like Japan. Instead of spending endless hours in Parliament shouting slogans, political leaders could discuss how such technologies might be adapted in India.

Japan, a densely populated nation where millions commute daily through busy train stations and urban centres, has experimented with generating electricity from human footsteps. The idea is based on the scientific principle known as the Piezoelectric Effect.

Engineers in Japan installed special piezoelectric materials beneath floor tiles in crowded areas such as metro stations, bus terminals, shopping malls and exhibition centres. Whenever a person steps on these tiles, pressure is applied to the material, generating a small electrical charge. This electricity is then stored in batteries and used to power LED lights, information displays and sensors.

While a single step produces only a tiny amount of energy—typically between 0.1 and 7 watts for a brief moment—the cumulative impact of thousands of footsteps can be significant. In a busy station where over one lakh people pass through daily, the collective energy generated can power numerous low-energy devices.

Beyond the electricity produced, such projects also serve an important educational purpose. When citizens see lights powered by their own footsteps, it creates awareness about energy conservation and sustainability.

The technology is also environment-friendly. It produces electricity without burning fossil fuels or emitting carbon. In the long run, such innovations could become part of smart city infrastructure, powering sensors, lighting systems and other urban utilities.

The only major limitation at present is the relatively high installation cost because specialised flooring systems and electronic infrastructure are required. However, as with most technologies, costs are likely to decline as adoption increases.

Imagine if Indian political leaders were to seriously discuss how such innovations could be integrated into our metro networks, railway stations and large public spaces. The country could generate supplementary electricity while simultaneously promoting environmental consciousness. It can also be a stand by system in times of energy crisis.

Unfortunately, instead of such forward-looking discussions, Parliament often becomes a stage for theatrics.

This is deeply unfair to taxpayers. Each working day in the Parliament costs the nation more than Rs nine crore. When sessions are repeatedly disrupted by slogan-shouting and forced adjournments, it is public money that goes to waste.

Accountability must therefore become part of parliamentary culture. One possible reform could be linking the salaries and allowances of legislators to their performance in Parliament. If members repeatedly disrupt proceedings and force adjournments, their salaries should face proportional deductions. Such measures might finally discourage habitual disruption.

India deserves a political culture where leaders compete through ideas rather than noise. The country needs representatives who read widely, understand global innovations and present constructive solutions.

Until that happens, parliamentary theatrics will continue to dominate—and the real business of nation-building will remain postponed.

(The author is former Chief Editor of The Hans India)

130th constitutional amendment bill is a democratic regression

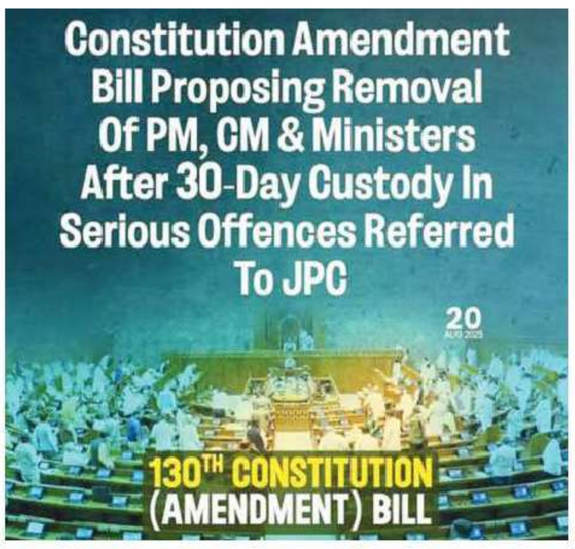
Nayakara Veeresha

In a democracy, citizens form the backbone across segments in a democracy. While on one hand, they can choose their representatives to raise their needs and concerns in the Parliament and Legislative Assembly, they have the right to recall in direct democracies. Indirect democracies have constitutional and legal frameworks to disqualify elected representatives based on criminal offences. In certain democracies, disqualification of elected representatives applies after charges are framed by investigative agencies or conviction by courts.

In India, here comes a proposed One Hundred and Thirtieth (130th) Constitutional Amendment Bill that endeavours to hand over the authority to remove elected representatives in the hands of non-elected executives like the President and Governor that too in the name of democratic exercise. In a way, it takes away the citizens' sovereignty and the right to elect. Thomas Jefferson observed that "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves. And if we think they are not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discourse, the remedy is not to take it away from them but to inform them of their discretion".

On August 20, 2025, Union Home Minister Amit Shah introduced the 130th Amendment Bill, with an aim to cleanse politics. However, it takes away the people's power and hence it is a democratic regression (Larry Diamond, 2022). The bill is currently being examined by the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

The stated aim of cleaning the body politic is the need of the hour. Given the exponential rise of MPs with criminal charges from 24 per cent in 2004 to 46 per cent in 2024, it is imperative to address the issue in the right perspective to restore the vitality of democratic polity. Towards achieving this, the proposed bill enlists the objectives of (i) non-partisan and public welfare, (ii) sound character and exemplary conduct and (iii) constitutional morality and principles of good governance. To do this, the Amendment of Articles 75, 164 and 239AA is proposed to remove "a minister who is arrested and detained in custody on account of serious criminal



charges", including the Prime Minister and incumbent Chief Ministers.

At the face of this proposition, the intent to bring purity in politics is desirable and ideal for any democratic nation, especially India, where criminalisation of politics has eroded public confidence in body politic. The third objective of the bill reads as "A minister, who is facing allegation of serious criminal offences, arrested and detained in custody, may thwart or hinder the canons of constitutional morality and principles of good governance and eventually diminish the constitutional trust reposed by people in him".

The most glaring part of this bill is its argument of constitutional morality and the principles of good governance. The principal agencies for arresting/detaining a person/elected representative are police with specifics of Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED) at the Central level and Crime Investigation Department (CID) in states. The functioning of these agencies is well documented and has almost become political tools in the hands of ruling dispensations both at the central and state levels. Institutional immunity and functional autonomy are rarely exhibited by the leadership of these agencies due to political intrusion.

The lowest rate of conviction (a mere two per cent) among nearly two hundred cases by the ED and CBI in the last decade or so indicates their use for political purposes and to suppress voices of opposition parties by hook and crook. The Supreme Court's directive to High Courts for a speedy disposal of all cases related to politicians facing serious criminal offences is going on too slowly. Massive vacancies of judges in HCs are resulting in snail paced dealing of cases pertaining to MPs and MLAs facing criminal charges.

In February 2025, the Union Government opposed the idea of a lifetime ban of convicted politicians in the Supreme Court. The 130th proposed bill stands contrary to this position as it takes away the right to elect by non-elected executives. Curiously, the timing of the bill coincided with the diminishing role of the Election Commission of India, and the push for the One Nation One Election approach.

While the intent to cleanse politics is laudable and desirable, the fact of the matter is that the bill, per se, falls short in terms of taking away the legal and constitutional immunities provided to the elected representatives. It also indirectly touches upon Article 32, the right to constitutional remedies when the elected representative is ousted from her/his position without being acquitted/convicted in the court of law. Filling up of all vacant judges' posts in High Courts, speedy setting up of fast-track courts as per the Supreme Court directive to deal with MP/MLAs cases, implementing the Law Commission recommendations on electoral disqualifications, strengthening the anti-defection law and last but not the least reforming the criminal justice system by barring political influence are the ways forward to ensure genuineness in politics. Without these steps, the proposed bill only encourages more political defections and thereby threatens the stability of elected governments and constitutional democracy.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Pune)

LETTERS

Dump LPG, patronise biogas

Amid escalations in the Middle East, we are now subject to disruptions in the supply of crude oil. However, there is respite given that there are other alternatives from the allies. However, those dependent on LPG, the tensions are worsening by the day. The demand from households, hotels and commercial establishments are increasing at a fast pace. In this worrisome situation, many of us have forgotten the most viable alternative, which can more than serve the purpose-biogas, which, incidentally, can be filled in cylinders. It is sustainable and affordable. All that one requires are cow dung, kitchen waste, old vegetables and stale food items. These can be recycled and used to light stoves. Rather than scaling up LPG extraction drastically, we can focus on establishing biogas facilities which require very minimal space and can be produced by waste that has no other use. In fact, this is such a sound alternative that the authorities can commercialise the entire sector, which can also create countless employment opportunities.

Saketh Sirasanagandla, Hyderabad

Citizens facing rising costs deserve candour

This is further to your editorial "Centre must communicate with people, coordinate with states" (March 13), the call for transparent governance during the Middle East tensions is as sensible as it is urgent. When hoteliers warn of crippling daily losses and a state legislature passes resolutions, we have moved beyond mere political point-scoring into genuine economic anxiety. The government's expanded sourcing strategy is welcome, but strategy shared is strategy doubled in effectiveness. Citizens facing rising costs deserve candour, not cryptic assurances. Similarly, opposition allegations of compromised energy security warrant substantive response rather than reflexive retort. This crisis illuminates a perennial truth: energy independence isn't forged in emergency meetings but through sustained vision - renewables, domestic exploration, strategic reserves.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Oppn must rally behind govt

It is imperative that all opposition parties stand firmly behind the government during a crisis of the kind we are going through due to the Gulf crisis. The LPG scarcity is not being felt as all needed measures are taken to avert such a situation. India's dependence on imported oil and LPG need not be overstated. The government is not complacent in this regard; and has diversified its sources of procurement of petroleum products and crude oil supply for the country.

Sakunthala K R, Hyderabad

Cong must be more constructive

This is further to the editorial "Centre must communicate with people, coordinate with states". The country has been witnessing unrelented attempts by the Congress to berate the government at every opportunity. Naturally, the Opposition cannot be expected to be supportive of the government in the ongoing oil crisis and LPG gas cylinder shortages that are being highlighted and exaggerated unnecessarily, while the reality is something else.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

LPG crisis crippling hotel industry

Hotels across India are facing a severe gas shortage with many forced to shut down or reduce operations. Many hotel associations have formed a Joint Action Committee to address the crisis, with some restaurants closing every Monday to conserve gas. Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, and Kerala are also affected, with long queues for domestic cylinders despite soaring black market prices. The government has invoked the Essential Commodities Act prioritizing domestic LPG supply and restricting commercial use. States are taking measures to curb black marketing and ensure supply. The hotel industry is hopping around and hoping to get an amicable solution by next week. Meanwhile, it is time to prevent the spread of fake news on fuel availability.

Jayanthi Subramaniam, East Mumbai

Flexible timings for women make sense

One should wholeheartedly welcome the flexible timings (come early-go early; 30-minute flexibility between 9.15 am and 9.45 am) that have been brought in by the Maharashtra government for women employees. This is a progressive forward-looking measure. There will be less traffic jams, especially during the peak hours; considerably reduce smoke-pollution, and help save on time, fuel and money. I feel that all States must take cue and introduce this well-intended Maharashtra model.

Sreelekha PS, Secunderabad-61

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

State expands British Council partnership to boost English learning in rural libraries

BENGALURU: The Karnataka government, on Thursday, expanded its partnership with the British Council to strengthen English learning and improve library services in rural areas through the state's Gram Panchayat 'Arivu Kendras' (Knowledge Centres).

Under the expanded collaboration, the number of British Council Library Corners in Gram Panchayat 'Arivu Kendras' will increase from 10 to 70, with 60 additional centres to be established across the state.

As part of the initiative, the British Council will provide 3,000 English children's books and extend free access to its digital library resources, enabling rural readers to access global knowledge platforms and curated English learning content.

The expanded partnership agreement was signed on Thursday under the chairmanship of the Karnataka Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Priyank Kharge and Deputy High Commissioner Chandru Iyyar.

The agreement was signed between Arundhathi Chandrasekhar, Commissioner of the Karnataka Panchayat Raj Commissionerate, and Janaka Pushpanathan, British Council Director of South India.

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

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DECCAN Chronicle
14 MARCH 2026

Amid LPG crisis, govt must be transparent

The West Asia war has created the biggest oil supply disruption in history. The choking of the Strait of Hormuz, a channel for about 20 per cent of the world's oil and natural gas supply to India, is a clever retaliatory move by Iran that was attacked by the United States and Israel. The blockade has not only sent the prices at the pump spiralling in the US and Europe but also set off panic among the people who are scrambling for cooking gas and panic-buying petrol and diesel.

Imagine Karnataka having to do without its favourite dosa, Tamil Nadu without idli and Hyderabad without biryani and, in this season, haleem. The gig industry revolving around supply of food is also hit as hard as the restaurateurs are struggling unable to get commercial gas cylinders.

The plight of hospitals, schools, and campus and community kitchens can well be imagined as the cries go out for LPG, leaving alone the fact that people dying at this time are also inconveniencing their kin and the system as crematories need gas as well. The government's simple assertion that there is no scarcity as stated by the petroleum minister in the Lok Sabha does very little to assuage the anxiety in people who are lining up in forlorn hope at cooking gas distribution depots carrying empty cylinders.

When clear communication needs to be backed up by visible action from centrally controlled distribution agencies of the nation's major oil and energy marketing companies, all we are being asked to do is to place blind faith in the government's statements and briefings at which the media cannot air questions and must depend on sterile handouts.

It is a fact that the government has asked the fuel refiners and marketing companies to prioritise LPG production by diverting propane and butane as they process crude

If the overall picture is one of high security of energy sources and storage, the government should be able to follow that up with demonstrable action to convince the people that they will get their cooking gas, maybe with some delays considering the hyped-up demand. But there is a huge divergence between the 2.5 days for supply that the government talks about and what the gas distribution companies and their often-unobtainable IVR systems state as an anticipated date of delivery.

It is a fact that the government has asked the fuel refiners and marketing companies to prioritise LPG production by diverting propane and butane as they process crude. Measures to tackle such emergencies as caused by war must be innovative but they cannot be touted as the panacea that will make a difference even if some of the people are behaving irrationally by panic-shopping as they may have done in the time of Covid pandemic too.

Can the agencies not be transparent about the status of domestic and commercial LPG cylinders bookings and keep customers informed of when the supply chain issues will be sorted and a reasonable timeframe be provided for distribution of cylinders?

Merely telling the Iranian President about the need to ensure the movement of goods and energy resources through the Strait of Hormuz is insufficient at a time when the ability to cause disruption has become a war weapon. And India's diplomacy has been constrained by not being able to speak freely on the original cause of the war that was initiated by the US and Israel against Iran. Nor was it sympathetic to a national leader being eliminated in a military attack, however distasteful his record in repressing his own people.

Bid on Farooq a wake-up call

An attempt to assassinate veteran National Conference leader and former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah outside a wedding venue in Jammu is a disturbing reminder of public safety in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

The 88-year-old leader, who is despised by pro-Pakistan leaders in Kashmir, escaped unharmed due to the response of security personnel and sheer luck rather than the robustness of the security arrangements.

Though Abdullah is a Z-plus protectee, one of the highest categories of security cover in India, the attacker — a 63-year-old man — managed to reach the veteran leader and fired at him from close range. Security officers and police swiftly brought the shooter under control, averting any additional danger.

Although the investigation to date suggests that the attacker had acted independently, this incident prompts a closer look at security readiness and a possible breach of security protocols. The inadequate police presence at a location hosting a Z-plus protectee underscores a failure in coordination between local law enforcement and the NSG.

After the attack, the National Security Guard has decided to conduct a comprehensive security audit of all Z-plus protectees. However, the NSG should also probe where the lapse occurred. If a lone person could breach NSG security, how safe would other Z-plus security holders, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi, home minister Amit Shah and Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, be?

Another aspect of this attack is worsening public discourse. If people harbour grievances for decades and believe that violence is an acceptable outlet, it indicates an erosion of democratic norms. Political disagreements must be expressed through accepted means and not through the barrel of a gun. The assassination attempt must serve as a wake-up call for the government to reassess security mechanisms and take steps to restore civility and restraint in public life.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

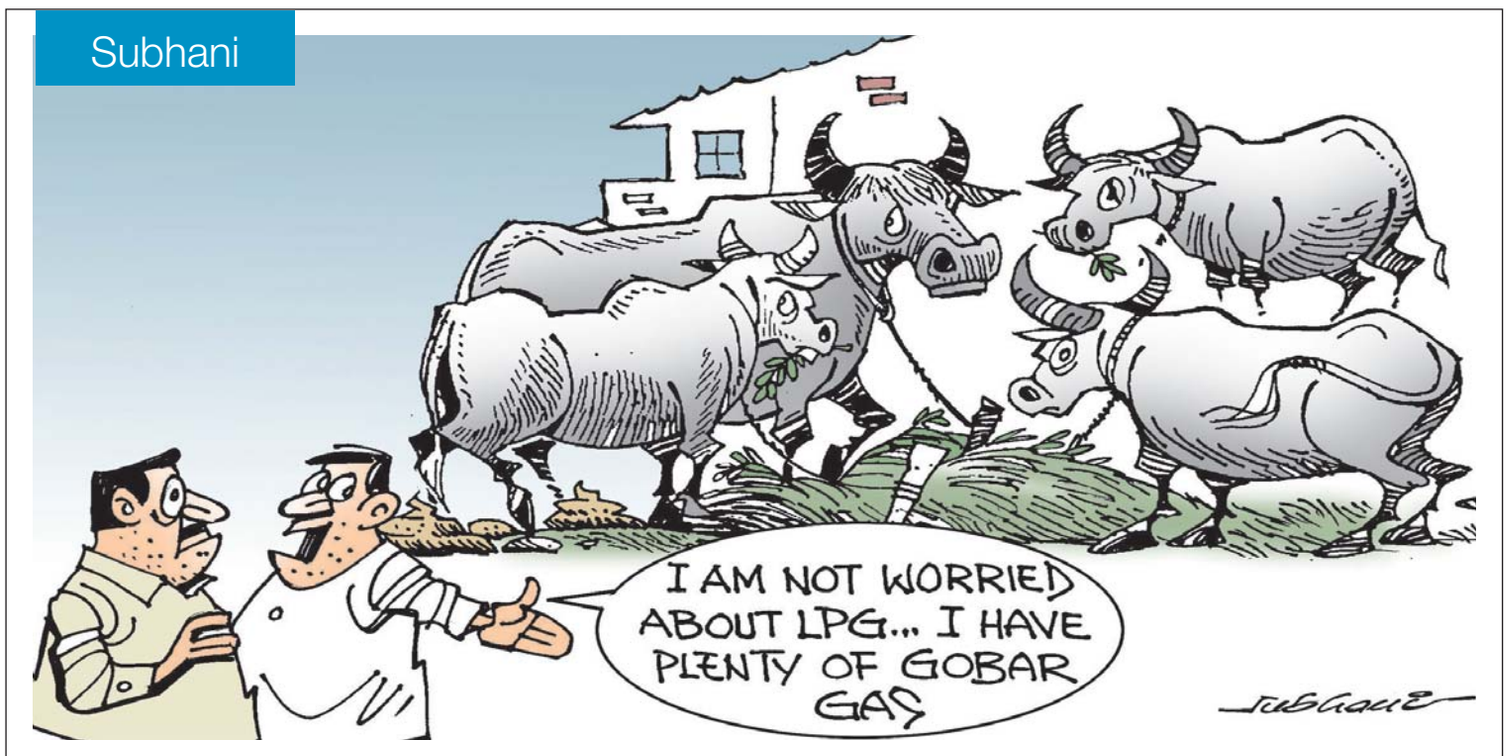
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Subhani



Can US-Israel & Iran find middle ground?



K.C. Singh

Just when US-Israel thought the Iranian retaliation was declining, Iran surprisingly escalated retaliation, and IRGC announced that the 'policy of reciprocal strikes has ended... . From now on, continuous strikes will be carried out'

The ongoing conflict between Iran and the United States-Israel combine is now impacting the entire world's economy. A debate, meanwhile, is raging over Washington's real objectives and when, if at all, they are achievable.

It appears that the decision to assassinate the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, rested on the very simplistic assumption that it would cause dissonance within the regime and a popular uprising. US President Donald Trump has been intermittently suggesting that, like in Venezuela, he should have a role in the choice of the next Iranian leadership. The US-Israel had also wrongly concluded, based on their experience after the June 2025 attack on Iran, that Tehran would be unwilling and unable to retaliate strongly. They thus expected Iran to rush to the negotiating table and accept a semblance of regime change.

As it turned out, Iran had prepared for these eventualities. Late Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as became apparent soon, had left behind a list of successors, not only for his own position, but also other important positions on the civilian and military sides. As early as March 2026, Iran had activated a "Decentralised Mosaic Defence" doctrine. This involved restructuring the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps into 31 autonomous units, and granting their commanders tactical independence. Iran already had advanced indigenous capability to produce drones, which it had been supplying to Russia for its Ukraine war. Additionally, Iran had upgraded their arsenal of missiles and stored them underground to escape expected aerial attacks.

Once the hostilities began, Iran simply followed its preconceived strategy. They tolerated the aerial attacks, depleting their Navy and Air Force assets. But they retaliated by using a combination of drones, in huge numbers, and missiles, stored in safe underground facilities. Their indigenous drones cost a fraction of the cost of missiles fired by Israel and the US to neutralise them. Moreover, beyond the first week, the defences of Israel, Gulf countries and the US faced the draining of their missile-defence assets. Consequently, the US has had to move parts of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) from South Korea to restock the fast-shrinking air defences in the Gulf and West Asia.

The world wonders when, if at all, a ceasefire can occur. Wars normally end in two ways. Either when one side faces defeat and accepts it; or both sides reach a point of exhaustion and realise that future gains are outweighed by ongoing losses. The US-Israel expected the first outcome, after assassinating the Iranian Supreme Leader and hammering Iran with unending waves of armed missiles.

Iran bore the attack's brunt and soon demonstrated its capacity to retaliate. That leaves only the second possibility. Ali Larijani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, posted on March 11 on social media that the "Strait of Hormuz will either be a strait of peace and prosperity for all or will be a strait of defeat and suffering for the warmongers". Iran calculates that disrupting the daily transportation of 20 million barrels through that strait would rattle economies globally, bringing pressure on the United States to seek a ceasefire.

President Trump's address to the nation earlier this week, on March 11, was expected to indicate if the ceasefire was close. He claimed that the war was going well for the US and they needed to finish what they started. The United States may now put boots on the ground, as history teaches that air operations alone have never achieved regime change.

The US could try to capture Iran's Kharg Island, the hub of Iranian oil exports. That could compel Iran to turn to the negotiating table, for a deal granting concessions to the US. Some sources maintain that the real US motive was never regime change. They wanted, like in Venezuela, a more compliant Iranian government, allowing indirect US control of Iranian oil assets. It can be argued that by capturing two countries with major oil reserves, the US could exert pressure on both Russia, an oil producer, and China, a major oil consumer.

Just when US-Israel thought the Iranian retaliation was declining, Iran surprisingly escalated retaliation, and the IRGC announced that the "policy of reciprocal strikes has ended... From now on, continuous strikes will be carried out".

Meanwhile, Iran announced that people should keep at least 1 km away from US-linked banks across the Middle East. This involves the expansion of targets to the financial institutions.

Robert Papa of the University of Chicago, on television, called it an "escalation trap". The impact on global markets of the slightest development in the Gulf area was demonstrated by a social media post of Chris Wright, American energy secretary. He said an oil tanker had been escorted through the Hormuz Strait by a US warship. The markets immediately rose, however, resuming their downward trend when the story proved false.

President Trump has a narrow window to test the usefulness of ground troops. He is due to reach China on March 31 for his much-anticipated summit with President Xi Jinping. It is quite unimaginable that Iran will not resist strongly. Going by US miscalculations so far about Iran's retaliatory capacity, the American troops may also face unforeseen hurdles. Late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein made that mistake by attacking Iran immediately after the 1979 revolution, thinking it was a divided and weakened nation.

India has been quietly restoring some balance to its position, which appeared heavily tilted towards the Israel-US combine when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was ill advised to visit Israel hours before they attacked Iran. India had to share the condemnation of US torpedoing of an Iranian naval ship, sailing back from an Indian naval exercise. India has rebalanced its stance by sheltering another Iranian ship.

For India, the interrupted supply of gas is a bigger challenge than that of oil, because the supply sources are less diversified. It also has immediate domestic implications as LPG is quite widely used for cooking. Iran is using its control of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz to court friends and punish antagonists. India reportedly may thus get some leeway. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has asserted that the war can end only if there is recognition of "Iran's legitimate rights, payment of reparations and firm international guarantees against future aggression". The United States and Israel too have some demands. Peace, however, requires some halfway point of concurrence.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkcsingh.

LETTERS

SPEAKER WINS

The Speaker winning the no-trust vote is a big joke (*Speaker prevails in vote but must win Oppn trust, March 13*). It is similar to a statement that the criminal must be honest in his statement. No Speaker can win the Opposition support.

Dr P. Karri
Vijayawada

CREATIVE VISION

The proposal to establish a Creative City in Amaravati bringing together AI, film production and digital content creation is a commendable initiative (*CM plans Creative City in Amaravati, March 13*). It can generate employment, attract global investment and position Amaravati as a hub of innovation. If implemented well, it will strengthen the regional economy. However, the government must back the plan with clear policies, strong infrastructure and skill-training programmes, while engaging startups, universities and creative professionals to ensure its success.

Raju Kolluru
Kakinada

EUTHANASIA

In a country like India, where life and death are often seen as the will of the almighty, the Supreme Court's verdict on passive euthanasia must be approached with caution (*A humane euthanasia verdict, March 13*). It should be considered only as a last resort when recovery is impossible and with the consent of family members and medical boards, strictly following legal procedures. Courts allowing withdrawal of life support for terminally ill patients may bring mental and financial relief to families.

Parthasarathy Mandadi
Tirupati

CHADHA'S LONE VOICE

It is deplorable that a Chartered Accountant-turned AAP MP from Punjab raises pertinent questions that keep the ruling BJP on its toes - from toll taxes despite road tax, telecom restrictions after prepaid expiry, poor facilities in government hospitals, and costly private treatment, to the lack of a recall system for elected representatives and doubts over the Election Commission's credibility with EVMs. Yet, he was suspended from the House, as the establishment appears to have no answers. Many see Chadha as a voice of the common man and hope he can help reshape India's future.

Dr T. Ramadas
Visakhapatnam

Email your letters to info@deccanmail.com, editor@deccanmail.com.

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



Of 'Sexploiters'; and how to help the sale of books on the Internet...

"He only began to count the cost
After all was lost.
He'd unchained the most precious pearl and tossed
It into the sea.
Does regret begin to descend?
Is it without end?
Or will both fate and fortune ever tend
To set him free?"
— From **Too Many, Khamenei**, by Bachchoo

Yes, writers want their books to sell, just as Popes want their prayers answered. A publisher friend tells me that the sales of books are negotiated now, not so much in bookshops but through the Internet.

My problem is that I don't know how to advertise or get my books reviewed on, say, Goodreads or ClickClock. I did some months ago use Facelift to tell all those on it that certain published titles of mine were available. I have no idea if putting their covers on this screen thing, as I was instructed to do, boosted sales.

The old saying is that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread". Contemporary technology has made it possible for hustlers and crooks to rush in where angels would be embarrassed to be seen.

One instance? My daughter Tir Dhondy is a TV presenter for the BBC, Channel 4 and other stations. She specialises in taking risks doing dangerous programmes — tracking and interviewing gangs of Rolex thieves, Las Vegas criminals, parcel thieves, Bitcoin launderers, etc. I could say she is an angel who rushes in where others would fear to tread? *(Enough family advertising — Ed... Just one more, yaar? — fd.)*

Recently, Tir went to the slums of Lagos to cover, for the Beeb, a phenomenon known as "Sexploitation". This entails criminal gangs setting up Internet communication with young men by pretending to be sexy young women. As the correspondence becomes intimate, they post nude pictures and ask the young men for compromising photographs in return. When they receive these, they threaten to publicise them to the young men's parents, friends, colleagues, etc, and demand sums of money to suspend this exposure. Blackest blackmail!

The documentary began with the suicide of one young man who took his life when he couldn't pay what the "sexploiters" demanded.

There we are: hustlers and criminals spot a gap in the contemporary "market" enabled today by technological development.

And so, to book sales... In the past weeks I have received insistent communications from four different communicants with female Christian names. These begin by over-the-top praise for and interest in one of my books — the first three for my latest translations of selections from the work of the Sufi poets, Rumi and Hafiz.

The latest communicant starts with three very positive and even extravagant reviews of *Hawk and Hyena*, my book about my twenty-year association and acquaintance with the serial killer Charles Sobhraj. These communicants all claim they are professional promoters of book sales through the Internet, and they so admire my work that they want to put their professional skills to significantly boost the sales of my books and consequently my royalties.

They don't begin by saying they will charge me for their work, but the first one, who volunteered to get a campaign going on the Internet for my Hafiz translations, outlined the steps she would take to increase the visibility of the book to readers. Then she wrote to say that her professional work would cost $600, snd I could pay that in two instalments, half before she began the serious promotion campaign.

There was a similar pattern from the other "promoters" quoting the fees they would charge, having attached favourable reviews from three or more people to their emails. Of course, all the reviews were flatteringly positive... hmmm!

They were different but, to me, had the odour of AI generated similarity.

I thought to myself that a professional book-promoter and reviewer certainly ought to be familiar with world literature, and I replied to the latest one saying I was sure she would require payment for her work, and I hoped she would "charge less than the Light Brigade". Her prompt reply asked who or what was "the Light Brigade". I said it was my attempt at a joke, but she was obviously unaware of one the most famous poems in the English language. Hmmm???

When I said I couldn't afford what each of them asked, they said they'd conferred with their CEO and asked what I could afford.

I said I'd only consider payment by results. In other words, I'd get sales figures of the title from my publishers and my royalty share from these, and then pay the promoters a generous percentage of the royalties No acceptance of this proposed fair deal yet!

What would positively boost the sales of *Hawk and Hyena* are two possible newsworthy developments or occurrences.

The first? Sobhraj has threatened to sue me. Not for the first time. Years ago, I wrote a work of fiction based on some facts of his life called *The Bikini Murders*. I didn't use his name, but all the reviewers caught on and the book became a bestseller. He then threatened on Indian TV to sue me, but as a convicted serial killer wouldn't succeed in any court.

Now he has threatened to sue again. If he does, it will be news and certainly boost the sales of *Hawk and Hyena*.

Secondly, Sobhraj suffers from a serious heart condition, and if Ahura Mazda, or the other one decides...

