



## No end to suffering India must enlist more support against Pakistan's bombing of Afghanistan

As the U.S.-Israel war against Iran rages, India's western frontiers have flared up, intensified by recent clashes between Pakistan and Afghanistan forces on the Durand Line. On Tuesday, Pakistani airstrikes tragically killed at least 400 Afghans at a drug treatment and rehabilitation centre. Pakistan, which has accused the Taliban administration of harbouring the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and supporting its terror attacks on Pakistan, denied Afghanistan's accusations, claiming that its strikes had only targeted "military installations". Despite the denial, it is clear from visuals that the Omid Rehabilitation Facility in Kabul was destroyed. In an extremely strong statement, India condemned what it called Pakistan's "cowardly" targeting of a hospital, rejecting its denial as a cover-up for a "massacre", and called for an international inquiry. The Pakistan-Afghanistan conflict, which has been simmering for over a year, escalated in February when the Pakistan Air Force struck Taliban bases in Kabul, Kandahar and Paktia in what it called Operation Ghazab Lil Haq (Righteous Fury). Tensions have also risen after TTP attacks killed 11 soldiers and a child in Bajaur and 32 people in an Islamabad mosque following a suicide bombing. Pakistan has also been angered by closer India-Afghanistan ties and New Delhi's hosting of Taliban ministers, accusing the Taliban of turning Afghanistan into an "Indian colony" — a turnaround from its support in 2021, for the Taliban's rise to power in Kabul. Apart from its continued tensions and hatred of India, and now Afghanistan, Pakistan possibly benefits from the global focus on the U.S.-Israel war with Iran. The U.S.'s actions here and its statement expressing support for Pakistan's "right to defend itself against Taliban attacks", has also imbued Pakistan's generals with a sense of impunity to strike targets in Afghanistan at will.

New Delhi could be permitted some sense of "payback" as Islamabad's fight against cross-border terrorism from Afghanistan mirrors India's problems with Pakistan. The constraints on Pakistan's military in a two-front situation with India and Afghanistan, compounded by a transnational war on the third front, may also be the source of some relief for India. With no dialogue with Pakistan, and the limited dialogue with a Taliban regime it deals with but does not formally recognise, India's diplomatic role in the conflict is limited. However, it must enlist other SCO members that have been concerned over the outbreak of an "open war" between Pakistan and Afghanistan, to intervene. The region is already suffering from trade, energy and travel restrictions as a result of the West Asia war, to risk more volatility and loss of lives, particularly in Afghanistan, where the vulnerable, especially women, have suffered the most.

## Fire and more fire

India must treat hospital fire safety as an issue of criminal accountability

Catastrophe is not an anomaly. It is the latest entry in a ledger of preventable deaths in Indian hospital ICUs. In 2016, 22 people died in a fire at a private hospital ICU in Bhubaneswar, which did not have the mandatory fire safety clearance. Following this tragedy, fire safety audits were made compulsory for such facilities. Last year, the Odisha government allocated about ₹320 crore for fire safety improvement across hospitals in the State. But this did not prevent the fire at the government SCB Medical College and Hospital, Cuttack, apparently caused by a short circuit in the ICU of the trauma care unit. Some reports suggest the fire may have started in a ventilator, which was later found heavily charred. The accident, which occurred in the early hours of Monday, claimed 12 of the 23 ICU patients. Although the hospital had a firefighting unit, its personnel arrived after more than 30 minutes, reportedly because staff did not alert them early. Additionally, the fire hydrants could not be operated by staff. Nevertheless, water is not the right medium to fight electric fires, which are best extinguished using carbon dioxide, a method that requires trained personnel. Last October, six patients were killed in an ICU fire in Rajasthan. In 2024, newborns died in an ICU fire in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh. Two similar accidents were reported in Maharashtra in 2021. An audit in Jhansi revealed hazards including exposed wiring, inadequate earthing and electrical circuits not matching power load requirements — the last being a leading cause of electrical fires in India.

ICUs have intrinsic safety risks, as their oxygen-rich environment can turn even a spark into an inferno. ICUs are also packed with electrical equipment, and the personnel are not always well trained in their safe handling. State-of-the-art medical equipment comes with advanced electronics and variable frequency drives that generate what are called "harmonic currents". These currents flow within circuits and typically have no safety devices such as circuit breakers. Harmonics create silent, persistent overheating and insulation degradation and are a severe fire hazard. Today's electrical practice lays down that every time a new ventilator is wheeled into an ICU, the wiring, protection and load capacity must be re-evaluated. Older facilities need an electrical upgrade before cutting edge equipment can be installed. As patients in ICUs are often sedated, intubated, and connected to machines, staff must be trained to ensure their safe evacuation. Until India treats hospital fire safety as a matter of criminal accountability rather than bureaucratic paperwork, the fires will keep burning and the bodies will keep mounting.

# NCERT book ban, a chapter on judicial transparency

Max Boot, former Features Editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, authored the seminal study on the United States judiciary, 'Out of Order: Arrogance, Corruption, and Incompetence on the Bench' (1998). Robert H. Bork, former Solicitor General of the United States, wrote the foreword to it with a striking conclusion — "Our Courts are behaving badly and the public, to the degree it can be brought to understand that, will exert force for reform, a reform that must be structural as well as intellectual and moral."

He observed that the book's subtitle sums up a system in distress. The book underscores the critical role that the media and citizens must play while dealing with the judicial institution in a democracy.

In February this year, the Supreme Court of India, faulting what it felt as selective reference to corruption within the judiciary, directed "a complete blanket ban" on a Class eight social science textbook published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). The three-judge Bench, presided over by the Chief Justice of India, further alluded to "an underlying agenda to undermine the institutional authority and demean the dignity of the judiciary".

The Court subsequently ordered that the persons responsible for preparing the passages should be "dissociated" from future projects by governments and public universities. The Court thus instantly punished them, without due process or hearing. The prohibition by the Court is problematic as it sends critical signals about the shape of India's democracy today.

What appears to have annoyed the Bench were the passages in the book on judicial delay and corruption in judiciary. As per the news report cited by the Court, the textbook has data on the approximate number of pending cases in Indian courts. It refers to the Bangalore Principles of Judicial Conduct, which prescribe values for judicial life. It also discusses the in-house procedures evolved by the Supreme Court and the constitutional mechanism for the removal of errant judges.

## An undermining of freedom

By itself, a book ban is the most egregious form of censorship. Such a move directly impacts the right to freedom of speech under Article 19, a solemn promise in the Constitution. This right could be restricted only by a law made by the



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The top court's ban on an NCERT textbook exposes gaps in judicial accountability and public trust

state on grounds expressly provided under Article 19(2), such as "the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offence". There is no law made by the state to justify the ban on the book in question. Judicial orders or judgments do not come under the realm of "law" made by the state, as understood in the context of Article 19 (*Narash Shridhar Mirajkar vs State of Maharashtra*, 1966).

For an act to amount to contempt of court, there must be material that scandalises the authority of the court or prejudices or interferes with judicial proceedings or the administration of justice, as defined under Section 2(c) of the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971. Whether mere references to corruption in the judiciary and case backlogs meet this high threshold for criminal contempt was a question that, unfortunately, did not form part of the Court's deliberations. What was also not examined was whether the statements were too general in nature to suggest any malicious intent to scandalise the Court.

Further, and importantly, going by the scheme of judicial review, courts must put to constitutional scrutiny the law passed by Parliament often violating fundamental rights. When the courts take on the task of book banning, citizens are left without remedy, as constitutional courts are the last resort to safeguard fundamental rights.

## Global efforts

In advanced democracies, the credibility of the court is a matter of concern, primarily for the court itself. Transparency International has conducted a number of surveys that show that there is a prevailing notion about judicial corruption. Judiciaries across the world have made efforts to address this problem. In Kenya, the reforms led by Chief Justice Willy Mutunga, between 2011 and 2013, are an illustrative example. During this period, institutions such as judicial ombudspersons, court users' committees, and performance management committees were established.

By 2013, public trust in Kenya in the judiciary had risen to 61%, compared to 27% in 2009. The reforms continued even thereafter. This happened only by acknowledging the issues and trying to address them, rather than suppressing critical voices.

In India, the courts including the top court have acknowledged the menace of delay and corruption. Judges have repeatedly warned about the "bad apples" within the system. The very existence of the in-house procedure indicates the possibility that a minuscule number of judges may breach their oath.

In *K. Veeraswami vs Union of India And Others* (1991), the Court categorically held that judges of the High Courts and the Supreme Court fall within the definition of "public servant" for the purposes of prosecution under the Prevention of Corruption Act, while also cautioning against the potential for misuse of this provision by the executive. The Court also said: "We consider that the society's demand for honesty in a judge is exacting and absolute. The standards of judicial behaviour, both on and off the Bench, are normally extremely high. For a Judge to deviate from such standards of honesty and impartiality is to betray the trust reposed on him. No excuse or no legal relativity can condone such betrayal. From the standpoint of justice, the size of the bribe or scope of corruption cannot be the scale for measuring a Judge's dishonesty. A single dishonest Judge not only dishonours himself and disgraces his office but jeopardises the integrity of the entire judicial system."

## The need for introspection

Therefore, the need to eradicate corruption and delay is also in the best interest of the judiciary. In the interim order directing the book ban, the Court also pointed out that the "book also chooses not to delve into any of the pioneering initiatives and measures promoted by this Court towards overhauling legal aid mechanisms and streamlining the ease of access to justice". Not addressing all counterarguments might render an opinion potentially incomplete. Yet, that is no reason for banning the view expressed. If the exercise of free speech is required to follow a particular form, the right itself becomes illusory. During judicial deliberations, nobody pointed out that the judiciary, like other organs of the state, must be open to dissent and reform.

The first step in fighting systemic problems such as corruption — whether in the executive or the judiciary — is acknowledging it. After all, it is imperative to curb all kinds of corruption and that civil society is educated about the institutional challenges. A court that continuously reforms itself is the bedrock of any democracy.

# The opportunity in Cameroon to rebalance the WTO

Today, trade is no longer just about economics. It is increasingly used as a geopolitical tool. Tariffs are imposed as pressure tactics, and economic dependence is sometimes used strategically. In this context, the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Ministerial Conference (MC14), to be held in Yaounde, Cameroon, Africa (March 26-29, 2026), comes at an important moment. The real issue is not whether the WTO needs reform, but whether it can adapt fast enough to stay relevant in a world moving toward more transactional and power-based trade relations.

## WTO in turmoil

The WTO is facing its biggest crisis since its founding in 1995. Its dispute settlement system is still effectively paralysed because the Appellate Body appointments have been stalled for years. This weakens trust in the system, since rules matter only when they can be enforced. At the same time, WTO negotiations have struggled to keep pace with major shifts in global trade. Digital commerce is growing rapidly and now forms a large part of cross-border economic activity. Yet, WTO rules have not evolved at the same pace. Decision-making has also become slow and difficult. With 166 members at very different levels of development, consensus is hard to reach and cumbersome. As a result, many negotiations produce limited outcomes and long-pending issues remain unresolved.

Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions and the growing use of tariffs as political tools have distorted markets. However, these problems should not be mistaken for irrelevance. Most global trade still operates under WTO rules. If enforceable multilateral rules weaken, global trade would become unpredictable and unstable. Smaller and poorer countries would suffer the most, because they rely on common rules to protect themselves from pressure by stronger economies.

The WTO's challenges are also part of a wider shift in the global order. The Munich Security



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The World Trade Organization's Ministerial Conference must ensure that trade is governed by rules rather than coercion

Report 2026 describes this as a move toward "wrecking-ball politics", where countries prefer disruption and short-term deals instead of gradual institutional reform. In trade, this is visible in the rise of unilateral tariffs, economic coercion and bilateral deals that bypass multilateral commitments. If this continues, rule-based trade could be replaced by ad hoc arrangements shaped mainly by power rather than shared principles.

## Global production has changed

Against this backdrop, the MC14 offers a chance not just to fix technical problems but to also restore balance between predictability and fairness. The original balance of rights and obligations in the WTO no longer reflects today's reality. Emerging economies now export advanced and technology-intensive products, climate-related trade measures are expanding, and digital networks are reshaping how global production works.

Rules designed for a late 20th century trading system cannot fully govern a 21st century one. Reform must start with restoring credibility to enforcement. Without a functioning dispute settlement system, commitments lose their value. Members need to rebuild a binding, trusted mechanism rather than relying mainly on temporary alternatives that lack universal acceptance. A robust dispute-resolution system helps remove politics from conflicts and keeps confidence in multilateral rules.

At the same time, predictability must go hand in hand with fairness. Long-standing disputes over agricultural subsidies, market distortions and unequal openness need transparent solutions. Many developing countries argue that while WTO rules ensure the rule of law, they do not always deliver the rule of justice. In other words, rules may be legally correct but still produce outcomes that feel unequal or developmentally unfair.

Reform should, therefore, improve transparency on subsidies, create credible

responses to distortive practices, and revisit special and differential treatment so that it remains meaningful in today's economic conditions.

Institutional adaptability is also important. The WTO's structures were designed for a smaller and less complex membership, which contributes to today's deadlock. Some countries are moving ahead in smaller groups on issues such as e-commerce, investment facilitation, and services. These efforts can help progress, but they must remain transparent, inclusive and connected to the wider WTO framework. Flexibility should help the system move forward, not divide it. If such initiatives remain open to all members and eventually become part of common WTO rules, they can support reform instead of fragmentation.

Ultimately, WTO reform is not only technical but also normative. The Munich Security Report warns that a world shaped mainly by transactional deals would favour the powerful and leave weaker countries vulnerable.

## The choice is clear

The WTO's value lies in preventing exactly this outcome by ensuring that trade is governed by rules rather than coercion. In an era of strategic competition, rules do not weaken sovereignty; they protect countries from economic domination.

The choice before the MC14 is crystal clear. Members can undertake serious reform, preserving the WTO's stabilising core while updating its rules, procedures and developmental balance, or allow the system to drift further into fragmentation. Achieving reform will require political will and shared responsibility.

Rebalancing the WTO is ultimately about securing a workable framework for cooperation in a world where economic interdependence is still unavoidable. If the MC14 seizes this opportunity, it can show that meaningful reform remains the most credible path to sustaining global trade governance.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Kabul bombing**  
Pakistan's action of bombing a hospital in Afghanistan is an inhuman act (Front page, March 18). Whatever may be the reasons, an attack on a hospital is indefensible. It is against the canons of international law and even the rules of war to target and attack civilians in any conflict, especially sick patients under treatment. Pakistan, which has been training and harbouring terrorists on its soil and indulging in cross-border terrorism against India for

long, appears to be at the receiving end of its western border. Comparatively, India has been very patient and tolerant towards Pakistan all these years. It is to be hoped that Pakistan would at least now realise the folly of creating, nurturing and harbouring terrorists and desist from such nefarious actions in future.  
**Kosaraju Chandramouli**, Hyderabad

**Resignation over Iran war**  
The resignation of Joe Kent, the U.S.'s top counterterrorism official, in

protest against the justification for American strikes on Iran, delivers a hard slap on the face to President Donald Trump and is an unexpected setback to his expansionist agenda. Mr. Kent's statement that Iran posed no immediate threat to the United States and that the U.S. started the war due to the pressure exerted by Israel and its powerful lobby in America, is a bold, categorical and candid articulation of the factual and bitter reality that is prevalent at the

ground level. It is an undisputed reality that relentless war mongering and military interventions culminating in military attacks have seen an unprecedented escalation in different parts of the world ever since Donald Trump returned to the White House. With the NATO allies giving the U.S. the cold shoulder, Mr. Trump stands exposed and isolated. Israel has been a co-offender too, in inflicting unwanted wars.  
**B. Suresh Kumar**, Coimbatore

**AI and finance industry**  
Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the finance industry, offering both significant opportunities and notable challenges. AI enhances operational efficiency by improving decision-making, credit scoring, and portfolio management, while also strengthening risk management through faster, more accurate fraud detection. Customer experiences are increasingly personalised with chatbots and AI-driven insights. However, automation may

displace repetitive jobs even as it creates new high-skilled roles, and ethical concerns along with cyber risks require robust governance. Financial institutions must balance innovation with responsibility, invest in workforce reskilling, and prioritise transparency to ensure sustainable growth and equitable opportunities.  
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# India's future demographic challenges

**A** new report by the International Institute of Migration and Development and the Population Foundation of India titled 'Unravelling India's Demographic Future: Population Projections for States and Union Territories, 2021-2051', underscores the demographic risks that are beginning to surface nationwide. India's population is projected to increase from 1,355.8 million in 2021 to 1,590.1 million in 2051, with an average annual increase of 0.5%, suggesting a prolonged period of slower population expansion. These figures fall below earlier estimates, strengthening the case that India is unlikely to face the threat of population explosion that once dominated political and academic debates. These projections point to a turning point, where India is poised to move beyond a youth-led, fast-expanding population into an era of a more urban, steadily ageing, and balanced demographic structure.



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Information System for Education and the Ministry of Education highlights a significant reduction in the number of government schools over the last decade, with schools dropping from 11.07 lakh in 2014-15 to 10.18 lakh in 2023-24, amounting to a reduction of close to 90,000 schools across the country. This decline has been accompanied by a sharp increase in private schools; their numbers grew from 2.88 lakh to 3.31 lakh over the same period, an increase of 43,000 schools.

While falling birth rates have led to a reduction in enrolments and closure of government schools, smaller families and improved capacity to afford education have propelled the demand for private schools. Many parents choose private schools in the hope of giving their wards the education they never had in life, nudged by social pressure and a common perception that government schools generally fall short on quality compared to private schools.

**Greying population**  
As the demographic dividend largely depends on the working age population (15-59), a relatively higher proportion of this specific group can lead to faster economic growth, a dynamic evident in the development phases of several countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea. India has one of the world's largest workforces, rising from 833.8 million (65.2%) in 2021 to a projected peak level of 1,009.0 million (65.5%) in 2041, before declining to 998.1 million (62.8%) by 2051. There is an impending concern that the demographic dividend window will close after 2041, highlighting the urgency of leveraging it before its contribution to economic growth starts to diminish. Nevertheless, close to six out of every 10 persons in the country are expected to be part of the workforce by 2051, which is an encouraging sign.

However, India's population is ageing. In 2021, India's elderly

population (60+) stood at 130.5 million or 9.62% of the population. By 2051, this number is projected to touch 325.5 million (20.5%), highlighting that there will be a profound increment in the ageing population. The median age, a measure that splits the population evenly by age, is projected to climb from 28 years in 2021 to 40 by 2051, signalling India's shift towards a more advanced stage of demographic transition. The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances.

**Policy signals**  
The declining child population is expected to offer a better teacher-pupil ratio and expand infrastructural facilities in schools. Further, declining birth rates reduce demand for maternity care, allowing the healthcare system to rationalise the use of resources and offer better quality care. Though fertility levels have been falling, continued investments are required for family planning and to prevent unintended pregnancies, as well as reduce infertility and ensure the reproductive rights of women.

India needs to overhaul its education and skill development system to cope with modern-day challenges. It should also equip the younger generation to seize new opportunities before our demographic leverage disappears in the coming decades. The decline in the working-age population can be offset by bringing in more women to formal work (gender dividend) and by expanding access to better-quality employment. With the rapid growth of the elderly population, India's financial and healthcare systems, especially geriatric care, must be redesigned to support the growing needs of elderly citizens. At the same time, this creates a strong potential for a thriving silver economy, and could help in unlocking a second demographic dividend in the future.

# A plausible three-cornered fight

The third player in Tamil Nadu electoral politics has always been a disruptor

## STATE OF PLAY

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**F**or the past one week or so, the political arena in Tamil Nadu has been dominated by reports of frenzied attempts to bring the fledgling Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), headed by popular film star Vijay, under the fold of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Talks of the TVK negotiating its entry into the NDA was laid to rest by party functionaries earlier this week. Leaders of the AIADMK and its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was said to be keen on roping in the TVK, also denied that talks were held in this regard. Political circles were abuzz with the speculation that the BJP was trying to bring the TVK into the NDA fold, as soon as the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Congress signed an electoral pact on March 4, after days of uncertainty and hard bargaining.

When the talks between the Dravidian Janata and the national party were on, there was a lot of noise about the possibility of the Congress ditching its long-standing ally in favour of the TVK. Once this issue became irrelevant, media attention turned to the theory of TVK joining hands with the AIADMK and the BJP. In October 2024, Mr Vijay said that he was open to not only an alliance, but also to the idea of sharing power.

**Luring in the TVK**  
What fuelled speculation was the perception that given the arithmetic strength of the DMK-led Secular Progressive

Alliance (SPA), the NDA would not be able to defeat the SPA. This was based on the fact that in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, the SPA secured 47% of votes polled while the AIADMK and its ally, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) netted 23% and the BJP-led NDA, 18.24% (now, the DMDK is a constituent of the SPA). As per an estimate, even after giving allowance for the political developments for and against the SPA in the last two years, the NDA still requires a minimum of five percentage points to put up a tough fight. Only the TVK can bridge this gap in vote share.

Of course, another reason cited for the alliance is that all the three major parties – the AIADMK, the BJP and the TVK – have the same goal of defeating the DMK. After all, at one stage, the first two had openly courted the TVK. About 10 days after the tragic stampede at the TVK leader's rally in Karur in September 2025, which claimed 41 lives, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami, during his visit to Namakkal, remarked that "a beginning" had been made for the alliance. He made this observation in reference to a few people holding up the TVK flag at the meeting.

Even as Mr Vijay began holding interviews, on March 10, with aspirants for the Assembly election at the party headquarters in Panaiyur on the outskirts of Chennai, me-

dia circles were abuzz about alliance talks. Mr Vijay's scheduled visit to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) office in New Delhi on March 15 was linked to the much-speculated deal. Even though the party's high-level administrative committee chief coordinator K.A. Sengottaiyan on March 12 clarified that his organisation would go to the polls alone, political circles were agog with speculation that a majority of the TVK district secretaries supported joining the NDA. This was reportedly conveyed during a virtual interaction with the party general secretary 'Bussy' N. Anand. As of today, TVK's office-bearers have not denied that any such interaction took place, even though they rebut reports of holding negotiations for the alliance.

**'Fancy offers'**  
Addressing a public meeting on March 17, TVK general secretary Aadhav Arjuna, regarded as one of the key functionaries of the party, claimed that "fancy offers" – 90 assembly seats and the post of Chief Minister for one half of the Assembly term of five years – had been made to his party but Mr Vijay was "very firm" in rejecting them, and that the party would stand by religious minorities. But, he did not state who made the offer. On Wednesday evening, the TVK chief reiterated at an iftar event that his party would not compromise on secularism and social justice. Even though there is still time for more alliance drama, a three-cornered fight looks imminent. As in the past, the third force is bound to be a disruptor. It is to be seen which formation – the SPA or the NDA – benefits from the solo performance of Mr Vijay and his colleagues.

**A problem for schools**  
The projections point out that the pre-primary school-going population (0-4 years) is expected to dwindle from 113.5 million in 2021 to 8.6 million by the middle of this century. Since most regions in the country are now close to universal primary school enrolments, the demand for new schooling facilities could ease out, especially in the government sector. A sustained drop in fertility could leave the country with an escalating number of 'unconquered schools' (schools with lesser enrolment rates that cannot justify their economic costs), raising the threat of teachers losing their jobs, a trend that the State of Kerala has seen play out for more than three decades.

Evidence from different parts of the country suggests that declining fertility rates have already started influencing schooling requirements, with classrooms adjusting to smaller cohorts. Data from the Unified District

The growing elderly population is set to exert increasing pressure on healthcare and social security, thereby putting a strain on the state's finances

# Children have borne the brunt of Israel-U.S. aggression

Israel accounted for about 41% of all external attacks that ended with a child fatality, while the U.S. accounted for 21% of such attacks

## DATA POINT

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**I**n the morning of February 28, as hundreds of young girls were attending their classes in Minab's Shajarah Tayyebah school, the building was struck by a missile.

Residents and rescuers, who rushed to help seeing black smoke rising from the school, found blood stained backpacks, severed arms, and dead children buried under piles of rubble.

The school was likely struck by one of the U.S.'s Tomahawk cruise missiles, claimed to be one of the most precise guided weapons in the world. The school was one of the casualties in the targeted attacks by the U.S. on Iran, in conjunction with Israel.

Later reports confirmed that around 168 children, mostly aged between seven and 12, were killed in the attack. The school was located adjacent to a naval compound operated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Though U.S. President Donald Trump initially suggested that Iran itself – despite not having Tomahawk missiles – may have been responsible for these attacks, media reports and the U.S.'s preliminary military investigations suggest the attack was a result of the U.S.'s use of outdated targeting data.

The Pentagon elevated its probe into the matter last week. A UN inquiry is also underway to investigate the fatal strike. Amnesty International, this week, said that the strike points to a failure by the U.S. forces to take feasible precautions to avoid civilian harm.

**A war on children**  
However, the girls in Minab weren't the only ones who paid the price of the ongoing war. More children are estimated to have been killed in the daily strikes launched by the U.S. and Israel on

Iran in separate instances. Less than two thousand kilometres away, in Lebanon, more than a hundred children have been killed by Israel's campaign since March 2. Reports indicate that Israeli airstrikes have completely wiped out generations of families in the country in less than two weeks. The death toll due to the ongoing conflict in Lebanon is reported to be rising faster than any other war that the country had previously endured.

What happened in Minab and what is unfolding in Lebanon aren't isolated instances. Data points to a more troubling pattern – the U.S. and Israel together accounted for about 62% of "external attacks" that ended with a child casualty since 1996. External attacks refer to acts of aggression or military involvement by an actor on foreign soil.

The *Hindu* analysed events of external attacks that were recorded by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. While over 66,000 events of external attacks have been lethal (ending with any fatalities), around 4% of such reported attacks have ended up with at least one child fatality.

Incidences of attacks were used as a proxy, as data for child fatalities under external attacks were not separately maintained. These events offer a reliable snapshot of the extent of attacks against children during conflict. However, fatalities in individual events may be significantly higher. The data only pertains to confirmed events of deaths, and therefore cases of missing children or unreported events of deaths are not included in the analysis.

A further look at the 4% reveals that close to 2,500 reported cases of external attacks have ended with a child fatality between 1996 and 2026.

A country-wise analysis of these events show that Israel accounted for about 41% of all external attacks that ended with a child fatality (Chart 1). That is, about one in

every nine lethal attacks (11% launched by Israel since 1996 has killed at least one child.

No other country has recorded such events as high as Israel. The figures reflect the violent escalations in Gaza and West Bank since October 7, 2023 including instances when children were killed while receiving aid; via airstrikes; and in refugee camps. Close to 20,000 children have been killed in Gaza between October 7, 2023 and August, 2025. Infants alone accounted for 10% of these figures. This is despite the fact that Israel, globally, only accounted for 14% of lethal external attacks. (Chart 2)

Meanwhile, Russia alone accounted for 55% of lethal external attacks since 1996. Less than 2% of them have been reported to kill a child.

As for the U.S., which ranked second, in terms of external attacks carried out by countries that resulted in a child fatality, data shows that roughly around 7% of its lethal external attacks had resulted in a child casualty.

**Grave violation**  
The United Nations Security Council identifies killing and maiming of children as one of the six grave violations against children in times of war. Children in these conflict zones might also be exposed to other atrocities such as recruitment by armed groups, sexual violence, abduction and denial of humanitarian access.

Days after the Minab school strike, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child said in a statement that the strikes on civilian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals, serve as a stark reminder that children are among the most vulnerable in armed conflicts. It added that children must never be treated as collateral damage. However, with intensifying attacks and more buildings falling to rubble, children are at an increasing risk of becoming exactly that.

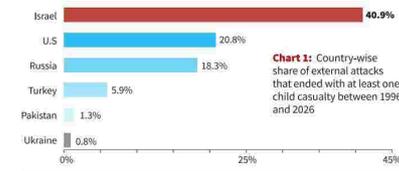
**Nivedha M. is intern with the Hindu Data Team**



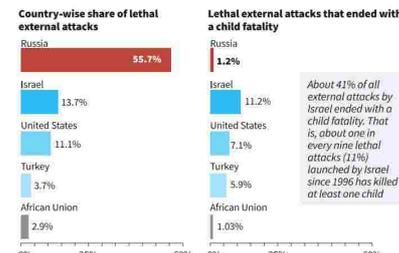
**A heavy toll:** Graves are being prepared for the victims following a strike on a school in Minab, Iran, on March 2. REUTERS

## Caught in the crossfire

The data for the charts were sourced from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Data for 2026 pertains only till March 6



**Chart 2:** Lethal external attacks refer to external attacks that resulted in any fatalities. Figures include reported lethal external attacks between 1996 and 2026



**Note:** Figures in the charts above may not add up to 100 as they only include the top countries in terms of share

**■** Attacks attributed to the U.S. include those under the 'Global Coalition Against Daesh', as it was a U.S.-led coalition

**■** Attacks attributed to the African Union refer to the African Union Mission in Somalia and the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia

The data only pertains to confirmed events of deaths, therefore cases of missing children or unreported events of deaths are not included in the analysis

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 19, 1976

## French author's reply to critics

Madras, March 18: Mr. Dominique Lapierre, co-author of "Freedom at Midnight", claimed to-day that the controversial book was objective history and "a hymn of love for India" and did not distort the facts in any way.

"Four years of hard work and research have gone into the book and to dismiss it as fiction is most unjust", he said at a press conference.

Turning to the controversial part which maintains that Nehru and Patel, unable to handle the partition riots, secretly requested Mounbatten to take charge of the situation, Mr. Lapierre said this account though never published before was accurate. A memorandum at the U.K. Government archives, which had been dictated contemporaneously by Mounbatten, recorded the conversation among the three. This version was also corroborated by the private papers of Mr. V.P. Menon.

He said that far from denigrating Nehru, the book only brought out his greatness and political courage in having an Englishman as head of State after independence. "One cannot conceive of Ben Bella, for instance, asking De Gaulle to become head of State in independent Algeria though it might have solved many of their difficulties", he remarked.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 19, 1926

## "Doodle" annual

We extend our congratulations to our humorous contemporary "Doodle" on entering its sixth year of publication, which it does with its current number. For these five years this weekly journal has been providing mirth and relaxation for the public through its amusing cartoons, humorous stories, pungent – but never offensive – skits and burlesques mainly dealing with Indian social life, farces, sharp pieces of witicism etc. The first number of its sixth volume which is now before us is decidedly an improvement on its predecessors in more than one direction. It is slightly bulkier than hitherto and its cartoons on local politics are as delightful as they are to the point. Its "curry and chutney" are indeed well-dressed and the "pickings" too are a choice selection. We have no doubt this pioneer venture in a branch of journalism which is yet to come into its own in India will receive the support and encouragement it deserves.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Record number of inbound tourists who visited Japan in Feb.**

**3.46** in million. Visitors to Japan in February rose 6.4% from a year earlier to set a new record for the month, despite a drop-off in Chinese tourists amid ongoing diplomatic tensions between the two countries. REUTERS

**Number of deaths of children under five in 2024**

**4.9** in million. About 4.9 million children under five died in 2024, according to new United Nations estimates. Most of the deaths were preventable with better access to healthcare and low-cost interventions for challenges. AP

**Displacements of Palestinians in the West Bank**

**36,000** A report by the UN warned that Israel's accelerating expansion and annexation of large parts of the West Bank was driving "unprecedented" displacement. AFP

**Telegram channels disabled for hosting pirated content**

**3,142** More than 3,100 Telegram channels and about 800 websites hosting pirated content have been disabled at the government's order, the Lok Sabha was informed on Wednesday. PTI

**Number of backlogs of consumer cases between 2020-24**

**5.15** in lakh. The Consumer Justice Report prepared by the India Justice Report (IJR) said that between 2020 and 2024, the pendency of cases increased by 21%, from 87,545 to 5.15 lakh. PTI  
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## What is new in transgender rights Bill?

How is the government proposing to alter the definition of 'transgender person'? What is the right to self-perceived gender identity? What does the new Bill propose on gender certification and SRS? Why are transgender communities opposing the amendments?

**EXPLAINER**

Abhinav Lakshman

**The story so far:**

Twelve years after the Supreme Court recognised the transgender identity and held that "self-determination of gender is an integral part of personal autonomy and self-expression", falling within the realm of personal liberty guaranteed by the Constitution of India, the Union government on March 13 introduced a Bill in the Lok Sabha to take away transgender people's "right to self-perceived gender identity" and redefine a "transgender person" by proposing amendments to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019. Transgender community leaders, activists, and people across the country reacted with shock, arguing that the amendments go against the fundamental principles underlying their long struggle for recognition.

**What are the changes being brought about?**

The key changes being proposed have to do with the definition of a "transgender person" and the expansion of the section on offences against transgender people and punishments for them.

In the amendment Bill, the Centre has called for the omission of sub-section (2) of Section 4 of the Act, which says: "A person recognised as transgender under sub-section (1) shall have a right to self-perceived gender identity."

In addition to this, a new definition of 'transgender person' is proposed. It describes them as people "having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani, and jogta, or eunuch", people with intersex variations, and people who have "congenital variations" in their "primary sexual characteristics, external genitalia, chromosomal patterns, gonadal development, endogenous hormone production or response or such other medical conditions".

The definition also includes any person or child who has been "compelled to assume, adopt, or outwardly present a transgender identity, by mutilation, emasculation, castration, amputation, or any surgical, chemical, or hormonal procedure or otherwise". However, it adds that this definition shall not include "persons with different sexual orientations and self-perceived sexual identities".

Compared to this definition, the Act currently defines transgender person as someone "whose gender does not match with the gender assigned at birth and includes trans men and trans women (whether or not such person has undergone Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) or hormone therapy or laser therapy or such other therapy), person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having such socio-cultural identities as kinner, hijra, aravani and jogta."

Further, a specific definition for "people with intersex variations" has also been proposed to be omitted.

Apart from these, the Bill suggests introducing the terminology for "authority", defining it as "a medical board, headed by a Chief Medical Officer or a Deputy Chief Medical Officer, as may be appointed by the Central government, State government or Union territory Administration".

Another key amendment is on the issuance of transgender certificates. While the law currently mandates the District Magistrate to issue a certificate based on a self-declared affidavit and without



Activists and members of the community during a demonstration against the Bill on Wednesday. AFP

physical or medical examination, the proposed amendment requires the District Magistrate to "examine the recommendation of the authority", and decide, if deemed necessary or desirable, and after consulting other medical experts, before issuing the certificate.

A new section has also been proposed, which confers the right of transgender people to have their first names changed in birth certificates and other

identification documents, with the caveat that the person should be a "transgender person" under the revised definition.

The Bill also mandates that individuals apply for a revised gender certificate after undergoing SRS, as opposed to the current law, which leaves this to the individual.

Additionally, medical institutions performing SRS would be required to furnish details of such procedures to the District Magistrate.

The Bill also significantly expands provisions relating to offences and penalties, introducing graded punishments, including rigorous imprisonment up to life and fines of up to ₹5 lakh, for crimes against transgender persons and children.

However, it remains to be seen what further changes could come through in the form of Rules. If this amendment Bill is passed by Parliament.

**How did the amendment Bill come about?**

Union Social Justice Minister Virendra Kumar introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026, in Lok Sabha on March 13. Days earlier, media reports cited that the Union Cabinet had approved amendments to the 2019 Act, though details were not disclosed. It remains unclear how long the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Centre had been preparing these changes.

Transgender activists, including Tamil Nadu-based Grace Banu, who had been central to the drafting of the 2019 Act, told *The Hindu* that the amendments seem to have been brought in without consultation with the community. Several leaders and members have described their initial reaction as one of "shock", calling the changes "sudden".

Interestingly, just hours before the Bill was introduced, the Ministry had posted on X, promoting the 2019 version of the Act and advertising the fact that this Act allowed the right to self-perceived gender identity as a key feature.

A few days back, on March 4, the Ministry had posted, "The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, safeguards the rights and dignity of transgender persons."

In February, the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) informed the Supreme Court that it had developed teacher training modules to build sensitivity towards transgender issues.

It substantiated this by saying that the 2024 module specifically spoke of the difference between gender and sexuality and discussed the idea that sex identity ascribed at birth may be at odds with a person's perceived sex identity at a later stage. The NCERT added that it had been conducting capacity building and training programmes based on similar modules till as late as November 2025, with more planned this year.

**Why is there a concern?**

A primary concern raised by the transgender community is the omission of the right to self-perceived gender identity, followed by the new definition, which appears to contradict the principles laid down in the landmark 2014 NALSA judgment recognising the right to self-determination of gender.

Ms. Banu said, "there is an issue that the government seems to be including only those in the definition of transgender who may have been accommodated in Hindutva's history and is using terms that indicate Hindutva's accommodation of transgender identity like 'hijra, kinner, aravani', etc." And there seems to be some sort of refusal to use respectful terms that have evolved for transgender people in other parts of the country, like in Tamil Nadu, where there is now a vocabulary of *thirunagai* and *thirunambi*.  
Dr. Arqa Shaikh has raised the issue of transgender people across the country having to now deal with the existential question of whether they continue to remain transgender as per the proposed new definition, while another Delhi-based transwoman spoke of concerns that this might create divides within the community about who has legitimacy to use the transgender identity.

**What does the NALSA judgment say?**

The landmark 2014 judgment in *National Legal Services Authority vs Union of India*, delivered by justices K.S. Radhakrishnan and A.K. Sikri, remains central to India's understanding of gender identity.

When the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, 2019, was introduced, the Statement of Objects and Reasons in it noted that it flowed from this very judgment of the Supreme Court, adding that one of the principal goals of bringing this Bill was to "confer right upon transgender persons to be recognised as such, and a right to self-perceived gender identity".  
In the judgment that notably

recognised a third gender beyond male and female, and the fundamental right of persons to self-determination of gender identity, the court accepted the principle that the concepts of gender and sexuality are different and that gender identity is on a spectrum.

The court said, "Gender identity is one of the most fundamental aspects of life which refers to a person's intrinsic sense of being male, female or transgender or transsexual persons."

The judgment explained that "a person's sex is usually assigned at birth, but a relatively small group of persons may be born with bodies which incorporate both or certain aspects of both male and female physiology. At times, genital anatomy problems may arise in certain persons and their innate perception of themselves is not in conformity with the sex assigned to them at birth and may include pre and post-operative transsexual persons and also persons who do not choose to undergo or do not have access to operation and also includes persons who cannot undergo successful operations."

On sexual orientation, the court defined it as an individual's enduring emotional, romantic, or physical attraction to others.

Importantly, the court held that no person should be forced to undergo medical procedures – such as SRS, sterilisation, or hormone therapy – as a condition for legal recognition of their gender identity.

It concluded that self-determination of gender is integral to personal autonomy, dignity, and freedom under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Justice Sikri, in his judgment concurring with Justice Radhakrishnan, expanded on this, saying, "If democracy is based on the recognition of the individuality and dignity of man, as a fortiori we have to recognise the right of a human being to choose his sex/gender identity which is integral to his/her personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom."

**What is the government's reasoning?**

In the Statement of Objects and Reasons, the government said that since the 2019 Act was enacted, "certain doubts and difficulties" have arisen in implementing it with regard to the "definition of transgender persons and how the identification of such persons is to be done".

It noted that the existing definition of "transgender person" was "vague", arguing that this made it "impossible to identify the genuine oppressed persons to whom the benefits of the Act are intended to reach". It added that this existing definition renders several provisions "unworkable", further saying that this definition was "not compatible" with several statutory provisions enacted by both Parliament and State legislatures.

The government has argued that the intent of the legislative policy was always to "protect only those who face severe social exclusion due to biological reasons" for no fault or choice of their own. It went on to say that the purpose of the legislation was never to "protect each and every class of persons with various gender identities, self-perceived sex/gender identities or gender fluidities".  
Noting these aspects, the government argued for a "precise" definition of transgender people, saying, "The protection and benefits that are provided under the Act are vast in nature, and therefore, care has to be taken that such identification cannot be extended on the basis of any acquirable characteristics or personal choice or claimed self-perceived identity of an individual."

**THE GIST**

The Amendment Bill proposes removing the 'right to self-perceived gender identity' and introducing a new definition of a 'transgender person', focusing on socio-cultural identities, intersex variations, and congenital conditions.

It introduces a medical board-led certification process, requires scrutiny by the District Magistrate, mandates a revised certificate after SRS, and expands provisions on offences and punishments.

Transgender activists argue the changes contradict the NALSA judgment on self-determination of gender, could exclude sections of the community, and have been brought without consultation.

# India's frogs find allies from citizen science to sanctuaries

India is home to over 450 amphibian species and roughly a quarter of them are categorised as 'threatened' and one-fifth as 'data deficient'; many species are threatened by climate change and habitat loss, but conservation programmes are turning the tide, and citizens can now join the effort

Karthikeyan Vasudevan

**W**orld Frog Day on March 20 celebrates the role of frogs, the world's most numerous amphibians.

They live at the interface between freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems, eat insects and in turn get eaten by other vertebrates, and are thus crucial in converting insect biomass into vertebrate biomass.

Losing them can mean a boom in insects that prey on plants as well as a depleted food base for many terrestrial vertebrates, which in turn can irreparably damage both freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems. Unfortunately for the earth, since the 1980s, frog and other amphibian populations have been on the decline worldwide. In 2023, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Global Amphibian Assessment Report said 37 species have become extinct and continue to decline, making them the most threatened vertebrate group.

The most prominent historical driver of amphibian decline has been chytridiomycosis, a fungal disease caused by *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* and *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans* in frogs and salamanders, respectively. This disease affects their skin — an organ that protects them as well as allows respiration and exchange of ions to maintain electrolyte balance. In the last two decades, more than 60% of amphibians globally have been affected by it — although intensive monitoring and conservation efforts have reduced the extinction risk of 63 species, halving the impact.

Today, however, the most important drivers of extinction are climate change for 39% of species and habitat loss for 37%.

## The Indian scene

India is home to more than 450 amphibian species, and roughly a quarter of them are categorised as 'threatened' and one-fifth as 'data deficient'. The burden of *B. dendrobatidis* and *B. salamandrivorans* fungi in India is substantial but it has not caused mass mortality the way it has for frogs in the Americas and Australia.

*B. dendrobatidis* and *B. salamandrivorans* both had their roots in Asia and spread worldwide through the trade on frog legs and salamanders as pets. In 1987, after Humayun Abdul Ali from Bombay Natural History Society published a scientific report highlighting their role in controlling agricultural pests, this trade was banned. However, by then, frog and salamander populations had been significantly affected as *B. dendrobatidis* had spread from Asia to Europe, the Americas, and Australia.

The situation in India itself is rather unique. Until 2015, scientists were unsure of the status of *B. dendrobatidis*; a diagnostic test emerged only in 2023. That said, while scientists in the country have not documented mass die-offs, they also haven't found the status of amphibians to have improved in the last two decades. Since they lack long-term monitoring data for any species, it is difficult to pinpoint the causes.

In fact, India hosts a significant share of the world's 'data deficient' amphibian



A Malabar gliding frog seen in Amboli, Maharashtra. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

species. And of the 157 threatened species in India, only six are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972.

Climate change in India also presents a serious challenge. One well-known consequence is the mismatch between seasons and the natural rhythms of plants and animals. So a false cue of an early monsoon followed by a prolonged dry period can result in catastrophic breeding outcomes. At the same time, thanks to the lack of long-term datasets on surface water availability and amphibian populations in the region, scientists are also unable to predict the effects of climate change on them.

## A time to care

The monsoons arrive at India's shores predictably every year and are synonymous with the frogs' chorus, when the adult males call out for mates. The females mate with several males and deposit their eggs in the water. The intensity of breeding frenzy wanes rapidly thereafter, when some laggards and first-time breeders might take a shot at breeding. While not all adult amphibians successfully breed every year, in this phase, many lose out as they become

**Climate change presents a serious challenge and a well-known consequence is the mismatch between seasons and the natural rhythms of plants and animals. A false cue of an early monsoon followed by a prolonged dry period can result in catastrophic breeding outcomes**

prey to animals. Because of their short lifespan, the timing of their complex breeding behaviours with rain, and the availability of surface water in streams and puddles, is critical.

Other important conservation efforts include the creation of the salamander sanctuary in Jorepokhri in West Bengal in 1985 (although it does not support a breeding population at present), the University Grants Commission banning the dissection of frogs for educational purposes in 2011; and the ongoing conservation breeding programme for Himalayan salamanders at the Padmaja Naidu Zoo in Darjeeling.

## Avenues to participate

There have also been more success stories of late. These include the Mapping Malabar Tree Toad Project, a citizen science project, coordinated by K.V. Gururaja in the Western Ghats; the Amphibian Recovery Project by S. Hari Krishnan of the Wildlife Trust of India in Munnar, Kerala, with the Kanau Devan

Hills Plantations Company Pvt. Ltd.; and the Himalayan Salamander Conservation Project led by Barkha Subba, in which she has involved the locals in protecting habitats. The CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (where the authors are employed) has also been running a long-term programme to monitor stream frogs, in collaboration with the Maharashtra State Forest Department in Tillari Conservation Reserve.

The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoo and the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad also prominently display amphibians in their collection of animals and spread awareness to visitors. There is also a growing number of young professionals implementing conservation programmes.

For a nation that embodies its conservation values in its Constitution, citizens have many avenues to participate: for instance, one can take a few minutes of their time to record their calls or take photographs of both healthy and sick frogs following ethical guidelines and share them on citizen science portals like iNaturalist.

Such efforts will help us move beyond a few charismatic species such as tigers and pandas.

The monsoon will arrive in a few months and we should play our role in amphibian conservation.

(Karthikeyan Vasudevan is a Chief Scientist at the CSIR-Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad. He is a herpetologist who works on amphibian disease ecology. karthik.cmb@csir.res.in)



The Large Hadron Collider during maintenance works in 2013, in Meyrin, near Geneva. AFP

## Large Hadron Collider discovers a new particle

The Hindu Bureau

The Large Hadron Collider has discovered a new particle, the 80<sup>th</sup> identified so far by the world's most powerful particle smasher; Europe's CERN physics laboratory announced on Tuesday.

The new particle has been named "Xi-cc-plus". Scientists have expressed hope that the particle — which is similar to a proton but four times heavier — will reveal more about the strange behaviour of quantum mechanics.

All the matter around us, including the protons and neutrons that make up the nucleus of atoms, are made of baryons. These common particles are composed of three quarks, which are fundamental building blocks of matter.

Quarks come in six "flavours": up, down, charm, strange, top and bottom. Each has varying mass, electric charge and quantum properties. In theory, there could be many different types of baryons that mix these flavours. However, most are extremely difficult to observe.

"To chase them down, the Large

**The new particle has been named "Xi-cc-plus" and scientists hope that the particle — which is similar to a proton but four times heavier — will reveal more about quantum mechanics**

Hadron Collider sends particles whizzing around an underground ring at phenomenal speeds until they smash into each other. This gives scientists a brief chance to measure how the more stable elements decay, then deduce the properties of the original particle.

The newly discovered Xi-cc-plus contains two "charm" quarks and one "down" quark. Normal protons have two "up" quarks and one "down" quark. Because the new particle has two heavier "charm" quarks instead of "up" ones, it is much heavier.

Vincenzo Vagnoni, spokesman for the Large Hadron Collider beauty (LHCb) experiment, said it was "only the second time a baryon with two heavy quarks has been observed". It is also "the first new particle identified after the upgrades to the LHCb detector that were completed in 2023", he said in a statement.

"The result will help theorists test models of quantum chromodynamics, the theory of the strong force that binds quarks into not only conventional baryons and mesons but also more exotic hadrons such as tetraquarks and pentaquarks."

In 2017, the LHCb experiment announced that it had discovered a similar particle, made of two "charmed" quarks and one "up" quark. The new particle differs only in having a "down" quark in place of the "up" quark — a small change that has profound consequences.

Due to complex quantum effects, the new particle has a predicted lifetime up to six times shorter than its counterpart, making it far more tricky to spot, CERN said.

The collaboration observed the new baryon by analysing data from proton-proton collisions recorded during the third run of the LHC, achieving a statistical significance of 7 sigma, well above the 5 sigma threshold required to claim a discovery. CERN Director-General Mark Thomson called it "a fantastic example of how LHCb's unique capabilities play a vital role in the success of the LHC."

The Large Hadron Collider is a 27-km long proton-smashing ring running 100 metres below France and Switzerland. Famously, it proved the existence of the Higgs boson — known colloquially as the "God particle" — in 2012.

(With inputs from AFP)

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Metaphors from science that are used in conflicts

Vasudevan Mukunth

**QUESTION 1**  
\_\_\_\_\_ is the point at which a policy or insurgency becomes self-sustaining. In nuclear physics, it's the minimum amount of fissile material required to maintain a nuclear chain reaction. The metaphor alludes to a system technically transitioning from a stable state to a self-propelling one. Fill in the blank.

**QUESTION 2**  
X is a metaphor for removing entrenched corruption or a hidden class of bureaucrats but which in history was used to eliminate the breeding grounds of vectors, like mosquitoes, and so stop the spread of malaria and yellow fever. Name X.

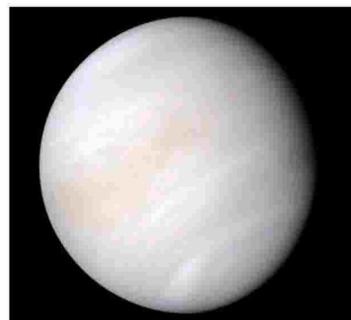
**QUESTION 3**  
To do this is to destroy a region so thoroughly that an opponent can never return to power or rebuild there. Taken literally, it refers to when a high concentration of sodium chloride in the soil draws water out of plant roots through osmosis, dehydrating them from the inside. What is it?

**QUESTION 4**  
Biologists say a substance is '\_\_\_\_\_' if it interferes with the internal balance of a living organism, leading to harm or death. But in policy circles, it refers to environments or assets so poisonous that they threaten the health of institutions. Fill in the blank.

**QUESTION 5**  
In chemistry, Y is the lowest temperature at which a liquid yields enough vapour to form an ignitable

mixture in the air — meaning at this point, the environment is primed for combustion. In the context of war, Y is where a specific area is likely to erupt into sudden and violent conflict. Name Y.

**Answers to March 17 quiz:**  
1. 1977 Spielberg film culminating at Devil's Tower — **Ans: Close Encounters of the Third Kind**  
2. 1997 adaptation of a Carl Sagan novel — **Ans: Contact**  
3. 1990 film exploring use of L-DOPA to revive encephalitis lethargica patients — **Ans: Awakenings**  
4. 1983 following the Mercury Seven pilots — **Ans: The Right Stuff**  
5. Film exploring the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, non-linear time — **Ans: Arrival**  
**Visual:** Douglas Trumbull  
First contact: Tamal Biswas | K.N. Viswanathan | Prem Nath Tiwari | Appa Rao M.V. | Soumit Chakraborty



**VISUAL:** Scientists believe the Z greenhouse effect left Venus's surface a hot hellscape. In a governance setting, Z refers to a positive feedback loop. What is Z? NASA

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

**For feedback and suggestions** for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily page'

Joe Kent's letter says the quiet part out loud: US is fighting in Iran for Israel!  
— By Kuldip Singh  
Log on to [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)

# The Editorial Page

Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves.  
— Abraham Lincoln

**The Indian EXPRESS**  
FOUNDED BY -  
**RAMNATH GOENKA**  
IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH  
INVOLVES US ALL

## Killing Iran's leaders is fraught and escalatory

As the war launched by the US and Israel on Iran enters its third week, the killing of Ali Larjani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, by Israel and the strikes on South Pars, part of the world's largest gas field, mark an escalation both rapid and perilous. Larjani's killing is another damaging blow to the regime after the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the war's first day. Together with the killing of Basij commander Gholamreza Soleimani, this decapitation strategy is one Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu believes could create the conditions for a popular uprising in Iran. On the evidence so far, the targeting of high-ranking leaders, one by one, has done little to rally the Iran street — instead, it could have shrunk the space for any diplomatic spade-work that will, inevitably, have to follow the conflict once it is picked up.

History is replete with attempts at regime change that led to instability and chaos, leaving power vacuums for armed groups to exploit. In the case of Iran, however, that may not necessarily be a downside for Israel. Unlike the US, which has extensive economic and defence ties with Gulf states, Israel's leadership may well view a prolonged war and an unstable Iran as favourable outcomes, not least in an election year for Netanyahu. The resignation letter of Joe Kent, director of the National Counterterrorism Centre, says the US "is not prepared to pressure Iran and its powerful American lobby". This has come amid continuing lack of clarity in President Donald Trump's war aims and claims. Despite Trump's efforts to draw NATO into the conflict by pressuring allies to deploy warships to open up the Strait of Hormuz, countries across Europe, as well as Japan, Australia, and Canada, have held firm in their refusal, leaving the US largely isolated, alongside Israel. US allies are justified in being cautious against joining a war they never supported.

India's energy security depends heavily on the Gulf and the uninterrupted flow of traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. Nearly 1 crore Indian citizens live and work in the region, making both their welfare and the flow of remittances vital national interests. India has done well to keep all lines of communication open. Delhi's understated diplomacy is beginning to show results. Last weekend, two Indian-flagged LPG carriers crossed the Strait. Undoubtedly, India and Israel share a growing, close strategic partnership that has strengthened in recent years. But Delhi must remain alert to the rapid escalation as it risks moving towards a point where Indian and Israeli interests begin to diverge.

## A Bill that narrows, not expands, rights

IF DEMOCRACY is based on the individuality and dignity of man... we have to recognise the right of a human being to choose his/her gender identity, which is integral to his/her personality and is one of the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity, and freedom. With these words, the Supreme Court in *NALSA vs Union of India* (2014) recognised the third gender as a category and trans persons' right to determine their own gender identity as integral to the right to life and dignity. The protections and rights assured by NALSA and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, could now be undermined by the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026.

The Bill limits the definition of who the state would recognise as a transgender person to biological and cultural markers: "A person having such socio-cultural identities as kinship, hijra, aravani and jogta...", intersex people and persons who have been "forced" to present as transgender. This means the state would cease to recognise the right to choose one's own gender identity, excluding lakhs of people for whom the legislation was framed — trans men, trans women outside the communities listed, genderqueer, and non-binary people. To identify and protect a "genuine" class of "oppressed" transgender persons, the Bill proposes the examination of trans persons by a district medical board. It fails to recognise that sex may be physically determined, gender identity is not. It is also impossible to diagnose "oppression" through medical examination. Many in the process of transitioning and/or acquiring fresh documents will be left in limbo, and those outside recognised categories may see their documents invalidated. By making it mandatory for medical institutions to share details of persons undergoing gender-affirming surgeries with the DM, the Bill violates the right to privacy enshrined in *Puttaswamy* (2018).

While the larger objective of the Bill — wider implementation of protections and welfare measures — is worthy, the institutional capacity, political will and understanding must be expanded. At a time when the world is seeing a rollback in the scant protections for trans people, India has the opportunity to offer its citizens safety, autonomy, and dignity. It should not, instead, walk back on rights.

## Spy writer who taught young men to cook

IN 1962, a few weeks after the first James Bond film, *Dr No*, opened to full houses, another spy thriller caught the attention of book lovers. In several ways, it was the antithesis to the Ian Fleming-scripted blockbuster — its title, *Press Files*, an acronym for "Induction of Psycho-neurosis by Conditioned Reflex under Stress", and its unnamed protagonist, a gritty civil servant, at home with office memos and bureaucratic rivalries. The book went on to sell more than 2 million copies in three years, establishing its writer, Len Deighton, who died on Monday, as a major voice in Cold War spy fiction. While *Dr No* found it difficult to fathom that the Sun had set on the British Empire, Deighton's protagonist is unabashedly joyous — he solves crossword puzzles, to file his taxes, cooks, and enjoys the smell of roasted chicken stuffed with pine-nuts and spices. He wears ill-fitting jackets and in his tinsel avatar — where he gets a name, Harry Palmer — Deighton's spy wears glasses.