LIVE RICH
FINANCIAL Chronicle
VIJAYAWADA | SATURDAY | 14 MARCH 2026

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	74,563.92	-1.93
Nifty 50	23,151.10	-2.06
S&P 500*	6,670.78	-0.03
Dollar (₹)	92.21	0.18
Pound Sterling (₹)	123.50	0.015
Euro (₹)	106.54	-0.13
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	158,350▼1,921	-1.20
Brent crude ($/bbl)*	101.13	0.67
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.680	0.16
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.249	-0.024

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Promoters of Godrej Prop increase stake

Godrej Properties' promoters have increased their stake in the company by 5 per cent in FY26 through purchases of public shares worth ₹2,674 crore in open market, as they are bullish on growth prospects amid robust demand for residential properties. The promoters' group stake has increased to 51.67 per cent from 46.67 per cent. Promoters have bought shares at an average price of ₹1,775 per share.



India, US trade talks on track

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO & SANGEETHA G.
NEW DELHI/CHENNAI, MARCH 13

- **COMMERCE MINISTRY denied reports about a hold-off on bilateral engagement. It is denied that there is any hold-off in bilateral engagement and reiter-ated that the two sides remain engaged for a mutually beneficial trade agreement.**

Amid the reports of delay in bilateral engagement between India and the United States, the commerce ministry on Friday confirmed that both the counties remained engaged in discussions for a mutually beneficial bilateral trade agreement.

Chief negotiators of the two countries were scheduled to meet last month in Washington to finalise the legal text for the first phase of BTA, but it was agreed to be postponed following a decision of the US Supreme Court striking down tariffs of the American administration.

The ministry has denied reports about a hold-off on bilateral engagement. "It is denied that there is any hold-off in bilateral engagement. It is reiterated that the two sides remain engaged for a mutually beneficial trade agreement," the commerce ministry said.



The remarks came after the United States Trade Representative (USTR) on March 11 launched a fresh round of Section 301 trade investigations targeting policies and industrial practices of 16 economies, including India and China.

"Every country is watching how the overall scenario of tariffs is in the US. The chief negotiators of India and the US have spoken at least 4-5 times since this (West Asia) crisis, and virtual sessions are also happening. There is no breakdown of talks and discussions are on. However, signing of the agreement will only happen at an opportune time, because this agreement, is based on comparative advantage, preferential access to the US market," the official said.

Before the US Supreme Court ruling, the Trump administration had announced in a joint statement to reduce tariffs on India to 18 per cent from 50 per cent.

The tariffs at that time on India were among the lowest compared to its competitor nations, such as China, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Vietnam. At present, there are no reciprocal tariffs. The 10 per cent levies are for all countries for 150 days

"Key trading partners have developed production capacity untethered from the incentives of domestic and global demand. This excess capacity leads to, among others, overproduction and large or persistent trade surpluses," the USTR said.

According to Ajay Sahai, director general, Federation of Indian Export Organisations, the USTR's Section 301 investigation should not have any immediate impact on Indian exports.

Stock mkts in unabated freefall

Investors' ₹10.2 L-cr erode as Sensex, Nifty sink to 11-mth low, FPIs sell ₹10,716-cr equities

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD
MUMBAI, MARCH 13

Stock markets' downward trend continued with benchmarks Sensex and Nifty-50 falling by another two per cent on Friday and touching 11-mth low as crude oil futures traded above $100 per barrel.

Markets faced selling pressure from the start of the session due to domestic energy crisis mounting on oil and gas supply disruptions and no sign of US-Israel war against Iran stopping with Iran continuing blockade of Strait of Hormuz.

Market investors suffered wealth erosion of over ₹10.24 lakh crore as BSE's market value was down to ₹429.82 lakh crore after Sensex fell 1470.5 points or 1.93 per cent, sliding below 75,000-level after 11 months to settle at 74,563.92.

Nifty-50 fell 2.06 per cent or 488.05 points to 23,151. BSE mid 500 index down by 2.29 per cent. Nifty-50 saw a cumulative fall of nearly 8 per cent in March so far, the worst fall since pandemic in 2020, said analysts.

Since start of US-Israel war against Iran (Feb.28, 2026), investors market wealth is down by over ₹33.68 lakh crore.

Foreign portfolio investors net sold equities worth ₹10,716.64 cr, marking biggest single day selling by them. Domestic institutions were net buyers by ₹9,977.42 cr. FPIs have sold equities worth ₹52,704 cr in March so far, said NSDL data.

On Friday worst hit sectors included BSE metal, auto, oil and gas, bankex, consumer durables, IT and healthcare.

DEEP SLIDE

NIFTY-50 cumulative fall by nearly 8% in March so far is worst fall since Covid in 2020. It declines over 11% since start of the year.

MARKET INVESTORS suffered wealth erosion of over ₹10.24 L-cr as BSE's m-cap down to ₹429.82 L-cr.

SINCE START of Iran war (Feb. 28), investors market wealth down by over **₹33.68 L-cr**



Market faces selling pressure from start of the session due to domestic energy crisis mounting on oil and gas supply disruptions.

Weaker rupee against US dollar seem to be worrying foreign investors as Indian currency sank to a fresh record low

Indian equities have witnessed a sharp correction in 2026 amid heightened global volatility and uncertainties, leading to significant erosion in market value across segments.
— **SIDDHARTHA KHEMKA,** *head-Research, MOFS*

Rupee hits new low 92.48 vs dollar on war concerns

FALAKNAAZ SYED
MUMBAI, MARCH 13

The Indian rupee on Friday fell to a record low of 92.48 against the dollar as a surge in global crude oil prices amid heightened geopolitical tensions in the West Asia triggered a risk off move across emerging markets.

The dollar index strengthened above 100 levels while Brent oil rose to $102-levels. Concerns emerged that a prolonged war could disrupt the country's growth-inflation dynamics and widen the current account deficit.

Traders said that RBI was present near to 92.48 levels this afternoon ensuring the fall was not steep enough. It has been intervening intermittently in currency markets to smoothen volatility and prevent sharp depreciation.

The rupee weakened to 92.48 per dollar intraday compared to its previous all-time low of 92.35 hit on Thursday.

It closed at 92.45, down 0.7 per cent for the week and 29 paise weaker for the day.

LPG output up 30%, no shortage, says Govt

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
NEW DELHI, MARCH 13

Amid reports of shortage of LPG cylinders, the government on Friday said that LPG production is up by 30 percent. It appealed to all citizens not to panic and to refrain from the panic booking, said Sujata Sharma, joint secretary (marketing and oil refinery) at the ministry of petroleum and natural gas.

She said petrol and diesel supplies remain stable and available at all fuel stations. However, LPG is a concern since a major portion of the consumption comes from the Strait of Hormuz.

"Despite this, no dry out has been observed so far at any of our 25,000 distributors. India remains self-sufficient in production of petrol and diesel and LPG output is up by 30 percent and the country has a refining capacity of 258 million metric tons. All refineries in the country are operating at 100 percent capacity or higher and have adequate crude oil inventories," she said.

States have been asked to identify specific locations for the distribution of kerosene — specifically the additional allocation of 48,000 KL that the government has sanctioned, over and above the regular quota, she said.

Alternate fuel options are being activated to ease pressure on LPG and gas channels. Coal India has issued orders to ensure that coal is made available to small, medium, and other consumers. Oil marketing companies will check for hoarding.

Gas supplies partially resume to businesses

SANGEETHA G.
CHENNAI, MARCH 13

The government has announced a 20 per cent average monthly supply of LPG cylinders to commercial establishments. A significant number of hotels and restaurants were shut on Friday due to the ongoing LPG supply shortage.

"While this offers a glimmer of hope, the key concern remains how quickly this allocation translates into distribution. Moreover, the allocation may still be insufficient to sustain operational costs and meet the demand of the hospitality sector," said Pradeep Shetty, vice president of hotel industry body FHRAI.

GAMES

SHORT TAKES

Satwik & Chirag pull out of Swiss

Basel: Top-seeded Indian men's doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty pulled out of the Swiss Open here on Friday ahead of their quarterfinal clash after a shoulder issue troubled the former. Rankireddy and Shetty were scheduled to clash with Denmark's Christian Faust Kjaer and Rasmus Kjaer in the last-eight pairs stage of the Super 300 badminton tournament. The 25-year-old from Amalapuram, known for one of the fastest smashes in world badminton, has often struggled with his right shoulder. In 2023, Rankireddy set a Guinness World Record for the fastest smash in badminton, clocking 565 km/h. "It is an old injury, hopefully he can recover fast. This will take a week at least," Malaysian coach Tan Kim Her said. The injury is understood to be an overuse issue rather than a fresh trauma. The Indian pair had played a high-intensity 74-minute match on Thursday, prevailing 21-15 15-21 28-26 over Japan's Hiroki Okamura and Kyohei Yamashita in the pre-quarterfinals. — *PTI*

5 Indian boxers sure of medals

Bangkok: Five Indian boxers assured themselves of podium finishes at the World Boxing Futures Cup after a series of impressive quarterfinals wins here on Friday. India's medal hopes were strengthened with victories from Gunjan (48kg), Joyshree Devi (54kg), Ambekar Meetei (50kg), Chandrika Pujari (51kg) and Radhamani Longjam (57kg), all of whom advanced to the semifinals, thereby assuring the country five medals at the tournament. Gunjan secured a convincing 5-0 unanimous decision victory over Azerbaijan's Gular Huseynova, while Joyshree Devi produced a dominant display to defeat Japan's Yura Kanemaru by Referee Stopped Contest (RSC) in the first round. Ambekar Meetei also progressed with a 4-1 victory over Japan's Akira Uekubo in the men's 50kg category. The evening session saw two more Indian boxers advance. — *PTI*

Bengaluru back on ball

Bengaluru, March 13: The Karnataka State Cricket Association officials on Friday met the state government constituted Expert Committee, giving detailed presentation of the security enhancement works being carried out at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium ahead of the IPL.

The state government has recently green-lighted the conduct of IPL matches at the venue after months of uncertainty owing to the stampede on June 4, 2025.

Defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru will take on former champions Sunrisers Hyderabad here in the inaugural match of the IPL 2026 on March 28.

"We wish to inform you that the Expert Committee constituted by the Government of Karnataka held a meeting today with officials of the KSCA and Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) at the Karnataka State Cricket Association," said Vinay Mruthyunjaya, the official KSCA spokesperson.

Apart from the season's inaugural match, the RCB Unbox function and the opening ceremony are also scheduled to be held here.

"During the meeting, KSCA made a detailed presentation on the infrastructural upgradations/arrangements and safety measures undertaken at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, in line with the recommendations of the Expert Committee that are to be implemented under Phase-I of the compliance framework," he added.



A view of the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru, home of IPL champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

The RCB will play five home matches at the Chinnaswamy Stadium this season, while the remaining two will be staged at Raipur.

"Representatives of RCB and their associated operational agencies also presented their preparedness and operational plans for the smooth and orderly conduct of the upcoming IPL matches.

"The discussions were constructive and positive, and all stakeholders reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring that the matches can be conducted in a safe, well-regulated, and seamless manner," added Mruthyunjaya.

KNIGHT RIDERS ROPE IN ZIMBABWE'S BLESSING

Kolkata: Three-time champions Kolkata Knight Riders on Friday announced the signing of lanky Zimbabwe pacer Blessing Muzarabani ahead of the Indian Premier League season, with the fast bowler pulling out of the Pakistan Super League, which will run concurrently.

The right-arm pacer was among the prominent bowlers in the recently-concluded T20 World Cup, finishing as the joint third-highest wicket-taker with 13 scalps as Zimbabwe made it to the Super Eights stage.

"KKR have signed Zimbabwe fast bowler Blessing Muzarabani to join the squad for the upcoming Indian Premier League 2026 season. The 6 ft 8" right-arm quick has emerged as one of Zimbabwe's leading pace bowlers in the shortest format, known for his steep bounce and ability to strike in key phases of the innings," KKR said in a statement.

"Muzarabani brings significant T20 experience, having claimed over 90 T20 Internationals at an average of around 21, with best figures of 3/8. His pace and consistency across global leagues and international cricket add further depth to KKR's pace attack heading into the season."

The addition of Muzarabani to Kolkata Knight Riders' bowling ranks follows the exit of Bangladesh left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman, who was released last December. Muzarabani is expected to arrive in Kolkata on March 17. — *PTI*

PARA | ATHLETICS

Preeti asserts dominance with another gold

New Delhi, March 13: Double Paris Paralympics medallist Preeti Pal exploded off the blocks with unrelenting grit to storm to an emphatic victory in the women's 200 metres, her commanding run capping a spectacular campaign for India at the World Para Athletics Grand Prix here on Friday.

- **The hosts completed an overwhelming domination by amassing a staggering 208 medals, an unprecedented haul. Preeti was the toast of the final day of the World Para Athletics Grand Prix as she added to her 100m gold from the previous day by storming to victory in the 200m (T35-T37) with a commanding time of 30.26 seconds.**

The hosts completed an overwhelming domination by amassing a staggering 208 medals — an unprecedented haul partially due to relatively sparse international participation, with their supremacy reflected in 75 gold, 69 silver, and 64 bronze.

Preeti was the toast of the final day as she added to her 100m gold from the previous day by storming to victory in the 200m (T35-T37) with a commanding time of 30.26 seconds.

The 25-year-old from Meerut finished well ahead of Russia's Karina Machulskaia, who claimed silver in 32.22 seconds, while India's Bina Shambhubha rounded out the podium with bronze in 32.35 seconds.

Russia secured second place with 35 medals (15 gold, 14 silver, 6 bronze), while Bosnia and Herzegovina finished third with three medals (1 gold, 2 silver) in a field of eight teams, including the hosts.

"I narrowly missed the target I was aiming for at the Grand Prix by a microsecond. Overall, things are going well. In four days, I will be heading to the Nationals, and since this is the off-season, I am satisfied with my performance," said Preeti after clinching her second gold here.

"My personal best is 30.03 seconds, and in practice I have already clocked 29.6 seconds, which is encouraging. However, I noticed that I get tired as I approach the finish line, something that didn't happen before. I am currently working on improving that," she added.

India also dominated the men's Shot put F57, claiming all three medals. Shubham Juyal won gold with a throw of 14.45 metres, while Bhagat Singh secured silver with 13.29 metres and Priyans Kumar took bronze with 13.07 metres.

From a mark of 13.72m at last year's World Championships here to an improvement of 0.73m in just five months, Juyal's leap showcases not only his dedication but also the rising prowess of Indian Army para athletes.

In men's 200m T35, Vinay won gold with a time of 28.18 seconds, followed by Anubhav Choudhary with silver in 29.49 seconds, while Chui Yiu Bao of Hong Kong claimed bronze. — *PTI*

ALCARAZ EXACTS REVENGE; SVITOLINA STUNS SWIATEK

Indian Wells (USA), March 13: Carlos Alcaraz extended his unbeaten season and got revenge over Cameron Norrie on Thursday to reach the semi-finals at Indian Wells for a fifth straight year.

The world number one from Spain emerged from a see-saw battle with 29th-ranked Norrie with a 6-3, 6-4 victory.

He will meet Russian Daniil Medvedev, who pushed his own ATP winning streak to eight matches with a 6-1, 7-5 victory over defending champion Jack Draper.

World number two Jannik Sinner powered past Learner Tien 6-1, 6-2 to line up a semifinal with fourth-ranked Alexander Zverev, a 6-2, 6-3 winner over Arthur Fils.

Alcaraz, 22, became the youngest player to complete a career Grand Slam with his victory in the Australian Open and followed up with a title in Qatar.

He pushed his 2026 season record to 16-0 with the win over Norrie, who beat him in the Paris Masters in November.

On the women's side, Elina Svitolina sent two-time champion Iga Swiatek spinning out to line up a semifinal meeting with Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina.

Ninth-ranked Ukrainian Svitolina surged home to beat world number two Swiatek 6-2, 4-6, 6-4 while Rybakina thwarted Jessica Pegula's comeback bid in a 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) victory over the fifth-ranked American.

World number one Aryna Sabalenka kept her bid for a first title in the prestigious ATP and WTA Masters 1000 event on track, holding off Canadian teen Victoria Mboko 7-6 (7/0), 6-4.

The Belarusian star will face 14th-ranked Czech Linda Noskova, who ended the fairytale run of Australian qualifier Talia Gibson 6-2, 4-6, 6-2. — *AFP*

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The Statesman
Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Oil War

The expanding conflict involving Iran, Israel and the United States has already demonstrated a harsh reality about modern warfare: the most immediate battlefield is often the global economy. Within days of military strikes and retaliatory threats across West Asia, energy markets convulsed. Oil prices surged towards $120 a barrel before abruptly retreating below $90 after remarks by US President Donald Trump hinted that the campaign against Iran might not become a prolonged war, and key interventions by Saudi Arabia. Such dramatic swings are not merely the product of speculation. They reflect the extraordinary strategic importance of the Persian Gulf, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a fifth of the world's oil supply normally flows. When shipping through this narrow waterway slows or stops, the consequences ripple instantly across continents. Tankers hesitate to enter conflict zones. Insurance costs soar. Energy traders price in the risk of further disruption. The result is volatility that affects everything from petrol pumps in Atlanta to fertiliser markets in India and manufacturing costs in East Asia. Governments are scrambling to contain the shock. Finance ministers from the Group of Seven have discussed releasing emergency oil reserves coordinated by the International Energy Agency. A potential release of hundreds of millions of barrels would represent one of the largest interventions in energy markets since the Russia-Ukraine war disrupted global supplies in 2022. Yet even such a dramatic step would only cover a few days of global consumption. That stark arithmetic explains why markets remain anxious. Strategic stockpiles can calm panic temporarily, but they cannot replace sustained flows of crude from the Gulf. If Iran's energy infrastructure remains damaged or tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz continues to face threats, the global economy may be confronting the largest oil shock in modern history.

Political calculations in Washington are therefore colliding with economic realities. Mr Trump has repeatedly suggested that the campaign against Iran is nearing success, even as officials speak about expanded military operations and new bombing phases. Such mixed signals have unsettled markets but also reveal a deeper constraint: energy prices are among the few global indicators capable of rapidly reshaping domestic politics. In the United States, rising gasoline prices have long been a political danger for any President. With midterm elections approaching and inflation already a sensitive issue, sustained oil price spikes could weaken public support for the war effort and damage economic confidence. Yet the global consequences extend far beyond American politics. China, India, and South Korea remain among the largest buyers of Gulf energy exports, meaning that prolonged disruption would reverberate through Asian supply chains and global trade. Even if hostilities end quickly, the economic aftershocks will linger. Damaged infrastructure must be repaired, shipping routes restored and insurance markets stabilised. Wars can be halted by political decisions. Energy systems, however, recover far more slowly. That is why the real cost of this conflict will not be measured only in missiles and military targets, but in the fragile stability of the world's energy lifeline.

Strategic rejig

India's defence procurement strategy is undergoing a quiet but consequential transformation. For decades after independence, New Delhi's military arsenal bore the unmistakable imprint of Soviet and later Russian hardware ~ from fighter aircraft and tanks to submarines and missile systems. That era is steadily receding. What is emerging instead is a far more diversified network of suppliers, reflecting the geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century.

The shift is neither abrupt nor ideological. It is driven by hard strategic calculation. Russia was once India's most dependable defence partner, especially during the Cold War when Western countries were reluctant to arm New Delhi. Soviet platforms formed the backbone of the Indian Air Force and Army for generations. Yet the world that produced that relationship has changed profoundly. Two developments in particular have altered India's defence calculus. The first is Moscow's growing strategic proximity to Beijing. As China has become India's primary long-term security challenge ~ visible in repeated tensions along the Line of Actual Control ~ New Delhi can no longer rely exclusively on a supplier whose closest geopolitical partner is its principal rival.

The second factor is the changing nature of modern warfare. Contemporary battlefields depend increasingly on advanced electronics, precision targeting systems, network-centric warfare capabilities, and unmanned technologies. Countries such as France, Israel and the United States have emerged as leaders in these fields. Their growing presence in India's procurement portfolio reflects the demand for cutting-edge capabilities rather than any abrupt diplomatic realignment.

France, for instance, has become a major partner through the acquisition of Rafale fighter jets and deeper aerospace cooperation. Israel has steadily expanded its role in supplying sophisticated surveillance systems, drones, and missile technologies. Meanwhile, American platforms such as the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft strengthen India's capacity to monitor the Indian Ocean, a region of mounting strategic competition.

At the same time, New Delhi's ambitions extend beyond merely diversifying suppliers. The long-term objective is technological autonomy. Initiatives such as "Make in India" and the expansion of domestic defence manufacturing aim to reduce reliance on imports altogether. Indigenous projects ~ from the Tejas light combat aircraft to advanced missile systems developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation ~ reflect this aspiration, even if delays and capability gaps remain persistent challenges.

The regional environment reinforces the urgency of this transformation. Pakistan's military modernisation increasingly relies on Chinese platforms, while Beijing itself has dramatically expanded its indigenous defence industry. Against this backdrop, India must maintain credible deterrence across two contested fronts. Seen in this light, India's evolving procurement pattern is less a break with the past than a strategic rebalancing. Diversification reduces vulnerability, expands access to technology, and strengthens diplomatic flexibility. In an era of shifting alliances and uncertain supply chains, spreading risk may be the most prudent defence strategy of all.

The paradox of experience

This reliance on guest faculties is a plague that threatens the very core of educational quality. It fosters a culture of sycophancy, where young teachers must remain in the good graces of administrators just to keep their temporary jobs, stifling the critical thinking and dissent that are essential to a university environment. The government must recognize that the education sector cannot be run on a 'rental' model. The wisdom of the retired is valuable but it should be channeled through advisory roles or emeritus honors that do not occupy active teaching slots



The architectural integrity of any higher education system rests upon the stability of its teaching workforce. In recent years, a growing trend has emerged where universities and colleges increasingly rely on 'guest faculties' to fill the gaps left by vacant permanent positions. By definition, a guest faculty is a temporary educator engaged on a lecture-wise or monthly basis, theoretically brought in to provide specialized industry knowledge or to cover temporary surges in enrolment. However, what was intended as a flexible, supplementary arrangement has metastasized into a structural dependency. This shift is particularly contentious when it involves the systematic re-engagement of retired professors. While the impulse to respect and utilize the wisdom of veteran educators is good and intellectually sound, the practical fallout of this policy suggests a troubling disregard for the vitality of the next generation of scholars.

The situation in Odisha serves as a stark microcosm of this national crisis. Data reveals a staggering shortfall in the state's higher education workforce, with nearly 65 per cent of permanent teaching posts lying vacant across 17 state public universities. Out of approximately 2,003 sanctioned permanent positions, only about 782 are currently filled by regular faculty, leaving over 1,200 vacancies. To bridge this massive gap, the state has engaged nearly 1,000 guest faculty members across these universities alone. The reliance is even more pronounced in newly established or upgraded institutions; for instance, universities like Odisha State Open University and Vikram Dev University in Jeypore have often had to function with zero regular faculty members in core cadres, relying entirely on guest teachers and retired professors. This high-stakes 'patchwork' management highlights an urgent need for the state to transition from temporary fixes to sustainable, permanent recruitment.

Statistical trends across the global south and various developing economies indicate that the reliance on temporary teaching staff is no longer an anomaly but a standard operating procedure. In many state-run universities, guest and contractual faculties now comprise nearly 40 to 50 per cent of the total teaching strength.

According to recent educational census data, tens of thousands of qualified PhD holders are currently circulating through the system not as tenure-track professors, but as 'academic migrants' moving from one temporary contract to another. The sheer volume of these appointments masks a deeper crisis: the stagnation of permanent recruitment. When institutions choose to re-hire a retired professor rather than opening a fresh vacancy, they are not just filling a seat; they are effectively closing a door on a young aspirant who has spent a decade preparing for that specific role. The arguments in favor of engaging retired teachers often center on the 'wisdom gap.' Proponents suggest that a professor with thirty years of experience brings a level of pedagogical mastery and institutional memory that a newcomer cannot replicate. There is also a fiscal argument, as re-engaging retirees often involves a fixed honorarium that is significantly lower than the full salary and benefits package required for a permanent new hire.

From an administrative lens, this is seen as 'efficiency.' Furthermore, in niche scientific fields or ancient languages, there may genuinely be a dearth of qualified young experts, making the veteran's presence a necessity for the survival of the department. These 'pros,' however, are largely short-term fixes for long-term systemic problems. They prioritize immediate budget balancing over the health of the academic ecosystem.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a clear, albeit challenging, roadmap for addressing these structural imbalances. It explicitly recommends that the harmful practice of hiring 'para-teachers' or those on short-term contracts must eventually be phased out to ensure that teachers are deeply invested in their communities and institutions. The policy envisions a move toward a permanent, tenure-track system where faculty is recruited through a rigorous, merit-based process.

While the NEP 2020 does suggest creating databases of retired scientists and educators to act as mentors or 'specialized instructors' for local knowledge, it emphasises that these roles should be supplementary. The core mandate remains the revitalization of the teaching profession by filling vacancies in a time-bound manner and ensuring that the 'brightest and best' are incentivized to enter the field through job security and a clear path for career progression.



BHASKAR NATH BISWAL

The writer is a former College Principal and founder of Supporting Shoulders

The 'cons' of this practice are far more systemic and devastating. The most immediate impact is the creation of a demographic bottleneck. When the top tier of the profession refuses to vacate their positions or is invited back immediately after retirement, the natural flow of the profession is interrupted. For every retired faculty member who returns to the lectern, a young scholar with a fresh PhD and contemporary research insights is pushed into the 'gig economy' of academia.

This creates a disillusioned class of young intellectuals who feel the system has betrayed them. If the brightest minds see that the path to a stable career is blocked by those who have already completed their tenure, they will inevitably turn away from teaching. We are currently witnessing a 'brain drain' where potential world-class educators are migrating to corporate sectors or foreign universities, not because they lack passion for teaching but because they cannot survive on the crumbs of the guest faculty system.

Furthermore, the quality of education suffers under the guest faculty model due to the lack of emotional and professional investment. A youngster appointed as a guest faculty member lives in a state of perpetual precariousness. They are often paid per lecture, sometimes at rates lower than unskilled manual labor and lack access to health insurance, research grants or even a dedicated office space. It is intellectually dishonest to expect teachers to 'teach whole-heartedly' when they are worried about whether their contract will be renewed next month. Teaching is not merely the delivery of content; it requires mentorship, research guidance and participation in the university's growth. A guest faculty member, treated as a disposable resource, is rarely motivated to go beyond the syllabus. They become 'academic delivery agents' rather than educators, and the students are the ultimate losers in this transaction.

This reliance on guest faculties is a plague that threatens the very core of educational quality. It fosters a culture of sycophancy, where young teachers must remain in the good graces of administrators just to keep their temporary jobs, stifling the critical thinking and dissent that are essential to a university environment.

The government must recognize that the education sector cannot be run on a 'rental' model. The wisdom of the retired is valuable but it should be channeled through advisory roles or emeritus honors that do not occupy active teaching slots. The priority must shift toward the massive recruitment of permanent, full-time faculty who can build careers, conduct long-term research and provide the stability that students need.

To conclude, the current trajectory of engaging retired faculty and temporary guest lecturers is a self-defeating strategy. It might save a few pennies in the annual budget, but it is bankrupting the future of the nation's intellectual capital. The government must take a decisive stand to withdraw the systemic reliance on guest faculties and instead invest in robust, transparent and regular recruitment cycles for young teachers. Respect for the elderly should not translate into the disenfranchisement of the young.

A healthy education system requires the energy, digital fluency and fresh perspectives of the youth just as much as it requires the guidance of the past. If we do not act now to professionalize the entry-level teaching cadres and provide them with certainty and dignity, we will find ourselves with plenty of classrooms but no one left who is truly inspired to lead them.

Việt Nam News

Expectations grow for improved law making in 16th National Assembly

The 15th National Assembly (2021–26 term) operated through the historic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Viet Nam endured prolonged lockdowns and social distancing but still worked to stabilise society and revive the economy, according to a US-based lawyer. Speaking to the Vietnam News Agency (VNA)'s correspondent in the US ahead of the election of deputies to the 16th NA and People's Councils at all levels for the 2026–31 term, lawyer Đặng Chiến Thắng, a registered legal adviser in Washington DC, said legislative activities of the 15th NA had been maintained effectively during its term, with 51 laws and dozens of legally-normative resolutions adopted.

These legal documents have largely institutionalised Viet Nam's key policy areas, ranging from national defence and security, justice, civil affairs and economic development to issues related to human rights, including education, healthcare and the handling of complaints and denunciations.

In addition, the recently adopted laws have addressed emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence, high technology, digital transformation and international financial centre, providing a legal foundation for Viet Nam to keep pace with global trends, strengthen international competitiveness and improve the quality of its human resources. Thắng noted that while it is still early to fully assess the effectiveness and stability of laws governing these new sectors, the important point is that Viet Nam has begun establishing the necessary legal frameworks.

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Adjustments and amendments in the future will be inevitable to ensure each law aligns with practical conditions, he said, adding that such revisions will be feasible once a sound legal foundation is in place. During its working agenda, the 15th NA also addressed immediate governance challenges, including institutional bottlenecks affecting major urban centres, while setting medium-term development targets through the approval of key national projects and maintaining a long-term vision via national target programmes such as new-style rural development and sustainable poverty reduction. With 51 laws and 31 resolutions adopted, the 15th NA's legislative efforts have been substantial, Thắng said, although some issues related to universality and applicability remain in certain individual laws.

Looking ahead to the 16th NA, Thắng suggested that further improvements to the legal framework supporting the private sector's development should be prioritised. The orientation of building a 'prosperous people and a strong nation' through the private economic sector's growth is both appropriate and inevitable, he noted, though it also presents challenges for lawmakers. He also highlighted the issue of transferring the exploitation and use of publicly owned resources to the private sector.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Disturbing

Sir, The sight of people once again standing in long queues for LPG cylinders is deeply concerning. For many citizens, it brings back memories of the difficult days during the 2016 demonetisation, when ordinary people had to spend hours in lines merely to access their own money. Such recurring situations raise serious questions about the effectiveness and sensitivity of decision-making within our political system.

In a country as large and diverse as India, governance requires careful planning, foresight and informed policymaking. When decisions are taken without fully considering their practical impact on citizens, the hardships are borne largely by the common people, who are left struggling with shortages, delays and uncertainty. A nation truly progresses when its leadership is guided by knowledge, vision and a deep understanding of public policy. However, when politics becomes dominated by emotional narratives, religious divisions or short-term populist measures, long-term governance often suffers. India is home to immensely talented and capable people who have excelled globally in science, technology, business and agriculture.

Our political leadership should reflect the same level of competence and awareness, ensuring policies that are thoughtful, practical and centred on the welfare of citizens.

Yours, etc., VANDANA,
Chandigarh, 12 March.

Convincing

Sir, Apropos "Leadership Gender Gap" (March 10), the article makes a compelling case without overstating it. The examples drawn from India's own villages are particularly convincing. Women sarpanches shutting down liquor shops, councillors abolishing widow-shaming rituals ~ these are not symbolic gestures. They are concrete governance outcomes that improve lives.

The global examples of Merkel, Ardern and Indira Gandhi are well known, but it is the local examples that deserve more attention. The journey from gram sabha to Parliament is possible, as Droupadi Murmu's own story shows. What is needed is sustained mentorship, better access to campaign funding and communities that actively encourage women to contest rather than merely support from the sidelines. The 33 per cent reservation in the Lok Sabha is a step, but reservation alone does not build confidence or capacity. That requires deliberate, consistent effort at every level, starting well before election season arrives.

Yours, etc., S M Jeeva,
Chennai, 10 March.

Iranian ship

Sir, Apropos your editorial "Naval Ripples" (11 March), the recent sinking of an Iranian frigate near Sri Lanka highlights how rapidly global conflicts can affect India's immediate maritime environment. Although the incident occurred outside India's jurisdiction, its geopolitical implications are significant.

India has worked hard to project itself as a stabilising maritime power in the Indian Ocean through initiatives such as multilateral naval exercises and regional cooperation. However, this episode demonstrates the limits of such influence when major global powers engage in direct conflict. It also complicates India's delicate diplomatic balancing act between the United States and Iran, both important partners in different ways. India's restrained response reflects maturity, yet the event serves as a reminder that strengthening maritime security, diplomatic engagement, and regional coordination will be essential to safeguard stability in its strategic neighbourhood.

Yours, etc., A C Vineeth Kumar,
Thrissur, 12 March.

SATURDAY INTERVIEW

'Tech sovereignty is an imperative'

Shashi Shekhar Vempati, Padma Shri, and former CEO of Prasar Bharti, is a prominent Indian media and technology leader known for his work at the intersection of public broadcasting, digital media, and policy.

He served as the CEO of Prasar Bharati, India's public service broadcaster, where he led major reforms to modernise Doordarshan and All India Radio through digital transformation, platform expansion, and greater transparency in governance.

Before joining Prasar Bharati, Vempati, Co-founder, AI4India, held senior leadership roles in the technology sector. Beyond his corporate and entrepreneurial work, Vempati has emerged as a prominent voice in India's digital policy and Artificial Intelligence (AI) ecosystem. He has been closely associated with Government bodies and public initiatives such as AI4India, where he has contributed to shaping conversations around responsible, inclusive and sovereign AI.

In an exclusive interview with Nikhil Vyas, Vempati spoke about Artificial Intelligence and the AI4India report.

Excerpts:

Q: Your AI4India report on the Future of Employability in the Age of AI argues that AI is not just a technology shift but a workforce reset. From the research and expert conversations behind the report, what do you see as the single biggest risk if India delays action today?

A: The single biggest risk is a deep structural divide between elite institutions where students have better access to latest models and tools, powerful computational infrastructure and have been mentored and guided on effective use of AI to build their skills and portfolio for the job market as opposed to colleges and universities within tier-2/tier-3 towns/cities where students have a shallow exposure to AI, limited access to computing infrastructure and have very poor understanding of the kind of skills and experience that the industry needs. It is urgent and important to bridge this gap through policy and institutional interventions in a mission mode.

Q: One of the report's key insights is that while access to AI tools is expanding rapidly, real capability building is lagging. What fundamental changes are needed in India's education and skilling systems to move from surface-level AI usage to deep competence?

A: In order to develop deep competence several changes are needed. The first and foremost is better access to compute and the latest models/tools. The second is availability of publicly accessible datasets that can be used for model development, training, prototyping, etc. The third would be exposure to real world problems from the industry that can better acquaint the students with the domain and mentorship that can ground them with a deeper understanding of the context within which AI adoption is occurring within these industries. There needs to be a concerted effort across industries and regions to build linkages between students and the industry through Internships and Mentoring programs. Lastly, it is essential to redesign curriculum at both school level and college level to encourage making and building, experiential learning while breaking away from the linear modes of teaching/testing constrained by textbooks.

Q: There is growing anxiety around AI replacing entry-level jobs. Based on AI4India's findings, how should young professionals in India rethink career paths in a world where AI compresses workflows rather than eliminating roles outright?

A: The mode and manner in which AI will likely impact different industries will vary. While there is no single mantra to a career path, the following traits should hold young professionals in good stead to weather the rapid change and the turbulence associated with it. Firstly learnability – it is important to keep learning and hone the ability to learn new tools, methods, skills etc. Learning cannot stop and has to be a lifelong pursuit.

Secondly, deep domain knowledge. While AI impacts different domains differently, most of the current AI systems lack deep domain knowledge. To stay ahead of the algorithms and models it is important to blend a deep understanding of the chosen domain with experiential knowledge. This will ensure a human edge over AI.

The third trait is rather counterintuitive to the second - lateral thinking and the ability to connect dots across diverse domains.

The fourth is developing one or more fallback skills that can help ride out turbulence in the job market by taking up gigs to ensure one or more streams of income during economically uncertain times.

The last is developing leadership skills around entrepreneurial thinking, risk management and communication. As the Prime Minister says - be a job creator, don't just remain a job seeker - it is important for young professionals to think of agile and flexible career pathways beyond linear and predictable corporate progression ladders.

Q: You have been a strong advocate for sovereign AI. Why is it critical for India to build sovereignty not just at the application layer, but across data, models, compute, and platforms?

A: The multiple crises of the first half of this decade hold several geo-political lessons. A once in a hundred-year pandemic exposed the fragility of global supply chains. Recent conflicts, both military and trade, have shown how globalisation is under threat and how big-tech platforms can impinge on sovereignty. As the world's largest democracy, India cannot wait for the next major crisis to wake up to the need for sovereignty across layers.

Unlike previous waves of technology, the AI wave is exponential in its advancements, thus likely to result in a wide and unbridgeable gulf between nations. As the world's largest democracy and one of the top economies by the end of the decade, Technology Sovereignty to India is not a choice but it is a strategic imperative.

Q: Many countries are investing heavily in AI but remain dependent on a few global technology providers. What does true AI sovereignty look like for India, and how can we avoid becoming a downstream consumer economy in the AI era?

A: It is a fact that the global technology landscape is dominated by a few large technology providers from chips to platforms. Even the processes for fabricating chips require specialised equipment that are proprietary to a couple of technology firms, while globally the semiconductor supply chain is concentrated within a couple of countries carrying significant geopolitical risks. True sovereignty to India would be flexibility across layers to make strategic choices that minimise geopolitical risk while allowing India to build national capabilities and ensuring Indian industries and start-ups remain competitive.

Q: India has produced world-class AI talent that often builds foundational technology in the West. What concrete policy, institutional, and ecosystem changes are required to bring this talent back and give them reasons to build in India?

A: A focused effort to re-engage technology talent across the Indian Diaspora can help accelerate India's journey to technology sovereignty. While engagement of tech talent from the diaspora by corporates is being done at market competitive levels of compensation, there are several hurdles faced by the non-corporate sector. This would require a targeted set of interventions that facilitate talent engagement by academia and focused research organisations from scale of funding specifically for such hiring, flexible policies in offering market competitive compensation and single window facilities to facilitate smooth relocation and settlement. With the RDI Fund being rolled out, a sustained focus on ease of business for startups and first-time entrepreneurs would also help encourage the 'ghar wapsi' of India's technology talent to nurse their entrepreneurial ambitions in India.

Q: The AI4India report stresses that AI literacy must become a baseline skill, not a specialized one. How should AI literacy be integrated across schools, colleges, and vocational training without turning it into a narrow coding exercise?

A: Integrating AI into the classroom will require a cultural shift within the teaching community both for teaching AI and for teaching with AI. It is important to coach and mentor teachers to raise the quality and consistency of teaching to specific benchmarks where the power of AI can be harnessed to the fullest. This has been evident across domains as diverse as sports to competitive exams such as JEE and UPSC. The quality of coaching and coaching sophistication matters if our youth are to be globally competitive.

Q: There is a sharp divide between elite institutions and the rest of India's education ecosystem in AI readiness. What scalable interventions can help Tier 2 and Tier 3 institutions participate meaningfully in India's AI growth story?



A: A parallel effort should be focused on Institutional capacity building and Institutional excellence. The lessons and best practices from the elite institutions must trickle down into the broader academic world through focused interventions.

Q: Employers increasingly value adaptability, judgment, and problem framing over traditional degrees. How should industry and academia realign assessment, hiring, and curriculum design to reflect the realities highlighted in the report?

A: As highlighted previously, going beyond sequential learning in classrooms and breaking free textbooks and emphasis on experiential learning, real world case studies and projects, industry internships and mentorship will go a long way in realising this.

Q: India has successfully built digital public infrastructure like Aadhaar and UPI. How can a similar public-interest approach to AI help ensure that productivity gains translate into broad-based employment, inclusion, and national resilience?

A: India awaits a UPI-like moment with AI where technology barriers have been broken and the fruits of technology extend to all layers of the socio-economic strata. This would require an innovative approach unique to India architecture that takes AI to edge devices, creatively harnesses the power of resilient and secure technologies such as D2M to push datasets and models to the edge, and innovative use cases that break language barriers and are able to converse and transact with citizens across every region of India through interfaces that are most natural and comfortable to them.

Forward bases may become America's Achilles' heel

NEHA KUMAR

Recent Iranian retaliatory actions targeting U.S. military installations in the Middle East have raised a critical question – whether US military bases still enhance the military power of the country or are becoming a strategic liability?

The United States currently maintains approximately 750 military bases worldwide which shows the largest overseas deployment in the world. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional isolationist policy of the US, considering that the country's first president, George Washington, famously warned against permanent entanglements in foreign conflicts. In his farewell address, he advised that the United States should "steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." For much of its early history, the United States broadly followed this cautious approach.

However, the geopolitical landscape changed dramatically after World War II and the world witnessed the onset of the Cold War. Confronted with the expansion of the Soviet Union, Washington constructed a vast network of alliances and overseas bases designed to deter adversaries and project military power across strategic regions. These bases became the backbone of American global strategy, strengthening conventional and nuclear deterrence while reassuring allies of Washington's commitment to their security.

Today, maintaining this global network comes at a significant cost. The United States spends approximately $55 billion annually to sustain overseas military bases, which is about one-twelfth of its defense budget. Yet Washington continues to invest in these installations because they serve several key strategic functions. Forward bases allow the United States to rapidly deploy forces, support allies during crises, and maintain a visible security presence in volatile regions such as the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

For decades, this strategy appeared highly effective. The presence of U.S. forces on foreign soil reassured allies and strengthened the credibility of American extended deterrence. It also allowed the United States to respond swiftly to emerging conflicts without the need for lengthy mobilization.

However, recent developments suggest that the strategic environment is changing in ways that challenge the traditional logic of forward deployments. Advances in precision missile technology as well as emergence of drone warfare have dramatically increased the vulnerability of fixed military installations. Bases that once symbolized American power are now increasingly exposed as targets.

The Middle East illustrates this emerging dilemma. Iran possesses one of the largest ballistic missile arsenals in the region, including multiple types of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) capable of striking U.S. facilities across the region. Many of these missiles rely on solid-fuel technology, allowing them to be stored for long periods and launched with minimal preparation time. Such capabilities significantly reduce warning time and complicate defensive responses. Moreover, U.S. bases are no longer threatened solely by state adversaries. Non-state actors, including militia groups armed with drones and rockets, have repeatedly targeted American facilities in the region. This evolving threat environment raises an uncomfortable question: Are forward bases still a source of deterrence, or have they become convenient targets that invite escalation?

The challenge is not merely operational but strategic. Fixed bases built for the Cold War era were designed to deter large conventional conflicts between major powers. Yet modern warfare increasingly relies on precision strikes, drones, and missile systems that can neutralize large installations without direct confrontation. In this context, the very infrastructure intended to project stability may inadvertently increase regional tensions and vulnerability.

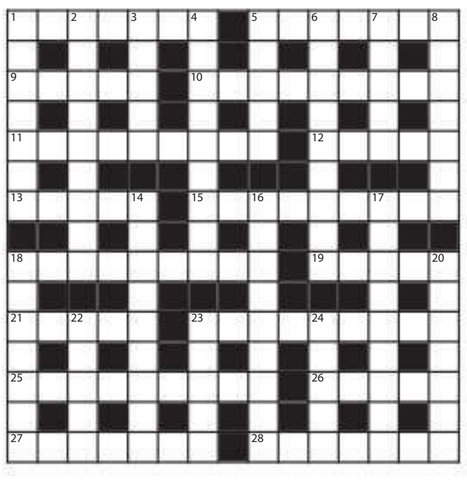
None of this suggests that overseas bases have lost their strategic value entirely. They remain vital for alliance management, intelligence coordination, and rapid military response. However, the changing character of warfare demands a fundamental reassessment of how these bases are structured, protected, and deployed.

Instead of relying on large, concentrated installations, the United States may need to adopt more flexible and dispersed force structures, invest in advanced missile defense systems, and develop mobile deployment capabilities that reduce vulnerability to precision strikes. It is important to combine all these with the hardened military systems to protect all kind of military assets. In short, the era of static military dominance may be giving way to a new era of distributed and resilient military presence.

The debate over overseas bases is therefore not simply about costs or alliances. It is about whether the United States is prepared to adapt its global military posture to a rapidly evolving technological and strategic environment. If Washington continues to rely on Cold War–era deployment models in an age of precision warfare, its most visible symbols of power could increasingly become its most exposed vulnerabilities.

(The writer is Associate Professor & Head, Department of Liberal Arts & Humanities Chandigarh University.)

Crossword | No. 293403



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

F	O	R	C	E	S	■	N	O	T	I	M	E	T	O
A	■	E	■	S	■	F	■	N	■	S	■	R	■	S
T	E	L	E	S	C	O	P	E	■	O	P	I	U	M
C	■	A	■	E	■	R	■	O	■	L	■	T	■	O
A	N	Y	■	N	E	W	S	F	L	A	S	H	E	S
T	■	R	■	■	■	A	■	T	■	T	■	■	■	I
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S	P	E	C	I	A	L	■	S	I	N	C	E	R	E
E	■	■	■	E	■	O	■	E	■	■	■	R	■	G
T	R	A	N	S	P	O	N	D	E	R	■	S	A	G
T	■	D	■	T	■	K	■	A	■	E	■	I	■	H
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D	R	E	S	S	A	G	E	■	B	E	L	T	E	D

ACROSS

1 Books from dump missing covers and devoured by rodents (7)
5 Arab revolutionary claims it s difficult to get job (7)
9 One following strict diet, say, squeezed into vehicle (5)
10 A dog tears around rock (9)
11 Demolish theatre in very poor quarter (9)
12 Refined sweetheart taking year off before degree (5)
13 Playwright scoffs behind enemy s back (5)
15 Motor originally bought by relative is a gem (9)
18 Cracks about clergyman meeting clowns (9)
19 Top 40 on the radio (5)
21 English musketeer lacks a moral code (5)
23 Predecessors hog markets for Spooner (9)
25 Enticed unfit to embrace exercise bug (9)
26 Call up First Lady about Oklahoma (5)
27 Itinerant almost steals King Tut s head ornament (7)
28 Alcoholic has fling with Mary Jane (7)

DOWN

1 Victors guarding island in an indolent manner, clearly (7)
2 Write rules and pin one above blackboard (9)
3 Institute providing support for fellow with a mental condition (5)
4 Gladiator fights nursing a cut, amazingly (9)
5 Burglars initially lie about fire (5)
6 Anger about commotion outside hotel s American bar (9)
7 Some knit a scarf, having spun material (5)
8 Prune tips of azalea bush on hilltop (7)
14 Friends rolled joint in perverse kind of comedy (9)
16 Making a comeback, ruler takes second Sumerian city (9)
17 Euphoric old hack is drunk in supermarket (4-1-4)
18 Queen enters church toilet with extremely unkempt hairstyle (7)
20 Most sumptuous female consumed by desire (7)
22 Government department defends article on international capital (5)
23 Swift measures blocked by Left (5)
24 Make cross hand gesture (5)

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 14 March 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Elsewhere we have dealt with the main question raised by Mr. Jinnah's motion in the Assembly. That resolution was defeated by 47 votes to 31, which gives 'a very good notion of the strength in the lobby that Mr. Jinnah can command. In a welcome speech in the course of the debate Mr. Baptista was complimentary to the non-official European members, whose presence he welcomed. That small band may feel gratitude for the throwing of even one bouquet. As Colonel Crawford said the frequent allusions in Indian speeches to the non-officials as a group of "thieves, robbers, and blackguards" are thoroughly well understood not to be serious by the men to whom they are applied. This mode of speech is only "pretty Fanny's way." While that is true of those who are in close touch with the atmosphere of the Assembly, it would be well if the Indian members who use these terms playfully enough realised that they are sometimes taken very seriously by Europeans generally.

News Items

ELECTRICITY SUPPLY

NATIONALIZATION PLANS IN NEW BILL

LONDON, MAR.

THE Bill containing the Government's scheme for the reorganization of the supply of electricity on a national basis is published.

Its main feature is the establishment of a Central Electricity Board to control selected generating stations which will be operated by the present owners; to construct the necessary interconnexion lines; and to deal with wholesale supplies. But the Board, except in case of necessity, will not generate electricity itself.

It is estimated that eventually 400 existing generating stations will be closed, or otherwise utilized.

It is proposed that the Central Electricity Board should consist of a chairman and seven other nominees of the Minister of Transport. It will be authorized to borrow £33.5 million.— Reuter.

BUDGET FORECAST

CHANCELLOR TO FIND 800 MILLIONS

(BRITISH OFFICIAL WIRELESS.)
RUGBY, MAR.

Now that the Army estimates and those of the Civil Service are published and the terms of the Economy Bill have been made known, it is possible to forecast the probable amount for which the Chancellor of the Exchequer will find it necessary to provide in his next budget.

The total Supply Services—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Civil Service, Customs (Excise and Revenue) and the Post Office—are estimated to cost just over £417,000,000. The Consolidated Fund Services last year involved an expenditure of nearly £392,000,000 but the newspapers anticipate that this amount may be slightly reduced in the coming year by cutting down the amount payable to the Road Fund. It is, however, considered unlikely that the grand total for which the Chancellor will have to budget will fall much below.

EVE & THE SERPENT

DUTCH SYNOD'S DISPUTE WITH PASTOR

AMSTERDAM, MAR

A LITERAL interpretation of the second and third chapters of Genesis is unjust," complains Pastor Geelkeren, replying to the Synod's ultimatum that he, should sign his belief, inter alia, that the conversation between Eve and the Serpent really happened.

Pastor Geelkeren points out that such an interpretation makes the authority of Holy Writ subject to the decision of a church meeting, and he asks the Synod to arrange a full discussion of the questions arising from the "Reformed Interpretation of Holy Writ."

The Synod has declined to accept Pastor Geelkeren's reservations, and demands immediate and unconditional signature.

Pastor Geelkeren has reiterated the impossibility of subscribing to a decision which excludes legitimate freedom of judgment.

The Synod is now considering depriving him of his pastorate.—Reuter.

ESTD -1928
QUALITY @ VALUE
The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Crumbling UN credibility in Gulf

The adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2817 is a study in selective memory and institutional impotence. While 135 nations may have lent their names to a document condemning Iranian retaliation, the resolution's primary achievement is highlighting the United Nations' total irrelevance as an arbiter of global peace. By focusing on the reaction while ignoring the provocation, the Council has effectively become a cheerleader for the original aggressor. On February 28, the world watched as a blatant, wanton, and deliberate military strike was launched against a nation that was actively engaged in the delicate art of diplomacy. This was not a state in isolation but one on the verge of a breakthrough. According to the credible account of the Omani interlocutor, Mohammed Al-Hassan, a comprehensive deal was not just a hope but a reality within reach. Al-Hassan was clear: "We were inches from a final signature that would have secured regional stability for a generation." That bridge was not just burnt; it was bombed.

> *Until the UN can address the root of the aggression rather than the symptoms of the response, it remains a relic of an era it can no longer protect.*

The irony of the Council's "outrage" over regional instability is particularly sharp when one considers the landscape of the Persian Gulf. It is the very states now seeking UN protection that have allowed US military bases to mushroom around Iran's borders, transforming the region into a permanent theatre of war. These are not charity hospitals or humanitarian outposts; they are the brawn and muscle of a hegemonistic power. From the permafrost of Greenland to the canal of Panama, these outposts serve a neocolonial agenda that threatens all nations within its idiosyncratic scope.

Under the current administration, Washington has abandoned even the pretence of even-handedness. Yet, President Trump continues to assert his status as a man of peace. Such claims fly in the face of the 72,000 verified deaths in Gaza and the naked "oil-grabbing" policies directed at Venezuela. Most galling is the steadfast refusal to acknowledge that it was American Tomahawks that struck civilian targets, including schools, in the initial February 28 assault. Ironically, the very chidren his policies could have given hope were killed en masse by American Tomahawks. Any nation associating itself with this one-sided distortion and a travesty of a resolution brings a deep shame to its citizens. The international community's priority should not be waving a star-spangled banner blotched with the blood of children and the debris of broken treaties. Instead, the urgent task is to reign in an American president who has run amok, alongside his partner in war crimes in Israel, and work to bring this to a halt. Until the UN can address the root of the aggression rather than the symptoms of the response, it remains a relic of an era it can no longer protect.

Dignity in life, dignity in death

The Supreme Court has done the right thing in giving its approval for passive euthanasia in a specific case, thereby bringing clarity to one of the most sensitive ethical questions confronting modern medicine. In a landmark ruling on Wednesday, the court permitted the withdrawal of life support for 32-year-old Harish Rana, who has remained in a permanent vegetative state since 2013. The Bench, consisting of Justices JB Pardiwala and KV Vishwanathan, authorised the removal of life-sustaining treatment, including feeding and nutrition, and directed the hospital to provide palliative care so that Rana may pass away with dignity. Though passive euthanasia had been recognised as legal in India since the court's earlier rulings in 2018 and the subsequent guidelines refined in 2023, this is the first instance in which the court has directly authorised such a course of action in an individual case. The decision draws its moral and constitutional strength from the interpretation of Article 21—the right to life—which, the court has repeatedly held, also includes the right to die with dignity. When life is reduced to a biological existence devoid of awareness or hope of recovery, the question naturally arises whether the law should insist on prolonging that existence indefinitely. The term "euthanasia", which is Greek in origin, means an easy or painless death. In modern ethical discussions, however, passive euthanasia does not mean actively causing death. Rather, it refers to the withdrawal or withholding of extraordinary medical measures that artificially prolong life. It is, in essence, a decision not to pursue further interventions when they serve no meaningful medical purpose. This must be distinguished from the horrific misuse of the term by the Nazis, who used it as a euphemism for the systematic murder of the disabled and the infirm.

Permitting passive euthanasia can also spare families prolonged emotional suffering. Watching a loved one remain indefinitely on life support, with no chance of recovery, can be an unbearable ordeal. In such circumstances, allowing nature to take its course may be the most humane option. In a country where medical facilities remain scarce, enormous economic and human resources are often spent on keeping alive patients with irreversible conditions. These resources could sometimes be better used to treat curable illnesses, strengthen preventive healthcare, or assist those who lack even basic medical care. Examples from public life illustrate the dilemma. In one case, the family of an industrial magnate chose passive euthanasia when it became clear that continued ventilation served no purpose. In another instance, a prominent politician was kept on a ventilator for years at public expense. One decision reflected practical wisdom; the other highlighted the absence of clear norms. The verdict affirms a simple but profound principle: dignity must accompany life—and, when the time comes, death as well.



MumbaiNaama

SMRUTI KOPPIKAR

Mumbaikars speaking up for habitat. Is the govt listening?

The mangrove felling for the Versova-Bhayander coastal road, the activists keep repeating, does not have the required clearances

Groups of people across Mumbai, united by nothing other than their desire to give of themselves to protect ecology in Mumbai, have been challenging the authorities for a while now. It is easy to miss these campaigns and actions. Each issue generates its own energy, each story gets reported or told in its own space, and each set of people are forced to focus on one or another. But what is unfolding across the city is perhaps unprecedented—people of different persuasions and armed with different skills have been standing up to the authorities to save mangroves, the Mahalaxmi Racecourse, the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and its hills, the Aarey forests, and more.

Connect the dots. What emerges is a picture of determined resistance by Mumbaikars against the onslaught that the authorities—the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation and the state government—have been making on the city's ecology. Of course, it is always peddled in the name of 'development', and ecologically damaging exclusive infrastructure is tagged as 'public projects'. The authorities, who should have acted as the custodians and guardians of the city's ecology, seem hell bent on ruining it. But people have found it in themselves to stand firm, to challenge the authorities, and to persist in their resistance.

Those who know the law are willing to educate others; those who have the professional expertise have decoded project documents and drafted letters to the authorities, including Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis; those who have protested earlier are guiding the rest; those who are creative have written and recorded songs; those in the area have been keeping a close watch and sharing photos or videos to alert the authorities. Mumbaikars, pressed for time as we tend to be, have been speaking up for the city's ecology—in letters, in petitions, in court cases, and with boots on the ground too.

Charkop, in Kandivali, is an example. In the past few days, it has seen the noise of machines attacking the mangroves and trees, the thuds of the decimated greens, and the frenzied cacophony of the displaced birds. This should be heartrending to each one of us, not just environmentalists. The mangroves, among 45,675 of the 60,000 in the Versova-Bhayander belt, are earmarked for felling; at least 9,000 will be permanently damaged, and compensatory afforestation will be done in the faraway Chandrapur district.

The official documents helpfully inform that there will be a 'diversion' of a total of 103.65 hectares of forest land, including the mangroves. Why? Only so that the Versova to Bhayander coastal road can be built to reduce travel time from the present 75 minutes to about 20 minutes. In a city where highways, including the Western Express Highway connecting these two areas, are gridlocked, resulting in fuel wastage and emissions, any reduction in travel distance or time would be welcome.

But is it not prudent to consider the comprehensive cost which includes the ecological impact of slashing mangroves that guard the city's coast? Should we not ask how many, and who, it will really benefit? The 22.84-kilometre six or eight-lane road is projected to carry 62,000 cars a day, according to official documents, but this may be an overstretch because there is little data on the current Passenger Car Unit (PCU) metric for this section. Bear in mind that the BMC's own Comprehensive Mobility Plan tells us that only 10.9 per cent of Mumbaikars use private vehicles—only a small percentage of these would be travelling from Versova to Bhayander.

This set might be excited. The real estate lobby already is; a leading platform has been excitedly claiming that 'the North is moving South' and points to an increase of 10-15 per cent in property prices in the Charkop-Kandivali-Malad belt. This is being called the 'coastal premium'. But Mumbai's ecological warriors are unwilling to let all this go unchallenged. From approaching the Bombay High Court, which ironically allowed the felling of the mangroves, to protests on the ground at Charkop and other sites, they have been resisting.

The 'Save Mangroves Group', with over 1,000 members, is abuzz through the day and night with ideas as well as clear instructions on how to register objections at the official level, where to meet and protest, how to share information and so on. They have converged at the mangrove cutting sites and, in an admirable manner, managed to stall or resist the private company and BMC officials. The cause is on social media platforms; the mainstream media has given it some attention too.

Like them, Mumbaikars of different persuasions and passions, not necessarily professional environmental activists, have taken up cudgels for one ecological cause or another. A committed group has been working to protect the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) from being opened to construction and development, including eco-tourism facilities in two of its three eco-sensitive zones that form the buffer between the noisy polluted city and the forest. It has challenged the BMC for its Draft Zonal Plan, attending public participation meetings armed with data.

Another group has been keeping watch over the Aarey area, where more than 2,200 trees were slashed in the dark of a night in 2019 to enable the construction of the car shed of Metro 3. This underground marvel, at a price tag of Rs 37,000 crore, has shown far lower footfalls than projected. As does the Bandra-Worli sea link inaugurated in 2009. Groups of people have been keeping watch these past few nights for fires that were seen atop the SGNP hills from Powai to Thane and have sprung into action to record and resist.

Yet another group, the Mumbai Architects Collective, with more than 100 professional planners and architects in its fold, wrote to municipal commissioner Bhushan Gagrani and CM Fadnavis, protesting, with detailed explanations, the planned redevelopment of the Mahalaxmi Racecourse into a Central Park with underground parking facilities. The area above the parking facility, they said, would be a concrete slab and would greatly impact rainwater absorption, groundwater recharge, and flood mitigation. This is elementary, but it had to be pointed out.

The mangrove felling for the Versova-Bhayander coastal road, the activists keep repeating, does not have the required clearances; only Stage 1 forest clearance has been given but not the critical Stage 2. The game seems clear: slash the mangroves before it comes through so that it's a fait accompli. Often, from this side of the picket line, on the larger canvas of the development-driven government, these actions appear futile. But each one shows that Mumbaikars will not take the ecological assault lying down. Who said Mumbai does not protest? The question is, are the authorities listening?

Smruti Koppikar, an award-winning senior journalist and urban chronicler, writes extensively on cities, development, gender, and the media. She is the Founder Editor of the award-winning online journal 'Question of Cities' and can be reached at smruti@questionofcities.org.



HerStory

DEEPA GAHLOT

A 'she' director who crashed through a concrete ceiling

Sai Paranjpye brought to the films she made a different perspective. She saw to it that her female characters were never Bollywood stereotypes

Later this month, on March 19, Sai Paranjpye turns 88. Age hasn't dimmed her shine or reduced her energy, as she kept an audience enthralled at a reading from her work in a show titled Darwal (Fragrance).

Dressed in a stylish kaftan, she stood for the first half of the show as she read from her memoirs; during the second half, she sat down and spoke about her plays and films. The show was sold out, which is not surprising; she has multitudes of fans of her films, plays, and writing, even though she has been away from the spotlight for several years.