By the early '70s, Deighton had cemented his place among writers such as Eric Ambler and John le Carré, who challenged spy fiction's hero mythology, and whose characters were often aware of the compromises demanded by their profession. Deighton's work was also distinguished by its understated wit. His 1970 work, *Bombier*, was praised as one of the finest post-war British novels. But it was also criticised for emphasising its ordinary Germans at the receiving end of the British counter to the Blitz.

Deighton also brought his storytelling skills to works on popular history. His "Cookstrips", illustrated step-by-step recipes in *The Observer*, were meant to nudge "young men living away from home to take up cooking". Like several of his other works, that, too, was an evocative idea.

# Silence on West Asia war is not moral surrender, but responsible statecraft



**THAROORTHINK**  
BY SHASHI THAROOR

IN THE last couple of weeks, many Indian liberals have turned their fire inward, accusing those of us who have not condemned the government's silence on the US-Israeli war against Iran of moral cowardice. In the American phrase, it has become a "circular firing squad" — shooting on ourselves. They want us all to demand that India should have taken the moral high ground, denouncing the war as a flagrant violation of international law.

Let me state clearly: I concur that the war cannot be justified under international law. It violates the very principles India has historically stood for — respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Nor, as I have explained earlier, is there a case for pre-emptive self-defence either. And yes, we should have promptly issued condolences on the death of the Supreme Leader of Iran, as we had done when his president was killed in a helicopter crash. I am free to say so, and so are my liberal friends in the Opposition or the commentator. But I will not condemn the government for choosing silence over confrontation.

India's diplomacy has always been about balancing principle with pragmatism. Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of non-alignment was not a refusal to take moral positions, but a recognition that India's sovereignty and survival depended on avoid-

ing entanglement in Cold War hostilities. Today, in an increasingly multipolar world, India practises "multi-alignment" — engaging with diverse powers, sometimes in tension with one another, while keeping our national interest paramount.

The objective has remained constant: Protect India's sovereignty while speaking for global justice. No one holds a monopoly over patriotism, nor over the interpretation of the values taught by Gandhi or Nehru. The true tribute to their legacy lies in applying their values wisely to the realities of our time, not in self-gratifying denunciations that could jeopardise our interests.

Critics forget that India has often chosen silence when principles collided with national interest. We were reluctant to condemn the Soviet Union's flagrant violations of international law in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979). Why? Because we rightly judged that we had too much at stake in our relationship with Moscow to antagonise it with a moralistic stand. The Soviet Union was our principal arms supplier, a crucial diplomatic partner, and a counterweight to Western hostility.

That silence did not mean we endorsed Soviet aggression. It meant we understood the costs of confrontation and chose prudence over posturing. Today, the same logic applies to our stand on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli-American assault on Iran.

India has far too much at stake, not only in the US, but in the Gulf Arab states currently facing Iranian missile and drone attacks. Nearly \$200 billion in annual trade flows through this region. Our energy security depends on Gulf oil and gas. And the well-being of some 9 million Indian workers and residents in the Gulf is directly tied to regional stability.

To indulge in sanctimonious moralising by condemning the US-Israeli war on Iran would risk destabilising these relationships. It would jeopardise remittances that sustain millions of Indian households, energy supplies that fuel our economy, and trade ties that underpin our growth. Silence, in this context, is not cowardice. It is a sober recognition of the interconnectedness of our national interests with the realities of the region.

We must also acknowledge the nature of the government in Washington. Today's United States does not prioritise international law in the way we might wish. President Donald Trump is often willing to lash out at those who obstruct his objectives. While the war violates tenets we stand for, jeopardising the many other strategic interests we have with the US would be unwise.

Our defence cooperation, technology partnerships, and shared concerns about China's rise all depend on a stable relationship with Washington. To antagonise the US with a moralistic denunciation of its war would risk undermining these vital interests. Loud lecturing combines poorly with low leverage. Foreign policy is, above all, about the protection of sovereignty, the pursuit of prosperity, and the preservation of peace. Our interests are not served by indulging in the gratification of grandstanding — unless we are confident that we can comfortably withstand the consequences. And today, we cannot.

To acknowledge reality is not to kowtow to anyone. India has often spoken for global justice in multilateral forums. But we have also known when to hold our tongue. That balance is the essence of responsible statecraft. Silence, in the absence of lever-

**We were reluctant to condemn the Soviet Union's flagrant violations of international law in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979). Why? Because we rightly judged that we had too much at stake**

## A German scholar, pioneer of India's regional history writing



**RANABIR CHAKRAVARTI**

A BUDDING GERMAN scholar, barely 23, came to a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka as a tutorial assistant for two months in 1959. He then undertook an exceptional train journey from the south of India, through the Deccan and the northern plains up to Amritsar and Lahore, and then hitch-hiked across the Khyber Pass. His journeys across South Asia would have pleased Xuanzang (the 7th-century CE Chinese Buddhist pilgrim). He visited several historic and sacred sites (including Thanjavur, Badami, Ajanta, Sanchi, Varanasi and Agra) and remembered the travels as his *trihina-yatra*. It would be the beginning of his six-decade-long association with India. The scholar was Professor Hermann Kulke, one of the most respected German experts on South Asian History, who passed away on March 10.

Kulke began by studying German History, Sociology and Political Science, but soon felt drawn to South Asian History by reading Heinrich Zimmer and Wilhelm Rau. He turned to Indology at the University of Freiburg as a doctoral scholar. Although he received rigorous training in German Indology, Kulke was never enamoured of the Aryan question, which, as he pointed out, was "a major ideological prop of German Fascism". A close reading of Max Weber aroused in Kulke a deep interest in Indic systems. The result was his groundbreaking doctoral dissertation on the sacred centre of Chidambaram. It involved a critical analysis of the *Chidambaram-mahatmyam*, which enabled new perspectives on the Cholas.

The growing appeal of the Bhakti cults from 600 CE onwards, emerging first in South India and then proliferating on a pan-Indian scale, coincided with the rise of numerous political powers at local and supra-local levels. These emergent polities often sought legitimisation through sacred ideologies and rituals. Kulke delved deep into the formation of regional states with his research on the history of the Jagannath cult and the polity of Odisha under the Eastern Gangas and the Gajapatis (twice leading the Orissa Research Project of the German Academic Council). These forays brought the premodern polities

of Odisha to global attention. Besides publications on the Jagannath cult, his *Kings and Monarchs in Sri Lanka* and the interactions between *Kshatriya* (power) and *Kshetra* (sacred centres) in Odisha and South India. It also set the stage for his seminal contributions to premodern political processes — *The State in India 1000-1700* and the books he co-edited with B P Sahu, *Interrogating Political Systems: Integrative Processes and States in Pre-modern India*, *The Routledge Handbook of the State in Pre-modern India and History of Precolonial India: Issues and Debates*. These works highlighted the process of state-making "from within" at local and regional levels. Along with Sahu and another close friend, B D Chattopadhyaya, Kulke critiqued nationalist historians' thrust on centralised and unitary polity, the Marxist perception of the decentralised polity under feudalism, and the segmented polity model. They presented, with empirical richness and conceptual strength, the alternative process of "integrative polity" that gave centrality to the regional profiles of powers.

Kulke was equally at home with South Asian and Southeast Asian pasts. His contributions to the study of the Angkor state in Cambodia, the Javanese polity and the Chola overseas campaigns in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka have brought about lasting historiographical shifts. He did not subscribe to R C Majumdar's claim of the Hindu colonies in the Far East or George Coedès' perception of the Indianised states of South East Asia. Instead, he demonstrated the cultural convergence on both sides of the Bay of Bengal that resulted in socio-economic, political and cultural interactions between South and Southeast Asia. Sahu and Chattopadhyaya passed away in 2022. The passing away of the remaining member of the trio will leave a deep void in Indian historiography. Generous and helpful to the fault, especially to young scholars, Kulke was an admirer of India and Indians. His many students, both in Germany and in India, will not only fondly remember him, but will surely further enrich the fields Kulke opened up.

The writer is a historian

## Diluting the power of lies in a post-truth age



**GEORGE JOHN**

TRUTH AND falsehood are not just opposing statements; they are rival ways of living together. Lies — especially those that empower or preserve — can circle the world before patient fact has laced its boots. We live in a "post-truth" age, where feelings often seem to weigh more than evidence and where every claim can be dismissed as "just your narrative". Yet, ordinary life still depends on some shared sense that words ought to answer to reality. When that weakens, everything else begins to wobble.

What, then, do we mean by "truth"? Philosophers speak of correspondence (our words matching the world), coherence (our beliefs hanging together), and pragmatism (truth as what "works" in experience). In practice, we borrow from all three. A doctor, a judge, or a journalist needs statements that fit the facts, make sense within a wider picture, and continue to survive serious questioning. Truth-seeking is less a static possession than a disciplined habit. Gather evidence, listen to objections, revise when necessary, and still be willing to say, "On present evidence, this is what we should believe." Plural perspectives do not mean anything goes. Different angles on reality can be partial without being arbitrary. Humility here is a virtue: The willingness to admit limits and learn from those who see what we have missed.

If truth matters so much, why do falsehoods flourish? Part of the answer is motivational: Lies can be comforting, convenient, or profitable. Part of it is structural: Rumours and half-truths are easy to share, while verification is slow and unglamorous. And part of it is what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt called "bullshit". Unlike the ordinary liar who still pays tribute to truth by trying to conceal it, the bullshitter saws off the very branch on which public trust sits. Power deepens the damage. From totalitarian propaganda to today's flood of contradictory messages, those who control megaphones can blur the line between fact and fiction. When citizens no longer know whom to trust, many retreat into cynicism or cling to their tribe's preferred story. Most victims of misinformation are not wicked; they are human. We all prefer information that fits what we already believe. We are overwhelmed by headlines, clips, and forwards. In this environment, "cognitive ease" — what feels familiar — often masquerades as truth.

So, what can we do? We can practise a few modest disciplines. First, triangulation: Don't rely on a single source; look for independent confirmation. Second, provenance: Ask who is saying this, how they know it, and what they stand to gain. Third, conversational ethics: Argue to understand, not just to win; try to restate an opponent's view fairly before criticising it. Fourth, character: Cultivate the habit of admitting, "I was wrong." A truthful society is not one in which everyone agrees, but one in which disagreement is conducted with shared respect for reality. That requires courage, patience, and humility.

The writer is a retired psychiatrist

## 40 YEARS AGO

March 19, 1986



## Sobhraj aide surrenders

DINESH, ONE of the six persons who escaped with the Israeli international criminal Charles Sobhraj, surprised police officers when he returned to the jail. He was subsequently arrested by the police, who had taken into custody the deputy jail superintendent, V D Pushkama, and a warder Prem Bahadur, for allegedly having a hand in the conspiracy regarding Sobhraj's escape from jail.

## Sobhraj met Tihar officials

CHARLES SOBHAJ, the pleaded international criminal, had an extraordinary meeting with two senior officials of Tihar

Central Jail about an hour before he escaped. It was not an official meeting. The two deputy superintendents who met him, B S Jaisil and H C Khera, were not in charge of the part of jail where Sobhraj was kept. The meeting was arranged in no. 1 section of the jail. Sobhraj was called there from no. 3 section at about 11 am. The meeting lasted an hour.

## Amritsar SP attacked

An attempt was made on the life of the Amritsar District Superintendent of Police (CID), Harjeet Singh, while another person was stabbed to death in Ludhiana in the last 24 hours. Harjeet Singh had a narrow escape when some unidentified persons, sus-

pected to be terrorists, fired Sten sub-machine gun shots at his car near his house on Taylor Road in Chandigarh.

## Clashes in Jalandhar

The Sri Lankan government is preparing an autonomy plan as part of a political solution to the island's ethnic crisis, reliable sources said in Colombo. The initial step would be to set up a provincial council in the disputed eastern province, which would have a chief minister at its head, the sources said. The new plan falls short of a merger of the northern and eastern provinces as demanded by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the main Tamil political party.

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

## • POLITICS

# Language row in Karnataka that led to cancellation of Railways exam

Kiran Parashar  
Bengaluru, March 18

THE SOUTH Western Railway (SWR) was forced to postpone a recruitment examination on Tuesday after a pro-Kannada outfit protested near exam centres across Karnataka, objecting to the test being conducted only in English and Hindi. SWR's action was all the more notable in a state that has had a history of protests over language, with pro-Kannada activists frequently resorting to vandalism and violence. Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah posted on X: "Despite peaceful protests, the department failed to respond in time, cancelling the examinations at the last moment and leading to the present confusion."

### What was the examination in question?

The Mysuru Division of the SWR issued a notification on February 25, 2025 for a promotion exam. Such exams are held for Group 'C' and 'D' employees, giving them an opportunity for promotion. It was to be held for 194 Goods Train Manager posts, with a 60% quota for existing employees. On November 5, 2025 another notification was issued for 101 posts under the Limited Departmental Competitive Examination with 15% promotional quota. Both exams were scheduled for March 17.



Pro-Kannada protesters in Bengaluru on Tuesday.

### How did the row unfold?

According to the candidates, the examination notification mentioned a three-language policy when it was first released, meaning it would be conducted in English, Hindi and Kannada. However, a later notification only mentioned Hindi and English. In a letter dated February 12, the All India OBC Railway Employees Association wrote to the General Manager of the SWR and demanded that the examinations be conducted as per the official language policy of the Government of India, and that, in its absence, Kannada-speaking employees faced disadvantages.

### What is the official policy in such matters?

According to Railway Board guidelines issued in a July 8, 1992 circular, all departmental examinations must be conducted in three languages — Hindi, English, and the respective regional language. South Indian states have long stressed the need for a three-language policy in recruitment concerning Public Sector Banks, the Indian Railways and other central agencies to encourage local recruitment. In his post on X, Siddaramaiah alleged that the "continued imposition of Hindi in recruitment processes across central departments" has led to the unfair treatment of local candidates.

### What has the Railways said?

SWR, which is yet to announce the new dates, said that regular exams abide by the three-language policy, but the promotion examination is being conducted in Hindi and English. An SWR official claimed the exam for promotions is computer-based, which is why Kannada was not added as an option. Questioned about the notification, which clearly mentioned that exams would be held in three languages, the official said that they would revert. An official statement indicated that the issue of Kannada's exclusion was being taken up for discussion.

## • CULTURE

# With 2 Oscars, how KPop Demon Hunters charted a path to mainstream success

Rishika Singh  
New Delhi, March 18

NETFLIX'S *KPop Demon Hunters* (2025) won two Oscars Sunday for Best Animated Feature Film and Best Original Song, a banner night for a film that came to the streaming platform with little expectation. It is now Netflix's most-watched film, ever. Its songs have topped US music charts and a sequel is in the works. So how did the film break multiple commercial records and accrue critical acclaim along the way?

### Infusing Korean mythology

*KPop Demon Hunters* follows three members of a popular Korean girl group called Huntrix. They live double lives as hunters of demons, whose existence is unknown to humans, and fight them through the power of their music. In the process, the main characters learn the values of self-acceptance and teamwork. The setting provides ample space for a colourful and bright visual palette, which

is rendered in the film's unique animation style. It has received praise for faithfully incorporating aspects of Korean culture, including the city landscape of Seoul, as well as Korean folk and mythology. For instance, it reimagines a feature seen in many Disney films involving princesses, that of a cute animal companion. In the film, this takes the form of a tiger and a magpie. A report in *The Korea Times* stated: "This odd-couple pairing may seem random at first, but it traces back to Korean folk art and genre paintings called 'minhwa'. Flourishing in the later centuries of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), minhwa broke away from the refined conventions of court painting. Rather than following rigid formalism, the genre embraced raw charm and unrestrained spontaneity. Blending with whimsical, often mischievous details, these works reflected the imaginative desires and everyday humor of ordinary people." "Traditionally, the tiger was seen as a guardian against evil spirits and the magpie as a harbinger of good news. But in



'KPop Demon Hunters' is now Netflix's most-watched film.

minhwa, these auspicious figures took on a satirical twist, delivering a playful jab at those in power," it added. Mijong Mimi Kim, a Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Washington University in St. Louis, was among the advisers consulted for the

add multiple catchy and energetic songs common to the genre in its two-hour runtime. Some of the soundtrack features the popular K-pop girl group, TWICE. The film attempts to capture aspects of the genre in a way that both nods to the fan culture and pokes occasional fun at its intensity without looking down on it. Most of the soundtrack is in English, which helps widen its appeal to non-Korean audiences. In centring K-pop, the film capitalises on the rapid rise of the genre in the West over the last decade. Groups such as *BTS*, *TWICE* and *Blackpink* served as inspiration for the characters' appearances and fashion. But it's not just K-pop — Korean movies and culture have had a spot in the limelight for a while now. This could have eased the film's path to mainstream success. At the Oscars, too, the 2019 film *Parasite* won the Best Picture award in 2020, becoming the first non-English film to do so. The next year, *Minari* received several nominations and the Best Supporting Actress award for Youn Yuh-jung. *Squid Game*, the most-

watched series on Netflix, was also a Korean creation. Prof Kim said: "Works such as 'Parasite' and 'Squid Game' reveal universal aspects of human nature — both its strengths and its flaws. Their power lies in their unflinching honesty, resisting any impulse to soften or idealize reality." **Kids as a key demographic** From a focus on friendships to love interests, the film includes several aspects common to feel-good animation movies. The genre is often targeted at children, and this film has the advantage of catchy songs that they request to be played on repeat. Netflix now offers a version with just the film's music videos. The overwhelming popularity doesn't mean the film hasn't faced criticisms, ranging from a lack of depth in characterisation to some plot inconsistencies. But put together, the visuals, music, and the overarching sense of fun and action have been enough to propel it to success.

## • WAR IN WEST ASIA

# Ali Larijani: Philosopher, negotiator and hardliner



SHUBHAJIT ROY

IRAN'S POWERFUL national security advisor Ali Ardehshir Larijani was killed by Israel on Monday night. His death was confirmed by Iran's Supreme National Security Council, which Larijani led as secretary. Larijani's son, Morteza, was also killed in the attack, the council said.

Larijani, 67, was widely believed to be running the country following the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

### Long ties with India

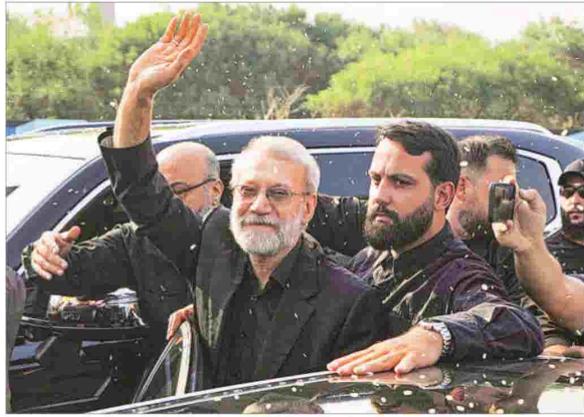
In New Delhi, Larijani was viewed as a "friend" and the Indian establishment had engaged with him for over 20 years.

The most recent engagement was in January this year, when Deputy National Security Advisor Pavan Kapoor visited Iran. This was a follow-up visit after National Security Advisor Ajit Doval called up Larijani in September last year and congratulated him on assuming the responsibility of Supreme National Security Council chief.

According to an Iranian readout, Larijani had "expressed his gratitude for the kind words and discussed strategies for expanding economic cooperation between the two countries, as well as strengthening security and defence relations and advancing the Chabahar project". It had been agreed that further negotiations would continue during an upcoming visit to India.

Larijani had visited India in February-March 2013 as Chairman (Speaker) of the Parliament of Iran. At that time, he had met Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar and discussed greater interaction between the two Parliaments.

At that time, he had offered a nuanced understanding of bilateral ties, saying: "Iran and India play complementary role to each other. This goes back to the roots that bind the two countries together. There were many Iranian scientists who came to India. I can say that for almost two centuries, Persian was the official court language of India. You have some great people who are considered great people for us too. Like Gandhi, like Jawaharlal Nehru. The people of Iran know about them. Their works are being studied even today in Iran. You have some Indian poets and they have



Ali Larijani being welcomed to Beirut by Hezbollah supporters in 2025.

actually written their poetry in Persian language and they are very famous in Iran too. So I can say that the people of the two countries are very close to each other. And when countries have very good people-to-people contacts, it is very easy for them to have political cooperation."

About differences of views, he said: "That's natural. In today's world, there are always small arguments and differences... We have to see whether they are tactical or strategic. But when it comes to the strategic level, we have no difference of opinion." This was remarkable, considering he was speaking soon after India had voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency.

### Calibrated hardline

Larijani was a quintessential Iranian politician: bureaucrat, technocrat and diplomat all rolled into one.

He ran for President in 2005 but came sixth. Subsequently, he was handpicked by Khamenei into the Supreme National Security Council (NSA equivalent) between 2005 and 2007 — a crucial phase for the Iranian nuclear programme. He was their lead negotiator during those years and is credited with fashioning a calibrated hard-

line position that he managed well enough to purchase time during the negotiations with EU3 (France, Germany and the UK).

However, he also said to have scuttled the possibility of an agreement with the West in 2009, when then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had agreed in principle to the Tehran Research Reactor deal. This involved shipping out enough of Iran's low-enriched uranium stockpile to Russia to prevent it from making a bomb, and Russia in return providing fresh fuel to keep the reactor running for civilian purposes. This was aimed at providing a year or two of negotiating time without the pressure of a clock ticking on the side. The collapse of this deal accelerated the push for tougher sanctions against Iran.

### Last letter

In his last letter on March 16, Larijani had called for the unity of the Muslim world

"You know that America has no loyalty to you and that Israel is your enemy. Stop for a moment and reflect on yourselves and the future of the region," he wrote

### Kennedy and Kant

Larijani belonged to a wealthy and powerful family from Amol. In 2009, *Time* magazine described them as the "Kennedys of Iran". His father, Mirza Hashem Amoli, was a prominent religious scholar and his brothers too have held powerful positions in the government. He was married to Farideh Motahari, whose father had been an aide of Khamenei's predecessor.

Larijani was the quintessential Iran politician: Bureaucrat, technocrat, diplomat. His killing will pave way for hawks less amenable to talks

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Larijani studied mathematics and computers for his graduation, and received his Masters and PhD in Western Philosophy from Tehran University. He taught philosophy at the same university, authoring three books on the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Having played an active role in the 1979 Iran Revolution, he joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the early 1980s. Then he transitioned to the government, serving as culture minister under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani between 1994 and 1997, and then as the head of the state broadcaster (IRIB) from 1994 until 2004. During his time at the IRIB, he faced criticism for being part of the repressive regime, but the broadcaster expanded its reach, including some international TV channels for Iranian expatriates.

He attempted to run for President for a second time in 2021. But this time, he was disqualified by the Guardian Council, which vets candidates. He was disqualified again when he attempted to run in the 2024 presidential election.

The Guardian Council gave no reason for the disqualifications, but analysts viewed the 2021 move as a way to clear the field for hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, who won the election. Larijani criticised the 2024 disqualification as "non-transparent".

But he did return to an influential position in August 2025, when he was reappointed as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council by President Masoud Pezeshkian.

The other top Iranian leaders, Larijani was under heavy US sanctions and implicated in the violent repression of mass protests in January. He had been appointed to advise Khamenei on strategy in nuclear talks with the Trump administration.

In his last letter to the Islamic world on March 16, he had called for unity among them.

### What his death means for war

Larijani was one of the insiders of the Iranian regime with the ability to work across the aisle — from moderates and reformists to hardliners and IRGC — while also having the bandwidth to engage with the most sophisticated American and Western diplomats.

Several European countries have rejected Trump's call for naval reinforcements, while others have chosen to engage at their own discretion. The UK has allowed the US to use some of its military bases in Cyprus following suspected Iranian drone attacks. While Cyprus is not a NATO member, the UK is. Greece has sent frigates and F-16s, while France deployed the frigate *Languedoc* to Cyprus. NATO forces have also intercepted Iranian drones and missiles near Turkey's Incirlik Air Base. To date, the eastern flank of the alliance has absorbed the spillover of conflict, even as NATO itself refrains from formally entering the war.

### Rules of engagement

Article 5, obligating a response by all members to an attack on one member, may be invoked strictly as a defence measure.

An attack on any member country's military bases or missiles does not automatically result in its invocation.

### Trump's grievances

Since his first presidential term, Donald Trump has claimed that other NATO allies haven't contributed as much to the shared alliance defence budget as the US. Since

2006, each member has been expected to contribute at least 2% of its GDP on its defence, and since 2014, endeavour to "move towards the 2% guideline within a decade".

According to NATO data, US defence spending constituted 63% of total defence spending in 2024, down from 72% in 2016, when Trump was first elected president. While both figures are substantial, the US ranks sixth in terms of the percentage of GDP spent on defence.

More importantly, Article 5 has been invoked only once, for America's aid following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Several NATO allies came together to stage a military intervention in Afghanistan. When the US exited it in 2021, there were about 10,000 NATO troops in the country (of which 2,500 were American), down from over 100,000 in 2011. Soldiers from Britain and other European nations died fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Denmark alone sent 18,000 troops during this period, and had one of the highest per-capita death rates, losing 43 soldiers between 2002 and 2014.

Several European leaders have seen the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a costly mistake driven by faulty intelligence.

## How to define an ancient hill range? By protecting a delicate balance



ANOOP SINGH

A new committee of experts is set to take up what appears to be an increasingly vexatious task of defining an ancient hill range. I was compelled to put on record why, as then director general (DG), Forest Survey of India (FSI), I opposed the definition based on 100 m elevation for the Aravalli.

It is also as good a time as any to remember why it may not be necessary to reinvent the wheel, because the Aravalli hills were meticulously mapped back in 2011 by the FSI under a very able director general, the late R.D. Jakati.

Pursuant to the Supreme Court (SC) order dated February 19, 2010, the central empowered committee of the SC assigned the task of mapping mining areas in the Aravalli hills of Rajasthan to the FSI.

Subsequently, after failing to obtain any map of Aravalli Hills and Ranges from other mapping agencies, the FSI embarked upon the arduous task of mapping by itself and submitted the delineated map of the Aravalli hills for 15 districts of Rajasthan on April 13, 2011.

The issue was revisited when a committee of secretaries and representatives of technical institutions was constituted, as per directions of the SC on May 9, 2024, to find a uniform definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges.

The committee submitted its report in its affidavit on October 3, 2025. As DG, FSI, I was a member of the committee and had opposed the definition based on 100 m elevation above a reference level due to its serious environmental impacts. After the SC judgment on November 20, 2025, multiple reports by this newspaper led to protests by environmentalists. On December 29, the SC stayed the November judgment with directions to form a new

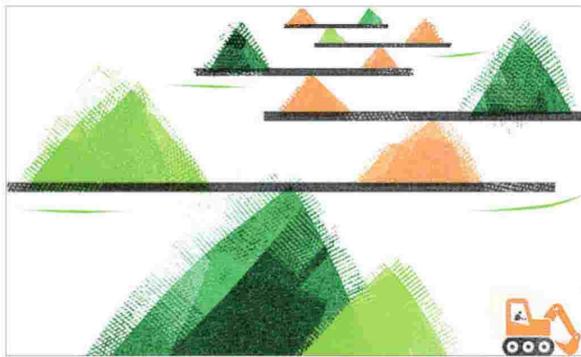


ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

### Aravalli region in Rajasthan

Total number of hills: 1,18,575

| HILL HEIGHT (M) | NO. OF HILLS |
|-----------------|--------------|
| ≥ 20            | 12,081       |
| ≥ 40            | 5,009        |
| ≥ 60            | 2,656        |
| ≥ 80            | 1,594        |
| ≥ 100           | 1,048        |

### Number of Aravalli Districts

| STATE        | AS PER FOREST SURVEY OF INDIA* | AS PER ENVIRONMENT SECY-LED PANEL** |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Rajasthan    | 36 of 41 new districts         | 20 of 41 new districts              |
| Haryana      | 9                              | 7                                   |
| Gujarat      | 9                              | 5                                   |
| Delhi        | 8                              | 5                                   |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>62</b>                      | <b>37</b>                           |

\*REPORT DATED 22 SEP 2025 \*\*AFFIDAVIT TO SC DATED 9 OCT 2025

committee to examine the issue. While this committee is in the process of being set up, I think it is important to highlight a few points.

The recent analysis on the Aravalli hills and their definition, extent, distribution, demarcation and altitudinal zonation was done during my tenure as DG, FSI. I studied the application of remote sensing and GIS from IITC, The Netherlands, and spent six months at ESRU, USA. I may claim a modest understanding of the technology.

It is also as good a time as any to remember why it may not be necessary to reinvent the wheel because the Aravalli hills were meticulously mapped back in 2011 by the FSI

While serving as DG, I had analysed the data for 15 districts of Rajasthan to ascertain the impact of excluding hills below 100 m from the Aravalli. Only 15 (est. v. 2011) districts were used because the Rajasthan government had earlier stated that the Aravalli is spread over only these 15 districts.

Digitised contours of these 15 districts were available with the FSI. The contour dataset was digitised painstakingly from 1:50,000 Survey of India topographic sheets in 2011. Based on this dataset, the

FSI had proposed to the SC the boundary of Aravalli hills using 3-degree slope criteria in 2011. The results of the analyses carried out by the FSI in 2025 were reported by this newspaper last November (see table 1).

In order to answer the SC's query on the accuracy of this study, it needs to be repeated by the proposed committee, without changing the Survey of India sheets-based dataset created during the tenure of former DG FSI Jakati.

According to the FSI's report dated September 22, 2025, as many as 62 districts qualify to be included in the Aravalli. In comparison, the environment secretary's committee listed only 37 districts in their affidavit on October 3, 2025. Even prominent districts such as Sawai Madhopur and Chittaurgarh, famous for their forts, were excluded from the list of Aravalli districts by the secretary's committee, even though they were included in the Aravalli Green Wall Project and also in the Ministry of Culture's UNESCO World Heritage sites as "Hill Forts of Rajasthan".

The districts to be included along with ranges for inclusion have been mentioned in detail in the FSI's report. As the table shows, the omission is stark (see table 2) and, if not rectified, the hills are destined to be obliterated in many districts without even being heard.

The new committee should also refer to FSI's September 2025 report to take note of the reasons why various government agencies — such as the environment ministry, the Ministry of Culture, Central Ground Water Board, Geological Survey of India etc. — have been including these districts within the Aravalli.

The new committee may also like to re-examine the robustness of the 3-degree slope criteria adopted by the FSI earlier as it is time-tested and identifies the hills in the Aravalli region quite accurately.

Rajasthan has only 8 per cent geographical area under forest and tree cover (ISFR, 2023) and the majority of this lies in the Aravalli region. The utmost care needs to be taken not to disturb this delicate balance.

Singh is former director general, Forest Survey of India

## Textbook row: NCERT needs to look within — judiciary, too



REKHA SHARMA

LUORD ATKIN, a renowned British judge, famously observed that "justice is not a cloistered virtue. She must be allowed to suffer the scrutiny... and outspoken comments of ordinary men." This observation gives the critics a free run. However, our Supreme Court (SC) feels the critics cannot run amuck and must bear in mind that the criticism has to be objective, genuine, and not aimed at tarnishing the image of an individual or institution.

The context is the controversy regarding the contents of a Class 8 Social Science textbook created and approved by NCERT. The chapter "The Role of the Judiciary in Our Society" contains references to judicial corruption and a massive backlog of cases. Taking suo motu cognisance, an SC bench headed by the CJI described the text as a calculated move to undermine the judiciary. He reportedly said, "I will not allow anyone on Earth to taint the integrity and defame the entire institution." The bench directed NCERT to withdraw all copies of the book in circulation and banned its publication. It also issued contempt notices to the director of NCERT and the secretary of the Department of School Education and Literacy. NCERT's role in these offending references and the SC's sharp reaction has triggered a debate: Did NCERT cross a red line or was this judicial overreach?

NCERT's primary function is to prepare the curriculum for students of Classes 10 to 12, and when it does that, it assumes the role of a teacher. It is expected of a teacher to impart quality education to her pupils and take a holistic view of things. By attempting to paint the judiciary in black hues, ignoring its seminal contribution in protecting the Constitution and the rule of law, NCERT was not only running down the judiciary as an institution but also doing a disservice to young minds. One would wish that NCERT had highlighted not only the judiciary's negative side but also its many positives.

The judiciary is a pillar of our democracy. And we can proudly say it has served citizens well. It has to its credit many landmark judgments that have

gone a long way in keeping our Constitution's spirit alive, like Kesavananda Bharti v. State of Kerala, which held that Parliament cannot alter or destroy the Constitution's foundational features — democracy, secularism, federalism, and the rule of law. Had it not done so, we would have lost the very essence of our fully tinkering with the Constitution's basic structure.

It is the judiciary that has given us the gift of public interest litigation. Today, any citizen can move the higher courts for

a public cause and demand public accountability from the authorities. It started with the SC taking cognisance of a newspaper report describing the appalling condition of prisoners languishing in Bihar jails without trial, notwithstanding the fact that they had already undergone the maximum sentence for the crimes they had allegedly committed. Treating the report as a writ petition, it directed the release of nearly 40,000 prisoners and gave a go-by to the *locus standi* rule, where only the aggrieved person could approach a High Court or the SC for justice. It is the judiciary that, through various pronouncements, has given an expansive definition to Article 21, which guarantees to every person the right to life and personal liberty, so as to include in its sweep the right to live with dignity rather than mere existence.

This should not be taken to mean that the judiciary is a paragon of virtue. It has its failings, too. Its judgment in *ADM Jabalpur* — holding that when an Emergency is in operation, the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 would stand suspended — is still etched in the minds of the people. There is a growing feeling that while the rich and powerful have easy access to justice, the poor and marginalised rot in jail endlessly, waiting to be heard. While Ashish Mishra — accused in the deaths of eight people in Lakhimpur Kheri — gets bail, Umar Khalid is condemned to the prison's four walls, even though he has spent more than five years in custody without trial. Corruption in the judiciary is not hidden from anyone: Not long ago, wads of burnt currency notes were found at the house of an HC judge. Certainly, the judiciary needs to make a course correction in a big way. One hopes the SC, while acting to protect the judiciary's honour, keeps in mind that at times, it too has failed the Constitution, and that where and when it so fails, the citizen has a right to say so, sometimes in whispers and at times loudly.

The writer is a former judge of the Delhi High Court

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Dowry cases

IN A country where countless undertrial prisoners accused of petty theft languish for years in overcrowded jails, the spectacle of failed dowry deaths and the murderers being set free through what appear to be run-of-the-mill bail orders is deeply troubling ('A case of gender injustice', IE, March 18). The tragedy of our times lies not merely in crime but in the perception of prejudice within the justice system itself. Bail jurisprudence must rest on clear principles to avoid legal loopholes, especially in grave offences like dowry death that reflect entrenched social violence.

Harsh Pawaria, Rohtak

### War aims

THE CALLS for a regime change in Iran may appear strategically decisive, but history suggests otherwise ('In war on Iran, Israel knows what it wants — US does not', IE, March 17). In Iraq and Afghanistan, rapid military success was followed by prolonged instability due to the absence of credible post-conflict political frameworks. Removing a regime is far easier than rebuilding a functioning state. Iran presents an even more complex challenge, with deeply embedded institutions and ideological cohesion. External pressure is more likely to strengthen internal unity than trigger collapse.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Barasat

### Energy insecurity

WHAT we are witnessing is not calculated diplomacy but a forced retreat born out of domestic insecurities and economic missteps ('Return of Russian oil signals US pragmatism', IE, March 16). The US is cornered by the mounting pressure of gas prices at home, and the waiver is less a strategic lever than a necessary evil to stave off backlash. Energy inflation has already been a key driver of broader price instability, with the US Bureau of Labour Statistics reporting that fuel costs contributed disproportionately to the rising Consumer Price Index increases over the past year. Washington cannot afford another shock.

Abhinav Shah, Lucknow



RAJAN KUMAR

WEST ASIA continues to be trapped in a deadly conflict with no end in sight. Most recently, Iran's security chief, Ali Jafarizadeh, and the paramilitary force Basij's commander, Gholamreza Soleimani, have been killed. The conflict has claimed over 1,300 lives, energy prices have hit the roof, and global security is at stake. But the global response remains tepid and perfunctory, marked by strategic ambivalence and risk aversion. The world is drifting towards disorder in the absence of collective action, owing to leadership paralysis. European leaders have abdicated their obligations, while the leaders of the Global South are reluctant to coordinate a joint response. Every state is apprehensive of disrupting its ties with Washington and souring relations with the unpredictable US President Donald Trump.

The central dilemma facing every state is: Who will bell the cat? Every state recognises the threat to global security, but each remains averse to initiating action, fearing punitive measures by Washington and uncertain outcomes. The middle powers expect the powerful countries to assume leadership, while the powerful states fear entrapment and uncertain support from the middle powers. Two sets of actors have economic and diplomatic capabilities to change the course of the war and restore the global order: The European coun-

Trump is not worried about the EU, given its dependence on the US. However, the combined strength of Brazil, Russia, India, and China will certainly serve as a deterrent

## BRICS should step in, restrain US-Israel

ties and the leaders of the Global South. But unfortunately, while Europe does not want to disrupt its alliance with Washington, BRICS countries appear equally apprehensive of antagonising Trump and thus prefer strategic restraint.

The European states do not view this as a necessary war, and most of them ignored Trump's exhortation to join it. Kaja Kallas, EU foreign policy chief, stated that Europe feels slighted because it was not consulted and because the US has no clear objectives. Trump expressed his displeasure with most NATO members because they refused to deploy their militaries to ensure free navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. However, their action is unlikely to move beyond non-cooperation. No European state blamed Trump squarely for initiating a war. In contrast, European states and experts were quick to blame the Iranian regime. Compared to the European stance on Russia, its posture on Iran is revealing. It invokes international law and sovereignty in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but is restrained even in using words against the US.

More striking, however, is the absence of strong statements and condemnations from the BRICS countries. The war has entered its third week, and there is a serious risk of escalation, but BRICS has not issued a joint statement condemning the US-Israeli action. For an organisation whose policies

centres around countering Western hegemony and which draws legitimacy from the Global South, its inaction is woefully inadequate. In a modest statement, it called for a ceasefire and urged dialogue and consultation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation issued a joint statement without naming or blaming anyone.

Ideally, BRICS should have taken concrete measures immediately. BRICS members — including the UAE, a US ally — have diverse interests. However, powerful factors such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil have higher stakes in global stability. BRICS states reiterate the cause of sovereignty and non-interference at every multilateral forum, but when it comes to concrete measures, their approach is lacklustre. In such a scenario, its credibility becomes suspect. It must not allow the world to hurtle towards a disorder where the powerful do what they can while the weak suffer what they must.

As the chair of BRICS, it is incumbent upon India to mobilise members. The Trump administration is not worried about the EU, given its dependence on the US. However, the combined strength of Brazil, Russia, India, and China will certainly serve as a deterrent. The question is: Will the leaders of these countries put aside their differences and coordinate action to send a powerful message? One cannot be sure.

The writer is professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi



MITALI NIKORE

LAST WEEK, when the Supreme Court refused to hear a PIL on a national policy for menstrual leaves, it stated, "The moment it is introduced as a compulsory condition, you do not know the amount of damage you are going to do to their (women employees') career. Nobody will give them big responsibility."

Are menstrual leaves indeed a structural barrier to enhancing women's labour force participation? Or will they, in fact, facilitate women's retention as they legally allow the rest required during painful, debilitating period pain?

The evidence, unfortunately, seems to point in the direction of employer discrimination. A parallel can be drawn with what happened after the Maternity Benefit Act,

2017 introduced a six-month, employer-funded maternity leave. Purna Banerjee, Shreya Biswas, and Debjoyoti Mazumder ('Maternity Leave and Labour Market Outcomes', 2025) show that the policy significantly reduced the employment probability for women in the high-fertility age group (ages 20-29), especially in high-skilled occupations with high wages in the formal sector.

The formulation of the law is critical. Spain, the only Western economy to have a national law on menstrual leave, requires a doctor's certificate and bears the cost through publicly funded social security. The cost of the leave is not on the employer, thereby reducing the chances of discrimination.

So where do we go from here? Here are a few things to consider. One, we need more quantitative evidence on whether paid period leaves result in employer discrimination and what it does to women's labour productivity and retention. We need studies that

provide comparative analysis: a cross-state comparison, possibly across Karnataka and Odisha — early adopters of a menstrual leave policy — with other states that do not have paid period leave. Or a comparative firm-level analysis of companies that offer paid period leave versus those that don't. This will allow policymakers to make data-driven, evidence-based decisions.

Two, we need a national menstrual hygiene policy that covers all menstruating persons. Menstrual health management

Companies are beginning to recognise that offering period leaves or work-from-home options improves employee morale, increases loyalty, and boosts labour productivity

(MHM) initiatives cannot be limited to rural schoolgirls. MHM policy is needed for all menstruating persons — working and non-working. And such a policy needs to go beyond subsidised sanitary pads. It can introduce financial incentives for sanitary napkin manufacturing, issue guidelines for provision of sanitary napkins and MHM infrastructure at workplaces and additional medical leaves for persons with severe period pain (similar to Spain, maybe). It can even look into protocols for period pain management.

Three, building on the foundations laid by the Swachh Bharat Mission, we now need a Swachh Bharat, Sashakt Nari Mission to build or upgrade toilets for women and girls in public spaces and workplaces. Under this mission, CSR funding can support municipal corporations, public transport authorities, industrial areas, market associations, and other public spaces, expand sanitation infrastructure, improve

maintenance and cleanliness of women's toilets across public spaces.

We need more empathy and flexibility. Even without legal mandates, some companies are beginning to recognise that offering period leaves or work-from-home options for menstruators who require rest/medical attention improves employee morale, increases loyalty, and boosts labour productivity. Private companies can offer flexible work arrangements or even leaves, as a benefit to their employees who menstruate, per their choice.

It's unlikely that this debate will die down any time soon. And that's a good thing. Because even as we keep debating the merits and demerits of a law on period leave, governments, private companies, and community-based organisations can keep working to make the world a slightly easier place for menstruating persons.

The writer is founder, Nikore Associates

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THURSDAY - MARCH 19, 2026

## Course correction

The overvalued Indian market is facing a reality check

Indian markets have fallen sharply since the start of the US-Israel-Iran war; they have reacted to the disruption in supply of critical energy sources, and to crude breaching \$100 per barrel. The benchmark Nifty50 index has lost around 7 per cent since the war began three weeks ago, akin to other global emerging market benchmarks. However, this fall may actually be beneficial to the long-term health of our markets.



Stocks from many sectors were unhinged from fundamentals. Retail investors who entered stock markets in large numbers post Covid, propelled a surge in demand for direct and indirect equity (through the mutual fund route). As a result, Indian stocks have been quite pricey, compared to other emerging markets. The Nifty50 traded at price-earnings multiple of 21.7 times towards the end of 2025. This was at a premium to benchmark indices of other EMs including China, South Korea, Brazil and South Africa which traded at PE multiples between 11 and 18. Stocks in consumption-oriented sectors such as FMCG, healthcare and retail trade traded at higher PE multiples of over 50 times. The absence of a deep correction since the Covid-low in March 2020, with declines not exceeding 20 per cent from the peak, had led to complacency with investors buying at every dip. Stocks remained elevated for too long. Owing to these higher valuations, foreign portfolio investors turned net sellers of India equity since September 2024, pulling out close to ₹3.5 lakh crore. The ongoing correction will help valuations to revert to their mean levels. The valuation of Nifty50 has cooled a bit, with the PE multiple declining to 19.51 times. But prices need to decline further.

And they will may. Given the multiple headwinds currently facing markets and the economy, investors should be prepared for further price corrections. If the war in West Asia prolongs, corporate margins are going to shrink, as fuel, logistics and input costs increase. Shortage of LPG and other fuel will likely further dent corporate bottomlines. The domestic economy, which was trotting along nicely before the onset of this war, is up against multiple first and second-order effects. Besides shocks in the form of prices, supplies and asset valuations, the sentiment factor, too, could hurt business. It does not help that there are just a few stocks in nascent, sought-after sectors such as AI and semiconductors.

The bottomline is that market corrections should happen when the underlying fundamentals change. After all, equities are not meant to be risk-free, and excesses created in bull and bear markets need to be ironed out. The Securities and Exchange Board of India should let markets follow their course, while watching out for any undue volatility caused by manipulation. The regulator, Association of Mutual Funds in India and other investor bodies should run awareness campaigns, advising investors to pursue long-term goals with realistic expectations.

## OTHER VOICES.

### THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

BY THE EDITOR

#### Why the SAVE America Act... Won't

For partisan hype, it's hard to beat the Senate debate this week on the SAVE America Act. President Trump says the legislation is a salvation from mass voter fraud. Sen. Chuck Schumer says it's an effort to mass voter suppression, "Jim Crow 2.0." Neither is reality. Also, Republicans don't have the votes to clear the Senate's filibuster. And if they bully the bill through anyway, Democrats eyeing the end of the 60-vote rule will quietly celebrate. The House version of the SAVE America Act has two main planks. First, people registering to vote would be asked to show proof of US citizenship, such as a passport, birth certificate or naturalization document. Many driver's licenses wouldn't qualify. While the bill says it would accept a REAL ID "that indicates the applicant is a citizen," standard license designs often don't say. (NEW YORK, MARCH 17)

### GULF NEWS

#### The challenges facing World Cup 2026

When the expanded 48-team FIFA World Cup kicks off in North America on June 11, 2026, it will be the largest sporting event ever staged. Matches will take place across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, involving millions of spectators and a global television audience expected to exceed five billion. The tournament is now unfolding against a geopolitical backdrop that few planners anticipated: a major war in the Middle East involving the United States and Israel against Iran, and an increasingly assertive foreign policy under the current US administration. Many quietly hope that the conflict will de-escalate or conclude well before the tournament begins, as a prolonged war would risk casting a shadow over the world's largest sporting event. (DUBAI, MARCH 17)



P. ELANGO

My favourite management lesson used to be this: when you get into the ditch (which often happens when you run an oil and gas company), one has to first get the cow out of the ditch, figure out how it got there and then ensure it does not get there. These three common sense steps need to be taken sequentially and not simultaneously. Let's follow the same principle while analysing the "worrisome" scenario in the government put it, in LPG supply.

The government is taking a series of measures including allocating priority for LPG usage, tightening the booking cycle, invoking the Essential Commodities Act to increase domestic production of LPG, securing safe passage for Indian flagged vessels to pass through the Strait of Hormuz and diversifying the LPG supply by sourcing from the US.

To know how we got into the current LPG situation requires understanding of some basics. A balanced mix of propane and butane is commonly known as liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). And it is produced in the process of converting crude oil into petroleum products such as petrol and diesel in the refineries. India has surplus refining capacity and was able to export about 65 million tonnes (mt) of petroleum products last year.

#### LARGE-SCALE IMPORTS

However, India imports 60 per cent of its LPG requirement and 90 per cent of that is from the Middle East, which means the vessels carrying the consignments have to necessarily pass through the Hormuz bottleneck. The first question is: when we have surplus refining capacity, why do we have to import LPG?

LPG production is highest (3-5 per cent) from light and sweet crude oil, but the Indian basket of crude (all the different types of crude that the country imports) has only 20 per cent light crude, as it is more expensive in international markets. Eighty per cent of crude that India imports consist of medium to heavy sour crude which are traded at a discount. However, modern Indian refineries with high complexity index are able to crack the heavy oil into export grade petroleum products. This process has some built-in flexibility and that is how Indian refineries are able to increase the LPG production under the current emergency protocol.

Still this will not be sufficient as India consumes about 60 lakh LPG cylinders

# India slips up on the LPG front

**IN CRISIS MODE.** India banked on the Middle East for almost all of its LPG imports, and failed to build strategic storage



everyday, the largest in the world for household cooking. LPG coverage, post the successful PM Ujala Yojana, is more than 10 crore households. Other countries do not depend solely on LPG as cooking fuel, electric or piped gas cooking is more common. So in the current geopolitical conflict India has a unique problem to deal with.

In a way the current situation is similar to the oxygen shortage that hospitals across the country faced during the coronavirus pandemic.

India has no facilities for strategic storage of LPG reserves to meet a crisis, and the commercial storage the oil companies together hold can meet only less than 15 days of normal consumption. The cost of storing LPG isn't much when compared to the economic cost of shortage, perceived or real. The investment needed to create storage to meet one day's requirement is about ₹2,000 crore. Surface storage

**As part of a robust energy security plan, we should have built a buffer of 45 days of surface and sub-surface storage (strategic and commercial) capacity**

capacity can be custom built for large customer segments, and large sub-surface strategic storage capacity can be created in suitable caverns to meet crisis situations such as the current one.

#### SKewed SOURCING

In the energy security planning agenda, LPG seems to have missed its rightful place. And we ended up sourcing nearly all our LPG imports from the Middle East. The major alternative source is the US, which is the largest producer and exporter of LPG in the world and it hardly uses LPG as a cooking fuel. However the transit time will be about 45 days, as the vessels have to take a longer route to avoid the strait of Hormuz.

As part of a robust energy security plan, we should have thought through this scenario and built a buffer of 45 days of surface and sub-surface storage (strategic and commercial) capacity. It's better late than never, and planning should start at least now if we are to avoid a "cylinder in a ditch" situation.

Piped natural gas (PNG), compressed natural gas (CNG) and LNG are different modes of storing and transporting natural gas, which is produced directly from gas fields in Mumbai High, Krishna-Godavari offshore and in onshore fields of

Gujarat, Rajasthan and Assam either along with oil as associated gas or independently as natural gas. The gas being predominantly methane, its storage will require expensive liquefaction and re-gasification process or reinjection in reservoirs.

Though LPG and natural gas can meet the same purpose, they are produced through different methods and by different entities. LPG is produced by downstream oil companies such as IOC, BPCL and HOCIL in the public sector, and Reliance and Nayara Energy in the private sector.

Natural gas is produced by upstream players such as ONGC, OIL and a few independent oil companies in the private sector. Incidentally, India meets about 50 per cent of its natural gas requirements by importing LNG. Disruption in LNG imports has implications for the industrial sector, too.

Policy planners must give serious thought to electric cooking as an alternative option. Though it would be expensive, at least we will not be dependent on any other country. Ten crore households depending on imported fuel to cook their daily meal is no way to build national energy security.

The writer is former CEO, Cairn India, and former MD, HOC.

# Keep alcohol, tobacco out of low-duty trade deals

Trade policy cannot trump the Constitution. The gains from tariff cuts are washed away by costs to health, family and society

Dileep Mavalankar  
Abhay Bang

As India steps up its global trade talks (bilateral free trade pacts or broader arrangements), there is a temptation to treat all commodities as equal bargaining chips. The discourse revolves around market access, tariff reductions and investor confidence. Yet there is one line that India must not cross: allowing foreign alcohol and tobacco products to enter the country at low customs duties. This is not merely a question of economics or protectionism. It is a constitutional, moral, and public health imperative.

The Constitution is unambiguous on the role of the State in relation to intoxicating and harmful substances. Article 47, one of the Directive Principles of State Policy, explicitly directs the State to "endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health." While Directive Principles are not justiciable, they are fundamental to the governance of the country and serve as guiding principles for any state policy. Trade negotiations, conducted in the name of national interest, cannot be exempt from this

constitutional responsibility.

Alcohol and tobacco are not ordinary consumer goods. Rather, they are among the important causes of preventable death and disease in India. Their harmfulness ranges from cancers, cardiovascular diseases, liver disorders, road traffic injuries, domestic violence, and loss of productivity. The WHO estimates, 40 million Indians are alcohol addicts. US Surgeon General has proposed a mandatory label on alcoholic beverages that alcohol causes seven types of cancers.

#### HEALTH HAZARDS

The Lancet and the WHO now unequivocally state that only safe limit of drinking alcohol is zero drinking. Gujarat, Bihar, Nagaland and Mizoram have prohibition in place. Meanwhile, India kills more than a million Indians each year, while alcohol use imposes enormous social and economic costs on families, particularly among the poor and women and children. Any policy that makes these products cheaper, more accessible, or more socially acceptable contradicts the State's constitutional duty to protect public health and life and liberty of citizens.

When customs duties on imported liquor and tobacco are slashed as part of



LIQUOR. No safe consumption limit

trade deals, foreign brands become more affordable, more aggressively marketed — especially to youth. Global evidence shows that transnational alcohol and tobacco corporations are very skilled at exploiting new markets with weak regulations. When India agrees to lower tariffs on whiskey, wine, cigarettes, or novel tobacco products, it sends a clear signal that revenue and trade relations matter more than health, social welfare, and even the Constitution. This goes against government's campaigns to reduce use of tobacco and alcohol. Trade negotiators often count tariff reductions

as "wins" without accounting for the downstream fiscal and social costs borne by health systems, families, and society. True economic rationality demands a

full accounting — not just of trade flows.

Public health exceptions under World Trade Organization rules and many bilateral agreements allow countries to restrict trade in products harmful to health. India, with its explicit constitutional directive, has an even stronger moral and legal basis to exclude alcohol and tobacco from low tariff treatment.

What India needs, therefore, is a clear red line in trade policy: alcohol and tobacco products should be removed from tariff-reduction commitments. Just as India has taken principled positions on access to medicines, generic drugs, and public health safeguards, it must now do the same for alcohol and tobacco. India has taken a tough stand on agri and dairy products as well.

At a time when non-communicable diseases are rising, health care systems are under strain, and families are grappling with the social fallout of addiction, trade policy cannot afford to be blind to its consequences. The long-term national interest requires the courage to say no to alcohol and tobacco in trade negotiations.

Dileep is public health expert and former director of Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar, and Bang is Director of SEARCH (Gandhinagar) and a public health expert and activist for tribal health

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

#### Luxury cars in demand

Apropos 'FTAs set to drive luxury car market: Audi India (March 18). Many Indians aspire to own luxury cars despite crowded streets and pothole-ridden roads. High-speed driving is rarely possible, yet comfort, smooth suspension, and stylish interiors make the ride enjoyable. For most buyers, the appeal lies less in utility and more in prestige and display of wealth. Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) could lower prices, encouraging wider adoption. Still, the pride of ownership often outweighs practical challenges. However, Indian roads remain unsuitable for such vehicles. The first priority should be building infrastructure fit for luxury cars before expanding imports or

manufacturing them locally.

O Prasad Rao  
Hyderabad

#### Uplift of rural areas

This is with reference to rapidly developing Naidupeta emerges as a key industrial node in southern AP (March 18). If India has to achieve all-round growth and development the contribution of the rural economy is vital. Due to lack of employment opportunities in rural areas people migrate to urban areas resulting in over-congestion of urban areas and all the problems relating to migration. To arrest this, it is important to start industries in rural areas. In this background it is refreshing to read about industrial development in Naidupeta, a small

town in Tirupati district.

Investments in infrastructure projects in rural and semi-urban areas will go a long way in creating employment opportunities for the youth in villages.

Veena Shenoy  
Thane

#### Pulling up insurers

This refers to "Wrongdoing by insurance cos will go unnoticed" (March 18). That the list of those subjected to penalties for various misdeeds, reads like a veritable who is who of Indian insurance industry, is not a matter of solace. It is proof of the extent of malfeasance, unbecoming of institutions entrusted with fiduciary responsibility and trust. Collecting

hefty sums as fines does not equate with good governance. Proactive monitoring, timely enforcement, are the abysmally lacking in Indian insurance, evidenced by reactionary fines. High time, the authorities

trash out the pain points in designing plans with adequate insurance cover for all, at affordable rates and on practical conditions.

Jose Abraham  
Valkem, Kerala

#### Stabilisation fund

Apropos 'Scenario planning' (March 18), government's decision to institute an Economic Stabilisation Fund constitutes a judicious and forward-looking policy intervention amid escalating geopolitical tensions in West Asia. With crude price

fluctuations exerting inflationary pressures and straining fiscal balances, such a mechanism

assumes critical importance. By creating a financial buffer to absorb external shocks, the fund can facilitate price moderation, macroeconomic stability, and policy flexibility during periods of uncertainty. It also reflects a calibrated approach to economic governance in an increasingly unpredictable global landscape. If operationalised efficiently, this initiative could significantly bolster

India's resilience, ensuring sustained growth while mitigating the spillovers of energy-driven disruptions.