Paranjpye always bristled when she was called a woman director, but the fact is that she heralded the entry of female filmmakers when she made Sparsh in 1980. Before then, there had been a few female film producers and a couple of directors, but through the 1960s and 1970s, there was a void. The industry's male domination is no secret, but when Paranjpye crashed through, not the glass but the concrete ceiling, women had not made inroads into Bollywood as directors. The industry simply did not trust women with ideas or money—it is better today, but still a long way to go. She and others who followed—Aparna Sen, Kalpana Lajmi, Vijaya Menta, and Aruna Raje—got small budgets to make what were then labelled 'parallel' or 'middle-of-the-road' films.

Paranjpye was born to a Russian father, the artist Youra Sleptzoff, and an Indian mother, Shakuntala Paranjpye, an actress, writer, and social activist. After her parents' divorce, she was raised in the home of her maternal grandfather, RP Paranjpye, a renowned mathematician and educationist, who served from 1944 to 1947 as India's High Commissioner to Australia. She grew up in a progressive atmosphere, with varied influences—some of which she recounts in Darwal. Her first meeting with her father and the Russian side of her family is particularly moving. She had started writing as a child, and her book of fairy tales, titled Mulancha Mewa, was published when she was just eight.

After graduating from the National School of Drama, working at All India Radio and then Doordarshan, and after writing and directing plays, she was ready to make movies, even if mainstream Bollywood was not ready for her.

What she brought to the films she made was a different—not necessarily typical female—perspective. She saw to it that her female characters were never Bollywood stereotypes. Her first feature film, Sparsh, was a sensitive love story between a widow (Shabana Azmi) and the principal (Naseeruddin Shah) of a school for the blind, where she volunteers. Kavita's widowhood does not define her existence; she may be hesitant, but she is open to the complex emotional journey of navigating a relationship with a prickly man, who hates any kind of pity or even acknowledgement of his blindness. The awards this film won helped get her next two projects made—the comedies Chashme Baddoor (1981) and Katha (1982). They were both marked with gentle humour and astute observations. In both these films, the female lead was played by Deepti Naval, who got the innocence and quirkiness of the characters as written by Paranjpye. Miss Chamko of Chashme Baddoor remains unforgettable.

In her show, she narrates a delightful incident about inviting Kamal Haasan to her home for the script narration of Katha. He was a huge star in the South already, and his imminent arrival sent her Tamil househelp into raptures. Her cat that lacked an ear was banished to the garage by the helper, lest the sight of him offend the star. Kamal Haasan turned the film down, not because he did not like the script, but because he did not want to do a two-hero project. The roles were eventually done by Naseeruddin Shah and Farouque Shaikh.

The fact also is that back then mainstream Bollywood did not know how to work with women in power. A film called Bicchu, to be produced by Dharmendra and directed by her, was launched and quietly shelved. Bollywood's conservatism and Sai's unique worldview could not have matched.

In Darwal, Paranjpye narrated hilarious incidents about the succession of cats she had as pets. Her love for felines led her to writing the characters of two cats (played by humans, of course) as a kind of chorus in her play Jaswandi.

She also speaks about her extensive travels to festivals as a filmmaker and as the chairperson of the Children's Film Society, a role she relished. The output of her work has been prolific—plays, documentaries, features, TV shows, and books. Her sense of humour led her to be sometimes called Lady Pula (Pu La Deshpande was the legendary Marathi writer and humourist).

She said in an interview with Nandini Ramnath on scroll.in, "We Indians tend to take life too seriously. We constantly pontificate and get philosophical about every little thing. Having fun is frowned upon; it's almost sinful. I have done serious things, but I will not let go of that thread that keeps me bubbling along and happy and merry." And went on to add, "Women actually have a fantastic sense of humour, better than men's. Men tend to have crass and predictable humour. Women see human foibles and minute details, and they can laugh at eccentricities and peculiarities. They are also more understanding. Go ahead and quote me and let me make some enemies."

Work did slow down, but certainly not because of her age. Going by her stage show, her voice is firm, her wit is sharp, and her joie de vivre is undiminished. She has written two memoirs, but the stories she would still have to tell could fill more volumes.

Deepa Gahlot is a Mumbai-based columnist, critic and author.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using snail mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, 215 Free Press Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.

Dying with dignity

The SC's decision allowing the plea for passive euthanasia filed by 31-year-old Harish Rana's family, after noting his condition had shown no improvement despite years of treatment, makes for good judgement. This could be the first instance of the Court passing such a judgement in an individual case, following its 2018 judgement which laid down the law allowing passive euthanasia. In India, active euthanasia is considered murder or culpable homicide under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS). Hence, the SC recognises only passive euthanasia, upholding the "right to die with dignity".

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee, Faridabad

Genuine concern

The concerns of Cuffe Parade and Colaba residents are justified. The construction of a bund on the pretext of preventing soil erosion will definitely result in coastal encroachment, unwarranted land reclamation, mangrove destruction, illegal jetty construction, and development of multi-storied slums taking over the coastline. Something that is blatantly evident in the bund built on the Versova beach eight years ago.

Ramesh Bhagwan, Mumbai

Brave move

Braveness and valour go hand in hand. Braveness must come at the appropriate time. A 3-year-old maneater leopard pounced on a teen in Shimla. The youngster gathered courage to grapple with the predator, keeping it from sinking its teeth on his neck, and clobbered it on the head with every rock and stone he could lay his hands on until the leopard died. The teen's bravery deserves appreciation.

Jayanthy Anandambal, Chennai

Jolted back to life

HASAN ZAIDI



Apropos the report "Miracle on Highway: Brain-Dead Woman Revives" (March 12), India's infamous potholes have finally found their redeeming purpose. While Bareilly's medical establishment was drafting death certificates, a highway ditch performed a better neurological assessment than expensive scans. Between medical arrogance and infrastructural absurdity, the patient somehow won—a distinctly Indian miracle where salvation comes from the Public Works Department's spectacular negligence. Perhaps we should question a system where families plan last rites before seeking second opinions and where rough roads jolt us back to life more effectively than hospital equipment.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Stop the war

The UN should intervene to end the US-Iran conflict immediately. India should come together with other countries and put pressure on the UN. Why is India being a puppet in Trump's hands? It is time to stand up against the war.

Unnikrishnan Mangalasseri, Kerala

Smart buses

Apropos the article 'Maha pushes for smart, safe buses' (Mar 13), BEST buses must be low-level, providing easy entry and exit. Besides, double-decker buses or joint buses, capable of being steered on Mumbai's roads, can help prevent overcrowding. Inter-city buses must have two chemical toilets, a GPS system, a black box, and an alternative to electric buses.

Whatever happened to the plan of introducing amphibious buses from the Gateway of India to the Elephanta caves?

Peter Castellino, Mumbai

Good decision

I support the Maharashtra government's decision to suspend issuing new permits to autorickshaws, which will curb rising pollution and traffic congestion in urban areas. The state transport minister must also keep regular check on auto rickshaw drivers, who drink and drive, to contain the increasing rate of accidents in the suburbs.

Cajetan Peter D'Souza, Mumbai

Briefs

Insurance shield for exporters

The commerce ministry is working to provide insurance support to exporters to help them deal with the ongoing West Asia crisis, an official said on Friday. An inter-ministerial group is keeping tabs on developments on a daily basis and interacting with exporters. "There is some thinking going on...insurance coverage and support for exporters. We will try to do that. We are evaluating options," the official said, when asked if the ministry is looking at announcing some kind of package for the exporting community.

Inflation for Q4 likely to come at lower than RBI estimate

Consumer inflation for the fourth quarter of the current financial year FY26 is expected to come in at 3%, slightly lower than the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) projection of 3.2%, according to a report by Union Bank of India. The report noted that the bank's internal projections suggest inflation will remain lower than the central bank estimates in the coming quarters as well. "Our CPI projection for Q4FY26 is now tracking 3%, slightly lower than RBI projection of 3.2%," the report said.

Oil may touch $150 bbl if SoH remains closed for 8 wks

Global crude oil prices could surge to as high as USD 150 per barrel if the Strait of Hormuz remains closed for the next four to eight weeks, according to a report by Nuvama. The report highlighted that the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz (SoH), which handles around 20 million barrels per day (mbpd) of oil flows, could significantly tighten global supply and push crude prices into the range of USD 110-150 per barrel within four to eight weeks. It added that the disruption has already slowed maritime traffic in the region to a near halt, tightening the global crude balance. The market had initially priced in a disruption of about two weeks, but expectations are now shifting toward a longer outage.

WAR MEETS INVESTORS | Energy shock, geopolitics test nation's economic nerves; West Asia conflict, $100 crude oil rattle India's markets again

War abroad, pressure at home

Palazhi Ashok Kumar
MUMBAI

In financial markets, distance offers little protection from geopolitical storms. As conflict deepens across the Middle East and Brent crude edges above $100 per barrel, India's equity markets have felt the sharp chill of global uncertainty. What began as distant geopolitical tension has rapidly evolved into a market-moving event—unsettling investors and reviving memories of past oil shocks.

A war unfolding thousands of miles away has once again sent tremors through India's financial markets. The sudden surge in oil prices, combined with persistent foreign fund outflows and weakening global sentiment, has unsettled equities and sharpened concerns about inflation and currency stability.

On Friday, the reaction was decisive. The BSE Sensex closed at 74,563.92, down 1,470 points, while the NSE Nifty slipped 2.06% to 23,151.10, reflecting a broad-based retreat across sectors sensitive to global shocks. Investors' wealth eroded by more than ₹27 lakh crore since March 2, 2026. The country has weathered oil shocks before. Stronger foreign exchange reserves, diversified energy sourcing and resilient domestic demand now offer buffers that earlier crises lacked.

"For long-term investors, therefore, the message is simple: volatility may dominate the headlines, but the deeper rhythm of India's economic growth remains intact. Dalal Street may be shaken — but it is



far from broken," chief executive of a wealth management firm told The FPJ Money.

Oil lies at the centre of the anxiety. Nevertheless, for investors with patience, storms often pass — leaving opportunity in their wake.

Brent crude has climbed to around $100.7 per barrel, fuelled by escalating confrontation involving Iran, Israel and the United States. Traders are increasingly factoring in the possibility of disruption in the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime corridor through which a significant portion of global oil shipments passes each day. For India — one of the world's largest crude importers —such developments carry immediate consequences. The country imports roughly 85 per cent of its oil requirements, meaning every surge in global energy prices quickly filters into inflation expectations, corporate costs and the external balance.

Rupee falls 5 paise to settle at record low

PTI
NEW DELHI



The rupee pared some losses and closed the session 5 paise lower at a fresh record low of 92.30 against the US dollar on Friday, with crude oil prices stabilising around $100 per barrel even as global sentiment remained volatile due to the West Asia crisis.

A strengthening greenback, heavy outflow of foreign funds and persistent selling in the domestic equity markets kept the rupee under pressure, according to forex traders.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the local unit opened at 92.33 and hit an intraday low of 92.47 against the US dollar. During the session, the currency pared some losses and settled at a new record low of 92.30 against the dollar, down 5 paise from its previous close.

"The rupee hit a new record low on Friday on weak domestic markets and a strong dollar. Rising crude oil prices and continued FII outflows also pressured the rupee," Anuj Choudhary, research analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on risk aversion in global markets amid the ongoing US-Israel and Iran war. Rising crude oil prices and worries over inflation may further pressure the rupee. A strong dollar and rising US Treasury yields may also weigh on the domestic unit," he said.

Fitch raises India's GDP growth forecast for FY26 to 7.5%

PTI
NEW DELHI



Fitch Ratings on Friday raised India's GDP growth forecast for the current fiscal and the next to 7.5% and 6.7%, respectively, and projected global crude oil prices to average $70 per barrel in 2026.

Fitch had in December projected India's GDP growth for the current fiscal at 7.4% and 6.4% for 2026-27.

Fitch expects growth to slow in the first half of FY27, with rising inflation constraining real incomes and limiting consumer spending growth.

GDP growth slowed in the December quarter to 7.8% year-on-year from 8.4% in the September quarter.

"We estimate that for the 2025-26 financial year (starting April 2025), growth will be 7.5%, a marginal upward revision from December. Domestic demand is the biggest growth driver this year, with consumer spending and investment rising by an estimated 8.6% and 6.9% in the current fiscal year," Fitch said.

In its Global Economic Outlook, March 2026, Fitch projected world GDP growth at 2.6% in 2026 on the assumption that the Iran war does not result in a larger or enduring spike in energy prices that pushes the annual 2026 oil price forecast above $70 per barrel. Global growth last year was 2.7%.

"But a scenario where oil prices rise to $100 and stay there would be a significant adverse global supply shock," Fitch Ratings Chief Economist Brian Coulton said.

Fitch said oil prices have risen by $20 per barrel to around $90 (Brent) since the US and Israel attacked Iran at the end of February.

Fitch's baseline assumption in the Global Economic Outlook report is that oil prices remain in the $90-100 range through March, as the Strait of Hormuz remains effectively closed for around a month, before falling to the mid-$60s by the second half of 2026 in a fundamentally oversupplied market.

"This implies an annual average price of $70 in 2026, up from $63 in the December GEO. We believe this revision would not have a material impact on global growth, inflation or monetary policy," Fitch said.

However, there are huge uncertainties and there is a possibility of more sustained disruptions to oil shipments and significant damage to production facilities in West Asia.

Forex reserves drop $11.68 bn to $716.81 bn

India's foreign exchange reserves declined by $11.683 billion to $716.810 billion during the week ended March 6, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said on Friday.

In the previous reporting week, the overall reserves had increased by $4.885 billion to an all-time high of $728.494 billion.

For the week ended March 6, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, decreased by $9.880 billion to $563.245 billion, according to data released by the central bank.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effects of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units such as the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves. The value of the gold reserves declined by $1.612 billion to $130.017 billion during the week, the RBI said. **-PTI**

Lok Sabha approves extra govt spending of ₹2.01L cr in FY26

Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar
NEW DELHI

The Lok Sabha on Friday approved the second batch of Supplementary Demands for Grants, enabling the government to spend an additional ₹2.01 lakh crore in the current financial year.

The government had sought approval to spend a gross additional amount of ₹2.81 lakh crore. However, with estimated additional receipts of ₹80,000 crore during the current fiscal year, the net additional cash spending stands at ₹2.01 lakh crore. In her reply to the debate in the House, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the new spending will not push the fiscal deficit beyond the government's target. "There is no increase in expenditure beyond the BE of 2025-26 due to the second Supplementary Demand for Grants," she said.



The ₹1 lakh crore Economic Stabilisation Fund will give fiscal headroom to allow India to respond to global headwinds

'ECONOMIC STABILISATION FUND'

The supplementary demands include grants for spending on setting up an Economic Stabilisation Fund of ₹1 lakh crore. Parliament's approval was also sought for extra spending of ₹19,230 crore towards fertiliser subsidy and ₹23,641 crore for subsidies under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGKAY). Other major expenditure heads include ₹41,822 crore for the Defence Ministry.

"The ₹1 lakh crore Economic Stabilisation Fund will give fiscal headroom to allow India to respond to global headwinds," Sitharaman said.

She said the fund will act as a buffer to absorb shocks arising due to unforeseen global challenges, such as the ongoing Iran war.

The Finance Minister assured that there would be no shortage of fertilisers for farmers and that adequate provision has been made in the supplementary demands for grants.

Data centre power demand to hit 13.56 GW by 2032: Min

PTI
NEW DELHI

Electricity demand from data centres in the country is expected to reach 13.56 gigawatt (GW) by 2031-32, Parliament was informed on Friday.

In a written reply to the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Electronics and IT Jitin Prasada said the total data centre capacity in the country increased from 375 megawatt (MW) in 2020 to around 1,500 MW by 2025. "The expected electricity demand from the growth of AI and other large-scale data centres is factored into the planning process of the government. As per information available with the Ministry of Power, electricity demand from data centres is estimated to reach 13.56 GW by 2031-32," Prasada said.

'India, US continue talks for mutually beneficial trade deal'

IANS
NEW DELHI

The Commerce Ministry on Friday said India and the United States continue to remain engaged in discussions for a mutually beneficial bilateral trade agreement, rejecting media reports that suggested a pause in negotiations.

In a statement, the ministry clarified that there has



been no hold on bilateral engagement between the two countries.

It said both sides are actively working towards a trade agreement that will benefit businesses and economic cooperation in both nations.

"We have noted a media report regarding ongoing trade talks with the US. It is denied that there is any hold-off in bilateral engagement. It is reiterated that the two sides remain engaged for a mutually beneficial trade agreement," the ministry said.

The Commerce Ministry rejected media reports that suggested a pause in negotiations

'Claim that India will hold off trade deal with US incorrect'

The government on Friday rejected reports suggesting that New Delhi might suspend the proposed trade deal with the US in view of the Trump administration launching a new "unfair practices" probe against India and some other countries. The claim that India will hold off the trade deal with the US is incorrect and misleading, top government sources said. The clarification came following reports that India will delay the finalisation of the trade deal following the launch of the probe.

Raajmarg Infra InvIT IPO subscribed over 13 times

The initial public offering of state-owned National Highways Authority of India-sponsored Raajmarg Infra Investment Trust was subscribed 13.74 times on the final day of bidding on Friday. The ₹6,000-crore IPO received bids for 2,93,14,93,200 units against 21,33,33,150 units on offer, registering a 13.74 times subscription, as per NSE data.

Banks' loans rise 14.5% on yr as of Feb 28

Bank credit growth picked up pace in the fortnight ended Feb 28 after moderating in the previous fortnight. Deposit growth also improved in the reporting fortnight, data released by the RBI on Friday showed.Bank loans were up 14.5% on year as of Feb 28, higher than the on-year growth of 13.6% as of Feb 15. Loans rose ₹3.23 trillion from a fortnight ago to ₹207.54 trillion as of Feb 28.Deposits grew 11.9% on year as of Feb 28, faster than the 11.2% growth recorded a fortnight ago. Bank deposits as of Feb 28 stood at ₹251.90 trillion.

SEBI CAPS MFs' INTRADAY BORROWING

PTI
NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) on Friday issued guidelines for mutual funds to undertake intraday borrowing arrangements with financial institutions such as banks.

Under the new framework, the board of an asset management company (AMC) as well as the board of trustees will be required to approve a policy governing the use of intraday borrowing facilities.

Further, the AMC will disclose the approved policy on its website, Sebi said in its circular.



Sebi said intraday borrowings can be used only for specific purposes such as repurchase or redemption of units and payment of interest or Income Distribution-cum-Capital Withdrawal (IDCW) payouts to unitholders.

The regulator also stipulated that the borrowing amount cannot exceed the "guaranteed receivables" expected on the same day.

The regulator also stipulated that the borrowing amount cannot exceed the 'guaranteed receivables' expected on the same day

Receivables eligible for such intraday borrowings include maturity proceeds from TREPS (Triparty Repo in Government Securities), proceeds from reverse repo transactions, maturity proceeds from government securities such as G-Secs, Treasury Bills, State Development Loans (SDLs) and STRIPS, interest payments on G-Secs and SDLs, as well as sale proceeds of these securities.

These conditions will apply to intraday borrowings by mutual funds from April 1, 2026, Sebi said.

Sebi noted that, as per prevailing industry practice, primarily in liquid and overnight schemes, redemption payouts to investors are processed in the morning hours of the T+1 day, while maturity proceeds from TREPS and reverse repo transactions are typically received in the evening of the same day.

US waiver frees almost 20 mn barrels of Russian oil for sale

A US waiver allowing the purchase of seaborne Russian crude has freed another 20-odd million barrels of oil currently on board ships, a move expected to cool runaway prices that have crossed $100 per barrel in the global market amid the Iran war.

There are currently around 25 ships carrying Russian crude at sea, while another five ships are carrying petroleum products. These cargoes can be diverted immediately to destinations where demand exists.

The temporary waiver comes on top of the 30-day waiver earlier announced by the Trump administration for Indian refiners to buy Russian oil, aimed at making more crude available in the market to bring down prices.

India and China have been the main buyers of Russian crude so far, which has helped control global prices as the two countries are among the largest importers of oil.

The Trump administration on Thursday issued a new licence allowing countries to temporarily purchase certain Russian oil products. **-IANS**

RBI injects ₹50K cr durable liquidity in to banking system



PTI
NEW DELHI

The RBI on Friday injected ₹50,000 crore into the banking system through open market operation (OMO) purchases of government securities. The central bank purchased 7.41% GS 2036 bonds worth ₹14,491 crore, 6.45% GS 2029 bonds worth ₹13,006 crore, 6.64% GS 2035 bonds worth ₹8,350 crore, 7.06% GS 2046 bonds worth ₹5,000 crore, 6.79% GS 2034 bonds worth ₹4,496 crore, 7.95% GS 2032 bonds worth ₹2,908 crore, and 7.62% GS 2039 bonds worth ₹1,749 crore, the release said.

Liquidity in the banking system is currently estimated to be in surplus of about ₹2.49 lakh crore. This auction was part of the two auctions of ₹50,000 crore each announced by the RBI last week. The OMO purchase auction was announced ahead of expected heavy outflows from the banking system due to advance tax and GST payments scheduled later this month.

Gilts end off lows as oil slips below $100/bbl

Prices of government bonds ended off the day's lows on Friday as traders, especially from state-owned banks, bought bonds to replenish their portfolios after selling gilts at the ₹50,000 crore open market operation (OMO) auction, dealers said.

Bond prices recovered almost all losses during the day, tracking an intraday fall in Brent crude oil futures for May delivery below the key $100-per-barrel mark. However, as trading neared its end, dealers placed short bets to trim risks ahead of the weekend amid fears of the war in West Asia escalating and Brent crude oil prices rising further.

The 10-year benchmark 6.48% 2035 gilt closed at ₹98.60, down from ₹98.69 on Thursday. The yield on the gilt closed at 6.6798%, up from 6.6666% on Thursday. Bond prices were down earlier in the day as Brent crude for May delivery rose to over $102 per barrel intraday before easing to $99.80 at 1700 IST, from $97.26 a barrel at the same time on Thursday. **-Informist**

Why women-led startups struggle to scale

Pooja Mehta
MUMBAI

Mumbai witnessed a gathering of women founders, professionals and decision-makers at the She Leads Mumbai summit held at the Bombay Stock Exchange on Friday. The event brought together leaders across sectors for conversations around entrepreneurship, leadership and the evolving role of women in India's economic growth.

Among the speakers was Shinjini Kumar, co-founder of SALT and MySALTApp. Kumar shared insights on the realities of women entrepreneurship and the structural factors that influence how many women start businesses. Kumar, who authored the book Busy Women, said the challenges women entrepreneurs face are often misunderstood. According to her, fear of failure or judgement is not always the primary barrier.

"I do not think there is something that is stopping women as much as something that is pushing them into choices that may not necessarily be the most

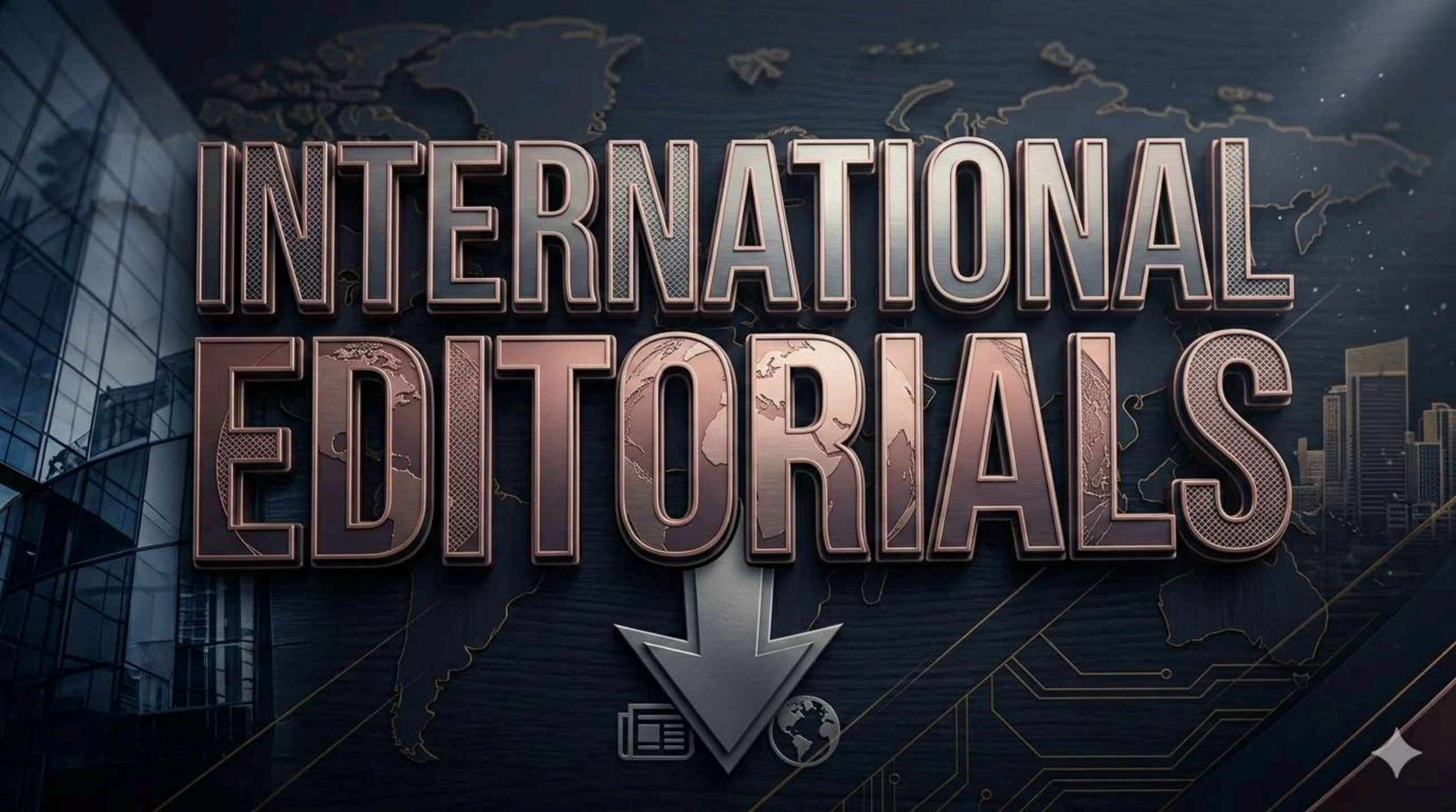


suited for success," she said.

Kumar identified three key factors shaping women's entrepreneurial journeys: access to capital, location and life-stage interruptions.

Many women start businesses with limited financial resources and rely on personal savings. This often pushes them towards ventures that require minimal investment.

Location also plays a role. Women frequently start businesses from home due to social expectations or family responsibilities, which can limit growth and scale. Kumar also highlighted unequal access to wealth and inheritance as a structural barrier. Despite these challenges, Kumar said women entrepreneurs should focus on identifying genuine problems to solve rather than choosing businesses simply because they are easy to start.


INTERNATIONAL
EDITORIALS

OPINION

Trump's Energy Triumph



POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

The Democratic-media complex seems determined to get everything wrong about Iran, though few efforts compare with this week's work to tag the Trump administration with a global energy crisis. Not only is this uninformed and overdone, the sudden concern over energy security comes about three years late.

The undermine-America crowd describes Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz as an "oil shock" that is "spiraling," "chaotic" and the "worst in history." It seems to have evaded this crew that Iran's bombardment of peaceful trading vessels is yet more justification of U.S. strikes. Iran's been using energy threats to manipulate geopolitics for decades and won't stop until it is fully defanged.

They are blaming the administration, in particular Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, whom Politico described as the "vaunted" team "in danger of fumbling the biggest energy crisis" of Donald Trump's second term. The go-to quote comes from Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy, who ranted that "on the Strait of Hormuz, they had NO PLAN. . . . Which is unforgiveable, because this part of the disaster was 100% foreseeable."

Let's talk about plans. That the U.S. was finally in a position to disarm Iran is largely thanks to a plan Mr. Trump initiated in his first term—to gain energy independence, which his team is now turning into energy dominance. Trump policies turbocharged a shale revolution that made the U.S. a net exporter of petroleum products and the world's largest exporter of natural gas. Alongside was Mr. Trump's plan to foster economic and security ties in the region against shared threats like Iran via deals like the Abraham Accords.

We are no longer hostage to Middle East fossil-fuel threats, which gives us room to weather temporary Hormuz disruptions. Domestic gasoline prices have spiked but are still notably below their highs during Joe Biden's term. Thanks to growing U.S. exports, our allies are better positioned against fallout. And Gulf actors are working alongside the U.S. to mitigate Iran's blockade. Some of us remember "OPEC embargo" days. No more.

The biggest threat to this plan was always the Biden administration, which halted liquefied natural-gas exports, shuttered Alaskan and Gulf drilling, snubbed Middle East partners, pressed investors to abandon fossil-fuel projects, and dispatched John Kerry to kill energy deals. All in the name of climate change. These would also be the folks who sold off the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to win an election. Want to send real fear through energy markets? Two words: Jennifer Granholm, the energy secretary who dedicated four years to ensuring your washing machine used fewer BTUs.

Speaking of secretaries, it might surprise the press to discover that the heads of Energy and Interior aren't tasked with countering Iranian mines. That's the Pentagon's job. Their job is to mitigate fallout from temporary supply disruptions—which, yes, were expected. Thanks to the energy-dominance policy, and a year of building real relationships with real energy players, they have more levers to pull.

He prepared the U.S. and its allies for the current troubles in the Persian Gulf.

Mr. Wright has been on the phone daily with Middle East energy ministers, ties possible thanks to early travel to the region, including five days he spent with Saudi energy chief Abdulaziz bin Salman (with whom he struck a landmark civil nuclear-energy deal). That allowed the U.S. to position regional players for a possible conflict. That beats an awkward Biden fist bump.

The International Energy Agency announced it is releasing the largest volume of emergency oil reserves in history—400 million barrels—after Mr. Wright rallied member nations to the need. Mr. Wright has been pressing the IEA for a year to drop its climate obsessions and get serious about its fossil-fuel mandate. That work is paying off.

The U.S. has been refilling the SPR with money earmarked in last year's reconciliation bill. A plan! It will now release 172 million barrels, and here's a fun aside: Rather than sell it straight (as the Biden team did), Mr. Wright is exchanging it on the market for futures contracts (which are currently betting prices will fall). This means the Strategic Petroleum Reserve will get back 200 million barrels for the price of its 172 million. How refreshing: An energy secretary who understands energy markets.

Mr. Burgum—fresh off expanding a Venezuela-U.S. energy partnership—is flying to Japan to reassure Pacific allies that American export capacity is expanding dramatically. He's keeping the machinery running to follow through on his promises. Interior this week announced $47 million in bids from a second Gulf of Mexico lease sale. It has issued 6,000 permits for oil and gas leasing in the past year alone—more than the Biden administration did in four years.

Hormuz is causing disruptions, but those are likely to be short-lived. As the U.S. gains ground against Iran's offensive capabilities, it can devote more assets to restoring shipping lanes. Mr. Wright on Thursday explained it as "short-term pain for the long-term gain" of denying Iran the ability "to hold the world hostage whenever it wants." Indeed. The ability to do it at all—and weather the short term—will be thanks to a Trump team that had a clear-eyed, multifaceted, fossil-fuel energy plan.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

James Talarico's Cost-Free Creed

HOUSES OF WORSHIP
By Barton Swaim

White progressives often complain about the uses to which GOP politicians put Christianity. Republicans in red states, or red areas of blue states, are apt to sprinkle their talk with references to God and church and prayer and "Judeo-Christian values."

I use the modifier "white" because those same progressives have little critical to say about black Democratic politicians whose speeches are similarly religiose. But ignore that inconsistency and grant the complaint some justice: To hear a clergyman at a Republican rally deliver an opening prayer invoking "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" feels amiss—coercive to nonbelievers and loose with that name.

In general, religious language fits badly in partisan spaces. Politics is about messy compromises and shifting coalitions, whereas religion requires precision of language and tenets that don't change with the public mood. Some politicians manage to speak unreservedly about their faith without offending—I think of the relentlessly positive Sen. Tim Scott (R., S.C.). But then, Mr. Scott doesn't have to fight contested elections and thus doesn't have to get nasty.

Even so, progressives who pine for a "religious left," for Democratic candidates sufficiently fluent in the language of faith to attract religious voters, miss the point. The mistake is to think Republican politicians are smarter and more calculating than they are. Most GOP pols who spout the terms of evangelical Christianity aren't trying to manipulate their base; they're speaking the way religious folk speak, however ill-advisedly in some public settings.

You don't need a degree in political science to know that progressive candidates do poorly with religious voters because progressive candidates mostly aren't religious. Leftist ideologies were originally, and in some measure still are, meant to take the place of religion—the state, not the church, would relieve the poor; experts rather than preachers would deliver moral instruction. That white Democrats struggle to make their views attractive to religious voters is the least surprising fact in American politics.

Enter James Talarico, who last week defeated Jasmine Crockett to win the Democratic primary for U.S. Senate in Texas. Mr. Talarico, a state representative, earned a master's degree in education from Harvard and is working toward a divinity degree at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He is a man of the progressive left. His theological commitments are decidedly liberal, perhaps universalist—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism he sees "as circling the same truth about the universe, about the cosmos."

Progressive commentators hope Mr. Talarico can lend the left some of the spiritual authority it long ago ceded to the right. I remain skeptical, but from now till November Mr. Talarico can count on most of the news media to make his faith-based progressivism sound attractive.

The question of what sort of politics the Bible recommends is an old and tired one. Mr. Talarico echoes two or three generations of left-leaning churchmen when he claims that the Bible gives far more attention to relieving the poor than to issues of sexual ethics. He often names abortion and homosexuality. "To focus on those two things," he said to a fawning Ezra Klein recently, "instead of feeding the hungry and healing the sick and welcoming the stranger—three things we're told to do ad nauseam in Scripture—to me, is just mind-blowing." Let's grant the shaky premise and point out that Mr. Talarico is free to feed the hungry and heal the sick. What Scripture doesn't command, ad nauseam or otherwise, is the coercion of other people to do those things or to pay for them.

Left-wing orthodoxy with a Christian gloss isn't what religious voters are looking for.

But the most important point the seminarian and his progressive fans fail to grasp is that religious commitments don't pack much of a punch if they're always aligned with the smart-set orthodoxies. From a typical oration, in 2024: "You can't call yourself a Christian and reject the stranger seeking asylum at our southern border. You can't call yourself a Christian and destroy God's creation with greenhouse gases."

In the same vein, Mr. Talarico as a lay preacher posited scriptural support for abortion. "Before God comes over Mary, and we have the incarnation, God asks for Mary's consent." (He doesn't, incidentally.) "To me," Mr. Talarico continued, "that is an affirmation in one of our most central stories that creation has to be done with consent. You cannot force someone to create."

Nonreligious progressives aren't always wrong to claim that Republican politicians use the language of faith to manipulate voters. It happens. What those progressives don't appreciate is that contradicting an elite consensus carries a cost, even for a cynical Republican politician. To repudiate a doctrine accepted by the nation's cultural arbiters gets you uninvited to their parties and called a fool. When Mr. Talarico shows he can bear that cost, I'll take him seriously.

Mr. Swaim writes the Journal's Unruly Republic column.

India's Boundless Biotech Potential

By Parag Saxena

Indian manufacturers account for roughly 20% of the global supply of generic medications by volume. But artificial intelligence could shift India's role from producing drugs to discovering them.

Modern pharmaceutical development can be simplified into three linked tasks. First is identifying the genetic mutations and pathways that drive disease. Second is translating those insights into a therapeutic molecule—the pill or infusion a patient eventually receives. Third is proving safety and efficacy through clinical trials, which consume the majority of time and capital. Moving from target to approved medicine often takes close to a decade.

India holds a distinct advantage in the first stage. Its vast, diverse population includes thousands of communities shaped by centuries of endogamy, or marriage within groups. This has enriched rare functional variation, including recessive disorders and homozygous loss-of-function mutations, or "human knockouts." That means someone inherits two copies of an inactivated gene. If such a person remains healthy—or protected from disease—it suggests that targeting the gene may be both effective and safe.

Its tech talent and endogamous cohorts make it unique.

In endogamous populations, such variants can occur 100 to 1,000 times as often as in more outbred populations, shortening the time and cost required to find them. While specific variants may be enriched in particular Indian subpopulations, the biological pathways they illuminate are universal. A protective mutation identified in South Asia may point to mechanisms driving cardiovascular or metabolic disease worldwide.

The second stage is different. Translating genetic insight into a drug candidate requires capabilities in chemistry and biologics engineering long concentrated in the U.S. and Europe. India's opportunity is partnership—combining Western translational depth with Indian-scale discovery.

Clinical trials are usually the most expensive part of drug development. Late-stage Phase III programs can run into hundreds of millions of dollars. AI could improve patient matching, optimize trial design, and automate documentation. With 1.4 billion people, India could support clinical research at unmatched scale.

India holds a second structural advantage: the world's largest concentration of software engineers. Its digital-payment infrastructure now processes more than 20 billion transactions a month through the Unified Payments Interface. Applying that engineering strength to biology could allow India to leapfrog from manufacturing generics to discovering cures.

Discovery is built on institutions. India needs translational laboratories, accredited biobanks, adaptive trial networks and globally trusted evidence systems. The evolving EU-India Trade and Technology Council framework has made pharmaceutical and biotechnology collaboration a priority.

India has population-scale genetics, computing talent, clinical diversity and advancing AI tools. If it builds the institutions to match these assets, its next great export will be manufactured drugs and discovery.

Mr. Saxena is CEO of Vedanta Capital, a venture capital firm investing in biotechnology and AI.

BOOKSHELF | By John G. Turner

Apocalypse and Its Aftermath

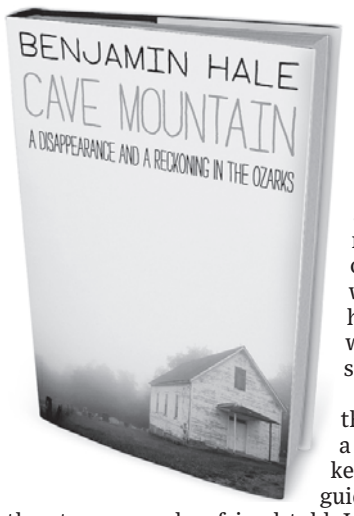
Cave Mountain

By Benjamin Hale
Harper, 304 pages, $30

It was a spring day in 2001. Joyce Hale, her husband, Jay, their 6-year-old granddaughter, Haley, and three friends were hiking to Hawksbill Crag in the Ozarks. Haley grew tired, sat down on a rock, and refused to budge.

Joyce stayed with Haley while the others kept going. To urge the child on, Joyce tried walking just out of sight and waiting. The first two times, Haley followed. The third time, however, Haley never came. When Joyce circled back, her granddaughter was gone.

"Cave Mountain," by Benjamin Hale, opens with his cousin's disappearance. Like the trails where it begins, the book is craggy, meandering its way between loosely connected acts of violence and Mr. Hale's ruminations about religion and redemption. But these difficulties are outweighed by Mr. Hale's subjects and his willingness to look beyond their worst moments.



The search for Haley lasted three days. Her family endured panic at first, then dread. Was she dead? Had someone abducted her? Two local men, ignoring the advice of the authorities about where to search, found her by a river. The child was cold and hungry, but she was fine.

Haley told her parents that an imaginary friend, a girl named Alecia, had kept her company and guided her to the river. As the story spread, a friend told Joyce that in 1978 a doomsday cult had murdered a toddler not far from where Haley had been found.

Coincidences accumulated. Haley described a little girl who looked a lot like the murder victim, Bethany Alana Clark, who would say her middle name was Alasee and pronounced it "all ah see-ah." Mr. Hale declares himself "a skeptic—in this, and in most things." He does not think Bethany's spirit or ghost succored his cousin.

The connection, though, spurred him to investigate Bethany's murder. The Church of God in Christ Through the Holy Spirit, Inc. amounted to around a dozen people. They believed that the 10 lost tribes of Israel had settled in the British Isles, making white Americans the descendants of Abraham and David. They also believed that a nuclear war was imminent and would precede the return of Jesus Christ to Earth. They thought they needed to keep themselves spiritually pure to survive the coming tribulation.

Royal Harris was the tiny church's pastor. Its members had accepted his 17-year-old son, Mark, as their prophet. However, Suzette Freeman, whom they called the interpreter, was the true authority. The church had little broad appeal; one of its members, a young mother named Lucy Clark, fell in with the group following her divorce. She and her daughter, Bethany, moved with them to Arkansas from Louisiana in 1977.

Freeman taught 3-year-old Bethany to fear hell by making her mother throw her doll's clothes into a fire. She ordered another man to place Bethany's hand in the flame, leaving it black and blistered. This was shortly before the group got stuck in the woods near Cave Mountain.

During that ordeal, Freeman and Mark Harris announced that the coming apocalypse had been "moved up" and that the voice of God had declared Bethany "anathema"—a curse that needed to be removed. Royal Harris and his stepson, Winston, took the girl into the woods, shot her and buried her in a shallow grave.

A child gets lost on a hike and meets an imaginary friend. The episode conjures memories of a decades-old murder.

The three Harrises, Clark and Freeman would soon be arrested. All of them would serve prison sentences for murder, except for Freeman, who secured immunity in return for her testimony.

It would be easy for a writer to make this into a cautionary tale about the danger of religious zealotry. And Mr. Hale does some of that. He asserts that the foundational Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*—scripture alone as the authority on faith and practice—leads to two possible paths: a watered-down Christian compromise with secularism, or "fundamentalism, fanaticism, insanity." This stark conclusion ignores the obvious reality that the vast majority of American Protestants are neither milquetoast secularists nor fanatics.

The author is more successful showing that Bethany Clark's murderers did not remain monsters. They rebuilt their lives, married, and grieved when they lost loved ones of their own. They worked dead-end jobs to make ends meet. Mark Harris realized that his father and Freeman had brainwashed him. He moved beyond Christianity to a vague and uncertain spirituality. "I know that suffering is not measurable or comparable," Mr. Hale suggests, "but I believe this man has suffered more than he has sinned." It is to Mr. Hale's great credit that he refuses to anathematize the prodigal children in his book.

Bethany's mother has lived for decades with immense guilt. When she heard about Haley's imaginary friend, she felt comforted thinking that Bethany was alive in heaven and able to help another girl on Earth. This belief granted an aged woman a measure of peace. "I think it's a good thing," he concludes, "because the most Christian thing I know I believe is the possibility of redemption from sin."

Mr. Turner is a professor of religious studies and history at George Mason University and the author of "Joseph Smith: The Rise and Fall of an American Prophet."

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

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OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Will Trump 'Fight to Win'?

'We have to start winning wars again. . . . And now we never win a war. We never win. And we don't fight to win. We don't fight to win. You either got to win or don't fight it at all."

President Trump spoke those words in February 2017, a sentiment he has often repeated. We hope he recalls them now as Iran escalates its retaliation and imposes costs on the U.S. and the world economy. Will Mr. Trump still fight to win?

Iran can't emerge from the war with a veto on oil flows from the Gulf.

* * *

Two weeks into the conflict, Israel and the U.S. continue their steady degrading of Iran's terror infrastructure. The early days had to target Iran's air defenses and missile forces. Its navy has largely been destroyed. The regime's forces of repression—the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the *basij* paramilitary—are under daily siege.

The regime's strategy in response is now clear: Target the production of oil in the Persian Gulf and its flow through the Strait of Hormuz. If it can raise the price of oil high enough for long enough, it believes it can force Mr. Trump to call off the bombing campaign.

Iran's advantage—its only one—is that it can employ asymmetric means to impose that economic pain. Drones are cheap to produce and hard to intercept when they swarm a target. Mines can be laid cheaply, and do great damage to U.S. ships if undetected. The U.S. hasn't been as prepared to counter these threats as it has been against Iranian missiles. Any ideas, Secretary Hegseth?

The result has been the near total closure of the Strait of Hormuz for non-Iranian oil, a surge in the global price to $100 a barrel, and panic in financial markets and the press. Even from their bunkers, Iran's remaining leaders can see this Western anxiety. Their bet is that if they can cause Mr. Trump to blink first, they will emerge from the war with a sword over the Gulf they can use at any time.

This is the danger Mr. Trump faces as he contemplates when to end the war. Iran has threatened Gulf oil production for decades, and that potential threat has built a risk premium into the oil price. But if the war ends with that threat having been proven in practice, with the U.S. unable to do anything about it, the U.S. will be the strategic loser. The deterrent effect of enforcing Mr. Trump's red lines will be diminished, if not evanescent.

Mr. Trump began the war with the straightforward aims of eliminating Iran's missile threat, what remained of its nuclear program, and its navy. These are well on the way to being accomplished. But Iran's counterpunch means that reopening the Strait and reducing Iran's veto power over its traffic will now have to be a goal. As a conflict evolves, war aims have to change as well.

This may mean a longer campaign than Mr. Trump initially anticipated as the U.S. and Israel secure the area of the Strait and increase the target list to include more of Iran's drone units and individual IRGC and *basij* units.

It may also require taking control of Iran's main oil export terminal at Kharg island. So far the allies have let Iran keep exporting oil from Kharg and through the Strait to give it an incentive to avoid mining the waterway. But that may have to change if Iran is mining anyway, as the British believe it is, and Iran's oil sales to China continue to sustain the regime.

Mr. Trump has been careful not to rule out deploying special forces for discrete and vital missions, and perhaps he has had Kharg in mind. Sending in ground troops is always risky, and holding Kharg once taken would mean absorbing attacks. But it would also put more pressure on the regime.

We cite Kharg not as an essential target that must be taken. We don't know enough about the intelligence to say. But it is an example of an escalation that can't be ruled out if Iran continues to resist and keeps the Strait closed.

As on so much else, Mr. Trump is sending mixed messages about how long the war will last. One day he says the war is nearly won and won't last more than a week or two. That tells Iran's leaders they can wait him out.

But on Wednesday in Kentucky, he told a rally, "We don't want to leave early, do we? . . . We got to finish the job." He added: "We don't want to go back every two years." On Thursday the President said, rightly in our view, that a short-term increase in oil and gasoline prices is worth eliminating Iran's threat to the Middle East, the world economy and the U.S.

Mr. Trump is also right that the U.S. shouldn't fight wars we don't intend to win. Winning now includes reopening the Strait of Hormuz.

Keeping Up With the Jones Act

The Trump Administration is looking for ways to mitigate rising U.S. gasoline prices caused by the war. That includes suspending the 1920 Jones Act, and ponder that irony: Because of a war, the President may suspend a law that was intended to protect national security.

Trump may suspend the 1920 law that hurts the U.S. in war and peace.

As Iran escalated its attacks on oil tankers and infrastructure in the region, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Thursday that "in the interest of national defense, the White House is considering waiving the Jones Act for a limited period of time to ensure vital energy products and agricultural necessities are flowing freely to U.S. ports." Hear, hear.

The law requires goods shipped between American ports to be transported on vessels that are U.S.-built, -flagged and -owned. Congress intended to boost the U.S. ship industry, but the protectionism has helped to ruin it instead. There are few Jones Act-compliant oil tankers, and they command higher shipping prices than foreign vessels.

America's shale fracking bounty means the U.S. isn't hurt as much by oil supply disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz as are Asia and Europe, which depend on the Middle East. Nonetheless, the Northeast and California import much of their oil. California imports about 15% of its refined fuel and 60% of its crude. About 30% of the latter comes from the Middle East.

The Jones Act is a major reason, in addition to California's anti-fossil fuel policies that have reduced in-state oil production and shuttered refineries. As we recently reported, some shippers are circumventing the Jones Act by routing gasoline from the Gulf Coast to California through a pit-stop in the Bahamas. That's not fuel or cost efficient.

Waiving the Jones Act could reduce oil shipping costs and fuel prices at the margin in the Northeast and on the West Coast. If President Trump wants to improve affordability, how about calling on Congress to repeal the law, which increases prices during peacetime too?

The Gerrymander Boomerang in Virginia

Early voting began in Virginia last week, as Democrats seek the public's permission to gerrymander the state to the max. The ballot language for the April 21 referendum asks if voters want to let the Legislature adopt a new House map to "restore fairness," by which Democrats mean they'll be favored in four additional districts, so they can take 10 of the state's 11 seats.

What Trump started, Obama drives to Democratic advantage.

Barack Obama has now endorsed the referendum, because of course. "Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of our democracy, but right now they are under threat," Mr. Obama said in an online video last week. "This amendment gives you the power to level the playing field in the midterms this fall." What a way to characterize giving 9% of Virginia's seats to the GOP, in a state where President Trump won 46% of the vote in 2024.

The ironies abound. "I think we've got to end the practice of drawing our congressional districts so that politicians can pick their voters and not the other way around," Mr. Obama said during his last State of the Union address. "Let a bipartisan group do it."

Oh, an outfit like . . . the Virginia Redistricting Commission? In 2020 the state's voters gave 66% approval to a constitutional amendment to create that body, which has 16 members, split between Democrats and Republicans, lawmakers and citizens. But it ended up deadlocked after the 2020 census, a frequent problem of such commissions, so Virginia's current House map was drawn by bipartisan experts under the state Supreme Court's watch.

Now Mr. Obama calls for a gerrymandering exception in Virginia, rather than standing on principles he long espoused. "Changes in our political process—in not just who gets elected, but how they get elected—that will only happen when the American people demand it," Mr. Obama said in 2016. "What I'm suggesting is hard. It's a lot easier to be cynical." It certainly is.

Yet it was Mr. Trump who fired the opening salvo in this mid-decade gerrymander war. In hopes of avoiding a hostile House next year, and perhaps a third impeachment by Democrats, Mr. Trump pressured Texas to create a new House map that was sold as handing Republicans another four or five seats. If the President's polling stays dismal, it could mean fewer GOP gains or none at all.

In any case, California retaliated, and after 64% of voters there approved gerrymandering, its new map could hand Democrats another five seats. One of the Republican lawmakers at risk of being squeezed out, Rep. Kevin Kiley, formally quit the party on Monday, becoming the House's only independent. Mr. Kiley will continue to caucus with the GOP, though perhaps he also will feel more freedom to go his own way on tricky votes.

The public dislikes gerrymandering, and for good reason: A Virginia map that's tilted 10-1 for Democrats is less representative of the state overall, and likewise for a Missouri plan that's 7-1 for Republicans. Some states are still considering redistricting, so it's impossible to say how Mr. Trump's gambit will work out in November, but it could be a backfire. Meantime, the case for Congress to put some limits on partisan gerrymandering is gaining force.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

What's Missing From the 'Mississippi Miracle'

Shad White in his op-ed "The Limits of the 'Mississippi Miracle'" (March 9) cites a valid problem in regard to test gains made by elementary students not "sticking" as "children reach middle school." To teach "reasoning, reading for meaning and information processing," middle and high school teachers have to prepare and test students in passage comprehension using passages paired with comprehension questions. This type of assessment has to be proctored effectively and done silently. Popular methodologies today for middle and high schools stress group work, projects, technology, and an oppressive focus on math and science curriculums. Even in math and science classes this should be done with students silently solving word problems and reading scientific texts. Reading science has shown for decades that our current educational system needs to get its head out of the sand.

Students who fail these expectations and assessments should be retained and remediated. If this isn't done we will continue to have high levels of illiteracy at the secondary level and in adulthood. Phonics instruction gets kids in the door, then whole language comprehension needs to take over.

JASON OLIPHANT
Education Specialist Level II
Chatsworth, Calif.

Mr. White warns that "Mississippi's recent decision to kill school choice is a devastating policy development." In general, killing school choice isn't a real policy decision—it's following through on the implicit deal in teachers unions' massive donations.

As a 25-year high-school math teacher in Alameda, Calif., I've listened to all the specious, spurious, self-serving excuses for denying students and families educational choice. The school-choice opposition's main reason augured the inevitable success and popularity of private schools: Choice would diminish the ranks of mediocre, failing public schools. Implicit in this argument is the idea that minority children have a civic duty to remain in public schools, regardless of education quality.

Politicians who have taken money from teachers' unions should be required to recuse themselves from votes and discussions regarding educational choice. Furthermore, if politicians have children in private schools, they have essentially voted in favor of choice.

Why should they be permitted to deny choice to those who are less privileged?

JEFF SMITH
Alameda, Calif.

Forget Cultural Revolution, Bring Back Pinkie

Laura Jacobs's review of the Frick's Gainsborough exhibit ("Style and Station at the Frick," March 5) raises a powerful contrast with the famous English portraiture gallery at the Huntington Art Museum in California. For decades visitors to the Huntington have been captivated by the apparent gaze across the gallery between Thomas Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy" and Thomas Lawrence's young woman dubbed "Pinkie." Recently, Pinkie has been banished elsewhere and replaced by Kehinde Wiley's "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman." The Wiley portrait, in contemporary style, reflects the pose of the Blue Boy and, as the Huntington curator explains, "by using a portrait format associated with privilege, Wiley glorifies those who are marginalized and who have historically been subjugated. His paintings ask us to reconsider how representation reflects power."

One wonders whether Gainsborough deserves being swept up into this revisionist political judgment. The Frick show suggests that, particularly for a man of his time and circumstances, he doesn't. Gainsborough's art, the Frick's curator points out, could "subvert the rigid rules of British social class,"—as Ms. Jacobs puts it—"elevating sitters into gentility." Ms. Jacobs highlights that "his portrait of 'Ignatius Sancho' (1768), a black valet who was also a musician and writer, does not present him in the livery he surely wore but as a gentleman in a dark-blue coat." As she concludes "in the world according to Gainsborough, a noble nature trumps high birth."

Gainsborough and the art-loving public don't deserve the Wiley portrait's stare down across the Huntington gallery. Bring back Pinkie!

JEFF HUDSON
Rancho Santa Fe, Calif.

The Reality of Sen. Markey's Energy Mark Up

Regarding Sen. Ed Markey's (D., Mass.) letter "The President's LNG Moves Put America Last" (March 9): Perhaps if Massachusetts didn't have such absurdly high taxes and stifling regulations, its citizens could turn their lights on and heat their homes without a problem. We continue to hear this "affordability" chant from Democrats in an effort to pin the ludicrous energy policies adopted in the last administration on President Trump. It was also Democrats in other out-of-control blue states like California who required employers to pay employees a minimum wage of $20 per hour for fast-food workers. Consequently, establishments had to cut staff or raise prices.

Democrats caused the current affordability spike over a four-year period in which they insisted that inflation was transitory only for the annual rate to rise over 9%. And now the Trump administration is supposed to fix it in 12 months?

It's truly unfortunate that many voters don't fully grasp that for Democrats the priority is always party before country. It almost feels like they're rooting for the mullahs in Iran. Sen. John Fetterman may be the one exception, and as a native Pennsylvanian and Marine veteran, I am truly proud of him.

LT. COL. LARRY KOVALCHIK (RET.)
Marine Corps
Boerne, Texas

Self Defense Minus Defense?

I am more than tired of people like Gov. Gavin Newsom who vociferously state they fully support Israel's right to defend itself until Israel actually defends itself ("Would Gavin Newsom Deny Arms to Israel?" Review & Outlook, March 6). Iran has attacked Israel for decades, through its proxies and more recently directly via ballistic missiles and drones. Israel saw an opportunity to eliminate Iran's missile stockpiles and production facilities at a moment when Iran's air defenses were at their weakest and the mullahs faced serious civil unrest. A way to have fewer missiles fired at homes and hospitals? This is the sine qua non of self-defense. Yet Mr. Newsom, supposed vigorous Israel defender, suggests he'd deny Israel weapons needed to defend itself.

I know Israelis who say they have no need for supporters like Mr. Newsom and hope he never gets elected to higher office.

RICHARD SCHLUSSEL
Englewood, N.J.

Perhaps Mr. Markey now recognizes the importance of America's LNG boom and will move to repeal the Jones Act and support natural-gas pipelines into New England.

These barriers, not exports, are the primary reason the region remains dependent on imported liquified natural gas rather than abundant domestic natural gas. As a result, Massachusetts households in 2025 paid roughly 60% more for natural gas than consumers in most other parts of the U.S.

GREGG OSENKOWSKI
Lakeville, Mass.

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Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"It's not just a sandbox. I happen to do some of my best thinking here."

OPINION

Partisanship on Iran Is Dangerous

By David Boies



DVIDS/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS

A U.S. Navy destroyer fires a Tomahawk missile.

Every past president since Bill Clinton, Republican and Democrat alike, has declared that Iran couldn't be permitted to develop nuclear weapons. Not one acted to prevent it. Every president since Ronald Reagan has condemned Iran's role in terrorism against American citizens, interests and allies. Not one acted to stop it. Instead each president left his successor with a more dangerous Iran and a more complicated threat to address.

Last June President Trump undertook a limited military operation designed to interrupt Iran's development of nuclear weapons and discourage the country from continuing its nuclear program. In the face of Iran's refusal to forswear nuclear weapons and evidence that it was rapidly increasing the number, sophistication and range of its missiles, Mr. Trump began the current military campaign.

If he hadn't acted, his successor would have been left with an even more dangerous choice than his predecessors left him. Three or four years from now, the Iranian missiles now hitting Iran's neighbors could be hitting Berlin or London, perhaps even New York or Washington—perhaps with a nuclear device or at least a dirty bomb.

Trump is doing the right thing for the U.S., and we Democrats should judge the war on the merits.

No sensible person wants a war, a president least of all. Wars destroy lives, waste treasure and usually are unpopular. But the widespread hostility to this military action seems untethered to any serious discussion of the merits. What is the alternative?

Obviously, few are prepared to say it is simply to permit religious madmen who swear "death to America" and back up their threats with terrorism to secure nuclear weapons and the capability to deliver them. The scope and scale of Iran's response show how much its military capabilities have progressed, and how dangerous it would have been to permit them to increase further.

For three decades we have tried everything that each president could think of. We've tried being nice, talking tough, moral suasion, negotiated agreement, economic sanctions. None worked. The problem is that there is only one language Iran's leaders understand.

I understand some of the hostility to Mr. Trump's action. The isolationist wing of the Republican Party and the pacifist wing of the Democratic Party each are wrapped in the fantasy that we can afford to ignore the capabilities and intentions of enemies because they are thousands of miles away. Two hundred years ago that view was credible. One hundred years ago it was plausible. Today it takes only one missile carrying a nuclear or dirty bomb to get through our defenses, or one such device smuggled into this country, to devastate a city.

I also understand—and deplore—the fringes of both parties that apparently hate Israel and Jews so much that they oppose any action to neutralize Israel's enemies.

What is harder to understand, and particularly troubling for our country, is opposition rooted simply in antipathy toward Mr. Trump himself. We used to say that politics stops at the water's edge. That was never completely true; the willingness to bludgeon a president over foreign policy for domestic political gain is as old as Vice President Thomas Jefferson's attacks on President John Adams. Yet for most of our history we have given the president the benefit of the doubt.

More important, criticisms have historically been based on policy differences over the military action at hand, not knee-jerk opposition to the president himself. Many Republicans supported Mr. Clinton's military actions and President Obama's surge in Afghanistan; many Democrats supported President George W. Bush's actions in Afghanistan and (at least initially) Iraq. More Republicans than Democrats probably supported President Lyndon B. Johnson's actions in Vietnam.

More important still, even when we believed a president's actions were misguided, we almost always wanted him to succeed if possible. Some efforts to curtail what the president is doing in Iran seem motivated simply by a desire not to give him a win—even if it means a loss for America.

When North Korea invaded South Korea President Harry S. Truman acted to stop it. It was so unpopular that Truman didn't seek re-election in 1952. Dwight Eisenhower was elected on the promise that he would go to Korea and end the war. But while Truman was president, lawmakers on both sides supported Truman, even when he removed the popular Gen. Douglas MacArthur from his command.

Truman's successful defense of South Korea began a four-decade bipartisan effort to contain, and ultimately end, communism as a global threat. One wonders what the result would have been if he faced a country as divided and partisan as today's.

Republicans, including Mr. Trump, bear a share of the blame for the divisiveness and extreme partisanship that has stunted our ability to cooperate and work together. Those of us who generally oppose Mr. Trump but who recognize the threat Iran poses need to support the military action not because we owe anything to Mr. Trump but because we owe it to ourselves, our country and our children.

If we opposed the war and succeeded in pressuring Mr. Trump to curtail it before the mission is accomplished, we would have the satisfaction of defeating someone we generally oppose, which might help ourselves politically. But America would be worse for it.