N Sadasiva Reddy  
Bengaluru



Editor's TAKE

Afghan-Pakistan rift turns deadly

The latest airstrikes on Kabul and rising casualties mark a sharp escalation between former allies turned adversaries, underscoring a dangerous shift

It is understated yet deadly and could have far-reaching implications for the South Asian region. The conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan is escalating and, with world attention focused on West Asia, it is playing out loudly but no one seems to care. What is more disturbing is the fact that its human cost is rising with every assault, and soon it could be a major flashpoint that would be hard to contain. The reported Pakistani air strike on a Kabul hospital, which the Afghan Taliban claims killed nearly 400 people and injured 250, is not a border skirmish; it is a full-blown conflict. Though Islamabad insists it targeted militant infrastructure, not civilians, it was a massacre nonetheless. Ironically, Pakistan is getting a taste of its own medicine. For years, Pakistan nurtured, trained and used Taliban militants, who are now turning against it. Pakistan wanted a friendly regime in Kabul which would not only make its eastern border secure but also stand alongside it, in providing manpower when needed against India. However, Pakistan's calculus failed when the Taliban returned to power in 2021. The Taliban, now in power and running Afghanistan, is no longer the insurgent force it once was. In five years of its tenure, Afghanistan has willfully demonstrated autonomy and refused to take diktats from Pakistan's generals.

At the heart of the breakdown is the resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of providing a safe haven to TTP fighters, who have intensified attacks within Pakistani territory. Kabul denies these allegations, countering with claims that anti-Taliban groups find refuge in Pakistan. This blame game has steadily escalated into military confrontation. The latest strikes fit into this paradigm. Border skirmishes, air raids and retaliatory attacks have become rather routine. Moreover, diplomatic interventions by regional players have failed to produce lasting stability. What we are witnessing is not an isolated crisis but the steady normalisation of conflict between two deeply intertwined states.

There is an acute asymmetry in military capabilities. Pakistan, with its advanced air power and large standing army, holds sway over the Taliban's limited conventional capabilities. Yet, its military might does not guarantee decisive victory. If Pakistan has the machinery, the Taliban have the will and mettle to fight, especially in rugged border regions where insurgency tactics thrive. What is worrisome is the fact that, at the moment, West Asia is unstable and in a state of flux. The chances of this war getting mixed up with West Asia are high, as eventually China, Russia and the US would get involved and contest any attempt by the rivals to dominate these strategically important countries. This creates a conducive environment for escalation, reducing the likelihood of timely international mediation. As the two nations slog, power has altered priorities and ideology has collided with sovereignty. The path forward demands restraint and the need for dialogue that can eventually stop this conflict. Ironically, neither Pakistan nor Afghanistan can afford to go to full-fledged war, and if they do, it would be catastrophic for their people and the region at large.



SUSHIL KUMAR SINGLA

The common prevalent notion is that the Government has no business being in business. It is time to move beyond and take a leap from PPP 1.0 to PPP 2.0, with Public being replaced with People as far as the management of national resources is concerned?

Nature-based Solutions (NBS) can be, and must be, taken forward with People at the forefront, as they are the most vulnerable and victims of climate change and resultant warming; and they must be placed at the front as leading partners. This will help in bringing all the stakeholders—Public, People or Private Entity—on the same footing and on the same page, as all of them will carry equal weightage, which will help in creating an inclusive and equitable societal order without any frills.

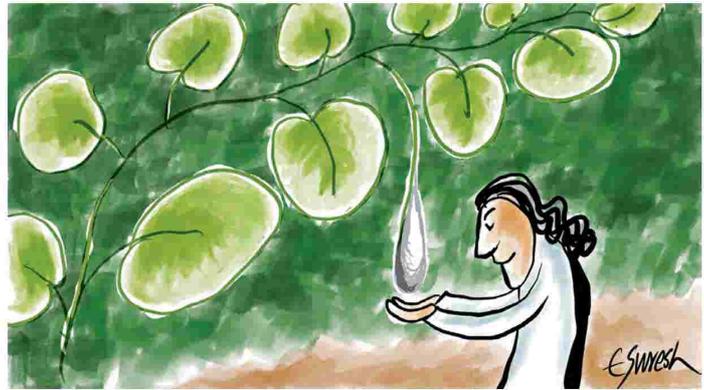
A case in point is the Forest Conservation Amendment Act, 2023, allowing industries to take up plantations on forest land, particularly degraded forest lands, aimed at enhancing green cover in the country. This is in line with the National Forest Policy 1988 goal of bringing one-third of the land area under forest or tree cover from the current level of approximately one-fourth.

In the mountainous Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, two Ayurvedic manufacturers, using bio-resource material for the production of plant-based formulations, have come forward to collaborate and work closely with people residing in rural areas to cultivate medicinal and herbal species. One of these, a leading company, shall provide free-of-cost plants to people for raising on their private lands or to farmers for growing on farmland as per feasibility assessments. Dabur India Limited has signed an MoA to supply 1.2 million plants every year without any charge to local people, and this free distribution shall continue for the next 10 years. The company has agreed to create awareness, impart technical know-how to the people, in addition to having a buy-back arrangement with the growers of these medicinal and herbal products.

The Department of Forest and Ayurveda under the State Government shall have a limited mandate of facilitating and providing a common platform to People and Private entities to coordinate, collaborate and cooperate to take forward the objectives of mutually

PPP: Reimagining national resource management

By placing communities at the centre of Nature-based Solutions, PPP not only addresses environmental challenges but also empowers those most affected, paving the way for sustainable livelihoods, equitable growth and a participatory framework



AS NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS HAVE A LONGER GESTATION PERIOD, THEY REQUIRE LONG-TERM AND CONTINUOUS EFFORTS TO MAKE THEM SUCCESSFUL AND SUSTAINABLE

The writer is Secretary Environment, Science Technology and Climate Change Government of Himachal Pradesh. Views expressed are personal

This will pave the way for the scientific propagation of herbal plants with the twin objectives of enhancing local rural livelihoods and ensuring quality herbal produce for the manufacture and preservation of traditionally harvested forest and conservation areas.

A similar approach has been taken by the State Government in the field of climate change projects in the state, such as India's first state-supported biochar production programme. Under the Biochar Project, forest-based bio-resources will be used to convert them into biochar, which shall help in protecting forests from forest fires and also create avenues for local people's livelihood enhancement. A tripartite Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) in this regard was signed between YS Parmar University of Horticulture and Forestry, Nauni, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, and ProClima Services Private Limited, Chennai. The initiative will not only create employment opportunities but also help the State to secure carbon credits. ProClima, through the Forest Department, will engage local communities in sustainable biomass collection, and the participants will be paid per kg of biomass collected, with performance-based incentives for maintaining quality and quantity.

The programme is expected to generate nearly 50,000 person-days of income annually through biomass collection, along with direct employment in plant operations. Skill

development programmes will also be organised in partnership with the university on safe collection practices, biochar applications in agriculture, and climate change mitigation. Over its 10-year operational period, the project is expected to generate about 28,800 carbon credits, giving a boost to Himachal Pradesh's

green initiatives. The Afforestation, Reforestation and Re-vegetation (ARR) project is being promoted on land owned by people by roping in private investments. Under ARR, the private company will supply seedlings free of cost to farmers for raising on private lands and, after five years, will be eligible to partake in the carbon credits accumulated on account of these plantations undertaken on farmland. Here, Government departments, particularly the Forest Department, shall play a peripheral role.

As nature-based solutions have a longer gestation period, they require long-term and continuous efforts to make them successful and sustainable.

Now, public servants have to think from the perspective that People, Private Entities and Public Servants are sitting on the same side of the table, and the table is not square or rectangular but round. National resource management has to graduate from joint management to community-led management, which shall ultimately lead to sustainable management.

PICTALK



A barbet attempts to catch a honeybee while perched on a tree branch. PHOTO: PFI

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TIME TO REVIVE PARLIAMENT'S CREDIBILITY AND PURPOSE

Parliament, once revered as the supreme forum of democracy, is increasingly losing its vitality and dignity. The sight of empty seats, computers left switched on without use, and lights blazing in deserted halls reflects wasteful expenditure and disregard for public resources. Poor attendance and lack of seriousness among lawmakers have become routine, undermining the very essence of parliamentary functioning.

Opposition parties often reduce their role to mere disruption, while treasury benches remain largely passive, showing limited engagement beyond praising the Prime Minister. The absence of top leaders, who skip more sessions than they attend, further erodes credibility and weakens accountability. Citizens expect Parliament to be a space for

debate, constructive policymaking and responsible governance.

Instead, it has become symbolic of neglect and inefficiency, where discussions are overshadowed by walkouts and noise rather than substance. Important Bills are passed without meaningful debate amidst uproar.

Restoring discipline, responsibility and genuine debate is essential if Parliament is to regain respect. Only through active participation, meaningful dialogue and respect for procedure can it reclaim its role as the guardian of democratic values. It is the responsibility of all Members of Parliament to ensure it does not degenerate into redundancy.

O PRASADA RAO | HYDERABAD

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

Contentment, not possession, holds the key to peace



RAHYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

It has often been observed that whenever people meet a spiritual personality or a learned, enlightened soul, they invariably express the feeling that their faces reflect inner contentment, peace and purity. However, hardly do these people make a sustained effort to go deeper into the factors that lead to a life of contentment and inner harmony and a state of calm and composure, and much less do they make a serious attempt to attain these, even though they value them highly. A quiet reflection and serene introspection would, however, lead to the conclusion that contentment does not come from high and numerous material attainments. Contentment dawns when the dark night of ignorance ends. It is born of a sense of realisation that all that this material world offers is only ephemeral and short-lived. Only he, from whose

mind desires for mundane achievements have been eliminated, has contentment. Contentment is thus a sign of spiritual wisdom and maturity.

So, what is so special about contentment that has made many great people talk or write about it? Well, to understand it, we would first need to understand the opposite of it, i.e. discontentment. A discontented person has a typical habit of building castles in the air while he is as poor as he can be. Such people totally fail to understand that it is only by dint of hard work that a man can make both ends meet, and only a man of right understanding can work on the right lines. Otherwise, it is a blunder to let your reason be clouded by passion and thus lose your own happiness. Hence, we should remember that just as food sustains the body, so does the mind find sustenance in happiness. So, the saying goes: there is no food as good as happiness. And, to be happy, you have to be content. Just as, for bodily well-being, man seeks food, so should he maintain the state of contentment to ensure happiness of mind.

As Alfred Nobel has rightly said, "Contentment is the only real wealth", we should therefore not run after securing another kind of wealth to lose the wealth of contentment. Likewise, peace comes when one's inner conflicts have been resolved and harmony of the mind and the intellect has been achieved. Peace is born of purity.

Contentment, purity and peace are the trio which make one's life worth living. They appear on the life scene after one has been pursuing one's spiritual studies and has also been practising deep meditation. Without the practice of yoga, one cannot attain and sustain inner peace and tranquillity.

One of the biggest illusions is that external circumstances must become perfect before we feel inner peace. In truth, it is the opposite—only when we cultivate peace, purity and contentment within does the external world begin to reflect it. Just as a lamp cannot spread light unless lit from within, society cannot become peaceful unless individuals awaken to their inner light.

Spiritual studies are often seen as uninteresting and ritualistic, but this is not so. They are as engaging as any other subject, and meditation is simply about reflection, remembrance and feeling. With a little guidance, even a small investment of time can yield rich dividends in the form of contentment and peace.

Today, very few people devote their time, money and energy to harmony in society. It is time we resolve to do so, for a peaceful and harmonious world must begin with each one of us.

The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LPG supply concerns rise

In the March 15 update, the Ministry of Petroleum stated that there were "no reported dry-outs at LPG distributors". However, the Strait of Hormuz, the main route for India's LPG imports, remains firmly closed by Iran. After talks between the Indian Prime Minister and the Iranian President, Iran granted a special concession, allowing LPG carriers bound for India to pass through the Strait. However, the Iranian Ambassador to India, Mohammad Fathali, declined to specify the number of ships given permission.

Abdul Majid Haque Ishaq, representative of India's Supreme leader in India, addressed Indians as "dear brothers and sisters" and stated that the concession reflected the solidarity shown by people towards Iran. It can be inferred that this balanced approach helped secure the concession.

India's LPG storage capacity, estimated between 1.2 and 1.9 MMT, remains unchanged since 2015, while consumption has risen from 17 MMT to 31 MMT. Import dependence has increased to 60 per cent. Countries such as Canada and China maintain significantly higher storage capacities. A comprehensive strategy to address supply disruptions and price volatility is urgently required.

HARIDASAN RAJAN | KERALA

Cheetah project shows progress

Wildlife enthusiasts are understandably euphoric over the birth of five cubs to Jwala, a cheetah at Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park. Asiatic cheetahs had vanished from India by 1950, and the species was declared extinct in 1952.

Low genetic variability and prolonged inbreeding were once cited as causes for their decline, although several wildlife experts argue that this loss occurred thousands of years ago. The more immediate causes were poaching, hunting and habitat destruction.

After initial setbacks, India's cheetah relocation project now appears to be on track. With recent additions, there are currently 53 cheetahs across Kuno National Park and Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary. Early planning recognised the importance of restoring suitable grassland and scrub forest habitats.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Self-identification under threat

The Transgender Persons Amendment Bill, 2026 requires careful scrutiny, as it raises significant concerns regarding constitutional protection and fundamental rights. By replacing self-identification with medical verification, the Bill appears to contradict the Supreme Court's 2014 ruling. Under the proposed amendment, gender recognition would depend on medical verification rather than self-identification. This creates additional procedural barriers for transgender persons seeking identity documents. In a society where transgender individuals often face discrimination, such requirements may further restrict access to education, employment and healthcare.

Supporters argue that clearer definitions are necessary for effective implementation of welfare measures. However, constitutional guarantees must remain paramount.

The Supreme Court had affirmed that gender identity is rooted in self-perception and lived experience, and not solely in biological criteria.

The Bill's emphasis on biological determinism risks undermining this principle. It may inadvertently reverse progress made in recognising the dignity and autonomy of transgender persons.

YASH PAL RAJHAN | JALANDBAR



# An open letter to Rahul Gandhi

India deserves an opposition that challenges the government with seriousness-not slogans; with evidence-not conjecture; with statesmanship-not theatrics. As Leader of the Opposition, you have a rare opportunity to elevate national discourse. That responsibility demands intellectual discipline & historical awareness

**FIRST Column**



**BALBIR PUNJ**

Dear Rahulji, I write with candour, yet with due regard for the office you occupy as Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. In any parliamentary democracy, this office is not meant merely to oppose, but to scrutinise rigorously, question the government of the day fearlessly, and do so while safeguarding national interest. A mature democracy requires both — a strong government and a credible opposition. When either falters, democratic balance weakens. Unfortunately, I must say that the dignity of the office has declined since your takeover, due to your conduct and statements that appear impulsive, theatrical, and lacking a solid grounding in facts or historical knowledge. My concern is not limited to a single incident. The pattern predates 2014 and indicates a deeper intellectual attitude—one that is sometimes disconnected from historical realities and national sensitivities.

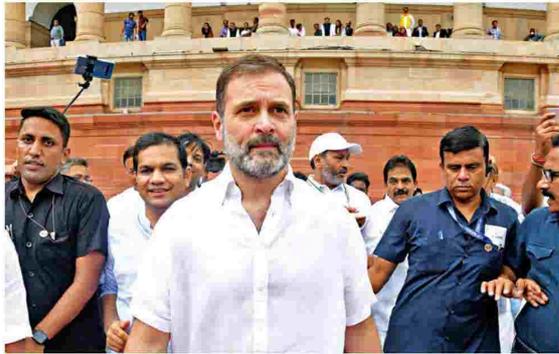
In 2010, diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks recorded that you told the US Ambassador that radicalised "Hindu groups" posed a "bigger threat" to India than the Pakistani terror outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba responsible for the horrific 2008 Mumbai 26/11. This disclosure came when India was still scarred by the Godhra train burning, where fifty-nine pilgrims were burnt alive by jihadis.

Yet, instead of confronting Islamist extremism with clarity, a fake counter-narrative of "soft terrorism" was constructed, even casting suspicion on organisations such as the Rashtriya Swamsevaks Sangh. The 2007 affidavit questioning the historicity of Lord Ram further reflected a disturbing intellectual drift. In a continuity of this disposition, you and your family choose to absent yourselves from the historic 2024 Ram Temple Pran-Pratishtha ceremony at Ram Mandir, Ayodhya.

In 2013, the country witnessed an extraordinary spectacle. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's tenure, you publicly dismissed your party-led Cabinet-approved ordinance as "complete nonsense" that should be "torn up and thrown away." The ordinance had already been cleared by the Cabinet and the Congress leadership. Democracy welcomes dissent; it also demands institutional respect.

The writer is an eminent columnist, former Chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), and the author of 'Trust with Aardha: Decolonisation of India' and 'Nareekha Majraal'.

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Where do you get such arrogance? From a sense of entitlement owing to your dynastic roots? More recently, on 13 March last in Lucknow, while commemorating Kansi Ram's birth anniversary, you suggested that had Jawaharlal Nehru been alive, Kansi Ram might have become Chief Minister through the Congress.

The claim surprised many observers—not just because it was speculative, but because it overlooked Kansi Ram's political journey and the historic disdain of Congress for dissenting Dalit voices outside its organisational structure. In 1994, I had the opportunity to meet Kansi Ram several times. Each interaction lasted hours. These meetings were facilitated by a Dalit leader from South India who then served as a minister in the government of P. V. Narasimha Rao and remains associated with your party even today. Kansi Ram impressed me as a man uniquely dedicated to Dalit empowerment. Unlike many politicians who see power as an end in itself, he viewed political office solely as a tool for social change. Personal ambition did not motivate him. He politely declined an offer to move to Rashtrapati Bhavan, made by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Ultimately, he trusted his movement to Mayawati, whom he believed could continue the struggle. The analogy you used in your speech—holding a pen vertically to symbolise hierarchy and horizontally to represent equality—was actually Kansi Ram's favourite metaphor. I remember him

demonstrating it vividly during our conversations. Invoking Nehru in this context, however, appeared historically misplaced. Kansi Ram built his politics precisely because he believed the Congress system had failed Dalits. The historical relationship between Congress leadership and Dr BR Ambedkar also deserves reflection. Kansi Ram regarded Ambedkar as his greatest inspiration. Yet Ambedkar's political experience with Congress leaders—particularly Nehru—was marked by sharp tensions.

Nehru had no hesitation in awarding himself the Bharat Ratna in 1955. Ambedkar, the chief architect of India's Constitution, received the same honour only 1990—thirty-five years later—under the government of P. V. Singh, which was supported from outside by the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Left. Ambedkar's entry into the first Cabinet of independent India occurred largely because Mahatma Gandhi insisted that the new government must include distinguished non-Congress figures. Thus, Ambedkar served alongside leaders such as Syama Prasad Mukherjee and Sardar Baldev Singh.

The 1952 general election further highlights the relationship. After resigning from the Cabinet, Ambedkar contested from North Bombay. The Congress fielded Narayan Sadobha Kajrolkar against him. Ambedkar lost by around four thousand votes, while over 75,000 ballots were declared invalid. It was probably the first case of vote chori (cheating), scandalising independent India in its very first election to the Lok Sabha. Compounding the hostility, Congress and Communist leaders called Ambedkar a "traitor". Yet such accusations were

not entirely novel. Writing to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur on 26 January 1946, Nehru himself remarked that Ambedkar had "allied himself with the British Government against the Congress".

Savitri Ambedkar records in her autobiography that Nehru was "keeping a sharp eye on the constituency" during the 1952 election. According to her account, Nehru, S. K. Patil and Dange were determined to ensure Ambedkar's defeat. Nehru himself appeared jubilant with the outcome. In a letter to Lady Edwina Mountbatten dated 16 January 1952, he wrote: "In Bombay city and to a larger extent in Bombay province, our success has been far greater than expected. Ambedkar has been dropped out." Rahulji, please ask yourself: Why was Nehru celebrating Ambedkar's electoral defeat? I am not implying anything, but I wonder why he was happily sharing the news of Ambedkar's loss with a woman who was the consort of a colonial ruler responsible for planning and executing India's partition, and had then left Indian shores for her country. Hopefully, you know the answer.

Ambedkar's anguish is recorded by his biographer Phani Ranjan Keer in 'Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Life and Mission'. Ambedkar lamented that Congress leaders routinely branded him a "traitor". In contrast, Mahatma Gandhi once told him: "I know you are a patriot of sterling worth."

In this context, your recent demand for the Bharat Ratna for Kansi Ram raises questions about consistency. When Mayawati made the same request in 2008, the Congress-led UPA government rejected it, arguing that such honours should not be subject to lobbying. Why were you silent then? Today, the same demand, raised by you on the eve of Uttar Pradesh elections, seemingly asserts insincere and driven by political opportunism. Kansi Ram himself had little faith in the Congress. In his 1982 book 'Chamcha Yug', he accused the party of cultivating "stooge" Dalit leaders who served its interests rather than empowering the community. Your rhetorical framework often echoes familiar ideological clichés about India's civilisation. This has repeatedly led to judicial corrections. Your remarks linking the Rashtriya Swamsevaks Sangh to Gandhi's alleged request for clarification in court. The "Chowkdar Chor Hai" episode led to an apology to the Supreme Court. Your statements on Vinayak Damodar Savarkar invited judicial caution.

Criticism is legitimate, and indeed a vibrant democracy's lifeline. However, undermining the nation while trying to criticise the government, echoing extreme prejudices, and making baseless accusations against political rivals and ideological opponents fall into a different category. It is irresponsible behaviour unworthy of a credible

leader. Your endorsement of foreign criticism describing India as a "dead economy" raised concerns about national disparagement. Your remarks abroad suggesting that "Sikhs may not freely practise their faith in India" were swiftly appropriated by hostile elements. Most alarming was your assertion that your party is fighting not merely the BJP or RSS, but the "Indian State"—a formulation historically invoked by insurgent movements. In 2018, you made an unsubstantiated claim in the Rafale matter, invoking the French President—swiftly contradicted by the French government. In 2017, during the Doklam standoff, you met the Chinese Ambassador, with your party first denying and then admitting the meeting.

During foreign visits, Rahulji, you have expressed concern that Western powers no longer comment on India's internal affairs and have repeatedly described India as merely a "union of states"—not as a nation. This is less a constitutional observation and more an intellectual stance that diminishes India's civilisational continuity—a doctrine Gandhi often emphasised and strived for.

Even recent episodes—such as the conduct of Youth Congress activists at an international forum, followed by your approving remark—suggest a troubling preference for spectacle over seriousness. You have warned that India would "burn" if the BJP returns to power and questioned constitutional reality. After electoral defeats, you and your party have cast doubts on institutions such as the Election Commission. Opposition is legitimate; delegitimising institutions is not.

Your parliamentary conduct has occasionally reinforced perceptions of theatricality—the 2018 embrace of the Prime Minister followed by a wink, or recent public gestures that prioritised superficial optics over substantive policies. Your renewed emphasis on religious slogans such as "Jinnabi abadi, utna haq" raises further concern. History offers a cautionary lesson. Under India Gandhi, excessive nationalisation weakened production, fuelled shortages, and culminated in the Indian Emergency. Redistribution without wealth creation destroys the very foundation it seeks to distribute. The test of leadership lies not in applause, but in arguments that withstand scrutiny—historical, judicial, and intellectual.

India deserves an opposition that challenges the government with seriousness-not slogans; with evidence-not conjecture; with statesmanship-not theatrics. As Leader of the Opposition, you have a rare opportunity to elevate national discourse. That responsibility demands intellectual discipline, historical awareness, and an unwavering commitment to the dignity of the Republic. I hope you will reflect — not as a matter of partisan disagreement, but as an appeal to restore seriousness to India's political conversation.

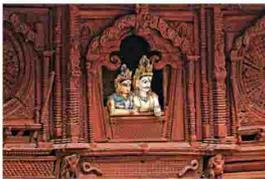
## Unearthing Kerala's carved legacy: A tribute to sacred woodcraft



**RAGHVENDRA SINGH**

I must, at the outset, concede that I am no art historian. Yes, I am a student of history but not particularly well placed to write a critical review on wooden sculptures in Kerala temples. My workplace experience fortunately exposed me to the marvels of Indian sculpture. A stint as Director General of the National Museum, New Delhi, gave me a wonderful opportunity to learn about Indian architectural masterpieces. It also gave me a chance to witness these artefacts in different museums across India and the world and compare them across time and space. I could not stop myself from embarking on the delightful task of going through the two recent publications on Kerala Sculptures by Professor Preeti Nayar and attempting a review. Painstakingly composed, they caught my attention immediately. These two books have been curated imaginatively and explained interestingly, even for a casual reader of this genre. The research done is meticulous. The temple architecture of Kerala is quite distinct from the 'Dravidian' and the 'Nagara' style. The Kerala temple architectural features manifest the integration of cultural elements from both within and without. It also has its own indigenous features, quite pronounced, for example, a modest structure with a subdued gopuram, lively in style, that merges elegantly with climate-friendly patterns of domestic dwellings, elevating it to a divine status. Timber is the main construction material, with striking wooden artistry as a dominant feature. Sculptural art of Kerala has a tradition of more than a millennium. The two main elements of the sculptural wealth come from the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions. The lyrical quality of twists and turns in forms, the musical harmony in proportions, the natural artistry in moulding shapes, and the precision in carving anecdotes in finite spaces greatly manifest in the craftsmanship of the godly hands of the woodcarvers of Kerala. They effortlessly impart a gigantic feel to miniature forms and transform expressions of fierce ferocity into subtle aesthetic delight.

The art of Kerala is one of the richest and most enduring. It is with some hesitation that I venture some reasons for it. Temples in Kerala adhere to a series of strict and closed-door ritualistic traditions with many layers of limitations. These traditions, under normal circumstances, do not permit access to sculptural niches for the purpose of iconographic investigation. It is against this background that the relevance of the two important publications, "Vaishnava



Sculptures of Kerala: An Iconographic Study" and "Carved Wonders in Wood: Rare Sculptures of Kerala," authored by Professor Preeti Nayar of the Department of Archaeology, University of Kerala, should be viewed. The book on Vaishnava sculptures of Kerala is methodically organised into eight chapters. It begins with the origin and development of Vaishnavism, and traces the historical roots and evolution of this tradition in the state. The next theme covers the cultural perspective and provides a contextual backdrop by examining the social dynamics that influenced the region's art and architecture. The author thereafter delves into the architectural features of the Hindu temples in Kerala. The various forms of 'Vishnu' are examined in detail, represented as they are in the sculptural art of the state. The 'Dashavatara of Vishnu' illustrates the ten principal avatars, highlighting their iconographic significance.

This is followed by a lucid analysis of minor avatars of Vishnu, focusing on lesser-known incarnations and their representations. Then there are the composite and associate deities of Vishnu, discussed extensively as per delightful visual representations. The book on Vaishnava sculptures of Kerala provides a comprehensive evaluation of the sculptural forms and their iconographic relevance. It is an in-depth scientific study of Vaishnava sculptures in stone and wood. Informative iconographic descriptions of different forms of Vaishnava sculptures starting with sthanaka (standing), asana (sitting) and shayana (reclining) forms of Vishnu, his major and minor avatars, are all presented aesthetically. It deals with sculptural depictions of many anecdotes (for example, Krishna's) affiliated with these forms. The work examines the explanations given for these forms in ancient iconographic texts like Vishnudharmottara and evaluates the salient features while indicating the degree of fidelity observed between the texts (shastras) and the images (prayogas).

Morphological features of the icons, like the number of different deities, the attributed symbols they hold and their schematic arrangement, are incisively analysed and classified. The findings in the book sub-regionalise important forms in different geographical areas of the state.

It categorises over 97 basic forms of Vaishnava sculptures, with 120 sub-forms and over 200 other varieties. The study compares these forms with those from northern and other parts of South India, attempting a broader classification and understanding of regional variations.

The visuals and descriptions enhance the understanding of the intricate details and variations within the Vaishnava sculptures of Kerala. This publication is a pivotal contribution to the understanding of Kerala's rich sculptural heritage. By intertwining the historical, cultural and iconographic perspective, the book offers a 360-degree framework to appreciate the intricate relationships between art and architecture of Kerala temples through iconography.

Now I come to the second work of Professor Preeti Nayar, the 'Carved Wonders in Wood: Rare Sculptures of Kerala.' This too is a beautifully brought-out volume in colour. It takes the readers on a journey through the magnificence of Kerala's wood carving heritage. It commences with a brief description of the unique architecture of Kerala temples and illustrations of its various architectural components. The rest of the text is a rare treat on the splendour of the 'least seen and least known' atypical sculptural forms, depicting 66 themes of Hindu mythology, carefully selected from a multitude of wooden sculptures that richly adorn the sculptural niches of 76 ancient Hindu temples across the state.

The sculptures are described with emphasis on their iconography after narrating the story associated with their respective forms. This is followed by images of specific niches where those sculptures are positioned in the temples, the names of those temples and their location in the state. The contents are supported with 186 original colour photographs, most of them in larger format. The work contains rare forms of cosmic Vishwadeva, Kinrara Shiva, Raksoghnamurti. Sculptures depicting themes like Vishnu in Yoginidra and the origin of Madhu and Kalababha, Bhima carrying his family on his shoulder to the Hidimba forest, Kalki in a termitarium, Aghorasavada, Ashtavakra, rare sculptures with philosophical dimensions like Vighna, and some denoting localised themes like six-breasted Pidari and many other rare images.

Both these publications, significant in their own way, come with references to literature and glossy array of technical terms which make them user-friendly. These two books add immensely to our understanding of the local Kerala tradition in the Indian context. Undoubtedly, it will prove to be an important source of reference for archaeologists, Indologists and art historians.

The writer is a former Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Government of India and an Advisor at Bharati Ki Soch Foundation

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## West Asia crisis and the Modi doctrine



**ISHAAN SAXENA**

As the conflict in the Middle East continues to escalate unabated, and the US and Israel continue their ferocious campaign against Iran, the world is on tenterhooks. The broad repercussions of this raging war can be felt worldwide, from rising energy costs to the profound implications for the tourism sector. But in the midst of this latest conflagration, which has captivated global attention and headlines, India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, appears to have skillfully navigated a tumultuous environment with great ease. This is a testament to our diplomatic sagacity and the art of dealing with close allies on a plethora of issues, even though our interests diverge on the current problem that is brewing.

Even though Israel and the US are acting in concert to obliterate targets in Iran and its proxies, India has skillfully demonstrated its ability to manoeuvre through this complex web and yet keep its ties intact with the Arab world. Three issues come to mind. First, the balancing act that occurred during the Gaza and Middle East conflict is a masterpiece.

Mr Modi's visit to Israel was timed at a very crucial juncture. Both Israel and the US could not have launched a coordinated attack on Iran with his presence in the Middle East. When the Prime Minister addressed the Israeli Parliament, he reiterated the strategic partnership between the two nations and the urgent need to further bolster defence and technology ties. The devastating war commenced less than two days after his departure. Terror was condemned in the harshest terms, but India successfully articulated a clear message to Israel: it has deep-rooted economic interests in Iran (the Chabahar Port), and India will not forsake them in light of the current situation. Concurrently, gone are the days when India had to tread a fine line to establish deeper ties with Israel. The message is loud and strident: our national interest comes first.

Second, despite a belligerent Iran that is hell-bent on striking any vulnerable targets in the Middle East, India opened direct talks with Iran to allow the passage of its oil tankers. This again is a manifestation of how intelligent diplomatic works. We have proven to the world that we embrace, empathise and cooperate with Israel, but that does not diminish the nature of our ties with the Middle East.

The cooperation between the two nations has evolved tremendously pursuant to the attacks,

especially in terms of intelligence sharing. Despite the fact that India has condoned the assassination of Ali Khamenei, our national interest in securing our energy needs has prevailed especially in a very precarious security scenario.

Third, America seems to be urging India to purchase Russian oil, which is vehemently opposing prior to the war. This is to contain surging oil prices. Yes, deep-rooted concerns remain in ongoing trade negotiations that reference environmental and labour standards, but history is a witness that these standards have always been employed to gain an upper hand in trade negotiations. Ever since the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1948 until the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995, Article XX has been invoked under the guise of genuine concern, but the core reason has been protectionism. Throughout modern history, this has been the bone of contention between the developed and developing world, and India will eventually have to face this challenge and sign a successful deal in the coming months. America is too engaged in the Middle East right now to pay close attention to a deal that will be mutually beneficial to both nations. After all, in Trump's own words, Mr Modi is a very tough negotiator.

So, if anything, the recent unfolding of events has only proved that the Indian economy is slated to outpace the rest of the world. Meanwhile, China's economic interests have been threatened by the recent bombing campaign on Iran's Kharg Island. Its air defence systems have proven to be weak. Operation Sindhour, the abduction of the Venezuelan President, and the attack on Iran point illuminatingly to this indisputable fact: a very precarious security scenario. Pakistan's reluctance to join Saudi Arabia in the war proves that the so-called Islamic NATO is just baloney a Catch-22 situation. If it joins the war, it will be implicitly endorsing Israel, and if it does not, the Islamic NATO becomes a laughing stock.

India has demonstrated that when interests align, it will constructively engage with all stakeholders, and when they do not, it will follow its national interests. The linear unfolding of events has conveyed a very powerful diplomatic message to the world: we watch quietly and act with purpose when necessary, in the interest of our country. Furthermore, the precision with which we react and activate our diplomatic channels will astonish India's mightiest adversaries.

The writer is a national security analyst

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# The Statesman

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## ICU Traps

Shortly after midnight in the city of Cuttack, flames reportedly spread through a trauma intensive care unit at SCB Medical College and Hospital, killing 12 patients who could neither run nor resist the smoke filling their ward. The tragedy, which also injured medical staff attempting rescues, was not simply a freak accident. It is another grim reminder that in many Indian hospitals, life-saving spaces can quickly become death traps. The danger is structural. Intensive care units depend on a dense web of electrical equipment - ventilators, monitors, infusion pumps and air-conditioning - often operating around the clock. Add oxygen lines, old wiring and overcrowded wards, and the risk of fire multiplies dramatically. When an emergency erupts in such an environment, evacuation becomes painfully slow because the patients inside are unconscious, immobile or dependent on machines. This vulnerability has been exposed repeatedly across India. Fires in hospital ICUs and neonatal units in states such as Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan over the past decade have killed patients who were already fighting for survival. Each disaster is followed by familiar rituals: compensation announcements, administrative inquiries and promises of stricter oversight. Yet the cycle keeps repeating. One reason is the chronic gap between regulation and enforcement. India's hospital infrastructure is governed by rules on fire exits, electrical load management and emergency preparedness. In practice, however, compliance checks are sporadic and often treated as paperwork exercises rather than rigorous inspections. Government hospitals in particular struggle with overcrowding and ageing infrastructure, while private facilities sometimes cut corners on safety upgrades. Responsibility ultimately lies with both state governments and hospital administrators. In Odisha, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Mahajhi has ordered a judicial inquiry into the Cuttack fire. Investigations may identify a short circuit or technical fault, but the deeper issue is institutional complacency. Electrical systems in high-risk areas like ICUs require constant auditing, modern circuit protection and dedicated maintenance teams. These are not luxuries; they are basic safeguards.

Equally crucial is emergency preparedness. Fire drills in many hospitals exist only on paper. Staff members are rarely trained to move ventilated patients quickly, cut oxygen lines safely or coordinate with fire services during an crisis. When seconds matter, such gaps can determine whether patients survive or succumb. India's healthcare system is expanding rapidly, from new medical colleges to upgraded district hospitals. Yet expansion without safety discipline merely enlarges the scale of potential tragedy. Hospitals are supposed to be sanctuaries where the sick seek protection from danger outside. When those spaces themselves become hazardous, public trust in the healthcare system erodes.

The deaths in Cuttack should therefore not fade into another statistic in India's long list of hospital fires. If this tragedy leads to a nationwide overhaul of electrical safety, fire audits and emergency training in critical care units, the victims may yet force a long overdue reform. Otherwise, the next ICU fire is not a question of if, but when.

## New Hollywood

When the film industry gathers for its annual night of self congratulation, the ceremony is usually remembered for glamour, spectacle and predictable triumphs. Yet the latest Academy Awards told a different story. The victories of filmmakers such as Paul Thomas Anderson and Ryan Coogler signalled not merely a celebration of cinema, but a subtle shift in Hollywood's cultural mood.

For decades, Anderson was regarded as one of America's most respected directors with his Oscar to his name. From Boogie Nights to The Master, his films were admired by critics but rarely rewarded by the Academy. His eventual sweep with One Battle After Another therefore carried symbolic weight. It was less about a single film's triumph than about an institution finally acknowledging the endurance of a filmmaker who had quietly shaped modern American cinema.

A similar sense of overdue recognition marked the awards given to Coogler and actor Michael B. Jordan for Sinners. Coogler had already proven his cultural reach through films like Fruitvale Station and Black Panther. Jordan had built a career that straddled independent drama and blockbuster franchises. Their success suggested that Hollywood's gatekeepers are gradually catching up with a generation of artists who had already won the audience long ago. But the significance of the ceremony extended beyond individual careers. The evening unfolded against a turbulent backdrop: wars dominating international headlines, renewed debates over immigration in the United States, and an entertainment industry wrestling with the disruptive power of artificial intelligence. The Oscars stage has always doubled as a platform for cultural commentary, and this year was no exception. References to war, political leadership and the moral responsibility of artists surfaced repeatedly in acceptance speeches and presentations.

In that sense, the awards functioned as a snapshot of Hollywood's anxieties. The film industry remains a global cultural force, yet it is increasingly aware of the fragility of its own ecosystem. Writers, actors and technicians have spent the past two years debating how algorithms and generative AI might reshape creative labour. When presenters emphasised that animation and filmmaking are human crafts rather than "prompts," the message was unmistakable: Hollywood is defending the value of human creativity at a moment when technology threatens to commodify it. There was another layer to the ceremony's symbolism.

Alongside the emergence of new winners came tributes to older legends such as Robert Redford and Diane Keaton. The contrast felt deliberate. One generation of storytellers is leaving the stage while another steps forward, carrying the industry's evolving values with it.

Taken together, the night suggested that Hollywood is entering a transitional era. The Academy is recognizing voices it once overlooked, confronting technological uncertainty, and responding to a world whose political tensions increasingly seep into art. For an institution long accused of living in its own bubble, that may be the most meaningful change of all.

# An Unnecessary War

Just before the US launched its murderous assault, a survey by the Economist and YouGov found that only 27 percent Americans supported a strike on Iran. Approval ratings spike once a war starts, but an NBC News survey has found that 54 percent of respondents disapproved of President Trump's handling of the situation in Iran. This is to be expected, as there is no clear objective behind the US invasion of Iran



As American representatives negotiated with their Iranian counterparts in Geneva, an armada of US warships, led by USS Gerald R. Ford, the world's largest warship, sailed towards the Middle East. The scenario in February 2026 was uncannily similar to the one in June 2025, when talks on nuclear disarmament had lulled Iran into complacency, catching it unawares when Israel, and later the US, attacked it.

However, Iran was much better prepared for the 28 February US and Israeli onslaught - it gave back almost as good as it received. Iran's supreme leader of 36 years, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with Iran's top military and military leadership, were all killed in an Israeli missile attack; bomb attacks destroyed Iran's navy and grounded its air force; diminished its missile capability and arms industry; the Iranian debacle was capped by the sinking of its warship, near the coast of Sri Lanka.

Along with military targets, US and Israeli bombs hit hospitals and residences in Iran, leading to around 1200 civilian deaths; the nadir was reached, when a US Tomhawk missile hit a school, snuffing out the life of 138 innocent Iranian schoolchildren.

Iran has retaliated by targeting US bases in the Middle East, and attacking Israel and other Arab countries. Even though most Iranian missiles and drones were successfully intercepted, yet some crucial targets were hit, including US bases in the Middle East, particularly Qatar, and Saudi Arabian oil installations.

Falling debris from missiles damaged malls and luxury hotels across the Arabian peninsula, and two Iranian missiles were intercepted in Turkish air space. Iran, on its part, has denied targeting Turkey or other Arab countries. Interestingly, just before the invasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was on a State visit to Israel, where he confabulated with the Israeli Prime Minister, and also addressed the Israeli Parliament (Knesset). Modi's hosts admitted that before launching their strikes, they had to wait for the Indian leader's departure.

There has been considerable collateral damage. Iran has blockaded the Straits of Hormuz that connect the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman. The Straits are 167 kilometres long, and a mere 39 kilometres across at their narrowest. Almost 20 per cent of the world's oil, and 20 per cent of global LNG transit through this tiny corridor.

The Iranian blockade has resulted in an immediate spike in oil prices, with crude touching US\$120 per barrel on 9 March. Should the blockade continue, a global oil and LNG shortage is inevitable. As of today, gas prices have risen sharply in India, and gas shortages have hit restaurants, catering and other establishments - even gas-fired crematoriums have shut down in several Indian cities.

Share markets are falling round the globe: the Sensex fell from 82,419 on 26 February to 77,510 on 9 March, with investors losing Rs.22 lakh crore in the process. The South Korean share index fell by 12 per cent in a single day, and the US share market is falling daily.

Dubai airport has been hit more than once, and airlines are intermittently cancelling flights, to and from the Gulf. Countries like India have deployed planes to evacuate their citizens from Gulf countries. Shipping costs have escalated sharply, as marine insurers are cancelling ongoing contracts, due to the enhanced war risk. As exports of the Gulf region become unworkable, returned export consignments are piling up in Indian ports. Chipmaking is suffering in South Korea because helium gas from Qatar, is not available.

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Many reasons have been offered by Trump and his cabinet: in the beginning the ostensible rationale for the strike was destruction of Iran's nuclear weapons and missiles, which does not wash, because after the June war, Trump had victoriously declared that Operation Midnight Hammer had obliterated Iran's nuclear programme. More recently, in an interview with Fox News on 22 February, Steve Witkoff, US Special Envoy to the Middle East, had claimed that Iran was only a week away from producing industrial-grade bomb-making uranium, only to be contradicted by Trump, two days later, who said that Iran's nuclear programme had been "blown to smithereens." More importantly, even before the war started, Oman, which mediated in the Geneva talks, between US and Iran, had said that there had been an unprecedented breakthrough in nuclear negotiations, with Iran having agreed to stop stockpiling of uranium, and converting existing enriched material into fuel.

Earlier this year, in the wake of murderous repression of protests by the Iranian regime, Trump had assured protesters that help was at hand, and that he would punish Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader. Khamenei is dead, but the war goes on with increased ferocity. Lately, Trump is taking the Israeli line that Operation Epic Fury was a pre-emptive strike on Iran, as Iran was about to attack Israel and the US.

Thus, it is difficult to find a clear motive for the US attack on Iran, which may be the reason that the American public is not enamoured of Trump's misadventure. Trump is hard put to explain the reason for attacking Iran to the US public: he delivered the longest State of the Union address in history on 24 February, covering an array of his policies

retired  
Principal Chief  
Commissioner  
of Income Tax

Iran having agreed to stop stockpiling of uranium, and converting existing enriched material into fuel. Earlier this year, in the wake of murderous repression of protests by the Iranian regime, Trump had assured protesters that help was at hand, and that he would punish Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader. Khamenei is dead, but the war goes on with increased ferocity. Lately, Trump is taking the Israeli line that Operation Epic Fury was a pre-emptive strike on Iran, as Iran was about to attack Israel and the US.

## CHINADAILY

### Racing line in Shanghai F1 showcases economic momentum and dynamism

The engines began to howl in Shanghai on Friday as the 2026 Chinese Grand Prix roared to life at the Shanghai International Circuit. But the sound echoing across the grandstands wasn't just that of high-revving engines. It was also the voices of eager spectators, roughly 230,000 of whom were expected to stream through the circuit gates this year.

Around the track, hotels were packed, restaurants hummed with late-night diners, and pop-up stalls selling official F1 merchandise glittered under the neon lights along the Huangpu River.

The Grand Prix is not just a sporting event. It is the driver of a small economic ecosystem. And in many ways, it offers a window through which to view China's newly adopted 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) as the country is revving up new engines to power high-quality development -

innovation, domestic demand, green development and global cooperation - that also create their own economic ecosystems. Looking at the choreography of the Shanghai race weekend - the technology, logistics, tourism, consumption - you get a glimpse of how policymakers hope to power the next laps of the country's development.

Shanghai hosted 182 domestic and international sporting events in 2025, generating 13.5 billion yuan output and stimulating 35.8 billion yuan in related economic activity. That includes hotels, airlines, ride-hailing apps, restaurants, retail and digital services. During the Grand Prix, 70 percent of spectators come from other parts of China and 15 percent from overseas, turning a weekend race into a

miniature version of global trade flows. One ticket does not just buy a seat in the stands. It unlocks what economists call a consumption chain: sports + tourism + culture + retail.

A visitor might watch the race, take a river cruise, buy an F1 jacket, and post it all on a livestreaming platform powered by Chinese cloud computing.

Multiply that behavior by hundreds of thousands of people and you begin to see the engine at work. This is precisely the kind of consumption-driven, innovation-powered growth model the 15th Five-Year Plan hopes to scale nationally.

China's 1.4-billion-person market remains one of the most powerful demand engines in the global economy. When domestic consumption expands, it pulls global supply chains with it. Consider Formula 1 cars. Featuring

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

### Structural difference

Sir, The insightful article "Religion is One" by Swami Sandarshananda published today serves as a vital reminder of India's unique spiritual architecture. To understand the depth of this "Oneness," one must revisit Swami Vivekananda's diagnosis of the structural "Impedance Mismatch" between the East and the West, as articulated in one of his lectures on return from Chicago (found in a monograph In Defense of Hinduism, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Kolkata).

Swami Vivekananda pointed a foundational inversion: In the West, religion was the "Fixed Point" requiring absolute conformity, while society was the "Field of Variation." Consequently, every religious departure in Europe was historically bought with "a river of blood." In contrast, in India, religion was the "Field of Variation" - never shackled, allowing infinite liberty in the choice of

Ishta Devata or sect. To sustain this spiritual fluidity, society was chosen as the "Fixed Point," which led to its historical rigidity. This distinction is crucial for our contemporary discourse. It indicates that "secularism" - the peaceful co-existence of diverse beliefs - is inherent in the Hindu ethos and is only a revolutionary political necessity in societies dealing with the historical baggage of Abrahamic conformity.

Today, while the extreme right wing distorts this fluid ethos, a section of "neo-colonial" intellectuals does equal harm by bracketing Hinduism with Abrahamic structures under a generic label of secularism. They ignore the historical reality that while India has faced class, linguistic, and political conflicts, the Hindu tradition has remarkably been devoid of the sectarian "religious wars" seen in Northern Ireland, the Balkans, or the Middle East. To ignore this structural

difference is to ignore the very genius of Indian civilization.

Yours, etc., Sindhuil Barman Roy, Kolkata, 16 March.

### Illegal war

Sir, Apropos the article "War and regime change in global governance" by Andrew Sheng, published today, the US and Israel launched strikes on Iran on 28 February, with President Donald Trump urging the Iranian public to "seize control of your destiny by rising against the Islamic leadership that has ruled the nation since 1979."

The repressive regime in Iran should not be supported. It is a reactionary, theocratic, and viciously patriarchal state that has brutally oppressed the Iranian people. But fascists are not liberators. Trump is himself heading a patriarchal Christian fascist regime and he does not care about the people of

the US economy, crime, trade, immigration and foreign policy - but mentioned Iran only in passing.

Perhaps, the rationale for the American-Israeli invasion lies in realpolitik. The "axis of resistance" of terrorist organizations - Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen - built by the Iranian regime, were a permanent thorn in the flesh of Arab governments, but particularly Israel. After smashing Hamas, the Americans and Israelis are targeting both Hezbollah and Iran, simultaneously.

There are two more important, though unstated reasons for the American belligerence: first are Iran's oil reserves, which the US would like to control, and second is the US desire to crush Iran militarily, so that Israel is the unchallenged boss of the Middle East - ready to protect US interests against everyone.

As the Iran war enters a decisive phase, no country stands with Iran - even its clients and steadfast supporters, China and Russia, only mouth platitudes. Supposedly neutral countries like India have kept mum. Apparently, no country wants to draw Trump's ire, the buzz being that a statement in support of Iran will serve no purpose except that of antagonising Trump.

Israel is a country which ploughs a lonely furrow, and does not let international law stand in the way of how it achieves its goals. Also, Israel does not mind using its vast arsenal on the least provocation, and has full US financial and military support for whatever it does.

In this backdrop, the entire world should ponder what could be done to stop the unnecessary bloodshed and certain economic ruin for the world economy.

On Trump's part, he may null over what Benjamin Franklin, statesman, polymath and one of the Founding Fathers of the USA, wrote to his friend, US Representative, Josiah Quincy: "May we never see another War for in my Opinion there never was a good War, or a bad Peace."

advanced aerodynamics, hybrid engines, sensors and materials science - they are laboratories on wheels. China's new five-year blueprint similarly emphasizes technological innovation - from semiconductor and artificial intelligence to renewable energy and smart manufacturing - that is putting on the track of a unified national market to open to the global economy.

And returning to the drivers of miniature economic ecosystems, China's accelerating transition toward renewable energy, electric transport and energy efficiency will reverberate across the pits of its supply chains.

## PERSONAL

THANK YOU Sir, Jude for your miraculous hand over Emyasa. — DS.

Iran or the Middle East. The US and Israel will not bring freedom and democracy or freedom from oppression and exploitation, from poverty and unemployment, from the oppression of women, from national oppression and environmental destruction, not for the people of Iran, nor for the people of the world.

These bombs and missiles are killing people and spreading fear across the region. This is a murderous, illegitimate, and illegal war against a sovereign country, openly aimed at regime change. This is a supreme war crime and must be stopped now. It is a fascist, imperialist war based on lies.

Trump's military moves and attempts to bully countries and whole regions of the world hold the extreme danger of spiraling into a nuclear confrontation, which really could lead to the extinction of humanity.

Yours, etc., Rudra Sen, Kolkata, 15 March.

# Bhajan Clubbing shatters myth of secularization

OMKAR JOSHI AND PRANAV GUPTA

Across the country, young Indians are flocking to concerts that blend devotional bhajans with contemporary rhythms and songs. The popularity of "bhajan clubbing" is not a passing cultural fad. Rather, it confirms a long-standing dimension of Indian society: religious practices are ubiquitous and youngsters have merely adapted rather than giving up on faith and practice. We analyze data from a nationally representative survey to demonstrate that young Hindus, including Gen Z, remain highly religious.

For years now, a familiar claim has circulated in public debates as India becomes more educated, urban, and economically mobile, younger generations are drifting away from religion. This is a narrative borrowed largely from Western societies, where modernization coincided with declining religious participation, and was then loosely applied to India. Contrary to this familiar Western reality, our analysis shows that young Indians report relatively high levels of religiosity.

We analyze data from a nationally representative survey—India Political and Social Attitudes Study—conducted by us among 7,382 respondents across 18 states in 2025. We asked respondents how often they engaged

in religious practices ranging from daily rituals to weekly observance and festival participation, including both public and private activities. In this article, we restrict our analysis to the 6,187 Hindu respondents in the sample. As the country's largest religious group with diverse forms of practice, Hindus offer a useful lens to examine generational change in religious life. We find that a substantial proportion of young Hindus actively participate in religious life. The reported levels of regular religious observance among Gen Z Hindus (those aged between 18 and 28 in 2025) are only marginally lower than older cohorts. A majority of Gen Z respondents (55 per cent) reported that they prayed daily, and around half (48 per cent) reported visiting a temple at least once a week. These figures are only marginally lower than the overall proportion across cohorts: 59 per cent of Hindu respondents reported praying daily, and 52 per cent pray at a temple at least once a week. The marginally lower levels among the youth should not be misconstrued as disengagement. Only a minuscule minority reported 'never' or 'rarely' undertaking various religious activities.

Beyond private activities, young Indians are also engaging in socially embedded forms of participation. About three in ten (29 per cent) Gen Z respondents said they attend a religious gathering such as a Katha,

Bhajan or Sangat at least once a month. This is why the enthusiasm for Bhajan Clubbing should not be viewed merely as a passing trend.

The secularization theory predicts that religious practice will decline due to modernization forces such as urbanization, upward economic mobility, and expansion in education. Contrary to this expectation, we find that a relatively similar proportion of college and non-college-educated youngsters actively engage in religious practice. For example, college-educated Indians (53 per cent) are slightly more likely to pray at a temple at least once a week than those with lower levels of education (45 per cent). Similarly, college education does not reduce attendance at public religious gatherings. It is evident that modern education and religious life coexist in contemporary India.

Urbanization shows a comparable pattern. Urban youth were at least as likely—and in some cases slightly more likely—to report engagement in religious practice. A majority of urban Gen Z respondents report visiting temples at least once a week (55 per cent), compared to 44 per cent among rural youth. The gap is even wider for socially embedded participation: nearly four in ten urban youth (39 per cent) attend religious gatherings such as Katha or bhajans each month, versus just one in four rural youth



(24 per cent). Rather than crowding religion out of everyday life, urban environments appear to provide new social spaces and opportunities for collective religious participation.

Finally, religious participation among the youth is not confined to particular social groups. Across General, OBC, SC, and ST respondents, engagement remains widespread, even though frequency and modes of participation vary somewhat. Religion in India continues to function as a shared social institution rather than a shrinking remnant of tradition.

Taken together, these findings challenge the common assumption that modernization naturally produces secularization. India's trajectory looks very different from the Western

historical experience that often dominates sociological thinking. Rather than abandoning religion, young Indians—including college-educated and those from urban areas—continue to embrace religion.

The secularization myth persists partly because it offers a simple story: development replaces tradition. But social change is rarely so linear. The IPSAS evidence suggests that modern India is not becoming less religious. Young Hindus still gather in temples, enthusiastically celebrate festivals, engage in both public and private religious activities, and maintain strong religious identities.

Borrowed historical templates cannot provide an accurate understanding of Indian society and belief structures. Moreover, it requires shedding commonly used binaries and adopting nuance. In this case, our survey suggests that modernity is not erasing faith. The enthusiastic embrace of Bhajan Clubbing is therefore not an anomaly. It is a visible expression of an enduring religious impulse finding new cultural forms. The medium has changed; the commitment endures.

**Table 1: Young Hindus remain engaged in Religious Practice**

|                    | Weekly Temple Visit | Monthly Religious Gathering |
|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Overall            | 52%                 | 30%                         |
| 18-29 years        | 48%                 | 29%                         |
| 30-40 years        | 52%                 | 31%                         |
| 41-50 years        | 52%                 | 29%                         |
| 51 years and above | 58%                 | 37%                         |

**Table 2: Modernization does not reduce religiosity among Gen Z Hindus**

|                           | Weekly Temple Visit | Monthly Religious Gathering |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Overall (All IS 28 years) | 48%                 | 29%                         |
| College-educated          | 52%                 | 32%                         |
| Non-college-educated      | 46%                 | 26%                         |
| Urban                     | 55%                 | 39%                         |
| Rural                     | 44%                 | 24%                         |

(The writers are, respectively, a sociologist and researcher at University of Maryland, College Park, and a doctoral candidate in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley.)

# Time to junk the UPSC route

DR. RAMANAND

The recent declaration of the UPSC Civil Services Examination (CSE) 2025 final results on 6 March has once again triggered a nationwide media frenzy over the "toppers' journeys". Social media erupts with motivational taglines, videos, and memes celebrating their success and struggles.

Families and communities distribute sweets, treating the achievement as a collective social triumph rather than a personal one. Toppers' stories are portrayed with the grandeur of Olympic medal wins or major sporting accomplishments yet these successes, if truly achievements in a broader sense, remain deeply personal and have limited tangible social impact.

Without delving into precise numbers, the 2025 results selected 948 candidates from a pool of roughly 10 lakh applicants. In a previous article in the Indian Express, I had examined how the civil services have become synonymous with prestige in India, often overshadowing other vital professions. Building on that critique, the 2025 results provide a fresh lens to examine the over-glorification of both the exam and the services it feeds into.

This is not to diminish the hard work of the selected candidates. Rather, it challenges the dominant societal narrative: UPSC toppers

are frequently portrayed as demigods. Media profiles dissect their "strategies" from daily routines to book lists as if cracking the exam unfolds the secrets of life itself.

This narrative ignores the significant role of randomness and privilege embedded in the process. Many toppers, such as those with medical or engineering backgrounds emerge from stable, privileged educational ecosystems. The exam inherently favours candidates with access to quality coaching, strong English proficiency, and the financial and temporal resources for multiple attempts. For average aspirants from rural areas or economically weaker sections, the odds remain heavily stacked against them.

The 2025 results tell the same familiar story, yet the relentless emphasis on "inspirational" narratives glosses over these systemic barriers. We celebrate the rare exceptions while millions of aspirants burn out in isolation, grappling with severe mental health crises. Reports from coaching hubs like Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar consistently highlight alarming rates of depression and suicide. Yet the glorification machine rolls on unabated.

The examination structure itself perpetuates a built-in hierarchical system that undervalues true talent, efficiency, and domain expertise. A candidate who scores a mere fraction of a mark higher than others is elevated to a position of

superiority that lasts for decades. This hierarchy often overrides humanity, knowledge, and practical skills: a person with minimal understanding of a domain can issue commands to those with far superior expertise.

Even more troubling is the service allocation process, which largely disregards competency and relies instead on accidental performance in a single exam cycle. This not only harms the lives of those who will be governed but also discourages genuine future governance talent. The 2025 batch will enter a system where debates on lateral entry and reforms continue, yet core issues such as accountability, innovation, and performance remain unaddressed.

Over-glorification breeds unrealistic expectations: new recruits anticipate a hero's welcome, only to confront the daily grind of paperwork, political pressures, and frequent transfers. This mismatch fosters cynicism and inefficiency.

The economic costs are equally stark. Lakhs of young people devote their prime years to UPSC preparation, forgoing skill development in high-growth fields such as AI, sustainability, or entrepreneurship. India's demographic dividend risks becoming a liability when talent is funneled into a single, hyper-competitive exam that selects barely 0.1 per cent of applicants. The 2025 results underscore this skew: many toppers hail from IITs or NLU,



diverting valuable technical and intellectual capital from innovation and the private sector into administration. Imagine the potential impact if that talent were channeled elsewhere.

This year also saw several individuals falsely claiming to have cleared the exam and around 6-7 candidates publicly celebrating successes they never achieved. These incidents highlight the immense public pressure and allure of UPSC glorification.

A major structural flaw attracting widespread attention is the role of the District Magistrate, who consolidates enormous power with minimal accountability. A generalist with limited domain expertise or practical experience commands entire departments at the district level, often leading to inefficiencies

and poor decision-making. This over-accumulation of power invites misuse, as accountability mechanisms remain weak.

Ultimately, we must confront and reform this colonial era system, which has failed to adapt to contemporary realities. It neither produces true domain experts nor effectively trains a modern workforce.

One of the boldest moves this government has taken was Lateral Entry but due to systematic resistance of the bureaucracy and opposition of certain political groups, it could not translate into reality as it should have. The over-emphasis on conservative bureaucracy often stops the growth of other systems. We need a more robust module which can take the place of the UPSC.

(The writer is director of the Centre of Policy Research and Governance.)

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 19 March 1926

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

SIR ABDUR RAHIM'S proposal that the appointment of judicial officers shall be taken away from the judges of the High Court and made a matter for the executive is certainly not a desirable change, particularly when it is not alleged that the present appointments are influenced by favouritism or by communal considerations. Certainly it is strange that only twelve Mohammedans are judicial officers out of a total of 350 but the reflection here is not upon the High Court but upon the standard of competence among the Mohammedans. It is not enough that the Mohammedans shall be able to say that they have more men qualified for these positions they must say that they possess men with equal or higher qualifications than those who are actually appointed. In short, if it is not to be alleged that the present selections are dictated by partisan considerations and that charge was made by nobody in the course of the discussion—then no reason exists for a change that is intended to bring communal considerations to the threshold of the bench.

## News Items

### LORD IRWIN'S DEPARTURE

**"A TASK RICH IN OPPORTUNITY"**

LONDON, MAR. LORD Irwin was given a cordial farewell at Victoria where he took train for Marseille to join the Multan.

Before his departure he held a reception in the Royal Waiting Room, where he took leave of a number of prominent persons including Mr. Baldwin, Viscount Halifax, Lord Salisbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Earl Winterton, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, Lord Birkenhead, Lord Phillimore, Sir Atul Chatterjee, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, Sir John Simon, Sir Michael O'Dwyer, Sir Benjamin Robertson, Sir Charles Yate, Sir Maneckjee Dadabhai and Sir William Vincent.

In the course of a special message to Reuter Lord Irwin said that he was looking forward with the keenest anticipation to his stay in India. He realized that his task was no light one, but he looked forward to the hearty co-operation of all with whom he would come in contact. In overcoming the difficulties that might be before them, it would be his endeavour to bring the same sympathy and understanding to the task as Lord Reading had done, and to forward the wholehearted and orderly advancement of India towards full self-government on constitutional lines.

### ISLAMIC CULTURE

## UNIVERSITY POLICY CRITICIZED

LONDON, MAR. MOVING that the demand of Rs. 3,74,128 for a grant to the Calcutta University should be reduced by Re. 1, Sir Abdur Rahim said that he had brought this motion in order to discuss the policy and general administration of the Calcutta University. They had allowed a grant to that University for the Post-Graduate Department to go unscathed not because they were convinced that there would be no waste, that all the money would be properly employed, but because they were not satisfied that the arrangement for Post-Graduate study was what it should be. Certain subjects were emphasized which ought not to have any place in the Calcutta University. Others—some very important subjects—were ignored. For instance, Arabic and Persia, containing the most glorious literature, which were studied all over the world, were neglected by the Calcutta University, which was situated in one of the largest cities of Mohammedan population.

When he talked of the Mohammedans being neglected by the Government and other bodies, a cry was at once raised in some quarters charging him and those who believed with him with exciting communal feeling. In answer to that Sir Abdur Rahim said: "I point to the Calcutta University as the monument of communalism." He had been to the University and was shown round the rooms. He was shown a little dining room where he was told Arabic was taught. There was no library for Arabic and no room—was kept reserved for the department of Persian. In his opinion, this was sufficient to damn any Indian university.

## Crossword | No. 293408

**Yesterday's Solution**

**ACROSS**

- Girl's top not returned, keeping her initially in bikini bottom? (7)
- Vermilion colour that's screwed some rat up? (9)
- Inconstant figure favouring odd bits of them and us? (7)
- Positive source of guidance for defendants? (7)
- Read article covering Lord Byron's daughter? (5)
- Medic, depressed, not initially disoriented? (7)
- Damage in church associated with Rector, a ladies man? (7)
- Right source of milk keeping one looking more like a cow? (7)
- Star taking 10 minutes of games in decline? (6)
- One who grows very much, only to be reduced by 50%? (5)
- Marines in a group of musicians displaying part of insignia? (7)
- Source of bronchial problem? Special doctor attending monarch? (7)
- Disorder about marine creature disposing of a shellfish? (7)
- A contributor to order, whichever way you look at it? (5,4)
- Expert standing beside a large old member of cattle family? (7)
- Wild former lover mentioned in documents? (7)
- New recruits I sent out to hold line—observe, in retreat? (9)
- Daring to give up power? That's fortuitous! (5)
- Cool online talks with very good content? (5)
- Grandiloquent end to portico, red and German? (7)
- Enthusiasm after good stink from ancient incendiary weapon? (5,4)
- Hating men putting quartz grains in boggy surroundings? (8)
- French team prepare for a hotel stay? (6)
- Chaps in A&E turning up for medical treatment? (7)
- Operatic hero: African prince embracing woman? (7)
- Came to an end, holed, leaving fluorine? (6)
- Official worth employing? That can be denied! (5)
- Not able to carry a tune? That could be calamious, nothing less! (9)
- US state confusion interrupted by new sense of order? (8)
- Four, upset about expression of meditation, left—leaving probably enough people? (7)
- Account about start of month unlikely to decay? (7)
- Derranged anger about navy entering game? (6)
- More than one religious figure is enthralling mother? (6)
- Like a bath? Some of day's dust to be lived! (5)

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

## Pragmatic position

India must drive reforms at the WTO meeting

The 14th ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) — the session to be held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, from March 26 to 29 — comes at a crucial juncture. Trade ministers from across the world are expected to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the multilateral trading system and decide the agenda. The global trade order has been upended by the world's largest economy over the past one year, with little regard for well-settled trade principles. Given the state of current policy thinking in the United States (US) and its actions regarding the WTO over the past decade, it remains to be seen to what extent the multilateral forum can advance the trade agenda. Geopolitics has also become a bigger risk for trade.

As reported by this newspaper this week, India's position going into the conference is that the foundational aspects of the WTO should not change. These include issues such as consensus-driven decision-making at the forum and non-discriminatory tariff treatment by trading partners. Further, pending issues must be addressed before new items are added. The position is understandable. However, it must also be noted that the WTO has seen little progress over the years. The nature of world trade has changed in recent decades with the emergence of global value chains (GVCs). However, the consensus-driven decision-making process has not kept pace with the changes. As a result, countries have turned to free-trade agreements (FTAs), which are allowed under the rules, as an alternative to attain deeper integration and facilitate GVC-led trade.

While the terms of an FTA remain limited to only the countries doing the deal, outcomes of plurilateral negotiations can be included in the WTO rulebook with consensus. One such issue is the integration of the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement. The idea is to facilitate investment by focusing on issues such as transparency, simplifying administrative processes and rules, and improving regulatory capacity. The agreement is supported by 128 of the 166 WTO members, including developed and least developed countries. India has opposed it, but it is hard to see why. India anyway needs to do all this to attract investment, which is absolutely necessary to grow at higher rates. Aside from the standpoint of macroeconomic management, where India needs foreign capital to supplement domestic savings to achieve higher growth, foreign capital also brings technology and can enable the country's integration into GVCs.

Equally important for the Cameroon conference is that several such issues, including the moratorium on e-commerce Customs, are likely to be discussed there. India must take a pragmatic position at multilateral forums and, more generally, in its trade and investment policies. Over the past year, India has shown considerable openness to trade and signed agreements such as those with the United Kingdom and the European Union. Although the fate of the agreement with the US remains uncertain, the initial framework reflected a pragmatic approach. India needs to carry forward the momentum and open itself to global trade. It is reported that India is considering joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. It must pursue this possibility. Exports can be a major source of growth, as demonstrated by a number of countries over the past few decades. The nature of global trade has changed, and India must adapt quickly. It can also be a major driver of reforms at the WTO.

## Apple@50

Staying ahead through many technology cycles

Fifty years ago, two young geeks, both named Steve, along with Ronald Wayne, who quickly left, started with an idea: Building and marketing a personal computer. Steve Jobs sold his car and Steve Wozniak his scientific calculator to raise funds for their venture, which was incorporated as Apple Computer Company. The Apple I was designed and hand-assembled by Mr Wozniak in a proverbial garage in Cupertino, California, while Jobs marketed the pioneering devices. The timing was perfect. Millions of consumers were waiting for just such a device, even if they didn't know it. Apple saw a dream run, in which its revenue doubled every four months for an incredible period of five years. When the company went public in 1980, it hit a market value of \$1.8 billion on its first day. It is worth over \$3.7 trillion now.

Apple has since seen its share of triumphs and disasters, far more of the former than the latter. Mr Wozniak decided to take the back seat fairly early in the game, going off to complete his college degree, while Jobs was removed by the board and then reinstated for complicated reasons. Through all the cycles that have driven global markets for consumer electronics and information technology since 1976, Apple has remained a leading innovator. It has conceptualised and created the smartphone — the iPhone is now into its 17th iteration. But long before that, it created the designer's dream computers and laptops, focusing on graphics and smooth operating systems. It drove and continues to drive trends in digital movie-making and editing.

Apple also reimaged personalised digital music mixes with the iPod. It launched the iPad, combining the convenience of the smartphone with some of the power of a laptop. And it has managed to remain the "premium brand" through all its product iterations even as every innovation was commoditised by other electronic brands. Apple has retained certain design principles. It offers integrated solutions. It designs and sources every hardware component on a bespoke basis to slot it perfectly into its specifications. It knits all the hardware tightly together with its proprietary iOS operating system. Every component of every Apple device speaks the same language, and every Apple device integrates seamlessly with every other Apple device, with the user's data backed up on the iCloud.

There is one advantage of this approach. Users like the fact that Apple devices work seamlessly with every other Apple device. For Apple, the advantage is that it considerably improves margins. Also, any problem considered by Apple engineers is perfectly solved, making the Apple ecosystem nearly "dirt-proof" and as close to being secure as any digital system can be. However, the disadvantage is that Apple's closed ecosystem lacks the flexibility to easily solve problems that Apple engineers may not have considered. This is why far more applications, programmes, and utilities are designed for the more open Linux, Windows, and Android ecosystems. But it is difficult to argue against a strategy that has kept the company in pole position across 50 years and umpteen technological cycles. Apple has over 2.5 billion active devices out there in the wild and its user-base will likely keep growing as it moves past the half-century mark.



## Can companies buy their way into S&P 500?

Firms' behaviour suggests that they see a link between rating purchases and index inclusion

Few benchmarks matter more to financial investors than the S&P 500. Trillions of dollars track it directly, and many more are evaluated against it. Inclusion often boosts a firm's stock price, lowers its cost of capital, and confers prestige. Many corporate boards even tie executive compensation to performance relative to the index.

Given the S&P 500's influence, index membership should be determined objectively and transparently. Yet as a recently published research paper by Kun Li, Kelly Liu, and I shows, the process for adding companies allows for considerable discretion, potentially creating incentives for firms to purchase S&P's credit ratings in hopes of improving their chances of getting into the index. This is suggested by a key finding: Firms that recently obtained an S&P rating were more likely to be added to the S&P 500 than those that purchased ratings from Moody's.

When the working-paper version of our study first circulated in 2021, S&P strongly objected to our interpretation, emphasising that its index committee operates independently of its ratings business, with the two separated by a "Chinese wall." According to the company, the index team does not communicate with ratings analysts about firm-level decisions, and therefore, index

inclusion cannot be influenced by ratings-related revenue. While we take this claim seriously, the data reveals patterns that are difficult to reconcile with full separation between S&P's index and ratings divisions.

S&P publishes detailed criteria for index inclusion, including minimum market capitalisation, liquidity, financial viability, and sector representation. Thus, we began with a simple question: How closely did decisions to include firms follow these stated rules? Using data from 1980 to 2018, we found that the published criteria explained no more than 15 per cent of additions to the S&P 500. Many firms that met all the criteria were passed over, while others were admitted despite seeming to fall short.

To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with discretion in stock-index construction, and S&P does not claim its methodology is purely mechanical. The index committee is expected to exercise judgement. But whenever discretion is involved, incentives matter.

With this in mind, we examined whether firms that recently purchased an S&P credit rating were more likely to be added to the index. S&P does not publicly disclose its rating fees, but estimates from other rating agencies suggest that they range from a few thousand



SHIANG-JIN WEI

dollars to several million. After accounting for the published selection criteria, we found a clear pattern: Firms that had recently obtained an S&P rating were significantly more likely to gain admission to the S&P 500. For non-member firms, the unconditional likelihood of being added to the index was 15.5 per cent; for firms that had recently purchased an S&P rating, it was 21.4 per cent. One possible explanation is that S&P tends to favour fast-growing firms, and that such companies are naturally more likely to issue debt and seek credit ratings. But if that were the whole story, we would expect to see the same pattern among firms that purchased ratings from Moody's, as we did not. If rating purchases simply reflect firm quality or growth prospects, the effect should not be specific to S&P.

Firms' behaviour further suggests that they see a link between rating purchases and index inclusion. When mergers among S&P 500 firms create openings for new additions, large non-member firms disproportionately increase their purchases of S&P ratings. Conversely, after a 2002 rule change that made foreign firms ineligible for inclusion, non-US firms listed on US exchanges sharply reduced their purchases of S&P ratings relative to Moody's. The implication is clear: When the prize disappears, so does demand. Taken together, these patterns suggest that firms believe purchasing S&P ratings increases their chances of joining the index.

What about another, more innocent explanation? S&P learns useful information during the ratings process, which helps it decide whether other firms belong in the index. In that case, the correlation we observed between rating purchases and subsequent inclusion reflects improved information from the rating process rather than business incentives.

But this explanation is difficult to sustain. For starters, if index-addition decisions rely on non-public information obtained through the ratings process, that would mark a departure from S&P's published methodology. It is also notable that private ratings information is used in index decisions.

Moreover, such information-sharing would seem at odds with S&P's public statements that the index committee and ratings department operate independently and do not exchange firm-specific data. In addition, the information uncovered during the rating process could just as easily lower a firm's chances of inclusion as raise them.

Lastly, when we looked at how companies performed after joining the S&P 500, we found no evidence that discretionary additions — including those associated with recent rating purchases — systematically outperformed rule-based additions or even firms that met the criteria but were passed over. In other words, discretion does not appear to lead to better outcomes.

Whether or not S&P 500 membership is literally for sale, the evidence suggests that firms behave as if it might be. And when companies believe that paying for ratings can improve their odds of inclusion in the index, the credibility of the admission process is at risk.

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## India's invisible urban fault line

Indian cities are learning to do very modern things in very old ways. You can order groceries in 10 minutes, pay a street vendor with UPI, track your bus on an app, and work from a glass tower plugged into the global economy. Then the rain comes, a junction locks up, garbage spills onto the service lane, a footpath disappears under parked cars, and the city reverts to negotiation. That is the invisible fault line this year's Economic Survey also identifies: A weak civic compact between citizens and the state that leaves Indian cities struggling to convert investment into order and growth into livability.

This is a more interesting diagnosis than the usual perspective that Indian cities simply need more money, more roads, and more flyovers. While they do need investment, they also need something harder to build and easier to ignore. Cities need a widely shared understanding that public rules are real, public space is shared, and compliance is not for the naïve.

What may appear abstract is, in fact, deeply practical. It determines whether traffic signals coordinate movement or simply function as suggestions, whether high-rises signal growth or are gradually hollowed out by encroachments, and whether waste segregation campaigns reshape everyday habits or remain confined to PowerPoint slides.

India's cities are now too economically important for this to remain a side issue. Urban India already produces the bulk of national output and will absorb much of the country's future demographic and economic change. The World Bank has estimated that by 2026, India's towns and cities could account for around 70 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). The standard urban conversation in India still tends to focus on physical infrastructure. Yet the harder truth is that cities are not merely engineering projects. They are large systems of cooperation among strangers. Their success depends on whether millions of people believe rules will be applied predictably and whether the state

itself behaves as though enforcement is routine rather than theatrical.

In India, urban systems falter less because of a shortage of rules than because of weak expectations that those rules will hold. Studies of urban governance show that compliance depends heavily on perceived legitimacy and credible enforcement, not simply regulation density. In many Indian cities, the gap between rules and practice is visible in everyday coordination failures. Bengaluru commuters now lose roughly 168 hours a year to congestion, while average peak speed falls below 14 km/h, illustrating how behavioural and institutional frictions compound infrastructure limits. Such patterns are well-documented in urban economics: When enforcement appears uneven and procedures opaque, citizens rationally adapt. Signals become negotiable, regulations elastic, and informal workarounds gradually emerge as the practical operating system of the city.

India's urban history helps explain why this equilibrium has proven stubborn. Colonial municipalities were designed more to administer than to empower. Post-independence, urbanisation expanded at a speed that negotiable, regulations elastic, and informal workarounds gradually emerged as the practical operating system of the city. India's urban history helps explain why this equilibrium has proven stubborn. Colonial municipalities were designed more to administer than to empower. Post-independence, urbanisation expanded at a speed that negotiable, regulations elastic, and informal workarounds gradually emerged as the practical operating system of the city.

This is visible in everything from land markets to traffic. India does not merely have congestion. It has a culture of negotiated movement. It does not merely have unaffordable housing. It has a planning system whose formal rigidity often pushes people towards informal solutions. It does not merely have waste problems. It has an urban commons problem, where the public realm is everyone's concern in theory and too often no one's responsibility in practice.

Even so, the picture is not bleak. Indian cities also contain evidence that civic norms can shift. Indore's

improvement in sanitation was not just a matter of trucks and bins. It involved sustained signalling that rules would be followed, monitored and socially reinforced. Digital tolling, online building approvals and direct benefit systems all show that Indian urban governance can reduce friction when it chooses process over discretion. The lesson is not that technology will save the city. Technology without trust often just digitises dysfunction. The real lesson is that norms change when institutions become more credible. People adapt quickly to systems that are clear, fair and reliably enforced.

This has major implications for urban policy. The next generation of reform cannot be confined to capital expenditure. It has to include boring but foundational tasks: Clearer municipal accountability, fewer overlapping agencies, simpler rules, faster approvals, and more visible consequences for non-compliance. It also requires treating citizens as partners rather than as obstacles or passive recipients. Ward-level participation, resident monitoring, vendor integration, decentralised waste systems and neighbourhood stewardship are not sentimental add-ons. They are ways of rebuilding the civic bargain at a human scale.

The most relevant question for Indian urban policy now is not whether cities need more infrastructure. They do. The more important question is whether India can build cities where public systems are trusted enough, and public behaviour aligned enough for infrastructure to work as intended. The invisible fault line is not a metaphor for urban chaos. It is a description of a deeper institutional fragility in cities that look increasingly modern from above but remain unstable in everyday use. India's urban future will not be decided on how much concrete it pours. It will be decided by whether it can make civic life less negotiable, public authority more credible, and shared spaces genuinely shared. Once that happens, Indian cities will not merely grow bigger — they will start working better.

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## Three Ts in Sino-Indian relations



VAPPALA BALACHANDRAN

This book, authored by senior business leader R Gopalakrishnan (Gopal) and human resource professional Nirmala Isaac, has encapsulated the two-millennium history of China-India relations in just 174 pages.

What distinguishes this volume from other books on China is the writing style, which is transactional rather than academic. The authors say the "book comes from the practical mindset of an enterprise manager rather than the academic rigour of a historian, philosopher or geographer."

Yet the book is deeply researched

and useful to academics too. The authors have suggested workable solutions for India and China to engage with each other to establish a stable global order against the backdrop of the decline of Western powers.

They say the long history of China-India relations was marked with three 'Ts': Thoughts, Travels and Trade. For over 2000 years, both countries were able to maintain a "peaceable intercourse" through these 'Ts'. "Thoughts were carried through travellers. Travel resulted in trade." Trade intensified the pursuit of ideas and thoughts," they write. Also common were the thoughts of Sun Tzu in China's ancient Zhou period and of Chanakya in the Mauryan Empire. A significant aspect of their narrative is based on practical experience of one of the authors (Gopal) who first visited China as a Tata director in the early 2000s. He was then chairman of Tata Auto Comp Ltd., which had set up a 100 per cent Tata-owned company in

Nanjing (NTACO) to make plastic injection-moulded automotive components. In 2015, NTACO set up a second unit near Changshu, followed by NTACO Trading Company to trade in automotive components. Gopal was also a member of the Indian delegation to the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting at Seattle in 2020 that admitted China to the world order of doing business. He had then shared the hope that the "rules-based global system would take deeper root as China would become more akin to other trading nations."

That was also the hope of the Bill Clinton administration that allowed China to enter WTO. This reviewer had published a column in July 2019 on this process and how it resulted in the United States (US) agreeing to China's WTO entry after their National Intelligence Council (NIC) had convened a crucial meeting with prominent academics and nine US intelligence specialists. This was on September 24,

1999. The NIC then concluded that China was "unlikely to break with the United States or engage in disruptive military buildups or aggressive foreign behaviour" unless "Beijing was challenged by unexpected circumstances". Global China watchers always hold this date as the crucial milestone in the history of China's economic rise.

This, together with US International Trade Commission's report in August 1999, which felt that the WTO Standardisation would benefit US companies in China and compel Beijing to adhere to WTO rules, was the reason the Clinton Administration recommended China's WTO entry. As a result, China became the largest exporter in the world, accounting for 20 per cent of US imports, as the US *Journal of International Economics* concluded in a September 2020 assessment.

Sure, there are voices in the Trump administration that want the US to

abrogate this on the ground that China is not adhering to WTO's rule-based global order.

However, on October 20, 2025, President Donald Trump brushed aside these calls and described the relationship with China as "G-2", a peer. The authors want this global trade to be modulated by quoting history: "Whenever India has been connected to the rest of the world, supported by its strong tradition, it has brought the country great prosperity." They strongly believe that the policy of "self-reliance," which was the core goal of India's Third Five Year Plan (1961) and repackaged in 2020 as "Atmanirbhar Bharat," is neither practical nor possible.

Instead, "we should consider how India can leverage its position with potential partners as the world's largest (or a major) importer of, for example, fertilisers, lentils, edible oils and hydrocarbons". To this end, the authors suggest

seven steps under "Thoughts", five under "Travel" and six under "Trade" with this conclusion: "It is time for Chanakya and Sun Tzu to walk the same path, where the wisdom of India and the strategy of China meet, not in conflict, but in convergence, forging a new dawn for Asia."

This idea might appear to be a mirage in the present context, but not impossible if we study current Sino-Vietnam relations. Hanoi, which resisted a brutal invasion by China in 1979, could settle their differences with Beijing in 2000. Hence, the authors accept the strategy of the 850-km Kunming-Hanoi highway to allow land locked south-west China to use Vietnamese ports. Politically, however, it pursues a nuanced policy of "Cooperation and Struggle" — economic cooperation and resisting China's encroachments in the South China Sea.

(R Gopalakrishnan is a Business Standard columnist)

# We Need to Quickly Get Ozempicky

Regulate, as cheap generics will surge use

With the key patent for semaglutide, the active ingredient in Novo Nordisk's blockbuster weight-loss drug Ozempic and Wegovy, expiring in India tomorrow, a surge of lower-cost generics is imminent, accelerating its shift from a clinical obesity treatment product to a lifestyle-aesthetic product. The demand isn't artificial. India faces a structural metabolic health crisis. According to the Lancet, 450 mn adults are projected to be overweight by 2050, and India is already the diabetes capital of the world. Affordable GLP-1 therapies could materially improve outcomes for millions who have struggled with obesity, insulin resistance and long-term metabolic disease. But the risk lies in scale without discipline.

This pattern isn't new to India. A drug is approved for medical use, proves effective, and then diffuses rapidly beyond its intended boundaries. Off-label prescribing rises, clinics and wellness centres commercialise it, and informal supply chains bridge access gaps. By the time regulators intervene, usage is widespread, with risks discovered only after scale is achieved. Antibiotics followed this arc. GLP-1 drugs — used to manage diabetes and promote weight loss by regulating blood sugar and reducing appetite — risk doing the same. India's prescription ecosystem is porous, and a drug that is visible, socially validated and increasingly affordable will be difficult to contain within clinical boundaries or traditional care pathways.

Which is why there must be proactive governance, not retrospective correction. Regulators, industry and medical community must align quickly on prescribing protocols, enforceable dispensing norms and transparent patient education that sets realistic expectations. Digital promotion — by clinics, platforms and influencers — needs tighter oversight and clearer accountability. At the same time, access for clinically indicated patients must be protected and streamlined. The choice is not between access and control, but between managed adoption and a cycle of reactive clean-up that arrives too late.

# End of Life, Dignify By Law and Practice

For decades, India's judiciary has faced a troubling moral boundary: when does medical intervention that prolongs life cease to respect a patient's interests and dignity? The issue resurfaced after Supreme Court allowed the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment for Harish Rana, who has remained in permanent vegetative state for over a decade. The decision earlier this month offers relief to his family. But its broader significance lies in reinforcing a structured legal and medical process for emotionally and ethically fraught choices. At its core, the judgment recognises a humane principle: dignity lies not only in how people live, but also in how they are allowed to die. The ruling applies a framework the court has gradually developed on 'passive euthanasia' — withdrawal of life-support — and advance medical directives. It allows doctors — after review by medical boards and with family consent — to discontinue artificial life support when recovery is no longer realistic. Crucially, the court has put in place safeguards — multiple medical opinions, documentation and procedural scrutiny to prevent misuse.

The next step is to ensure the framework doesn't remain confined to judicial orders. Parliament should move toward a law on euthanasia that codifies these principles. Operational changes are equally important. Hospitals need protocols, ethics committees and documentation practices. In the Netherlands and Belgium, strict reporting rules, second medical opinions and post-procedure review committees scrutinise each case. As India moves forward to take a decision, compassion and caution must evolve together — protecting vulnerable patients while allowing families and doctors a humane, regulated path when medicine has little left to offer.



## JUST IN JEST

Sculptor-entrepreneur Subimal Das has birthed a demand, and is tapping it

# Resurrecting Business, In Kolkata, Of Course

When Rajiv Gandhi described Kolkata in the 90s as a 'dying city', there was enough pushback from its citizens to raise the dead. Zombie or not, the city is home to one sculptor-entrepreneur who has created a new market, and is tapping it: hypno-memorials of dead loved ones. Why settle for framed photos — or a stone monument to a British lady who passed away 125 yrs ago — when you can have a full-size silicone-clay fibreglass simulacrum of 'kaka' smiling from the sofa, forever poised to ask why you never became a doctor?

Subimal Das has cracked a new sub-industry in the City of Nostalgia by selling life-size — and life-like — statues of the close departed. While everyone else is busy making statues of celebrities, politicians, cultural icons, etc. Das is selling the option that makes death part of a décor choice. The products are no tacky sub-Madame Tussaud waxworks. They are striking simulacra far removed from the sort of stuff you are striking with Norman Bates and his mum in Psycho. Families commission these hyper-realistic replicas, and Das' workshop provides them their 'loved one' for some ₹2.5 lakh. Creepy? Absolutely Visionary? Without question. In a world where grief is commodified and memory is moulded, Das has birthed the ultimate startup that's a mix of taxidermy and the ancient Egyptian industry of mummification: a resurrection economy.

## PUBLIC INTEREST **Rebased GDP shows higher growth estimate — which looks overestimated**

# Demand, an Explanation?



Rathin Roy

There has been much technical chatter about rebased GDP. MoSPI has done an honest and consultative revision of the methodology to calculate and estimate GDP. There is no attempt at glibbery. This is reassuring. However, uneasy questions remain about one, relationship between growth and inflation; two, relationship of multi-year growth trends with other economic and sectoral trends.

There is little reason for economic stakeholders to worry about a rebasing and methodological improvement exercise. Any resultant change in GDP estimate for the crossover year (FY26 in the current case) will be a one-time business. The pre-rebasing growth estimate was 7.2% real growth. The new rebasing raises that to 7.6%. The uneasiness has to do with the nominal growth estimate: 8.6%, implying a deflator of 1%, the same as with the old series. This is puzzling. Digging a little deeper, goods inflation has been negative for 10 quarters. This has led to a significant jump in the growth rate of manufacturing GVA, which has been revised to 11.5% from 7%. A significant part of this is due to the negative deflator. But a negative



Inflating the deflator

deflator would indicate a severe demand problem as nothing has happened on the productivity front, or prices of global goods. Hence, there is good reason to postulate that manufacturing growth and, therefore, GDP growth is being overestimated.

This unusually low and negative growth rate and nominal growth also has important relevance for the India growth story. It is important to realise that GDP calculations involve first measuring nominal growth. This fell dramatically from 14.2% in FY25 to an estimated 8.6% in FY26. The higher real GDP growth is attributable to a sharp disinflation, and negative inflation in manufacturing.

Many economic indicators that would fuel a growth in domestic demand are constrained, as these respond to nominal growth. Real wages, for instance, are either constant or falling over past 8 yrs, as nominal wage growth has been less than CPI inflation. This obviously depresses domestic demand.

Fiscal deficit/GDP ratio is calculated as a percentage of nominal (not real) GDP. With a collapse in the nominal growth rate, and the post-Covid need to cut fiscal deficit, expansionary government spending is curtailed, further depressing demand.

Disconnect between growth numbers and multi-year trends in things that matter to growth have been a topic of discussion for some time. Arvind Subramanian



Growth Rates of Macro Indicators and of GDP

Subramanian show convincingly that growth was overestimated over the past 12 yrs. This means that the stalling of the growth process has occurred sooner than anticipated.

Apart from stagnating real wages and declining manufacturing growth, data show low consumption plus every macroeconomic and financial supply-side indicator has been growing more slowly over time. The sharp fall in nominal growth in FY26 is consistent with these trends. They puzzle only if compared with real growth.

What then, to make of real growth? If real growth was overestimated across the last 10 yrs, then total GDP is smaller than we had thought. This means a smaller consumption, investment and demand base, and that we are not the 4th-largest economy. The trend real growth rate of the economy over the last decade (excluding the Covid fall and spike) has been just 6%. When CEA V Anand Nageswaran estimated that real growth would be 7% or less over the past 3 yrs, I thought he was being prudently cautious. Turns out, he was, in fact, wildly aspirational. To achieve 'Viksit Bharat' — even habitually late in a Indian Railways — we will have to increase growth by 200 bps every year for the next 25 yrs.

But what is to be done to unlock higher growth? Given declining nominal growth, and decline in consumption, private investment and sales over the last decade, it's clear that the India growth story faces a severe demand problem. Export-led growth is not an available option. India was not, and is not, a major exporter. It will continue to have a structural CAD over the next 5 yrs. Given the current geopolitical situation, to assume any reversal in that trend is a fool's errand.

There are pathways to a solution. But GoI must listen. And economists trained in the days of the Washington Consensus must stop bleating their tired mantra of labour and capital market reforms and supply-side fixes. The clear and present danger is a structural demand problem that is now upon us.

The writer is former member, EAC-PM

## THE SPEAKING TREE

# Radha and Andal

AK JAGANNATHAN

In India's spiritual tradition, two women shine with unmatched devotion: Radha of Vrindavan and Andal of Srivilliputhur. Though separated by centuries, they embody the same truth — love for Krishna that transcends all boundaries.

Radha is more than Krishna's companion in the Rasa Lila; she symbolises the soul's deepest longing for the Divine. Her devotion is not mere ritual or duty but pure, consuming love. Radha's surrender dissolves the line between devotee and the making her the ultimate symbol of Prema Bhakti.

Andal, the only female Alvar saint, mirrors this intensity in her poetry. Believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi, she poured her longing for Vishnu into the Tiruppavai and Nachiyar Thirumozhi. Her devotion transcends the mystical lore of Vrindavan, and Andal to the temple-centred devotion of Srivilliputhur. Radha's love is private ecstasy; Andal's devotion is public prayer for purity, peace and divine grace. Yet, both speak the same language of surrender.

Bhakti is not passive worship but active surrender — a love that consumes, transforms and unites. In Radha's yearning and Andal's poetry, we glimpse the highest truth of the spiritual path: Presence, which is the soul's final, its eternal home in the Divine.

## Chat Room

# Be a Foghorn To A Trumpet

Appropos 'Don-a-Lago Ain't America' by TK Arun (Mar 18), one couldn't agree more that BRICS, including India, must stop being cautious in criticising US follies in West Asia. In the light of our constructive trade relations and historic actions of the US, our newfound reticence citing our national interests is unjustified, and constricts our expanding role in global affairs. Our increasing dependence on the US and Israel for our burgeoning defence needs can be tempered through constructive trade relations while promoting a new global currency. However, desirable Iran's regime change, the current brutal destruction being pursued after Gaza is absolutely unacceptable. Buddha Bagai, New Delhi

# Don't Look a Gift Horse in Mouth

This refers to the Edit, 'Businesses Can Fight War-Ped Ecocide' (Mar 18). Wars accelerating fossil fuel disruption may ironically do what climate summits could not — make clean energy economically compelling rather than merely morally desirable. Indian businesses, facing volatile LPG and crude oil prices, have immediate incentive to accelerate electrification and renewable adoption. The govt should meet this momentum with faster clearances for industrial solar, revised electricity tariff and green financing incentives. Crisis-driven transitions are rarely orderly, but they are real. The opportunity should be squandered waiting for stability that may not arrive soon. A Miyahmi Coimbatore

# Opposition By Any Other Name

Appropos the news report, 'Oppn MPs' Suspension Revoked; LS Focuses On Constructive Work' (Mar 18), Opposition leaders may not be as vocal as they once were, but the pressures of political rivalry and the need to challenge the ruling side often undermine the promise of cooperation — even as the Speaker and parliamentary affairs minister hope for smoother proceedings. The Lok Sabha usually functions in a familiar rhythm: members debate, the speaker presides, and sharp disaccord. The cycle of suspension, regret and reconciliation reflects the enduring tension between the executive and legislative branches and political rivalry, where promises of constructive work are frequently overtaken by the demands of confrontation. Pleas can only be fulfilled by suppressing 'political compulsions'. O Prasad Rao Hyderabad

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



The economy was not able to produce things top 40% of income-earners wanted at affordable prices without subsidy.

Meeting this demand when our entire growth story was focused on

## ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a nation so sure, That their PM had a cure secured. While the world wrung its hands, He'd loudly demand — 'Woe kindly stop! And things would turn demure!' ...

## Fighting Child Mortality: Slowing Gains

Table with 4 columns: Region, Under-five mortality rate (2024), Under-five mortality rate (1990-2024), Decline, %.

\*With 90% uncertainty interval. \*\*UN IGME est. India's official data source is SRS, 2023 (SMR is 29, W0, F 29). Latin Am & Carib: Latin America and the Caribbean; EC: Australia and New Zealand.

## Bell Curves



Want me to walk you to a zebra crossing to complete your captha verification?

# Sing the Body Electric



Arijit Barman

If the US-Israel war against Iran teaches anything, it's this: now is the moment to rethink our energy transition and expand the role of electrons in the economy. They already power Indian homes. The next leap is to scale them for industry. Until recently, 'electro-states' — economies shifting from fossil fuels to electrification — felt like a distant ideal. But Iran's reprisals on oil and gas infrastructure across the Gulf show how even cheap tools like drones can destabilise global energy markets. A defining metric of an electro-state is the share of total final energy demand supplied by electricity. Across solar, wind, EVs, batteries and rail, China has built the world's largest clean-energy supply chain and leads both in production capacity and in the pace and scale of deployment. The shift reflects strategic intent and geopolitical leverage more than morality. Economies still run on fossil fuels. Petrostates — from Gulf monarchies to Russia and the US — have long used control of oil, coal and gas to influence the global order. Fast-growing economies like China and India have imported these fuels to industrialise, a significant environmental and fiscal cost.

Of late, nations with abundant sun and wind are trying to flip the equation. A combination of industrial policy, subsidies and long-term investments has made Beijing an indispensable player in the global energy transition value chain. Since 2019, China's solar panel export volumes have tripled. That should be India's cue, too. China will still need 600 GWh to meet electricity growth in line with the 2026

projections of China Electricity Council, despite their breakeven buildouts. India will be no different. Fossil fuels like crude and natural gas are essential. Much like China, coal-fired thermal power has made a comeback in recent quarters and has absorbed much of the short-term wear-and-tear in domestic power grids. But ICE coupled with battery storage is taking over electricity supply. Our data centres are fed by discom power, which, in turn, draws 30-40% of clean power from transportation to smart buildings, everything that can economically electrify is going electric, pushing up the share of electrons in GDP to 18-20%.

Half of India's crude oil demand comes from the transport sector. With Indian Railways leading the charge in electrification, it is changing fast. Automobiles are changing gears, 50% of our 3-wheeler sales are now electric, the highest in the world, while 1.27 mn electric 2-wheelers were sold last year alone, a 40% y-o-y jump. Even electric cars have exceeded 5% of sales at 80% lower oil demand per vehicle than ICE vehicles on price. A scramble for renewable options will stop our reliance on imports, with know-how replacing crude oil to make us a technology export of China — which controls the lion's share of solar manufacturing and battery supply chains — instead. But in the long run, cheaper electricity is the only



Expand our circuit

## STEP UP TO THE PLATE



Joia Milan

Milan has always been a city of high-octane fashion and deep-rooted tradition. But tucked away from the frantic pace of the Duomo is Joia, a sanctuary that redefined the Italian food scene before 'plant-based' became a buzzword. Stepping inside feels like a serene departure from the bustling Milanese streets. Founded by Swiss chef Pietro Leemann in 1989, Joia holds the distinction of being the first vegetarian spot in Europe to snag a Michelin star. Today, under the creative eyes of Surojit and Raffaele Minghini, that legacy continues. The menu leans heavily into organic, biodynamic ingredients, often slipping eggs and dairy daily and not expecting a simple salad, plates with whimsical names like 'Ombeledi del mondo (Navel of the world)'. There's a distinct Asian influence at play — think roasted eggplant with miso and ginger — blended seamlessly with local Italian finds like Ciarelle chickpeas. Whether you're stopping for a refined Platto Quattro (four) or a full tasting menu, the experience is bright, understated and nourishing. It's a rare spot where the food transcends the kitchen and invites you with a lingering sense of edible wonder.

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OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE



# IDBI Bank's sell-off: Its delay should mystify us

The government's decision to mark time on this bank's privatization is a puzzle. Its rationale is clear and the stage for it was set long ago. Low bids shouldn't get in the way of a stake sale

It is unfortunate that India's government has decided to call off the privatization of IDBI Bank for now, as reports indicate. The disappointment is that this decision was reportedly taken in response to poor investor interest—as seen in low bids for the 61% stake on offer to corporate bidders. There are many reasons behind the process of what we in India like to call 'disinvestment,' a euphemism coined as a political shield against critics. The money it raises is just one reason. It pales in front of another motive, one that has long been regarded as a free-market principle. Namely, that governments should not be in any business that the private sector can do as well, if not better. It was this aspect of India's market reform agenda that led successive administrations to disinvest in a host of state-run undertakings across sectors over the past three decades. It was an exercise that culminated in the most difficult and perhaps controversial sell-off of all, that of Air India in January 2022.

For a government that has been keen to demonstrate its ability to bite the bullet on contentious reforms such as those related to labour, its call on IDBI Bank is puzzling. It risks sending mixed signals on the Centre's commitment to structural reforms. This puzzle is deepened by the government's rejection of revenue maximization as its main motive for selling stakes in publicly held enterprises. To be sure, banking is a strategic sector—especially in an emerging economy like ours where public ownership of banks helps serve policy ends like financial inclusion. But we already have 12 public sector banks (PSBs) with a strong presence in this field; they account for 53.5% of all loans, against private lenders'

share of 41.5% (at the end of 2025), and about 60% of all bank deposits, according to a 2024 State Bank of India report. In such a scenario, turning IDBI Bank over to private control would not have upset the appellation of PSB dominance of Indian banking. Moreover, the process has long been in the works. After state-owned LIC bought a 51% stake in January 2019 when IDBI Bank was under stress, the cabinet committee on economic affairs gave an in-principle nod for its privatization way back in 2021. By then, an equity issuance had taken LIC's share below half. The plan was for the government to sell 30.48% of the bank's equity pie, with LIC offloading another 30.24%. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget speech on 1 February five years ago had set a target for the sale's completion within fiscal 2021-22—only to have the deadline breached time and again.

Ironically, foreign investors have lately shown considerable interest in our banking sector. The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) approval of Warburg Pincus's 10% investment in IDFC First Bank in July 2025 was followed by a significant stake taken by Japan SMBC in Yes Bank last September. That's not all. Last October, RBL Bank received funds from Emirates NBD, which was reportedly also one of the bidders for IDBI Bank in the aborted auction. Earlier this year, a Blackstone affiliate obtained regulatory approval for investing in Federal Bank. While some of these investments could be attributed to RBI's recently relaxed stance on foreign ownership, it also reflects greater global interest in the country's banking space. All of this gives the Centre's decision to mark time on IDBI Bank's sell-off an air of mystery.

# Pride in AI: It's a force that needs constraints of collective wisdom

Some forms of pride must be nurtured but not the kind that raises the risk of civilizational collapse



ANURAG BEHAR is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

There is something remarkable about the best salespeople, something quiet. Not the loudest, not the most decorated, not the ones with the fanciest titles or biggest incentive payouts. The truly effective ones, if you spend enough time around them—in liquor distribution, IT services, pharmaceuticals, agricultural inputs, across every sector—you begin to notice a common thread that has nothing to do with technique or personality type. They have pride in their work. This is not the pride that comes from a sales award at an annual jamboree or being featured in the company newsletter, a cash reward for nudging quarterly numbers up or other such motivators. But from something deeper. This pride emanates from a felt sense that they have made a real difference to someone or to someone's business.

In the liquor business, this might look like a salesperson who has spent years helping a distributor grow, building his territory, thinking about his margins, relationships and capital cycles with as much care as if it were her own business. In IT services, it might be the account manager who feels genuine ownership over whether her client's operations became more efficient. The sale is the outcome. The pride is in the effect. This distinction matters.

What is true of salespeople is equally or perhaps more true of those who work

in professions whose very purpose is human well-being. The most effective teachers carry a particular light in their eyes when they speak of a student who struggled and then found her way. The best doctors speak of a difficult diagnosis resolved or a patient restored to full life with a satisfaction that no performance bonus can replicate. Care workers who persist through the severe physical and emotional demands of their work are also often driven by this force.

Organizations that achieve sustained excellence understand this even if they don't always articulate it this way. They build structures, processes and cultures that constantly reinforce the connection between what their people do every day and the difference it makes. They tell stories. They create visibility. They bring the salesperson face-to-face with the effect of her work. This scaffolding matters. Pride doesn't always emerge spontaneously; sometimes it needs to be cultivated, made legible and given form.

In this, the world of business has it harder than the social sector in one specific respect. A business is ultimately about making money. The immediate goal of the salesperson—close the deal, hit the number—is structurally at some distance from the deeper effect that generates pride. Organizations must aim to bridge that gap. The social sector, at least in principle, has no such problem. The work itself—the learning of children, the curing of patients, the well-being of communities—generates pride. It should come more naturally. Yet, with tragic regularity, it does not.

In too many parts of our public and social systems, anganwadi workers, teachers, nurses, doctors and care workers are treated as replaceable cogs in a large indifferent machine. They are blamed for systemic failures that are not of their making. Their professional judgment is second-guessed and their dignity quietly eroded. Rather than building pride in their work, these systems demolish it. This is one of the most

consequential and least-discussed failures of institution-building.

But now I turn to a very different kind of pride, because pride is not always benign. It can, under certain conditions, become something dangerous. Something that licenses recklessness.

We are living through a moment when the most powerful technology companies in the world and many individuals who lead them are in the grip of a particular variety of pride. The people driving the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution are motivated by the usual things—money, market dominance and the fear of being left behind. But there is something else that makes this moment distinct. There is a messianic quality to much of today's discourse. A felt sense that these individuals are not merely building products but transforming the world, reshaping human civilization and bending the arc of history.

This pride is driving a breach point of development that an increasing number of the very pioneers of AI—people who understand these systems better than almost anyone alive—are warning against. The risks being accumulated are together sufficient for civilizational collapse. AI could undermine economic stability as well as public safety, diminish basic human capacities for independent thought and genuine relationships, and deplete the natural world through its extraordinary consumption of energy and related carbon emissions.

There is a phrase so old that it has become a cliché. Yet, it captures something precise about this moment: pride comes before the fall.

The pride of the best salesperson, best teacher and best doctor is among the most constructive forces in the world. It should be nurtured. But the pride of those who believe their roles are too important and their mission too consequential to be constrained by ordinary caution or collective wisdom has been among the most destructive forces in human history. We would do well to tell the difference.



**JUST A THOUGHT**

Each era has the fatal hubris to believe that it has once and for all climbed to the top of the mountain and can see everything as it is, from the highest and most objective vantage point possible.

ERIC METAXAS

MY VIEW | TIGHTROPE WALK

# America has missed the great irony of its war on Iran

RAGHU RAMAN



is former CEO of the National Intelligence Grid, distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation and author of 'Everyman's War'.

Beneath the stated justifications of any war in history—righteous causes, nuclear threats, regime changes—the bedrock truth is the same. Conflict is and has always been a quest for resources. The Iran war is merely the latest chapter. What distinguishes it is not the violence itself, but what has been abandoned to prosecute this war.

The *blitzkrieg* delusion: Heady after the one-sided bombardments of Gaza and Tehran and kidnapping of a sitting head of state, US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may have convinced themselves that similar tactics would crush Iran within hours. Three weeks into an ever-enlarging conflict, that figment has been brutally dispelled.

Consider what Iran represents as a theatre. At over 90 million people, its population exceeds the combined populations of Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan at the time of their respective US wars. Over a million of its citizens live across the West—a politically engaged diaspora now watching their

homeland burn. Iran's landmass is larger than all three of those killing grounds combined. A nation of that size, with thousands of years of civilizational memory, cannot be pummeled into submission.

The American war machine has been weakening through a decade of West Asian entanglements and a grinding proxy war in Ukraine. Structurally, it has an Achilles heel that weapons cannot compensate for; a decaying democracy's intolerance for body bags and economic pain. Every increase in war casualties or inflation erodes Trump's domestic support even within his base.

*Pandora's Box*: Killing Ali Khamenei has not decapitated the Iranian state. It has decentralized it, creating something more dangerous than a unified enemy. A headless movement cannot be negotiated with, deterred or made to submit. What replaces centralized authority is not chaos, but something more implacable: a 'nothing left to lose' resolve. A person who loses his entire family in a single day does not calculate the odds of success as he plots vengeance.

The US and Israel are creating entire nations of such men and women. Their targeted killing of a nation's leader, its nuclear scientists and its commanders without any due process has opened a door that cannot

be shut. If the world's most powerful military can eliminate a sovereign nation's entire leadership and slaughter civilians, on what moral or legal basis can it object when a weaker adversary reaches for the only instruments available to it?

*Terrorism*: US and Israeli forces can kill schoolgirls in Iran and scientists in Zurich, by what principle would CEOs of US firms be off-limits to Iranian forces? This is not an argument to target civilians, but a warning that the choice of legitimate targets is not unilateral.

*Rules aren't a constraint on war but the architecture of peace*: The UN Charter's prohibition on external regime change action, the Geneva Conventions' protections for civilians and the norm against assassinating heads of state were not designed to constrain military power, but to make peace possible. Without those rules, there is only escalation until one side is annihilated or both are exhausted.

The US has indicated that those rules are for adversaries, not for it. It launched a war

for regime change, killed a sitting head of state and normalized civilian infrastructure as targets. So if these rules don't apply to the US, why would China feel constrained in Taiwan or Russia in the Baltics? Why would a middle power grant the international order its allegiance or not pursue nuclear weapons as an insurance policy?

The US spent eight decades as architect and enforcer of the post-war international order. What is being dismantled in Iran is not merely a hostile regime. It is that framework itself.

*Iran is in it for the long haul*: Tehran understands something that advocates of this campaign don't seem to. A nation that survived eight years of war with Iraq, fought against chemical weapons and endured harsh sanctions does not break easily. A civilization spanning three millennia does not measure time in news cycles or US election schedules. A dispersal of power that appears to have followed Khamenei's killing will not weaken Iran's resistance; it will fragment it into cells and individuals whose

motivations might plausibly be personal more than political. An insurgency with no command structure to negotiate with, disrupt or destroy could prove more perilous.

History offers a consistent verdict on superpowers trying to bludgeon proud nations into submission. Think of Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Mistaking firepower for the will to fight imposes very high costs.

*The price of arbitrary action*: Every war has been premised on the assumption that it will end. That premise requires rules—not as a concession to the enemy, but as a precondition for settlement. Total arbitrariness produces not victory but a permanent state of violence, radicalizing populations and forcing every exit. The great irony is that the nation that will suffer the most from the death of a rules-based order is the one that has killed it. America's power rested on the voluntary deference of allies that believed the rules applied to everyone, including Washington. That credibility is now spent.

Resources have always been fought for. But the most precious resource: any great power possesses is not oil, territory or nuclear capability. It is the trust of the world that it seeks to lead. That resource cannot be seized by force. And once lost, it cannot be recovered by bombing anyone.

**We've seen the world's most powerful nation tear up its own rulebook and erode its most vital resource**



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# Geo-economic warriors should think twice: They endanger us all

National strategies that weaponize trade equations, essential supplies and financial systems are prone to dangerous errors



**BARRY EICHENGREEN**

is professor of economics and political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author, most recently, of *Money Beyond Borders: Global Currencies From Croesus to Crypto*

In 1945, at World War II's close, the economist Albert O. Hirschman published *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, in which he analyzed how nation-states shape trade patterns to their strategic advantage.

The book sank like a stone. It garnered just a brief summary in the *American Political Science Review* and was rarely if ever cited by other economists and authors.

Today, Hirschman and the field he invented, known as 'geo-economics,' have re-emerged with a vengeance, building on his seminal ideas. These start with his 'influence effect,' which showed how a dominant state could structure its trade so that disruptions hurt its partners more than itself. By threatening to withhold exports or market access, this dominant state could then coerce and extract concessions from its partners.

In the last year, we have seen multiple instances of US President Donald Trump using tariffs and export controls to coerce countries to invest in the United States or grant US firms favoured market access. Unlike Hitler's Germany, Hirschman's original example, the Trump administration can't be credited with having consciously shaped US trade to amplify this effect. Trump inherited a large US market and America's high-tech leadership, which granted him leverage. However, the resulting strategy is the same.

Hirschman also pointed to a second mechanism, the 'supply effect,' where trade is used to stockpile resources and channel transactions toward reliable partners, strengthening economic resilience and limiting vulnerability to foreign influence. Today, we see countries friendsourcing their trade and investment, enhancing their self-sufficiency in semiconductors, and stockpiling rare earths. The more things change...

But some things have not remained the same. International financial markets, having fallen into disarray in the 1930s, were inactive when Hirschman was writing. Now, by contrast, they are a major arena for geo-economics. The US notably capitalized on Russia's financial dependence following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by freezing the Kremlin's overseas dollar deposits and denying it access to the US correspondent banking system.

China uses its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) not only to build secure supply chains, but also to cultivate other countries' dependence on its financial resources. Those other countries are not unaware: in 2023, Italy terminated its participation in the BRI precisely because of uneasiness about its financial dependence on China.

Critics of financial sanctions worry that such measures will erode the leverage of governments applying them. Russia and other countries worried that they too will find themselves on the sharp end



of US sanctions have an incentive to seek other ways to hold foreign assets and make foreign payments.

Russia is pushing its System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) into the domain of cross-border transactions. A more serious competitor for the dollar and US correspondent banking system is China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), now with some 1,700 banks participating directly and indirectly. Analysts warn that willy-nilly use of sanctions will lend more impetus to such initiatives and thus end up undermining the global role of the American dollar, eliminating America's ability to leverage finance to its advantage.

Similarly, countries like China that are on the receiving end of US export controls have reason to accelerate their own investments in dual-use (civilian and military) technologies. If so, the US may end up facing an even more powerful and technologically sophisticated rival as a result of its geopolitical measures.

Such responses should not come as a surprise. They are exactly what Hirschman's framework would lead one to expect: countries targeted by America's 'influence effect' would resort to their own 'supply effects' to limit their vulnerability.

Targeted countries will also retaliate in an effort to deter aggressive action by the initiator.

Hirschman devoted little attention to this, given the power imbalance between Nazi Germany and the Central and Eastern European countries it targeted. By contrast, today's China possesses leverage. It responded to Trump's tariffs and export controls with tariffs on US products, export controls on critical minerals and investment restrictions for US companies.

Late last year, the two countries drew back from the brink, negotiating a 'tactical truce' to de-escalate their trade war. But their tit-for-tat retaliation could easily have spiralled out of control. This danger remains. Now that the American Supreme Court has forced Trump to reconfigure his 'reciprocal' tariffs, the entire situation will have to be revisited.