America's national security is too important to hold hostage to partisanship. We Democrats need to begin by asking what our position would be, and why, if the action had been taken by Mr. Clinton, Mr. Obama or Mr. Biden. I'm not counting on it, but maybe in 2029, when a Democrat is in the White House, our Republican neighbors will return the favor, and judge that president's efforts to keep our nation safe on the merits and not merely obstruct.

If we believe that Iran presents a serious threat, we need to support the president on this issue. There's plenty to disagree with him about, and we don't need to like or admire him. But on Iran we should be on common ground. Not primarily because we want to reduce partisanship in foreign affairs—although that is conceivable. Not because the voters will reward us for a more measured response—although I hope they will. But because it is the right thing to do for our country, our children and the Democrat who will succeed Mr. Trump as president.

Mr. Boies is a founding partner of the law firm Boies, Schiller & Flexner.

Iran War Will Lower Energy Prices

By Peter Navarro

President Trump's decision to confront Iran's advancing nuclear program, stockpiles of ballistic missiles, and promotion of terrorism addresses an urgent national-security threat. It also tackles an overlooked problem: For more than four decades, Iran's rogue behavior has imposed a hidden tax on the world economy through higher oil prices and slower growth. Call it the "Iran Terror Premium."

Roughly a quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade transits the Persian Gulf, much of it through the narrow Strait of Hormuz. When markets price crude oil, they must account for the risk that conflict, sabotage and terrorism will interrupt these flows. Iran creates that risk through its own forces and through proxy groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis and militias in Iraq, which have targeted energy infrastructure, shipping routes and regional oil facilities.

Even when no oil fields are shut down and no tankers are blocked, the risk of disruption itself pushes prices higher. In this way, oil markets behave like insurance markets: The greater the perceived risk, the larger the premium.

The risk of regime violence has long been baked into the global price of oil and gas—and everything else.

Economists and market analysts have measured this effect in several ways. Dario Caldara and Matteo Iacoviello's Geopolitical Risk Index is often used to show that spikes in geopolitical tension are accompanied by higher oil prices. Research by Lutz Kilian, Michael Plante and Alexander Richter at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas finds that even an increasing probability of supply disruption can push oil prices higher. Market analysts—from major banks to surveys of energy economists—commonly estimate that tensions involving Iran add roughly $5 to $15 a barrel to global oil prices under normal conditions. During major crises, like today's, oil prices may surge above $100 a barrel.

Oil remains one of the world's most important economic inputs, affecting transportation, manufacturing, agriculture and trade. Even modest increases in price ripple through the global economy in the form of higher production costs, reduced household purchasing power and tighter financial conditions.

International Monetary Fund research suggests that a sustained 10% increase in oil prices shaves 0.1 to 0.2 percentage point off global growth the following year. Applying that rule of thumb to a persistent $5- to $15-a-barrel Iran-related premium—roughly a 7% to 21% oil shock at current price levels—suggests a drag of about 0.1% to 0.4% on global output. At today's roughly $115 trillion world economy, that translates into losses of about $100 billion to $450 billion per year. Over a decade, the cumulative burden reaches into the trillions; over a quarter century, it can approach $10 trillion—roughly the combined annual economic output of Germany and Japan.

The burden of the Iran Terror Premium rarely appears as a dramatic economic shock. Instead, it behaves more like a parasite on the global economy—quietly draining growth through slightly higher fuel prices, transportation costs and production expenses year after year.

The world has tolerated this situation for decades, but the economic logic is clear. If the geopolitical risk associated with Iran were reduced, oil prices would fall toward their underlying supply-and-demand equilibrium. Market evidence suggests equilibrium prices could be well below $60 a barrel.

President Trump has made this point. Military confrontation may cause temporary spikes in oil prices, but once Iran's threat to global energy markets is removed, the geopolitical risk premium should fall—leaving prices lower.

If that happens, the benefits will extend far beyond the Middle East. Across the world economy, production costs will fall while a persistent drag on growth is removed and household purchasing power is strengthened.

Confronting Iran's destabilizing behavior is first and foremost a matter of national security. But it also promises to reduce the persistent geopolitical risk surrounding Persian Gulf energy flows and bring down the Iran Terror Premium.

Mr. Navarro is White House senior counselor for trade and manufacturing.

Europe's Insurgent Right Seems to Be Fizzling



POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

Sorry, JD and Elon: The Europe plan isn't working.

Vice President JD Vance, Elon Musk and segments of Trumpworld have spent more than a year trying to remake Europe in American national conservatives' image. This includes Mr. Musk's battle with the British establishment over unprosecuted rape gangs and free-speech suppression, Mr. Vance's flirtations with a far-right party in Germany, and American conservatives' longstanding and dysfunctional love affair with Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

The underlying premises are that Europe is primed for a takeover by the insurgent right as the great mass of the European public rebels against out-of-touch globalist-liberal elites, and that such a political revolution would be in America's national interest. Alas for this crew, Europeans appear not to agree.

Witness last weekend's elections in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, which includes Stuttgart. The political story Mr. Vance wants to highlight is the ascent of the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, but the biggest winner from the vote in this southwestern industrial center was—drumroll, please—the Green Party.

It's an instructive outcome. Ahead of the February 2025 national election, the AfD's rising popularity in this state was cause for concern in some quarters and excitement in others. The state is a bastion of prosperity in the former West Germany, far from the economically deprived former East German states that constitute the AfD's main stomping grounds. If the AfD was gaining support in BaWu, as the state is known, it could become popular anywhere—and the AfD doubled its share of the vote in the state, to nearly 19% from less than 10% in the 2021 national election.

Yet in the state election barely a year later, the AfD at around 18% slightly underperformed its vote share in the state in the national election. Voters instead turned to the Greens under the leadership of Cem Özdemir, a charismatic politician from his party's more pragmatic wing. Mr. Özdemir tempers the Greens' typical antipathy toward the internal combustion engine—important for a hub of auto manufacturing.

Apart from the Green Party upset in England, America should consider this welcome news.

This state election was idiosyncratic in the way local elections around the world always are. The key point is that, presented with a plausible governing option on the left, voters for various reasons didn't feel particularly tugged toward the insurgent right after all.

Something similar happened in a parliamentary by-election in Britain in February, recently mentioned in this space in passing but now worth a closer look. The center-left Labour Party of Prime Minister Keir Starmer was defending a seat in the northwest of England that the party had held in various forms for decades. Labour suffered a humiliating defeat, while the insurgent Reform UK party led by Nigel Farage consolidated its position as the leading opposition party on the right.

Yet the biggest winner (actually gaining the seat in Parliament) was the Green Party, which in Britain is insane in a way it isn't in Germany. The Greens captured the seat on the strength of a far-left economic message and a fair dose of foreign-policy pandering to local Muslim voting blocs. Again an idiosyncratic result driven by local factors as well as voters' frustrations with the direction of the nation. But an outcome that suggests that rather than Reform becoming the primary (and Trump-friendly) focus for Britain's electoral discontents, the country is entering into a period of starker competition between further left and further right.

Elsewhere, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, a Social Democrat, has called a snap election for later this month. Her center-left party is expected to perform quite well after her recent tussles with President Trump over Greenland. Far from catalyzing right-wing opposition to the status quo, Mr. Trump appears to have firmed up support for the center left among Danish voters keen to resist any rightward tilt in their politics.

And let's not forget Hungary. Mr. Orbán faces a potential electoral upset in an election next month at the hands of a more conventional center-right party. Far from entrenching a new form of neoreactionary national conservatism, Mr. Orbán's 16 years in power appear to be exasperating Hungarians with poor economic outcomes, widespread concerns about corruption, and serial embarrassments on the European stage.

With the exception of the rise of the Greens in Britain, these developments needn't be bad news for the U.S. or for American strategic interests in Europe. The German Greens have become in their way a more pro-North Atlantic Treaty Organization, pro-America party than the AfD Mr. Vance loves. Ditto for Ms. Frederiksen. Mr. Orbán has never been the staunch opponent of EU overreach he wanted the world to believe, and Hungary may well fare better under more normal center-right governance.

But these mixed trends for the insurgent right are embarrassing for American politicians who thought they could stage-manage a conservative revolution in Europe. If that happens to be you, this spring provides an opportunity for a rethink.

Mr. Fix-It's Funeral

By Danny Heitman

As a man in his 60s, I've been to my share of bereavement services—but only one took place in front of a cash register. After Bill Boyd, who ran my neighborhood hardware store, died recently, his family decided to hold a memorial gathering on the sales floor. It seemed the best venue to honor a merchant who had spent some of his best years roaming aisles of primer and paint, screwdrivers, hammers, socket wrenches and the thousand other things people need to keep their lives mended and whole.

The management suspended business on a Sunday afternoon so that friends and customers could share food, fellowship and memories as they crowded near the front counter to salute a man many of us knew fondly as "Mr. Bill."

My own connection with Bill started on my first day of homeownership nearly three decades ago. I'd stopped by our house after signing the sales agreement and discovered that the pull chain inside one of our toilets had snapped. As a longtime renter, I'd grown accustomed to leaving such problems to the maintenance guy at my apartment complex. Now, with the ink still wet on my mortgage, I remembered I'd have to fix things myself.

Flustered, I made my inaugural visit to Bill's store, where he patiently walked me through what I needed to set things right. He remained a fixture in my life whenever I hung a window shade, replaced a door lock, changed a light switch or unclogged a drain—in short, whatever our old house asked of us in its daily struggle against decline.

Although I'm a writer with no talent for handyman projects, Bill always assured me and his other customers that we were up to the task. His sense of possibility helped shape my view of life beyond matters of home improvement, making me more resolved about the roles I'd assumed as a husband and father.

In this way, Bill's cadre of customers became a can-do community, and our small corner of the world was better for it. Near the register book where mourners signed their names, someone posted a few of Bill's treasured truisms. "Take control of your life" was one of his favorites.

A couple of days after Bill's send-off, I was back at the hardware store. A kitchen cabinet had come undone, and I needed a bracket and some glue to piece it back together. As Mr. Bill would have told me, these things aren't going to fix themselves.

Mr. Heitman is a columnist for the Baton Rouge Advocate and editor of Phi Kappa Phi's Forum magazine.

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'Without fear and without favour'

How the Iran war will change global business

Damage from the conflict is already having an impact on corporate strategy

Management consultants often ask their clients: "What does success look like?" As war in the Middle East approaches its third week, companies are increasingly having to consider the opposite question: "What does failure look like? And what might we need to change as a result of the conflict?"

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, corporate boards have grown used to factoring geoeconomic risk into their decision-making. Speaking in late 2023, former UK cabinet secretary Lord Mark Sedwill warned about "combination risk", where diverse, apparently unrelated events create a perilous polycrisis.

The Iran conflict is violently combining a number of such risks, including market volatility, supply chain disruption, inflation pressure and the physical security of staff and infrastructure.

Whether US President Donald Trump declares victory or not, Iran's deliberate effort to stifle the flow of crude oil and its byproducts through the Gulf is already having a knock-on effect on the price of fuel, the cost of sulphur and sulphuric acid, and the supply of helium. The tremors could shake companies in sectors from fertilisers, key ingredients of which pass through the Strait of Hormuz, and the agribusiness industry which uses them, to semiconductors, which are manufactured using sulphuric acid, helium and bromine.

Tourism in the Gulf, and possibly beyond, will be affected as nervous travellers delay or reroute holiday plans. Data centres belonging to Amazon Web Services have already been hit by drones. Iran has this week threatened to set its sights on US and Israeli banks in the region after one of its financial institutions was struck. Companies in Iran's target zone are rushing to buy political violence insurance, once deemed an optional extra but now a must-have.

Chief executives may argue they have been here before and come through largely unscathed. Not all crises have a lasting global macroeconomic impact and sometimes a knee-jerk corporate response can add to uncertainty and instability rather than offset it. The pandemic had a whiplash effect on supply chains, first closing them down and then reopening them in an almost equally unexpected resurgence of demand. Business found a way through.

But the prospect of continuing disruption from war and its aftermath will push businesses again to carry more inventory in a just-in-case, rather than just-in-time, approach. That will impose costs and add to the risk of stagflation, which will in turn require a strategic adjustment by companies. Lasting instability in the region is bound to lead to reassessment of short- and medium-term investment plans. Analysts already believe companies will have to consider a permanent change in how, where and in what form they source power for their operations.

> Lasting instability in the region is bound to lead to reassessment of short- and medium-term investment plans

Not all of the consequences will be malign. Previous oil shocks led to structural and strategic changes, some of them positive. Countries that were dependent on oil shifted away from energy-intensive manufacturing. Europe and other regions promoted efficiency. Cars became smaller and more economical — and more ecological — to run. Financial markets innovated to produce tools that would allow companies to hedge against market volatility. Boards learnt to use scenarios to plan for an unpredictable future.

Boardrooms tend to follow the rule that they should avoid precipitate changes to strategy. That is wise. But given the lasting damage inflicted even in the first weeks of this conflict, and the absence of an easy exit for the combatants, they should ask themselves whether this will be the rare crisis that proves to be the exception.

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Opinion Economics

In a game of Top Trumps, which chokepoint wins?

Ann Kiernan



Soumaya Keynes



Imagine a deck of cards, each illustrated with a different instrument of economic warfare. Examples include export controls, financial sanctions, and the one currently giving commodity traders nervous breakdowns: halted traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. Each weapon is assigned three scores: one for economic potency, another summarising the scope for self-harm and a third for durability. Call the game Top Trumps: Chokepoints edition.

Start with marine bottlenecks, by which we mean the canals, straits, channels or seas that ships pass through. A study by Lincoln Pratson of Duke University counted 13, estimating that in 2019 roughly four-fifths of the world's trade flowing between non-neighbouring countries passed through one.

In most cases, the economic damage

> The most powerful geoeconomic weapon is no good if it blows up the weaponiser too

score associated with choking off these routes would be a lowly two or three out of five. Closing the busy English Channel, for example, would lead trade to reroute around the top of the UK, taking several days longer. Closing the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal or the Bab el-Mandeb strait (connecting the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean) would add as much as a month to some journeys. But ultimately ships should find other paths to their destinations.

The Danish straits, the Bosphorus Strait and the Strait of Hormuz are different: they lead on to cul-de-sacs, which minimises the opportunities for rerouting. When Pratson analysed the top items at risk from clogging, two stood out: in 2019 the Bosphorus Strait supplied 11 per cent of cereal supplies, while the Strait of Hormuz handled 14 per cent of the world's trade in mineral fuels by value. So they get economic damage scores of 4/5. And commodities traders do now deserve sympathy.

Why not 5/5? Partly because there are other sources of energy out there and also because as weapons go, it's not very well targeted. Analysts at Goldman Sachs predicted the effects of oil rising to $100 a barrel would slow global growth by about 0.4 percentage points, but also that the losses for energy importers such as the euro area, the UK and India would be at least double the size of those in the US — and that's the nation dropping the most bombs.

Other chokepoints get lower damage scores because they can be wriggled around. Edward Fishman, author of *Chokepoints: How economic warfare is changing the world*, confirmed that Britain's seeming monopoly over shipping insurance should fall into that category, because of how both Russia and Iran found ways of coming up with (admittedly imperfect) substitutes after sanctions restricted their access in the 2010s and 2020s.

In this game, monopoly power matters. Over the 2010s, for example, a group of economists estimated that the western coalition powers went from supplying 94 per cent of Russia's financial services to more like 84 per cent. And over that same period, their measure of the sanctions' power over Russia approximately halved. Damage score: 2/5.

Explicit export controls on goods and services might be punchier. Some European Central Bank economists estimated last year that were the Chinese to play their best hand, the hit to spending would be 0.3 per cent in the US and 0.4 per cent in the EU. I'll score the damage associated with those at 5/5, accounting for the risk that switching away from Chinese components is harder than assumed. Boldly, they reckon the hit to a Chinese bloc from western controls would be even larger, hitting spending by about 1.4 per cent. Another 5/5.

The most powerful economic weapon is no good if it blows up the weaponiser too. Shutting down the Strait of Hormuz hurts Iran's oil sales. And funnily enough, taxing one's own imports doesn't come cheap either. The Yale Budget Lab has estimated that the Trump administration's latest set of tariffs is likely to hurt US GDP by about six times as much as it will damage the rest of the world. Both get high blowback scores of 4/5.

Durability matters too, or the risk that in using a weapon, you push the target to undermine its power. These are the most controversial scores of all. How long will the dollar's primacy last? Will China wean itself off western chip technology faster than the west can crack China's dominance in rare earths processing? Geography is lasting and ship teleportation isn't an option, but what if we could wean ourselves off seaborne fossil fuels?

I'll hand out lots of high durability scores for now, but not before noting some players' efforts. Jesse Schreger of Columbia University shared findings that after being hit by an export control, Chinese companies were twice as likely as American ones to invest in research and development. In this game, the scores could change.

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AI outages expose Amazon's 'moral crumple zone'

Rafe Rosner-Uddin's report on Amazon's emergency meeting of its engineers to discuss a recent spate of outages (March 11) identifies a "trend of incidents" linked to generative artificial intelligence. However, the management's response — requiring senior engineers to sign off on all AI-assisted changes — misses the deeper structural crisis.

What Amazon is experiencing is a breach of what the management coach Dan Sullivan called the "complexity ceiling", which describes what happens when a business becomes too complex to manage, resulting in stagnating returns and burnout. In Amazon's case, by eliminating 16,000 roles while simultaneously deploying tools that generate code at machine velocity, the company has created a fundamental capacity mismatch. The volume of AI-generated changes awaiting human review may far exceed the remaining engineers' ability to verify them.

The requirement for senior sign-off does not restore control; it merely creates what the cultural anthropologist Madeleine Clare Elish calls a "moral crumple zone". It positions senior staff to absorb accountability for the logic of systems they no longer have the time to substantively review. This is governance by ritual rather than by insight.

More concerning is the invisible collapse of the apprenticeship pipeline. Professional judgment is not an innate trait; it is forged through the cognitive friction of entry-level analysis that Amazon is now automating away.

By treating junior coding as a mere inefficiency to be optimised, the company is hollowing out the institutional memory required to recognise a "high blast radius" before it crystallises.

Amazon may be the first to summon its engineers to such a "deep dive", but it will not be the last. Until boards ask whether their oversight capacity matches the velocity of AI-assisted deployment — and design accountability architecture accordingly — organisational amnesia will continue to be the price of algorithmic efficiency.

Vsevolod Shabad
Independent Researcher, University of Liverpool, Bristol, UK

Real reason Britain should not scrap its oil profits levy

I am afraid that Lex put forward an unconvincing case for abolishing the Energy Profits Levy to encourage new development of oil and gas in the North Sea (Lex, March 10).

While accepting that UK production is too small to make any difference to international market prices, Lex argues that new oil and gas production would generate taxes and jobs. The supposedly "unfair" total tax rate of 78 per cent on UK production is the same as the marginal tax rate faced by producers in the Norwegian North Sea. And the tax benefits are not what they seem.

For instance, even with the Energy Profits Levy on windfall profits, the total tax revenue from oil and gas production over the past three years has been £19.6bn. This is less than half the £44bn that the government spent on measures to protect consumers from high energy prices during the last fossil fuel crisis after Russia invaded Ukraine.

However, the main reason for preventing further development in the North Sea is that it allows the UK to be more credible in arguing for other fossil fuel producers to leave their reserves in the ground. The International Energy Agency has pointed out that current reserves of oil, gas and coal, if consumed, would fill the atmosphere with so much carbon dioxide that the impacts of climate change would become unacceptably catastrophic.

As the IEA has stressed, the world needs a combination of policies that address both the supply of and demand for fossil fuels to avoid dangerous climate change. The latest fossil fuel crisis highlights once again the urgent need for such policies.

Bob Ward
Policy and Communications Director, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2, UK

How Jenny's Side Party kept the Royal Navy shipshape

It is an embarrassment that the Royal Navy is so reduced it cannot send a proper warship to the Middle East. However, surely after a delay of a week HMS Dragon could have received a coat of paint instead of leaving Gosport looking, at least in the photographs I saw, like the proverbial rust bucket ("Delayed navy deployment spotlights cuts", Report, March 6). A crew of side painters could at least have covered up the rust!

In Hong Kong it would have been done. Even into the 1980s, an organisation called Jenny's Side Party — made up largely of women, Chinese and Vietnamese — would paint sitting or standing on planks hanging on ropes over the side of the ship.



The side party always welcomed ships to HMS Tamar, the Royal Navy's base in Hong Kong, and the captain did a deal to get the ship painted while the crew enjoyed a bit of shore leave.

That HMS Dragon left Gosport in such a condition only confirms what many people say — the Royal Navy is a laughing stock compared with the navies of France and other EU nations.

We know the carriers and other vessels, because of lack of maintenance, spend more time in port than on the high seas, but to show what little we do have, without a bit of spit 'n' polish, is a shame.

Peter Double
Mildenhall, Suffolk, UK

Pensions — from Bismarck to Pennsylvania Railroad

When the German retirement age was set at 65 in the 1910s, Valentina Romei makes the point that "life expectancy was below 50" ("Five ways demographics are changing the economy", The Big Read, March 6). In fact, the historical contrast with today is even sharper than you suggest.

When the German state pension system was established by Otto von Bismarck in 1889, he set the retirement age at 70. Bismarck himself was 74 at the time.

The corporate pension plan of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1900 adopted a mandatory retirement age of 70. Early pension plans of American states likewise set 70 as the pensionable age. Correspondingly, the 1854 hymn, "Work, for the Night is Coming" (sadly no longer in the Methodist hymnal) urged us to keep working "under the sunset skies" and to "Work till the last beam fadeth".

On average these days, that is a long way past 65.

Alex J Pollock
Senior Fellow, Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama; Lake Forest, IL, US

Donkeys of war — the Brits helping the Ukrainians

On May 11 2024, Life & Arts published an article about the so-called "donkeys of war", where your reporter, Hugh Carnegy, joined a small band of volunteers driving donated pick-up trucks from Britain to Ukraine. I mulled. I procrastinated. I wanted to match passion with purpose. But in September last year, attending an FT conference in London, where I listened to Lea Ypi and Nick Clegg discuss immigration, I sat next to a woman who was learning the Ukrainian national anthem for her trip the following week. I teared up. Finally I committed and came back just last week after delivering a Nissan Navara and 12 boxes of children's clothes to Lviv for the group "Drive 2 Save Lives". My car from Whitstable, in Kent, and 17 others were parked up outside Lviv town hall, while we were treated to a show of drones and the daily memorial to the fallen. What a great city, what great people, what a great way to offer real help. Thanks for the inspiration.

Martin Hill
Brighton, East Sussex, UK

Here's a creative solution to the student debt problem

Chris Smyth's report "Student loan scheme saddles graduates with £40,000 of debt" (March 12) provides useful details linking student loan interest rates to retail price index (RPI) inflation plus a premium of up to 3 per cent. To help graduates, the government should relate interest rate repayments to consumer price index (CPI) inflation as well as the unemployment rate for 18 to 24-year-olds. The latter is an appropriate economic indicator since it roughly covers the duration of time students spend in university education (including on postgraduate degrees).

In this context, student loan repayments should be going down when the 18 to 24-year-olds' unemployment rate rises above its recent historical levels (such as the 18 to 24-year-olds average unemployment rate over the previous three years).

This would signal stress conditions and therefore challenging economic times in the labour market for graduates (to be).

In practical terms, the interest rate could then be equal to something like: CPI inflation (currently 3 per cent) minus 0.25 times the difference between 14 per cent and 12.1 per cent. This would give you an interest rate of approximately 2.5 per cent, where 14 per cent is the latest figure for the 18-24 unemployment rate, 12.1 per cent is the 2023-25 average, and 0.25 is the "discount weight" chosen to reflect labour market pressures.

Professor Costas Milas
University of Liverpool, UK

Blunt visa crackdown is bad for all UK universities

While a fair and robust immigration system is something that all universities should support, the government must distinguish between holding individual universities accountable for compliance failures and sending hostile signals to the world's brightest students ("Enrolment at London campus plunges amid visa crackdown", Report, March 9).

International students contribute £37.4bn to the UK economy. These students support our local economies and contribute the skills needed to drive our national growth.

A blunt visa crackdown puts this at risk far beyond one London campus. While other countries build their global prestige for higher education, Britain is losing ground in one of our most successful exports.

As members of the Alliance for International Students, we believe we must not let individual examples shape policies that have far-reaching consequences for our higher education system and the future of our economy.

Henri Murison
Northern Powerhouse Partnership
Joan Concannon
University of York
Dan Monnery
Northumbria University
Kirsty Walker
UCL
Tim Watkinson
Leeds University
Leigh-Sara Timberlake
Business South

Older wine drinkers

I've been following with interest the Bordeaux vs Burgundy debate, prompted by Jancis Robinson's excellent column (February 14).

From the soon-to-be-70 Dick Sands, and his "Bordeaux red is 'one of the great tastes of the world'" (February 27) to the "clapback" of the octogenarian Andrew Creese (March 3), who offered ironic commiserations to "young Dick Sands" with the comment: "We have all been through our Bordeaux stage."

The most recent letter from Julian Verden espoused what he called the "gentle" virtues of Burgundy ("Soft wines, softer politics?", March 9).

As a 32-year-old, I do not have a refined enough palate to warrant offering my own opinion. But given Verden threw his hat in the ring, I'm disappointed he didn't provide his age, as the other writers had.

Age is an important qualifier in this particular discussion.

In any case, I do hope that Dick and Andrew make amends and I wish them — and Julian — all the best.

Billy Lennon
Publisher, Cleveland Review of Books, Cleveland, OH, US

Opinion

Iran is playing a long game

Vali Nasr

Two weeks into the war, Iran's strategy is coming into focus. It initially set out to absorb American and Israeli strikes while retaliating against Israeli cities and US bases with drones and missiles in an attempt to deplete their stockpiles of interceptors. The long-term plan was to preserve larger and more lethal missiles for the second phase of the war.

But Iran has also deployed a parallel — and potentially more effective — strategy: waging war on the global economy. Iranian missiles and drones attacked oil and gas facilities in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE along with oil tankers in the Gulf, and restricted passage through the Strait of Hormuz, in effect closing it and leading to spikes in oil prices.

In his State of the Union address on February 24, days before the war started, US President Donald Trump barely mentioned Iran. But he dwelled extensively on gas prices, inflation and the state of the economy. Iranians understand that bombs and missiles may go unnoticed by many Americans, but gas prices and inflation will not.

They have been proved right. As the conflict spread to the Gulf, energy prices surged, rattling global markets. Although Iran had warned of exactly such a scenario, the US was caught off-guard. Its unpreparedness only accentuated fear of an impending crisis.

But Iran is not going after energy supplies alone. Its drones and missiles have deeply impacted other vital industries in the Gulf, from tech companies to airlines. It has attacked Amazon's data centres, Dubai's airport and port facilities in a number of Gulf countries. Disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz also impacts container traffic carrying commodities and industrial products such as petrochemicals and the fertiliser necessary for agriculture.

In war, geography matters as much as technology. Iran commands the entire northern shore of the Gulf, looming large over energy fields on its southern shore and all that passes through its waters. Its Houthi allies are perched at the entrance to the Red Sea and along the passage to the Suez Canal; Iran is thus perfectly positioned to squeeze the global economy from both sides of the Arabian Peninsula.

Those in command of Iran today are veterans of asymmetric wars in Iraq and Syria. They are now applying the same strategy to fighting the US on the battlefield of the global economy. Drones, short-range missiles and mines setting tankers and ports on fire can have the same effect IEDs had in Iraq, only with greater impact — disrupting global supply chains and sending oil prices higher.

> Tehran will not accept a ceasefire until Washington grasps the global cost of waging this war

Iran's missile attacks against a depleting stock of Israeli interceptors helped push the US and Israel towards a ceasefire the last time the two attacked in June 2025. Waging war on the global economy could, however, produce a different outcome this time.

Iran could sustain its counteroffensive more easily and for far longer. Furthermore, a ceasefire alone will not lift the shadow of risk that Iran has imposed over the Gulf. That is why Iranian leaders are saying they will not accept a ceasefire until Washington fully grasps the global economic cost of waging this war. Businesses, investors and tourists may not return to the Gulf states if they assume that war could resume again.

Unless the US is prepared to invade Iran to remove the Islamic republic's leaders and then stay there to ensure stability and security, confidence in the Gulf will only return if the US and Iran arrive at a durable ceasefire. The pressure is building on Washington to seek one. It is not just Gulf states that want an end to the fighting, but also countries across Asia, Africa and even Europe, all of which fear serious economic crises unless the fighting stops soon.

In recent days, the US and Israel have increased the pace and intensity of their bombing campaign on the assumption that they can force Iran to collapse or surrender. The Iranian regime is in turn prepared to wage asymmetric warfare on the global economy for long enough to persuade Washington to view a political settlement as the only option.

Iran says it will only accept a ceasefire with international guarantees for its sovereignty, which would probably mean a direct role for Russia and China. It may also demand compensation for war damages and a verifiable ceasefire in Lebanon. The US would then have to agree to some form of the nuclear deal it left on the table in Geneva in February and commit to lifting sanctions.

Iran's leaders entered this war with the goal of ensuring it will be the last one. Either it breaks them or radically changes the country's circumstances. They are betting on surviving long enough and squeezing the global economy hard enough to realise that goal.

The writer, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, is the author of 'Iran's Grand Strategy'

Silence is not golden when it comes to science and AI

Geraint Rees

By conventional metrics, artificial intelligence in science is an unqualified success. My former doctoral student, Sir Demis Hassabis, received the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 2024 for his work predicting protein structures using an AI model.

More broadly, a recent study of over 41mn research papers published in Nature found that scientists who adopt AI methods publish three times as many papers, attract five times more citations and reach leadership positions faster than those who do not.

Yet a second, less comfortable pattern is also emerging. As AI-augmented research proliferates, the scope of scientific inquiry is contracting.

In their research study, academics at Tsinghua University found that AI adoption reduced the number of topics studied by 5 per cent and led engagement between researchers working on related questions to fall by 24 per cent. The technology that accelerates individual careers seems to be simultaneously narrowing what science explores.

AI is an amplifier. It works most effectively where data is rich and reliable. This includes established problems with large datasets and clear benchmarks.