This is our dangerous new world. It is one of alarming parallels between nuclear deterrence theory and Hirschman's geo-economic theory. As with nuclear weapons, the consequences of miscalculation by those wielding geo-economic weapons would be devastating.

The globalization to which we have grown accustomed has survived recessions, financial crises and a worldwide pandemic. It is not clear that it will survive escalating geo-economic conflicts. Geo-economic warriors should think twice. They proceed at their—, more precisely, our—peril.

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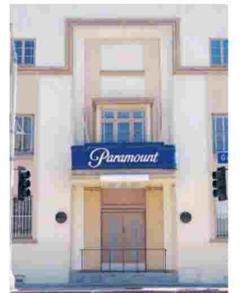
# Paramount priorities: Hiring #MeToo men comes at a cost

The Hollywood studio's signing up of 'distressed assets' is myopic



**BETH KOWITZ**

is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering corporate America.



Hiring decisions have an impact on the kind of films that get made.

Hollywood is known for its short memory, but David Ellison has been testing the aphorism's limits. Ellison, who merged his Skydance studio with Paramount seven months ago and is in the process of acquiring Warner Bros Discovery, has a payroll that includes several names lodged in the collective memory of observers for the wrong reasons.

First, there's Jeff Shell, president of Paramount Skydance, who was fired as CEO of NBC Universal in 2023 following an allegation of sexual harassment. Then there's John Lasseter, Paramount's head of animation, who left Walt Disney in 2018 after allegations of inappropriate behaviour. Paramount brought on Max Landis, who faced accusations of sexual misconduct in 2019, to write a treatment of *G.I. Joe*—one the company has passed on. Filmmaker Brett Ratner, who was accused of sexual misconduct by several women (allegations he has denied), is making *Rush Hour 4* with Paramount as its distributor. (Amazon also hired Ratner, tapping him to direct *Melania*, a documentary.)

As *The Wrap* aptly pointed out, Ellison is essentially telling "Hollywood's canceled #MeToo men: We're hiring."

The industry publication amplified a theory about why Paramount Skydance has hired controversial figures: The company isn't trying to make a big point about redemption, the #MeToo movement or cancel culture. Instead, it's just trying to get talent on the cheap. One top dealmaker it didn't identify said, "Studios like Paramount Pictures are ultimately in the asset business. Hiring someone like Max Landis or Brett Ratner is more likely about acquiring distressed creative assets at a price below their historical market value." Ellison has a strong incentive to keep a tight leash on expenses. Paramount will have \$79 billion in net debt after its acquisition of Warner Bros Discovery, which Ellison has promised to quickly pay down.

There are two ways to think about all this. The first is that Hollywood has always played a prominent role in shaping the country's broader culture.

So what does it say that one of the world's soon-to-be largest and most influential movie studios has hired these men? It was not long ago that almost no company would be motivated to bring on anyone accused of allegations during the #MeToo movement. The climate around accountability was so swift and public that association alone could end a career. Clearly, moral clarity has softened. What was once considered a clear disqualification is now

framed by some as undervalued assets.

The second is that Hollywood in many cases seems more willing to grant second chances to men than first opportunities to women. Women held only nine, or 8.1%, of the 113 director roles attached to the top 100 US box office films last year, down from 13.4% in 2024, according to a study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California. The report also found that films by women received the same ratings from critics as those made by men; films by women of colour were the highest rated overall.

The study notes that Paramount, which Skydance merged with only in August, was one of three major distributors that didn't hire a female director across the top films of 2025 that it evaluated. Since then, the company has greenlit several women-led films, including Billie Eilish's concert film that the singer co-directed, *Children of Blood and Bone* directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood and Teyana Taylor's directorial debut. The company declined to comment.

In Hollywood, hiring decisions have an impact on the types of stories that get told. A separate report from San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that last year women who worked on the top 250 films continued to be wildly underrepresented as producers (28%), executive producers (23%), writers (20%), editors (20%) and cinematographers (7%). Meanwhile, the percentage of top-grossing films with female protagonists dropped from 42% in 2024 to 29% in 2025. As the report put it, "Hollywood has never needed permission to exclude and diminish women, but it now has it."

The one area in Hollywood where women aren't under-represented? Viewership. Men and women were equally likely to report going to the movies in the last year, but an ability to capture a female audience can make a film. Last month, *Wuthering Heights* had the year's biggest opening so far, with women buying some 75% of those tickets.

In such a fragile box-office environment, which has yet to fully recapture its pre-covid audience, failing to represent and tell the stories of this audience on the big screen will come at a cost—no less distressed asset can offset. —BLOOMBERG

THEIR VIEW

# How climate stress impacts corporate real-estate assets

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India's corporate skyline has expanded rapidly over the past three decades. Tech campuses in Bengaluru and Hyderabad, logistics parks along the Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor and multiple warehouse clusters on city outskirts reflect a country building the infrastructure of a modern economy. Yet, much of this expansion has been planned around connectivity, labour access and land prices. Climate risk has rarely figured in the blueprint.

That omission is becoming harder to ignore. Floods, extreme heat and infrastructure breakdowns are increasingly shaping the reliability and value of corporate real estate. The 2015 Chennai floods offered a stark illustration, causing industrial property losses estimated at around \$4,600 crore, according to a report on building climate resilience for Indian industry. Events like these are not isolated shocks. They are signals of a deeper structural risk embedded in the built-up environment.

Corporate property is especially exposed

because it is designed to last. Office parks, warehouses and campuses are typically built with a life-span of 30-50 years. Once a facility is constructed in a vulnerable location, the investment is effectively locked in. Flood-prone land, rising temperatures or fragile infrastructure can gradually erode the reliability of assets that companies depend on for operations.

Extreme heat has emerged as one of the most pervasive pressures in recent times. India's cities can be as much as 6° Celsius warmer than surrounding rural areas because of the urban heat island effect, as research by World Resources Institute shows. For large corporate campuses and data-heavy office buildings, this translates directly into higher electricity consumption for cooling. Power systems designed for milder conditions can come under severe strain during prolonged heatwaves.

Logistical infrastructure faces a different kind of exposure. Warehouses and distribution hubs are often located on the edges of cities where land is cheaper and access to highways is easier. These areas are often former wetlands or low-lying floodplains. Heavy rainfall can overwhelm drainage systems, cut road access and damage inventory. As supply chains become more time-sensi-

tive, even short disruptions can ripple through corporate operations.

Risks extend beyond physical damage. Climate stress increasingly affects the economics of property assets. Cooling costs rise as temperatures climb. Insurance premiums may increase in areas with repeated disasters. Worker productivity falls when heat becomes extreme. The Institute of Risk Management estimates that heat-related productivity losses already cost India tens of billions of dollars annually and could threaten several percentage points of GDP by the end of this decade.

Investors are beginning to treat these pressures as financial variables rather than environmental concerns. Property portfolios are increasingly assessed for exposure to physical climate hazards such as floods and heatwaves, according to the OECD, a club of rich nations. For companies with large real estate footprints, resilience may soon matter as much as location.

That shift is beginning to influence how

corporate infrastructure is planned. One response is better information. Companies are starting to incorporate climate hazard maps and heat projections into location decisions, avoiding sites prone to floods or extreme heat exposures. The practice is already visible in sectors such as data centers, where developers increasingly factor climate risks into site decisions.

Building design is also evolving. India's policy framework for construction emphasizes structures that can withstand rising temperatures and other climate stresses. Architects are turning to techniques that reduce heat absorption and cooling demand, including reflective materials, improved ventilation and building orientation that minimizes solar exposure. Flood-prone sites are increasingly incorporating raised foundations and improved drainage.

Green infrastructure is another emerging tool. Expanding tree cover and permeable landscapes can lower local temperatures and absorb excess rainwater during storms,

urban adaptation research supported by the International Finance Corporation shows. Corporate campuses that integrate parks, shaded walkways and natural water retention areas not only improve work conditions for staff but also reduce flood risk.

Even logistics infrastructure is beginning to adapt. Developers are building warehouses that meet green certification standards, which often include better insulation, water management systems and more efficient energy use. India's stock of green-certified warehousing space could quadruple by the end of the 2020s as institutional investors push for more resilient assets, according to JLL, a property consultancy.

India's corporate real estate boom is far from over. New industrial corridors, tech clusters and logistic networks will continue to reshape its landscape. However, the next generation of corporate infrastructure will be judged not only by how efficiently it supports growth, but by how well it withstands the pressures of a changing climate.

Companies that treat resilience as a design principle rather than an afterthought may find that their safest assets are also the most valuable. In the coming years, corporate India's geographical map may be shaped as much by climate science as by economics.

**Business site decisions are turning into climate bets with the value of property at stake**



A thought for today The direct use of force is such a poor solution to any problem, it is generally employed only by small children and large nations DAVID FRIEDMAN

Scary Middle Game

Iran war enters a troubling stage, where most likely outcomes look more destabilising than US planned for

If war is a game of chess, Iran conflict has moved beyond its opening gambits into a tense, intricate middle game - where every move carries layered consequences, and no outcome is guaranteed. The early phase was dramatic and decisive: US and Israel eliminated Ayatollah Khamenei, in a stunning strike. That momentum continued. On Tuesday, Ali Larjani, a key figure in Iran's national security establishment, was killed. Soon after, intelligence minister Esmail Khatib met a similar fate. Israel has hinted more such moves are coming, keeping adversaries guessing. Meanwhile, a US naval vessel - believed to be carrying marines - edges closer to West Asia, fuelling speculation of a possible ground operation inside Iran.

Nearly three weeks into the conflict, certain realities are becoming clearer. First, air power alone - even when precise and relentless - rarely delivers regime change. History offers no convincing example of regimes collapsing solely under aerial assault. While Iran's leadership has been significantly degraded, and institutions like Basij are under pressure, the system has shown resilience. New figures are stepping in, almost as quickly as others are removed, suggesting depth within the regime's structure.

If outright regime change through military strikes seems unlikely, the alternative being floated is more volatile: internal collapse via civil unrest. Both Trump and Netanyahu have called for Iranians to rise against their leadership. Netanyahu's appeal to public celebrations like Nowruz may not be cultural - it may be strategic, hoping that gatherings could ignite dissent. Yet, recent history tempers such expectations. Protests earlier this year were met with brutal force, reportedly leaving tens of thousands dead. Though weakened, the regime still commands powerful instruments of repression. An uprising, if it occurs, could spiral not into reform - but into chaos.

And that chaos would not remain contained. Iran has already signalled its capacity for escalation - targeting Gulf states, and disrupting Strait of Hormuz, sending shockwaves through global energy markets. A full-scale civil war could ignite sectarian tensions, across the region, turning instability into a wildfire. For Gulf nations, this is an uncomfortable bind: involved in the war's initiation, yet deeply affected by its consequences. Their calls for restraint - to both Washington and Tehran - have so far gone unheard.

Yes, the board is set, major pieces are in motion. But in this dangerous middle game, the final outcome remains uncertain - and potentially far more destabilising than opening moves suggested.

Working With Hands

Skilled physical work isn't a social stigma, India has to fix its thinking, if more young people are to find jobs

Azim Premji University's State of Working India 2026, highlights a key point, which explains why India struggles to fix its 40-year-old problem of joblessness. Apart from structural challenges and gaps, the report talks of the need for "an attitude shift in society" on what counts as "knowledge", and what's "dignified work". Caste, class and colonial legacies inform, to this day, what work is "respectable". Only 6.7% young graduates, aged 20-29, had permanent salaried jobs in 2023. About 40% are unemployed. Less than half had some form of work: self-employed or ready to be underemployed, as a way of getting a foot in the door market better prospects. Of course, high levels of unemployment among graduates are not uniquely Indian phenomenon. But, the sheer volume of India's working-age population, makes unemployability a crisis.

Look at the numbers - India's 367-million strong working-age population (aged 15-29), is about 20mn more than US's population. Keeping out those in school and college, there are 263mn in the workforce. By 2036, the report estimates, graduates will be 38% of employable men, up from 26% in 2023, in age group 20-24. Among men aged 25-29, share of graduates is projected to rise from about 30% to 42% by 2036. It simply cannot be business as usual.

The idea that "head work" is superior to "hand work", putting higher value on mental labour than on physical labour, is defined both by caste and class. Graduates from middle classes and aspiring middle classes aspire to "head work". Status is a prime consideration, for jobs that will pass family and society's approval. There is near contempt for hand work. The report says skill training, vocational and technical, must be made aspirational. Formalising jobs, that such training attracts, is key. The world of work has to be made class- and caste-agnostic.

Fine print, finer trap

On the great maya of travel insurance

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Main Hoon Na. Never take this assurance at face value, unless it's given by SRK. I learnt about this relatively unknown fifth law of Newton the hard way after buying travel insurance for an overseas trip, last month.

The policy worked very well as long as the trip went smoothly. At dinner on the last night of my stay I got a message from the airline that my next morning flight had been cancelled due to a strike at the airport. And the airline said they wouldn't provide a hotel, as the cancellation wasn't their doing.

No problem, you hai na, I told myself, thinking of the insurance that covered, among other things, flight delays and cancellations. After making arrangements for the prolonged stay, I called the insurance company, which told me I was eligible for \$40 compensation for every four hours of delay.

Since that covered my unplanned expenses, I happily stayed on, and was a little heartbroken when the airline sent a mail next evening, saying I was booked on the next morning flight - a total delay of 24 hours. "Just keep the boarding cards as proof. We are there for you," the insurance portal told me, just like SRK in the movie had assured his stepbrother.

After filing the claim on returning to India, it was my turn to get the stepbrotherly treatment. "In the present case, as per the email from the airline, we note that you were informed more than six hours prior to the scheduled departure of the flight. Hence the claim is not admissible under the policy," the claim rejection letter said.

"Is that fair?" I asked the insurance portal person, who seemed to agree with me, but blamed the fine print. Now, for future trips, I have created a foolproof checklist to escape dodgy fine print clauses. Block the airline from contacting me till I enter the six-hour departure window. Carry extra khakhra, matri, and a mini tent on future trips, to resist expenses if my flight is cancelled. Use the policy document carefully, to put the khakhra and achar on it.

In Love and Death, Woody Allen says: "There are worse things in life than death. Have you ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?" While I love the man and his movies, I won't blame the salesman. After all, don't shoot the messenger.

War Or Peace: Brains Of Nations

Behavioural science has an interesting take on why countries like US, Russia are now totally ignoring a rules-based system: old habits change when new rewards seem, even if wrongly, more lucrative than older ones

Arandam Goswami



Charles Duhigg, in The Power of Habit, says that most human behaviour follows a simple loop: a cue triggers an action, a routine follows, and a reward tells the brain that it should remember it. Habits, once formed, do not go away. They can be changed. By swapping in a new routine, while keeping the same cue and reward. This idea also explains why the international order after World War II worked well for a time, and why it is now facing problems. The habit of cooperation has quietly been replaced, by the habit of conflict.

After 1945, leaders like Truman, Marshall, Monnet, and Adenauer knew they couldn't erase centuries of distrust between countries. Instead, they changed how countries handled problems. Earlier, political disputes or trade issues often led to military action, and appeals to national pride. The new approach replaced that with legal processes, treaty obligations, or turning to Brussels.

The reward was access to European markets, reconstruction funds, and political legitimacy. This system kept peace in Western Europe for 70 years. It was the habit of cooperation, not just good intentions, that made the difference.

This same habit framework helps explain why the international order is falling apart today. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, violence in Gaza, and American actions - whether in Venezuela, Iraq, or pulling back from global institutions - all show a pattern: powerful countries decided that breaking the rules now brings more benefits, than following them.

Duhigg points out that habits break down when the rewards change. The post-war system relied on rewards like trade, development money, security, and diplomatic status, which worked when US and its allies dominated the global economy. That dominance is now being challenged. For instance, now, China offers its own rewards. Gulf money moves without democratic rules, and IMF has less influence as new leaders appear. Following the rules no longer always pays off, and international institutions have not kept up.

Some might ask if any of this matters, since powerful

countries like US, China, and Russia set the rules anyway. That's a fair question, but it confuses short-term gains with long-term interests. US's real strengths today are not just military - they include dollar's global role, deep capital markets, demand for American tech, and alliances that make its military power effective. All these depend on a stable, rules-based world. When that system breaks down and contracts, or norms are ignored, US and its economy also suffer.

Now, to bring about change, a good starting point is to look at what behavioural economists call defaults and friction. Right now, if a country faces a border dispute,

it's better access to markets, lower borrowing costs, faster tech deals, or priority for development funds. Rewards should come quickly and be updated often, so countries can see the results, and plan ahead. This fits with Duhigg's point that the brain craves rewards. If following the rules clearly brings benefits, and breaking them clearly brings losses, the habit loop will work again.

But Duhigg's biggest insight is about identity, not just rewards or punishments. Alcoholics Anonymous works, because people start to see themselves as non-drinkers, supported by others who share that identity. After World War II, European leaders began to see themselves as Europeans, not just as leaders of their own countries. Today, the international order is struggling not only because its incentives are outdated, but also because the sense of global community has faded. Being called an international outcast does not hurt as much now, since some leaders feel backed by other countries with similar views.

So where should we start? Duhigg suggests looking for a keystone habit - a single change that triggers many others. In global affairs, that keystone is reforming how UN Security Council works. For example, a new rule could say that no permanent member can veto a resolution, about a conflict where it is directly involved. Then, Russia could not block action on its own wars, US could not protect its allies' campaigns, and China could not avoid scrutiny of its actions.



Other changes could follow: a system to score countries on compliance, like a credit rating, but for security and humanitarian behaviour; a group of mid-sized democracies able to trigger economic consequences, without needing big power approval; and special trade and investment deals, for countries with strong compliance records.

This is where India has a unique opportunity, as the world's largest democracy, and a growing economic power, with no ambitions to expand its borders. But to lead, India must make a choice: move from staying on the sidelines, to taking action. India should propose Security Council veto reforms, and bring together a new group of mid-sized, rule-following nations, which together are ready to break free from old habit loops.

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I Visited Tehran In Nov, And It Disproved So Many Stereotypes

- Many women didn't wear hijab • Religiosity seemed less overt in most of the city than in some parts of India • Nightlife was not dead, it was great • Israel and US were not discussed as hated countries

Sujit John@timesofindia.com



Beneath the shadow of global headlines, day-to-day reality in Iran has long been at variance with Western narratives. In November, when I visited Tehran, one of the first messages I received when I reached - from a friend in US - said the women must all be in hijabs. How wrong that was!

Barring some older women, no one was wearing - forget hijabs - even a scarf over their heads in public places. We were told that in restaurants, if a woman has a scarf covering her head, a young woman might come by, flip it off, and say "Don't betray the movement". This is a reference to the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement, triggered by the Sept 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish-Iranian woman, who was arrested by the police for allegedly wearing the hijab improperly.

Yes, Western sanctions over decades have had a severe impact on the economy. The person assigned to pick me from the airport had some fascination for cars. So, during the one-hour drive to my hotel, he frequently pointed to various car models - mostly European brands. He noted that those models were no longer being produced in Iran, but owners were managing to keep them going, with parts imported from China, or reverse-engineered locally. The cars looked old. Even the ones we were sitting in was long past its prime. The few new cars are expensive, imported ones. The city looks old too, modern buildings are few.

But socially, Iran is far from what most of us imagine. Indian Embassy officials told us Iran is probably less religious today, than India is. One of them said a third of mosques in Tehran have shut down, because nobody goes to them. That's true for mosques across Iran. People who go are mostly those getting financial assistance from govt, distributed through religious bodies. It is one of the conditions of the grant.

Evening was mostly one of the phenomenal nightlife, all through the week - private parties, dating, music and

gatherings. One evening, we were at an open-air food court. Filled with youngsters - in groups, in pairs, boys and girls. On one table, a young woman sat wearing what looked like a wolf-shaped headgear. We could just as well have been in San Francisco or Bengaluru.

What stood out was also the warmth of ordinary Iranians. Shopkeepers routinely offer items free. We heard stories of cab drivers refusing payment, after learning the passenger was from India.



The conference we went for, while being a demonstration of Iran's strengths in science and tech, was primarily to bring Brics countries, including its researchers, together - to find ways to reduce the world's dependence on the dollar. Iran is looking at crypto and blockchain as an alternative.

Many Iranian govt officials and academics spoke. What was striking was, even though the event was happening less than five months after last year's Israel and US strikes, there were no offensive references to either country, let alone rants. Speeches

and discussions were matter-of-fact.

Like when Ali Asghar Ghaemi, member of Tehran City Council, told us: "It's been more than 50 years that our country has had controversies with America. And we have seen the results on the screen, the war, and destruction. So, we are eagerly cooperating with any country that would like to de-dollarise the economy. India has this shared purpose... you have a conflict also with America, and your country could handle it so well."

These and other conversations also come to mind, when today the world talks of the Iranian regime. The West often presents the regime as a monolithic bloc of Islamic fundamentalists. That may be far from the case. Multiple people told us the regime is a mix of hardliners and reformists, and reformists are probably gaining ground. Even hardliners probably aren't as hardline, as they once were.

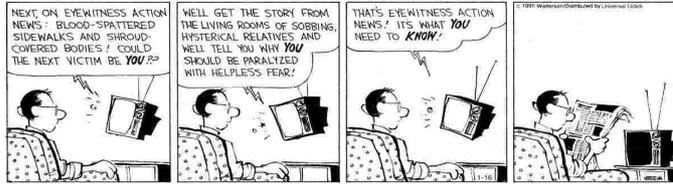
One senior Indian Embassy personnel had previously been posted in Tel Aviv. We asked the official, who - Iran or Israel - was more delusional about the other side's "evil" intentions. "Both are equally so," was the instant response.

On our return flight was Narjes Mottaghi, a data scientist, and head of ICT Dept at Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. She was coming to Bengaluru to meet her Indian-Australian fiancé and his family. Her dream was to be a NASA scientist - put paid to by US sanctions. She wears a hijab. "It makes me see me as a human being, not as a woman, not as a pretty face," she explained, but added that she fully supported the 2022 women's protest against the hijab. She told us there are more women than men, in many science and tech universities in Iran. Men are going into business, not doing higher education, leading often to incompatibility in marriages. Divorce rates are near 50%.

On weekends, Narjes drives across Iran alone for adventure sports, sometimes stopping by the side of a highway to sleep. "It's completely safe for women," she said.

The writer was in Iran in Nov, for a blockchain & cryptocurrency conference, organised with support from Iranian govt

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing - to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts.

John Keats

Can You Control Your Thoughts?

Rajiv Vij

Purpose for a moment. Close your eyes and gently observe your thoughts.

Do you notice them arising one after another - some linked to the previous one, some disjointed? Are you choosing these thoughts, or are they appearing on their own beyond your control?

Consider your everyday thoughts about the past or future. Thoughts that generate excitement or fear. Thoughts coloured by love, envy, or self-judgement. Don't they seem to arise by themselves? This is clearly not possible on a sleepless night when an unending stream of thoughts shows up uninvited.

Now consider a situation where you 'consciously' decide to think about something, perhaps planning your weekend. How did it weekend the thought, 'Let me plan my weekend' arise? Did you manufacture it? Or did it simply appear? Thoughts arise from memory, habit, fear, desire - from everything we have ever

experienced. They emerge automatically from the mind's past conditioning, not from a controller consciously choosing and releasing them. Yet from birth, our language and social structures reinforce the sense of an independent thinker who owns and controls these thoughts.

But what power do you actually have over your thoughts? Can you choose your next thought? Did you choose the last one? Or do thoughts simply arise, one to fade away and give way to the next? The continuity and coherence of thoughts create the impression of a thinker. But it is possible that thoughts arise due to conditioning and then another thought subtly appears, claiming 'I am the one thinking?'

It all begins with an experience. Pain is felt, hunger arises, a thought appears. But instead of noticing 'pain', 'hunger', or 'thinking', we learn to say 'I am in pain', 'I am hungry', 'I am thinking'. Language creates

a central reference point for experience - an 'I' to whom every thing happens, a thinker behind the thinking.

Over time, memory links experiences together and strengthens the sense of a continuous controller. In the process, an identity forms. Life no longer simply unfolds; it happens to 'me', or is caused by 'me'. An awkward moment becomes 'I am embarrassed', followed by 'Why am I like this?'

But let's look closely. Is it possible that thinking happens on its own and the sense of a thinker is itself another thought? The narrative of 'I' is surely essential for navigating daily life and operating in a social construct. But when we over-identify with the thinker and take every thought personally, it often becomes a source of emotional struggle and unhappiness.

If thoughts arise on their own, perhaps they don't need to be tightly managed. Perhaps they don't need to define us. We

don't need to judge them or ourselves for them. As long as we are alive, just like breathing, thinking continues. But the rigid sense of a thinker can soften. Plans are made, conversations occur, and life goes on. But the underlying tension and the need for control can subside.

Recognising that thoughts arise on their own does not mean we have no responsibility. Actions still have consequences. Conditioning still shapes thinking and behaviour, but responsibility does not require a controlling thinker at the centre - only awareness of what is arising and sensitivity to its effects.

Maybe true inner growth is not about producing more positive thoughts and eliminating negative ones. Maybe it's seeing that each thought arises on its own and need not be taken personally. When thoughts are observed without identification, old patterns can begin to shrink.

The writer is a Singapore-based life coach



# Devastating truth

A class VI girl from Ahilyanagar had acid thrown at her face while returning home from school

At 13, childhood should still be intact, defined by school bells, scraped knees and unfinished homework. In Vadgaon Pan, Maharashtra's Ahilyanagar district, that fragile world was shattered in an instant. A class VI girl, walking home after school, had acid thrown at her face by a man who vanished as swiftly as he struck. In that moment, innocence was not just interrupted, it was violently disfigured. The details are as grim as they are familiar. A child from a poor family - father deceased, mother toiling as a daily wage labourer, raised amid fragile economic security - now finds herself in a hospital bed, her life cleaved into a 'before' and 'after'. The state will promise treatment. Officials will cite swift action. The police will speak of CCTV footage and 'efforts underway'. Yet, behind this procedural choreography lies a devastating truth: India has not done enough to prevent such crimes, even against its most vulnerable.

Acid attacks are not crimes of impulse alone, they are crimes of access. Despite regulations, acid remains cheap, available and lethally anonymous. It can be purchased with fewer questions than a train ticket. Every such attack is therefore not just the act of an individual, but a systemic failure - of enforcement, of accountability, of urgency. What compounds the horror is the age of the victim. Thirteen. A number that should have placed her far outside the radius of such brutality. The "motive unknown" line, repeated with numbing regularity, only deepens the unease. When violence becomes so arbitrary, so detached from reason, it signals a deeper rot - one where power is asserted through cruelty and the weak are seen as expendable.

There is also an uncomfortable social dimension that cannot be ignored. Victims of acid attacks disproportionately come from economically weaker backgrounds. Their lives are less visible, their justice less urgent, their recovery more uncertain. Rehabilitation - medical, psychological, financial - remains an afterthought, often dependent on sporadic charity rather than guaranteed state support. This case must not dissolve into statistics. It demands a response that goes beyond outrage. Stricter enforcement of acid sale laws is non-negotiable. Fast-track courts must ensure that justice is not just delivered, but delivered swiftly enough to matter. And most critically, the survivor must receive comprehensive, life-long support - not as an act of benevolence, but as a matter of right. A society is ultimately judged by how it protects its children. In Vadgaon Pan, we have failed that test - brutally, visibly, and once again. The question is no longer whether we are outraged. The question is whether we are willing to act before another childhood is burned away. The chances look bleak.

# Brutal assault

Pakistan's airstrike on Kabul hospital kills over 400, India calls it a barbaric act

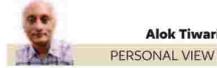
The images from Kabul are not merely tragic, they are indictments. A hospital, meant to heal the broken, turned into a graveyard in minutes. Over 400 dead, many of them recovering addicts, too frail to flee, too forgotten to matter in the calculus of war. India was right to call it what it is: A 'barbaric' assault on civilians. There are moments in international affairs when moral clarity must override diplomatic hedging. This is one such moment. Hospitals are not collateral. Patients are not proxies. And addiction centres are not, by any stretch of imagination, legitimate military targets. Pakistan, however, has chosen a familiar script - deny, deflect and justify. It insists the strike targeted 'terrorist infrastructure' and not civilians. But even if one were to momentarily entertain that claim, the scale of civilian casualties tells its own story. Precision, the oft-cited shield of modern warfare, collapses when hundreds of the most vulnerable lie dead under rubble.

This is not just about competing narratives, it is about the erosion of international humanitarian law. The principle of distinction - between civilian and combatant - forms the bedrock of any rules-based order. When a 2,000-bed rehabilitation hospital is reduced to ashes, that principle is not merely violated, it is mocked. Eyewitness accounts are chilling. Patients burned alive in their beds. Buildings collapsing on those who could not even walk unaided. These are not the unintended consequences of war. They are its ugliest, most preventable excesses. Pakistan faces a real threat from militant groups operating along its western frontier. But counter-terrorism cannot become a carte blanche for indiscriminate force. If every alleged militant hideout can justify a strike of this magnitude, then no civilian structure - school, hospital or home - remains safe. What makes this episode even more dangerous is its geopolitical ripple effect.

Afghanistan has already vowed retaliation. The region stands on the edge of a wider conflagration, where cycles of accusation and reprisal spiral into open war. In such a climate, truth itself becomes a casualty. India's condemnation is not merely rhetorical positioning, it is a necessary assertion of a principle - that state power must be restrained by law, not driven by expediency. Silence would have amounted to complicity. The international community must now move beyond statements of concern. An independent investigation is imperative. Accountability must follow. For, if the bombing of a hospital housing society's most vulnerable can be explained away as a tactical necessity, then the very idea of humane warfare stands discredited. Kabul's dead demand that the world refuses to normalise this brutality.

# Another controversial law

Maharashtra's anti-conversion Bill furthers erosion of civil liberties



Alok Tiwari PERSONAL VIEW

As far as anti-conversion laws are concerned, Maharashtra has been a bit late to the party. This is understandable as chief minister Devendra Fadnis was preoccupied with things of far more importance. But the state has made up for the delay by bringing a law that is far more stringent. It will no doubt help the chief minister gain some distance in the race for being the next Hindutva icon. One suspects another law on uniform civil code must be in the pipeline.

Like many laws pushed under the Modi regime, this one too seeks to kill two birds with one stone. One, it keeps the communal pot boiling. And second, it gives another tool to the government to curb freedoms. Make no mistake, it may be named Freedom of Religion Bill, but its real purpose is exactly the opposite. It aims at appeasing the Hindutva base by empowering the state to poke its nose into what should be completely private affairs - religion and marriage.

Jail terms ranging up to 10 years and fines up to ₹5 lakh have been mandated for "unlawful" and mass conversions. Moreover, police can initiate suo motu action or on the complaint of an unrelated party. This effectively means the police can intervene in any interfaith marriage. The bride, groom or their relatives can be made accused. Marriages done with the purpose of conversion have been outlawed. How is one to prove whether a marriage has been done for the purpose of converting someone or someone is converting for the purpose of marriage? Well, the burden of proof is on the accused. The police or any random accuser just has to lodge a complaint. There is no punishment for anyone lodging a false



On paper the law will be neutral, but it will be selectively applied. The police and street muscle power will ensure that.

complaint. This law represents the biggest fall in Maharashtra's standing as a progressive state that before long celebrated inter-caste and inter-faith marriages. This is the same state where architect of our constitution Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar led lakhs of Hindus from oppressed castes into Buddhism. If Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar were to do the same today, he would be required to give a notice to the Nagpur district collector 60 days in advance. Any caste Hindu hurt by his actions could lodge a complaint with local police and he would have been arrested under non-bailable provisions of the law. He will have to prove over the next several years that the conversions were not being made under any inducement or coercion.

The law is so poorly drafted and full of ambiguities that it should not have survived even a cursory legal scrutiny. Yet, given that much of the judiciary is now similarly motivated as proponents of this law, it may survive legal challenge. Yet I wonder how it will work in reality. It is not clear what the ambit of religious conversion is. Will it apply only to established religions or to

less known ones? What about paganism or those outside of India like Shintoism? Will becoming an atheist be covered under the ambit of conversion? Some who worship Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu a Hindu or a Buddhist? Will Jains worshipping Hindu gods require an enquiry by the collector? If a lover promises their spouse a better life, as all lovers do, is it inducement? Are promises of heaven in every religion inducement, or is warning of hell coercion?

Government says the right to profess any religion remains intact. Does not a 60-day notice requirement abridge that right? What if one wishes to convert under 60 days? What if they change their mind after giving notice? Can one find a unique religion and be the sole convert to it or will that also require giving a notice? What if one wishes not to make one's religion public matter? Why should the state or anyone know what religion I profess? Does that not violate my right to privacy, also guaranteed by the Constitution. These questions are at the heart of freedom as we know it. Faith being an intensely personal matter, it cannot be defined by anyone else, much less the state. A

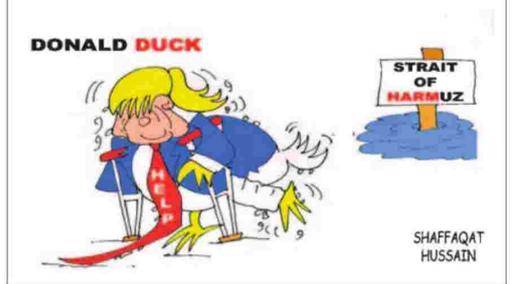
citizen should be free to follow any faith any time, including changing it without telling anyone.

Hence it appears the real purpose of the law is to simply cause harassment. That has been the whole thrust of the Modi regime. Today you have more laws that curb your freedoms in more ways than 10 years back. You can be arrested for more reasons, by more agencies, and for longer periods. Government has access to more of your data. Your RTI requests can be denied for more reasons. There are curbs on what you can eat or drink and where in more places than ever. Heck, even tax authorities can now demand access to your emails and social media accounts. Increasingly your accusers are no longer required to prove your crime. The onus is on you to prove yourself innocent. And everything from your bank balance to your social media posts and even your identity as a citizen can be questioned by anyone.

On paper the law will be neutral, but it will be selectively applied. The police and street muscle power will ensure that. A Muslim or a Christian person marrying a Hindu and converting will not be touched. A Hindu marrying a Muslim or a Christian will be sacrificed at the altar of political agenda.

Conversions are not a problem. But the solution just adds another cut to Indian democracy that is dying by a thousand cuts. Slowly but surely our liberties are being eroded. The pill we are being given is sugar coated with nationalism and religion, but it is pure poison.

The author is a Nagpur-based senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.



# What LPG crisis reveals about society!



Biswajeet Banerjee

The shortage of LPG cylinders in several parts of Uttar Pradesh over the past week has done more than disrupt kitchens. It has revealed how quickly an energy supply concern can ripple through society, influence politics, trigger panic behaviour and expose weaknesses in distribution systems.

On Monday, police filed cases against six workers of the National Students' Union of India in Varanasi after they attempted to make tea using gas produced from a drain outside the gate of Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapeeth University. The act was clearly meant as satire. By trying to brew tea from drain gas, the protesters sought to mock what they described as the government's inability to ensure cooking gas supplies amid the ongoing Iran-US-Israel conflict in West Asia.

The incident symbolised how a domestic energy concern has quickly turned into a political issue. Opposition parties have seized the moment to criticise the government, accusing it of inefficiency and poor planning. For ruling authorities, however, the crisis is as much about perception as it is about supply.

Across cities such as Lucknow, Kanpur and Prayagraj, long queues outside gas agencies have become a common sight. Consumers begin gathering early in the morning, hoping to secure a refill. Many return empty handed even after waiting for hours. The scenes persist despite repeated assurances from the government that supplies are adequate.

The persistence of queues reflects a familiar pattern seen during crises. When uncertainty spreads, people tend to stock up on essentials. This behaviour often worsens the very shortages they fear. Officials from the ministry of petroleum and natural gas have repeatedly stated that India currently has sufficient LPG stocks and that domestic refineries are operating at full or even higher capacity.

According to government data, domestic LPG production has been increased by around 25 to 30 per cent to cope with the sudden surge in demand. Supplies of compressed natural gas continue uninterrupted and crude oil imports remain diversified. Officials have also clarified that disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz have affected only about 20 per cent of shipping routes, while India continues to receive significant crude supplies from countries such as Canada, Norway and Russia.

Yet the reassurance has not fully calmed public anxiety. Rumours



circulating through social media and messaging platforms have fuelled fears of an imminent cooking gas crisis. In several regions, daily refill requests have reportedly surged to nearly three quarters above normal levels. Such panic booking places pressure on distribution networks and creates temporary logistical bottlenecks.

Whenever shortages or perceived shortages occur, the risk of black marketing rises. The memory of the Covid period, when panic buying and hoarding created artificial scarcity of several essentials, remains fresh. Authorities have warned that rumours and panic behaviour often provide an opportunity for unscrupulous traders to exploit the situation.

The government has introduced several measures to prevent hoarding and diversion. In many urban areas, a gap of 25 days between LPG bookings has been mandated, while some rural areas require a 45-day gap. A delivery authentication code system has also been implemented so that a cylinder can be delivered only after the consumer shares a

unique code. This measure aims to prevent diversion of domestic cylinders into commercial markets.

Despite these measures, the crisis has revealed deeper lessons about India's energy security. The tension in West Asia has once again demonstrated how global geopolitical conflicts can quickly affect everyday life. Thousands of kilometres away, India has attempted to reduce this risk by diversifying its energy imports. At the same time, the present disruption underscores the need for a longer term strategy. Expanding refinery capacity, exploring new gas fields and accelerating the shift towards renewable energy could gradually reduce dependence on imported LPG. Strengthening domestic production and storage infrastructure will also help cushion future shocks.

For society, however, the immediate challenge is managing fear and expectations. Energy crises often become self-reinforcing when rumours spread faster than facts. When millions rush to book cylinders simultaneously, even a robust distribution network can appear overwhelmed. The queues outside gas agencies, the protest in Varanasi and the illustrating rhetoric together illustrate how quickly supply anxieties can shape public behaviour.

The author is a senior journalist. Views expressed are personal.

# YOUR LETTERS

## Women judges

The International Day for Women Judges is observed on March 10. In India high courts, there are 116 women judges out of a total working strength of 781. Only the high courts in Punjab and Haryana, Madras and Bombay have reasonable representation. In the Supreme Court, Justice B.V. Nagarathna is the sole woman on the Bench among the 33 judges. No woman has been appointed to the top court after 2021. As Chief Justice of India Surya Kant said recently, the high court collegiums should identify more and more suitable women to be elevated to the benches. Lawyers of a state practicing in the Supreme Court could also be considered, he said. Women are well equipped to find solutions through dialogues and they are highly sensitive to human rights and relations. It is believed that women judges, being with them diverse approaches, varied outlook and fresh thought processes.

Dr Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhavan, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Nagpur - 440012. E-mail: litedit.ngp@lokmat.com



Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts

Barbara Gittings

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

## CROSS-VOTING IN RS POLLS REFLECTS FADING IDEOLOGY, WEAKER PARTY DISCIPLINE

THE election for 37 Rajya Sabha seats across 10 states came down to thrillers that played out in Odisha, Bihar and Haryana. These three states, with the combined strength of 11 seats, engaged in contest while the rest were decided unopposed. The cat-and-mouse game of resort-hopping and cross-voting led to a nail-biting finish, which seems to have become par for the course in elections to the Upper House of Parliament.

Odisha had a history of strong party discipline, with rare exceptions like in 2002 when Dilip Ray managed to garner votes across parties. This time, Ray entered the fray as a BJP-backed independent candidate and unleashed a chain of events from the Congress herding off its MLAs to a Bengaluru resort and alleging large bribes offered for votes. When the numbers came out, Ray had managed to gain 11 votes, eight from the BJP and three from the Congress, to cross the finish line. In the process, the BJP gained a seat, while the BJP and the Congress together lost one despite having the numbers.

In Bihar, the NDA made a clean sweep of five seats, thanks to three Congress and one RJD MLAs' absence. However, Haryana, with two seats on offer and the numbers stacked equally between the BJP and the Congress, had the most dramatic climax. Though Congress's Karamvir Boudh managed to scrape through against BJP-backed independent Satish Nandal, deep cracks were exposed as five Congress MLAs crossed-voted and four others' votes were declared invalid.

The end result is that the NDA consolidated its position in the Rajya Sabha with its seats rising from 135 to 141. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc's count went down from 62 to 58. Despite gaining two seats to take its tally to 29, Congress legislators' proneness to cross-voting exposed worsening internal problems and slipping organisational control.

In truth, these elections established cross-voting as a norm in the current political climate, reflecting ideological erosion, opportunism and vulnerability to coercion or inducement. An attempt was made during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA government to make Rajya Sabha elections more transparent with a shift from secret to open ballot. When the process was challenged, the Supreme Court upheld it with the observation, "If secrecy becomes a source for corruption, then sunlight and transparency have the capacity to remove it." Today, it has a ring of irony to it.

## WITHDRAW BILL TO AMEND TRANSGENDER RIGHTS LAW

THE Supreme Court's NALSA (2014) verdict recognised the right of self-identification as male, female or transgender. The verdict was a watershed moment for the marginalised LGBTQIA+ community in India. Last week, a Bill introduced to amend the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019 weakened that right. While the 2019 Act is based on the NALSA verdict and recognises the right of self-identification, the proposed amendment regressively states that care has to be taken so that "such identification cannot be extended on the basis of any acquirable characteristics, or personal choice, or claimed self-perceived identity of an individual". The Bill seeks to "define" transgender persons only as those "having such socio-cultural identities", persons who are intersex, and persons who have been "compelled" to "assume, adopt, or outwardly present a transgender identity". Essentially, it claims to protect only those who are marginalised due to "biological reasons" for no choice of their own.

This "definition" betrays an utter lack of comprehension of the populace it seeks to protect. It conflates intersex persons (who have biological conditions) with transgender individuals (whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth). To reduce this nuance to vague "biological reasons" betrays a lack of knowledge, understanding and empathy. Further, by relying on "socio-cultural" identities, the Bill effectively leaves trans men, non-binary individuals and other marginalised identities out of its ambit. Under this Bill, the privacy and dignity of trans individuals will be compromised at every level—gender-affirming treatment must be notified to the district authorities and medical scrutiny would be necessary to receive an identity certificate.

These provisions show that the law's framers have not consulted with members of the community on their needs. In the name of protecting people from abduction and trafficking, the Bill also potentially criminalises chosen (non-biological) communities or families who provide support to LGBTQIA+ persons who have left their natal families. That the Bill says nothing about the real concerns of the community—reservation and support for education, employment and livelihood—reveals its intent is not really to help trans persons. The question the community has asked of the Bill is valid: who asked for these changes, who do they help and who do they harm? The answer is not the community. The Bill should be withdrawn.

### QUICK TAKE

#### SAFETY ON PLATE

Just a month, the Food Safety and Standards Authority has conducted raids in Jaipur, Dhanbad, Kanpur and Surat to unearth tonnes of adulterated food and thousands of litres of unsafe oil that were being distributed. This welcome step up in vigilance comes a month after the launch of a dedicated portal to train central and state officers in food safety risk assessment. Data shared in Parliament last week showed the extent of the challenge in keeping our food safe—220 licences were cancelled and 1,265 criminal cases initiated against offenders across the country in 2024-25 alone. Along with government capacity augmentation in personnel and laboratory infrastructure, this requires heightened vigil on the part of citizens, too. The future of India's public health depends on training school children on the basics of food safety.

THE myth that the country's south and east were virtually impregnable for the BJP has long been busted—albeit partially.

In Karnataka, the BJP is entrenched by itself and through ally Jdeta Dal (Secular). The JD(S), though singing by corruption charges and discredited for perpetuating dynastic rule, has a captive vote bank. In Telangana, the BJP has made considerable strides despite the incongruence in its vote shares in the 2024 Lok Sabha (35.4 per cent) and 2023 Assembly (13.9 per cent) polls. In Andhra Pradesh, the national BJP has a strong ally in the TDP. The BJP ran a coalition government in Puducherry with the All India NR Congress, a breakaway from the Congress whose leader and incumbent Chief Minister N Rangasamy quit in 2008 following differences with the Gandhis.

In the east, the BJP wrenched Odisha from the BJD in the last Assembly election and announced in the state for now. In West Bengal, it has edged out the Left as the principal opposition in the legislature.

Yet, for all intents and purposes, Kerala has been a no-go for the BJP, which has just had one MLA so far, the veteran O Rajagopal. The victory of V V Rajesh as Thiruvananthapuram's mayor last December was celebrated as a breakthrough that can provide a base to build political capital.

Given this backdrop, what's at stake for the principal actors in next month's state polls? On the face of it, the regional parties have higher stakes—more than the mainline BJP and Congress—because they have invested everything that can sum in these states and owe their *raison d'être* to the turfs they hold. Take away West Bengal from Trinamool Congress chairperson Mamata Banerjee or Tamil Nadu from DMK overlord M K Stalin, and these leaders would be hollowed out. The Congress is perhaps proactive in Kerala because one of the Gandhis owes her Lok Sabha seat to this state. Meanwhile, the BJP is furiously on the job in West Bengal, Assam and Kerala, though slightly less so in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Watching the BJP's steps—or missteps—in West Bengal, it is apparent that it has pulled out all stops to corral Banerjee, leaving her with no time or inclination to visit neighbouring Assam even once. Laying siege to Banerjee is retribution for the BJP being "denied" the top state in the polls after its quantum leap in the 2019 parliamentary elections. In 2021, the BJP's slogan of a Bengal poised for "porbortan" (change) became a war cry. But the BJP was left with only 77 of the 294 Assembly

The stakes for regional outfits like Trinamool Congress and DMK are higher at the upcoming state polls. The national parties too have their tasks cut out

## BATTLE LINES SHIFTING IN SANDS OF TIME



RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

Columnist and political commentator



SOURAV ROY

seats. Its ace political strategist Amit Shah has still not reconciled with the indifferent showing, according to insiders.

This time, the BJP has employed tactics beyond the realm of conventional electioneering. Trinamool has charged that prodded by the Centre the Election Commission deleted a large number of voters from the rolls in Banerjee's strongholds. The transfer of Governor R N Ravi from Chennai to Kolkata, and the relocation of two bureaucrats believed to be close to the Trinamool regime are aspects of BJP's Operation Siege, intended to sensibly manoeuvre to swing votes.

This leaves Banerjee to play the game through conventional means like upping the emotional quotient on regionalism and the Centre's "assault" on the state's hallowed culture, language and pride. The

BJP's central leaders have committed their share of serious gaffes by exhibiting a cavalier attitude towards the names and legacies of Bengal's revered icons.

The other factor at work is Bengal's changing demography, especially in the urban areas populated by migrants from Bihar and Jharkhand. The "Bihar effect"—manifest in the NDA's sweep in the Assembly polls—is cited as a reason why the migrant Hindu votes could tilt towards the BJP. Loss in Bengal will whittle Banerjee's clout nationally and diminish her hopes of leading the amorphous INDIA bloc in 2029.

In the south, the DMK seems well placed as the opposition is in disarray and the BJP has not yet opened its cards. In the prelude to the elections, the BJP pulled out several arrows from its quiver to reach out to Tamil Nadu's voters—in-

## SCIENCE FOR A NEW TRADE ERA

WITH the draft text of the India-European Union free trade agreement now public, attention must shift from the headlines to the regulatory architecture shaping India's agricultural engagement with one of the world's most standards-intensive markets. Its provisions span sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, sustainable food systems (SFS), climate action, gender equality, biodiversity and marine resources, signalling deeper integration where systems credibility matters as much as tariffs.

The FTA reflects a shift from production-centric agricultural science to regulatory- and sustainability-oriented science. Competitiveness will increasingly depend on surveillance, traceability, risk assessment, sustainability metrics and alignment with global benchmarks. For India, this places the agricultural research and innovation system, led by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, at the centre of implementation. Science, in effect, becomes trade infrastructure.

SPS credibility: Despite India's price competitiveness in several commodities, access to the EU has often been shaped less by tariffs than by SPS requirements. Concerns over residues, pest status, disease outbreaks and approvals have shaped trade continuity.

The negotiated text responds through clearer regulatory disciplines. Import approvals must rest on transparent risk assessment and scientific reasoning.

Equivalence allows different regulatory systems to be accepted if they deliver comparable outcomes, shifting the focus from identical standards to demonstrable regulatory performance supported by reliable monitoring and institutional competence. Technical consultations enable structured engagement where concerns arise, including emergency measures. Their effectiveness will depend on India's capacity to respond with coordinated technical expertise across its agricultural science institutions.

Sustainability: The sustainability provisions widen the mandate of agricultural science. The SFS chapter—the first such standalone framework in any FTA concluded by India—establishes cooperation on responsible input use, reduction of food loss and waste, antimicrobial resistance, animal welfare and sustainability across production, processing and consumption. Rather than treating sustainability as a compliance



M L JAT

Director General, ICAR and Secretary, Department of Agricultural Research and Education



SMITA SIROHI

ICAR National Professor and M S Swaminathan Chair

threshold, the FTA embeds dialogue, research exchange and technical cooperation within the trade architecture.

Trade and sustainable development (TSD) provisions extend this approach. Climate cooperation promotes mutually supportive trade and climate policies aligned with low-emission and climate-resilient pathways. Agriculture is both climate-sensitive and emission-relevant; stress-tolerant crops, resource-efficient production systems and adaptation across agro-landscape zones increasingly shape competitiveness.



To make proper use of the EU trade pact, Indian agriculture will have to heed a host of regulations regarding phytosanitary measures and sustainable practices. With focus shifting to the raft of new norms, scientific engagement will have to be at the core of decision-making mechanisms

Provisions on biodiversity and genetic resources recognise the trade relevance of sustainably managed biological resources, ecosystem valuation and access to genetic material under international frameworks. For an economy rich in plant and livestock diversity, this elevates agrobiodiversity governance, including germplasm conservation, indigenous breeds and seed systems as a trade-relevant scientific function.

In fisheries and aquaculture, the FTA promotes sustainable sourcing, responsible practices, capacity building and research collaboration. Given the impor-

tance of marine exports, benchmarks such as stock management, disease control and value-chain traceability increasingly shape market access. India's fisheries research institutions therefore become central to this interface.

Gender: Gender provisions encourage cooperation on disaggregated trade data, policy analysis and measures expanding women's access to markets, finance and business networks. In the agri-food economy, where women are central to crop production, dairy, fisheries and rural enterprises, integrating women producers into formal value chains becomes both an equity and competitiveness imperative. This reinforces the importance of gender-inclusive innovation in technology design, value addition, producer organisations and digital advisory systems.

Monitoring and science: Across the SPS, SFS and TSD chapters, the FTA establishes mechanisms for technical consultation, monitoring and periodic review. Measures affecting trade are expected to draw on scientific information, international standards and collaborative research. The credibility of engagement will depend on the depth and reliability of scientific inputs, from surveillance systems and laboratories to climate analytics, biodiversity documentation and fisheries assessment.

India's agricultural research system possesses substantial scientific depth. Yet, evolving trade architecture requires this expertise to be systematically integrated into trade implementation rather than engaged episodically. Scientific engagement must move from the margins to the core of decision-making. Institutional linkages between research bodies and trade policy processes are essential so regulatory preparedness evolves with global market expectations.

Sustained policy support and continued investment in agricultural research will therefore be critical. In that alignment lies the opportunity to expand exports and strengthen the scientific foundations of India's agricultural system for the decades ahead.

(Views are personal)

## MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

**Reducing dependency**  
Ref: *Rising trade deficit* (Mar 18). China has adroitly exploited its natural resources and raw materials, and India lags in mining and exploration due to environmental issues, bureaucratic delays and lacklustre focus. We need to diversify our supply chains and augment R&D to accelerate mining and reduce dependency.  
**Rajaro Kumar, Bengaluru**

**Everyday pragmatism**  
Ref: *Dress for the climate* (Mar 18). By questioning why professional should suffer in stuffy suits simply for the sake of convention, we open the door to a broader, necessary conversation: genuine sustainability begins with everyday pragmatism. This isn't a step backward from professionalism but a thoughtful redefinition of it.  
**Veda Chidambaram, email**

**Conflict-ready India**  
Ref: *Pakistan's perpetual hostility* (Mar 18). Pakistan's military has always been disrupting civilian initiatives for peace and this will continue unabated. India should maintain a constant state of readiness against infiltration, skirmishes and political miscalculations. Monitoring Pakistan's military actions is more important than analysing its political statements.  
**N Rama Rao, email**

**Electoral ethic**  
Ref: *Chopping and changing to deliver* (Mar 18). The EC took the right step. It would be better if, amid the severe trade deficit, the Chief Election Commissioner voluntarily steps aside to send a correct message that the commission means serious business when conducting fair and peaceful elections.  
**D Nagarjuna, Hyderabad**

**Softer Sonam**  
Ref: *Wangchuk strikes conciliatory tone* (Mar 18). Sonam Wangchuk is a mellowed man after his release. He said any negotiation means both sides will have to make some adjustments, yet his previous agitation turned needlessly violent. Hopefully, the violence and vandalism don't return.  
**K V Raghuram, Wayanad**

**Absent UN**  
Ref: *Iran leader killed* (Mar 18). Israel's claim will only lead to escalation of hostilities. Where is that peacekeeping organisation which we all used to call the UN? If it is incapable of taming its murderous member states, it is better disbanded.  
**George Jacob, Kochi**

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# THE ASIAN AGE

19 MARCH 2026

## Pakistani attack on Afghan hospital has no justification

With the world focused on the Iran war and its global fallout, Pakistan carried out an attack on Afghanistan, bombing what turned out to be a drug rehabilitation centre and patients staying there in hundreds. The barbaric attack which took a death toll above 400 is several times greater than the deaths in a dozen Gulf nations and among the US armed forces put together in Iran's retaliatory strikes.

Monday's barbaric bombing of a civilian institution near Kabul from a Pakistani air force jet, the deadliest since February when Pakistan declared war on its neighbor and launched strikes at 20 locations and killing 274 people, is part of a Gen. Asim Munir gambit that may have been meant to carry several pointed messages to Afghanistan.

With all eyes on Iran for over two weeks now, the Field Marshal may have timed the heavy attack to convey to the Taliban authorities not to use the Tehreek-i-Taliban to attack Pakistan in cross-border raids and also not to cozy up to India by sending ministers, diplomats and even delegations to New Delhi after India was prepared for a thaw in relations with Kabul just as ties between Pakistan and Taliban were beginning to sour.

Pakistan has a right to defend itself is the argument being used to justify the escalation of the conflict in which several Pakistani Army personnel have also lost their lives in Afghan guerrilla-type raids across the 2,600-km border. The ties had gone the rehab centre was previously an ammunition dump nor its history earlier when US troops were stationed there. A Pakistan minister claimed this was one of several precision strikes carried out on the Afghans.

Officials of both countries had been meeting regularly last year until the two militaries clashed with each other last October. The ties had gone rapidly downhill since then with the Pakistan armed forces, several times more powerful than that of the Taliban regime, inflicting damage including on civilian places with its firepower from the air being used to demonstrate the military superiority.

So long as the Pakistani army, under a general feted by the American leadership in Washington, runs a state within a state, waging war will remain a hobby to be carried out periodically to keep the forces busy

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## Our 'Goldilocks' moment: How to insulate from war



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

The ill-advised and hooley thought through war across the Middle East adversely affected "good actors" like India even more than "bad actors". At risk is India's upward inclined growth trend, flattening inflation and export prospects, which were just recovering from the global dislocation caused by the bilateral imposition of arbitrary American import tariffs in early 2025.

Expand the supply of PNG from just 14 million users at present to 126 million by 2034 as planned. The import risk can be diluted by storing more natural gas in liquid form (LNG).

Economic uncertainty, as the efficacy of global trading rules fade, is now heightened by a weeks-long war in the Persian Gulf as the United States and Israel blockade Iran into a humiliating defeat, while the powerful friends of Iran, like China and Russia, stand by and India scrambles to set its own energy supply chain in order.

Another option being explored is the domestic production of Dimethyl Ether (DME) from coal via the gasification route. While it is lower in energy content than LNG, it can bulk up LPG supply by 20 per cent, while also capturing the carbon emissions from the use of coal — a mineral in which India is abundant.

By 2050, petroleum is unlikely to have a dominant role in energy markets today. In the long term, expanding electricity supply is the primary option to derisk cooking and transportation fuel from external supply risk, via improved induction stoves, electric vehicles and hydrogen fuelled heavy transport.

Could India have managed the 2026 oil crisis better? India's import dependence is

Populatising this option requires a roof and branch reform of India's energy economy in conformity with climate objectives. This reform also feeds into the base layer of a five-steps AI infrastructure.

Could India have managed the 2026 oil crisis better? India's import dependence is

India's Supreme Court, in a recent ruling, directed the Union government to frame a "no-fault" compensation policy for serious adverse events following Covid-19 vaccinations. The direction marks an important moment for India's public health policy and its nearly five-decade-old national immunisation drive. The court's observation that vaccination campaigns are carried out under the authority of the State and therefore must include mechanisms for redress touches the core of the social contract between citizens and the government.

When governments encourage people to participate in public health programmes for collective benefit, they also assume a responsibility to support those who may, in rare circumstances, experience unintended harm. Vaccines save millions of lives every year and remain among the most effective and cost-efficient tools in modern medicine.

the lowest for LNG, which is at about 50 per cent, followed by LPG, at 65 per cent, and crude, at 85 per cent. Of the three, LNG is the least widely traded with long-term futures contracts.

Curiously, piped cooking gas (PNG) and CNG transport fuel derived from LNG have been the least in the news. Public hysteria is around LPG supply, the common household cooking fuel. The supply of fuel for India's 260 million motorcycles and scooters and 50 million private cars and stand-by generators for decentralised electricity supply is similarly a lifestyle necessity.

reserves. The government's crude reserve is good for ten days of demand. The oil companies maintain another 60 million barrels of reserves. Deepening our total reserves to 100 days of consumption across crude, LNG and LPG would require an outlay of Rs 3 trillion to Rs 4 trillion, plus annual maintenance charges.

Despite the price, the domestic supply of petro products supply has been maintained. Pumps have not gone dry for petrol or diesel. Regulations for the fair distribution of LPG cylinders have been revised to discourage panic purchase by increasing the gap between refills of LPG cylinders from 14 days to 25 days in urban areas and 45 days in rural areas.

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Could India have managed the 2026 oil crisis better? India's import dependence is

## BJP gains amid Opp. disarray

Elections to the Rajya Sabha are an indication to the political climate in the country as the elected members of the Upper House will form the electorate. If the latest elections are an indication, then the picture one can see is very simple: The Opposition lacks focus, the Congress which leads the platform is in ideological disarray and the BJP makes gains on its own strength as well as by exploiting its weaknesses.

The NDA won all the five seats in Bihar where the Opposition had the chance to win one, had all members were present and voting. However, four MLAs, three from the Congress and one from the RJD, chose to keep away, helping the NDA make a clean sweep. The Opposition BJP and the Congress played truant in Odisha, where three Congress members the party whip and voted for the BJP-backed Independent. Congress members cross-voted in Haryana, too, but the party candidate managed to scrape through. In all, the NDA won 22 of the 37 seats for which election were conducted, taking the ruling alliance's number in the 250-member house to 141.

The Congress has always claimed that it is wedded to the ideals in the Constitution which include federalism and secularism, but the party is often seen compromising with them. While in power, the party has used every chance to strengthen the hands of the Union government and not the states. Its stand on secularism is circumspect; it has, for instance, played ball with the BJP when it comes to Hindutva politics. Such compromises on core ideals cannot strengthen only disheartens constituents who will break free at some point. The BJP, on its part, has only hardened its political positions and continues to harvest the dividend.

The Congress is a 141-years old formation, and it need not take political lessons from others. But if it chooses to not to recognise the sign of the times, it will only hasten its own downward spiral.

**THE ASIAN AGE**

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THE ASIAN AGE office is located at:  
New Delhi: Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Dena Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002, Phone: 011 25311234

Published and Printed on behalf of and for:  
Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawahar Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Dena Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 & BFL, Bantock Rd., C-9, Sector-III, Noida-201301

London: Quincewood Ltd, 208 Bow Circle 2, Elizabeth House, 39 York Road, London, SE1 7NQ  
RNI Registration number: 5729094



Chandrakant Lahariya

'No-fault' policy on compensation to boost India's immunisations

India's Supreme Court, in a recent ruling, directed the Union government to frame a "no-fault" compensation policy for serious adverse events following Covid-19 vaccinations. The direction marks an important moment for India's public health policy and its nearly five-decade-old national immunisation drive. The court's observation that vaccination campaigns are carried out under the authority of the State and therefore must include mechanisms for redress touches the core of the social contract between citizens and the government.

When governments encourage people to participate in public health programmes for collective benefit, they also assume a responsibility to support those who may, in rare circumstances, experience unintended harm. Vaccines save millions of lives every year and remain among the most effective and cost-efficient tools in modern medicine.

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## LETTERS DON'T BE SILENT

Re: "Who will call off this mad war?" (Mar. 18). Two developments offer a sliver of hope: the moral courage shown by artists at the Oscars and Spain's principled decision to deny the US permission to use the jointly operated air bases at Rota and Moron for attacks on Iran. Such gestures remind the world that public conscience and sovereign restraint can still challenge the normalisation of war. Yet symbolism alone won't suffice. The US Opposition and large sections of its media must rediscover their role as democratic correctives. A robust Opposition and a questioning press are essential if reckless adventurism is to be restrained before this war spirals further.

Harsh Pawaria  
Rohtak

## ASYMMETRIC WARFARE

IRAN HAS mastered asymmetric warfare to counter stronger its rivals the US and Israel. It uses low-profile tools — drones like Shahed-136, proxies, and cyber tactics — under a "mosaic defence" that adapts even after damage. By threatening not closing, the Strait of Hormuz, it fuels oil uncertainty while keeping conflicts prolonged and costly. Similar strategies were seen in the Vietnam War and Soviet-Afghan War where weaker forces raised costs for stronger powers. Iran has succeeded in avoiding decisive defeat by imposing strategic and economic strain. India is applying comparable methods against China along the LAC. It uses terrain advantage in Ladakh, forward deployment of light, mobile forces, swarm drones and precision artillery.

R.S. Narula  
Patiala

## ARNAB AT IT AGAIN

CONCERNS regarding the role of Indian media in fostering communal discord and spreading misinformation deserve legal scrutiny. The Delhi high court has issued summons to Republic TV editor-in-chief Arnab Goswami in a case filed by the Congress Party, over an allegation that he made false claims regarding the party's operations in an office in Istanbul. Justice Mini Pushkarna is hearing the bench. An FIR was registered against Goswami and Amit Malviya in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor last May. Following communication with office in Istanbul, Justice Mini Pushkarna is hearing the bench. An FIR was registered against Goswami and Amit Malviya in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor last May. Following communication with office in Istanbul, Justice Mini Pushkarna is hearing the bench. An FIR was registered against Goswami and Amit Malviya in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor last May.

Jang Bahadur Singh  
Jumshapur

Dr Chandrakant Lahariya is a leading cardio-metabolic physician and specialist in public health policy, parenting and child development



FOR THE PEOPLE

Free Press  
FOR FREE FLOW OF TRUTH

## Now, US power play over Cuba

US President Donald Trump's threat to 'take Cuba', in the wake of engineered economic collapse starting at the island nation of 11 million people, is a crude escalation of a policy that successive American leaders have adopted towards it. That he chose to ratchet up the pressure using an energy chokehold on the Cuban government in the midst of ongoing talks that his administration is holding is a deplorable act of intimidation. No one believes that Trump holds out idle threats after the capture of Venezuela's leader Nicolas Maduro and the bombing of Iran. But the motives behind his attempt at regime change in Cuba seem more symbolic, designed only to add another trophy to show his supporters at home. Cuba has been an ideological holdout in America's backyard since the success of the Communist revolution of 1959 and the loss of capitalist power to the nationalisation of economic assets under Fidel Castro. The small country has faced the brunt of US sanctions over the decades and has been deprived of trading opportunities. Now, after regional allies, such as Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, withdrew oil supplies to Cuba in favour of humanitarian aid, in the face of US pressure, the country's electric grid has suffered collapse. The regime of Miguel Diaz-Canel in Havana finds itself even more embattled in the absence of backing from China. It is not that the Cuban leader has refused to appear conciliatory, offering Cuban expatriates opportunities to invest in their home country and own businesses. Yet, Trump feels compelled to flex hegemonic muscle rather than do an honourable commercial deal.

Just what the US policy seeks to achieve in Cuba appears unclear.

Just what the US policy seeks to achieve in Cuba appears unclear. By many accounts, setting the country on the path to multi-party democracy is not high on the agenda, as the recent experience in Venezuela shows. America's tradition of supporting dictators who are ready to aid capitalist interests is well-known and is very much part of Cuban history from the time of Fulgencio Batista, who was overthrown by Castro's fighters. The island was the scene of an alarming Cold War crisis when Russia and the US faced off over deployment of the former's nuclear missiles; later it was the target of crippling economic sanctions. Today, as the Communist revolution fades in appeal to many Cubans, the imperative is to let the island's people determine their future through free and fair elections and global trade. America's poor neighbour is often criticised for lack of political freedoms, but Havana's rulers opt to universal healthcare and education as achievements that the US, the most powerful country, cannot match. Trump is ready to use any available tactic to advance his exploitative goals, as he plans to in Zambia. There, he intends to seek more minerals to continue the HIV treatment access. It is time all nations condemn the savaging of innocents by ideologically bankrupt rulers, whether in Gaza, Iran or elsewhere.

## Barbarity has no justification

The bombing of the Omid Drug Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul by Pakistan's air force deserves the strongest possible condemnation. Few acts in warfare are as morally indefensible as the deliberate targeting of a facility where the sick and vulnerable seek healing. According to reports, nearly 400 patients undergoing treatment for drug addiction were killed in the attack. Many of them were already suffering the agony of withdrawal and were in no condition to flee or defend themselves. They became helpless targets in an act that violates not only the norms of civilised conduct but also the most basic principles of humanity. The hospital, a former US military base converted into a rehabilitation centre, had become a refuge for those attempting to reclaim their lives from addiction. Instead, it turned into a site of mass death. The attack also represents a blatant infringement of Afghanistan's sovereignty and airspace, undermining the dangerous disregard Pakistan has repeatedly shown for international norms. India's Ministry of External Affairs was right in describing the bombing as a barbaric and unconscionable act. The victims were civilians who had nothing to do with the tensions along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. They were men struggling with addiction, seeking treatment in a facility that symbolised hope and recovery. Their killing serves no conceivable military purpose. For many Indians, particularly those familiar with the early days of the Kashmir conflict, the episode evokes grim historical memories. When Pakistan-backed tribesmen invaded Kashmir in 1947, the world witnessed similar brutality, including the sacking of a hospital in Baramulla and the killing and assault of innocent civilians, among them a Catholic nun. The swift securing of Srinagar airport and the eviction of the raiders remain chapters written in golden letters in India's military history. Equally haunting are the memories of the atrocities committed by Pakistani forces in East Pakistan before the 1971 war. These episodes reveal a troubling pattern in which civilian lives are treated as expendable.

The world community must, therefore, unequivocally condemn this assault on Afghanistan's sovereignty and on the sanctity of humanitarian institutions. The moral clarity demanded in such situations must also be applied universally. The bombing of a school in Iran during the early days of the current conflict in West Asia, which reportedly killed several children, was similarly horrific. Initial attempts to deny responsibility did little to soften the tragedy when evidence suggested the missile involved was of American origin. Civilian deaths, whether in a rehabilitation centre in Kabul or a schoolyard in Iran, demand the same moral outrage. Nations often weigh their responses through the prism of strategic interests, but humanity expects something higher. When barbarity wears different uniforms and produces the same suffering, the world must ensure that its voice of condemnation is guided not by convenience but by conscience.



BRIG BYTES

Brig Suyash Sharma, VSM (Retd)

Why did US and Israel go to war in Iran when the negotiations were in an advanced stage and it is reliably learnt that they were pretty close to a deal? Ever since Trump returned to power, the war was imminent, and the early indications were evident all along. Since 1979, Iran has been the nemesis of the US, when the Shah of Iran, a stooge of the Americans, was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution. Iranian resilience is legendary, having survived the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war despite the overt and covert support of the West. It is the inheritor of the rich Persian civilisation. But the story actually began sometime in 1953, when US indulged in a now quite infamous 'regime change' operation, orchestrated a coup, and deposed the democratically elected

Prime Minister Mohammed Moaddegh because of his decision to nationalise the British-controlled oil industry, and installed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi on the throne.

US was made to eat humble pie after the Tehran hostage crisis of 1979, which lasted 444 days and cost Jimmy Carter his presidency. Iran has been at the receiving end of US-led sanctions since then. It has not only survived all that but has been waging a proxy war through Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthis, targeting the US and Western interests in the Middle East. Israel has been a thorn in the flesh for the Mullahs of Iran, and they have vowed to destroy the Zionist state in totality. The rest of the Arab world has been brought around by the Americans to accept some sort of adjustment with Israel, except the Iranians, who have the concern about the Iranian nuclear programme. A nuclear-powered Iran spells disaster for Israel and, in the bargain, for Western hegemony in

the region. Israel has been itching to neutralise this threat once and for all; however, US has been reticent and cautious all this while because the administration was aware of the mess it may end up in.

This time around, Bibi and the powerful Jewish lobby in US administration seem to have convinced Trump that all that was needed was the elimination of the top leadership of Iran and the cookie will crumble, as the masses are themselves fed up with this brutal dictatorial regime. The leadership was eliminated, but the regime has survived so far, and there are no indications that it is anywhere near a total collapse. It turned out to be a grave miscalculation, as the war is now in its third week and there are no signs of any fatigue visible in the Iranian response. Iran obviously has not been surprised by the turn of events, as its neighbourhood has been targeted in the last two decades or so, with Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Syria meeting the same fate of regime

change and ensuing anarchy. Having been a witness to these happenings, it has been quietly preparing for this eventuality. So it systematically targeted the US bases in the region along with Israel in the first phase, then decided to choke the Strait of Hormuz, thereby sending ripples around the rest of the world as well. If the war drags on longer, these ripples can turn into tsunamis, which may end up drowning many of the smaller economies of the world.

In today's era, where economies of the world are globalised and intertwined, this blocking of the Strait of Hormuz has implications way beyond just oil. With oil prices shooting through the roof and supply of LPG severely affected, this will end up in hyperinflation in smaller economies. The other major sectors likely to be affected in the near term are agriculture, as nitrogen-based fertilisers need gas, the semiconductor industry, which needs helium, another byproduct of the petrochemicals industry, and plastic,

and packaging material. India is also being affected by the shortage of LPG in the short term. If the war continues for a considerably longer period, the economy will also face headwinds. Global supply chain disruption will cause mayhem in almost all sectors.

What is the end state of this current imbroglio? It is evident that Iran is not exactly suing for peace. Trump's call for support to ease the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz has not been heeded to by NATO countries, nor China. Signs are ominous; an off ramp is required for US to call off the offensive, which does not seem to be available as of now. Knowing the unpredictable nature of Trump, it may just happen as suddenly as it began, with him announcing that they have achieved their aim of denuclearising Iran, as he did last time around after bombing Iranian nuclear facilities and claiming to have decimated them. That may end the war for now, but peace will still remain elusive.

# India@2047 - The \$30 TN Question

The five pillars that will shape India's economic rise by 2047



Niti Sutra

PROF HIMANSHU RAI

In the Arthashastra, Chanakya writes with characteristic clarity: "The root of the kingdom is the treasury."

Power may command armies, diplomacy may shape alliances, and culture may inspire respect, but without economic strength none of these instruments can be sustained for long. As India looks toward 2047, the century of its independence, the most frequently asked question is whether the country can become a \$30 trillion economy. Yet the more important question is not simply whether that number can be reached, but how that scale will be constructed, and whether the foundations beneath it will be strong enough to sustain it.

Today, India's economy exceeds \$4 trillion and is growing among the fastest of major economies, yet the path to \$30 trillion over the next two decades will require not merely steady growth but a profound structural transformation in the way the country produces, innovates, trades, and governs economic activity. If India sustains real growth be-

tween 6.5 and 7 per cent over the coming decades, a demanding but plausible trajectory, the arithmetic of compounding could indeed place the economy in the \$25-\$30 trillion range by 2047. However, such growth cannot rely indefinitely on domestic consumption alone; it must be supported by manufacturing expansion, export competitiveness, technological capability, and productivity gains across sectors.

**The first pillar of this transformation must therefore be manufacturing scale.**

Today, manufacturing contributes roughly 16-17 per cent of India's GDP, significantly below the 25 per cent threshold typically associated with industrial powerhouses. Countries that have successfully moved into high-income status, from South Korea to Germany, built strong industrial ecosystems capable of exporting globally competitive products. For India, this implies not merely assembling goods but mastering advanced electronics, semiconductors, defence systems, electric mobility, and precision engineering, while simultaneously strengthening small and medium enterprises that form the backbone of supply chains.

Closely linked to manufacturing is the **second pillar: Export dynamism.**

India's exports of goods and services together approach \$300 billion annually, yet reaching \$300 trillion in GDP will require exports exceeding \$2 trillion. This is not merely a trade target; it is a productivity test. Export competitiveness forces industries to innovate, reduce costs, improve quality, and integrate into global supply networks. The strategic objective must therefore be to position India as a trusted manufacturing and services hub in a world where supply chains are increasingly diversifying away from excessive concentration.

**The third pillar is technological sovereignty and innovation.**

Research and development expenditure in India currently remains below 1 per cent of GDP, far behind innovation-driven economies that invest three to four per cent annually. If India is to lead in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, space technology, and advanced materials, public and private investment in research must rise dramatically. Universities must become engines of discovery rather than merely credentialing institutions, and industry-academia collaboration must deepen so that innovation moves from laboratories into markets.

**The fourth pillar is infra-**

**structure scale and urban transformation.**

Over the past decade, India has made significant progress in highways, digital infrastructure, airports, and logistics corridors, yet the coming decades will require even more ambitious integration of rail freight corridors, port modernisation, smart energy grids, and sustainable urbanisation. By 2047, India is expected to have nearly 50 per cent of its population living in urban areas, and the productivity of these cities will determine whether growth accelerates or stalls.

**The fifth pillar, often less discussed but equally decisive, is human capital productivity.**

India's demographic profile remains favourable, with a median age far younger than most advanced economies, but demographics alone do not produce prosperity. Education systems must deliver foundational literacy and numeracy universally, while higher education must cultivate analytical thinking, innovation, and technical mastery. Skills aligned with automation, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing will determine whether the workforce becomes a competitive advantage or a missed opportunity. Yet economic architecture is

not built by economics alone. It depends fundamentally on institutional credibility, predictable regulation, efficient dispute resolution, transparent taxation, and administrative competence that reduces friction for entrepreneurs and investors alike. Investors do not seek perfection; they seek reliability.

Indian civilisational thought reminds us that artha, prosperity, must always remain aligned with dharma. Economic growth that deepens inequality, degrades the environment, or erodes trust cannot sustain itself for long. The true test of India's rise will therefore not be how quickly GDP expands, but how responsibly prosperity is created and distributed.

The path to \$30 trillion is thus not a sprint but a disciplined construction, of factories and laboratories, ports and classrooms, laws and institutions.

The sutra for India@2047 is therefore simple:

*Build production with innovation, expand trade with competitiveness, and anchor growth in institutions, for when the economic foundation is strong, the edifice of national power stands secure.*

The writer is director of Indian Institute of Management, Indore

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Energy Dependence

Tensions around the Strait of Hormuz have exposed India's vulnerability to global energy disruptions. Liquefied petroleum gas shortages and rising prices are affecting households and industries alike. The crisis highlights the urgent need to strengthen domestic energy production and diversify supply sources to reduce dependence on a volatile region.

Ranganathan Sivummar, Chennai

#### Missing Statesmen

Recent global conflicts have shattered the belief that economic interdependence would ensure lasting peace. The world today has many powerful leaders but few statesmen capable of guiding humanity with moral vision. Voices of reason and ethical reflection are urgently needed to steer civilisation away from rising nationalism and destructive conflict.

R. Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

#### Speaker Debate

The no-confidence motion against Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla may not succeed numerically but has highlighted concerns about parliamentary impartiality. A Speaker must rise above party affiliations to protect democratic debate. The continued absence of an Opposition Deputy Speaker has further intensified

doubts about institutional balance within Parliament.

K. Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

#### Gas Disruption

Supply disruptions of LPG cylinders due to the West Asia conflict are troubling consumers. Long queues at gas agencies and delays in refills have caused anxiety in several cities. Though authorities describe the issue as a temporary logistical problem, reports of black-marketing and rising commercial cylinder prices are adding to public concern.

Dimple Wadhawan, Kanpur Nagar

#### Fare Surge

Airfares have surged sharply during the US-Israel-Iran conflict, raising concerns about opportunistic pricing by airlines. While fuel costs may justify some increase, fares often soar even during festivals due to high demand. Such practices appear unfair to travellers. Authorities should examine pricing policies and ensure reasonable limits on fare hikes.

Melville X. D'Souza, Mumbai

#### AI Future

The prediction that 65% of existing jobs may change by 2030 due to artificial intelligence highlights the urgency of preparing students for a new technological era. Universities such as Vivesvarya Technological University are en-



couraging innovation, design thinking and AI learning. Embracing technology will help young people remain competitive and adaptable.

Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

#### Right To Die

The euthanasia debate centres on dignity, personal choice and compassionate care. When terminal illness causes unbearable suffering, the right to life must also recognise the right to die with dignity. Passive euthanasia and living wills have been discussed in India, though active euthanasia remains illegal. The issue demands careful legal and ethical consideration.

GK Maniam, Ghaziabad

#### CSK Without Rajini

Fans of Chennai Super Kings will no longer hear songs from Rajinikanth films at matches. The franchise informed the Madras High Court it will avoid tracks from Jailer, Jailer 2 and Coolie following a copyright plea by Sun TV Network. Even so, supporters will expect the team to deliver the same excitement and charisma on the field that Rajinikanth brings to the screen.

A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

#### Talent Overflow

When talent overflows, it finds many outlets. Kamal Haasan, now a Member of Parliament, recently wrote an impassioned letter to Donald Trump urging him to stop meddling in India's affairs. Reaching the letter explains why admirers hold him in such regard. He has proved that his command of written English matches his reputation as

#### There is LPG shortage

The centre says there is no LPG 'dry out' so far. The ground realities, however, belie this assurance. The hotel industry is badly affected, with many hotels closing shutters, throwing workers out of their jobs. Why can the government not make available alternate sources of energy at subsidised costs, viz., induction stove, coal, etc., or follow the Mandur-Bangalore model adopted by the Tamil Nadu government?

P.R. Ravinder, Hyderabad

#### IndiGo Joyride

IndiGo provided passengers with an unusual aviation experience this week: follow the Manchester-Delhi journey lasting 13 hours without landing in Manchester. Travellers enjoyed uninterrupted views of the sky while the crew served meals and beverages. When the aircraft returned to Delhi, passengers disembarked relieved. The episode will long be remembered as a curious airline adventure.

CKR Natharaji, Coimbatore

#### CSK Dorai Ramani

Maniam, West Chennai

#### Artistic Minister

A photograph of a West Bengal minister painting has sparked humorous speculation that art collectors may soon rush to ac-

quire the works. Given the state's revenue deficit, some joke that these paintings could become a new income source. The minister's artistic pursuits often resurface during political crises. In West Bengal, governance may fluctuate but artistic productivity seems constant.

Ram Lakshman, Mumbai

#### Sibling Loyalty

Priyanka Gandhi's steadfast support for her brother Rahul Gandhi is often striking. She consistently interprets his actions generously and defends him vigorously against criticism. Political observers note that while some in the ruling party praise her leadership potential, she remains firmly committed to backing her brother as Leader of the Opposition. Family loyalty, it appears, remains central.

Akhila Ramakrishnan, Chennai

#### LPG Alternatives

The LPG shortage reminds us of earlier times when households relied on varied cooking methods. People can explore alternatives such as induction stoves, microwaves, ovens, tandoors or traditional chulhas using wood or coal. Most households still possess one full cylinder, so panic buying is unnecessary. Calm adherence to supply guidelines and modest adjustments in cooking habits will help stabilise the situation.

Maya Hemant Bhatkar, Pune



BORIS PISTORIUS  
German Defence Minister

“It is not our war, we did not start it. We want diplomatic solutions and a swift end to the conflict. Sending more warships to the region (Hormuz) will certainly not contribute to that



JAIRAM RAMESH  
Congress general secretary

The youth are standing in line for jobs, but there are no jobs. Apart from rolling out some new agenda every now and then to distract attention, the Prime Minister has no solution to this mega-crisis



ASHWINI VAISHNAW  
I&B Minister

We must respect and operate according to reasonable restrictions under the Freedom of Speech. Freedom of Speech cannot be absolute; it has to be in the context of society, culture”

## NavIC needs urgent reset

Billed as India's answer to the American GPS network, the indigenous satellite navigation system — Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) — is plagued by technical failures and ageing infrastructure. It needs an urgent reset if the ambitious goals set by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) are to be met. Experts have commented that NavIC represents a classic case of over-promising and underdelivering. It is ironic that just two years ago, the Ministry of Science and Technology had described it as “a beacon of self-reliance, shining brightly in the world of satellite navigation”. Despite ISRO's commendable technological achievements, persistent issues such as satellite failures, delays, and limited integration in consumer devices have restricted NavIC's effectiveness. The system's primary weakness has been the failure of onboard rubidium atomic clocks — many of which were imported. Without these precise clocks, satellites cannot provide accurate positioning data, leading to a cascade of service capability losses. The clocks have continued to malfunction, and as many as five satellites have been rendered unusable. A functional satellite navigation system requires at least four satellites to be visible simultaneously for reliable positioning. With reports indicating that the constellation has fallen below this threshold, the system's reliability for critical applications like defence, disaster management, and transportation is severely compromised. The navigation system was envisioned as a step towards self-reliance in satellite-based navigation, yet its relatively low usage in smartphones and commercial applications reflects gaps in policy execution and industry collaboration.

The system faces challenges, including satellite failures, faulty atomic clocks, and poor smartphone integration

The idea of NavIC was born out of a strategic need for indigenous navigation and timing services, particularly after India was denied access to foreign GPS data during the Kargil War. The NavIC was designed to provide precise position, velocity, and timing information over India and surrounding areas. It was meant to be particularly useful in high-altitude areas where signals from global systems are sometimes unavailable. The hybrid operation of NavIC, along with GPS and other systems, could contribute to higher accuracy and seamless operation in certain geographic areas. However, the commercial and public utilisation of NavIC has remained very low. India's mobile phone market currently has some 20 major brands and 700 phone models. To enable handsets to support the Indian navigation system, changes must be made to both hardware and software. Although some chipset manufacturers are shipping processors that support NavIC, a study by the Space Applications Centre and Vishwakarma University, Pune, found that NavIC signals on many devices remain invisible or are filtered out by low-level drivers, even though hardware support exists. Over the decades, ISRO has delivered complex missions, developing indigenous capability in key segments of space technology. However, it has faced huge challenges when it comes to the mass application of space technology beyond dedicated government use.

# Who pays the price of wars?

Consumption is not merely market behaviour — it reflects deeper economic resilience and vulnerability



Dr HARSHA SHEELAM

When conflicts erupt thousands of kilometres away, their consequences often appear much closer — at the fuel pump, in grocery prices, and within household budgets. Wars and geopolitical tensions disrupt energy markets, strain global supply chains, and trigger inflationary pressures that ripple across economies. For a country like India, which depends heavily on global trade and imported crude oil, these shocks quickly translate into everyday economic realities.

Yet the transmission of global shocks into domestic economies is rarely linear. Prices rise, markets fluctuate, and policy responses follow — but the true economic story lies in how these shifts filter through different layers of society. Consumption patterns become a quiet indicator of economic stress: what people delay buying, substitute, or stop consuming altogether often reveals more about economic strain than headline statistics. In this sense, consumption behaviour functions as an early signal of how deeply global turbulence penetrates domestic economic life. This raises deeper questions. Who ultimately absorbs the cost of global instability? How do international conflicts reshape everyday consumption decisions within emerging economies? And can India build greater economic resilience so that external shocks do not disproportionately burden its most vulnerable households?

**Lower-income Consumers**  
Lower-income households operate under severe income elasticity constraints, where even small price changes dramatically affect consumption behaviour. Because most of their income is spent on essential goods — food, transport, and utilities — their ability to adjust spending is extremely limited.



For instance, food inflation often intensifies when fuel prices rise because modern agricultural systems are deeply energy-dependent. Transportation of produce from farms to urban markets, the operation of irrigation systems, and the production of fertilizers all rely significantly on fuel and energy inputs. When energy costs increase, these higher input and logistics expenses cascade through the supply chain, ultimately raising the retail prices of essential food commodities such as vegetables, edible oils, and grains.

For lower-income households, the impact is particularly severe because food typically constitutes a substantial share of total household expenditure. Consequently, even modest increases in food prices can significantly erode purchasing power, forcing families to reduce consumption diversity and reallocate spending toward basic survival needs. These households experience what we may call consumption compression. Instead of reallocating spending across categories, they often reduce the quantity or quality of essential consumption itself. Nutritional diversity declines, healthcare visits may be postponed, and educational expenditures can be reduced.

From a behavioural perspective, these households prioritise short-term survival over long-term wealth, reinforcing cycles of economic vulnerability. This highlights a structural issue in developing economies: external shocks disproportionately affect those whose consumption is already constrained.

**The Squeezed Middle Class**  
The middle-class operates within what we may describe as intertemporal consumption planning — balancing present consumption with future financial commitments. Loans for housing, education, and automobiles allow households to smooth consumption over time. For instance, middle-class households function within a credit-driven consumption framework, where major purchases such as housing and automobiles are financed through loans.

When inflation rises, monetary tightening increases interest rates, raising loan repayments and compressing disposable income. As financial obligations expand, households reprioritise

spending — protecting essentials such as education, healthcare, and housing while postponing discretionary consumption. Rather than eliminating spending entirely, middle-class consumers typically recalibrate their choices, shifting from premium products to budget alternatives and from international to domestic travel. These adjustments illustrate how credit commitments and economic uncertainty reshape middle-class consumption behaviour.

Geopolitical shocks often trigger inflationary pressures that lead central banks to increase interest rates. This disrupts the delicate balance of intertemporal planning. Rising loan costs increase financial commitments, reducing disposable income and forcing households to reassess consumption priorities. Unlike lower-income households that cut essential spending, middle-class consumers typically adjust by reducing discretionary consumption. Leisure spending, travel, and premium goods become the first casualties. In this way, geopolitical crises reshape middle-class consumption patterns through financial tightening rather than direct deprivation.

**Affluent Consumers**  
Affluent consumers respond to geopolitical shocks through a different mechanism: the wealth effect. Their consumption decisions are influenced less by immediate price changes and more by fluctuations in financial markets and perceived wealth. When geopolitical tensions create uncertainty in stock markets or global investment flows, wealthy households often experience declines in portfolio valuations. Even when their income remains stable, this perceived reduction in wealth can lead to sentiment-driven spending adjustments.

**Geopolitical tensions are reshaping consumption in India, hitting lower-income households the hardest, and forcing middle-class adjustments**

ments. For instance, luxury consumption — international travel, high-end automobiles, premium experiences — may be temporarily postponed as affluent consumers adopt a cautious outlook. However, unlike other groups, these adjustments rarely threaten essential consumption. Instead, they reflect a strategic moderation of lifestyle spending, illustrating how financial sentiment rather than price shocks shapes consumption behaviour at the top of the income distribution.

Geopolitical tensions often create volatility in equities, currencies, and global investments, influencing perceptions of wealth. In response, high-income households tend to moderate lifestyle spending — postponing international travel, luxury purchases, or high-value experiences. However, rather than eliminating consumption, they typically reallocate spending, shifting from international to domestic luxury experiences or premium local services. This pattern reflects the wealth effect, where perceived changes in asset values influence consumption behaviour, demonstrating how financial confidence — rather than immediate economic hardship — shapes spending decisions among affluent consumers.

At the same time, a segment of ultra-wealthy consumers remains largely insulated, as diversified assets and high liquidity buffer them from immediate economic shocks. These asymmetries highlight how global crises amplify structural inequalities, underscoring the need for policies that strengthen economic resilience and protect the most vulnerable consumers.

For policymakers and businesses, this highlights the need to view consumption not merely as market behaviour but as a reflection of deeper economic resilience and vulnerability. Strengthening domestic supply chains, reducing dependence on volatile energy imports, and safeguarding essential consumption sectors become crucial in limiting the transmission of global shocks. Yet important questions remain. How can economies protect essential consumption when global markets become unstable? Are existing policy tools sufficient to shield vulnerable households from external price shocks? And can India build a consumption structure that remains resilient even when global geopolitical tensions intensify?

Addressing these questions will determine whether global instability translates into domestic insecurity — or whether the Indian economy can develop the structural resilience needed to protect its most economically fragile consumers.

(The author is Visiting Faculty, Department of Management Studies, Pondicherry University, Port Blair (Sri Vijaya Puram), Andaman & Nicobar Islands. She is also a Marketer & Digital Brand Experience Consultant for Island Tourism Brands)

## Letters to the Editor

### Fire safety rules

Hospitals are meant to be places of healing, yet negligence in fire safety measures can turn them into sites of disaster. This outbreak incident calls for strict enforcement of fire safety regulations, regular safety audits, and proper staff training to handle emergencies. Authorities must ensure that hospitals are equipped with functional fire extinguishers, alarms, and clear evacuation plans. Accountability must be fixed, and those responsible should face strict action to prevent such tragedies.

NAGARAJAMANI MV,  
Secunderabad

### Preventable tragedy

Unlike many other toxic substances, there is no specific antidote available for paraquat poisoning. Despite aggressive medical management, the mortality rate remains extremely high. In the Nizamabad region alone, an estimated 8-10 deaths per month are being reported due to paraquat poisoning, translating to nearly 100 deaths annually within a single district, highlighting the magnitude of the problem at a regional level. The easy availability of this toxic herbicide in agricultural communities contributes significantly to these preventable deaths. In the interest of public safety, a complete ban on paraquat should be strongly considered in India. Paraquat poisoning is not merely a toxicological issue — it is a preventable public health crisis that demands urgent and decisive action.

Dr V JITHIN, Nizamabad

### Gig workers' welfare

This refers to “Seen but not secured” (March 18). Although the Social Security Code aims to safeguard today's workforce, it often fails to specify the exact quantum of benefits. The framework does not address the core issue of income fluctuation or the lack of a minimum guaranteed wage or income for gig workers. Many firms have not yet set up the mandated social security fund. While the reform provides a national registration framework, e-Shram, and mandates a grievance redressal mechanism for gig workers, it still suffers from poor implementation. The government should allocate funds for the welfare of gig workers, including healthcare, education, and housing. It must also address practical challenges such as rigid eligibility criteria and an unclear funding mechanism.

P VICTOR SELVARAJ, Palayamkottai

### Literary honour

The selection of Tamil poet and lyricist Vairamuthu for the 60th Jnanpith award illustrates his profound impact on contemporary Tamil literature and his works on social concerns and nature. Vairamuthu is the third Tamil author to receive this prestigious award, following Akilan and Jayakanthan, representing a major milestone after a gap of 24 years. However, the selection of the award on Vairamuthu has sparked significant controversy, with several women and activists from the #MeToo Movement strongly opposing the honour. By awarding the Jnanpith to a person associated with unresolved allegations that left a lasting shadow over his public image, the institution has inevitably drawn itself into an ethical debate. It also raises a paradoxical question whether artistic brilliance be celebrated separately from personal misconduct or do allegations leave a permanent shadow on such honours.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR,  
Chennai

## India in the hotspot

■ Bloomberg

### Why India has friends everywhere, but no leverage

For more than a decade now, India has sought to build its “strategic autonomy.” New Delhi has booked a place at every high table — the Quad, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, & the I2U2 Group and Abu Dhabi. The national interest, we were told, required us to be close to everyone, but not too close to anyone.

■ Al Jazeera

### How war on Iran puts Indian remittances at risk

As the United States-Israeli war on Iran completes two weeks, one country in particular could face a double whammy if the conflict intensifies: India, the world's fourth-largest economy, depends on the Gulf for its energy needs and also for remittances sent by a vast workforce resident in the Middle East.

■ The Japan Times

### Modi walks fine line between Iran, US as war hits...

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is stepping up engagement with Iran as a worsening conflict in the Middle East causes severe gas shortages in the country and threatens economic growth, testing New Delhi's relations with the US. Earlier this month, the U.S. allowed India to buy Russian oil again.

# Opinion

THURSDAY, MARCH 19, 2026

## A dividend at risk

Mismatch between education, jobs, and aspirations could narrow India's demographic window

**E**MLOYABILITY AND JOB shortages have long cast doubt on India's ability to realise its much-vaunted demographic dividend. A new report by Azim Premji University adds to these concerns, flagging a growing mismatch between aspirations and economic realities. India is projected to have a working-age population of over one billion by 2030. However, according to the State of Working India 2026 report, the share of this cohort is likely to begin declining from 2030, signalling that the window to harness this advantage may be narrower than previously assumed. This shift is expected to coincide with a rise in unemployed graduates, particularly among the young. Although the demographic dividend is expected to last until 2055, it will be of limited value if younger cohorts are forced into low-skill work.

The report suggests this trend is already under way, with low levels of permanent, salaried and white-collar employment among graduates. Consider this: fewer than 7% of male graduates were able to secure a permanent salaried job within a year of graduating as of 2023. These findings are especially concerning given a labour market facing headwinds from artificial intelligence and automation, whose impact on entry-level roles is increasingly visible and likely to intensify in the coming years. The shortage of salaried employment has been building over the past decade. Economists note that since the early 2010s, the number of young people entering the labour force has risen steadily, even as job creation has slowed. The study acknowledges progress in bridging educational gaps of earlier decades. Gross enrolment ratios in higher education are broadly in line with India's stage of development, and socioeconomic barriers—across gender and caste—have narrowed to some extent. Yet, despite rising overall enrolment, the share of young men in education has fallen from 38% in 2017 to 34% in the last quarter of 2024. A key reason is financial pressure, with many forced to support household incomes, often at the cost of completing their education. The government has sought to boost employability through initiatives such as the Prime Minister Internship Scheme, but it has struggled to attract applicants, with concerns ranging from low stipends to logistical constraints.

Policy priorities must centre on expanding salaried employment opportunities. This includes improving the absorption of women graduates. A Team Lease report earlier this year noted that only about one-third are considered employable, despite a sharp rise in women's participation in higher education. More broadly, unless structural divides are addressed, India risks not only missing an economic opportunity but also facing social strains that could deepen inequality. It is important to reverse trends such as the rising share of students from poorer households in tertiary education, alongside the continued dominance of those from more affluent backgrounds in professional courses such as engineering and medicine.

The rapid expansion of vocational training institutes since the 2010s—driven largely by private industrial training institutes—has not translated into better employment outcomes, largely due to concerns over quality and weak industry linkages. This has contributed to a persistent skills gap that undermines India's manufacturing ambitions. Historically, China moved ahead with a broad-based approach to vocational training and basic education, while India focused more on elite higher education. Bridging this imbalance is essential if the goals of the 2020 National Education Policy, particularly improving employability, are to move beyond intent and deliver measurable outcomes.

## Firms pivoting from China shedding to maxxing

**SOME OF CHINA'S** most successful global companies have spent years masking their origins to sidestep Western scrutiny. But that approach, called "China shedding," has run its course—at least for the bigger players.

The surprise homecoming of online retailer Shein Group's founders should be the final nail in the coffin for the strategy. Last month, Xu Fuguan, who has been rarely photographed, took to the stage in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong to thank the local government and suppliers for helping the company to become a retail juggernaut. Shein is now the biggest player in the global market for bargain-priced apparel, according to GlobalData, ahead of the likes of Primark and Target Corp. Private market research firm Sacra estimates its 2025 sales at \$60 billion, which would be more than Hennes & Mauritz and Inditex's Zara combined.

Blurring ties to Beijing to minimise regulatory or reputational risk overseas was a defensive manoeuvre five years ago. At the time, telecoms equipment maker Huawei Technologies was still making headlines after being banned by Washington over spying concerns. Following that episode, Chinese firms aiming for international prominence wanted to avoid a similar fate.

Three of the most successful—social media platform TikTok and budget online retailers Temu and Shein—have all tried to distance themselves from their roots. None have succeeded. Increasing opposition from Beijing, combined with a recent view shift that has elevated perceptions of Chinese products suggest it would be smart for home-grown companies to be more upfront about where they're from.

What was unusual about Xu's first-ever public appearance was that Shein had been presenting itself as a Singapore-based fast-fashion giant, with only perfunctory mentions on its website of the region that powers its ability to churn out designs in as little as three weeks. It's a positioning that reportedly upset the Chinese regulators who must approve its long-delayed IPO.

Another reason companies should be more honest is that China shedding was always a hard sell. Just look at TikTok, owned by Beijing-based ByteDance. No matter how they tried, the short-form video platform was unable to convince the public it wasn't Chinese, even though it doesn't exist in China.

Fearing a Huawei-like ban following a 2019 national security probe, TikTok hired Kevin Mayer, a former Walt Disney executive, as CEO in 2020 to effort to improve its standing in the US. The platform even left Hong Kong in 2020 to signal independence from China. To no avail. President Joe Biden's efforts to investigate it culminated in a congressional grilling of the next chief executive, Shou Chew, in March 2023.

Pressed on whether TikTok was Chinese, Chew sidestepped the question, saying only that the app was unavailable in China and based in Los Angeles and Singapore. Though Chew comforted himself well, his argument was unconvincing. The lesson? Simply downplaying Chinese ties was not enough to avoid political scrutiny. Eventually, the Trump White House brokered a deal to create a US-controlled TikTok to which ByteDance licenses its algorithm.

Last year, during the height of the US-China tensions, President Donald Trump ended long-standing tariff exemptions on goods under \$800 that had propelled the fortunes of Temu, owned by PDD Holdings, and Shein. But while the active users of both online shopping sites fell, they eventually recovered, with Shein bouncing back especially quickly, according to market intelligence firm Sensor Tower.

In fact, trade volatility hasn't hurt the seller of \$1.5 billion shapewear and \$4 wax strips at all. Shein raised its US prices before tariffs on small packages were imposed, which is expected to have helped its net income hit \$2 billion in 2025, nearly double the year before, Bloomberg News reported.

Smaller companies may still be able to fly under the radar with China shedding. Not so for the global heavyweights for which honesty would be the best policy.



**JULIANA LIU**

Bloomberg

What I tried

## WTO MORATORIUM

INDIA SHOULD SUPPORT ITS CONTINUATION, WHILE PRESSING FOR CLARITY, FAIRNESS, AND SAFEGUARDS

# Naysayer to decision-maker

**I**NDIA IS ONE of the global leaders in digitally delivered services and goods trade through e-commerce. The government has taken several measures to promote small and medium enterprise exports through online platforms at a time of global trade uncertainty. As the World Trade Organization (WTO) approaches its next Ministerial Conference (MC14) next week in Cameroon, debate intensifies on India's position regarding the moratorium on e-commerce. Should India secure its export interests and shift from a naysayer to a decision-maker, or continue aligning with South Africa and Indonesia, even if they shift positions for job markets like the US?

Discussions on e-commerce began in 1998 with the establishment of the Working Programme on E-commerce (WPEC) at the WTO. Members agreed to a "moratorium"—no customs duty on electronic transmissions. This has been renewed at each Ministerial Conference and was extended in MC13 until MC14 or March 31, when both the moratorium and WPEC are set to expire. Progress on trade rules within WPEC has been limited, raising questions about its survival.

What began as a temporary arrangement has, over nearly three decades, underpinned the expansion of the digital economy and India's exports. India has opposed a permanent moratorium, arguing that the definition of e-commerce is still evolving and duties cannot be permanently waived for a sector that remains undefined. Concerns have also been raised about tariff revenue losses for developing countries. Yet, India has struggled to build support, as many developing nations have joined the Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on e-commerce. On July 26, 2024, 80 JSI members reached consensus on trade rules in a "stabilised text." Key exceptions are India and the US, with Washington treating the moratorium as a bargaining tool in its trade agreements.

The India AI Impact Summit 2026 in New Delhi showcased India's ambition to become a hub for responsible, human-centric AI innovation. It highlighted how technology can drive inclusive growth across the Global South and demonstrated India's readiness to take leader-

## ARPITA MUKHERJEE

Professor, ICRIER



### Stakes for a digital economy

As one of the fastest-growing digital economies, India has high stake in global trade rules. Electronic transmissions cover software downloads, cloud services, design files, research data, and cross-border digital services. In 1998, e-commerce was largely confined to digitally ordered goods and some services. Today, digitally delivered goods and services are ubiquitous, yet WPEC has not reached consensus on scope or definition.

Trade agreements, however, have attempted definitions of e-commerce in digital trade chapters. India has digital trade chapters with the United Arab Emirates, the UK, and the European Union. WPEC discussions remain crucial to keep e-commerce on the multilateral agenda, especially since JSI's status as plurilateral is unclear. The US has not joined JSI but remains part of WPEC. The moratorium has enabled businesses, especially smaller firms, to access platforms and markets without layered border taxes. If countries begin levying duties on digital transmissions, micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) exporters could suffer in an increasingly protectionist world.

The India AI Impact Summit 2026 in New Delhi showcased India's ambition to become a hub for responsible, human-centric AI innovation. It highlighted how technology can drive inclusive growth across the Global South and demonstrated India's readiness to take leader-

**India should use upcoming negotiations to push for clarity on what constitutes an 'electronic transmission'**

ship roles in global digital trade policy-making. India is already agreeing to zero tariffs under multiple trade agreements, so tariffs can no longer be treated as an import shield.

### Revenue concerns

The principal argument against the moratorium is fiscal/custom revenue loss. Some studies (such as United Nations Trade and Development [UNCTAD] studies by Banga, 2019 and 2021) estimated that developing countries forgo potential tariff revenues from digital imports.

Countering this, ICRIER Working Paper (WP) 426 found that the UNCTAD studies included goods where India has a positive trade balance and/or is a net importer where tariffs are already zero or low under existing free trade agreements. Thus, the argument is technically flawed. India is already a net importer where tariffs are already zero or low under existing free trade agreements. Thus, the argument is technically flawed. India is already a net importer where tariffs are already zero or low under existing free trade agreements. Thus, the argument is technically flawed.

With government focus on electronics exports, global capability centres, and revival of special economic zones, India should prioritise removing export barriers. Imposing customs duties on digital trade transmissions would also pose serious administrative challenges. Indonesia attempted to create a separate HS code, without success. ICRIER WP 426 argued that domestic tax/goods and services tax is a more effective revenue collection method than customs duty.

India is investing heavily in semiconductor design, advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence development, and digital public infrastructure. These ambitions depend on integration into global supply chains and access to digital ecosystems. Timing is critical. While the US threatens tariffs, India is positioning itself as a trusted digital partner. Supporting the moratorium could strengthen India's image as a transparent market, especially as global firms seek secure supply chains and evaluate long-term investments.

### Balanced path forward

Supporting the continuation of the moratorium does not mean accepting ambiguity. India should use upcoming negotiations to push for clarity on what constitutes an "electronic transmission" and how it should be defined within WTO frameworks. Clear definitions would reduce disputes and provide greater legal certainty.

At the same time, India can advocate complementary measures to ensure developing countries benefit from digital trade. This includes strengthening capacity-building provisions, facilitating technology access for MSMEs, and improving digital infrastructure financing.

Trade rules must evolve with technology. Abrupt reversals that introduce uncertainty into digital commerce would be step backward. The WTO moratorium has provided stability during the formative decades of the digital economy.

India should support its continuation—while pressing for clarity, fairness, and developmental safeguards. Doing so would reinforce India's role as a responsible digital leader and protect the interests of developing economies seeking growth through integration, not isolation.

The question before policymakers is not whether digital trade will expand. It will. The question is whether India chooses to shape that expansion from within the system or risks standing at its margins.

# Liberalisation sandboxes can break deadlock



## YARAAN AHLUWALIA

General Counsel, Premji Invest

Used well, they could become living demonstrations of the gov't's reform vision—global models of sustainable, rules-based urban and economic governance

**INDIA HAS BECOME** boldly ambitious in what it wants to build but remains less in how to achieve it. Reforms over the past decade have been a pattern of incrementalism at best—not because they lack democratic legitimacy or policy nuance, but because they were limited by politically safe measures that ultimately failed to deliver commensurate results. For every step forward, a chorus of special interests and federal complexities often pulls another step back. The costs are substantial—the stalling of land acquisition reform alone has left land-related disputes holding up investment projects greater than \$200 billion. Initiatives such as special economic zones (SEZs) and the production-linked incentive scheme also follow an incrementalist approach by relying on financial incentives to offset structural bottlenecks rather than addressing them.

Effective reform is a public good, one that requires deliberate effort in diverse democracies. As James Madison and BR Ambedkar cautioned, democratic systems are distorted when formally empowered governments are unable to act because of narrow special interests.

This raises the question of whether alternative reform pathways exist that can demonstrate our openness to help build consensus. One possibility lies in using existing constitutional space more creatively—by reimaging Union Territories (UTs) not as administrative afterthoughts or strategic outposts but as liberalisation sandboxes—controlled reform environments. Drawing on experience from Guangdong's reform enclaves, Estonia's e-govern-

ance architecture, and Singapore's financial regulatory design, such frameworks could be tested locally in UTs before being scaled nationally.

The creation of the Island Development Authority and the \$9.4-billion Great Nicobar Island Development Project reflects a renewed push by the government to unlock growth in UTs. Yet these initiatives remain sporadic and embedded in the same legal and administrative frameworks that have constrained execution. The real opportunity lies not in incremental adjustments to existing models but in rethinking the governance fabric.

India's UTs occupy a distinct constitutional position, separate from the Centre-state legislative demarcation that defines Indian federalism. Under Articles 240 and 246, UTs without a legislature fall under the direct legislative and executive authority of the central government—a distinction reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in 2023. This structure helps neutralise the democratic distortions that impede reform—it places law-making squarely within the Union's constitutional remit while reducing exposure to entrenched special-interest vetoes.

India's administrative structures function as a hidden tax on growth. Consider dispute resolution—with nearly 50 million pending cases and commercial contract enforcement typically taking around four years, and delays are especially crippling in land markets—where two-thirds of civil cases involve property disputes. These weaknesses directly affect India's ambitions. Take large-scale AI clusters that will require international talent, digital infrastructure, reliable based power, and assured access to land and water. These investments depend on clear titles and liability laws, enforceable contracts, and predictable regulatory approvals. In their absence, even well-capitalised projects struggle to move beyond planning.

When layered onto India's federal polity, where reform efforts often trigger democratic distortions, these constraints become decisive. A liberalisation sandbox offers the ability to jettison such distortions by offering best-in-class governance and administrative frameworks. For instance, the government could pioneer blockchain-secured land registries, single-window regulatory clearances, fast-track dispute resolution, and state-backed nuclear liability frameworks to launch such projects in UTs. Over time, these territories could build concrete economic capabilities—AI clusters, international financial services, arbitration hubs, tokenisation, and digitally enabled trade—even attracting global talent. Beyond economic gains, their success would create a channel for evidence-based policymaking, encouraging wider adoption and strengthening New Delhi's hand in trade negotiations by enabling more cred-

ible market-access commitments in ring-fenced territories for clearer evaluation. While constitutionally sound, liberalisation sandboxes would be an exceptional step and must be designed to streamline—not bypass—checks and balances through empowered and accountable governance. Concerns that this could undermine fragile ecologies, vulnerable communities, or simply rebrand SEZs are legitimate. The government could anchor this through a council presided over by the PMO—drawing on international and Indian constitutional experts, economists, environmentalists, regulators, and entrepreneurs—to design best-in-class governance frameworks to compete with international business havens. A well-conceived sandbox approach will embed suitable environmental and social safeguards within the development framework. If achieved, we'd strengthen institutional democracy by evolution rather than weakening it.

With India's macroeconomic conditions steadily favouring the opportunity is both immediate and substantial. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are 10 times the size of Singapore and larger than Hong Kong, while Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu are comparable in scale to Singapore, offering scope for concentrated, high-quality development. Used well, these sandboxes could become living demonstrations of the government's vision—global models of sustainable, rules-based urban and economic governance. The challenge is self-imposed and warrants a deliberate constitutional solution in the service of democratic evolution.

**The structure governing Union Territories helps neutralise the democratic distortions that impede reform**

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Turbulence for Air India

As protons of "falling flight path" (FE, March 18), four years after the Tata Group's takeover of Air India, the airline is trailing expectations. Regular travellers and public rejected with confidence when AI was taken over by Tata, hoping the latter would overhaul the ailing airline's systems and its management, and bring it at par with private players. While the Tata group

was channelising efforts, placing orders for a massive number of aircraft, overhauling the brand, and setting the house in order, the unfortunate Ahmedabad crash last year cast aspersions. People have confidence in the group's dedication, but it needs to initiate multi-pronged initiatives right from refining internal control, upgrading the fleet, and upskilling flight crew, to reorienting administrative mechanisms. —RV Baskaran, Pune

### China's growth strategy

Apropos of "Enabling Chinese ambitions" (FE, March 18), China is resilient to the disruption in its huge Iranian oil import of 3.8 million barrel a day due to the US-Iran war. The oil import disruption increases costs and impact its economic growth and China's Iranian investments, including the Belt and Road Initiative, will be affected. Despite these headwinds, China chalked out its 15th Five-Year

plan with reduced growth rate but with a goal of high-quality investments, transforming its economy for technological self-reliance and innovation-driven growth including artificial intelligence and robotic and digital application in industries. The instability in West Asia doesn't appear to be affecting China's agenda for high-quality growth yet. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

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# INTERNATIONAL EDITORIALS



## The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

ft.com/opinion

## Reeves' ambitious growth rhetoric clashes with reality

## UK chancellor's plans for a reset with the EU lack credibility

The economic backdrop for UK chancellor Rachel Reeves' Mais lecture – a prestigious annual set piece – was less than ideal. Official data on Friday revealed the British economy flatlined in January, after a sluggish end to 2025. The Iran war has prompted investors to scale back their expectations for interest rate cuts by the Bank of England – which the government had hoped would help drive growth this year – while concerns over rising energy prices are mounting. Reeves' speech set out an ambitious agenda for growth, but it will do little to lift the near-term gloom.

The chancellor put a deeper relationship with the EU, rapid technological adoption and regional growth at the heart of her plans. These are all laudable priorities. Closer ties with the bloc on

regulation, defence and energy would in theory support growth and national security. Britain's services-led economy is also well placed to benefit from a productivity boom through faster AI adoption, while backing the quantum industry should reinforce its technological edge. Finally, boosting activity beyond London would help harness more of the country's productive potential.

But there are doubts about the government's ability to meaningfully deliver on her three goals. First, the EU will talk at the chancellor's unrealistic strategy to cherry-pick arrangements without being prepared to rethink the government's redline opposition to returning to the single market or customs union. The bloc is likely to demand politically contentious concessions in return. Reeves' approach echoes the "cakeism" that stymied earlier negotiations with Brussels.

Next, Reeves' backing of AI and quantum technologies with £2.5bn investment and procurement pledges sends a

positive signal to innovative companies. But worries around a shallow venture capital pool and steep marginal tax rates must also be addressed to prevent tech talent from leaving the UK.

On regional growth, the chancellor appears to be taking a more holistic approach. Her goal to turn the Oxford-Cambridge Arc into Europe's Silicon Valley – using development corporations to spur investment and cut bureaucracy – is promising, as are plans for new city investment funds and greater fiscal devolution.