Researchers facing career incentives that reward output are focusing on where AI delivers. But the collective result is convergence on the data-rich centre. This risks a systematic withdrawal from the edges where data is structurally difficult to collect or so complex that existing frameworks cannot yet interpret it. The tools that reduce friction also risk reducing exploration.

> Where data is abundant, the technology delivers. Where it is sparse, there is less incentive for research

The pattern is easy to imagine in any field. Where data is abundant — well-studied diseases, popular model organisms, established experimental systems — AI delivers. Where data is sparse, there is less incentive to carry out research. These areas of silence are the domains where theory has generated predictions that no experiment has yet tested.

The investment case for AI is therefore incomplete without the investment case for data. We should not just be mining what previous generations collected but also collecting what future generations will need.

For many decades, immunology was a data-poor, institutionally marginalised field. The mechanisms by which the immune system recognises and destroys aberrant cells were poorly understood, technically difficult to study and commercially unattractive. It took sustained public investment over decades to build the data and conceptual infrastructure that made everything else possible.

The blood-brain barrier is today where immunology was fifty years ago. Dementia, motor neurone disease and drug-resistant epilepsy together affect millions of people, yet delivering therapeutic molecules to the brain remains largely unsolved. The transport dynamics are extraordinarily difficult to measure in living systems. The comprehensive dataset needed to guide this complex work does not yet exist. But the immunology precedent suggests what can happen when you build it.

Governments investing in AI should consider making equivalent investments in the data collection that AI currently cannot reach.

AI could assist by creating a systematic map of the unmeasured frontiers, ranked by the gap between what existing theory predicts and what empirical observation has confirmed. This would tell governments and funders where investment in data collection would have the highest return.

The stakes are considerable. Science has been humanity's most reliable engine of long-term prosperity, but its productivity depends on maintaining a broad frontier of exploration. A system that narrows that frontier in exchange for short-term efficiency gains is a poor bargain.

The writer is vice-provost of research, innovation and global engagement at University College London

The wrong kind of money on the brain

BRITAIN

Stephen Bush



It's my fault. I should never have used that cursed monkey's paw to wish that Britain's political class would spend more time talking about making money. The biggest revelation in the "Mandelson files" — the release of government correspondence, relating to and with Peter Mandelson during his brief tenure as the UK ambassador to Washington and for half a year prior to that — is that the disgraced former cabinet minister received a £75,000 payout.

Following a consultation by the Bank of England, the next banknotes will feature native wildlife, and this was the landslide choice of 60 per cent of respondents. That, at least, I can't be blamed for: I voted for more historical figures. The change has been called the "definition of woke" by Nigel Farage. Winston Churchill "deserves better than to be replaced by a badger", says Sir Ed Davey. The Conservatives, meanwhile, produced a mock-up of a £5 note featuring Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer as a worm, claiming that this was what the government wanted instead of Churchill. (That the BoE decides what goes on our money appears to have passed them by.)

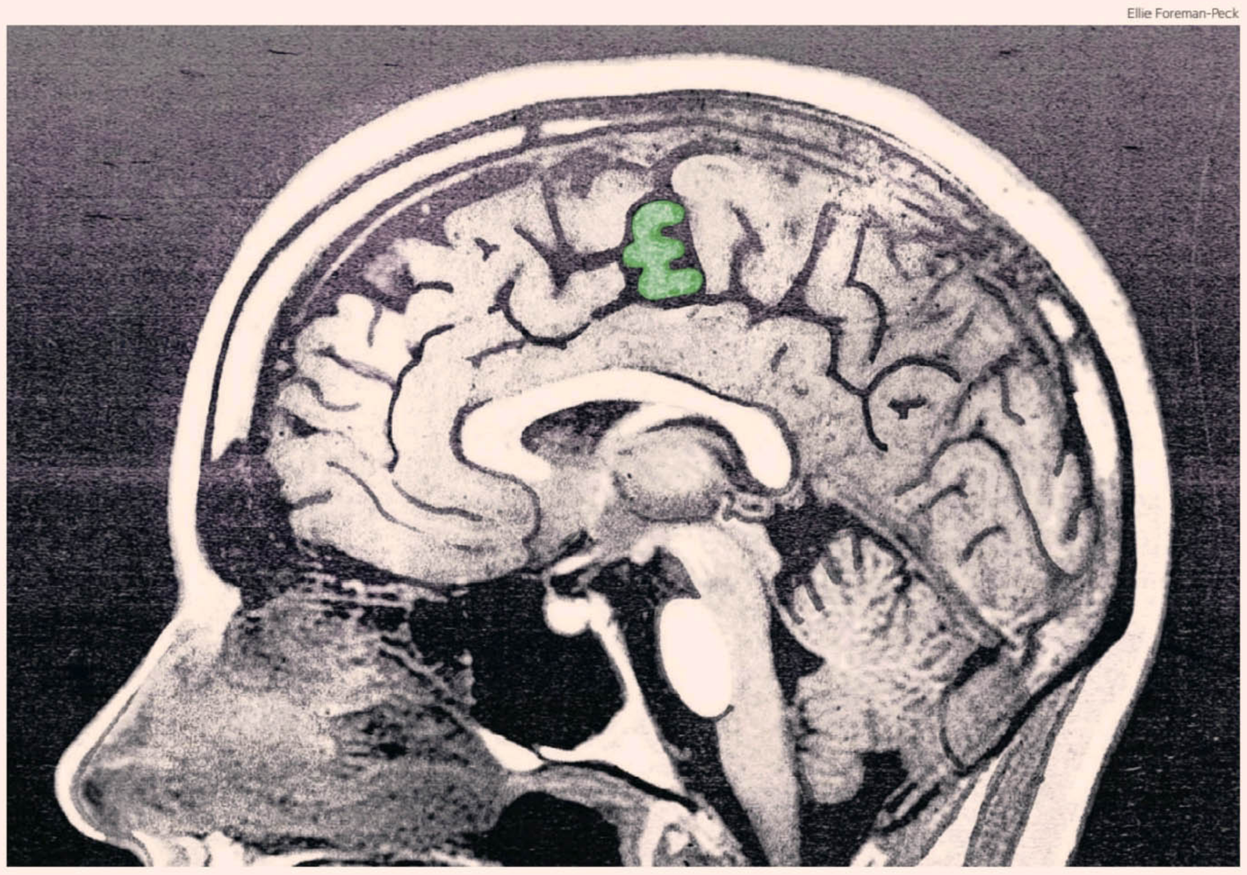
One of these stories matters more than the other — that Starmer's ill-advised appointment of Mandelson left the government paying out to dismiss him reveals a bigger problem with the prime minister's judgment. I defer to few on my enjoyment of history and my lack of interest in wildlife, but what the British public wants on banknotes they increasingly don't use is not worth expending any emotional energy on.

And yet both are taking up an outsized chunk of political argument in a week in which the price of oil has surged, nearly 500 mortgage products have been taken off the market and the chances of a prolonged war in Iran have increased. This is a reflection of a Westminster that struggles to talk seriously about most topics and in particular to talk frankly about the British economy.

For all the talk that the economy no longer matters at elections, this is visibly untrue. Yes, how you feel about so-called culture war topics decides where unhappy voters defect to. Those particularly exercised by immigration and keeping the UK outside the EU have abandoned the Conservatives and Labour for Reform. Voters who want to get back into the EU, are less bothered by immigration and are socially liberal have deserted Labour and the Tories for the Greens and Liberal Democrats.

But what unites the voters who have walked away from both main parties is that they are feeling the pinch economically. The best way to understand what is happening in British politics is that voters are holding two referendums in their heads: the first on how they feel about their own finances, the second on how they feel about Farage.

Ellie Foreman-Peck



Both Labour and the Conservatives are becoming parties of the most economically secure. Labour is the home for the most comfortably off working-age voters; the Conservatives are the party of pensioners who have paid off their mortgages and have generous pension schemes. They have lost, respectively, the support of young professionals in the private rented sector, and of pensioners on the new state pension or on less generous defined contribution schemes.

Some MPs do get this. On the Labour side, there is a growing awareness among backbenchers that they will have to be the principal and vocal generators of an intellectual renewal: Starmer lacks either the interest or, frankly, the capacity to oversee this himself. Many were heartened by Chris Curtis, the former pollster turned Labour MP, setting out, cleanly and clearly, that Labour's problem is that it is overseeing a crummy economy that has sent its voters off in multiple directions. All too often, however, the MPs and thinkers who have most influence over the prime minister meditate on what it reveals about Labour's soul that the party's remaining voters are quite so affluent. (Answer: it reveals nothing about Labour's soul and everything about the economy they have presided over, due to both bad luck and bad decisions.)

> Westminster struggles to talk seriously about most topics and in particular about the economy

Kemi Badenoch's leadership of the Conservatives is at its least disastrous when she returns to what were once traditional Tory themes of economic competence and fiscal restraint. But she is hamstrung by her own lack of genuine interest in economics and her party's continuing commitment to Brexit.

Labour's problem, and that of the wider political class, is different. The reason why many in the government and the press prefer to self-soothe by talking about the culture war, or even ministerial payouts, is that these are all things that the government can, up to a point, control.

We might think it unwise to over-rule central bank independence in order to put Vaughan Williams, say, on a £10 note. But the government could at least do it. Accepting that what matters is the overall economy means accepting, for the government of a middle power like the UK, that many decisions about the next election are out of your control. You can avoid self-defeating tax rises on businesses, yes. But you can't prevent disastrous and ill-thought-out wars of choice that raise energy costs, whether conducted by Donald Trump in Iran or Vladimir Putin in Ukraine. Having realistic debates about economic policy involves accepting that government is sometimes a passenger: small wonder that many politicians prefer instead to discuss hedgehogs on bank notes.

stephen.bush@ft.com

Trump's foreign policy will only push China and Russia closer together

Alexander Gabuev

The one thing you never want to happen is you never want Russia and China uniting. I'm going to have to un-unite them," Donald Trump bragged on the campaign trail. Fourteen months into his second presidency, Trump's actions are having precisely the opposite effect. America's latest war in the Middle East looks set to bring Beijing and Moscow's asymmetrical interdependence to a whole new level.

While Vladimir Putin's disastrous war in Ukraine has pushed Moscow deep into Beijing's embrace — on Xi Jinping's terms — the Sino-Russian relationship appeared to be plateauing in recent months. Bilateral trade peaked in 2024 at $245bn before falling 6.9 per cent to $228bn in 2025 as a result of a drop in the price of oil, which comprises the bulk of Russian exports, as well as weakening demand for Chinese goods among Russian households thanks to war-induced economic hardship.

Beijing seemed reluctant to further increase its reliance on Russian energy. In 2025, Moscow accounted for 17.9 per cent of Beijing's oil imports and 27.8 per cent of natural gas. China enjoys the upper hand in the energy relationship — western sanctions translate into significant discounts. However, economic policymakers in Beijing have long advocated for the diversification of supplies to boost China's energy security, despite the Kremlin's pitches for a Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline and additional cross-border oil pipes. So far, Xi has listened to this advice.

Trump's war in the Middle East and the US naval blockade of Venezuela may change that calculus. In 2025, Venezuela shipped 80 per cent of its crude to China, which constituted up to 4 per cent of Beijing's oil imports — but not anymore. Even if sales to Beijing resume, they will be strictly controlled by the US. Trump can turn off the tap at will. The war in the Gulf is an even greater problem. Iran supplied 13 per cent of Chinese oil imports, and Beijing sources an additional 42 per cent from other Gulf countries — with nearly all those barrels passing through the Strait of Hormuz, where shipping has in effect ground to a halt.

Damage to Gulf energy infrastructure is mounting, and oil prices are once again hovering around the $100 level. When the hostilities are over, it will take months to carry out repairs and restore normal energy flows. What's more, given that the current conflict was preceded by a 12-day war back in the summer, Beijing now needs to brace for a scenario in which instability in the Middle East is the new normal.

> Moscow is being left with few options but to crawl even further into Beijing's pocket

China's economy is still heavily dependent on imported hydrocarbons and will be for years to come, despite Beijing's ongoing switch to renewables. Meanwhile, Chinese energy consumption is projected to jump, driven by the development of AI. In a world where physical supplies of energy are increasingly important, Russia looks like Beijing's quickest and most obvious hedge. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the new five-year economic development plan adopted by Beijing this week includes a new gas pipeline from Russia.

If Xi approves the project, it could be completed in under five years since its resource base is a cluster of well-developed gasfields that used to feed Europe. Additional branches of an overland oil pipeline can be completed even faster.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has no choice but to redirect its energy flows eastward. It faces mounting risks to its westward-oriented energy export infrastructure, including Ukrainian strikes on oil ports and tankers, as well as the EU's ongoing efforts to seize shadow fleet vessels.

Beijing can be sure that Russia will continue to sell below market prices. The Kremlin's ability to leverage its growing market share in China will be curtailed by the fact that Moscow has no other big buyers next door.

As for the threat of US tariffs and sanctions, Beijing has the antidote: its grip on critical minerals, which Xi could bring into play just as he did last year when fighting Trump's tariffs. There is a reason why Trump tariffed India for buying Russian oil but not China, despite it being a bigger buyer.

Trump's chaotic policy choices are pushing Russia into an unprecedented degree of vassalage to China. Energy trade in renminbi coupled with western sanctions and China's industrial dominance will leave the Kremlin with few options but to crawl even further into Beijing's pocket. This cycle is vicious for Russia but virtuous for China. The key policy question is how exactly China will come to use its massive leverage vis-à-vis Russia and what that might mean for the rest of the world.

The writer is director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin

Where will the deployment of offensive missiles lead Japan?

Japan is currently deploying offensive weapons at an unprecedented pace, sparking widespread international concern. This month alone, at least three offensive missiles have been scheduled for deployment by the Self-Defense Forces: the upgraded Type-12 land-to-ship missiles – Japan's first batch of domestically developed long-range missiles – will be deployed in Kumamoto; the "Hyper Velocity Gliding Projectile for island defense" will be deployed in Shizuoka; and a batch of US Tomahawk cruise missiles will be delivered to Japan since late March, with priority deployment on Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's Aegis destroyers. All three types of missiles extend far beyond Japan's territorial reach, marking the latest departure from commitments enshrined in Article 9 of its "pacifist constitution," which renounces "war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force." The long-standing principles of "exclusively defense-oriented principle" and "passive defense strategy" in Japan's defense policy have become mere empty words.

With three types of offensive missiles being deployed in rapid succession within a month and defense spending soaring as a share of GDP, one cannot help but ask: Is this still a country bound by its "pacifist constitution"? For some time now, right-wing forces in Japan have made frequent moves to accelerate remilitarization, including the push to amend the "pacifist constitution," expediting revisions to the three national security documents, and the attempt to alter the three non-nuclear principles. Every move they make gives the distinct impression of militaristic aggression and "accelerated preparations for war." Where exactly are they leading Japan?

The neo-militarism in Japan has become more than just a perilous tendency, but a very real threat that is wreaking havoc to regional peace and security. Japan's recent intensified military buildup in the Southwest Islands near China's Taiwan island also has a very clear targeting intent. Previously, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi made inappropriate remarks 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. To this day, she has not retracted this statement. Our question is: The Taiwan question is China's internal affair. What right does Japan have to interfere? Who is the one aggressively provoking disputes, undermining regional peace, and attempting to portray itself as a "victim"? What exactly is the motive behind Japan's right-wing forces repeatedly portraying China – a nation that safeguards world peace through concrete actions – as a hypothetical adversary and pretext for "remilitarization"?

Japan's rush to push forward "remilitarization" represents a continuation of policies driven by conservative political forces in recent years to break through postwar restraints and pursue the status of a major military power. It also reflects the more aggressive military ambitions that have emerged since Takaichi took office. Japan is now engaging in a dangerous gamble – it seeks to exploit the window created by strategic competition between China and the US, positioning itself as Washington's forward outpost in the Asia-Pacific and, under the banner of "sharing security responsibilities for the US," attempting to secure US tacit approval for Japan to shake off its military constraints. Yet, US indulgence will only embolden the military adventurism of Japan's right-wing forces. Looking back at history, whether in the September 18 Incident, the July 7 Incident, or the Attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese militarism launched wars of aggression under the pretext of a so-called survival-threatening situation.

More than 80 years ago, Japanese militarism brought profound suffering to the peoples of Asia and pushed Japan itself to the brink of national ruin. Japan's right-wing forces are now attempting to retrace a path that history has already nailed to the pillar of shame, a course that can only lead to self-destruction.

In today's world, peace and development are the shared aspirations of people in all countries, and resolving disputes through dialogue and consultation is a basic consensus of the international community. Yet, Japan's right wing seeks to secure regional dominance through military power. What they forget is that today's Asia is no longer the Asia where militarism once ran rampant, and today's China is no longer the impoverished and weakened nation of the past. China possesses both the firm will and the strong capability to safeguard its sovereignty. Any attempt to threaten China with force will only end in failure.

The Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Proclamation, and the Japanese Instrument of Surrender all clearly stipulated Japan's international obligations, while Japan's constitution strictly limits its military power and the right to wage war. Article 9 of Japan's "pacifist constitution" explicitly states that "aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes." Against this backdrop, the remilitarization pursued by Japan's right-wing government has clearly "gone too far," representing a betrayal of history, a disregard for the postwar international order, and a manipulation of sentiment within Japan itself.

Recently, the leader of Japan's Social Democratic Party criticized the deployment of upgraded Type-12 land-to-ship missiles in Kumamoto Prefecture, saying it would "constitute a violation of the constitution." Meanwhile, local residents staged protests, chanting "No missiles" and "Don't turn Kumamoto into a battlefield." These reactions show that tying the entire nation to the chariot of revived militarism goes against public will. The sense of insecurity among the Japanese public stems precisely from the Japanese government's misguided policies, rather than from the so-called China threat used as a pretext.

So where will Japan go from here? Will it uphold the "pacifist constitution" and earn the trust of its Asian neighbors and the international community through concrete actions, or once again be swept up by right-wing forces and revive the old dreams of militarism? History is a mirror. The year 2026 marks the 80th anniversary of the opening of the Tokyo Trials. Eighty years ago, the international community delivered a just verdict on the crimes of Japanese militarism. Eighty years later, if Japan dares to gamble again, the outcome can only be a quicker and more devastating defeat.

Is the global hot sale of the 'new trio' really 'dumping'?



Editor's Note:

Currently, China's economy is steadily advancing along the path of high-quality development, even as domestic and international circumstances become increasingly complex. Some Western media, due to misunderstanding or bias, have repeatedly questioned or even distorted China's economic development. Accordingly, the Global Times launches the "Q&A on China's Economy" column to publish opinion pieces to present facts and clarify perceptions.

In recent years, certain US and European politicians and media outlets have fabricated a rather misleading new narrative using the economic term "overcapacity" – claiming that China's products represented by the "new trio" products, namely electric vehicles, solar batteries, and lithium-ion batteries, will constitute "dumping" and "disrupt global supply chains and market order." In response to this narrative, it is necessary to clarify: What exactly is fair competition, and what is dumping?

At present, China has long eliminated so-called export subsidies for green-power products such as the "new trio," with the remaining export tax rebates being phased out or eliminated. China has been proactively tightening and gradually phasing out even these compliant export tax rebates. It has previously implemented multiple significant reductions in its export tax rebate policies. Looking further at the market prices of the relevant export products, the so-called claim of "dumping" is even less tenable. The core competitiveness of China's green-power products lies not in "low prices," but in high cost-effectiveness and technological innovation, confirming the demand for such products in overseas markets.

It is undeniable that the initial development of China's green-power industries was inseparable from the guidance and support from national industrial policy. However, it is the forward-looking deployment, long-term commitment, and stable, sustained, and systematic cultivation that are truly decisive for the rise of an industry. Looking back at the development trajectory of the green industry, China's strategic positioning came far earlier than the world imagined. Drawing on its globally unmatched and complete manufacturing system, China has formed a distinctive model of industrial cultivation: the state provides top-level design, anchoring long-term goals of green transition and manufacturing power; local governments enhance industrial chain support systems, build industrial clusters, and lower overall enterprise costs; and enterprises compete on technology, efficiency, and management in a fully competitive market.

Industrial policy is not China's exclusive domain. The difference is that Western industrial policies tend to be highly inconsistent. The greatest strength of China's industrial policy, by contrast, lies in its stability, continuity, and sustained long-term effort. Once a direction is identified, it is advanced resolutely without wavering or hesitating. This is what has enabled industries to complete their technological accumulation, scale expansion, and cost reduction, ultimately forging globally leading competitiveness.

From an international perspective, green-power capacity is not in surplus – it is severely insufficient. To those with ulterior motives, we want to say this: Rather than fighting a trade war with no winners, it would be far better to join hands with countries around the world and collectively drive technological progress in a market environment of fair competition – so that people in more countries and regions can enjoy the green, convenient, and affordable benefits that new-energy products bring. That is the right path to sustainable development.

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Opinion

The New York Times

Trump Isn't Ready for What He's Starting in Cuba

Christopher Sabatini and Katrin Hansing

Dr. Sabatini is a senior fellow for Latin America at Chatham House. Dr. Hansing is an associate professor of anthropology at Baruch College at the City University of New York.

Havana has a deep-seated siege mentality from decades of U.S. confrontations.



RAMON ESPINOSA/ASSOCIATED PRESS

IN THE wake of the Trump administration's removal of President Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela and amid the U.S. bombing campaign in Iran, it may soon be Cuba's turn.

Less than two months after imposing a brutal oil blockade on the island in order to maximize pressure on the government, President Trump is now bragging that the Cuban regime is on the verge of collapse and that its leaders want to "make a deal."

As may have been the case in Iran, Mr. Trump's focus on Cuba appears to be driven by the perceived ease of the Venezuela operation, in which the capture of Mr. Maduro led to the quick emergence of a more accommodating partner, Delcy Rodríguez. But the president seems to lack a clear vision for a Cuba intervention: He has recently floated options including a friendly takeover, a "liberation" or, according to recent reporting, economic liberalization without full regime change.

Any resolution forged in the current standoff between Washington and Havana risks being a hollow victory, offering only a temporary reprieve for Cubans and a fleeting achievement for an administration that has yet to define what lasting success in Cuba looks like. A continued squeeze on the island aimed at the destruction of the state could bring chaos and perhaps even a new refugee crisis. A deal limited to managed economic liberalization could offer a brief diplomatic win, but it would most likely close off the chance of a real political opening.

Still, catastrophe in Cuba is not a foregone conclusion. It also presents an opportunity — a chance for broader international engagement that could head off impending disaster.

For more than half a century, the United States has maintained an embargo on Cuba. Though its theory of political change for the island nation was never clear, the approach was presumably intended either to force Cuba's Communist government to surrender or to spark a massive popular uprising that would overthrow it. But as the cases of Iran, Venezuela and Cuba all demonstrate, sanctions rarely topple entrenched authoritarian systems, which use external threats to justify internal repression and consolidate their grip on dwindling resources.

This year, the Trump administration nonetheless decided to turn the screws further on Havana by blocking oil shipments to the island. Rather than provoking the government's collapse, though, the move has only plunged the country further into a dire humanitarian crisis. With Cuba's oil reserves running low, power cuts of up to 20 hours have become normal. Lack of access to fuel is bringing transport and tourism to a standstill and has altered work and school schedules, increased food shortages and prices, devastated an already weakened health care system and forced most people to focus on the basic, existential chores of daily survival.

Yet the regime lives on. Sixty-seven years since the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, the Cuban government survives on its smothering control over the country's society and economy. Even in the throes of an emergency, the Cuban state and its leadership remain relatively aligned and politically consolidated, having built a deep-seated siege mentality over decades of confrontation with its neighbor to the north.

The coherence and loyalty within Cuba's state apparatus preclude the sort of smash-and-grab operation that delivered Mr. Maduro and his wife to a Brooklyn jail. There is no one person to take out, no compliant deputy waiting in the wings to replace him. An air bombing campaign of the sort now occurring in Iran would be likely to just create a power vacuum and deepen the desperation on the island.

Reports that Secretary of State Marco Rubio has been involved in behind-the-scenes talks with Raúl Castro's 41-year-old grandson signal an unexpected — and inauspicious — trajectory. If true, these discussions appear to be heading toward a modest government reshuffling and a settlement for some economic reforms.

Cuba's decrepit state-led economic model has indeed failed. But an opening that injects market incentives without political change will not provide the security and predictability that an emerging private sector and foreign investors require. (It also sounds surprisingly like the Cuba policy of former President Barack Obama, who, through his modest liberalization of the embargo, sought to expand and empower Cuba's independent economic sector and introduce liquidity into the market by increasing tourism.) Such concessions are also unlikely to be accepted by many in the politically powerful Cuban American community, who have long advocated complete regime change.

There is still an opportunity for a softer landing that could alleviate Cubans' suffering and pave the way for a more stable and peaceful political and economic transition. But it requires Washington to coordinate with allies in the Western Hemisphere and in Europe.

The first step would be to work with other international actors invested in Cuba's future to mount a joint campaign of humanitarian assistance. The Trump administration seems to recognize the severity of the crisis in Cuba, but funneling aid through either the Catholic Church or the private sector, both of which are being advanced by the White House as options to bypass state channels, is insufficient to meet the needs of the population.

The second involves establishing formal talks between the U.S. government, the Cuban government and the Cuban diaspora. These negotiations should include representatives from Europe, Canada, Latin America and the Vatican who could serve as neutral arbiters and provide the institutional guarantees that neither Washington nor Havana currently trusts the other to uphold. These individuals could guide a process of meaningful talks to push for human rights protections, a gradual de-escalation of the embargo and genuine political pluralism.

If conditions on the ground continue to get worse, Cuba may soon descend into chaos. Alongside further state repression, this could prompt a refugee crisis that would make the Mariel boatlift exodus of 1980, in which around 125,000 Cubans fled to the United States, look small in comparison. It could also motivate members of the Cuban diaspora to take things into their own hands, either through violence or through uncertain, fantastical models of regime change.

That impulse came to a tragic end recently when a group of 10 people, including at least one U.S. citizen, was intercepted in Cuban waters, having set sail from Florida armed to the teeth in an apparent attempt to sow instability on the island. Other such efforts could force the United States' hand to intervene militarily to defend the lives of Americans.

There is still, at least for now, a window in which the world can defuse the consequences of Washington's cruel and reckless adventurism. Onlookers, U.S. voters and especially Cuba's long-suffering citizens can only hope.

It's Oscars Snubbing Season Again

Sloane Crosley

The author, most recently, of the memoir "Grief Is for People" and the novel "Cult Classic."

The Academy Awards never overlook any actors. Choices are made.

IT'S an honor just to be nominated. Alas, one is not always granted the option for such graciousness. When actors are left out of the running for an Academy Award, they have to make do with being the subject of public uproar, of cries for justice from people whose previous tantrum was over a discontinued potato chip. The Oscar snub has become its own conversational domain, a prominent outgrowth of the Oscars themselves.

During snubbing season, there are endless posts, pieces and reels devoted to this chew toy of a topic, all arguing about which art and artists should have been recognized by the academy. One could go so far as to suggest that our fixation on Oscar snubs is healthy. In a culture that can't concentrate, that routinely forgets the names of films and actors, we have trained ourselves to notice what isn't there. Once a year, we perk up, survey the party and ask: Hey, has anyone seen Janet?

Because I have been given the floor, I will get my own licks in: Jesse Plemons was a revelation in "Bugonia," like otherworldly (ironic, considering the premise of "Bugonia"), and when Leonardo DiCaprio called Chase Infiniti "the heart and soul" of "One Battle After Another," it felt like fact, not bias. Personally, I was surprised when neither of those actors made the cut. It would've been nice if they had, but they didn't. And now? Now I must go on living my life.

Some of us are not so sanguine. Perhaps this is because passionate engagement with snubbing offers an unchallenging sort of righteousness. Especially when delivered via social media. For many fans, becoming agitated over the Oscars is a simple way of telegraphing sophistication and memory. You know who doesn't mind a subtitle and remembers what came out in September? Your very online college friend. You know whose other takes regarding the multiple wars, civil rights violations and humanitarian disasters raging across this planet seem a bit iffy? Your very online college friend.

So maybe let's enjoy what's left of this season of anodyne outrage, this inconsequential possessiveness over millionaires whom we do not know. It's an extension of fandom to be nonplused that one's favorite actor or film was left off a list. If people take these things personally, it's because a film has done its job.

That said, there's nothing that puts film fans on message quite like the actors and directors themselves. Normally, I am not one for recommending the emulation of celebrities, but the people involved in awards shows seem to have a more nuanced view of snubs than those watching at home.

Granted, these are professional performers, cornered into playing nice. They have to comport themselves under an umbrella of politics and perspective, to deftly support their co-workers when only some members of their team received recognition for the same project. Audiences have the luxury of getting still mad about snubs, years later. (Don't get me started on "Yentl," not again!) Realistically, all of Hollywood can't possibly have right-sized this occasion. Otherwise, we wouldn't get those tearful acceptance speeches. But boy, can they sell diplomacy in the meantime.

Except for when they choose not to. Which is its own kind of seasonal joy. After the exclusion of both Margot Robbie and Greta Gerwig from the 2024 Oscar race, Ryan Gosling made his feelings plain: "There is no Ken without Barbie." This year, there was a delightful relatability to Kirsten Dunst's reaction to her husband's (Mr. Plemons's) snub for best actor because it mirrored how the nonguild members of society tend to react to snubs. She reposted a picture created by the comedian Stavros Halkias of himself with a superimposed hand holding a gun and the words: "me to everyone who didn't nominate Jessie Plemmons for best actor tho."

The fact that her husband's name is misspelled makes it all the funnier for Ms. Dunst to share, all the more dismissive of the enterprise. As a member of the academy, she knows how this works (the elaborate campaigns, the ranked-choice system) enough to know it was not unstoppable. The moviegoing public will often use the word "overlooked" when discussing snubs. But it's not accurate. No one escaped anyone's attention. Choices were made. Some of them hurt. It's human not to morph into a stoic about it.

Since 2022, the number of Oscar nominees for best picture has been fixed at 10 (five for all other major categories). Justice is not possible for all. Audiences can disagree with the choices or lose their office Oscar pools, but the bouncer is telling the truth: There really is a private party on the other side of this door. Part of the appeal of this conversation among cinephiles is the speculation about what this must be like for celebrities, those on the business end of a snub. Are they kind of fine with it? How quickly do they tell themselves it's silly to care? Are they pacing around their kitchen islands? Can someone see if there's still a pack of cigarettes in the desk drawer?