Reeves' speech builds on her earlier efforts to boost public investment, free up pension capital and streamline the planning system. But her initiatives will take a while to generate growth. Companies and workers need more immediate reasons for optimism too, particularly amid the conflict in the Middle East.

Private sector confidence has been weak since Reeves' first tax-raising budget in October 2024. Hiring and investment intentions are subdued, and

Calls for a more 'active and strategic state' will be met with scepticism by some investors, given the government's record so far

joblessness – especially among younger people – is also on a worrying upward trend. The chancellor's calls for a more "active and strategic state" will be met with scepticism by some investors, given the government's record so far. Meanwhile, reports that former deputy leader Angela Rayner, a favourite to succeed Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, has been courted by investors will only add to concerns about political churn.

Indeed, businesses, investors and households will be looking for more clarity on the chancellor's plans ahead of her Budget in the autumn. They will be focused on bread and butter issues such as tax reform and simplification, investment and hiring incentives, and measures to contain rising costs alongside fiscal and political stability.

Reeves' broader growth agenda is finally taking shape but needs to be developed. Either way, without improvements in near-term confidence, it will lack the economic momentum it needs to take off.

## Opinion Technology

## What's with all the AI lobsters?

Andy Carter



Elaine Moore



The invitation to this week's meetup for fans of viral AI agent OpenClaw comes illustrated with a giant, smiling lobster perched on top of The Gherkin in London. At a recent "ClawCon" in New York, partygoers were photographed wearing lobster claw headbands. Berlin's spin on the trend this month was a night of "technical deep dives and music".

Whether an AI rave sounds like your idea of a good time or not, lobsters are everywhere in tech right now. They are in emojis, on merchandise and added to project titles. The playfulness feels like pre-techlash days, when downloading tools with cute logos was considered fun and hardly anyone talked about human obsolescence. Even Ashton Kutcher – mainstay of the 2010s tech scene – is back,

## The playfulness around OpenClaw's popular autonomous agent feels like pre-techlash days

posing for pictures at the San Francisco chapter of ClawCon.

Everything tracks back to the original lobster – OpenClaw's wide-eyed cartoon crustacean, its claws pointed up as if welcoming a hug. In the space of five months the logo for this free, open-source, locally run autonomous agent is on its way to becoming the mascot for agentic AI – artificial intelligence that can carry out actions on your behalf.

AI needed a friendly symbol. This is, as one venture capital fund manager in San Francisco put it recently, "an unsettling time". Warnings of job displacements arrive in tandem with company enforcement of AI use. Weak murmurings about guardrails are being drowned out by imperatives to win the global race.

The sector's own branding does little to soothe existential anxiety. Think of OpenAI's mechanical-looking circle (which is supposed to resemble blossom) and Grok's *Interstellar*-like singularity symbol. More ominous is the Lovcraftian tentacle monster adopted by some as an early AI meme – a way to represent the real nature of the technology.

Into this uneasy steps a friendly, blobby lobster. Peter Steinberger, OpenClaw's creator, says he chose it because the world is "marching fast

into a future that is weird, and picking something that is weird yet approachable seemed like the right thing to do for this project".

The fact that OpenClaw was created by a single person instead of a big company is part of its appeal. It is a call-back to the tinkering side of tech. Steinberger, a software engineer from Austria in his late thirties, says he built it as a hobby in less than a week. Previously the creator of a popular PDF tools company, he stepped back a few years ago to, in his words, party, go to therapy and do ayalmasca. Now that he's back, he is leaning hard into the lobster joke – referring to himself as the "ClawFather".

Tech companies have been quick to adopt the identification too – bolting the word claw on to agentic projects, like Xiaomi's miClaw and Nvidia's NemoClaw.

The backlash has been as rapid as the adoption. The OpenClaw community went viral with Moltbook – the "Reddit for bots" where AI agents using OpenClaw could communicate. Some of the weirder posts are now thought to have been written by people, taking some of the shine off. Still, the claim that agentic AI has put us on the precipice of a sci-fi future returned last month with RentAHuman.ai, a marketplace for AI agents to pay people to carry out tasks in the real world. The over 600,000 sign-ups feels like a joke that has gone too far.

It helps that the friendly lobster logo rubs off some of the rougher edges. To work best, agents need access to everything on your computer. That means OpenClaw can cause real damage if it is used incorrectly. Steinberger declared in January that non-techies should not install it. But even the experts have had problems. The following month a Meta employee wrote on X that her agent had deleted her inbox.

Moltbook's creators have now joined Meta. Steinberger has opted to join OpenAI. Both he and OpenAI are clear that OpenClaw will remain open but competition from Big Tech is looming.

Developers like to point out that that makes OpenClaw stand out in its accessibility. But this alone is noteworthy. What it has done is show how enthusiastic people feel about AI when they understand what it can do and how to communicate with it. For those of us who don't spend our days dreaming up software solutions, an agent that you message via WhatsApp and instruct to carry out tasks is unimpeachable.

"My goal was to get people to think outside the box and inspire them and to make things fun and weird," wrote Steinberger when I asked what his plan was. "I think I managed."

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## Letters

## We need to remember that real lives are devastated by wars

Watching wars play out as entertaining movies and video games, we conveniently overlook that real people are being maimed and killed, real homes, businesses and critical infrastructure are being blown to smithereens ("AI-driven 'kill chain' transforms how US wages war", Report, March 14). The Faith No More rock

band's lyric – "It's always funny until someone gets hurt / And then it's hilarious" – is how we perceive wars: faraway, as our bombs, missiles and drones rain death on people whose lives we consider unimportant.

The ethos of true warriors holds life sacred and considers killing a necessary evil. It is barbaric to be

gleeful and boastful about death and destruction. Commanders who do so are unfit for office ("White House accused of going too far with fiery war rhetoric", Report, March 7).

But even worse would be to outsource battlefield decisions to amoral machines that are indifferent to life. Even those who subordinate ethics

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## Don't forget the seafarers caught up in this crisis

Understandably, the ongoing conflict in the Gulf has prompted a great deal of speculation about oil and gas prices and the knock-on effects for other essential industries, from aluminium to fertiliser production. With roughly 3,200 ships unable to transit as a result of the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, these concerns are both real and immediate.

However, one dimension of this disruption risks being overlooked: the people on board those vessels. It is estimated that as many as 20,000 seafarers are stranded on ships caught up in the crisis. As the war enters its third week, we face a serious and under-discussed challenge – how to carry out routine crew changes or repatriation.

The maritime sector has experienced this before. During Covid, travel restrictions and port closures left seafarers in effect trapped at sea, in some cases for more than a year beyond the end of their contracts. Extended periods on board, away from families and with limited shore access, placed enormous strain on both the wellbeing and safety of crews.

Seafarers perform an essential role in sustaining global trade. Yet when maritime disruptions occur, their welfare can quickly become a secondary consideration, behind freight rates, commodity prices and supply chains. This situation cannot be allowed to drift. Governments and relevant authorities must work urgently to ensure that maritime routes are reopened safely and that the security and welfare of seafarers are guaranteed.

As analysts and markets speculate about where oil prices may be in six, eight or 12 weeks' time, it is worth remembering that thousands of seafarers are already facing the immediate consequences of this crisis. **Thomas Kazakos**  
Secretary General,  
International Chamber of Shipping,  
London EC3, UK

## North Sea wind farms will not fuel British warships

It was perhaps an unintended irony that you should have positioned the letter from Peter Double, bemoaning the rusty state of HMS Dragon ("How Jenny's Side Party kept the Royal Navy shipshape", March 13), alongside that of Bob Ward urging the prevention of further development of our North Sea oil reserves as an example to other nations.

I have difficulty accepting the argument of the latter. Our government is seeking to address the somewhat parlous state of the Royal Navy by building eight Type-26 anti-submarine frigates on the Clyde and five Type-31 frigates at Rosyth.

These vessels, and our two huge aircraft carriers, are all powered by diesel-electric propulsion, which was deemed preferable to nuclear propulsion in the concept



stage on grounds of economy. Environmentalists argue, rather simplistically I fear, that we can simply import diesel for that purpose, perhaps from Norway, a very near neighbour.

Well, here is further irony indeed. Norway is currently pumping oil from the North Sea right up to the boundary of its sector, bordering that of the UK, rather cruelly exploding Ward's argument. And guess what? Norway has just ordered six Type-26 frigates from us. Further, one reason for the Type-26/31 programmes is that we need to be able to protect our green North Sea wind farms from Russian sabotage. I will mention too that our fighters stationed at RAF Lossiemouth use military-grade kerosene as fuel to defend our offshore skies from Russian intrusion.

There is a noxious reek here that cannot be attributable to an escape of condensate. Am I wrong in suspecting muddled thinking?

**Donald R MacLeod KC**  
Edinburgh, UK

## Europe must secure a quid pro quo on Ukraine

Donald Trump's political approach is famously transactional. European leaders should bear this in mind as tensions in the Strait of Hormuz threaten disruption to one of the world's most vital energy corridors.

With US midterm elections approaching, Republicans face mounting pressure from high petrol prices and inflation. Domestic economic pressure may therefore shape Washington's willingness to seek help abroad (Interviews, March 17).

The US Navy appears stretched, lacking sufficient destroyers and mine countermeasure vessels to guarantee the uninterrupted flow of oil. The UK, France and other European partners could help safeguard this critical artery by contributing naval assets.

But such support should come with a clear quid pro quo: renewed and unequivocal US military and economic backing for Ukraine and an end to policies that weaken Kyiv's position against Moscow.

**Howard Radley**  
London NW6, UK

## Shein's core fashion offering looks intact

Your article details the mounting regulatory pressure facing Shein ("The problems piling up for Shein", The Big Read, February 21).

Customs scrutiny, the end of duty exemptions and investigations under the EU's Digital Services Act are significant developments. However, regulatory pressure is not the same as behavioural collapse.

Our analysis of cross-market retail and social media data across the fast-fashion sector shows that Shein's core engagement patterns remain intact. The company's model rests on a repeat cycle: low prices, rapid product turnover and heavy social media amplification. That cycle continues to generate high levels of online replication and short-term purchasing spikes, even in markets where scrutiny has intensified.

Search volumes around seasonal events remain elevated. Social media haul formats and discount-code sharing remain widespread. In several European markets, controversy itself has coincided with increased visibility rather than retreat. While enforcement may affect margins, logistics and expansion plans, there is little evidence so far of a structural break in consumer participation.

This distinction matters. Shein's vulnerability appears to lie in sustained capital formation and regulatory tolerance, not in immediate demand. Tariffs and compliance costs may compress profitability. But the appetite for inexpensive, fast-moving fashion – particularly during a prolonged cost of living squeeze – remains strong.

The central question is whether regulation can alter consumer behaviour, not just corporate economics.

Until the demand for speed and affordability weakens, pressure may slow Shein's growth without fundamentally dismantling its core loop.

**Russell Glenister**  
Founder and CEO, The Fame Index,  
London EC1, UK

## Stranger than fiction

The future of writing novels and fiction generally is bleak if the front page of Monday's FT is to be believed.

The splash for example explains how the world's largest military force in history – according to president Donald Trump – cannot make the Strait of Hormuz safe for world shipping ("Talks with Iran yield results, India says", Report, March 16).

Below the fold, we are reading that Peter Thiel will be preaching against Pope Leo XIV, arguing that those who lobby for tech regulation are hangers of the antichrist ("Palantir founder Thiel challenges pope with lecture in Rome on the antichrist", Report, March 16).

So do I read novels? No, I make do with the FT.  
**Richard Hooper**  
London N2, UK

## How parliament ignored a disability charity's evidence

Your article "Labour to refocus apprenticeships on youth" (Report, March 14) highlights renewed efforts to tackle economic inactivity among younger people, many of whom are outside the labour market because of sickness or disability. If this debate is to be meaningful, both government and parliament must listen to the lived experience of those navigating the systems designed to support them.

Disabled workers from Aspire – including one who previously had fallen into the Neet category (not in employment, education or training) as a result of disability, exclusion from school and lack of educational qualifications – helped prepare our evidence for parliament's public accounts committee inquiry into the access to work scheme. This is the grant intended to enable disabled people to access and remain in employment.

The committee accepted our submission. To the dismay of our workers our evidence was not published. When we asked, we were told it had been marked confidential, a decision never communicated to us. We do not know the number of other submissions the committee felt unable to publish. But the chair has indicated there are many.

Because evidence submitted to a parliamentary committee becomes the property of parliament, it cannot be published without permission. To do so would technically place us in contempt of parliament.

Parliamentary inquiries exist to strengthen scrutiny by bringing lived experience into the open.

Disillusion with democracy grows when people feel cheated by a system that says one thing and does the other. And when that feeling is strong some will stop participating, others will never start and the rest will hear a louder and clearer message that they truly do matter for those who would wish to sweep democratic institutions apart.

**Katharine Sutton**  
Managing Director, Aspire Community Works, London E2, UK

## Gross national contentment

"Touched if not generated by AI." What a brilliant insight from Claire Bodanis ("Made by the tag, to show humans created the content", Letters, March 17). I do hope you will give active support to her specific proposal... ie for "labelling non-AI-generated content". This will certainly be in the interests of maximising our gross national contentment!

**David Lea, Lord Lea of Croydon**  
London, Hampshire, UK

## Correction

Matthew Chitwood is a former Institute of Current World Affairs fellow, not a former Fulbright scholar as wrongly stated in an article on March 9.

# Opinion

## China is not going to bail the president out

### AMERICA

Edward Luce



**W**ars, AI drama, even the odd peace prize – the world had plenty on its bingo card for 2026. But it did not include Donald Trump urging China to send ships to the Middle East. The US president's request for Chinese help is a black swan moment.

In an age of great power rivalry, the hegemon is inviting its main challenger to help extract it from the world's most combustible region. Read that again. Then ponder where China's incentive lies. Why interrupt your

enemy while he is making a mistake? That China has no intention of sending minesweepers to the Strait of Hormuz is clear. The question is whether Xi Jinping wants to see Trump backed into a corner. It is one thing for China to gain a diplomatic edge over the US; quite another to test whether Trump is Dr Strangelove.

The worse things go for Trump in the Gulf, the more tempted he will be to take risks. George W Bush's 2005 invasion of Iraq ended up being a geopolitical windfall for China. US boots on the ground in Iraq could be at least as big.

Trump's pitch to China nevertheless makes sense. With roughly half of China's oil imports coming through the Strait of Hormuz, compared with almost nothing for America, Xi has a greater long-term stake in Middle Eastern stability than the US.

That was one reason why Joe Biden commended China for blocking a

rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023. The hope was that China's days of free riding on US maritime security were over. That sounded plausible then. In today's drone-infested Middle East, however, Beijing is content to play the looker.

Yet China also dreads instability. Since being re-elected in 2024, Trump

**In an age of great power rivalry, why interrupt your enemy while he is making a mistake?**

has been pressing Xi to host a summit. Last April, however, Trump launched an economic war on China, which was his biggest "liberation day" target with tariffs reaching 145 per cent. Following China's rare earths embargo, the two

reached a truce last October. That paved the way for Xi to invite Trump to China.

From Xi's point of view, the summit's goal would be to stabilise US-China relations. Until the US struck Iran on February 28, Trump's purpose was hazier. The only thing on his mind now is exit from a conflict that could consume his presidency. Trump needs all the help he can get, including from China.

Yet he was clearly loath to be pictured on a podium with Xi while the war with Iran is still raging. The optics of any US president – let alone Trump – heading to the Forbidden City with a begging bowl is too lurid. In an interview with the FT on Sunday, Trump floated the prospect of delaying the summit, which was set for March 31 to April 2.

On Monday he postponed it. In the interview, he said that China's help in the Gulf would be needed before he met Xi, whenever that is. Since Trump knows there is scant chance China will

insert personnel into the world's most lethal chokepoint, we must take the reason for the president's delay with a pinch of salt.

Which leaves the world in a state of suspension. Trump has better odds of cajoling help from Nato partners, including Britain. Even then, however, he has made it very hard for US allies to say yes. For a start, they were not consulted about a war that none of them would have advised. Second, Nato is a self-defence organisation. That means an attack on one is treated as an attack on all. It does not mean that a unilateral attack by one against a third party must be joined by fellow members, especially when they see that war as gratuitous.

The difference is that Trump can inflict real pain on Europe for refusing to help him. He already suspended oil sanctions on Russia, which is boosting Vladimir Putin's coffers. That, and the fact that there are far fewer Patriot

missiles available for Ukraine, is a blow to European security.

Trump is unfazed by evidence that Putin is helping Iran target US military assets. Vetoing Britain's deal with Mauritius on Diego Garcia is one threat he was tempted to carry out before the war. Withholding intelligence from Ukraine is another.

By contrast, China is a nut that Trump has not learnt to crack. While Beijing has a stranglehold on rare earths, America is at a disadvantage. Chinese consumers dislike higher oil prices as much as Americans. Until Trump postponed, China said it wanted the summit to go ahead as scheduled.

But Trump is now caught in a trap of his own making. Two weeks is famously a long time in the US president's eyes. Which means he is adjusting his mindset for a long war.

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## Trump has broken it. Now he owns it

### Martin Wolf Economics

Continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz threatens the movement of gas and fertilisers as well as oil



**T**he only thing prohibiting transit in the straits right now is Iran shooting at shipping. It is open for transit, should Iran not do that." This staggering remark from "secretary of war" Pete Hegseth explains why none of the US allies being asked to join in the fight to reopen the Strait of Hormuz are prepared to do so: they were not consulted; this is not a Nato operation; and, above all, the people in charge are plainly careless. Of course, Iran is attacking the shipping in the strait. That is the most obvious way for its leadership to fend off the US and Israeli assault. The question is rather what are the attackers able to do about it. After all, as Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgewater notes, "in the case of this Iran war, ... there is near-universal agreement, that it all comes down to who controls the Strait of Hormuz". At the moment Iran does. So long as this is true, it is winning.

Quite simply, as the International Energy Agency has noted: "The war in the Middle East is creating the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market." Yet it also estimates that global oil supply will actually rise "by 1.1m barrels a day in 2026 on average, with non-Opec+ producers accounting for the entire increase." That is because the IEA expects trade flows through the strait to resume gradually from the end of March and then quickly recover over April. But it is not hard to imagine a far grimmer future.

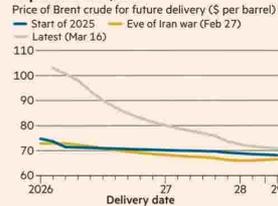
In his Substack, The Overshoot, Matthew Klein argues that oil prices are surprisingly low. This is true in both nominal and long-run real terms. Just like the IEA, markets assume that things will soon return to normal. Yet it is not at all obvious why this will be the case. In particular, as Klein stresses, "the current threat to supply is unprecedented". Moreover, he adds, previous "changes in prices required to reduce demand and/or increase supply were far larger than what we have seen so far, and the adjustment periods also took longer, even though the changes in volumes were also far smaller than what is currently happening". (See charts.)

Crucially, exports of crude oil from Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were about 20 per cent of global supply and more than 40 per cent of global crude oil exports. Much of this has now vanished. If traffic through the strait were to stop blocked because ships choose to avoid Iran's missiles, drones and mines, the loss of supply would be unprecedented.

Since the early 1970s, notes Klein, we have had three periods when oil prices more than doubled from "normal" levels and then stayed high: the Arab oil embargo of 1973; the Iranian revolution of the late 1970s; and the soaring demand of 2003-08, especially from China. For demand and supply to balance, there would once again have to be far higher prices, because demand for oil is inelastic, especially in the short run. To achieve needed reductions in



**Markets expect the price of a barrel of oil to peak above \$100**



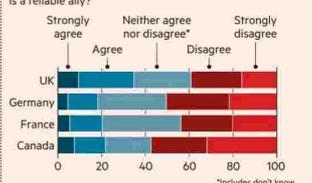
Sources: ICE; Matthew Klein

**If the Strait of Hormuz is closed, the reduction in oil supply would be among the largest ever**



Sources: EIA; Matthew Klein

**Most people in important allied countries now longer view the US as a reliable ally**



Sources: Politico poll of UK, German, French & Canadian adults, 6-9 Feb 2026

demand, oil prices might have to rise far above \$200 a barrel, which would suppress demand for oil both directly and also indirectly, via the macroeconomic impacts of higher inflation, interest rates and unemployment.

Moreover, it is not just about oil. It is also about gas, fertilisers and petrochemicals, more broadly. These are crucial inputs. Higher prices and outright scarcity would have damaging effects, notably on food production. Many of these would be particularly damaging in

**Almost all countries will be hurt by the impact on inflation, demand and income distribution**

Asia, for which the Gulf is the dominant supplier of oil, gas and related products.

In brief, if the strait is not reopened soon, the world risks both economic and political disruption. Only one major power, Russia, will be unambiguously better off. Moreover, not only net oil and gas importers will be damaged. Countries may need some of these products because they suit particular purposes. Moreover, almost all countries will be hurt by the impact on inflation, demand and income distribution.

So what is to be done? In the short run it is up to the US to fix the problem it created. It must find a way to end this entirely predictable (and predicted) threat from Iran. It cannot be up to others to save it from its failure to think things through, particularly after its multiple hostile actions and words,

notably over tariffs. It should have remembered the words of Colin Powell, a wiser military leader, who famously warned George W Bush that "If you break it, you own it." That was said of the war in Iraq. It is now true of global oil supply. The US owns that problem.

Yes, the US will threaten not to come to the rescue of its Nato allies in a crisis. But the sad truth is that very few of its allies expect it to do so in any case. Its behaviour towards them has been so erratic and offensive, under Trump, that trust has in large part evaporated. Worse, the US has even seemed hostile to the liberal democratic values that Europeans and others long believed they shared with the hegemonic power.

Is there then a way through this mess to a measure of meaningful stability in this crucial region of the world? It does not

know. If it is a military one, it is up to those who attacked Iran to find it. If it is a diplomatic one, then outside countries might be able to help, though India or China are likely to have far more influence over Iran than any western power.

In the long run, the world needs to diminish its reliance on oil and gas. But that will not be tomorrow. In the short run, the world has to hope that the US comes to its senses. I used to think that Trump's sole good point was that he did not want to fight wars. Now it turns out he loves them, but cannot bother to think through how he is going to win them – a problem many of his predecessors shared. Maybe he will learn something useful from this war. But first of all he must find a way to end it.

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## The era of US dominance in economic warfare is over

### Nicholas Mulder

Iran's effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has sent shockwaves through the global economy. The Iranian threat to shipping in the Gulf is widely seen as an asymmetric retaliation against the US and Israel. But Iran has actually replicated a tactic that America has long practised in its use of sanctions: it has turned a key chokepoint in the world economy into a weapon to compel its adversary to de-escalate.

This is not the first time that the Trump administration has faced blowback from an adversary responding with their own economic weapons. Upon returning to office, Trump

embarked on an assault on the global trade system by levying hefty tariffs on friends and foes alike. Several US allies succumbed and quickly signed trade deals to preserve their relationship with Washington. But not all countries acquiesced. China held firm and launched a counteroffensive. When new US export controls were unveiled in late 2025, Beijing retaliated by imposing controls on its exports of refined rare earths.

In the decades that followed the end of the cold war, America had an effective monopoly on major sanctions. That is no longer the case. Iran and China have now shown that the era of US dominance in economic warfare is over.

The Chinese critical minerals weapon struck US manufacturers in the defence, aerospace and automobile industries, leading to delays and production cuts in North America and elsewhere. China's pressure on US supply chains eventually forced Trump into economic de-escalation. The deal concluded with Xi Jinping in South Korea in October 2025 amounted to a Sino-American truce in economic coercion.

Now, by embarking on another American war in the Middle East, Trump has

**In today's sanctions-clogged world, more pressure can mean diminishing returns**

unleashed a much larger set of risks. The entire world is experiencing the damage that broad-based economic coercion can inflict. By moving from "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran to open war, the US prompted the Iranians to deploy an economic weapon of their own – cutting off 20 per cent of global oil and gas flows and one-third of

the global fertiliser trade that passes through the Strait of Hormuz and enforcing that closure with missiles, drones and mines.

What does the end of the unipolar era in economic warfare mean for the global economy? For one thing, it is apparent that the US and its allies will face hard trade-offs, especially when seeking to use sanctions in the oil market. Iran's blockade has caused such a large energy price shock that the Trump administration has temporarily relented on its sanctions on Russian oil.

The EU, which only recently celebrated its imminent decoupling from Russian gas, may now have to continue purchasing energy from Russia to avoid economic damage. Warding off the energy weapon used by Tehran has thus necessitated a dialling down of the economic war on Moscow. But although other countries are resorting to economic pressure more frequently, this

does not mean that they will fare any better than the US. The failure of sanctions is a widespread phenomenon.

The economic blockade of Qatar by its Gulf neighbours from 2017 to 2021 was unsuccessful. Sanctions imposed by the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) have failed to mend relations with military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. And China's use of rare earth export controls against Japan and its ban on Australian coal imports have made Tokyo and Canberra more rather than less antagonistic towards Beijing.

This is not surprising. Throughout the history of economic coercion, sustained use of sanctions has often prompted targeted states to increase their self-sufficiency and seek new partners. Diversifying trading patterns weakens the effects of pressure over time. After 2022, Russia reoriented its trade to Asian economies to avoid sanctions.

Chinese companies have reacted to US tariffs by shifting production abroad, and cushioned the hit from export controls on chips by accelerating domestic innovation. In today's sanctions-clogged world economy, more pressure can mean diminishing returns.

Indeed, the political and diplomatic usefulness of sanctions is declining. For a long time, one could argue that sanctions were, despite their imperfect record, at least a preferable alternative to open war. After the US attacks on Venezuela and Iran, this claim no longer seems convincing. Instead of averting military action, sanctions are now just as frequently paving the way to violent escalation. A world of persistent economic wars will, sooner or later, spiral into actual warfare.

The writer, an assistant professor at Cornell University, is the author of 'The Economic Weapon'

# Opinion

## The Iran war and the alleged plot against China

ABDULRAHMAN AL-RASHED

**M**erchants of rumors and conspiracy theorists, much like merchants of fear, feed off people's fears and anxieties. With the first shot fired in the current Middle East conflict, a wave of theories emerged. The most prominent being that the war is nothing more than a US strategic plan against China, aimed at controlling Gulf oil and its maritime routes. Another suggests that US President Donald Trump dragged the region into a devastating war and will eventually walk away, leaving Gulf states to face their fate. Others argue that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pulled Trump into the conflict and that both will ultimately flee the confrontation. A fourth theory claims the war was launched to grant Israel a regional role and eliminate the Palestinian cause. All of these can be debated and the truth is not definitive. But why not consider that the reality may be simpler?

The war against Iran is the result of prolonged tensions and proxy conflicts. It is not surprising that matters eventually escalated into direct war, whether to change the regime or to limit its capabilities. One of the most widespread theories, especially among some intellectual circles, is that this war is a chapter in the US-China rivalry, with Washington seeking to control energy resources and maritime routes to deny Beijing dominance. This theory stems from political science frameworks and does not contradict the broader dynamics of great power competition. Its only flaw is that the US already controls these routes in the oceans and the Gulf, with military bases on land and at sea. It also dominates the oil industry and its movement across the supply chain, from companies to spare parts and insurance. The war with Iran has multiple causes and one main objective. The most important driver is the growing threat from Tehran — its nuclear ambitions, missiles and



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cross-border militias — which Washington believes must be contained. The stated goal is to curb the threat posed by Iran's regime. Does Washington want to control energy sources and maritime routes against its rival China? Yes, but not in a simplistic sense. Competition is more like a chess game played across the global map. US-China competition is indeed strong in Asia and Africa but that is separate from the serious threats created by Iran's regime in the region and globally — threats that Washington believes have reached a point requiring containment and deterrence. The rivalry between the two powers is intense over resources, markets and technology, but this does not necessarily mean entering semi-direct wars. In fact, contrary to that notion, during the current oil shock, Washington lifted restrictions and facilitated China's purchase of Iranian and Russian oil to prevent global economic collapse. Trump also urged China to send forces to help protect oil tankers.

Much of America's competition with China is strategic hedging; the US remains the primary power securing global energy routes. Ironically, China benefits from this protection, while also being the most harmed by Iran's military activities, which have disrupted the flow of Gulf and Iraqi oil and gas and targeted related infrastructure. The cost to China is high because it is the world's largest energy importer, while the US is now the largest producer of oil and gas. As for why the war is happening, Washington says it seeks to strengthen its influence by eliminating the Iranian threat to its interests and the security of its allies, not to deprive China of oil today or in the future. The consequences of the current war are also costly for Washington, particularly in terms of inflation and its impact on domestic elections. The discussion of conspiracies will continue.

**This war has multiple causes and one main objective. The most important driver is the growing threat from Tehran**



**The region is again becoming an arena where competing powers pursue influence, deterrence and ideological ambitions**

## Why the Arab world must avoid the Iran-Israel trap

HANI HAZAIMEH

**T**he escalating confrontation between the US, Israel and Iran is being framed in much of the international discourse as a battle between opposing camps: one defending stability and deterrence, the other resisting Western and Israeli dominance. But for the Arab world, this framing is dangerously misleading. The reality is far more troubling. For decades, the Arab region has repeatedly found itself trapped in conflicts designed, driven or manipulated by external powers. The current escalation is another example of this grim pattern. Arabs must understand a basic and uncomfortable truth: neither Israel nor Iran is acting in the interests of Arab stability, sovereignty or prosperity. Both are pursuing their own strategic agendas and both have already extracted a devastating human price from Arab societies. Those who still believe this confrontation

represents a simple struggle between "good" and "evil" are missing the deeper geopolitical reality. The Middle East is once again becoming an arena where competing powers pursue influence, deterrence and ideological ambitions while Arab populations bear the consequences. Israel's role in this equation is hardly ambiguous. For more than seven decades, Israel has occupied Arab land, defied international law and entrenched a system that continues to dispossess and oppress the Palestinian people. Israeli leaders often justify their actions under the banner of national security. Yet the scale of destruction inflicted on Palestinian civilians has raised profound moral and legal questions worldwide. But if Israel's record in the Arab world is marked by occupation and military supremacy, Iran's regional policy presents a different — but equally troubling — challenge. Over the past two decades, Iran has



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pursued a strategy aimed at expanding its political and military influence across multiple Arab states. Through alliances with nonstate actors, militias and ideological networks, Tehran has steadily inserted itself into the internal dynamics of several Arab countries. The consequences of this strategy are visible across the region — from the fragile political landscape of Iraq to the protracted civil war in Syria and the ongoing instability in Lebanon and Yemen. Iran presents itself as a champion of resistance against Israel and Western hegemony. Yet the practical outcome of its regional strategy has often been prolonged instability within Arab societies. This is the painful truth the region must confront: Arab lives have repeatedly become collateral damage in power struggles that do not serve Arab interests. Now, with missiles and drones inflicting damage across the region, the risks facing the Arab world are multiplying. Any full-scale war between Israel and Iran would

not remain confined to distant battlefields. The Middle East is too interconnected — politically, economically and geographically — for such a conflict to remain limited. Arab governments must guard against the expansion of external influence that undermines national sovereignty. Stability cannot be achieved if regional actors continue to operate through proxy networks and armed factions that weaken state institutions. The growing confrontation between Israel and Iran is not simply another chapter in their long rivalry. It is a warning sign that the region could be drifting toward a wider and more destructive conflict. For the Arab world, the path forward should not be dictated by the agendas of others. It must be shaped by a clear understanding of the region's own priorities and by a firm commitment to protecting the lives, dignity and future of its people.

## Opinion

## Is Lebanon now living its last chance?

EYAD ABU SHAKRA



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and expansionism, it was not the cause of these actions.

From there, this segment argues that pinning all of Lebanon's suffering on Hezbollah's actions reflects a denial of reality and an ignorance of history. They point out that Hezbollah, as a political-military organization, did not exist before the Israeli occupation of 1982. The Zionist project, for its part, came to light in the Swiss city of Basel in 1897 and it began to be practically implemented with the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Its execution on the ground (through funding, sponsorship, complicity and militarization) proceeded over the following decades until the establishment of the state of Israel in the spring of 1948.

And while many believe that Arab naivety in 1948, then again in 1956 and in 1967, was directly responsible for Israel's growing and expanding footprint, they deny crucial historical developments staring us in the face, chief among them being that this entity was never, at any point, alone or isolated.

It is perhaps this reality that led Benjamin Netanyahu to abandon his customary claim of "victimhood." After having mastered this narrative better than any

of his predecessors, he is now boasting, with remarkable arrogance, that Israel has become a major regional power and is on its way to becoming a major global power that will likely set its sights on Türkiye once it is done with Iran.

He is reassured that the expansionist far right has truly come to represent a majority of Israelis. The Israeli public supports expansion, massacres and occupations

wherever its army can reach. The evidence is now clear in both the West Bank and Lebanon, after the world witnessed the horrors of Gaza.

Moreover, the Israeli prime minister is now certain that there are no international or regional obstacles to the fulfillment of his ambitions. The moral compass has been lost and

the once "central" Palestinian cause has evaporated.

In light of all this, it is no longer surprising that Netanyahu feels invincible and behaves with unprecedented hubris. How could he not when we now even hear those who had once claimed to be his opponents and adversaries, such as Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, voice positions no less extreme and abrasive than his own?

Last week, my esteemed colleague Hiba Nasr, an Asharq News correspondent in Washington, wrote a post on X that reflected palpable anguish about the receding shadow of the Lebanese state in her village in southern Lebanon after the army's withdrawal in the face of a new Israeli assault.

Hiba wrote about her tranquil village, nestled in the Wadi Al-Taym valley and sheltered by the majesty of Mount Hermon, despairing at how the state, after having given residents the impression that they could again have hope and dream, was abandoning them.

"It weighs heavily on us to be abandoned for decades, only to appear in the news as part of a conflict we never chose," she wrote. "May we return ... May it be a nightmare that ends soon."

Beyond the suffering and pain of the population native to this land, the Lebanese oscillate between a blame game and fears for the future. One segment finds comfort in addressing a world it had known for decades, decrying the constant marginalization of the state in favor of

Hezbollah, Iran's "Trojan horse."

This segment of the Lebanese population has always condemned reckless adventurism on the part of an armed force that is ideologically and structurally beholden to outside powers and that has consistently failed to acknowledge the severe imbalance of power between its camp and its rival's.

Accordingly, this segment believes that this force, Hezbollah, has allowed the Israeli fundamentalist hard-liners to implement their messianic ambitions by portraying their assault as legitimate "self-defense" ... and eventually pursue scorched-earth operations in preparation for seizing and settling the land.

This is precisely what has happened and continues to happen in what remains of Palestine.

It is currently also unfolding in Lebanon and it is what the rest of the Arab Levant can expect.

On the other hand, another segment of the Lebanese population believes that Hezbollah should be understood as a Lebanese political condition and, in their view, while the party may have facilitated the task of the Israeli propaganda machine and helped justify its aggression, occupation

### Beyond the suffering and pain of the population, the Lebanese oscillate between a blame game and fears for the future

## The future is urban

YOSSI MEKELBERG



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Some changes in human history are sudden and we are often mesmerized by them. Others are more incremental and evolutionary, yet no less revolutionary or impactful. Urbanization belongs to the latter.

The movement from the countryside and rural life toward towns and cities has dramatically changed the way humans live — and the last chapter of this story is far from being written.

From humble beginnings in small settlements, the urban population has grown steadily. With technological advances, especially in the post-Second World War era, the demand for manual labor has declined while new opportunities continue to emerge in towns and cities. In 1950, urban living was still relatively uncommon: only about 20 percent of the world's 2.5 billion people lived in cities, defined as population centers with at least 50,000 inhabitants. Decades of urbanization have since transformed the global landscape. Today, cities are home to about 45 percent of the world's 8.2 billion people.

Despite the negative aspects of urban living, largely driven by high population density, cities continue to attract people in growing numbers. High pollution levels, rising living costs, severe traffic congestion,

reduced access to green spaces and struggling infrastructure for waste management are among the most common challenges. Higher crime rates in some urban areas add to these concerns.

Yet the benefits of city life often outweigh its disadvantages and the trajectory points to continued urban growth. A recent UN report estimated that the world will have gained approximately 2.2 billion new urban residents by 2050, mostly in Africa and

Asia. As a result, about 70 percent of humanity might be living in cities, many of them megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants.

What draws people to cities is both tangible and intangible. Cities offer material benefits, jobs and wealth-creating opportunities, while services are more widely available, accessible

and diverse. Healthcare, education and retail options are typically far more extensive than in rural areas. Yet urban life is also about lifestyle — one that is constantly evolving. Urban living has reshaped human interactions and transformed society. Without cities, art and culture, architecture and tourism, even the art of conversation, would likely not have flourished as they have done.

However, this transformation has come at a cost. Urbanization has changed the nature of some of our social ties. For example, we

are seeing the decline of the extended family and the support structures that has traditionally provided. And many people feel that city life can be paradoxically solitary, where one can live among millions of others yet often experience social isolation.

Over decades of urban debate since the mid-20th century, cities have emerged as engines of both national and global economic growth and centers for the cross-fertilization of ideas and innovation. Today, cities account for more than 80 percent of global gross domestic product, far exceeding their share of the world's population and suggesting significantly higher productivity than rural areas.

The direction of travel is clear: the future is urban. If projections suggesting that up to 90 percent of the global population could live in cities by the end of the century prove accurate, urban development will become even more complex, yet also more exciting and promising.

Rapid urban expansion requires cities, regardless of their location, to demonstrate resilience across three key areas: economic productivity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. While these goals may appear contradictory within current

economic structures, they are in fact complementary.

Rising living costs, particularly in highly sought-after cities that usually have soaring rents, can push people toward poverty or keep them constantly on the brink of it, sometimes leading to homelessness. In lower-income countries, cities increasingly serve as refuges from poverty and the consequences of climate change.

When conditions in large cities, and more so in megacities, become hostile to low-income residents, opportunities emerge for smaller towns and cities to think bigger.

Although the move toward urban life may have initially been driven more by necessity than preference, urban centers have

nonetheless continued to attract growing numbers to the city lights. Beyond just jobs, cities give people a sense of identity, pride and belonging. They are a place where life rarely feels dull and where people can continue to grow throughout their lives.

As the British writer Samuel Johnson famously observed in the late 18th century: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." Those who embrace urban life to its fullest may occasionally suffer from fatigue — but rarely from boredom.

### The benefits of city life often outweigh its disadvantages and the trajectory points to continued urban growth

### Many people feel city life can be paradoxically solitary, living among millions of others yet experiencing social isolation

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Saudi Research & Media Group

Established in 1987 by  
Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

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**ARAB NEWS**

is a daily international newspaper published by the  
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1975 by  
Hisham & Muhammad Al Hafiz

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Deputy Editor-in-Chief  
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EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com  
MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALLA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3; India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y; Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

L: Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 15 Rs; Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore S\$; Syria 20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 30 P; U.S. \$1.50; Republic of Yemen R 50; Sudan 25 P.

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## EDITORIALS

# Speaker Chris Welch has an iron fist. It threatens to disenfranchise voters

Like many incumbent Democrats throughout the state, Illinois Reps. Fred Crespo and Harry Benton ran unopposed in yesterday's primary. But here's where those two suburban lawmakers differ from Illinois' other Democratic state lawmakers who are preparing for November's general election.

They're not permitted to attend caucus meetings with their fellow Democrats.

As a result, Democrats in Crespo's northwest suburban district and Benton's southwest suburban district are voting for representatives whose ability to make a difference in the Capitol has been significantly weakened due to internal party politics.

These men have been dispatched to the Democratic doghouse for different reasons by Illinois House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch, who's built quite a record of ruling his caucus with an iron fist over the last five years or so.

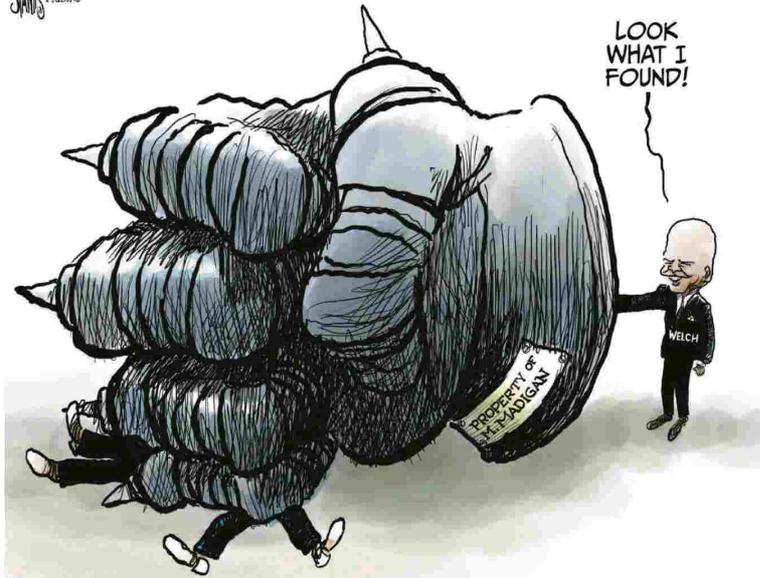
Without public explanation, Welch stripped Benton of his committee assignments and barred him from caucus meetings late last month, the Tribune reported. Last year, Welch stripped Crespo of a committee chairmanship and kicked him out of the caucus after Crespo publicly proposed a major budget policy to gird against potential Trump administration cuts (quite the sensible idea, we might add) as the caucus internally was trying to forge House Democratic consensus on the budget.

Former speaker, now federal prison inmate, Michael Madigan, was dubbed the velvet hammer for how he spoke softly — and seldom — and yet set firm expectations for his fellow Democrats, which most of them followed. The few who displeased or challenged him usually suffered some form of punishment, as Madigan held firm control over campaign funding on which most members relied for re-election.

But with Madigan, at least, there was the chance of future rehabilitation for those with whom he was unhappy. Perhaps the best example comes from 2011, when Madigan tapped then-Rep. Elaine Nekritz for leadership in the House even after she'd voted against the chamber's rules package in 2009 — a no-no in Madigan's book. Madigan came to see Nekritz as a valuable member of his caucus and didn't allow any lingering personal beef to stand in the way of his judgment about what she had to offer. He said as much at the time.

We're not recounting this history about Madigan to say we've had a change of heart about him. Far from it. But we are recalling the aspect of Madigan's leadership where he could relegate past slights to history and forge new, productive relationships. That is

STANTIS  
FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

something Welch should emulate.

Since becoming speaker in 2021, Welch already has booted three Democrats from his party's House caucus and ousted one of them — long-time Rep. Mary Flowers — from the chamber by recruiting a primary challenger, who defeated her.

In Benton's case, allegations of sexual harassment may have prompted Welch's action, the Tribune reported. Our reporter was not able to reach Benton for comment. Welch also declined to comment; separately, he also had for no comment for us. Such silence is unhelpful. We agree with House Republicans who have said that the public deserves to know the substance and nature of any such allegations and how they are being handled by the speaker.

Still, the news about Benton prompted us to reach out to Crespo to get caught up

on his situation. Crespo told us that, yes indeed, he's still frozen out of the caucus. We condemned Welch's punishment of Crespo shortly after it happened; That he remains on the outs is beyond absurd.

But Crespo added something more disturbing. Last year, after a masked gunman shot the former Minnesota House speaker and her husband to death and tried to assassinate other Democratic state lawmakers, Illinois state police held sessions with anxious Springfield lawmakers to discuss their security. Crespo tells us he wasn't allowed in those meetings.

"That to me was going too far," Crespo said. "What kind of leader would not include all the colleagues for something as serious as public safety?"

What kind indeed? We also asked Speaker Welch's office to

respond on the Crespo situation, but they declined to comment.

We understand that keeping Democrats in Springfield working productively together is challenging and tricky. But it's clear to us that Crespo's treatment is unwarranted.

As it stands, two House Democrats will be on the ballot in November who aren't allowed to caucus with their fellow Democrats. That reflects poorly on the speaker, who has an informal rule that no major bill will move to the floor unless at least 60 of his chamber's 78 Democrats support it. It's going to get ever more difficult to enforce that dictate — which is unwise anyway and purposefully impedes bipartisan solutions to Illinois' many problems — if Welch keeps booting more fellow Democrats out of his club.

## As a hot, new market tests Chicago's trading industry, trouble looms

The rise of prediction markets has enabled Americans across the country to trade on practically any event, from sports to elections and, most recently, death and destruction.

Will Iran's leader be removed, potentially by assassination? Will a nuclear bomb be detonated?

Prediction markets such as Polymarket and Kalshi enable customers to bet yes-or-no on all kinds of timely questions, pitting individuals against each other rather than against a casino or betting site.

The rise of these markets has prompted a backlash, most recently over the controversial contracts related to war that may have violated U.S. regulations. Mainstream financial players are struggling to embrace the latest innovations without inviting a regulatory crackdown. In Congress, Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat, probably spoke for many of his colleagues when he responded to wagers on military strikes against Iran with an incredulous, "It's insane this is legal."

It may not be legal. As it stands, Kalshi and Polymarket have offered sports-event contracts in Illinois and other places where state regulators say the products amount to illegal

or unlicensed sports betting, setting up a direct clash over whether federal derivatives law can pre-empt state gaming rules. Illinois is among the states that have pushed back, and the Trump administration has backed a broader view of federal authority.

With Congress unlikely to act during an election year, the Supreme Court could be left to decide cases now winding through lower-court jurisdictions that appear to be split. The dispute doesn't fit neatly into a conservative-versus liberal legal template. Depending on the outcome, the future of these markets could be up for grabs or, conversely, states could lose control over gambling and the billions of dollars in revenue it generates.

For years, this page has staunchly defended free markets. But we're not in favor of free-for-alls, and the current state-of-play is alarming. Even many of the free-market advocates attending last week's Futures Industry Association conference express misgivings. An industry that has worked for decades to disassociate itself from gambling now finds itself tempted to roll the dice on these fast-growing new markets. Cboe says it is focused on financial

contracts rather than sports betting and is launching a more nuanced new version of the simple yes-or-no prediction-market offerings, aiming to attract cerebral young traders who could graduate to its traditional options products.

Crosstown rival CME has partnered with FanDuel, the sports betting platform, and Chief Executive Officer Terry Duffy recently complained about the difficulty of making strategic decisions without legal or regulatory clarity. Last year, ICE, owner of the NYSE and other exchanges, announced it made a multibillion-dollar investment in Polymarket, which offers a dizzying range of contracts.

Problems are piling up, including disputes over how markets are resolved and scrutiny over whether traders with inside information could profit from sensitive events.

Exchanges have a duty to list contracts that can't be readily manipulated. Sizable bets were placed hours before airstrikes began in Iran, for instance, raising questions about whether government officials profited from secret intelligence.

The Commodity Futures Trading Commission, on deck to regulate Kalshi, Polymarket and their ilk, has been

hollowed out by layoffs and retirements. More than a year into the Trump administration, only one of its five commissioners is in place, and Chairman Michael Selig has yet to establish any credibility.

As of today, the CFTC is poorly positioned to protect customers and prevent manipulation in these fast-moving new markets. Congress shows little sign of settling the regulatory question anytime soon.

With lawmakers divided and courts weighing competing rulings, the legal framework governing these markets may remain unsettled for some time.

This undesirable situation can be resolved with common-sense guardrails. If Congress is too divided to act, and courts won't reach a final ruling for years, the trading industry should take matters into its own hands, policing itself to a greater extent than it has so far.

Self-regulation would be much better than letting a dispute fester with states coast-to-coast and failing to protect the integrity of markets that a new generation of customers has eagerly embraced. The longer the wait, the greater the risk of a potentially transformative financial innovation being smothered in the crib.

### ON THIS DAY 26 YEARS AGO THE SAD AND SICKENING NRA

It would be a sweet irony if the National Rifle Association's revolting attempt to capitalize on the murder of Ricky Byrdsong finally broke Washington's stalemate on gun control.

Even for an organization that thrives on cowboy rhetoric, the official wisdom that emanated from the NRA last week was shocking.

Last Sunday, NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre recklessly claimed that President Clinton was "willing to accept a certain level of killing to further his political agenda." Three days later, LaPierre suggested that Clinton was responsible for the death last summer of Byrdsong, the former Northwestern University basketball coach who was shot to death by white supremacist Benjamin Smith.

That's more than vile political rhetoric from the NRA. That's sick.

So when is the Republican leadership in Congress going to realize that by stalling negotiations on gun safety measures — talks have been on hold since last fall — it is doing the bidding of a lobbying group that stands on the fringe of national debate?

Maybe that is starting to dawn on some people. Texas Gov. George W. Bush has tried to walk a fine line on guns, but he was quick to repudiate LaPierre and to emphasize his own support for some gun-control measures. He has yet to make as dramatic a statement as his father did in 1995, when former president George Bush renounced his NRA membership after the group called federal agents "jack-booted thugs."

George W. Bush could go further by pressing Congress to resume negotiations on gun control. It is hardly as though Bush would be standing alone. A number of Republicans last week voted for a successful House resolution support-

ing renewed negotiations. House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde have all along made a commendable effort to keep the issue alive.

But the fact is that even after the horrendous shootings at Columbine High School last April, the NRA ultimately prevailed. Congress was paralyzed by the power of the gun lobby, and did nothing.

Even the gun industry is passing Congress by in the effort toward firearms safety. The Clinton administration announced Friday that it will stay out of a class-action lawsuit against Smith & Wesson because the gunmaker has agreed to install trigger locks on its firearms and promote other gun safety measures.

Will Congress be the last body standing in defense of the NRA?

Tribune editorial board, March 18, 2000

## OPINION

# The US has the ability to achieve victory in Iran

By Chuck DeVore  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Americans tend to ignore foreign policy. Living in a continent-sized nation bounded by two vast oceans allows for that dangerous self-deception. But when we're attacked or the price of gas spikes, we're rudely reminded that while we may not care about the world, the world cares for us.

Why did President Donald Trump order an attack on Iran? Two reasons: because we had to and because we had the ability to achieve victory.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been a problem for the U.S. since President Jimmy Carter encouraged the fall of the shah in 1979. Carter was worried about human rights. If only he knew the horrors his actions would unleash.

The pattern of Iranian aggression began in 1979, when revolutionaries seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. This act of war humiliated the United States and established Tehran's playbook: terrorism, defiance and impunity. Four years later, Iran backed nascent militant group Hezbollah's suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 U.S. service members on a peacekeeping mission in the deadliest single-day loss for the Corps since Iwo Jima.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) trained and armed the attackers, yet the regime faced no serious consequences. Iran's support for deadly proxies includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. They act as Tehran's forward bases, attacking U.S. forces and allies with funding, weapons and direction from Iran. During the extended conflict and occupation of Iraq, Iranian-supplied penetrators — sophisticated improvised explosive devices — killed or wounded hundreds of American troops with estimates of more than 600 U.S. deaths attributable to Iranian-backed attacks.

Closer to home, Iran conducts illegal operations on U.S. soil, including cyberespionage, assassination plots and attempts to smuggle agents across our borders. FBI warnings about Iranian sleeper cells are based on years of intelligence.

Globally, Iran aids Russia's war on Ukraine by supplying Shahed drones — cheap, deadly "kamikaze" weapons that mostly kill and maim Ukrainian civilians



A man stands in a damaged residence on Saturday at the site of buildings, including a police station, that were destroyed in an airstrike two days ago in the Khani Abad neighborhood of Tehran, Iran. According to authorities, the police station was empty at the time of the attack but six civilians were killed. The United States and Israel have continued a campaign of air strikes in Iran after launching their joint war on the country on Feb. 28.

MAJID SAEEDI/GETTY

while draining Western resources.

With China's help, Iran has been rapidly expanding its ballistic missile arsenal, improving guidance and production with the intent to create an overwhelming offensive capability — before that plan was interrupted by joint U.S. and Israeli action.

And then there's Iran's nuclear weapons program. Iran has amassed about a ton of highly enriched uranium — material with no credible civilian use. While June's Operation Midnight Hammer interrupted Iranian progress toward a larger nuclear stockpile, its existing stocks of 60% enriched uranium were merely weeks away from purification to weapons grade.

Adding to the peril, Iran tested sea-based missile launches two years ago. Using a converted container ship, the IRGC fired a ballistic missile to simulate a high-altitude electromagnetic pulse (EMP) detonation. This capability allows Iran to position a disguised vessel off America's coast, launch a nuclear warhead

high into the atmosphere to cripple our grid and then sink the ship to obscure its origins. Such an EMP attack could cause millions of deaths from collapsed infrastructure — with no intercontinental ballistic missile required.

Further, Iran's corrupt theocratic regime believes that its actions against the "Great Satan" (America) and the "Little Satan" (Israel) can bring about the apocalyptic arrival of the hidden 12th Imam — hardly people that traditional nuclear deterrence would be effective against. Further, there's a very high likelihood that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia and other regional powers would follow soon after.

Why now? While Iran's ballistic missile and nuclear programs were rapidly advancing, so, too, were U.S. capabilities in a changing world.

The face of warfare has transformed since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. What once demanded hundreds of thousands of ground troops — such as the forces assembled for Desert Storm from 1990

to 1991 — can now be accomplished through precision air power. Advances in guided munitions, drones and intelligence enable rapid strikes with accuracy measured in mere feet, dismantling missile sites, command centers and leadership swiftly.

Crucially, the Iranian people themselves can serve as the decisive force on the ground. Widespread discontent, fueled by repression, economic failure, corruption and protests over rights and shortages, has eroded regime loyalty. Unlike more cohesive dictatorships, Iran's youth, middle class and ethnic minorities — Persians number less than 50% in a nation with seven major ethnic groups — are primed to rise once air power shatters the mullahs' control. Further, the clandestine infiltration of Starlink terminals allows unprecedented coordination among dissident groups as well as the even more remarkable real-time, on-the-ground intelligence from Iranians helping U.S. and Israeli airpower destroy their tormentors.

Now, with superior technology and an Iranian population primed for change, Trump's decision to eliminate a growing threat might also achieve lasting strategic results for American national security — the collapse of Iran's ayatollahs will rank with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later.

Had action been deferred, Iran's rapidly increasing ballistic missile would have soon reached the point of immunity — erecting a shield of threatened destruction behind which the mullahs' nuclear program could be rebuilt. Iran has a long and proud history. But the past 47 years under theocratic rule have been an aberration that's held the region — and the world — hostage to violence, chaos and threats.

Chuck DeVore is chief national initiatives officer for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a retired U.S. Army intelligence officer, and a former California state assemblyman.

## Meta's smart glasses are a privacy risk invisible to Chicagoans

By Yunus Emre Tozal  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Meta Ray-Ban smart glasses have a small LED light on the frame that blinks when the camera is recording. According to Meta, this light is the privacy feature, a design solution for the fact that you are now wearing a camera on your face in public.

I find myself thinking about that light. Not because it is inadequate, though it is. I think about it because it invites interpretation, like all urban objects do. The spotlight, the security camera, the construction fence: Interpretation is how we move through cities, though we are seldom aware of it. The LED on the Ray-Ban frame is one such signal. The problem is that nobody really understands what it means.

Recently, Swedish journalists broke news that should have brought the news cycle to a screeching halt. Meta pays subcontractor Sama, based in Nairobi, Kenya, to manually label videos taken by Ray-Ban smart glasses. A user says "Hey Meta" to the artificial intelligence on the glasses in asking it to examine what's seeing. That then sends the video to Meta's servers, then it goes on to workers who label what they see on the video: objects, faces, locations, etc. These workers, the journalists found, see people undressing, using the bathroom and recording their own bank cards by accident. One annotator described the work as: "We see everything."

Seven million pairs of these glasses were sold in 2025. Each pair generates training data. Each "Hey Meta" command routes footage through human eyes on two continents, where they work for low wages under nondisclosure agreements, surveillance cameras and a strict no-questions policy. Workers who raised concerns about what they were



Food influencer Natasha Sonya Zhatko turns on her Meta Ray-Ban smart glasses, which she uses for content creation, in Brea, California, on Feb. 11, 2026. STELLA KALININA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

seeing were fired.

This is the same Sama that Time magazine exposed in 2023 for paying Kenyan workers less than \$2 an hour to label graphic violence and abuse content for OpenAI. Workers described the experience as psychologically devastating, while contracts stated that OpenAI would pay an hourly rate of \$12.50 per worker per hour.

Meta technically discloses this arrangement buried in its privacy policy. A sentence notes that the company reserves the right to conduct "manual (human) review" of AI interactions. That sentence is doing enormous legal work. It is the LED light of the legal world. Technically visible but designed not to be seen.

Urban planners have a concept called legibility, developed by Kevin Lynch in the 1960s. The

idea is that cities should be designed so residents can orient themselves, understand their environment and feel a sense of agency within it. A legible city is one where the street grid makes sense, where landmarks anchor neighborhoods, and where you know where you are and roughly how things work. An illegible city produces anxiety, alienation and disorientation.

The smart-glasses problem is a legibility problem. When you walk down Michigan Avenue today, you cannot tell who around you is recording. The LED light blinks only when active, and even if you spotted every active device, you would have no way of knowing that your image, caught accidentally and without context, might be reviewed by a worker in Nairobi who has no choice but to keep watching no matter what

appears on screen.

This is not a hypothetical privacy risk. It is an active data pipeline running through one of the most documented failures of AI labor ethics on record, operating at scale in every city where 7 million pairs of glasses are being worn.

Cities are negotiated spaces. The compact is implicit but real: When you walk outside, you accept a degree of visibility. You might be seen, photographed or remembered. But that compact has always assumed some rough parity. The person seeing you is also visible to you, subject to the same social norms and standing on the same sidewalk. The smart-glasses pipeline breaks that entirely. The person reviewing your footage is invisible to you, working under rules you never agreed to, in a city you have never

visited, for a company that paid \$2 an hour for the privilege.

Chicago is not a naive city when it comes to surveillance. We have more cameras per capita than almost any American city. The city has debated, legislated and litigated cameras in public space for decades. But those debates assumed a fixed infrastructure. Cameras mounted on poles, operated by identifiable institutions, subject to Freedom of Information Act requests and City Council oversight. Wearable AI cameras are none of those things. They are mobile, privately operated, legally obscured and outsourced to labor markets with no connection to the cities being recorded.

Meta is already working on the next generation of these glasses. Facial recognition, the ability to identify strangers on the street in real time, is coming. The company that cannot reliably blur faces in training data wants to start naming them on purpose.

The LED light will still be there. It will still blink. Most people still will not know what it means.

Cities are legible when their systems are honest about what they are and how they work. A security camera mounted on a pole has an owner, an operator and a legal framework. You can dispute it, submit a FOIA request about it and protest it. A tiny light on a fashionable frame, signaling nothing interpretable to the people walking past, connected to a labor pipeline that runs from the Magnificent Mile to a Nairobi office where workers are fired for asking questions: That is not a privacy feature. It is a design decision made to look like one.

That is a city that no longer knows how to read itself.

Yunus Emre Tozal is a civil engineer in Chicago and a master's of art student at Catholic Theological Union.

## OPINION

Pride Cleaners building at 558 E. 79th St. in Chicago on March 12. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

## Chicago must act to protect the South Side's midcentury modern Pride Cleaners

By Elizabeth Blasius  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

On Feb. 28, the last orders of crisply pressed dress shirts passed through the doors of 79th Street's iconic Pride Cleaners. After nearly 70 years cleaning South Siders' uniforms, sweaters and suits from a building straight out of the futurism of "The Jetsons," Pride Cleaners closed its doors — leaving its future uncertain.

Pride Cleaners, located at 558 E. 79th St. and designed by architect Gerald Siegwart in 1959, was built during a period when midcentury modern design was used to capture the attention of consumers with shape and flash.

Yet Pride Cleaners, both the angled, parabolic building and the towering, colorful pylon sign out front, captured more than customers. This humble dry cleaner, a de jure Chicago landmark, has been photographed by professionals and amateurs alike; has appeared in books, films and

music videos; and has become a keystone in conversations about the significance of Chicago's South Side to this city's architectural heritage.

The architecture of Pride Cleaners stands in stark contrast to Chatham's bungalows and courtyard apartments and the classical revival ornamentation of 79th Street's commercial thoroughfare. Yet when surveyors evaluated Chatham in the 1980s as a part of the fieldwork conducted for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS), they were looking for these traditional architectural elements; midcentury modernism was largely considered too new of a style to be evaluated objectively, so Pride Cleaners was not included.

Nearly 40 years later, Chicago is still using the aging CHRS data as a bellwether for what it considers potentially historic, what is landmark-worthy and what buildings can be torn down or substantially altered as of right without

Historic Preservation Commission staff review. The movement and field of preservation and architectural history has since broadened its purview to include the vernacular, the midcentury modern and even the postmodern, yet our data and policies in Chicago remain stuck in the past.

The striking Pride Cleaners sign, original to the site, spells out the word "Pride" in metal letters filled with light bulbs, placed within brightly colored pointed oval lollipops. A metal sign frame below is designed to illuminate the words "shirts laundered" and "cleaners" in neon.

While the city of Chicago amended its municipal code in 2023 to make it easier for property owners to keep and maintain vintage signs such as this one by bypassing select permits and approvals, the cost of maintenance is placed squarely on property owners. The Pride Cleaners sign has been dark for decades, likely the result of the labor of maintain-

ing its complicated mechanics and the expense of repair and upkeep. Yet despite its lack of illumination, the sign remains remarkably intact — for now.

Despite its presence in Chicago pop culture, as an icon of South Side architecture, Pride Cleaners is not a Chicago landmark. Its absence from the Chicago Historic Resources Survey means that the iconic structure could be destroyed as of right — and the highly collectable sign could be dismantled and sold.

A change in use — including a business closure — is always a critical period in the life of a historic place. Preservationists know that swift action often makes a difference in terms of whether historic places have an opportunity for a future. South Siders know that in terms of historic places, there is a paradox between what is worthy of protection, recognition and resources there and what occurs on the North Side or in the Loop. On the South Side, places and

spaces with incredible architectural and cultural history are often neglected by absentee owners, who then demolish them for the promise of a project that never materializes beyond creating yet another vacant lot.

In the case of Pride Cleaners, designating the building and the sign together as du jour Chicago landmarks right now, while the site is still intact, guarantees their future and incentivizes their preservation and maintenance — whether that future is adaptive reuse or another 70 years of cleaning shirts.

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## Voice of the People

### Let Bears pay for stadium

Regarding David Greising's op-ed on the possible departure of the Chicago Bears from the city ("Chicago is going to lose the Bears. It didn't need to happen," March 13), the real need for leadership lies in Washington, D.C., where Congress should step in to ban professional sports teams from pressuring taxpayers into funding new stadiums.

If the Bears or any other professional team wants a new stadium, they should use their own billions in revenue to construct it, as the Chicago Fire has done. Congress should pass a law preventing states from offering financial incentives to lure teams from other states and stipulate that any state or local government offering such incentives would see its federal subsidies or grants reduced by an equal amount. — *Arthur H. Anderson, Harbert, Michigan*

### Johnson out of his depth

I agree wholeheartedly with the op-ed on the Bears stadium debacle. David Greising says just about what I wrote to the incoherent mayor of Chicago. With no disrespect to Mayor Brandon Johnson, he is out of his depth completely. His inability to ask for help from the many extremely qualified leaders and businesspeople of Chicago is as mind-boggling as President Donald Trump picking the clowns he has.

This whole thing is shortsighted: \$1 billion over 20 years is a pittance to pay to keep hotels, restaurants, shopping and new business locating to this wonderful city. If only the Bears could hold out a little while longer until Johnson is shown the door and begin again. — *Todd Swift, Chicago*

### The power of the rich

The Tribune Editorial Board on March 13 correctly praises Gov. JB Pritzker for trying to avoid raising taxes on high-income Illinoisans ("Whatever his reasons, it's good Pritzker isn't



Season ticket holder Dave LaCerra wears a Chicago Bears hat, center, while attending a rally about bringing the Bears to Arlington Heights, at the DoubleTree by Hilton on Feb. 11 in Arlington Heights. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

joining other blue states on the tax-the-rich bandwagon"). On the next page, David Greising faults Mayor Brandon Johnson for failing to adequately entice the Bears to stay in Chicago.

What's interesting is that both arguments are not ethically based but practical. Raising taxes on the rich might motivate some to leave Illinois, and losing the Bears may be costly for Chicago. It seems to be accepted as a given that if we fail to treat the rich in the way that they prefer, they can sometimes cause us a great deal of harm. A small number of individuals seem to be dictating terms because of their immense power.

Of course, teams demanding tax breaks and financial assistance for new stadiums is nothing new, but other changes are occurring. Our president is a billionaire, and a number of his Cabinet members are billionaires as well. And of course, our governor is also a billionaire. Coincidence? Unlikely. Wealth can buy influence.

Not long ago, the Supreme Court decided that unlimited campaign contributions are free speech and that paying a "gratuity" to politicians who have pleased someone is perfectly legal. A list of media controlled by the

rich reads like a who's who of the industry. This trend is likely to continue. According to the St. Louis Federal Reserve, the share of the nation's net worth held by the top 1% steadily rose from 23% in 1990 to over 31% in 2024. The share held by the 50th to 90th percentile fell 5 percentage points during the same period. Any good investor can tell you the reason: Money invested tends to multiply exponentially in the absence of any controls.

Are we becoming a plutocratic republic? I hope not, but we seem to be heading in that direction. — *Craig Zabel, Sugar Grove*

### Greising's bellyaching

How obtuse can an opinion be? I just read the whining opinion of David Greising regarding the Bears rejecting the former Michael Reese Hospital site to build a stadium. That site is godawful and didn't warrant the consideration.

The Bears are going to make a sizable investment on their stadium and have the right to choose their location. They have: In Illinois, it's Arlington Heights. So stop the bleating and belly-aching over Bronzeville. — *Bruce Stanley, Naperville*

### Pritzker could cut a check

The Bears stadium saga seems to have gone somewhat quiet, but I can envision late-night meetings in Springfield trying to come up with a plan. We all know that Gov. JB Pritzker has his eye on a new residence in 2028. It really wouldn't look too good on his resume if the Bears escape to Indiana.

If I were a betting man, I would wager that a plan will come from those late-night meetings that will keep Bears in Illinois and give the governor cover from taxpayer backlash.

*Using any Illinois taxpayer money to support this should be a nonstarter. Taking money from hardworking, already-overtaxed residents to support a billion-dollar corporation, which has many employees who make millions, makes no sense. Also, giving the Bears a 20-year or more break on real estate taxes speaks volumes. Are taxes already so high a business cannot be successful without a special break? I could sure use a 20-year break on real estate taxes.*

I know the pressure on the governor to keep the Bears in Illinois is tremendous. If he really cares about the residents of Illinois, maybe he should just write the Bears a check himself — problem solved, win-win-win. He could even put his name on the stadium. — *Bill Adamson, Naperville*

### Rein in shocking awards

In Saturday print, the Tribune carried the story "Panel advances \$27M deal for woman killed in police chase." In this case, a car fleeing from police officers and driven by a person sought on suspicion of firing a gun struck the victim's car, killing her. After the crash, a gun was found in the fleeing car. It appears a Cook County jury originally awarded \$10.2

million in the case, but after an appeal and some new revelations, city attorneys and the Finance Committee are now recommending that survivors be awarded a shocking \$27 million.

Two things are clear to me: Innocent plaintiffs do deserve to be compensated, but the pool of available compensation comes from Chicago taxpayers and is very limited, perhaps even shrinking. And police pursuits are the result of split-second decisions made by well-intentioned police officers acting in good faith and under usually very stressful conditions.

It's time to require that decision-makers, whether they be city officials, attorneys, judges or jurors, balance the interests of innocent plaintiffs with the interests of innocent Chicago taxpayers to rein in these shocking awards.

Chicago's survival as a world-class city requires it. — *John Mulvey, Chicago*

### Shows that open our eyes

Op-ed writer Alexis Adamson is absolutely right ("Hello Bachhon" reveals about the future of cinema," March 15).

Two of the most interesting series on Netflix are "North of North," set in a Canadian Arctic community with a lot of Native things worked into the plot, and "Hello Bachhon," set in India and based on a true story. "Hello Bachhon" shows some of what poverty in India is like. The poverty in our country doesn't nearly approach how bad the living conditions are in India.

These two series are eye-openers about some of the ways people outside our experiences live. The importance of culturally derived shows is more important than ever with the increasing narrowness of racism and antisemitism. — *Alice Marcus Solovy, Highland Park*

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OPINION

# War Requires Ugly Choices



**BUSINESS WORLD**  
By Holman W. Jenkins, Jr.

Presidents miscalculate in war all the time, from John F. Kennedy launching the Bay of Pigs invasion and inviting the Diem coup in Vietnam, to Lyndon Johnson escalating without believing in victory, to Harry Truman failing to draw a red line around Korea, to George W. Bush pinning so much of the public case against Saddam Hussein on weapons of mass destruction.

The Trump administration didn't fail to perceive the Hormuz Strait risk. It bet a regime survivor (aka an Iranian Delcy Rodriguez) would quickly sue for peace and make the issue moot, in a case of scenario fixation syndrome.

Now U.S. prestige has been committed. The best made of it. Options include a conveying and fire-suppression effort to take back control of the Persian Gulf—an open-ended military commitment. Or the U.S. might make a hostage of Iran's own oil exports, which are actually increasing while the regime gives itself free passage in the Gulf. A U.S. Marine flotilla may be on its way to Kharg Island, where it would need constant overhead protection against Iranian drones and missiles. Add that Iran is believed to have 50 days of output

stored on tankers, about half of it around Singapore. Then an idea that seems to be grudgingly considered: leveling Iran's oil industry, forcing Iran's customers, neighbors and allies to deal with the mess.

Mr. Trump understandably finds the notion repulsive, just days earlier picturing a friendly or at least compliant regime that would marry its oil power to America's, in the great game with China.

Mr. Trump bombed military emplacements on Kharg but, as he put it, spared an attack that would "knock the hell" out of "the pipes." Iran's normal incentive, let's understand, is not to interfere with Hormuz shipping, making an enemy of its own customers, importantly China. The exception: when the regime is under existential, terminal threat—exactly the consideration Mr. Trump set out to create.

That's why his regime-change war has become an oil war.

I'm aware of the speculation that the U.S. acted to take an Iran threat off the board in light of a possible Taiwan contingency. The counterargument: Weakness is provocative. The U.S. has shown its military highly capable, all the more reason to challenge it while it's distracted and its stocks are low.

Mr. Trump has made a situation for himself. If Iran can't be coaxed by China or other mediators to reach terms, he may have to esca-

late more than he ever intended or wanted to.

The only U.S. flag officer to win a Pulitzer, Adm. William Sims, wrote in 1920's "The Victory at Sea" that the point of escorting Allied shipping in World War I wasn't to protect the ships. Convoys were bait. German subs were forced to surface in the presence of Allied destroyers or give up the fight, as they did.

**If Trump wants to exit rather than escalate, he can take out Iran's oil infrastructure.**

In the Gulf today, the parallels are exactly zip. Iran not only fields elusive, multipronged threats to shipping traffic via speedboat, drone, mine and missile. It need only threaten the flow to stop it.

But there's a flip side. The U.S. is a net exporter; oil is a shrinking share of household budgets and total domestic output. The U.S. economy is more flexible, not least because of the Carter-era deregulation of transportation.

In the Iranian revolution of 1979, oil reached \$165 in today's dollars. Analysts are fretting now about the possibility of \$150.

The Soviet Union is no more. The main beneficiary of 1980's Carter Doctrine, which held that the U.S. must defend the Gulf even at the risk of nuclear war, is China.

Strategic conceptions are ripe to be overhauled in the heat of crisis. U.S. troops don't need to be risked to protect China's oil. If a reasonable settlement isn't forthcoming, Mr. Trump can tell Tehran the U.S. will unleash its precision munitions on its export infrastructure.

Mr. Trump can still hope a better option will materialize—the outcome I'd bet on. China or other intercessors will engineer the out he seeks because they fear his escalation. But this outcome will receive impetus only if he shows himself willing to follow the logic of the regime-change war he started and the oil war he got.

Ironically, the U.S. was already in a good and improving position in Iran, thanks to the regime's domestic unpopularity. Mr. Trump's sanctions, and U.S. and Israeli repression of its nuclear program and air defenses.

The U.S., in other words, was in a good position to attend to other priorities, such as rebuilding its military stockpiles and adapting to a new strategic environment and new war technologies.

More than its allies, the U.S. has done the right things on energy and national-security investments. China is still a long way from being able to act militarily in the Gulf. Remember, Mr. Trump's larger purpose was supposed to be redistributing peacekeeping duties among regional stakeholders so the U.S. can focus on bigger matters.

BOOKSHELF | By Stuart Halpern

# Bravery in the Bonfires of War

## Out of the Sky

By Matti Friedman  
Spiegel & Grau, 256 pages, \$29

In early 1944 a group of Jewish volunteers left British-controlled Palestine to save their co-religionists in Europe. Officially serving as British special-operations troops, they parachuted behind enemy lines and tried to disrupt the Nazi death machine. Matti Friedman documents their mission in "Out of the Sky," an account of the personal motivations and tragic fates of these heroic figures of undying Jewish faith.

Mr. Friedman, a Canadian-Israeli journalist, focuses on four of the roughly 30 parachutists who landed in Europe. Though they could have survived the Holocaust by remaining in Palestine, they instead chose to travel through the Sinai Desert and then to a liberated airfield in Italy before departing on their mission. "In the story of the Exodus from Egypt," Mr. Friedman writes, Sinai "leads from slavery and death to freedom in the promised land. The characters in this book make the astonishing choice to travel the other way."

Mr. Friedman relies on unpublished letters, out-of-print memoirs and declassified files to craft his narrative of the operation, a joint initiative between British intelligence and the Jewish Agency. Many of the volunteers had emigrated from Europe to escape the Nazis.

After arriving in Palestine in 1940 the Hungarian-born Mihály Kaszás changed his name to Haim Hermesh. His new surname meant "scythe" in Hebrew. "A hero needs a narrative in which actions matter and death has meaning," Mr. Friedman explains. "Kaszás was a victim. The Scythe is a man of the land, an avenger." His orders in 1944 were to coordinate the rescue of downed Allied airmen and prisoners of war while establishing radio contact between the resistance and the British.

Hermesh—the only one of Mr. Friedman's four principal figures to survive the mission—had no love for his commanding officers. In September 1939 the British had fired on the refugee vessel Tiger Hill, killing multiple Jews trying to reach safety. But the Jews had no air force and Hermesh had no other choice. He landed in Yugoslavia with instructions to head to Hungary. After getting separated from his team, he joined up with local partisans and repeatedly ambushed Nazi soldiers before returning to Palestine at war's end.

Enzo Sereni grew up in Rome, a short walk from the Arch of Titus, with its engraved legionnaires celebrating the defeat of ancient Judea by plundering the Second Temple. In 1927 he and his wife moved to Palestine, where they helped found a kibbutz and advocated for peaceful coexistence with Arab neighbors.

Sereni, who recited cantos from Dante in Italian to calm his nerves, was offered a British alias for the parachuting mission. He refused, Mr. Friedman notes, "instead choosing papers identifying him as a Jewish officer from Palestine." He was apprehended almost immediately in Northern Italy and killed at the Dachau concentration camp. "There was no replacement for Enzo," lamented David Ben-Gurion, the Zionist leader who would later serve as Israel's first prime minister.

Marta Reick was active in the Zionist youth movement in her native Czechoslovakia. In Hebrew, Mr. Friedman notes, her parents were named Mordechai and Esther, the two main characters in the story of Purim, which is about a Jewish queen who saves her people. After arriving in Palestine in 1939 she changed her first name to Haviva, which means "beloved." Reick sought to help Jews in her home country, where the rest of her family was murdered. "We must parachute into Europe," she wrote before setting out, "like a mother breaking into a burning house to rescue her children." She too was captured and killed.

**A group of Jewish volunteers parachuted into occupied Europe with the goal of saving their co-religionists and fighting the Nazis.**

Then there was the Hungarian-born Hannah Szenes (anglicized as Senesh). She emigrated to Palestine in 1939 to study at an agricultural school. Senesh would become the most renowned of the group because she also wrote poetry, miraculously preserved amid her misadventures behind enemy lines. She was captured in Nazi-occupied Hungary and executed a few months before the fall of Budapest in early 1945.

Senesh's words have lived on. In the aftermath of Hamas's attack against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, Mr. Friedman recounts seeing a video clip of a battalion commander speaking to his troops. "I want to read you a poem," the commander said, "written by a brave woman who was a poet and a farmer but who, when her people's fate hung in the balance, parachuted behind the lines of the Nazi enemy on a mission that had little chance of success, because she believed this was the right thing to do." He then recited lines that Senesh had written in 1940: "In the bonfires of war, in the blaze, in the flame / Between bloody seas that race, / I light my little torch / And seek a human face."

Today in Israel, Mr. Friedman relates, there are kibbutz named for Reick, Senesh and Sereni. (Senesh also lends her name to a forest and no less than 32 streets.) "I've lived most of my life in this country," the author writes, "where the language of the Bible is the language of electricity bills and pop music, where Jews aren't forced into questions of identity or warped by the fantasies of their neighbors." Mr. Friedman often rides his bike in his hometown of Jerusalem, at the intersection of roads named for Senesh and Sereni, "hoping for something evocative to happen." But nothing ever does in that quiet neighborhood. Such moments of serenity in the Jewish homeland were exactly what the paratroopers had fought for.

Mr. Halpern is the senior adviser to the provost at Yeshiva University. He is the author, with Wilfred McClay, of "Jewish Roots of American Liberty."

# Iran and the Escalation Trap



**POLITICS & IDEAS**  
By William W. Jenkins, Jr.

If war is the continuation of politics by other means, as the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously claimed, then a war's success is judged by the achievement of its political goals. Military victories, however stunning, aren't ends in themselves.

The war in Gaza brought home this truth to Israel. More than two years of battle destroyed much of the infrastructure that Hamas built and killed many of its fighters, at the cost of mass civilian casualties and injuries along with the widespread destruction of apartments, hospitals and schools. But after the most recent cease-fire took hold last October, Hamas emerged from its tunnels and exerted political control over Gaza's demoralized civilians and restless tribal leaders. Its fighters refused to disarm, exposing the terms of the cease-fire agreement as a sham. Some far-right Israeli leaders are demanding a renewed war to finish the job. The U.S. wouldn't tolerate Israel's Gaza campaign unless it achieved significant military success but a political failure.

As America's war with Iran enters its third week, we've reached a moment of decision. The U.S. military has achieved significant successes. Much of Iran's navy has been de-

stroyed, and its capacity to launch ballistic missiles has been substantially reduced. (Drones are another matter.) The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the regime's primary fighting force, has lost much of its infrastructure, and some members of the *basij* militia reportedly are refusing to show up for work.

Despite these achievements, the Trump administration's prospects for achieving its political objectives remain remote. At the onset of the war, President Trump said to the Iranian people, "When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take." It's now clear that won't happen anytime soon, a point that both the president and Israel's prime minister have conceded.

Nor will Iran agree to Mr. Trump's demand for "unconditional surrender," a goal that the U.S. achieved at the end of World War II only by conquering Germany and dropping two atomic bombs on Japan.

Nor will Iran agree to surrender its stocks of enriched uranium, which are probably buried deep underground beneath the rubble from a U.S.-Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities last June. U.S. ground forces to seize Iranian uranium at a congressional briefing this month, Secretary of State Marco Rubio reportedly said that "people are going to have to go and get it." Such a task would have uncertain prospects and would likely require the biggest and

most technically challenging special-forces operation in history.

Iran's decision to close the Strait of Hormuz—a step that every U.S. military official knew was inevitable—has turned the tables on the Trump administration, which seems to have been caught unprepared. Our options for reopening the strait without

**U.S. military successes against Tehran don't guarantee a lasting political victory.**

Iran's agreement aren't attractive. The U.S. Navy is weeks away, at best, from being able to escort oil tankers through the strait, a mission that experts estimate would require two ships per tanker. Naval officers worry that Iranian drones and missiles could turn this confined area into a "kill box" for American sailors.

This dismal prospect invites a further question: What would it take to suppress Iranian fire directed at our Navy and the ships it's escorting? The most likely answer: using U.S. ground forces to seize IREG strongholds along Iran's southern coast. Even if such an assault were to succeed, the U.S. beachheads would have to be protected against counterattacks from the IREG, whose strength is estimated at 190,000 active personnel.

The logic of escalation could lead Trump administration down a road it doesn't want to travel.

One thing is clear: If the U.S. tries to reopen the strait, it can't expect much help from its allies. With the exception of France, Mr. Trump's request to join with the U.S. in naval convoys has met a chilly reception. The German defense minister said bluntly that "this is not our war." A senior Japanese policy adviser said Japan's threshold for joining such an operation is "extremely high." British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has refused to send warships to the strait. If Mr. Trump had consulted allies before starting this war, he might be getting a better reception.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) and some others have urged the administration to seize control of Kharg Island, the command post for Iranian oil exports. But this would involve us in a risky game of chicken. If we cut off Iran's exports, would we bring the regime to its knees before soaring oil prices severely damaged the global economy and forced us to relent?

The U.S. decided when the war with Iran would begin, but it doesn't control when the war will end. Even if we were to announce a unilateral cease-fire, Iran wouldn't reopen the Strait of Hormuz without making demands that we would find difficult to accept. Translating our military achievements into political gains won't be easy.

# How to Hollow Out Your State's Economy

By Arthur Laffer  
And Stephen Moore

Washington has been one of the fastest-growing states for decades. It has consciously avoided the "blue-state disease" of low economic growth and population declines. The Seattle area is home to great companies from Microsoft and Amazon to Starbucks. Washington has been the Florida or Texas of the West Coast.

A secret to the Evergreen State's success has been that it has no income tax. But Democrats in Olympia are perilously close to enacting a "millionaire tax" of 9.9%. Washington would go from being one of nine states with no income tax to having the fifth-highest rate in the country. The tax has passed both legislative houses and Gov. Bob Ferguson says he'll sign it. Supporters hope the state supreme court will uphold it, overturning or

brushing aside a 1933 precedent under which it is plainly unconstitutional.

The decision to enact an income tax bodes ill for Washington's economic future. Eleven states have done so since 1960: West Virginia, Indiana, Michigan, Nebraska, Illinois, Maine, Pennsylvania,

**Washington residents will soon pay an income tax of 9.9%.**

Rhode Island, Ohio, New Jersey and Connecticut. We found that every one of them significantly underperformed the rest of the nation in every economic measure we looked at, including share of the nationwide population, income, and state and local tax revenue.

The 11 states in combination accounted for about one-third of national output in

1970. Today they account for slightly more than one-fifth. Since Ohio adopted its income tax in 1971, its share of nationwide domestic output has fallen by nearly half. Since Michigan adopted its income tax in 1967, its share of total state and local tax revenue nationwide has fallen by 53%.

Pennsylvania's share of national output declined 42% since its income tax of 1971; West Virginia has lagged national population growth by 56% since its income tax of 1961; and Rhode Island's share of state and local tax revenue nationally has plummeted by a third since its income tax of 1971. In terms of the change in its share of the nation's population, economic output and population, not one of the new income-tax states registers a positive number since the imposition of this tax. And the negative numbers are often highly negative.

In every state that adopted

an income tax, supporters promised the added money would be used to improve education. Washington is trying to play this card, saying that the statements from lawmakers make it clear they want a new fund for any of their spending desires.

When the Washington House approved the income tax, Rep. April Berg, chairman of the Finance Committee, triumphantly declared this plan "a major step" because it will "make life more affordable for Washingtonians."

Many of them will not be Washingtonians anymore. Illinois added its income tax in 1969, and since then its share of the national population has sunk by 40%. By following suit, Washington will join the ranks of the incredible shrinking states.

Messrs. Laffer and Moore are co-founders of *Unleash Prosperity*.

## OPINION

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Why the SAVE America Act . . . Won't

For partisan hype, it's hard to beat the Senate debate this week on the SAVE America Act. President Trump says the legislation is a salvation from mass voter fraud. Sen. Chuck Schumer says it's an effort at mass voter suppression, "Jim Crow 2.0." Neither is reality. Also, Republicans don't have the votes to clear the Senate's filibuster. And if they bully the bill through anyway, Democrats eyeing the end of the 60-vote rule will quietly celebrate.

## A pyrrhic victory on voting isn't worth busting the filibuster.

The House version of the SAVE America Act, which passed last month, has two main planks. First, people registering to vote would be asked to show proof of U.S. citizenship, such as a passport, birth certificate or naturalization document. Many driver's licenses wouldn't qualify. While the bill says it would accept a REAL ID "that indicates the applicant is a citizen," standard license designs often don't say. Legal immigrants can get REAL IDs, too.

"Enhanced" driver's licenses do show citizenship, and those can be used to cross international borders. But they're available in only five states that neighbor Canada, according to the Department of Homeland Security. To pick one state, Minnesota says it has issued 782,000 "enhanced" licenses, out of a total 4.7 million active credentials.

People who register to vote at a motor-vehicle office, while proving U.S. citizenship to get a REAL ID, might not have any problem under the GOP bill. But Americans who join the voter rolls elsewhere, such as at a county office, could be told that a driver's license is no longer sufficient, so they have to find other documents. If the state already knows they're citizens, can't it check its own database?

The House bill's second piece would set a national rule on voter ID, which is popular because it makes sense to millions of Americans who flash a driver's license when they check in at a hotel or buy alcohol. Under the GOP bill, a voter casting a ballot in person would be asked for photo identification, such as a state, tribal or military card. An absentee voter would send in a copy of an ID, or else an affidavit that it can't be obtained after "reasonable efforts."

Mr. Trump now wants to expand the SAVE America Act. One of his ideas is to countermand

dozens of state laws on mail voting, by restricting such ballots to people who are sick, disabled, serving in the military, or traveling. As an election policy, this has real upside. Yet many GOP states let anyone vote absentee. Do Republicans really want to endorse having the federal government overrule the election laws in Florida, Georgia, Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Kansas, and more?

The decentralized nature of American elections is a source of resilience, and Republicans rightly opposed President Biden's attempt to federalize voting rules on the lax California model. Have they given up federalist principle? If 51 Senate votes are all it takes to limit mail ballots across the country and require voter ID, Democrats next time will use 51 votes to mandate ballot harvesting and ban voter ID.

That's to say nothing of what else progressives have in mind if Republicans do them the favor of launching a pre-emptive strike on the filibuster. Mr. Schumer might make new states out of Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, meaning four new Democratic Senators. He might add Justices to the Supreme Court. In exchange for laying the groundwork, Republicans get . . . the SAVE America Act? No thanks.

Although Mr. Trump insists that voter fraud is endemic, his big claims aren't backed by hard evidence. The President recently said illegal aliens are voting in such huge numbers that he won Minnesota three times.

Audits in a variety of places—Georgia, Michigan, Texas, Utah, Idaho—have found noncitizen voting and registration to be rare. Other states might be worse, but consider incentives: Illegal immigrants who want to stay are trying to avoid being noticed by the authorities. Green card holders have much to lose if they commit a crime. Prosecuting violators is good for deterrence, and vigilance is important.

But the SAVE America Act wouldn't turn blue states red, and it can't save Republicans from voter anger at unpopular policies. In the MAGA era, the bill could even marginally hurt the GOP. Kamala Harris in 2024 won college graduates and voters earning over \$100,000 a year. Mr. Trump carried those with no degrees and lower salaries. Which coalition is most likely not to have passports and birth certificates handy?

## Joe Kent Resigns on Anti-Israel Principle

Sound advice in Washington is never to take a job unless you're prepared to resign, and more people should heed it. The resignation Tuesday of a Trump counterterrorism official in protest against the Iran war is notable on those grounds, but why was he in the Administration in the first place?

"I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran," Joe Kent, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, wrote in a public letter. "Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation."

Mr. Kent, who worked under Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, added that as "a veteran who deployed to combat 11 times" he "cannot support sending the next generation off to fight and die in a war that serves no benefit to the American people nor justifies the cost of American lives."

Resigning over sincere differences is an honorable tradition, but Mr. Kent couldn't leave without adding some dishonor: It is clear that we started this war due to pressure

from Israel and its powerful American lobby," he wrote. Mr. Kent said "high-ranking Israeli officials and influential members of the American media deployed a misinformation campaign," and he suggested Israel dragged America into Iraq in 2003. Ah, yes, the nefarious Jewish lobby.

This is a smear about an ally fighting alongside U.S. troops. Mr. Kent's portfolio was terrorism—and it isn't reassuring that he was more concerned with Israel than with an Iranian regime that has sought to kill President Trump and other U.S. officials.

Mr. Kent hails from the corner of Mr. Trump's base that paints any U.S. action in the world as a quagmire, and the White House let many of them into the Administration as coalition management. Ms. Gabbard is another, and now one of her underlings has produced a spectacle to undermine Mr. Trump during a war.

"When I read his statement, I realized that it's a good thing that he's out," Mr. Trump said of the resignation. May there be more such resignations, voluntary or otherwise.

## The Allies Take a Pass on Iran

President Trump is angry with U.S. allies for refusing to help make the Strait of Hormuz passable for oil tankers, and the media coverage boils down to a version of "serves him right." Mr. Trump has played the bully with allies, who are now returning the disfavor. This is satisfying for those who dislike Mr. Trump, but the outcome may not turn out well for the allies.

Europeans have a point that Mr. Trump didn't consult them before he began this round of bombing with Israel. He's also been high-handed with Europe over Greenland, and with the world on his unilateral tariffs. A more conventional U.S. President would have done more to cultivate personal ties with leaders who could help smooth over rough political moments. Mr. Trump always prefers the U.S. power flex, which is no doubt grating on European sensibilities.

Yet let's assume Mr. Trump feels he must keep bombing for many more weeks to end an Iranian veto on oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz. Who will be harmed the most? Not the U.S., which is largely self-sufficient in energy. Americans will pay more for gasoline because oil is a global market. But the price of West Texas crude is still lower than the Brent crude global price, and natural gas is far less expensive in the U.S. than in Europe or Asia.

Escorting ships through the Strait is dangerous and costly even for the U.S. Navy. If there's no cease-fire that Iran agrees to, Mr. Trump might decide to blow up Iran's oil energy facilities on Kharg Island.

On Friday the U.S. hit Iran's military forces on the island but spared the oil production targets. Hitting those would cost Iran dearly since it is still exporting oil through the Strait. It

would also hit the rest of the world far more than it would the U.S.

Mr. Trump said Monday "we don't need anybody" in the Gulf, but he wouldn't be asking if that were true. European countries have more mine-sweeping ships than the U.S. Naval fleet would reduce the burden on the U.S. Navy, which has other interests to protect around the world. These days that includes the Caribbean and the Pacific.

More important for relations with Mr. Trump for the next three years—sorry, folks, he still has 34 months to go—is the message that countries were unwilling to help when asked. Mr. Trump has a long memory, and Europe simply can't defend itself without American military power.

The country in Europe that most seems to appreciate this is Ukraine, of all places. President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has dispatched his experts on drone defenses to the Gulf, and that could well save American lives. The military in Europe most threatened at home is the one most willing to help the U.S. abroad. Mr. Trump might keep this in mind before pressuring Ukraine into a bad peace with Russia.

The tragedy of this Western division is that the real winners are Iran, Russia and China. They're working together to defeat the U.S. in the Gulf and weaken American deterrence. If Iran emerges with a veto over Strait of Hormuz oil flows, and U.S. credibility is damaged, Mr. Trump will be hurt.

But the bigger losers in the long run will be countries that depend on American power to deter aggressors. See Ukraine 2014 and 2022, and Gaza 2023. The allies may come to regret their short-term *Schadenfreude* about Mr. Trump's Hormuz predicament.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## MAGA Isn't Really Against the Iran Operation

Barton Swaim is wrong that President Trump "antagonized a material faction of his MAGA coalition" with Operation Epic Fury ("Trump's Old-Fashioned War," *Unruly Republic*, March 12). Polls have shown decisively that in contrast to what some podcasters and online influencers may wish, Trump voters—particularly his most loyal MAGA base—strongly support his fight with Iran. In a poll we recently conducted, 84% of Trump voters overall and 94% of those identifying as MAGA specifically support U.S. military action in Iran. These numbers track closely with other recent polls and align with the views of Trump voters expressed in our polling taken after Operations Midnight Hammer and Absolute Resolve.

These results strengthen Mr. Swaim's overall argument that the president's decision to order the strikes was "a judicious and honorable one," motivated by the need to neutralize the Iranian threat to America and our allies, Trump voters, and Mr. Trump himself, clearly recognize the reality—confirmed by all of human history—that conflict and war are inevitable. Neither liberal internationalist utopianism nor spheres-of-influence arrangements can prevent that. The question isn't how to prevent or avoid all conflict, but rather how to

identify the right time and manner in which to fight to protect American interests. Trump voters ultimately may turn on Operation Epic Fury if it is unsuccessful, but their discontent will be about the specific result rather than an immutable opposition to the use of American power.

CORBAN TEAGUE  
Senior policy director  
The Vandenberg Coalition  
Washington

Mr. Swaim's analogy to the Japanese surrender in World War II is in some ways more apt than he allows. The Japanese considered the emperor to be divine, and a surrender was to admit his fallibility—a very bitter pill to swallow. The mullahs likewise consider their cause preordained by their god. But the important difference comes in the fact that most of the country doesn't share their zeal. Mr. Trump is betting the regime can be destroyed and Iran left intact. The critical missing link at present is a viable transitional government. Since the mission is only a few weeks in, this isn't necessarily unexpected, but its absence risks extending the mission to the point of intolerance for the American people.

LOYD W. TALBERT  
Manhattan Beach, Calif.

## We Don't Need a Strategic Petroleum Reserve

Your editorial "A Strategic Petroleum Red Herring" (March 10) points out that the Strategic Petroleum Reserve's "storage facilities require extensive repairs before they can be refilled." Given the amount of time and money required to refill them, why not take this opportunity to abandon the SPR altogether?

The strategic reserve may have been conceived as a tool to mitigate supply disruptions in emergencies, but, as with all things placed in the hands of politicians, the function of the SPR has changed since its establishment in 1975. Rather than address genuine crises, the SPR has been used by politicians to manage the price of oil, releasing oil from the reserve not in genuine emergencies but, rather, when the price of oil gets uncomfortably high and there exists some sort of overseas disturbance that can justify such interference with the markets. The strategic reserve has thus stifled the very price mechanism that would address rising oil prices in a more enduring manner. Why should

producers respond to high prices by increasing production when it is virtually assured that the government will take measures to bring down those prices by releasing SPR crude?

The market has long been capable of handling price spikes, even those resulting from geopolitical events in oil producing regions, when it has been allowed to function without political interference. Furthermore, now that the U.S. is a net exporter of energy, the possibility that America will suddenly find itself "out of oil" has been eliminated. So why do we insist on maintaining a device that interferes with the efficient functioning of the oil markets in order to avoid a catastrophe that has zero chance of occurring?

Let the SPR run dry, perhaps by gradually selling forward contracts on its output. Doing so will both make and save the taxpayers a lot of money and will allow the market to more efficiently address perceived and real oil shocks.

MARK M. QUINN  
Naperville, Ill.

## A 'Millionaire Tax' Quickly Goes Middle Class

You make the same very good point in two editorials in the March 12 paper addressing the populist introduction of a "millionaire tax" in Washington ("Washington State's Income Tax Con") and New York ("New York's Dismal Tax Forecast"). As millionaire taxes fail to deliver the promised collections because of implementation issues and the fact that millionaires tend to be very mobile, the tax base will inevitably expand

and hit a broader swath of the middle class. One of the best examples of how this plays out is the Alternative Minimum Tax. Enacted in 1969 as an add-on tax so that the "rich" paid their fair share, it has evolved into a complex parallel tax system that has gone through numerous legislative tweaks over the years. A congressional report in 2017 concluded that the AMT "may reduce the equity of the tax system" and that it reduced "both the simplicity and the transparency of the tax system." The AMT has often ensnared a higher percentage of middle and upper middle-class taxpayers rather than millionaires, according to the Tax Policy Center. In the end, the AMT is more of a boon to accountants than a true equalizer of the tax burden. These millionaire taxes may have similar unhappy endings.

PROF. S. ABRAHAM RAVIV  
Yeshiva University  
New York

## Enjoy the Houston TSA Line

Regarding your editorial "Pat Chuck Schumer on 'TSA Duty'" (March 16): Why not take this idea one step further and pass a bill that stops all payments to congressmen and senators if they create a budget shutdown? Let's let those who pass the laws live in the same world as those that implement them.

JEFF STACK  
Aiken, S.C.

Rather than have Sen. Schumer put on a Transportation Security Administration uniform, I would like to see him have to stand in the Houston screening line for a couple of hours.

CHARLES H. GESSNER  
Marblehead, Mass.

Do we really want Mr. Schumer to be the responsible for checking our baggage for bombs?

STEPHEN BORKOWSKI  
Pittsburg, Texas

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Investors remain optimistic because they're not paying attention."

OPINION

# Newsom's Climate False Alarms

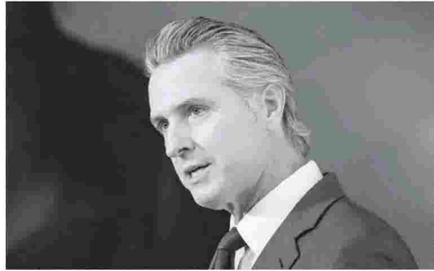
By Bjorn Lomborg

**G**avin Newsom is raising alarms on climate change again—and getting basic facts wrong. The California governor vows to sue the federal government over the Trump administration's repeal of the Environmental Protection Agency's 2009 "endangerment finding," the main legal basis under the Clean Air Act for mandating reductions in carbon-dioxide emissions. Mr. Newsom claims the reversal will trigger "more deadly wildfires" and "more extreme heat deaths."

Age-adjusted heat-related death risk in California has risen modestly in recent decades—enough to account for 90 additional annual deaths likely linked to higher temperatures. But he omits the other side: Warming has helped reduce age-adjusted cold-related deaths by more than 5,000 a year. Citing only the tiny heat increase while ignoring the large decrease in cold-related deaths is misleading.

## Global warming isn't behind California's wildfires, and fires around the world are declining.

As for wildfires, Mr. Newsom has long wrongly focused on California and the Western U.S. while ignoring that global warming is global. He has repeatedly referred to California as "the tip of the spear of climate change," including after last January's Palisades Fire. Years earlier, amid West Coast wildfires, he said climate change's role "cannot be denied," that the science was "absolute"



Gavin Newsom

and the data "self-evident."

Global data contradict this. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration's satellites have tracked fires globally for more than 25 years. In the early 2000s, about 3% of the world's land burned annually—in total acreage, an area about twice Mexico's size. The trend since has been downward: 2022 hit a record low of 2.169%, and 2025 nearly matched it at 2.198%, the second-lowest. That's a reduction of over 25%, sparing an area of land larger than Texas and California combined each year. North America is the only continent where burned area is increasing, but it accounts for only 2.2% of the global total.

Despite Mr. Newsom's pronouncements, global warming isn't the main driver of fires in North America. Poor planning puts more houses in extreme fire-risk zones. California's surge in wildfires stems overwhelmingly from poor forest management: decades of fire suppression that built up fuels, with almost no prescribed

burns. Studies indicate nearly 20% of the state needs controlled burns to reduce risk, yet only 0.1% to 0.3% receives them annually.

Wildfire CO2 emissions have also plummeted globally, hitting a satellite-era low last year—down 3 billion tons from early-2000s levels. This undercuts claims of supercharged fires and feedback loops of carbon release. Because less of the world's landscape is burning, the result is less air pollution, especially in heavily populated areas in Africa. A 2024 Lancet study found that deaths from fire-related air pollution declined between 1980 and 2019, even as the global population increased over 26%. Adjusted to today's population, this means about two million people would have died from such pollution in 2000. Toward the end of the study period, 400,000 fewer people died each year because of the reduction in fire-driven air pollution.

The wildfire decline is a century-long pattern driven by human adaptation. In the early 1900s, nearly 4%

of global land burned yearly. Last year, only 2.2% did. Better land management, farming practices and suppression have tamed global fires.

Some claim that "intense" fires are worsening, citing a 2024 Nature paper that declared extreme fire events doubled globally from 2003 to 2023. But a subsequent Nature review demolished that claim: The original study inflated trends by clustering fire hot spots and measuring their "radiative power" as intensity. Properly analyzed, extreme fire didn't burn more; its frequency decreased by about 35%. Yet NASA's fire homepage still prominently features the original study's claim.

Mr. Newsom's push for aggressive mandates and lawsuits to pressure federal climate rules ignores these facts and gives priority to high-cost, low-benefit policies. According to United Nations models, even if the world's wealthiest nations made major emissions reductions, far exceeding what California or the U.S. could do, the effect would be negligible: It would avert less than 0.2 degree Fahrenheit of warming at significant cost. Emerging economies will drive most future emissions. Policies like California's vehicle mandates have imposed economic pain for negligible global effect, a trade-off voters elsewhere have rejected.

Global fires are dramatically declining in extent, emissions, pollution death risk and intensity. Mr. Newsom's rhetoric may energize his supporters, but Americans deserve evidence-based policies, not cherry-picked alarm.

*Mr. Lomborg is president of the Copenhagen Consensus, a visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, and author of "False Alarm" and "Best Things First."*

# Regime Change Is Inexorable

By John Bolton

**H**ow does President Trump expect the Iran war to end? He's been ambiguous about the answer, saying in an interview last Friday that he'll know it "when I feel it in my bones." Some of his advisers and supporters urge him to stop short of a change of regime in Tehran. But the logic of regime change is inexorable.

If the president wasn't fully resolved to remove the ayatollahs, he should never have initiated so ambitious a military effort. Strikes on military targets alone won't topple the regime. Instead, they must debilitate the institutions of state power, notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the *basij* militia. That would prove the regime's inability to defend itself, signifying it can't long survive and exacerbating divisions within a system already rocked by an accelerated succession crisis and the elimination of many top leaders. Iran's opposition must help intensify regime collapse by working with disaffected officials, civil and military.

Mr. Trump is already failing in one key respect: Many Iranians feel betrayed, fearing moral reprisals if the regime survives. Regime-change failure would also pose grave risks in three critical areas: oil, international terrorism and nuclear weapons.

Tehran last week closed the Strait of Hormuz, through which most Gulf-produced oil passes, causing turmoil in global markets, increased oil prices and stock-market declines. The administration says the blockade took it by surprise.

In the war's opening days, the U.S. and Israel rightly gave priority to eliminating Iran's air defenses and its ballistic-missile retaliatory strike capability. But closing Hormuz was also an Iranian retaliatory option that warranted urgent attention: Iran's mine-laying ships were destroyed late, 10 days into the operation, and attacks on drone and

## Ending the war now is untenable. As Trump said last week, 'We don't want to go back every two years.'

small-boat mine-laying efforts, reducing threats to oil tankers, are still under way, as the strikes on Kharg Island underline. A reported attack over the weekend on Bandar-e Lask, outside the strait, might have stopped Iranian oil exports there. It would be untenable for the White House to declare victory while it remains unsafe to export Gulf oil. The ayatollahs now have palpable evidence of what closing the strait means for the global economy. If they remain in power, they will never forget it.

The lessons being learned in the Strait of Hormuz apply with even more force to Tehran's support for international terrorism and its nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs. Should the regime survive, it will undoubtedly resume work on both fronts. On terrorism, if the U.S.-Israeli campaign is fostering a new generation of terrorists, as some anti-regime-change critics contend, those future threats will be far more menacing if a terrorist-sponsoring, oil-rich regime holds sway in Tehran.

Russia and China have undoubtedly provided Iran nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile assistance in years gone by. Moscow is reportedly supplying Tehran with both military intelligence and battlefield insights from its experience using Iran's drones in combat against Ukraine. If regime change fails, the ayatollahs will seek increased cooperation on such matters—and more, such as missile defense. South Korean missile defenses now operational in the United Arab Emirates have doubtless attracted attention in both Iran and North Korea. Future destruction of Iran's nuclear program will only be harder.

The president's partner, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, knows the inexorable logic of regime change well. So do Iran's ayatollahs, whose fanaticism justifies any sacrifice to ensure no military victory but regime survival, living to fight another day. And Mr. Trump has made this point himself. In Kentucky on March 11, he said: "We don't want to go back every two years. . . . There will be some day when you don't have me as president. . . . Perhaps you'll have a weak, pathetic person like we've had in the past."

*Mr. Bolton served as White House national security adviser, 2018-19, and is author of "The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir."*

# Paul Ehrlich Was Always Wrong, Never in Doubt



UPWARD MOBILITY  
By Jason L. Riley

Not many biologists sell millions of books. Frequent appearances on late-night talk shows and achieve guru status. Paul Ehrlich, the population-control advocate who died last week at 93, checked all three boxes.

Ehrlich's 1968 book, "The Population Bomb," first brought him notoriety. It asserted that widespread famines and mass starvation would doom huge swaths of mankind because the world's population was growing too rapidly. "The battle to feed humanity is over," Ehrlich wrote. "In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

Ehrlich had visited India and concluded that poor people were overbreeding. He believed that the developing world simply had "too many people" and calculated that the earth's population needed to be cut in half. "The operation will demand many apparently brutal and heartless decisions," and the "pain may be intense," he cautioned, sounding like a cartoon villain. But it would be "coercion in a good cause." Ehrlich urged wealthy nations to cut off food assistance to the Third World. He endorsed an Indian official's proposal for "sterilizing all Indian males with three or more children." It was for their own good, he insisted.

The world's population grew, but famine on the scale that Ehrlich predicted never materialized. Within a decade, India not only produced enough food to feed itself, thanks to technological advances in agriculture that Ehrlich hadn't anticipated, but was a net exporter of wheat. "Since 1900 the world has increased its population by 400 per cent; its cropland area by 30 per cent; its average yields by 400 per cent and its total crop harvest by 600 per cent," Matt Ridley wrote in his 2010 book, "The Rational Optimist." "So per capita food production has risen by 50 per cent."

Making spectacularly wrong predictions of imminent catastrophe became something of a habit for Ehrlich over the decades. His dire forecasts about global cooling and

warming were wide of the mark, a twofold. He speculated that the U.S. and Europe would be forced to ration food and encouraged couples to limit themselves to one or two children. In 1971, he said that by "the year 2000 the United Kingdom will be simply a small group of impoverished islands, inhabited by some 70 million hungry people." Three years

## He didn't repudiate his warnings when they failed to pan out, yet didn't lose his popularity or prestige.

later, he predicted that "America's economic joyride is coming to an end; there will be no more cheap, abundant energy, no more cheap abundant food."

Today, the U.K. has the sixth-largest economy in the world, and its population has yet to reach 70 million. After adjusting for inflation, staple foods and energy in the U.S. cost less than they did 50 years ago and claim a smaller percentage of the average person's disposable in-

come. Ehrlich said in 1970 that famine would kill 65 million Americans between 1980 and 1989. The reality is that our population has more than doubled since 1950, our air and water have gotten cleaner, and obesity is a much bigger problem than hunger.

Ehrlich's knack for being not only wrong but 180 degrees in error cost him neither popularity—he appeared on "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson" more than a dozen times—nor prestige in academia. But it did cost him a famous bet. In 1980 the economist Julian Simon, annoyed by the "phony bad news" being fed to the public, wagered that Ehrlich couldn't name a natural resource that would become more expensive after adjusting for inflation over the next decade. Ehrlich accepted the bet and chose copper, chromium, tin, nickel and tungsten. He lost. Each one of the minerals declined in price. Ehrlich sent Simon a check for \$576.07 and wisely declined the offer to reap the bet, which he would have lost in 2000 as well.

Ehrlich was often labeled a neo-Malthusian, a reference to the 18th-century British political econ-

omist Thomas Malthus, best known for "An Essay on the Principle of Population." Malthus argued that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce sustenance for man." Still, comparing Ehrlich to Malthus is something of an insult to the latter. Malthus published several revisions of his original essay, responding to new observations as well as criticism from contemporary economic giants like David Ricardo.

During his lifetime, Malthus's prediction that more people would necessarily lead to a decline in the standard of living proved incorrect. He witnessed a simultaneous rise in population and living standards, which continues today. "From the first to the seventh edition of *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, its author moved from an ecological to a sociological perspective," wrote Malthus biographer William Petersen, "and—most remarkably—from an unrelenting pessimism to a cautious optimism." Facts and evidence mattered to Thomas Malthus. To Paul Ehrlich, and the radical environmentalists who revered him, they were at best an afterthought.

# One Exit Won't Cure the FDA's Culture

By Robert M. Goldberg

**V**inay Prasad's departure from the Food and Drug Administration is an admission that something has gone wrong in how the agency handles therapies for rare and life-threatening diseases. But Dr. Prasad's exit from the Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research doesn't solve the problem. The larger failure belongs to Commissioner Martin Makary.

Dr. Prasad became the face of the agency's turmoil, but Dr. Makary made it possible. He brought Dr. Prasad in, empowered him and elevated deputies who treated the patient-focused flexibility built into rare-disease regulation as a flaw rather than a necessity.

President Trump began his second term promising more domestic drug manufacturing, faster innovation and lower prices through competition and new therapies. The ex-

pectation was that the FDA would help carry out that agenda. Instead it has often appeared hostile to its own mission.

Gene therapies for tiny patient populations, the kind of product that requires regulatory flexibility, became targets of shifting standards and surprise objections. Companies were guided one way during development and judged by another at review. Families confronting fatal childhood diseases, after working with the FDA on endpoints and trial design, saw applications delayed, rejected or refused filing on grounds that departed from earlier advice.

For such patients, delay can mean no treatment at all. This was presented as scientific rigor. Too often, it looked like a regulatory mugging of children with rare diseases.

Congress understood that rare-disease medications can't be reviewed as if every condition has large trial populations and unlimited time. Lawmakers and the FDA spent years building a framework that recognizes small patient populations, their urgent need, and the value of multiple forms of evidence. The point was flexibility. The Makary-Prasad faction treated flexibility as a loophole to be closed.

Dr. Prasad's departure doesn't mean that faction is gone. Consider Katherine Szarama, one of his closest deputies. Before joining the FDA, she served at the philanthropy organization Arnold Ventures, known for favoring more-stringent drug-approval standards and for skepticism toward regulatory flexibility. Rare-disease advocates have long warned that this philosophy would slow the development of urgently needed therapies. Inside the FDA, it appears to have done exactly that by chang-

ing requirements and demanding additional days of study after the fact.

Ms. Szarama has supported the requirement of randomized superiority trials for emerging therapies such as CAR-T, even when patients have exhausted multiple prior treatments. In rare diseases and advanced cancer, such demands can be impractical, ethically dubious and less informative than carefully analyzed real-world evidence.

Then there is Tracy Beth Hoeg, acting head of the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. Her background is in sports medicine, epidemiology and pandemic policy, not the traditional disciplines of drug development and regulatory management. Whatever her strengths, that is an unusual résumé for overseeing the nation's main drug-review operations.

Dr. Hoeg has also faced scrutiny over a potential conflict involving efforts to recruit a professional associate while supporting internal action on his petition. An FDA already struggling with credibility shouldn't invite further doubts about judgment and impartiality.

Dr. Prasad's exit changes the personnel, not the culture. For that, Dr. Makary empowered him, and his allies remain. The same mindset governs: evidentiary maximalism detached from clinical reality, indifference to patient urgency, and hostility to the flexibility Congress intended.

Replacing one lieutenant won't change the culture that resides in the commissioner's office. If the administration wants a real correction at the FDA, it should begin there.

*Mr. Goldberg is vice president of the Center for Medicine in the Public Interest.*

## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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