This is not schadenfreude on the part of audiences; it's relatability. We all know what this is like. When you receive approval, your peers are a bunch of geniuses. When you don't, they are out to lunch. What's always been surreal is seeing this emotional parade televised. Like all seasons, this one must come to an end, and the actual Oscars are upon us. The actor George C. Scott famously called the ceremony itself "a two-hour meat parade, a public display with contrived suspense for economic reasons" (two hours, good one!) and refused an award in 1971.

And yet we at home continue to crave more of what snubbing season has offered, more moments of humanity, not just humility. That is, if we decide to tune in at all. I probably won't watch the Oscars this year. I wasn't even nominated, for Christ's sake.



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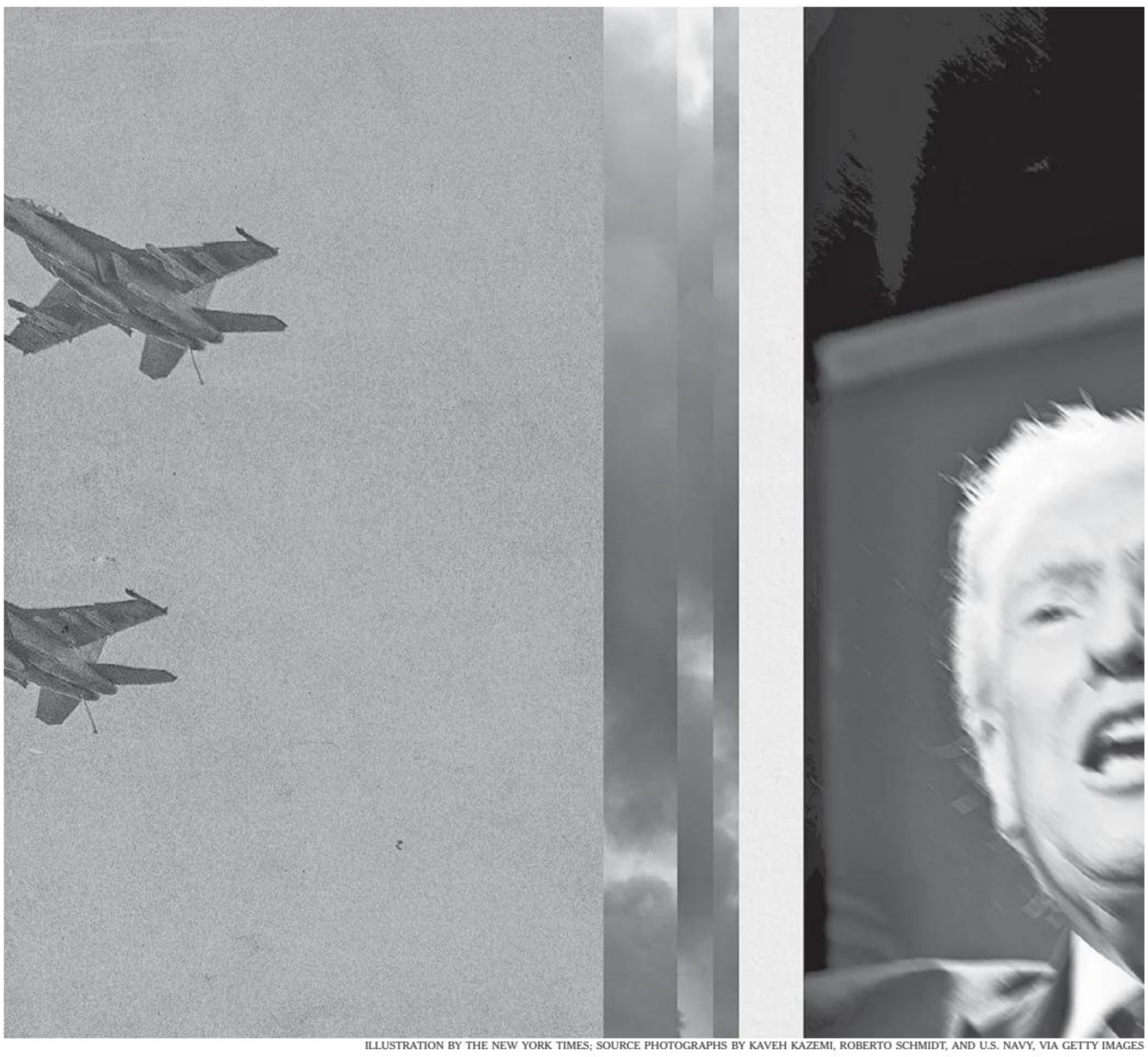


ILLUSTRATION BY THE NEW YORK TIMES; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAVEH KAZEMI, ROBERTO SCHMIDT, AND U.S. NAVY, VIA GETTY IMAGES

ROUND TABLE

‘I’m Flabbergasted by the Pessimism’

THE United States and Israel have been conducting airstrikes on Iran for a week and a half. Stephen Stromberg on Wednesday convened three Opinion writers to discuss how the war is developing and how it might end.

The conversation has been edited for clarity.

Stephen Stromberg, Opinion editor: How has your view of the war changed over the last week and a half?

Nicholas Kristof, columnist: I thought attacking Iran was a terrible idea but that there was always some possibility that it would prompt an uprising. Now that seems unlikely. President Trump has acted in ways that boost Iranian nationalism — with talk of arming the Kurds, attacks on cultural sites, his failure to apologize for a strike that hit an elementary school — and arguably help the regime.

I also thought that the war might end quickly, partly because both sides would want it to. Now I think it may drag on, in part because Iran seems intent on re-establishing deterrence, making the West pay a substantial price so that it is less likely to attack again.

I’ve also been surprised that the Trump administration seems to be contemplating inserting ground troops, either to try to recover Iran’s highly enriched uranium or to seize Kharg Island, Iran’s oil export hub. Both would risk significant casualties and make an exit even more difficult.

Bret Stephens, columnist: I’m flabbergasted by the relentless pessimism I’m seeing in much of the commentariat. We are less than two weeks into a war that will almost surely be over by the end of the month, and already there are predictions that it’s “another Iraq.” American casualties, heartbreaking as they are, have been minor for a conflict of this scale. Iran’s ability to threaten its neighbors diminishes by the day: We’ve seen this in the sharp decline in its ballistic missile and drone attacks. I have to assume that before this war is over, we will find a way to remove Iran’s remaining stores of highly enriched uranium, which greatly enhances global security over the long term. And Iran’s leaders now know they are not immune from reprisal, which will make them think more carefully as they plot their retaliation. We may not see regime change now, but this regime is likely to become a zombie state before the next, all-but-inevitable, popular uprising.

Megan K. Stack, contributing writer: As a country, we need to take a beat and look at ourselves. This is an illegal war, lacking congressional or U.N. Security Council backing. Two U.S. acts early in the war were sinking an Iranian ship off Sri Lanka and letting dozens drown, and, it appears, bombing an Iranian elementary school, killing more than 150 people.

A few things came into focus this past week. One, we’re starting to see some of the destabilization that Trump is inviting, in the oil markets and the standstill in the Strait of Hormuz, in Lebanon, Turkey, the Persian Gulf and on and on. Two, it is now clear that our government cannot articulate why we started this war or what we’re trying to achieve. And, three, so far, the countries gaining are Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

Stromberg: So, sharply differing takes here. A lot rides on what you think will happen to the Iranian regime and what that means for the world. Bret argues it could turn into a zombie regime, unable to suppress its people for much longer. Nick and Megan, what do you make of the likelihood of such an outcome, and how might its realization shift your thinking about the war’s costs, if at all?

Kristof: Sure, that might happen. But I wouldn’t bet on it. The regime is exceptionally unpopular, and I had thought that after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei died on Feb. 28, there was some possibility of change and reform. But that seems less likely now. The West thought that killing Khamenei would accelerate change. He might have thought that if he were “martyred,” that would help preserve the regime and keep hard-liners in power, and he may have been right.

I’m also skeptical that a zombie regime would be harmless. The Houthis in Yemen are in some sense a zombie group, yet they are still a threat in the Red Sea. As long as Iran has dhows, it can lay mines in the Strait of Hormuz. I worry that even a zombie regime could make a new drive for nuclear weapons.

Stephens: A nuclear weapons program requires four things that Iran will now struggle to build up again: first, a great deal of specialized machinery; second, a fair degree of secrecy; third, scientists and technicians willing to participate in the program; and, finally, reasonable hopes of ultimate success. What’s just as significant is that the Iranian people may have a better chance to topple a regime that is surely under intense inner strain.

Stack: A zombie regime, humiliated and crushed? Why do I find myself thinking of Russia’s Soviet Union-to-Vladimir Putin trajectory?

We make a mistake looking at a place such as Iraq or Iran or Russia and assuming that we have a strong fix on the overall politics within the country, what people want, what they are likely to do, what trade-offs they might accept or not.

Three Opinion writers on how the war in Iran might end.

Stromberg: Trump said on Wednesday that there is “practically nothing left to target” in Iran. Is the United States accomplishing anything with more bombing?

Kristof: I wish Trump would disingenuously declare victory and end the war and press Israel to cease its strikes, too. That’s pretty much what he did with the Houthis a year ago: He saw that his war on them wasn’t dislodging them and gave up.

Stack: it’s impossible to know whether the United States is accomplishing anything with more bombing because we don’t know what Trump is trying to achieve, as the administration’s answers on that point keep changing.

And no matter how or when this war ends, significant damage and confusion have already been caused in the region’s sense of security. Saudi Arabia might continue its push — with more reason now, unfortunately — for a NATO-style defense treaty with the United States and the right to enrich uranium on Saudi soil. On the nuclear question, this war is a terrible illustration of why countries such as Iran or Saudi Arabia might want a nuclear bomb to deter strikes against them.

Stephens: I don’t think we can end the bombing campaign until we’ve either destroyed or secured Iran’s remaining nuclear capabilities, particularly those roughly 200 kilograms of highly enriched uranium believed to be at a site in Isfahan. The United States should also seize Kharg Island in the Persian Gulf, from which Iran exports roughly 90 percent of its oil, as long-term leverage over the regime’s behavior. As for other targets, people such as Adm. Brad Cooper, the CENTCOM commander, is probably in the best position to determine when Iran will no longer be able to threaten us in the Strait of Hormuz and the rest of the region. I’m guessing that might happen in a week or two.

By the way, the surest route to nuclear proliferation in the Mideast was an Iranian weapon. That’s one of the reasons this campaign is so important: to keep Iran from getting one and to lower the temptation the Saudis, and perhaps others, feel to get nukes of their own.

Stack: We should just seize an island from a sovereign country? What gives the United States the right to do that? We started this war even though it’s been acknowledged by intelligence assessments and lawmakers that Iran posed no immediate threat to the United States. And yet we’ve very quickly become cavalier about bombing the country and seizing its territory.

Stephens: We’ve seized a lot of islands throughout history, though sometimes we’ve given them back, particularly to defeated adversaries that adopt better courses: think of Okinawa or Iwo Jima. Kharg could be Iran’s again if it simply desisted from supporting terrorist groups while breaching the Nonproliferation Treaty in its attempts to get a bomb.

Kristof: The aim of seizing Kharg Island would be to force Iran to capitulate rather than lose its oil revenues. But this regime is ideological and willing to have the country endure suffering indefinitely. How long would we leave U.S. troops on Kharg Island, as they took casualties from periodic drone attacks from the mainland, as Iran harassed shipping in the Strait of Hormuz by dropping mines from dhows, as the Houthis escalated by attacking shipping in the Red Sea, as Iran employed cyberattacks or terrorism to harm Americans?

Stromberg: The Times reported Tuesday that Trump discounted the possibility that striking Iran might lead to big economic consequences. Whatever you think about how the war’s costs and benefits stack up, what does the last week and a half show about the president’s capability to see through this conflict to a good — or, depending on your view, a less-bad — conclusion?

Kristof: Trump seems to have operated throughout on best-case scenarios, and that makes me doubt his ability to end this conflict wisely. I fear he might take Bret’s advice and either seize Kharg Island or insert Special Forces to try to recover the highly enriched uranium.

Trump seems really bad at getting advice from those who know the region. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reportedly warned Trump about all that could go wrong, and the intelligence community reportedly said that an uprising to overthrow the regime was unlikely — yet Trump charged ahead.

Stack: I expect that Trump will abruptly end U.S. involvement — or at least try to — and claim that any resulting chaos or economic downturn is somebody else’s fault. And, to be fair, even if he wanted to stabilize the situation, it’s hard to imagine what he could do to put things back together, short of the much-discussed boots on the ground — and even that probably wouldn’t work. This war has given me a new understanding of Trump’s capacity for recklessness.

Stephens: My friend Eliot Cohen recently reminded me of an apt line attributed to Henry Kissinger: “Why are the wrong people doing the right thing?” I, too, have my share of misgivings about this administration. On the other hand, one president after another — Clinton, Bush, Obama, Biden — insisted that a nuclear Iran was an unacceptable threat to American interests and global security. But it was Donald Trump who had the nerve to do something about it. For that, as an American and as a Jew, I feel grateful.

Stromberg: Thanks, Bret, for reminding us that there is a possibly apocryphal Kissinger quote for most situations. We’ll see how things look in another week and a half.

LETTERS

A Tragic U.S. Strike on a School in Iran

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “U.S. Is Responsible in School Strike, Early Review Says” (front page, March 12):

The preliminary findings on the American missile strike that destroyed an elementary school in Minab, Iran, killing scores of children, should alarm every American.

We are not fighting wars with crude tools. Agencies like the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency routinely work with satellite imagery that can be minutes or hours old, and high-priority targets are often monitored in near real time. The technology exists precisely to prevent catastrophic errors like this.

Yet according to the investigation, officers relied on outdated targeting data that was not properly verified against current imagery. That is not simply tragic. It represents a breakdown in the most basic safeguards of modern targeting.

War is always brutal, but modern intelligence systems were designed to reduce civilian deaths. When those safeguards fail through negligence and children die as a result, it cannot be dismissed as a routine mistake. It is incompetence in war approaching the moral territory of a war crime.

TOM DEBLEY
WALNUT CREEK, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:

The news of the likely fault in the United States’ Tomahawk missile strike on an Iranian elementary school is just the latest example of the cost of the incompetence of the current administration. It displays a lack of understanding, or a lack of care, that human errors — in this case, the military using outdated targeting information — are fully predictable byproducts of going to war.

True military professionals understand that these operations are inherently dangerous, that humans are fallible and make sometimes deadly mistakes. But the Trump administration’s chainsaw approach to driving out experienced personnel has only increased the likelihood of tragedies.

When ignorance and arrogance, from the president on down, are the primary qualifications and characteristics of an entire civilian management team, ignorant and arrogant decisions will be made, and innocent lives will be needlessly lost.

PAUL FISK, LATHAM, N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:

Leave it to ham-handed, know-it-all Republicans to not seek or, worse, even listen to military and diplomatic professionals when venturing into dangerous waters.

Not since George W. Bush referred to the fight against terrorism in 2001 as a “crusade” has any administration so accurately shot itself in the foot.

Make no mistake, a large number of Iranians welcome this intervention; they just never figured it would come in the form of the annihilation of their country. The tragically deadly strike on the elementary school in Minab and the American destruction of Iranian cultural and religious sites are evidence that President Trump and his defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, are ignoring the real path to success — the winning of hearts and minds.

That is what the Obama administration was working on before Mr. Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, and what the Biden administration later tried to repair. It will be decades before the Iranians ever trust the United States for anything again. In the meantime, we have created another generation of people who do not wish us well.

STEVE ZANE, PROVIDENCE, R.I.

TO THE EDITOR:

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently declared that American forces would not operate with “stupid rules of engagement” or fight “politically correct wars.” The U.S. missile strike on an elementary school in Iran that killed at least 175 civilians, mostly children, shows he is keeping his promises.

Even as this deadly error remains under investigation, it has left a stain on the fabric of our nation that can never be wiped away. As Iranian families grieve and try to come to terms with this unspeakable heartbreak, our president continues to lie about the facts and avoids taking any responsibility. And Americans go about their business, grieving over the price of gas.

BOB BASCELLI, SEAFORD N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:

The United States must compensate the families of those children and teachers killed by its errant Tomahawk missile attack. While money won’t heal their deep emotional wounds from these losses, it would show a measure of compassion from those of us who find this war the wrong path to securing safety for all.

ELLEN CREANE
GUILFORD, CONN.

Kennedy’s Push

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Kennedy’s Crusade on Nutrition Could Reshape Medical Schools” (front page, March 5):

The idea of the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services — any secretary, but especially the current one — instructing medical schools about what to teach is offensive to any physician and anyone who values academic freedom.

That being said, perhaps four hours of lectures about nutrition, based on published peer-reviewed scientific research over the last two or three decades, would be more appropriate than the one hour I received on this topic when I attended medical school in the 1970s.

My suggestion: one hour about the health advantages of a plant-based diet, one about the health advantages of the Mediterranean diet, one about nutrition in the elderly and one about nutrition in children.

Additional teaching could be included on clinical rotations in pediatrics, medicine, surgery or obstetrics and gynecology, with additional information provided during residency training.

Since physicians are not in control of what a patient eats or what he or she purchases in the markets and serves to the family, perhaps better training in how doctors can get patients to change their behavior might also be included.

No federal official should tell any part of any university what should be taught. End of discussion.

DANIEL FINK
BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.

The writer is a retired internist.

City Life for Seniors

TO THE EDITOR:

Re “Retiring Move? Baby Boomers Pick New York” (front page, March 8):

I read this article with special attention, as my 96-year-old mother just arrived in London, alone, with her walker, to spend two weeks in an Airbnb she found online. This plan she was insistent on undertaking seemed crazy to my sister and me.

When we visit her in Florida, it is a struggle to get her out of her apartment just to join us at the pool. But now, from London, we hear about her trips to the Borough Market or the National Gallery on WhatsApp every day. She is almost manically happy with her self-planned holiday.

Cities, she says, pump life into her, unlike at her condo in Coconut Creek. The article reassures me that crazy as she may be, at least she’s trending.

URSULA ABRAMS, TROY, N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:

I loved this article on retiring to New York City. It was a dream of mine, but I could not afford it, so I moved from a small town in Massachusetts to Philadelphia for many of the same reasons described in your article.

Needless to say, I love it. Philadelphia has its own deep cultural vibe, and for seniors there is free public transportation around the city. In addition, New York City is only a little over an hour away, so I consider it within my cultural extended urban area. Life is good.

BARBARA ELSER
PHILADELPHIA

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Members of the House of Lords during the state opening of parliament, 7 November 2023

PHOTOGRAPH: LEON NEAL/ GETTY IMAGES

Good riddance to hereditary peers – now for more reform

Polly Toynbee



Goodbye (almost) to the hereditary peers, voted out on Tuesday night. But they didn't go without a vicious tooth-and-nail fight. Labour should be making much more noise about how the Tories blackmailed and threatened to the very last to hold on to the hereditary peerage (almost all Tories), despite 66% of voters wanting a democratically elected second chamber.

Tories in the Lords, fully backed by Kemi Badenoch, did that despite the abolition pledged in Labour's manifesto. They trashed the Salisbury convention, which expects the Lords to nod through anything in a government's manifesto that has been approved in an election. But never mind conventions: the good chaps who are supposed to keep the unwritten constitution on its feet are no more. Instead of upholding convention, they vandalised it.

The absurdity of the final Lords debate may add to Samuel Johnson's gaiety of nations. Enjoy Lord Hamilton's searing honesty, when he said that a reason to keep the hereditaries was that once they were gone there would be "nothing other than political chancers, like me, and donors and members of the blob of one sort or another". Or Lord Moore, who said their "lack [of] legitimacy" was a badge of honour as "you behave a bit better because you are a little doubtful about whether you should be there". Or the Earl of Devon, who said that under normal employment law, there would be discrimination concerns "given the regrettable commonality of protected characteristics among our hereditary peers", presumably as all-male, all-white, blue-bloods. When I debated with the earl this week on the Nicky Campbell show, he said his crusader ancestry was especially valuable now, with "what's going on in Israel and in Gaza".

Does it matter much? Yes, and the disgraceful way they departed shows why. The Tory leader in the Lords, the misnamed Lord True, went full Tony Soprano, threatening to stop all government business unless Labour compromised. In the Sunday Telegraph, he warned that if the "purge" of the hereditaries went ahead, Labour would face "very aggressive procedural action" on all the rest of its legislative agenda. This could be filibustering, wrecking amendments and using "ping-pong" delays by bouncing bills back and forth between the Commons and Lords. He made an "offer to the government" they couldn't refuse: he would back off if a "goodly number" of hereditaries were allowed to remain. "It's not a threat. But I think if relations broke down, as night follows day, you would find that a lot of people, perhaps on the backbenches, would put down amendments that would slow things down." So 15 hereditaries are reprieved, converted into life peers.

Watch how just a handful of lords are killing off the assisted dying bill, despite a majority for it in the Commons, backed by three-quarters of the public. It now has no chance of passing, as a small group of filibusterers prevent a vote being taken, as day after day they talk very slowly, making identical speeches on crass amendments. Look how the Tory-dominated Lords forced a watering down of new employment rights, also pledged in Labour's manifesto. But as an employment minister warned the Commons, the alternative to compromise was "being stuck in parliamentary limbo for another year". The government could use the Parliament Act to force its will on the Lords – but that's an alarming precedent if hard-right authoritarians form the next government.

> **It would be a category error to call the Lords corrupt, when corruption is built into its foundations: money buys peerages**

Tinkering reforms will cut its huge 842 membership. This could include sacking those who fail to turn up and considering an age cap: all out at 80. But that will eject some of the most valuable, such as Alf Dubs and Michael Heseltine. Better by far to give parties a fair quota.

Even with hereditaries (almost) gone, we retain many of the splendorous anachronisms that prevent us from making real constitutional change. Why keep any (former) hereditary peers making laws, or 23 bishops despite minimal C of E attendance? That spirit of "sovereignty" bound into nostalgic British traditions led directly to the disaster of Brexit.

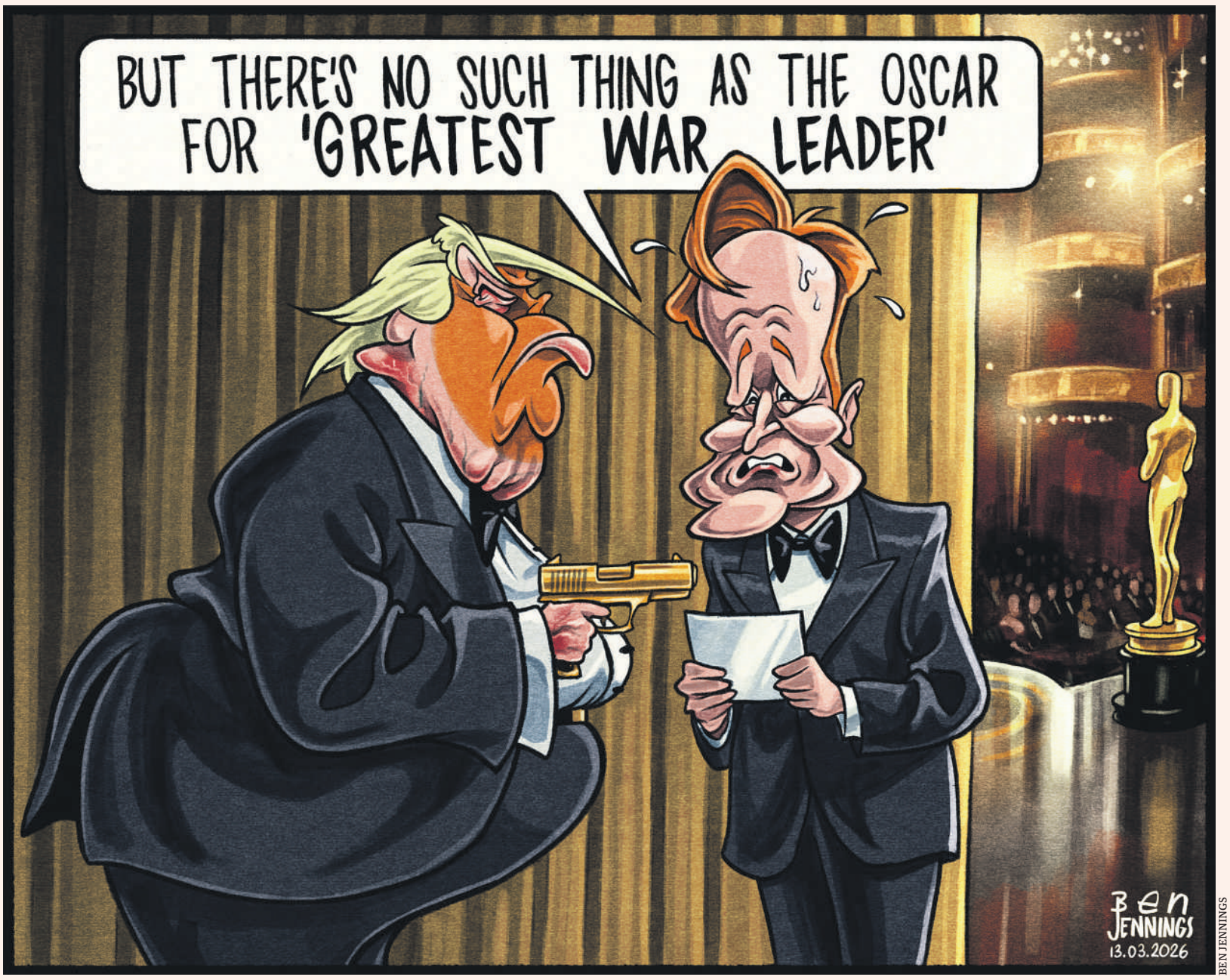
It would be a category error to call the Lords corrupt, when corruption is built into its foundations, out in the open for all to see: donations buy peerages. Twenty super-donors in the Lords, mainly Tory, gave £92m between them. Transparency International research shows that £48.2m in donations are alleged or proven to have bought access and/or honours. The current weak elections bill fails to cap donations or to prevent, say, Elon Musk's rumoured $100m gift to Reform if it came from his UK-generated profits.

Since 1911, attempts to reform the Lords have always been stymied by conflicting alternatives. The warning is that we will end up like the US – with chambers blocking each other – yet all of Europe manages second chambers of different hues, none unelected. Summon a commission (yes, royal probably). It's not beyond the wit of the British to devise a senate, and the Electoral Reform Society has the alternatives laid out. The public strongly backs proportional representation to reform our dysfunctional electoral system. This government needs a radical legacy: it should use its majority for this.

But the rumour is that Labour is retreating on reform. The excruciating waste of time and effort on what should have been the easy expulsion of hereditaries has cooled what was, anyway, only modest enthusiasm for constitutional change. If so, that will be the revenge of the departing born-to-rule peers.

✻ **Can Labour come back from the brink?** *On 30 April, join Gaby Hinsliff, Zoe Williams, Polly Toynbee and Rafael Behr as they discuss the threat to Labour. Book tickets at theguardian.com*

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BEN JENNINGS

It would be folly to cancel the king's US visit

Simon Jenkins



Should King Charles's state visit to the United States next month be cancelled? The case for doing so is powerful. The US is waging an unprovoked war on Iran in which more than 1,000 innocent people have already been killed. The collateral damage to the global economy is becoming astronomical. All Donald Trump can do is insult Britain's prime minister as a "loser" and "no Winston Churchill" for failing to join him. Should the monarch honour such a man by attending a Washington banquet?

The call is close. The occasion is the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States with the declaration of independence. Of course this merits celebration. But now? British public opinion is opposed to the US war on Iran. Many more Britons think the royal visit should be abandoned (46%) than think it should go ahead (36%), with 18% undecided. Just as the war has been staged by Trump for personal political gain, so he can be expected to exploit a royal visit.

Downing Street's refusal to confirm the visit suggests an understandable indecision. As with the energy markets, all could depend on how long the war continues. Leaving the question open might add to pressure on Trump for an early ceasefire. But from the start, the war's course seems to have been dictated by the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and that appears still to be the case.

What is certain is that cancellation would be a severe blow to Anglo-American relations. The king is not the head of Britain's government, nor does he represent the British people, who never elected him. Academic texts on his status, by people ranging from Walter Bagehot to Vernon Bogdanor, read more like theological tracts than practical guides.

The monarch is the dignified rather than efficient arm of the constitution, which means his opinions are as irrelevant to public policy as is his compulsory Protestant faith. The executive authority of the Crown is semantic. Parliament alone is sovereign, and has been so since the Bill of Rights of 1689. This is a fact that merely adds to Starmer's problem. Cancellation might appear to be prompted by domestic politics and would add to the bad taste left by Trump's censored second state visit last year, when he could not even show his face in London.

Not to allow the visit to proceed would be a mistake. Better by far would be to elevate it well above the level of current events. Attention should rise above daily political disputes. Instead, the bonds of finance, science, education, culture and even matrimony that have long joined our nations should be honoured. Trump, a son of Scotland, is a case in point.

At the 1783 Peace of Paris, which secured American independence, a French delegate commented on how generous the defeated British had been to the Americans. A British delegate is reported to have replied with a smile: "Yes sir, and they will all speak English; every one of 'em." That answer has secured a closeness between Britons and Americans that has held over the centuries ever since. It is a closeness this visit should celebrate.

As for what the king might discuss with Trump – not to mention Queen Camilla with Melania – that may be left to conjecture. With Iran and Jeffrey Epstein off limits, perhaps they can turn to revivalist architecture, onshore wind turbines and the latest Oscars. Charles has never been shy of political conversation, but he is also the master of small talk. Trump may yet test his minimalism.

Now is an occasion for the British nation to present itself as respectful of the American people in their handling of a president who appears to be uncertain as to where he is leading them. That may require sympathy rather than criticism. The US has embarked on a terrible aggression and that fact cannot be sidestepped. But a state visit is a bonding of nations, not governments, of cultures, not commentators.

The eternal weakness of the US presidency is that it must embody the union of states in one nation and yet do so through the medium of partisan politics. Time and again the stature required of a president – self-styled leader of the western world – is tarnished by polarisation and short-term gain.

Separating headship of state from daily politics is a virtue of hereditary monarchy. Now is its time. Charles will present that headship as holding a dignity above the political round. I am sure the American people would respect him as such. That is why the visit should go ahead.